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## CAST

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**JOHN GOODMAN** as Lawrence Woolsey

**CATHY MORIARTY** as Ruth Corday / Carole

**SIMON FENTON** as Gene Loomis

**OMRI KATZ** as Stan

**KELLIE MARTIN** as Sherry

**LISA JAKUB** as Sandra

**ROBERT PICARDO** as Howard the Theater Manager

**LUCINDA JENNEY** as Anne Loomis

**JESSE LEE SOFFER** as Dennis Loomis

**JESSE WHITE** as Mr. Spector

**JAMES VILLEMAIRE** as Harvey Starkweather

**DAVID CLENNON** as Jack

**DICK MILLER** as Herb Denning

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## CREW

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Directed by **JOE DANTE**

Produced by **MICHAEL FINNELL**

Co-Producer **PAT KEHOE**

Screenplay by **CHARLIE HAAS**

Story by **JERICO** and **CHARLIE HAAS**

Director of Photography **JOHN HORA, A.S.C.**

Editor **MARSHALL HARVEY**

Production Designer **STEVEN LEGLER**

Music by **JERRY GOLDSMITH**

# MATINEE

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# What have you got for me? - On Joe Dante's *Matinee*

by David Jenkins

Within the opening five minutes of Joe Dante's 1993 film *Matinee*, two young brothers view the trailers to a pair of apocryphal horror movies. The first is at their local cinema, a single screen picture palace built to bring some west coast glamour to the rows of suburban tract housing. It's for an interactive, cheapjack scare flick called *Mant!*, the latest pack-em-in product by stogie chomping showman, Lawrence Woolsey (John Goodman). The second is broadcast live on television. It's a speech delivered by President John F. Kennedy warning of inflamed political tensions between America and Russia. The first presents the possibility of humanity's destruction at the hands of a radioactive man-ant hybrid who, upon being accidentally electrified, begins to physically enlarge at an alarming rate. The second presents the possibility of humanity's destruction due to game of nuclear proliferation, with confirmation of the apocalypse resting on whether a Russian ship bearing a cargo of warheads manages to reach the strategic stronghold of Cuba. Both promise terror beyond our wildest imagination.

*Matinee* takes place in Florida's Key West during October of 1962. It suggests that, when faced with the end of the world, people will still make time to catch a quick movie. It's a film that has gotten richer, sweeter and fiercer over time, not so much down any radical formal innovations, more to do with what it has to say about how we consume movies, and how movies are given to us to consume. It's a comparative study of real and fictional armageddons that are conjoined by the mildly unwholesome exploits of dorky schoolboy and budding cinephile, Gene Loomis – played by the British actor Simon Fenton (a strange, mature-beyond-his-years doppelgänger to TV's Doogie Howser MD, played by Neil Patrick Harris). As clean-cut Gene ambles around his neighbourhood, everywhere he goes is tinged with the prospect of death: futile “duck and cover” rituals are enforced by teachers at his high school as air raid sirens wail; punch-ups over the last ever box of shredded wheat on Earth are witnessed at the local supermarket; and a picturesque sea front is now home to scads of heavy artillery. Yet the ever-cool Gene seems comfortably numb towards the violence that surrounds him, his worryingly mellow performance perhaps the film's only suggestion (beyond historical reality) that all will be okay in the end. But like any horror movie worth its salt, the realities of a nuclear firestorm hit Gene hardest in his dreams.

Woolsey himself is an homage to mid-century movie showmanship, the point at which cinema drunkenly transcended narrative drama and celebrity affiliation to become more like a circus sideshow. Innovations in this area were exemplified by William Castle's 1959 film, *The Tingler*, a story that's been crookedly engineered around the notion that people go to the cinema to scream. That film's arthropod-like beastie is weakened by the sound of screaming, and its fourth wall-breaking climax in which the monster crawls into a cinema during a silent film screening is directly mirrored by the finale of *Mant!* in which a costumed stooge dashes into the auditorium to shake up the patrons with an abrupt live theatre interlude. Beyond this more literal overlap with countercultural film history, the film's dramatic roots snake back to Orson Welles' infamous 1938 radio adaptation of HG Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, an early example of the media's role in articulating the end of days and the ensuing panic it sparked.

As with Welles' spoken-word opus, *Matinee* is a film which explores the nature of fear. Movies harness the pleasurable and addictive properties of fear, while political reality represents fear as something that is entirely incomprehensible and abstract. Either way, Dante argues that we can't put an empirical value on fear; we can't measure the fear caused by one thing against the fear caused by another. It's also a screed against artistic censorship, asking why children should be exposed to the horrors of everyday reality and remain guarded from the horrors offered up by a piece of expressionist fiction. The director's singular 1998 feature *Small Soldiers* ended up becoming a literal embodiment of this conundrum, when commercial partners claimed that the film was too violent for its intended pre-teen audience. Paradoxically, the violence in the film is all the more shocking within the context of what appears to be a cheery and colourful family entertainment.

On a political level, the film is too clever and nuanced to function as a blunt polemical statement by its maker. There's a scene early on where Woolsey hires in two old pals (played by the filmmaker John Sayles and Dante regular Dick Miller) to act as the members of an outraged conservative pressure group whose protestations regarding the scandalous levels of violence in *Mant!* are intended to pique the interest of harried locals. This can be seen as Dante's nudging liberal barb at the right wing's tendency to whip up hysterical reactions to art that they know nothing about. Woolsey soon turns up and, handing out a few gratis tickets, claims he wants the people to see the film and decide for themselves. The men are also hectored by the left-leaning parents of Gene's soon-to-be girlfriend Sandra (Lisa Jakub), who complain that their right to choose is being denied to them. Later, having



seen the film, they're angered at how poor it was, realising they've been duped by their own sense of self-righteousness.

One of *Matinee's* most moving scenes Woolsey and Gene pounding the pavement in search of some extra parts for his personally patented "Rumble-Rama" cinema seat vibration system. The pair enter into a conversation about their status as outsiders which dovetails with their taste for schlock horror cinema. Woolsey makes a motion towards a plain brick wall and an animated insert appears. He tells the visually-assisted story of the first horror movie, in which a caveman is chased by a mammoth. When the man gets back to his cave, he decides to paint the mammoth, but as a way of enhancing his own bravery and to scare those who might see the picture, he makes "the teeth real long and the eyes real mean". To Dante, fear isn't an emotion that can exist inside a vacuum. There always needs to be the counterpoint of reality. "The country is on red alert. People are already scared," says Robert Picardo's panicky cinema manager. "Exactly!" responds Woolsey. "What a perfect time to open a new horror movie."

The subtle complexity of *Matinee* is also exemplified by Dante's ambivalent attitude towards his subject matter. His fondness for the medium is palpable, as seen in detailed, era-specific interpretations and recreations of personalities, products and fashions. But this is no gossamer-light paean to movie escapism. Rather, it poses questions about whether time spent gawping at a giant screen and shovelling popcorn and candy down our collective gullet is time that could be better spent with families or dealing with real human relations, both personal and political. The concept of "escapism" is generally thought of in a positive light – it's healthy to be able to escape the drudgery of our daily toil. But could escapism also be seen as a shirking of civic responsibility? Should we be outside, worrying about the state of the world and what we can do to improve it? The film cleverly straddles cynicism and sincerity, in love with the emotional possibilities of the medium while also depicting movies (certain types, at least) as a matter of cold manipulation, a business enterprise powered by people out to make as much filthy lucre as they can.

In an interview with DVDTalk.com conducted to coincide with the original 2010 DVD release of *Matinee*, Dante seemed lightly nostalgic for the era during which the film takes place. It wasn't just that the movie-going experience was richer because there was more to it – more features, more shorts, more coming attractions, more adverts, and all for less money. It was that people seemed to have more free time to lose themselves in movies, that





settling down in a fleapit for the best part of an entire afternoon would not overlap with other daily responsibilities. What makes *Matinee* so great is its refusal to assume a pointed stance on the true value of cinema-going. Sure, it gives us sympathetic characters and places them in a situation where a viewer pines for their survival. But there's an undertow of pessimism, of agitation that the system has stopped working. Just as a symbolic nuclear deterrent has reached a precipice where two heads of state are goading one another for a reaction, cinema too has become a mechanism that requires nothing more than the harvesting of primal, in-the-moment emotions.

Though the film is a period piece, it still has a lot to say about how we consume movies in the modern age. "Fight Pay TV" reads a sign on the cinema marquee, representing exhibitors' genuine fear that their business model is in mortal danger due to the rise of home entertainment. Woolsey himself is a conflation of Alfred Hitchcock and William Castle, filmmakers whose work was made specifically for consumption if not on the big screen, then certainly in a rowdy communal environment. Nowadays, movies themselves are not enough to get people through the doors, so screenings are "eventised" with added filmmaker Q&As, fancy-dress screenings, quote-along screenings, food-themed screenings, 3D screenings, anything that might entice potential audiences away from their plasma screens. It's actually somewhat ironic that 35mm film, having been displaced as an industry standard in the mid-00s, is now being used as a marketing tool to play on audience nostalgia for film as a physical artform. All of this is anticipated in *Matinee*.

Dante has long been fixated with how movies are valuable cultural artefacts that perpetuate and recycle their own history. From his own auspicious beginnings working for Roger Corman's New World Pictures, there was a sense that he saw the function of movies as more than passive entertainment. Films like 1978's *Piranha* or *The Howling* are calibrated as ironic retoolings of the archetypal monster movie represented by *Mant!*. The question at the core of many of Dante's films is whether, when all's said and done, the world is actually worth saving. Certainly, it contains good people, usually young and untainted by the disease of commercialism. Perhaps the first signs of *Matinee* could be seen in 1985's *Explorers*. The film sees three young scamps build a spaceship and visit an alien craft, only to discover that the waddling, bright green beings on board have entered a state of blissful stupefaction having gorged on Earth's trashy pop culture by way of research. A fond rendition of Little Richard's 'All Around The World' is the point where Dante relents and accepts that humans might just be valuable after all. The pearls and the trash can sometimes look mighty similar.



But this culture, however we respond to or categorise it, constitutes an important fragment of society at large. Gene's father is directly involved in the Cold War manoeuvres, and as such is absent from the narrative. Not only are movies a way to soften the traumas of geopolitical discord, but they can assume the place of a person or an emotion that, for whatever reason, is missing. Though we never get to witness their relationship directly, there's a sense that Gene's movie obsession is a reaction to his father's militarist tendencies. From the moment they meet in front of the cinema, Woolsey becomes a physical father figure to Gene, his candid revelations about this artistically bankrupt industry helping to usher the boy under the wing and behind the curtain. Beyond its more overtly satirical elements, *Matinee* is a work that attempts to place a value on art. It asks what it means to individuals and how it can have a profound effect on their lives. Maybe movies aren't a form of escapism, but a simple way to fill a void. As Woolsey says with great enthusiasm, life is about walking to a cinema and saying: "Here I am. What have you got for me?"

**David Jenkins is editor of *Little White Lies* magazine. He has written on film for *Time Out London*, *The Guardian* and *Sight & Sound*.**



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## About the Transfer

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*Matinee* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with stereo sound. The HD master was provided by NBC Universal via Hollywood Classics.

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## Production Credits

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Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**

Executive Producer: **Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer: **James White**

Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**

QC Manager: **Nora Mehenni**

Subtitling: **IBF Digital**

Blu-ray Mastering: **Digital Content United**

Artist: **Graham Humphreys**

Design: **Jack Pemberton**

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## Special Thanks

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Alex Agran, Michael Brooke, Ewan Cant, Joe Dante, Elijah Drenner,  
Roland Feliciano/Lakeshore Entertainment





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