

# Renfield (film)

***Renfield*** is a 2023 American action comedy horror film directed by Chris McKay and written by Ryan Ridley, based on a story by Robert Kirkman, who also served as a producer alongside McKay, Samantha Nisenboim, David Alpert, and the duo of Bryan and Sean Furst. Inspired by characters from the 1897 novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, the film stars Nicholas Hoult, Awkwafina, Ben Schwartz, Shohreh Aghdashloo, Brandon Scott Jones, Adrian Martinez, and Nicolas Cage.<sup>[5]</sup>

The film tells a story of the character Renfield, Dracula's devoted servant. The film entered development hell after the commercial failure of *The Mummy* (2017). Kirkman later pitched a new version of the film, leaning more into the comedic aspects of the story, and the production rights were acquired by Skybound Entertainment. Dexter Fletcher was originally announced as director in 2019, but McKay eventually replaced him, working off the Ridley script and Kirkman's original pitch. Much of the cast joined between August 2021 to January 2022, and filming took place from February to August 2022. Marco Beltrami was hired to compose the film's score.

*Renfield* had its world premiere at the Overlook Film Festival on March 30, 2023, and was released in the United States on April 14, by Universal Pictures. The film received mixed reviews from critics and grossed \$26.9 million.

## Plot

In the early 20th century, Transylvanian vampire Count Dracula meets English lawyer R. M. Renfield. Renfield hopes to broker a land deal, and after proving to be a useful assistant, he ends up becoming Dracula's familiar, which grants him immortality and super strength and speed when he consumes bugs.

Ninety years later, Renfield has grown weary of bringing victims to Dracula as well as the latter's abuse. They recently had a close call with vampire hunters who almost killed the count, so the duo moves to New Orleans to recuperate. There, Renfield discovers a 12-step self-help group for people in codependent relationships. He tracks down one of the group member's abusive lovers so he can

### Renfield



Theatrical release poster

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|----------------------|--|
| <b>Directed by</b>   | <span>Chris McKay</span>   |
| <b>Screenplay by</b> | <span>Ryan Ridley</span>   |
| <b>Story by</b>      | <span>Robert Kirkman</span>  |
| <b>Based on</b>      | <span><i>Dracula</i></span> <div>by <span>Bram Stoker</span></div>   |
| <b>Produced by</b>   | <span>Chris McKay</span> <div><span>Samantha Nisenboim</span></div> <div><span>Bryan Furst</span></div> <div><span>Sean Furst</span></div> <div><span>Robert Kirkman</span></div> <div><span>David Alpert</span></div> |
| <b>Starring</b>      | <span>Nicholas Hoult</span> <div><span>Awkwafina</span></div> <div><span>Ben Schwartz</span></div> <div><span>Shohreh Aghdashloo</span></div> <div><span>Brandon Scott Jones</span></div>                              |

give him to Dracula without feeling remorse, but they are attacked by an assassin hired by the rival Lobo crime family, whom Renfield kills.

The assassin's boss Teddy Lobo drives off and runs into a sobriety checkpoint that is run by police officer Rebecca Quincy, who arrests Teddy. At the police station, Teddy is released from custody, while Rebecca has a confrontation with her sister Kate, an FBI agent.

Dracula tells Renfield that the criminals he has brought as food are insufficient and that the vampire desires the blood of the pure. Renfield goes to a restaurant to abduct commoners while Rebecca is also led there by clues from the crime scene. The two are caught in an attack on Rebecca's life that Teddy has been pressured into making. Instead, Renfield and Rebecca defend themselves, killing several gang members, and leading Teddy to escape.

Teddy's mother, Bellafrancesca, orders him to hunt down the man who killed her footsoldiers, and he ends up encountering Dracula when Renfield is away. The two form an alliance while Renfield heeds the teachings of his self-help group and decides to make a life for himself apart from his master. Renfield gives a statement to the police to help them finally stop the Lobos. However, Dracula learns of Renfield's betrayal and slaughters the support group in front of him.

Rebecca appears and finds Renfield surrounded by dead bodies, causing her to arrest him until she is swarmed by corrupt police officers and the Lobos, who also want revenge on Renfield.

Rebecca refuses to hand Renfield over, and she barely escapes with him. The next morning, Rebecca finds that Renfield has saved her life, and he explains his true origin. The two fight through corrupt police officers and Lobo henchmen who come to the apartment to kill them and escape, but after attempting to call Kate, Rebecca discovers that she has been taken hostage by Dracula and Bellafrancesca. She and Renfield stockpile weapons and bugs to storm the Lobos' headquarters, only to find that Dracula has empowered over a half-dozen gang members, including Teddy, with Renfield's supernatural abilities.

Renfield kills Teddy and the gang members while Rebecca heads to stop Dracula, only to find that Kate is beaten to near-death and only the healing properties of Dracula's blood can save her, which he will offer in exchange for Rebecca's loyalty. She tricks Dracula and injures him by exposing him to sunlight, leading to him having a final standoff with Renfield and Rebecca that ends with the two capturing him in a magical circle.

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|-----------------------------|--|
|                             | <u>Adrian Martinez</u><br><u>Nicolas Cage</u>  |
| <b>Cinematography</b>       | <u>Mitchell</u><br><u>Amundsen</u>   |
| <b>Edited by</b>            | <u>Zene Baker</u><br>Ryan Folsey<br>Giancarlo<br>Ganziano                                |
| <b>Music by</b>             | <u>Marco Beltrami</u>  |
| <b>Production companies</b> | <u>Skybound</u><br>Giant Wildcat   |
| <b>Distributed by</b>       | <u>Universal</u><br><u>Pictures</u>  |
| <b>Release dates</b>        | March 30, 2023<br>( <u>Overlook Film Festival</u> )<br>April 14, 2023<br>(United States) |
| <b>Running time</b>         | 93 minutes <sup>[1]</sup>  |
| <b>Country</b>              | United States  |
| <b>Language</b>             | English  |
| <b>Budget</b>               | \$65 million <sup>[2]</sup>  |
| <b>Box office</b>           | \$26.9<br>million <sup>[3]</sup> <sup>[4]</sup>  |

Renfield and Rebecca beat Dracula into pieces, then encase the pieces in concrete, and scatter them among the city's water system. Kate is healed, Bellafrancesca is arrested, and Renfield resurrects his self-help group friends with Dracula's blood, feeling empowered to make a new life for himself.

## Cast

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- [Nicholas Hoult](#) as Robert Montague Renfield, the long-suffering servant of Dracula
- [Nicolas Cage](#) as [Dracula](#), a legendary Transylvanian [vampire](#) and Renfield's ill-tempered and narcissistic master
- [Awkwafina](#) as Rebecca, an aggressive [traffic cop](#) working for the [NOPD](#).
- [Ben Schwartz](#) as Tedward Lobo, a cowardly mob enforcer and Bellafrancesca's son
- [Shohreh Aghdashloo](#) as Bellafrancesca Lobo, matriarch of the Lobo family and Tedward's mother
- [Brandon Scott Jones](#) as Mark, a support group leader
- [Adrian Martinez](#) as Chris, a traffic cop and Rebecca's co-worker and partner
- [Camille Chen](#) as Kate, an FBI agent and Rebecca's sister
- [Bess Rous](#) as Caitlyn, a support group member
- [Jenna Kanell](#) as Carol, a support group member
- [James Moses Black](#) as Captain Browning, Rebecca's corrupt boss
- [Caroline Williams](#) as Vanessa
- [William Ragsdale](#) as a priest killed by Dracula during a failed attempt to destroy him
- [Miles Doleac](#) as a vampire hunter who falls prey to Dracula<sup>[6]</sup>

Additionally, [Helen Chandler](#) and [Edward Van Sloan](#) respectively appear as [Mina Seward](#) and [Van Helsing](#) via archive footage from [Dracula](#) (1931).<sup>[7][8][9][10]</sup>

## Production

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### Development

In July 2014, [Universal Pictures](#) announced classic horror film properties, including the character of [Count Dracula](#), as part of a unified [shared universe](#) with [Alex Kurtzman](#) and [Chris Morgan](#) attached to oversee its development.<sup>[11]</sup> After the negative reception of [Dracula Untold](#) (2014), its connections to a unified series were downplayed, and [The Mummy](#) (2017) was re-positioned as the first film in the series.<sup>[12][13]</sup> *The Mummy*, a critical and commercial failure, resulted in Universal's decision to shift its focus to individual storytelling and move away from the shared universe concept.<sup>[14]</sup>

*Renfield* is based on an original pitch by [Robert Kirkman](#) and uses a screenplay by [Ryan Ridley](#). In November 2019, [Dexter Fletcher](#) was hired to direct the film for Universal and [Skybound Entertainment](#). The film was described as a comedic approach to the story of Count Dracula, in the vein of [Taika Waititi](#)'s vampire mockumentary [What We Do in the Shadows](#) (2014), that focuses on the character of [Renfield](#).<sup>[15][16]</sup> In 2020, [Leigh Whannell](#)'s [The Invisible Man](#) became a commercial and critical success for Universal and served as a relaunch to its monster universe.<sup>[17]</sup> In April 2021, [Chris McKay](#) entered negotiations to direct after Fletcher left to work on a reboot of [The Saint](#) for [Paramount Pictures](#). McKay was hired because



*Renfield* is based on an original pitch by comic book writer [Robert Kirkman](#).

he reportedly gave a successful pitch combining the story's mix of humor and action, "something the studio was looking to have more of".<sup>[18][19]</sup> In March 2023, McKay described the film as a "quasi-sequel" to Universal's 1931 English-language film *Dracula*, depicting the same characters of Dracula and Renfield ninety years on,<sup>[20]</sup> with the film's black-and-white opening scene depicting the beginning of *Dracula* (1931) with Nicolas Cage and Nicholas Hoult respectively inserted in place of Bela Lugosi and Dwight Frye as Count Dracula and Renfield.<sup>[7][8][9][10]</sup>

## Casting

Nicholas Hoult was cast as Renfield in August 2021.<sup>[21]</sup>

Nicolas Cage was cast to play Count Dracula in November,<sup>[22]</sup> Awkwafina

and Ben Schwartz were added to the cast in December,<sup>[23][24]</sup> and

Adrian Martinez,<sup>[25]</sup> Shohreh Aghdashloo,<sup>[26]</sup>

Bess Rous,<sup>[27]</sup> James Moses

Black,<sup>[28]</sup> Caroline Williams,<sup>[29]</sup> and Brandon Scott Jones were confirmed to star the following year.<sup>[30]</sup> An "enormous" fan of *Dracula* and the source material, Cage prepared for his role by observing the distinctive ways *Dracula* was portrayed on screen by Bela Lugosi, Frank Langella, and Gary Oldman. "What can I bring that will be different?", he said, "I want it to pop in a unique way. We've seen it played well, we've seen it play not so well, so what can we do? So I'm thinking to really focus on the movement of the character ... [and] that perfect tone of comedy and horror". Cage mentioned *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), *Ring* (1998), and *Malignant* (2021) as inspirations for the role.<sup>[31][32][33]</sup> The film is Cage's first live-action film by a major studio since *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (2011).<sup>[34]</sup>



## Filming

Filming began in New Orleans on February 3, 2022, with Mitchell Amundsen serving as cinematographer.<sup>[35][36]</sup> On February 8, more than twenty vehicles belonging to the production crew were burglarized.<sup>[37]</sup> One security guard was present at the time of the incident, which occurred late at night in a secured parking lot. Crew member Elmo Peoples said the vandals had stolen his insurance papers, two bank cards, and a laptop. He added, "I'm supposed to be here all week and I don't even want to come back because I feel like they don't really care about us as much as the main characters or actors." Love Bugs Film LLC reassured the production crew that they would hire additional security.<sup>[38]</sup> Filming wrapped on April 14, 2022, exactly one year prior to the film's scheduled release.<sup>[39]</sup>

The film's black-and-white opening scenes recreate the events of *Dracula* (1931) with Nicolas Cage and Nicholas Hoult respectively inserted in place of Bela Lugosi and Dwight Frye as Count Dracula and Renfield ("compositing the actors into the old backgrounds — we're just erasing [the original actors] and

putting Cage and Hoult in"), with [Helen Chandler](#) and [Edward Van Sloan](#) appearing as [Mina Seward](#) and [Van Helsing](#) via archive footage.<sup>[7][8][9][10]</sup> [Zene Baker](#), [Ryan Folsey](#) and [Giancarlo Ganziano](#) served as editors.<sup>[40]</sup>

## Release

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*Renfield* had its world premiere at the [Overlook Film Festival](#) on March 30, 2023<sup>[41]</sup> and was released in US theaters on April 14, 2023, by [Universal Pictures](#).<sup>[42]</sup> The film was released on Blu-Ray and DVD in the US on June 6, 2023 and began streaming on [Peacock](#) June 9.<sup>[43]</sup>

## Video game

*Renfield: Bring Your Own Blood*, a video game based on the film, was developed by [Mega Cat Studios](#), published by [Skybound Games](#) and released on April 12, 2023, for [Microsoft Windows](#). *Renfield: Bring Your Own Blood* is a [bullet hell](#) [roguelike](#) game.<sup>[44]</sup>

## Reception

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### Box office

*Renfield* grossed \$17.3 million in the United States and Canada, and \$9.6 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$26.9 million.<sup>[3]</sup> It has been deemed a [box office flop](#).<sup>[45]</sup>

In the United States and Canada, *Renfield* was released alongside *The Pope's Exorcist*, *Mafia Mamma*, *Sweetwater*, and *Suzume*, and was projected to gross \$8–10 million from 3,375 theaters in its opening weekend.<sup>[2][46]</sup> The film made \$3.1 million on its first day, including \$900,000 from Thursday night previews.<sup>[47]</sup> It went on to debut to \$8.1 million, finishing fourth behind *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, *The Pope's Exorcist*, and *John Wick: Chapter 4*.<sup>[48]</sup> The film made \$3.1 million in its second weekend (dropping 61%), finishing in eighth.<sup>[49]</sup>

### Critical response

On the [review aggregator](#) website [Rotten Tomatoes](#), 58% of 301 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 5.8/10. The website's consensus reads: "Although it fails to take full advantage of its committed stars and killer premise, *Renfield*'s batty horror-comedy blend sinks in just enough to leave an impression."<sup>[50]</sup> [Metacritic](#), which uses a [weighted average](#), assigned the film a score of 53 out of 100, based on 49 critics, indicating "mixed or average" reviews.<sup>[51]</sup> Audiences surveyed by [CinemaScore](#) gave the film an average grade of "B−" on an A+ to F scale, while those polled by [PostTrak](#) gave it an 86% positive score.<sup>[48]</sup>

Tim Robey of *The Daily Telegraph* gave the film three out of five stars, writing, "It fulfils the basic requirements of a beat-'em-up formula established by [Buffy](#) and [Blade](#), but that's it. To get any further, we'd have wanted a real sharpening of the emotional stakes."<sup>[52]</sup> Amy Nicholson of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, "The small gags are great, the overall story arc is weak—particularly a quasi-romantic subplot where a cop ([Awkwafina](#)) challenges Renfield to turn from heel to hero", and gave the film a B grade.<sup>[53]</sup>

Conversely, Kevin Maher of The Times gave the film a score of two out of five stars, calling it "a gore-splattered, consistently tiresome, one-joke movie that could only have been pitched in a Hollywood development meeting as, you know, 'It's fucking Dracula!'"<sup>[54]</sup> Alison Willmore of Vulture praised the film's premise, but said it had "maybe a comedy sketch's worth of ideas to stretch over a feature-length run time."<sup>[55]</sup> ABC News's Peter Travers wrote, "what started as a clever, contemporary spin on the Dracula myth gets swallowed up into a quicksand of cartoonishly repetitive, R-rated action clichés that make *Renfield* seem too long at a scant 93 minutes."<sup>[56]</sup>

## Accolades

*Renfield* received a nomination for Best Comedy Poster at the 2023 Golden Trailer Awards.<sup>[57][58]</sup> At the 51st Saturn Awards, it received 5 nominations, winning Best Supporting Actor for Nicolas Cage.

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- Official website (<https://www.renfieldmovie.com/>) 
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