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357

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SEASON 2 EXCLUSIVE!

CHUCKY!

The killer doll
takes it to church

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sins Of The Father

**Religion and family go head-to-head as
Chucky returns to wreak revenge once more**

WORDS: DARREN SCOTT





Jake (Zackary Arthur), Devon (Björgvin Arnarson).

YOU KNOW THAT spooky season has officially begun when you sit down with *Child's Play* creator, writer, director and executive producer Don Mancini. Why? Because it means that his demon doll is heading back to stalk us, just in time for Halloween.

After seven big-screen outings, Chucky came to terrorise television screens last October in his first self-titled series. Not a reboot, not a remake but a continuation of the 34-year legacy – with all the complicated and kooky bits included – the show was a smash hit.

When we catch up with Mancini – called from “a little emergency” on set that we can only imagine has ginger hair – he’s shooting the last block of *Chucky* season two, comprising the final two episodes, seven and eight. “Knock wood,” he grins, “I’m feeling good about it. I think fans are gonna dig it.”

The studio and network, he says, have been incredibly supportive from the beginning of the journey to reanimate Chucky once more. This, he notes, is because of a genuine love from them for the character and the genre. “That’s not always the case,” he chuckles, citing that “horror/slasher stuff” might not necessarily always be people’s “thing”.

“I’ve been around a long time now – a lot of these executives grew up on Chucky. So they’re just genuinely enthusiastic about the character and the franchise and the show.”

FAMILY AFFAIR

The success of the first season, Mancini considers, probably makes them “feel even more bullish about it.” But as we discussed way back in *SFX* 344, it was never taken for granted that the show would land, let alone guarantee a second run.

“I felt good,” Mancini says of his pre-season one thoughts, “but going into any new venture,

particularly with an established film franchise, making the transition into another medium inherently there is some roll of the dice there. You just don’t know for sure. So that was always a little interesting and stressful and thrilling, but people liked it, fortunately.”

Those same thrills have brought him back for more, with a promise to expand things further still, pulling more from the franchise’s legacy. “I always was excited about the opportunity of having the sheer storytelling real estate and time to delve into relationships, and the backstories of characters like Charles Lee Ray and Tiffany, that fans have been wondering about over the years,” he explains.

“Now of course, with this season, we’re finding out what became of Glen and Glenda. So I think television is the perfect medium to explore all of these different avenues.”

The origins of Chucky’s queer child were first told in 2004’s *Seed Of Chucky*. Now *Chilling Adventures Of Sabrina* star Lachlan



A puppeteer gives Chucky his starring moment.



Lexy (Alyvia Alyn Lind) and Nadine (Bella Higginbotham).

Watson joins the cast to continue their story. “Lachlan is amazing,” Mancini enthuses. “They’re *such* an amazing actor. It’s really been thrilling bringing back these characters that we created two decades ago. As you know, that movie, when it first opened, was not successful. Which was, of course, disappointing.

“But over the years, it’s really sort of come into its own in a way, which has been very gratifying. I love hearing from queer kids, gay kids, trans kids telling me how much Glen/Glenda meant to them. So to be able to explore those characters again, and pick up where they might be in their lives now, it’s been really fun, challenging and interesting. And Lachlan, as I said, is just the perfect performer to do this.”

In perhaps a sign of times finally changing, there’s been an outpouring of love for the queer

“These characters, they’re not tortured in the traditional ways of queer characters”

elements of the series. As a gay man working in the industry, could he have anticipated that?

“Well, I hoped for it, of course,” he considers, “because it’s something that we’ve been doing for many years now, since before it was in vogue. Starting with *Bride Of Chucky* and *Seed Of Chucky*, we started leaning into queer themes, queer characters and queer stories. I’ve just kept that going over the years.

“It’s so nice. Just as a marker of where we are, culturally, now that we can do this, and depict a sweet teenage gay romance. These characters, they’re not tortured in the traditional ways of queer characters – it almost seemed like they had to be tortured in certain ways. And now they’re not, their love fulfils them and helps them defeat the monster and it was also just sort of fun that the monster himself,” he bursts out laughing, “he’s cool with it. That’s not his problem with any of these characters. He just gets frustrated if he can’t get them to do his bidding, or if he can’t corrupt them and get them to kill, but it’s like, ‘Oh, you’re gay? Like, I’ll kill anybody.’”

LIKE A PRAYER

Unsurprisingly, this continues in the new season, with Mancini setting the action in a location that will create friction from the start.

“A lot of the story takes place at this Catholic reform school where the kids get sent,” he says. “Why did they get sent there? You’ll find out when the season begins! But yes, it’s very connected to Chucky, of course. One of the things I’ve liked doing over the years with the franchise is delving into different subgenres of horror, and one of my favourite subgenres of horror has always been the Catholic-based spooky horror movies like *The Omen* and *The Exorcist*.

“So being able to put Chucky in that world – Chucky with priests and nuns and Chucky in a mass, in confession, intersecting all of that stuff, that was really a lot of fun. I think that people will get a kick out of that.”

This, obviously, is going to spell trouble for Jake and Devon in more ways than one... “Of course! Yes, of course, that’s one of the first →



Lexy's surely too old to be playing with dolls...?

issues that comes up for Jake and Devon when they arrive. Of course they know that Catholics are not exactly down with the gays, and how does that affect their relationship when they are now stuck in an institution that officially rejects them, officially tells them that they're wrong?

"I was raised in the Catholic Church, so that's something that I dealt with as a young gay kid," he explains. "With season one, and the character of Jacob, it was more autobiographical than I'd ever been before. Which was a little scary, in a way. But I think it paid off because people responded to the realness of that stuff, with Jake and his father and Jake and Devon."

"So I wanted to continue to explore that. This is something that lots of gay kids, whether it's in the Catholic religion or whatever, a lot of religious institutions, as we know, are not down with the gays. So yeah, it's something to deal with."

It sounds, we wager, that season two has been even more cathartic for him.

"Yeah," he laughs loudly. "It's been incredibly cathartic. Actually, not just for me, but a lot of people on the show behind the camera and in front of it. A lot of us turned out to be lapsed Catholics," he laughs again. "So I think a lot of people are identifying with it and working out some chips that they've had on their shoulders for a while."

"We continue to explore the relationship between the boys and seeing how religion can potentially impact that. Then there are other things that affect their relationship during the course of this season. I don't want to give away too much, but it's very important to keep that relationship a focus of the show."

Devon Sawa returns... but who is he playing?



Relationships have also formed a huge part of this season off-set, with Mancini now having an established rapport with his new and younger ensemble.

"It's been fun getting to know them, and then writing toward their talents because on season one we wrote everything and then cast," he explains. "But with season two, I got to do with the kids as I've been doing with Brad, Jennifer, Fiona, Alex and Christine for decades, which is being able to write to specific actors strengths and interests."

"So for example, Björgvin, who plays Devon, that character in season one was very earnest. And Björgvin played that beautifully. But in real life Björgvin, I mean, he is earnest and sincere but also he's fucking hilarious. He's such a funny guy and he has such a funny dry

sense of humour. So this year, we wrote to that, so we could exploit that a little bit."

GAGGED AND BOUND

As for what else is in store for the current season, he's obviously reluctant to go into spoiler territory. "We do up the ante. One thing I can say, because it's been set up at the end of the last season – there are 72 Chuckys on this truck. Andy has commandeered it but then he's held hostage by the Tiffany doll. So what does that perhaps imply?" he laughs loudly, aware of the chaos he's about to unleash on his long-suffering characters. "I can point to that element as a hint as to how we up the ante."

He's also excited about a *Bound* reunion on the show, bringing back stars from the Wachowskis' 1996 noir-crime movie.



Lexy's sister is too young to be playing with knives.

"That was really exciting for me to reunite Jen with Gina Gershon and Joey [Pantoliano] from *Bound*. So exciting to work with Meg Tilly as well. I've known them a bit over the years through Jen, but getting to work with them as actors, that was really thrilling because all of those actors have meant so much to me, as they have to most film fans over the years. So I think that's something fans – and also particularly queer fans – are really going to like, is seeing those actors reunited."

And what about the future – is the seed of Chucky firmly planted this time?

"We're all down for season three, if the audience is down with it," Mancini states. "We definitely have new places to go with these characters, new stories to tell and themes to explore. So, fingers crossed."

He says that he has a plan in "broad strokes" as that's part of the process of pitching a show to a network. "They want to know ideally, can this go the distance, can this sustain for five or so years? For season three, it's getting more solidified. I'm ready," he laughs. "I'm ready to go. All they have to do is give us the word."

Mancini's love of working in this medium shines through. He says that it's not just the ability to tell longform stories – he

genuinely loves the production side of things. "You shoot an eight-episode television show, you're shooting for 100-plus days," he says when talking about previous experience of 30-50 day shoots for one 90-minute instalment. "It's kind of a marathon and I think you have to have a certain endurance. I was a runner as a kid so I have that kind of training in a way, an appreciation for long-term goals."

He likens the process of working with all different departments to being a theatre kid in high school. "How joyous that is! That joy of being part of a troupe, or repertory company, and you put on different plays, and you get to know each other as a family, behind the scenes, all of that I love."

"We've sustained that for decades with the movies. But on the TV show, we're just doing more of it, we're just spending more time together making stuff. We're all like, 'Hey, I could do this for another five or seven years, couldn't you?' And they're like, 'Fuck yeah, this is great!' So that's another reason I selfishly hope we get to go further."

What about plans for other Chucky ventures away from television? "We have plans for diversification and I can say absolutely nothing more about it!" he chuckles. "Another thing I



Lexy, sister Caroline and their mum Michelle.

love about television," he says, bringing the conversation back to the here and now, "is that it can accommodate my own sort of restlessness with regard to tone, because I like to range widely. I like dealing with the earnest teenage romance and the seriousness of some of those queer themes, and I love dealing with suspense and tension and horror, but I also love comedy. I love character comedy."

"I love dialogue. It's always really important to me that the talk in the show, and in the movies, is memorable. So I hope that fans will find all of that new stuff that we're giving them, that it's still a delicious meal, delicious enough to want yet another course."

Father, we give thanks for this meal... ●

Chucky is on USA/Syfy from 5 October. UK details are TBC.



“you’d think you wouldn’t be scared of it, but he’s freaky...”

ZACKARY ARTHUR
is Jake Wheeler

What was your first experience of seeing horror on the screen?

When I was younger, my parents didn’t really let me watch movies from the horror genre. It kind of makes sense. But of course, as I got older, I loved watching horror movies. I think my first time I was really freaked out was for an *Annabelle* commercial. And I was nine years old or something. I jumped behind the couch because I was so scared.

Did you know early on that Jake and Devon would get together?

One of the audition scenes was when Jake and Devon meet. So I already knew that that was going to be part of the storyline and also Don expanded upon it. I actually ended up going through some chemistry reads. I remember getting on with Björgvin, and it just worked so smooth, and I kind of knew that he would be the one who would get the part and it’d be great. And, you know, it ended up being great.

The response to the couple has been great...

Oh, it’s been really good. I’m receiving messages from people saying how much they related to the character, and how much it’s helped them. And honestly, seeing that makes my day. The thing about this show is that the characters are gay, and that’s it. It doesn’t throw it in your face, you know what I mean? It’s just, like, they’re just living it and that’s what they are. I think that’s what’s great about Don’s writing.

Did any of the OG cast give you advice?

When I first met Alex [Vincent, who plays

Jake (Zackary Arthur): not happy with his new school.

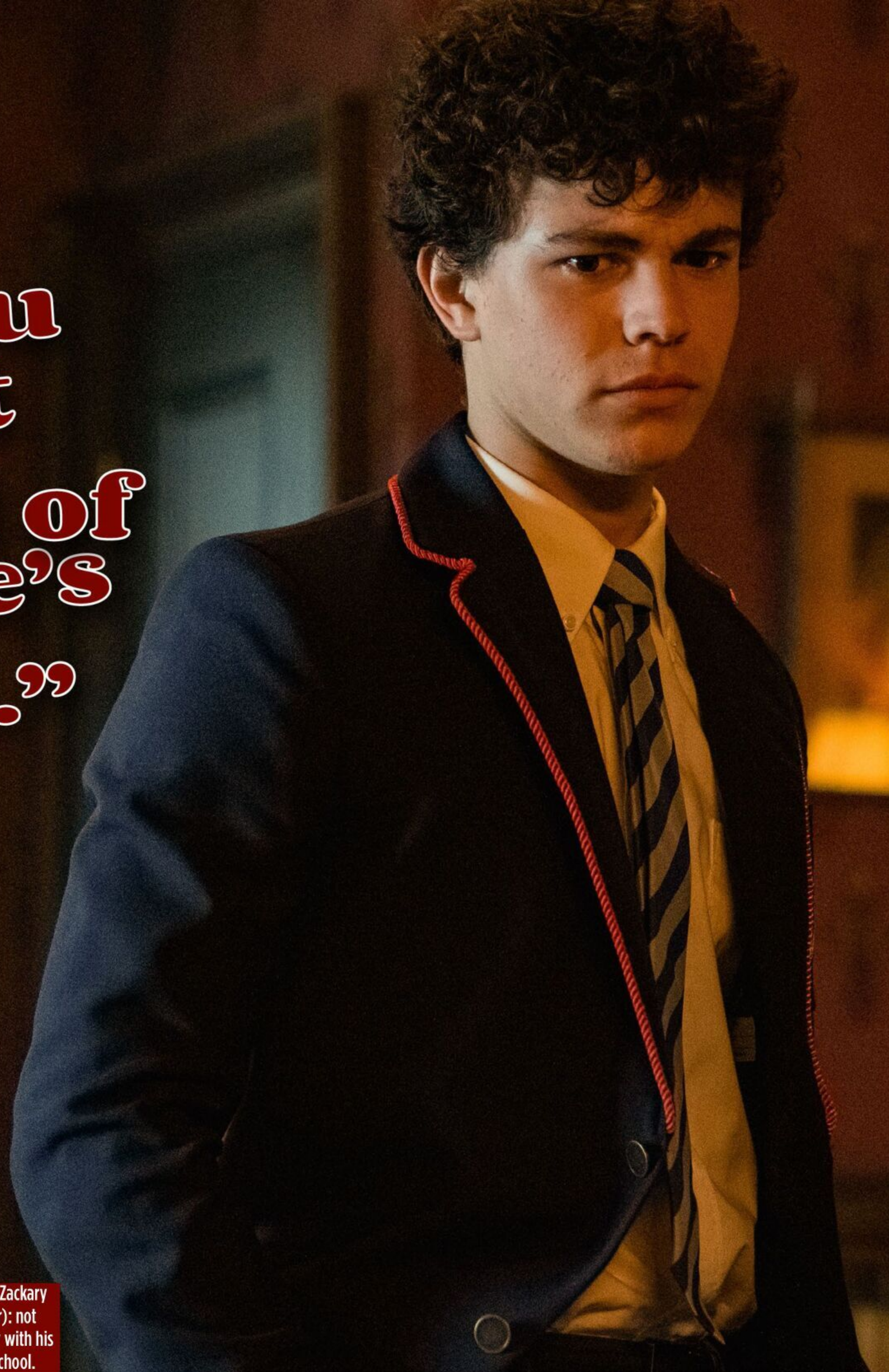
“I’m not worried about coming back every 40 years, because honestly, I really enjoy it”

Andy Barclay], we had a conversation about how long he’s been with the Chucky family – there was actually a line in the first season where he says, “My earliest memories are of Chucky.” He told me that that was actually kind of really true for him. That’s his earliest

memories, so it was pretty crazy for him to come back 40 years later and do it again. This set has been the greatest moments of my life. Everybody’s so nice and it’s just so welcoming. It doesn’t even really feel like a job. It’s like a summer camp. I’m not worried about coming back every 40 years, because honestly, I really enjoy it.

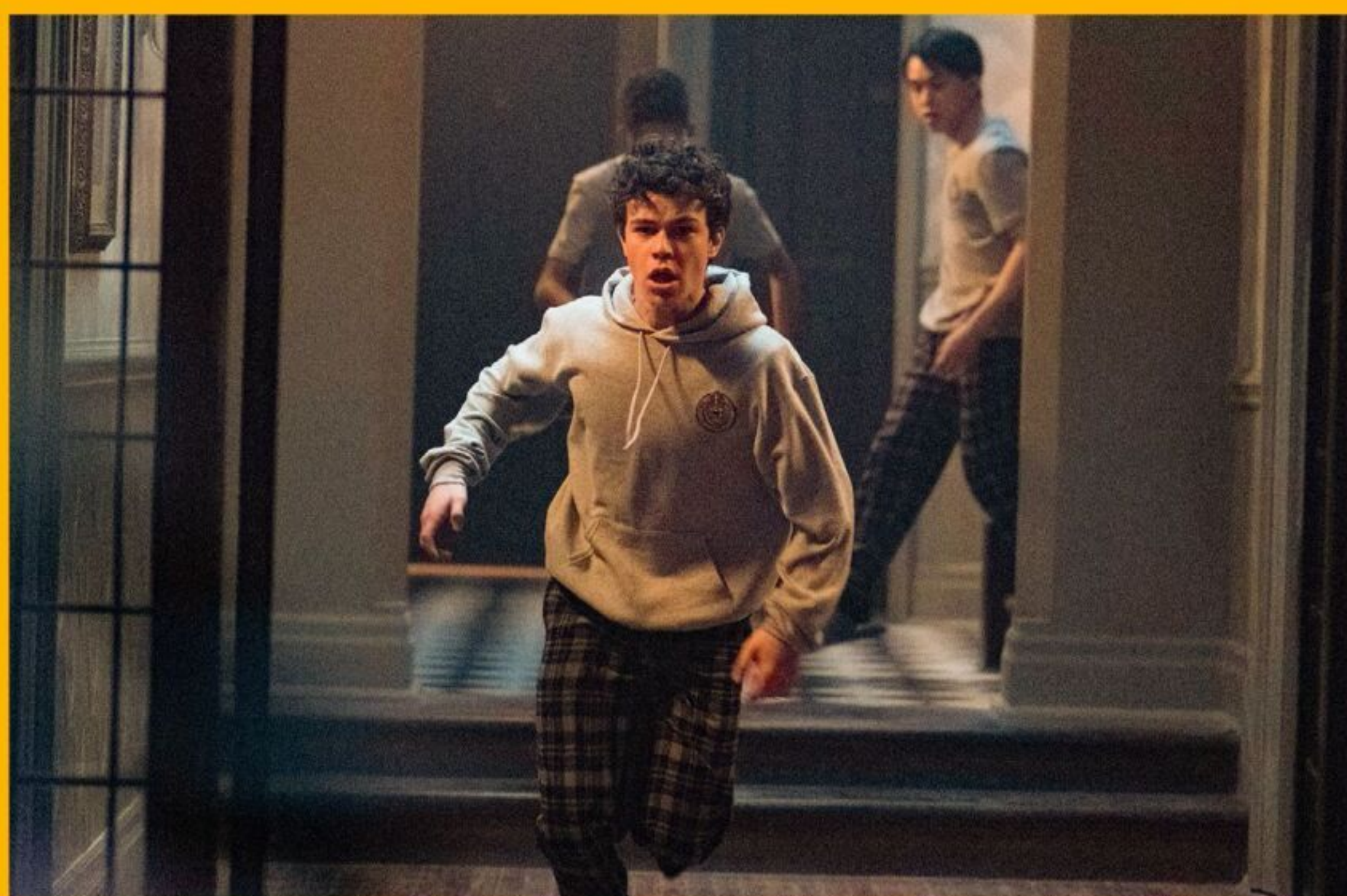
Do you share any of Jake’s character traits?

I guess a lot of people can relate to the fact that he was bullied. I remember a long time ago, when I was in elementary school, I sort of had a similar experience. I’d say he’s a little bit of a nerd. He’s a little bit of a geek. That’s definitely



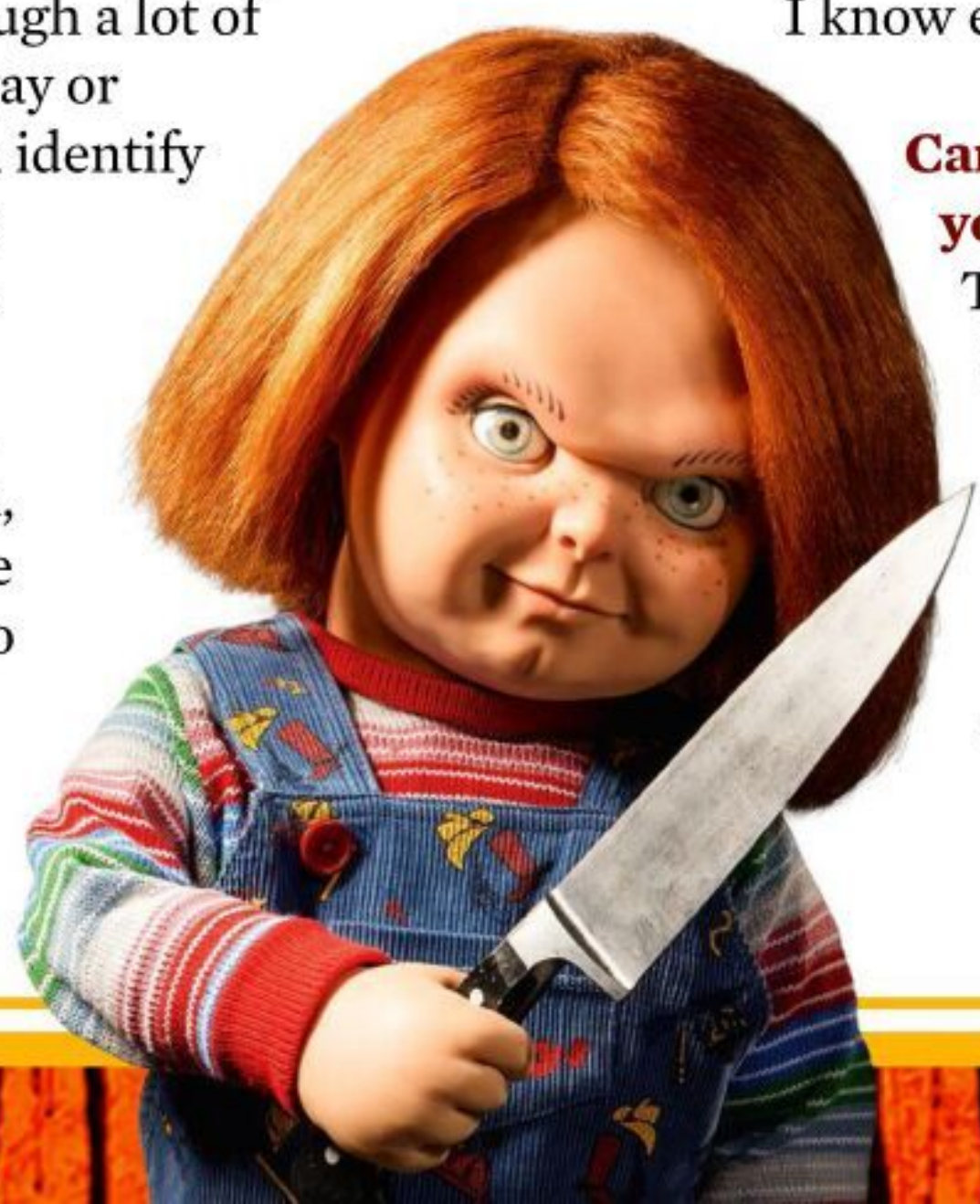


Lexy and Nadine aren't ecstatic, either.



How many times: no running in the corridors!

qualities that I have. I like making music in my spare time and I guess I would say I'm very enthusiastic about it to a point where I'm nerdy. So I guess we both have that shared quality. Jake goes through a lot of shit, you know? One way or another most of us can identify with him in some way. I think maybe that has something to do with how popular it's been. But this second season, you know, there's more shit with everybody. So get ready for that.



What geeky thing are you a fan of?

I have to say this one's a little embarrassing. Actually, no, it's not embarrassing. I'm gonna own it. I think I've seen *Lion King* about 60 to 70 times. I'm not even kidding you. I've seen that movie way too many times. And that is definitely my geek movie. I know every line, I know every song...

Can you remember the first time you met Chucky?

The first time I had to work with him was actually on the first day! I'm holding the doll at school, and I remember I picked it up for the first time and I just looked into his eyes and I was just like, "Oh my god". You would

think that seeing it, seeing how it works in real life, the puppeteers and stuff, that you wouldn't be scared of it, but he's freaky. The doll is all practical effects too. There's no CGI, it's all done right in front of you. They have the voice of Brad Dourif playing while you're in the scene, so it just feels like you're acting with another person. And it's really freaky. They set his voice up on a speaker and you hear it from somewhere in the room. So it's just like Brad Dourif's the voice of God coming down the middle of the scene.

This season has returning legacy characters such as Glen/Glenda...

Lachlan [Watson], they're sooo amazing. I met them in the hair trailer and they were just so nice, I think we talked for like, 40 minutes. We're always hanging out on set, and playing pool. It's funny, because we're always giving each other shit the whole time. It's kind of how we talk. And also, Bella Higginbotham, she's coming on this season [as Nadine] and she's great. We've all been hanging out on the weekends, and we've all got this strong relationship.

What's been the craziest thing you've done in season two?

There are a lot of stunts that I get to do this season. It's been really fun for me, because I love doing my own stunts. That's all I can really say! I'm actually filming today. And I was about to say what I was filming but I realised that that would be *really* big spoilers! This season, we've been upgraded. The writers really found a crazy way to end up this season. ●