

= The Frighteners =

The Frighteners is a 1996 New Zealand @-@ American horror comedy film directed by Peter Jackson and co @-@ written with his wife , Fran Walsh . The film stars Michael J. Fox , Trini Alvarado , Peter Dobson , John Astin , Dee Wallace Stone , Jeffrey Combs , and Jake Busey . The Frighteners tells the story of Frank Bannister (Fox) , an architect who develops psychic abilities allowing him to see , hear , and communicate with ghosts after his wife 's murder . He initially uses his new abilities to befriend ghosts , whom he sends to haunt people so that he can charge them handsome fees for " exorcising " the ghosts . However , the spirit of a mass murderer appears able to attack the living and the dead , posing as the ghost of the Grim Reaper , prompting Frank to investigate the supernatural presence .

Jackson and Walsh conceived the idea for The Frighteners during the script @-@ writing phase of Heavenly Creatures . Executive producer Robert Zemeckis hired the duo to write the script , with the original intention of Zemeckis directing The Frighteners as a spin @-@ off film of the television series , Tales from the Crypt . With Jackson and Walsh 's first draft submitted in January 1994 , Zemeckis believed the film would be better off directed by Jackson , produced by Zemeckis and funded / distributed by Universal Studios . The visual effects were created by Jackson 's Weta Digital , which had only been in existence for three years . This , plus the fact that The Frighteners required more digital effects shots than almost any movie made until that time , resulted in the eighteen @-@ month period for effects work by Weta Digital being largely stressed .

Despite a rushed post @-@ production schedule , Universal was so impressed with Jackson 's rough cut on The Frighteners , the studio moved the theatrical release date closer by four months . The film was not a box office success , but received generally positive reviews from critics . Despite its lackluster performance at the box office , the film has gained a cult following in more recent years .

The Frighteners is also Fox 's last leading role in a live @-@ action feature film ; Fox then went on to a four @-@ year run on the television series Spin City before semi @-@ retiring in 2000 due to the effects of Parkinson 's disease .

= = Plot = =

In 1990 , architect Frank Bannister 's (Michael J. Fox) wife , Debra , dies in a car accident . He abandons his profession , and his unfinished " dream house " sits incomplete . Following the accident , Frank gained the power to see ghosts and befriends three : 1970s street gangster Cyrus (Chi McBride) , 1950s nerd Stuart (Jim Fyfe) , and The Judge (John Astin) , a gunslinger from the Old West . The ghosts haunt houses so Frank can then " exorcise " them for a fee . Most locals consider him a con man .

Soon after Frank cons local health nut Ray Lynskey (Peter Dobson) and his wife Lucy (Trini Alvarado) , a physician , Ray dies of a heart attack . Frank discovers there is an entity , appearing as the Grim Reaper , killing people , first marking numbers on their foreheads that only Frank sees . Frank 's late wife Debra had a similar number when she was found .

Frank 's ability to foretell the murders puts him under suspicion with the police and FBI agent Milton Dammers (Jeffrey Combs) , who is convinced Frank is responsible . Frank is arrested for killing newspaper editor Magda Rees @-@ Jones (Elizabeth Hawthorne) , who had attacked him in the press .

Lucy investigates the murders and becomes a target of the Grim Reaper . She is attacked while visiting Frank in jail ; but they escape with the help of Cyrus and Stuart , who are both dissolved in the process . Frank wants to commit suicide to stop the Grim Reaper . Lucy helps Frank have a near @-@ death experience by putting him into hypothermia and using barbiturates to stop his heart . Dammers abducts Lucy , revealing that he had been a victim of Charles Manson and his " Family " in 1969 .

In his ghostly form , Frank confronts the Grim Reaper and discovers that he is the ghost of Johnny Bartlett (Jake Busey) , a psychiatric hospital orderly who killed twelve people 32 years earlier ,

before being captured , convicted , and executed . Newspaper reports reveal that his greatest desire was to become the most prolific serial killer ever , showing pride at killing more than contemporaries like Charles Starkweather . Patricia Bradley (Dee Wallace @-@ Stone) , then a teenager , was accused as his accomplice , although she escaped the death penalty due to her underage status . Lucy resuscitates Frank and they visit Patricia . Unknown to them , Patricia is still in love with Bartlett and on friendly , homicidal terms with Bartlett 's ghost , and eventually kills her own mother , who had been trying to monitor her daughter 's behavior . Lucy and Frank trap Bartlett 's spirit in his urn , which Patricia has kept . The pair make for the chapel of the now @-@ abandoned psychiatric hospital hoping to send Bartlett 's ghost to Hell .

Patricia and Dammers chase them through the ruins . Dammers throws the ashes away , releasing Bartlett 's ghost again before Patricia kills him . Bartlett 's ghost and Patricia hunt down Frank and Lucy . Frank realizes that Bartlett 's ghost , with Patricia 's help , was responsible for his wife 's death and the number on her brow , and that he is still trying to add to his body count (and infamy) even after his death .

Out of bullets , Patricia strangles Frank to death , but Frank in spirit form rips Patricia 's spirit from her body , forcing Bartlett to follow them . Bartlett grabs Patricia 's ghost , while Frank makes it to Heaven , where he is reunited with Cyrus and Stuart along with his wife Debra . Bartlett and Patricia 's spirits claim they will now go back to claim more lives , but the portal to Heaven quickly changes to a demonic looking appearance , and they are both dragged to Hell by a giant worm @-@ like creature . Frank learns it is not yet his time and is sent back to his body , as Debra 's spirit tells him to " be happy . "

Frank and Lucy fall in love . Lucy is now able to see ghosts as well . Frank later begins demolishing the unfinished dream house and building a life with Lucy while the morose @-@ looking ghost of Dammers is riding around in the sheriff 's car . Frank and Lucy then enjoy their picnic .

= = Cast = =

Michael J. Fox as Frank Bannister : Although Jackson and Walsh envisioned The Frighteners as a low @-@ budget film with unknown actors , Zemeckis suggested casting his Back to the Future star Fox in the lead role . Fox became enthusiastic about working with Jackson when he saw Heavenly Creatures at the Toronto International Film Festival .

Trini Alvarado as Dr. Lucy Lynskey : The character is named after Heavenly Creatures star Melanie Lynskey (who also cameos in The Frighteners) .

Peter Dobson as Ray Lynskey , Lucy 's health @-@ obsessed and comically hot @-@ headed husband who dislikes Frank 's tactics

John Astin as The Judge , a decaying gunslinger ghost from the Old West with a penchant for mummies and firing guns at random .

Dee Wallace Stone as Patricia Ann Bradley , Bartlett 's mentally ill lover (escaping execution at the time of the original murders as she was underage) who is under strict observation by her mother .

Jeffrey Combs as Special Agent Milton Dammers , an eccentric FBI agent who has a vendetta against Bannister . A former undercover agent known for his work with cultists , which caused him to sustain multiple massive mutilations and driven to the brink of insanity . He has a problem with women screaming at him . Jackson opted to cast Combs as Dammers because he was a fan of the actor 's work in Re @-@ Animator .

Jake Busey as John Charles " Johnny " Bartlett , a mass murderer who continues his work in the afterlife , focusing on increasing his body count as a form of competition with other famous murderers . He returns from Hell , able to attack the living and the dead as the ghost of the Grim Reaper .

R. Lee Erney as the ghost of Sergeant Hiles .

Chi McBride as Cyrus , a gangster who is one of Frank 's deceased associates for his ghost @-@ hunting business .

Jim Fyfe as Stuart , a nerd who is one of Frank 's deceased associates for his ghost @-@ hunting business .

Angela Bloomfield as Debra Bannister , Frank 's deceased wife .

Troy Evans as Sheriff Walt Perry , a local law enforcement officer and ally to Frank .

Julianna McCarthy as Mrs. Bradley , Patricia 's mother and former director of the psychiatric hospital , who is constantly monitoring her daughter .

Elizabeth Hawthorne as Magda Rees @-@ Jones , the snooty British editor of the local newspaper .

Peter Jackson (cameo) as a man with piercings .

Melanie Lynskey (cameo) as a deputy , who is briefly seen standing next to Trini Alvarado 's " Lucy Lynskey " .

= = Development = =

Peter Jackson and wife / co @-@ writer Fran Walsh conceived the idea for The Frighteners in 1992 , during the script @-@ writing phase of Heavenly Creatures . Together , they wrote a three @-@ page film treatment and sent it to their talent agent in Hollywood . Robert Zemeckis viewed their treatment with the intention of directing The Frighteners as a spin @-@ off film of the television series , Tales from the Crypt (which he helped produce) . Zemeckis hired Jackson and Walsh to turn their treatment into a full @-@ length screenplay in January 1993 . The husband and wife duo completed their first draft for The Frighteners in early @-@ January 1994 . Zemeckis was so impressed with their script , he decided The Frighteners would work better directed by Jackson , executive produced by Zemeckis and funded / distributed by Universal Pictures . Universal greenlighted the film to commence pre @-@ production on a \$ 26 million budget in April 1994 . The studio also granted Jackson and Zemeckis total artistic control and the right of final cut privilege .

= = = Production = = =

Jackson decided to film The Frighteners entirely in New Zealand . Zemeckis and Universal agreed on the condition that Jackson made New Zealand look similar to the Midwestern United States . Principal photography began on May 14 , 1995 and lasted until November 16 , which is one of the longest shooting schedules ever approved by Universal Pictures . Six weeks into the shoot , cinematographer Alun Bollinger had a serious car accident . His replacement , John Blick , later alternated duties with Bollinger for much of the rest of the shoot . Location shooting primarily included Wellington and three weeks spent in Lyttelton . Interior scenes were compiled at Camperdown Studios in Miramar .

= = = Visual effects = = =

Jackson 's Weta Digital created the visual effects , which included computer @-@ generated imagery , as well as scale models (which were necessary to make Wellington look American) , prosthetic makeup and practical effects with help from Weta Workshop . Visual effects supervisor Richard Taylor explained that effects work on The Frighteners was complex due to Weta 's inexperience with computer technology in the mid @-@ 1990s . Prior to this film , Weta worked largely with physical effects . With so many ghosts among its main cast , The Frighteners required more digital effects shots than almost any movie made up till that time . For a special effects company that had been in existence less than three years , the eighteen @-@ month period for completing The Frighteners was largely stressful . Some shots were handled by a small New Zealand company called Pixel Perfect , many of whose employees would eventually join Weta Digital . Rick Baker was hired to design the prosthetic makeup for The Judge , portrayed by John Astin (the detachable jawbone was later added digitally) . However , Baker was not able to apply Astin 's five hours of makeup himself due to his commitment on The Nutty Professor . Makeup artist Brian Penikas (Pirates of the Caribbean trilogy , Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull) fulfilled Baker 's duties .

The extended shooting schedule owed much to the fact that scenes where ghosts and human

characters interacted had to be filmed twice ; once with human characters acting on set , and then with the ghost characters acting against a blue screen . The two elements would later be digitally composited into one shot with the use of split screen photography . Such sequences required precise timing from the cast as they traded dialogue with characters who were merely blank air . The hardest challenge for the digital animators at Weta was creating the Grim Reaper , which went through many transformations before finding physical form . " We set out with the intention of doing the Reaper as a rod puppet , maybe shooting it in a water tank , " Jackson commented . " We even thought of filming someone , dressed in costume , at different camera speeds . " Test footage was shot with puppets and a man in a Reaper suit , but in the end , it was decided that using computer animation would be the easiest task . Another entirely computerized character called " the Gatekeeper " , a winged cherub who helps guard the cemetery , was deleted from the final cut .

With digital effects work running behind schedule , Zemeckis convinced Wes Takahashi , an animation supervisor from visual effects company Industrial Light & Magic , to help work on The Frighteners . " The shots Zemeckis showed me were pretty remarkable , " Takahashi reflected , " but there were still about 400 shots to do , and everyone was kind of worried . " Takahashi was quickly drafted as a visual effects supervisor , and began looking at the schedule , trying to work out whether The Frighteners could be finished in time . " There was no way we 'd make the deadline . I figured out a concerted plan involving Jackson and Zemeckis to convince Universal it was worthy of asking for more money . " The executives at Universal proposed splitting some of the shots to visual effects companies in the United States , but Jackson , for whom the film was a chance to show New Zealand filmmaking could stand alongside Hollywood , convinced Universal otherwise . Instead , The Frighteners received an accelerated release date , four months earlier than planned , and an additional \$ 6 million in financing , with fifteen digital animators and computer workstations (some were borrowed from Universal and other effects companies in the US) . Andrew Adamson was hired as a digital effects supervisor .

= = Soundtrack = =

The film score was written and composed by Danny Elfman . It was released in 1996 on cassette and compact disc by Universal Records . The closing credits play a cover of Blue Öyster Cult 's " (Don 't Fear) The Reaper " performed by New Zealand alternative rock band The Mutton Birds . The Mutton Birds version of the song had been previously released as a B @-@ side to their single " She 's Been Talking " released in 1996 . It plays also " Superstar " , written by Bonnie Bramlett + Leon Russell and performed by Sonic Youth

Critical reception was average ; Jason Ankeny of album database Allmusic described the soundtrack as " imaginative " giving it three stars out of five . This was a lower rating on the site than Elfman 's other scores of the era , such as Mission : Impossible , Mars Attacks ! and Flubber . The soundtrack review website Filmtracks referred to the album as " lacking much cohesion or singular creativity " .

= = Release = =

The original release date was October 31 , 1996 , but after Universal studio executives viewed a rough cut of The Frighteners , they were impressed enough to move the release date to their " summer blockbuster slot " on July 19 , 1996 . In addition , Universal offered the filmmaker the opportunity to make King Kong , which was not released until 2005 . Jackson often disputed over the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) over the film 's rating . Aware that he was meant to be delivering Universal a PG @-@ 13 rating , Jackson tried his best to omit the amount of graphic violence as much as possible , but the MPAA still believed The Frighteners deserved an R rating .

= = = Box office = = =

The Frighteners was released in the United States in 1 @, @ 675 theaters , and opened at # 5 , earning \$ 5 @, @ 565 @, @ 495 during its opening weekend , averaging \$ 3 @, @ 335 per theater . The film eventually grossed a worldwide total of \$ 29 @, @ 359 @, @ 216 . The Frighteners ended up being a box office disappointment , mostly due to competition from Independence Day ; in interviews conducted years after The Frighteners ' release , Jackson commented he was disappointed by Universal 's ubiquitous marketing campaign , including a poster which " didn 't tell you anything about the picture " , which he believed was the primary reason the film was not a financial success . Additionally , the film opened on the same day the Atlanta Summer Olympics began ; when Jackson realized this and told the studio , they answered " ' We don 't think so ; our research indicates that 's not the case ... ' And I just thought how the hell do they know ? There had only ever been three Olympic Games held in the United States in one hundred years ! " Jackson acknowledged The Frighteners ' tone made it hard to pigeon @-@ hole and sell , and his experience on the film made him understand the importance of marketing .

= = = Critical reception = = =

The Frighteners received generally positive reviews from film critics . As of June 2014 , 64 % of the 36 reviewers selected by review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes gave the film a positive review , certifying it " Fresh " with an average score of 6 @. @ 2 / 10 ; the consensus states : " Boasting top @-@ notch special effects and exuberant direction from Peter Jackson , The Frighteners is visually striking but tonally uneven . "

Kenneth Turan of the Los Angeles Times stated " Director Peter Jackson , at home with all kinds of excess in New Zealand , keeps everything spinning nicely , not even losing a step when the mood turns increasingly disturbing . " Janet Maslin from The New York Times enjoyed The Frighteners , but " walked out the theater with mixed emotions , " she commented that " Peter Jackson deserves more enthusiasm for expert , imaginative effects than for his live actors anyhow . These lively touches would leave The Frighteners looking more like a more frantic Beetlejuice if Jackson 's film weren 't so wearily overcrowded . The Frighteners is not immune to overkill , even though most of its characters are already dead . " Jeff Vice of the Deseret News praised the acting in the film , with the performances of Fox and Alvarado in particular , but said that there were also " bits that push the taste barrier too far and which grind things to a screeching halt " , and that if " Jackson had used the restraint he showed in Heavenly Creatures , the movie could have " been the best of its kind " . Critic Christopher Null praised the film , as he described it as a mixture between Ghostbusters and Twin Peaks . Michael Drucker of IGN said that although the film wouldn 't make Jackson 's top five of movies , it " is a harmless and fun dark comedy that you 'll enjoy casually watching from time to time " . The Frighteners received mixed reviews from critics from Jackson 's native country , New Zealand .

Conversely , Todd McCarthy of Variety thought that the film should have remained an episode of Tales from the Crypt . Critic James Berardinelli believed that although The Frighteners wasn 't " a bad film " , it was " a disappointment , following Jackson 's powerful , true @-@ life matricide tale , Heavenly Creatures " , and because of that " The Frighteners fell short of expectations by being just one of many in the long line of 1996 summer movies . " Chicago Sun @-@ Times ' Roger Ebert , felt that Jackson was more interested in prosthetic makeup designs , computer animation , and special effects than writing a cohesive storyline . Ebert and critic Gene Siskel gave it a " two thumbs down " rating on their TV show At the Movies with Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert . Chicago Reader critic Jonathan Rosenbaum , described the film 's special effects as " ugly , aggressive " and " proliferating " , saying that " trying to keep interested in [the special effects] was like trying to remain interested in a loudmouth shouting in [his] ear " . Edward Guthmann of the San Francisco Chronicle stated that " instead of moving the horror genre in new directions , The Frighteners simply falls apart from its barrage of visual effects and the overmixed onslaught of Danny Elfman 's music score " . The Austin Chronicle 's Joey O 'Brien , said that although the screenplay was " practically loaded with wild ideas , knowingly campy dialogue and offbeat characterizations " , it " switched gears " too fast and too frequently that " the audience is left struggling to catch up as [The

Frighteners] twists and turns its way unmercifully towards a literally out @-@ of @-@ this @-@ world finale " .

At the 23rd Saturn Awards , the Academy of Science Fiction , Fantasy & Horror Films honored Jackson with nominations for Best Direction and Best Writing , the latter he shared with wife Fran Walsh . The Frighteners also was nominated the Saturn Award for Best Horror Film , and for its Special Effects , Make @-@ up (Rick Baker) and Music (Danny Elfman) . Michael J. Fox and Jeffrey Combs were also nominated for their work .

= = Home media = =

The Frighteners was first released on DVD in August 1998 , but included no special features .

To coincide with the release of Jackson 's King Kong , Universal Studios Home Entertainment issued a double @-@ sided director 's cut DVD of the film in November 2005 , which featured a version of The Frighteners that was 12 minutes longer . The other side includes a documentary prepared by Jackson and WingNut Films originally for the Laserdisc release . The director 's cut was also made available in HD DVD and Blu @-@ ray .