

SPOTLIGHT

THE STUFF OF SCREAMS

Heather Langenkamp just wanted a movie role. She became the face of a new kind of slasher film.

BY TRACIE WHITE

i **N THE SPRING** of 1984, **Heather Langenkamp**, then a Stanford undergraduate, flew to Los Angeles for an acting gig. She had no idea how much it would shape her life.

“Nobody wanted me to do it, that’s what’s so funny,” says Langenkamp, ’86, now famous for playing teenager Nancy Thompson, who, in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, triumphs over one of the most famous screen villains in history: Freddy Krueger. “There was a huge stigma as an actor to have been a ‘scream queen’ in a horror movie back then. But I loved the script, and I wanted to get paid, and I thought, ‘Oh, no one will ever see it.’”

Nightmare became a top horror franchise, spanning nine films, as well as comic books and a short-lived TV series. As the film celebrates its 40th anniversary, Langenkamp is crisscrossing the country, signing autographs at horror conventions and rebooting her acting

career. *Nightmare* is broadly considered one of the all-time classic horror flicks, and Nancy representative of a new kind of slasher heroine—one who faces the bad guy at the end of the film and lives to scream another day.

“I really had no sense of how great a role it would be and how it would really affect my entire life,” says Langenkamp. As for being a “scream queen,” a role once seen as a kiss of career death? “I embrace it.”

Born in Tulsa, Okla., Langenkamp got hooked on acting at her all-girls high school in Washington, D.C., where her family lived during the Carter administration while her father, R. Dobie Langenkamp, ’58, worked for the U.S. Department of Energy. The summer she turned 18, she was back in Oklahoma and, while working for the *Tulsa*



Tribune, saw a newspaper ad seeking local extras for Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Outsiders*.

“I put my name in, and I got hired,” she says. “I loved it.”

It was so exciting to be on the set. These big trailers, big lights, beautiful wardrobe. Cute guys were everywhere—Matt Dillon, Rob Lowe—driving around Tulsa in their cars, and we were all chasing them.” She nabbed a bit part in another Coppola movie, *Rumble Fish*, which was filmed in Tulsa the same summer. She didn’t make the final cut of either film, but the experience made her hungry for more. After arriving at Stanford in 1982, she’d regularly fly to L.A. for auditions, writing papers during breaks in the day. She stopped out of school multiple times for movie roles. “My parents were not thrilled,” she says. “This world of Hollywood was just completely foreign to them.” But she was



determined to remain in both spheres and proudly paid most of her way through Stanford with income from acting. Still, when now-renowned horror filmmaker Wes Craven cast her as Nancy, she (as well as her on-screen boyfriend, Johnny Depp) was little known. Langenkamp fit the bill: the smart, suburban girl who outwits Krueger after he hunts down her friends one by one in their dreams, which kills them in reality. Erik Piepenburg, who writes a column on horror films for the *New York Times*, says Nancy stood out by standing up to the bad guy. “Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween*, for example, was kind of bumbling, somewhat helpless,” he says. “Nancy was unafraid. She fought Freddy in a way people found refreshing.”

Langenkamp, at 20, did not know she was entering the world of horror at a pivot point. Slasher films, a particularly formulaic and gruesome subgenre of horror usually characterized by a killer stalking and slaying a group of people, had often been dismissed by critics. But as the films gained traction in the '70s and '80s, so, too, did a new type of heroine. Unlike the passive, usually rescued scream queens of yesteryear—think Fay Wray’s Ann Darrow in *King Kong* (1933)—these new women survived the villain, typically by using their heads. This victim-hero is “the survivor, or Final Girl,” wrote Carol Clover, now a professor emerita of medieval studies and American film at UC Berkeley, in her 1992 book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. “She alone finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B).” The Final Girl, she wrote, was a surprisingly bright spot for feminism at the time, emerging from the unlikeliest of places. And Nancy Thompson was “the grittiest” of them all.

Langenkamp describes the trope a bit differently. “She’s usually the one who’s more squared away, and she’s more serious. She might have brown hair, and she’s not, like, the Hollywood gorgeous babe.” To Langenkamp, Nancy’s strength, not her gender, is the salient

characteristic. “It really has to do with her being this strong young person who finds a way to fight Freddy in her own dreams.”

Langenkamp appeared in two more installments of the *Nightmare* franchise—*A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* in 1987 and *New Nightmare* in 1994—both penned, and the latter directed, by Craven.



Langenkamp keeps a photo of Atticus, '13, hanging across from her desk at the studio. He's standing tall, grinning widely next to a model of a horrific-looking burned dead body. It makes Langenkamp smile.

In a 2011 documentary, *I Am Nancy*, Langenkamp asked him about the underpinnings of the role. “When I did *Swamp Thing* way back with Adrienne Barbeau,” he said, “my daughter, who was young then, asked me, ‘Why do women always fall down? Women aren’t so clumsy.’ That planted the germ of the idea that became the main thrust of *Nightmare*. I wanted to get away from all those boy heroes. I wanted somebody who was strong and willing to face the truth.

And I think women do that more than men.”

Craven also played a role in Langenkamp meeting her husband. At the 1988 wrap party for Craven’s zombie flick *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Langenkamp was introduced to David LeRoy Anderson, a special effects artist. Anderson proposed the following year, while Langenkamp was visiting him on the set of *Pet Sematary*, and they married in 1990. As her acting career ebbed and flowed, Langenkamp began to help run Anderson’s special effects makeup studio.

AFX Studio, in Van Nuys, Calif., looks like the kind of place where a two-time Oscar winner for Best Makeup—Anderson shared the award in 1997 for *The Nutty Professor* and 1998 for *Men in Black*—might work. It’s filled with molds for missing limbs, exploding heads, and broken jaws. “My husband is the designer and creator of all of the monsters and makeup effects that we do, and I am the humble CFO,” Langenkamp says.

The couple had two children, Atticus and Isabelle. By working with her husband, Langenkamp could keep the whole family in one place, even while Anderson was on location. “I started doing that when we worked on *Dawn of the Dead*,” she says. These days, most monsters are computer generated—“everything has to be so realistic now,” Langenkamp says—so AFX focuses more on makeup: fake noses, scars, and the like. But there are still some elaborate models to be made. “In *American Horror Story*, Twisty the clown had his head shot off, and we made a fake head.”

When Atticus was a sophomore at Stanford, in 2010, the family plunged into a real-life nightmare. Atticus was studying abroad in Berlin when he collapsed. Langenkamp immediately flew to Germany and learned that her son had a brain tumor. After surgery, he insisted on returning to Stanford while he underwent chemotherapy. “He was skateboarding to class, learning to be a DJ at parties, living the dream life of a Stanford student except for the fact that he had brain cancer,” Langenkamp says. Acting was put on the back burner for nearly a decade while

she focused on family and running the studio. “Being [an actor] then would’ve been really hard, because you’re often going places at the spur of the moment,” she says. “I really felt like Dave and I needed to be really close to home, and we all needed to do whatever was necessary to make everything run smoothly and so that Atticus could have what he needed.” After graduation and with his cancer in remission, Atticus launched a product design firm for a short time, then took a position as an engineer at AFX Studio. In 2017 the cancer returned, and in 2018 he died, at the age of 26.

Langenkamp keeps a photo of Atticus, ’13, hanging across from her desk at the studio. He’s standing tall, grinning widely, next to a model of a horrific-looking burned dead body. It makes Langenkamp smile. “He worked on *American Horror Story* with us for about 2½ years. And we just had such a great time.”

A few years later, Langenkamp says, she felt emotionally strong enough to reenter the acting world and was offered a role in the Netflix series *The Midnight Club*. When she read the script, she discovered her character had a son who died of brain cancer. She burst into tears. “I kind of felt like I had put it out in the universe that I really wanted a great role, you know? My career up to that date had been so spotty and so weird. I mean, it makes you get goosebumps when you think of things like that.” The series was canceled after one season, but critics called it well-acted and heartfelt.

So now Langenkamp is back to auditioning, as well as celebrating the campy blood and gore that accompanies her most famous role. Her parents came to appreciate the significance of *Nightmare* in her life long ago. Her mom, Mary Alice, was particularly proud in 2021 when the film was admitted to the United States National Film Registry at

the Library of Congress, an honor reserved for movies with cultural, historical, or aesthetic significance.

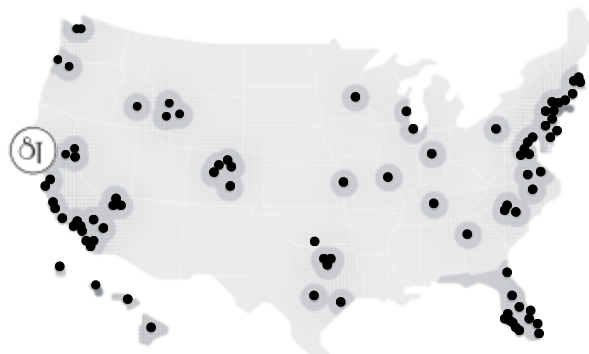
Langenkamp revels in all of it. “And I love to scream,” she says. “It’s great for stress relief.” She particularly appreciates her fans, who she says have a deep connection with Nancy Thompson. Nancy isn’t as famous as Freddy, but people embrace her “because she uses her mind,” Langenkamp says. “She’s very resourceful and logical about how to attack Freddy and how to get rid of him in her life.” And there’s no sign of that fandom slowing now: A 4K, ultra-high-definition edition of *Nightmare* drops October 1 for a new generation to discover. Langenkamp has no regrets about saying yes 40 years ago to starring in a slasher flick. It turned out to be a dream job. ■

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