



PREVIEW

In the Earth

+ Q&A with director Ben Wheatley

Following an uncharacteristically tepid adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* undertaken for Netflix and released last year, Ben Wheatley here returns to the diseased rural British underbelly he probed in his reputation-making early works, *Kill List* (2011), *Sightseers* (2012) and *A Field in England* (2013). Conceived and made in the throes of the Covid-19 crisis, and premiered at January's online edition of the Sundance Film Festival, *In the Earth* uses a pandemic as the jumping-off point for a delirious folk horror, in which the science of mycorrhizal networks (webs of communication whereby plants can transfer nutrients and minerals between them) infects the more familiar genre territory of woodland spirits greedy for blood sacrifice. 'People get a bit funny in the woods sometimes,' says Frank (Mark Monero), one of the sombre government employees who welcome newcomer Martin (Joel Fry) to a research encampment somewhere near Bristol: 'It is a hostile environment.' This phrase, used by the Home Office to describe its policy of making life unpleasant for immigrants to the United Kingdom, hints at a political undercurrent in what is to come; but Wheatley's cocktail of horror tropes and hippy science proves more hallucinogenic than satirical in its effect.

Martin has joined the project in the hope of assisting – and, we surmise, reconnecting romantically with – an erstwhile colleague and old flame, Dr Olivia Wendle (Hayley Squires). Deep in the forest, Olivia is researching how plants communicate – but, Colonel Kurtz-like, she's not been heard from in a while. Before he heads off to find Olivia, Martin is casually told about the key figure in the local 'hostile environment': an ancient woodland spirit named Parnag Fegg. (The name suggests a nod at Alan Clarke's extraordinary 1974 TV film *Penda's Fen*, of which Wheatley is an acknowledged fan.) Off Martin goes to join Olivia, a journey that requires a two-day trek on foot, and the company of business-like park guide Alma (Ellora Torchia). If Martin is carrying guilt and sorrow over the loss of his parents during the pandemic, Alma is one of those for whom it's all about moving forward. 'Things go back to normal quicker than you think,' she insists. 'People will forget what happened.'

Normality, however, quickly slides further away. In the night, Martin and Alma are assailed by unseen forces, in a startling sequence of discordant sounds and flashes that jars the film out of its mood of deadpan understatement and into more florid and fevered terrain. Though assistance soon arrives in the bedraggled form of forest-dweller Zach (Reece Shearsmith), it's no great surprise that his kind of help comes with a terrible downside. A star of *A Field in England* also well known for the television comedies *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2017) and *Inside No. 9* (2014-21), Shearsmith is such an embodiment of blackly comic English creepiness that his casting risks tipping the film into pastiche. However, his relatively low-key performance and the new plot information his character provides serve to keep outright silliness at bay. Zach is an artist, but out of perceived necessity rather than an instinct for self-expression. While Olivia and her kind look for scientific routes to understanding the forest and its ways, Martin seeks to appease what he calls 'the thing in the woods' by creating things that he thinks will bring it pleasure.

‘I’m talking to him in a purer way,’ Zach claims. Unfortunately for Martin and Alma, that means drugging them, stitching symbols into their skin with animal guts, and photographing them in strange poses. ‘Photography is like magic,’ he notes in passing. ‘But then, so is all technology when you don’t know how it works.’

This is the idea that draws together the film’s wayward strands: that art, science and superstition are not separate, but enmeshed and symbiotic; and that nature may consequently have more of a hold on our behaviour and self-expression than we think. The artist Zach romantically characterises, and identifies with, Parnag Fegg as a wandering necromancer who became trapped in the forest. To Zach’s scientist counterpart Olivia, however, his interpretation is evidence of ‘a psychological problem with humans: we want to make stories out of everything.’ Olivia – played by Squires with an intense stare and prim manner reminiscent of Harry Potter’s clever sidekick Hermione – has gleaned from ancient texts that the name of the supposed spirit in fact refers not to an individual at all, but to the forces of ‘heartfelt prayer and God’s light’. Olivia has the forest wired for blaring, blinding soundscapes and lightshows, her hope being that somehow this will break communication barriers between humans and the interconnected natural world. Not that those barriers are as solid as we think. Nature, Olivia explains to Martin, is able to manipulate us using not only our senses, but our emotions, our physiology, even our diseases. Martin’s longing to see Olivia was not the manifestation of a higher human feeling – romantic love – but a virus, whereby the forest draws to itself what it needs. Indeed, despite the three-way crackle of sexual jealousy between Martin, Olivia and Alma, nothing here is romantic. Though Olivia claims that the aim of her work is to find out ‘how we can live together without destroying each other’, her methods turn out to involve a good deal of destruction. Nature is not gentle; and both artist and scientist have convinced themselves that their chosen routes to understanding it justify the infliction of tremendous suffering.

Is Parnagg Fegg real, or a name for nature? Either way, why does it require the blood of a nice man called Martin? That sort of firm explanation gets a little bit lost in a denouement that goes big on psychotronic rampage before leaving a lot of its loose ends defiantly untied. There’s a whole strand about standing stones that never quite relates to the other aspects of the story. But *In the Earth* may ultimately have more to say about the experience of being an artist than about monuments, magic mushrooms or mycorrhizal networks. ‘So... you’re using light and sound to communicate?’ Martin innocently asks Olivia – a query that neatly remind us that we, too, are being told a story, and affected by a sensory display. Could it be that Zach and Olivia are not just embodiments of creativity and ontology respectively, but aspects of Wheatley’s clashing instincts as an artist: the storyteller who wants to involve us, and the iconoclast who’d rather mess with our senses? It is in between these boundaries – artist and scientist, natural and supernatural, disrupted present and dystopian future – that this film finds its fertile ground.

Hannah McGill, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 2021

IN THE EARTH

Director: Ben Wheatley
©: NEON Rated LLC.
Production Companies: Neon, Rook Films
With the support of the: BFI Locked Box Initiative
International Sales by: Protagonist Pictures
Executive Producers: Jeff Deutchman, Tom Quinn, Amy Jump, Ben Wheatley
Produced by: Andy Starke
Line Producer: Michael Constable
Production Manager: Filiz-Theres Erel
Production Co-ordinator: Cecily Colaheen
Financial Controller: David Cook
Payroll: Moneypenny
Unit Manager: Ed Burrell
Locations Manager: Eleri Coulten
Post Supervisor: Hashim Alsaraf
COVID/Production Assistant: Natasha Khaleeq
Production Assistant: Anya Kalirai
Floor Runner: Sam Jones
1st Assistant Director: Andi Coldwell
2nd Assistant Director: Charlie Vaughan
3rd Assistant Director: Jack Wren
Script Supervisor: Anita Christy
Casting by: Shaheen Baig
Casting Assistants: Shaheen Baig Casting
Extras Casting: We Got POP
Written by: Ben Wheatley
Director of Photography: Nick Gillespie
B Camera Operator: Andrew Butler
DIT: Kevin Bell
Gaffer: Tim Jordan
Visual Effects by: Milk Visual Effects
Special Effects Supervisors: Daniel Bentley, Daniel Snelling, Dewi Foulkes
Special Effects: Real SFX
Motion Graphics: Peter Eszenyi
Rotoscoping Lead: Ben Thomas
Trip Visuals by: CYRIAK

Editor: Ben Wheatley
On-line Editor: Daniel Tomlinson
Production Designer: Felicity Hickson
Standing Stone Construction: Supersets
Woodcut Illustrations: Richard Wells
Prop Master: Callum Hickey
Costume Designer: Emma Fryer
Costume Supervisor: Tracy McGregor
Hair and Make-up Designer: Emma Scott
Prosthetics Designer: Dan Martin
End Titles by: Intro, Julian House
Colour Grade and Finishing: Goldcrest Post UK
Colourist: Rob Pizzey
Music: Clint Mansell
Mixed by: Geoff Foster
Sound Designer: Martin Pavey
Sound Recordist: Ron Entwistle
Dialogue Editor: Nikki Ruck
Foley: Tapio Liukkonen, Kaamos Sound
Stunt Co-ordinator: Peter Pedrero
Covid Supervisors: Alex Kemp, Uli Kress
Armourer: Noel Francis
Digital Intermediate Producer: Suhaila Mahmoud
Digital Intermediate: Emma Liu

Cast

Joel Fry (Martin Lowery)
Reece Shearsmith (Zach)
Hayley Squires (Olivia Wendle)
Ellora Torchia (Alma)
John Hollingworth (James)
Mark Monero (Frank)

USA/UK 2021
107 mins

Courtesy of Universal Pictures

EVENTS & STRANDS

Preview: Doctor Who: Dragonfire
Sat 12 Jun 12:00
Relaxed Screenings: The Reason I Jump
Fri 18 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:10
Woman with a Movie Camera: Wildfire
Sun 20 Jun 18:40 (+ Q&A with director Cathy Brady); Mon 21 Jun 18:10; Tue 22 Jun 14:40; Wed 23 Jun 20:50; Thu 24 Jun 14:45

BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

LIFF Opening Night: WOMB (Women of My Billion)
+ on stage Q&A with Srishti Bakshi and film critic Anna Smith
Thu 17 Jun 17:20
My Beautiful Laundrette
Fri 18 Jun 20:20
The Warrior + on-stage career interview with writer-director Asif Kapadia
Sat 19 Jun 20:30
Ahimsa: Gandhi the Power of the Powerless
Sun 20 Jun 15:00
Searching for Happiness...
Tue 22 Jun 20:50
Nazarband Captive
Wed 23 Jun 20:45
A'hr Kayattam
Thu 24 Jun 18:00
The Salt in Our Waters Nonajoler Kabbo
Sun 27 Jun 15:00

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NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

First Cow From Fri 28 May
Surge From Fri 28 May
After Love
From Fri 4 Jun (Q&A with director Aleem Khan and actor Joanna Scanlan on Sun 13 Jun 18:40)
Gunda From Fri 4 Jun
 Fargo From Fri 11 Jun
The Reason I Jump From Fri 18 Jun
Nashville From Fri 25 Jun
Ultraviolence From Sat 26 Jun
Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and contributor Janet Alder
Supernova From Fri 2 Jul
Another Round From Fri 9 Jul
Jumbo From Fri 9 Jul
Deerskin From Fri 16 Jul
Girlfriends From Fri 23 Jul
Mandabi From Fri 23 Jul

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