



**TERROR VISION**

# The People under the Stairs

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

For reasons that are hard to fathom, *The People under the Stairs* is one of Wes Craven's less well remembered films, often overlooked amid all the adulation for the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Scream* films. Which is a shame, as it's one of Craven's most overtly political films – like *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) it pits two disparate family groups against each other, in this case a wealthy and venal white couple against a poor and victimised working class black family.

Young black Los Angelino Fool (Brandon Adams) and his family are facing eviction from their white landlords the Robesons (Everett McGill and Wendy Robie). Fool accompanies Leroy (Ving Rhames) and Spencer (Jeremy Roberts) on a mission to break into the Robesons' house, believing that they're hoarding a stash of gold coins. But the robbery goes awry when Spencer is killed and Fool stumbles across a large group of feral, pale-faced cannibal children locked up in the basement. Fool also meets Alice (A.J. Langer), supposedly the Robesons' daughter; though as he learns later, she and the other children in the basement were all abducted by the Robesons. Along with Roach (Sean Whalen) who has had his tongue cut out by the Robesons, they try to stay one step ahead of both the insane couple and their flesh-eating brood.

Craven took inspiration, in part, from the true story of a pair of burglars who broke into a Los Angeles house and inadvertently alerted the police to a pair of siblings who had been locked away in the cellar by their parents. Craven transforms an already shocking story into a witty and often very shocking film that has something interesting and important to say but never loses sight of its basic requirement – to scare its audience. And on that score, there's no doubting its efficacy, containing as it does some of Craven's most impressive jolts.

It's a dark fairy story, with a princess that needs rescuing, a valiant young prince, wicked step-parents, a legendary stash of gold and an old dark house where the physical laws of the universe no longer seem to apply (Craven has referred to the house – which, as in the Tom and Jerry cartoons, seems to expand infinitely as the story demands it – as 'the whole society of the United States'). It's *Hansel and Gretel* given a Gothic twist and transplanted to the ghettos of Los Angeles, then shot through with a streak of contemporary social politics – at the end, the victimised masses unite, rise up, overthrow their oppressors and literally tear down their capitalist edifice and redistribute their wealth.

Craven's usual wit shines through, and amid the horror it's often very funny. Indeed, the film's masterstroke is in tackling weighty subjects – racism, inequality, greed – without ever taking itself terribly seriously. Its tongue is never far from its cheek, though it doesn't skimp on the horror. There are

plenty of creepy moments, macabre detours and effective scares, even if it's not as grisly as perhaps it could have been.

The casting is perfect. Brandon Adams, A.J. Langer and Sean Whalen make for a likeable trio, with none of the precociousness that too often afflicts young performers. Ving Rhames comes and goes before he gets a chance to make that much of an impact so the adult acting end is held up by Everett McGill and Wendy Robie, reunited from *Twin Peaks*, where they played another married couple, 'Big' Ed and Nadine Hurley. Robie has a nice line in uncontrolled hysteria while McGill rampaging around the house in full leather fetish gear brandishing a shotgun is quite the sight to behold. The mutant brood in the cellar are realised by the effects make-up of KNB's Gregory Nicotero, Robert Kurtzman and Howard Berger – if they don't always exactly convince, they're a lot of fun, a ghastly little family that finds themselves caught between the impromptu family formed by Fool, Alice and Roach and the repulsive Robesons.

*The People under the Stairs* is a constantly surprising and inventive film, intelligent, funny and when it needs to be, quite scary. As a satire, it's focused and potent (the film's sharpest barbs are reserved for Reagan-era capitalism), the story twists and turns admirably and when the going gets nasty in the basement it's satisfyingly unpleasant. It was released between the ho-hum *Shocker* (1989) and *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1992) – the first flowering of the post-modern strain of horror that Craven would farm so effectively in the next few years. It's definitely one of Craven's high points and a film that has held up notably well – it was a hit at the box office in 1991 and it's having fallen under the shadow of the director's better-known films is a pity as it still has much to offer.

Craven had plans to remake the film and later announced a television series spin-off but neither ever got any further than the planning stages. In late 2020, Jordan Peele (director of *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019) and *Nope* (2022)) and Win Rosenfeld (producer of *BlackKkKlansman* (2018) and the *Candyman* (2021) remake) signed up for a remake.

**Kevin Lyons, *The EOFTV Review*, [eofftvreview.wordpress.com](http://eofftvreview.wordpress.com)**

---

## THE PEOPLE UNDER THE STAIRS

*Director:* Wes Craven  
*Production Companies:* Universal Pictures Company, Alive Films  
*Executive Producers:* Shep Gordon, Wes Craven  
*Producers:* Marianne Maddalena, Stuart M. Besser  
*Co-producer:* Dixie Capp  
*Associate Producer:* Peter Foster  
*Unit Production Manager:* Stuart M. Besser  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Sarah James Arbeid  
*Location Manager:* Judson Neil Schwartz  
*Post-production Co-ordinator:* Yvonne Valdez  
*2nd Unit Director:* Peter Chesney  
*1st Assistant Directors:* Nick Mastandrea, Rosemary C. Cremona, Melanie Knox  
*Casting:* Eileen Knight  
*Extras Casting:* The Casting Group, Rick Montgomery  
*Screenplay:* Wes Craven  
*Director of Photography:* Sandi Sissel  
*2nd Unit Director of Photography:* Tony Cutrono  
*Camera Operator:* George Billinger  
*Additional Camera Operator:* Chris Hayes  
*Steadicam Operators:* Dan Kneece, Jeff Mart  
*Video Playback:* Intervideo  
*Special Effects:* Image Engineering  
*Image Engineering Supervisors:* Peter Chesney, Gregory Nicotero, Robert Kurtzman, Howard Berger  
*Image Engineering Key Co-ordinator:* Dean Miller  
*Image Engineering Projects Co-ordinator:* Kate Steinberg  
*Image Engineering Technicians:* J.D. Street, Sandy Stewart  
*Image Engineering Keys:* Mark Maitre, Earl Ellis  
*Mechanical Dog Effects:* Robert Clark, Roark Productions  
*Roark Productions Crew:* Camilla Henneman, Rikelle Kerr, Mark Goldberg, Jim McLaughlin, Mark Goodell, Kent Jones  
*Fibreglass Moulds:* Make Believe Productions  
*Editors:* James Coblentz, Tom Walls  
*Production Designer:* Bryan Jones  
*Art Director:* Steven Lloyd Shroyer  
*Set Decorator:* Molly Flanegin  
*On-set Dresser:* Daniel M. Butts  
*Storyboard Artist:* Philip Mayor  
*Costume Designer:* Ileana Meltzer  
*Set Costumer:* Yvette M. Walsh  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Tim Wegman  
*Make-up:* Michelle Bühler  
*Special Make-up Effects:* KNB EFX Group Inc  
*Title Design:* Kathie Broyles, Jeff Okun  
*Opticals:* Howard Anderson Company  
*Music:* Don Peake

*Additional Orchestral Music:* Graeme Revell  
*Music Editor:* Dick Bernstein  
*Sound Recording:* Donald Summer  
*Supervising Sound Re-recordists:* Peter Reale, Howarth Wilmarth  
*Sound Re-recordist:* Roberta Doheny  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Paul Clay  
*Sound Editors:* Carin Rogers, Susan Kurtz, Jeff Sandler, Mike Szackmeister, Richard Bozeat  
*ADR Recordist:* Tanya Sharp David  
*ADR Editors:* Pat Somerset, Ernesto Mas  
*Foley Artists:* Diane Marshall, Jerry Trent  
*Foley Recordist:* Karen Roulo  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Tony Cecere  
*Stunts:* Linda Arvidson, Marian E. Green, Kelsee Devoreaux, Beth Nufer, Sandy Gimpel, Paula Moody, Birgit K. Schier, Melvin Jones, Lori Lynn Ross, Eric Mansker, Dane Farwell, John Branagan, Dan Rycerz, Rex L. Waddell Jr, Lynn Salvatori, Jeff Habberstad, William R. Perry  
*Stand-ins:* Wanda Welch, David Riggons, Julie Mondin, Sean Lemar, Roxanne 'Rocky' Meyers, Van Johnson  
*Dolby Stereo Consultant:* Steve F.B. Smith  
*Head Animal Trainers:* Roger Schumacher, Jim Dew  
*Animal Trainer:* Angelo Rivers

## Cast

Brandon Adams (*Poindexter 'Fool' Williams*)  
Everett McGill (*man, 'Daddy'*)  
Wendy Robie (*woman, 'Mummy'*)  
A.J. Langer (*Alice*)  
Ving Rhames (*Leroy*)  
Sean Whalen (*Roach*)  
Bill Cobbs (*Grandpapa Booker*)  
Kelly Jo Minter (*Ruby*)  
Jeremy Roberts (*Spenser*)  
Conni Marie Brazelton (*Mary*)  
Joshua Cox (*young cop*)  
John Hostetter (*veteran cop*)  
John Mahon (*police sergeant*)  
Teresa Velarde (*social worker*)  
George Parker (*attic cop*)  
Yan Birch (*stairmaster*)  
Wayne Daniels, Michael Kopelow (*stairpeople*)  
Bubba, Schultz, Zeke (*Prince*)  
Nick Cramer, Robert Michael, Earl Dax, David Robinson, Gregory Kavtzer, Daniel Windtree, Burton Pierce (*people under the stairs*)

USA 1991  
102 mins

---

## IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

### BFI Expanded: World Premiere: UNIQUE

Fri 25 Feb 19:00 and 20:30

### Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Ali & Ava + Q&A with writer-director Clio Barnard

Mon 28 Feb 20:20

### Preview: Rebel Dread + Q&A with Don Letts

Thu 3 Mar 18:00

### Doctor Who: Revelation of the Daleks

Sat 5 Mar 12:00

### Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 7 Mar 18:10

### Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: a True Things + Q&A with director Harry Wootliff

Mon 7 Mar 20:35

### TV Preview: Gentleman Jack Series 2 + Q&A with writer Sally Wainwright and actors Suranne Jones and Sophie Rundle

Wed 9 Mar 18:10

### TV Preview: Inside No. 9 + Q&A with creators Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton, and executive producer Adam Tandy

Fri 11 Mar 20:40

## REGULAR PROGRAMME

### Relaxed Screening: Keep the Change + discussion

Mon 28 Feb 20:10

### Projecting the Archive: A Question of Adultery + intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting

Tue 1 Mar 18:20

### Member Picks: Evita

Fri 4 Mar 17:50

### African Odysseys: From the Caribbean to West Africa:

#### Edric Connor's Travelogues

Sun 6 Mar 14:00-16:30

### Silent Cinema: The Joker (Jokeren) + intro by BFI Curator

#### Bryony Dixon

Sun 6 Mar 15:00

### Experimenta: Ticket of No Return + pre-recorded intro remembering

#### Tabea Blumenschein with Ulrike Ottinger

Tue 8 Mar 18:00

### Film Wallahs: The Beatles and India + intro by co-director Pete

#### Compton and producer Reynold D'Silva

Thu 10 Mar 18:15

---

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780