

**SPACEMAN PRESS NOTES**

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**PRESENTS  
A JOHAN RENCK FILM**

**SPACEMAN**

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**PRESS CONTACTS:**

[SpacemanUK@DDA.com](mailto:SpacemanUK@DDA.com)

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**LOGLINE**

An astronaut realizes that the marriage he left behind might not be waiting for him when he returns to Earth. Desperate to fix things with his wife, he is helped by a mysterious ancient creature he finds hiding in the bowels of his ship.

**SYNOPSIS**

Six months into a solitary research mission to the edge of the solar system, an astronaut, Jakub (Adam Sandler), realizes that the marriage he left behind might not be waiting for him when he returns to Earth.

Desperate to fix things with his wife, Lenka (Carey Mulligan), he is helped by a mysterious creature from the beginning of time he finds hiding in the bowels of his ship. Hanuš (voiced by Paul Dano) works with Jakub to make sense of what went wrong before it is too late. Directed by Johan Renck and based on the novel *Spaceman of Bohemia*, the film also stars Kunal Nayyar, Lena Olin, and Isabella Rossellini.

## KEY CREDITS

**Release date:** In select theaters on February 23, 2024 and on Netflix on March 1, 2024

**Running time:** 1 hour 46 minutes

**Director:** Johan Renck

**Cast:** Adam Sandler (Jakub), Carey Mulligan (Lenka), Kunal Nayyar (Peter), Lena Olin (Zdena), with Isabella Rossellini (Commissioner Tuma) and Paul Dano (Hanuš)

**Screenplay by:** Colby Day

**Based on the book *Spaceman of Bohemia* by:** Jaroslav Kalfař

**Production companies:** Tango, Free Association, Sinestra

**Produced by:** Michael Parets, p.g.a, Channing Tatum, Reid Carolin, Peter Kiernan, Tim Headington, Lia Buman, Max Silva

**Executive produced by:** Johan Renck, Ben Ormand, Barry Bernardi, Jaroslav Kalfař

**Director of photography:** Jakob Ihre, FSF

**Production designer:** Jan Houllévigie

**Edited by:** Scott Cummings, Simon Smith, John Axelrad

**Costume designer:** Catherine George

**Music by:** Max Richter

**Music supervisor:** Linda Cohen

**Visual effects supervisor:** Matt Sloan

**Visual supervisor:** Lauren Ritchie

**Creature designer:** Carlos Huante

**Casting by:** Nina Gold and Robert Sterne

## A CONVERSATION WITH JOHAN RENCK

**You discovered the script first and then read Jaroslav Kalfař's book [*Spaceman of Bohemia*] later.**

**What was your initial impression of the script?**

I immediately felt that this was going to be something that really worked for me. It was the diametric opposite of the project I had done right before it. It was very personal. It was a love story. And even though the script was raw, because it was pretty much the first draft of it, I felt it could be something really great. When I learned that it was based on a book, I ran out and bought the book. There was a lot of stuff in the book that made sense in terms of building the story. But what really attracted me to the script was how much it resonated with me in terms of my previous experiences, an earlier version of me that had a tendency to focus too much on things that I cared about but in the process neglected everybody around me, including those very close to me. So it felt like an atonement, almost, for me to dive into the script and try to figure out how it could make even more sense to me and to tell a story that I felt was important to talk about.

**The film has elements of science fiction, but at its heart is the love story of Jakub and Lenka. How did you navigate that balance?**

I've never, ever seen this film as sci-fi at all. It is kind of science fiction in terms of the Chopra cloud and some of the concepts around that. But to me, the story is about isolation and distance and unattainable love. It was first and foremost a love story for me, with such a unique and specific setting as being on a solo journey in space, which becomes a perfect metaphor. My production designer, Jan Houllé, whom I've worked with for many years, was always saying, "There is no space, there is no Chopra. This is obviously a man whose wife has left and who's sitting in his shitty little apartment trying to figure out what happened. And this is just this dream scenario of all of that." And I'm like, "Yeah, probably." We could have done this film in a lot of different ways. It could have been a solo mission to the Chopra cloud, or it could have been a man sailing solo across the Pacific Ocean. It's all about how do you create distance and solitude in a way that cannot be overcome.

**Why did you have Adam in mind to play Jakub?**

Adam was the perfect person to play this character, and I really wanted a performance from him that had nothing to do with the Adam Sandler we all know. We wanted somebody who wasn't inherently brooding or dark or intense. We wanted a certain warmth, but also a certain aspect of being pathetic in the sense of the character he portrays and also primarily, for the first half of the film, having a completely warped view of himself and the world. Those are all things that are not necessarily Adam Sandler-centric, and it really excited me to get to those types of tonalities with him.

It all started when I met Adam at a general meeting in Los Angeles. I've always been a massive fan of everything he has done, including his comedies. I love him. We had this conversation in Los Angeles over an hour, and I immediately felt like everything I wanted to believe about Adam Sandler he actually was. I don't think people understand that even though he comes across as funny and goofy and sweet, he's a very intelligent and profound person who loves his craft and is very bold and brave in terms of what he wants. He'll throw himself at anything if it excites him. He's not in any way restrained or withheld. He'll just make the fucking plunge.

**Adam plays a Czech astronaut but doesn't have an overt accent. Why is that?**

I never do accents in my films. I rely on letting the immersion and the characters be. Yes, Jakub Procházka is Czech, but there's the backstory that nobody knows that, in his younger years, to become an astronaut, he studied at some university in the U.S. If we would've started having everybody having some weird Czech accents, I can't do that. It is just ridiculous. And even though Jaroslav, the author of the book, is originally Czech, he wrote the book in English. These stories are universal; the locality and the nationality are secondary.

**Carey Mulligan is terrific as Lenka, Jakub's wife. What does she bring to the role?**

Carey Mulligan is perhaps the most complete actor I've ever worked with. She is incredible both for her technical skills and her tremendous authenticity. I've never seen anybody like her. There's not a frame of her in this film that is not flawless. I love her as Lenka, and it's a challenging character. Jakub is obviously the main character in that his plight and his trials and tribulations are what drive the film, but Lenka's presence is tremendously important. It's so tricky not to turn her into a device, something that motivates or is the origin of the things that Jakub is going through. Because of her powerful presence onscreen, she's such a big part of this film and does such an extraordinary job.

### **What do you like about Paul Dano's performance as Hanuš?**

Paul approached this character with his own mindset, and I think it just worked out perfectly. You have to take into consideration the versions of Hanuš we may have seen in other films throughout history, whether it's Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or even Yoda in the *Star Wars* films. This entity of Hanuš has been represented in films before, but obviously we had no interest in making another rendition of that character. And Paul understood that.

### **What do you think Hanuš represents for Jakub?**

He's a voice of reason. You can obviously think of Hanuš as being a creature from the beginning of time, or you can think of him as being manifested by Jakub in his cabin-fever state and isolation in the spaceship as a companion to talk to. I've always found that I have an ability to have these inner dialogues with myself when things are challenging or in situations of severity. And I tend to find those conversations give a lot of clarity. I think we all have that ability to have one outer you and one inner you. So obviously Hanuš is a version of that, but at the same time, he's also a creature from the beginning of time who comes and visits Jakub. We are not alone in the universe. We know there are Hanušes out there. I don't want to turn him into something drab. I want him to be this altruistic creature who believes he can help Jakub solve some of the challenges he's facing. I don't want this film to be about some kind of manifestation from a lonely astronaut. That bores me a little bit, actually.

### **What were the technical challenges, such as zero gravity, of making this movie?**

Zero gravity is difficult. Once you start going down that path, the issue is that you don't get away with anything. You have to try to find some version of authenticity in that. We used all the tricks in the book. We have everything from wires to various rigs that Adam was attached to on his hip or even things he was sitting on, depending on the framing of the shot and so on. It's tremendously uncomfortable with all these harnesses and hanging in your own body weight, and it can be painful in a way that is going to be intrusive to your performance – unless you're Adam, because he just pushed through that in an incredible way. One of the most astonishing things I noticed when I watched this film and while working on it in post-production is that Adam is hanging in these harnesses, hating every aspect of that, and acting with this incredible sincerity and authenticity.

### **What other films or art inspired you as you were making *Spaceman*?**

Everything I do comes from my life in my head. Even in my mood boards that I do for every project I do, I never, ever use an image from another film. If it's in another film, it's already been done. I have no interest in replicating it. For me, it is my own images and my tonalities and my sensibilities, and if I would by accident do something that would make somebody say, "Oh, that kind looks like that film," then I would cut it out of the film because then I made a massive mistake.

### **What do you hope audiences take away from this film?**

I can't make a film with an audience in mind. You obviously deal with certain aspects of clarity and understandability in which you can arbitrarily ask, will people understand this? But more than that, I don't know. There are lots of people who think because of Adam Sandler's name that this film will have a predominantly comical tone, which it obviously doesn't. What I like about art in any shape is for it to leave you with a thought. If I turn off a film or leave a movie theater, and there's something from that film that still kind of resonates, and the currents are still moving within me, that's a success and a requirement for me. That has been my intention with a film like this – that you don't finish it and then it's gone.

### **CAREY MULLIGAN ON LENKA AND JAKUB'S LOVE STORY**

The love story of Jakub (Adam Sandler) and Lenka (Carey Mulligan) gives *Spaceman* its emotional compass, and the film is unflinching in its portrayal of just how fraught their relationship is. While Jakub floats in space, heartsick over what's happening to his marriage back on Earth, we see their romance bloom and then wither through flashbacks.

Mulligan relished the challenge of figuring out what made Lenka and Jakub fall in love in the first place.

"Lenka is a free spirit. It's a real kind of yin-and-yang thing with her and Jakub because he has such a scientific, intellectual mind and she's so artistic and creative, and their impulses come from completely opposite places," Mulligan says. "They are very different characters, but I think the thing that connects them is that she's probably one of the only people who really knows how to pull him out of himself. She can shake his exterior and get into who he is and bring out a bit more of a child in him."

Mulligan was drawn to the fact that Lenka defied expectations we might project onto her character.

"There's that cliché of the wife who stays at home and is miserable and complains about her husband going off to do something huge," Mulligan says, "and I felt like this role was such an interesting take on that because she has real agency. She makes a decision that she's going to leave and do this alone. I thought there was real power in her deciding that she's not going to just wallow in the fact that he's not there. She's not isolating herself really. She's just isolating herself from him, and it's what she needs in that moment to survive it."

The role also marked the first time Mulligan had ever met Sandler after years of admiring his work from afar.

“I am such an enormous fan. In fact, before we shot, I watched all of his movies,” she says. “I'd never met him. I didn't meet him until I got to Prague to shoot the film. Everyone said he was the best, but he really was. I loved every day I got to spend with him as well as every day I got to act with him.”

## HANUŠ 101

We meet Hanuš 16 minutes into *Spaceman*, and once you see – and hear – him, you'll never forget him.

For an alien creature who has traveled through galaxies from the beginning of time, one who is prone to spook anyone with a fear of spiders, Hanuš is a gentle giant with a sage voice calm enough to lull you to sleep. Sure, he has six eyes, but they're soft and knowing. His body is furry, but it glides across Jakub's spaceship in search of connection with his earthly new friend – “Skinny Human,” as he's fond of calling Jakub.

Hanuš (pronounced ha-NOOSH) is the creation of author Jaroslav Kalfař, whose 2017 book, *Spaceman of Bohemia*, the film is based on.

“I knew from the beginning when I started working on the novel that I wanted Jakub to have a friend, someone up there in space with him, but not someone who's human and not someone who understands human things,” says Kalfař. “There was something really beautiful about this idea of having to explain your humanity to a creature that isn't human. We are all very different people on this earth and we misunderstand each other a lot, but in the end, we have core experiences and emotions.

“Hanuš at the beginning was just the concept of an alien creature that would give me an opportunity to make Jakub explain the most basic things about life, about love, about want, about desire, about guilt.”

The idea of Hanuš sprang from one of Kalfař's core childhood memories of visiting his grandparents' village in the Czech Republic.

“They had a lot of spiders in their house, and there were all these daddy longlegs in every corner of every room,” he remembers. “I always saw them as observers because they were just completely still for days at a time in their webs looking at us. As a kid, I got this notion in my head: Are they wondering what we're doing? Are we a soap opera for them to watch?”

“When I thought, ‘What shape should this alien creature take?’, a floating spider was the first thing that came to mind,” Kalfař adds. “And, of course, in the book he looks different because it's easier to be more impressionist in a book. So he has big red human lips and human teeth. In the film he doesn't look quite that absurdist because visually it's harder to pull off on the screen.”

Acclaimed creature designer Carlos Huante, whose work has appeared in *Arrival* and in the upcoming *Stranger Things* animated series, was enlisted to conceptualize how Hanuš should translate to the screen.

“Carlos’ work stood out because it didn’t feel like it was referenced from other movies,” says director Johan Renck. “It was way more idiosyncratic and specific and had nothing to do with things you’ve seen before.”

Huante sent Renck what felt like hundreds of sketches on paper for the character, which slowly came together over a few weeks as they landed on what color and shape his eyes should be, how his little mouth should move. In Kalfař’s book, Hanuš is described as being the size of a Doberman, but certain characteristics (such as those red lips) weren’t compatible with a cinematic space spider.

“When you walk up to him and see his face, you realize that he’s more than what you expected,” Huante says. “Now there’s dimension to the character, because you thought he was scary. But when he comes up close to you, it feels more like , ‘Oh, he talks and oh, I can see a friendly face in there somewhere. OK, maybe it’s not what I thought it was.”

Even more crucial to Hanuš’ gentle spirit is the voice. Renck found his Hanuš in Paul Dano, the *Fabelmans* star who was the filmmaker’s instinctive choice for the role.

“Paul was the first person who came up in thinking about Hanuš, because he has this peculiar cadence and careful formulation of words and this very unique voice,” Renck says. “He really went deep in terms of who Hanuš was and how to approach that character.”

Dano was intrigued by the challenge, which marked only his second time to do voice work in a film.

“For me, Hanuš felt really clear on the page. I think Johan and I saw eye to eye right away,” Dano says. “The biggest question that I had was about the process, and I hadn’t done much voice work before. I’ve done only one other thing, actually: *Where the Wild Things Are*. On this film I went to set a few times and we did some rehearsals and it was important for Adam to kind of have just a taste of the real Hanuš as well.”

Dano worked extensively with VFX supervisor Matt Sloan and animation supervisor Brett Purmal, along with the rest of the VFX team, to bring Hanuš to life.

“I remember when we talked, they asked me a lot of questions that were not technical. They were questions that were emotional or philosophical or psychological,” Dano says. “There’s a lot of technical work that goes into the VFX, but they were clearly starting from an emotional center, and it seemed like they developed their work in a holistic way. I was super inspired and impressed by that.

“I need fuel for the daydreams,” the actor adds. “So if I’m at home or in a rehearsal room with the script, it’s really important for me to be able to see the film in my head. It’s really important for me to let my imagination run with the script and with the set and with the character, and, in this case, the spider.”

In Sandler's scenes with Hanuš, the spider manifested in an amusing physical form.

"We had a massive plush toy spider that we could pin up so that Jakob Ihre, our director of photography, knew where Hanuš was going to be," Sloan says. "And we did have a 3D-printed little Hanuš face as an eye line for Adam to talk to."

Hanuš' bond with Jakub is unlike anything we've seen in other films set in space, says producer Michael Parets.

"*Spaceman* clearly belongs in a lineage of films that use space exploration and humankind's desire to go as far away as one can imagine to tell very intimate personal stories," Parets says. "But there's nothing quite like the relationship that Jakub forms with Hanuš. Whether or not you read Hanuš as real, the immediate expectation upon his arrival is that his presence poses some sort of threat to Jakub. *Spaceman* bucks the trend, using their physical intimacy to explore something much scarier: unfettered self-examination."

Carey Mulligan, who plays Lenka (Jakub's wife), says Hanuš' importance to Jakub can't be overstated.

"I imagine that, if we were all on our own for that length of time, we would invent or find in ourselves some kind of mirror. And I think Hanuš is a mirror that reflects the truth of what you've been through," Mulligan says. "He's saying honest things to you that you already know about yourself, but you kind of don't want to confront – and in the voice of Paul Dano, which is probably the most soothing way you can be told that your life is heading to disaster."

"Paul is absolutely perfect as Hanuš," echoes Kalfař. "When I was writing the book, it was a highwire act trying to make him both sinister and perhaps even dangerous at times and mysterious and impossible to understand while also making him endearing and friendly and lovable. And I think Paul Dano is the man to call upon when you want all of those things."

"I hope that Hanuš is a little bit scary at first, because he would be. I mean, he is a giant spider. Spiders, especially hairy spiders, they're not for everybody," Dano says. "But he's a kind soul and a wise man. He's a traveler of space and time. It was easy for me to love him, and I hope the audience does, too."

Hanuš is so lovable, in fact, that it might have even assuaged the filmmaker's aversion to creepy-crawlies.

"I don't think I have it anymore, but I have throughout my life had severe arachnophobia," Renck admits. "Obviously the task was to make a character that's unpleasant at first, but then you start spending time with him and you start liking him – maybe even loving him."

Indeed, Skinny Human.

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**(a fun fact to be inserted in the design):**

### **What's in a name?**

“Hanuš was the name of a clockmaker. In Prague we have this big famous astronomical clock called the Orloj. It's probably the most well-recognized landmark in the Czech Republic. It has been disproven by now, but when I was growing up, legend had it that the councilors of Prague at that time had Hanuš construct this clock. After he built it, the councilors actually had him blinded by a man sent to his house to poke out his eyes with a hot rod because they didn't want him to be able to construct this kind of work for anybody else. And as punishment, Hanuš went into the astronomical clock and he reached into it and he made it stop for 100 years. Nobody was able to fix it except for him. So that's where the name Hanuš comes from.”

– Jaroslav Kalfař

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## **IMAGINING A WORLD THROUGH SPACE AND TIME**

### **PRODUCTION DESIGN**

Under the direction of production designer Jan Houlevigie, *Spaceman* was shot in Prague but also on sets in New York where the scenes of the spaceship came to life. Key among the challenges was how to capture Jakub's world in such a confined container.

“When I started designing the spaceship, I wanted to make something very, very tight, almost like a submarine. It had to feel very claustrophobic,” says Houlevigie. “At the same time, we were shooting in zero gravity with all these rigs, so we made everything modular. When you do the production design, you also need to be able to shoot it.”

Houlevigie made sure the viewer was dropped into Jakub's ship without ever realizing just how much work went in behind the scenes. They built the spacecraft in modules so that everything could be separated and dismantled to allow cameras and equipment to film, creating what Houlevigie calls “an origami” of moving parts.

“I wanted this spaceship to be so chaotic that I would feel restless from just watching it, and I wanted Jakub's environment in there to be of that nature,” says director Johan Renck, who worked closely with Houlevigie, a longtime collaborator, to conceptualize the ship. “Jakub is spending a year in space, and it's not a serene, peaceful, zen-like environment. We dealt with this spaceship in a very form-and-function way. There's nothing aesthetic about it. It's built by modules, nothing fanciful, very much a brutalist type of thing.”

### **CINEMATOGRAPHY AND VFX**

As claustrophobic as Jakub's spaceship feels, it also imparts a dream-like sense of floating – partly from the zero-gravity setting but also from Jakub's melancholy and spiraling thoughts about his life back on Earth.

“It was important to make life in space feel authentic. The film puts enormous focus on the human condition, on the feelings of Jakub,” says Jakob Ihre, director of photography. “You need to feel the hardships of being in the spaceship and the mental and physical pain of being in space. That was extremely important to convey via the camera visuals of constantly floating in zero gravity.”

Conveying such a light touch, however, required hulking equipment.

“Many times we had to use the longest and the heaviest camera cranes available in the world to create the zero gravity and images where the camera should feel like it's as light as a feather,” Ihre says. “We wanted to convey realism and intimacy, but we also wanted to blend that with grand, mind-bending images.”

True to director Johan Renck's vision for the lighting, Ihre also had to contend with no natural light and instead lean into the dark hues that mirror Jakub's sense of isolation and longing.

“In the spaceship, it's all artificial lights, and we don't have any sunlight coming through the windows of the spaceship,” Ihre says. “For the viewer, it's an incredible feeling when we come back to Earth and suddenly have this daylight for the first time.”

Meanwhile, VFX supervisor Matt Sloan also had his work cut out for him from the get-go.

“It was clear from the start that the visual effects were not going to be driving the movie. Johan wanted them to be present in a way that served the story without bringing attention to themselves. All the effects inside the ship were to be gritty and understated,” Sloan says. “It was important to Johan that when Hanuš is present, people are not seeing a spectacle, they are just seeing the character of Hanuš – he is just there, as if on set with us.

“When we ventured outside the ship, however, we were given a little more latitude,” Sloan continues. “Space, and specifically the Chopra Cloud, needed to be beautiful, but with a slightly unsettling dark edge. We referenced a lot of 18th-century nautical paintings of ships in stormy seas that have this same underlying uneasy feeling.”

The director was deeply invested in every aspect of the visual effects as an extension of the film's love story.

“Johan really built the visual palette of the VFX components – which are mainly the Chopra Cloud, Hanuš, and the zero-gravity elements of Jakub's experiences on the ship – in a way that celebrates what makes them a little bit fantastical but also very visceral and vivid,” says producer Michael Parets. “That's something that could have come only from Johan's brain.”

## MUSIC

Max Richter had a particular puzzle to solve as he was creating the film's evocative score. How do you capture the emotional disparities of an intimate love story cast in the vast expanse of space?

"The visual language of the film really informs your musical decisions," says the celebrated post-minimalist composer, whose film credits include *Ad Astra* and *Mary Queen of Scots*, among many others. "The visual texture, the way the light is, and the haptics of the images really tell me a lot about how the music should feel."

To that end, Richter experimented with striking a balance between retro electronic textures and luminous orchestral flourishes.

"The score's palette is kind of 1970s-period electronics that have been treated with '70s effects – recorded on tape as they would have been recorded back then," he says. "And then we have acoustic instrumentation that is mostly strings, some piano, and the strings we've done in two layers: a very closely mic-ed, intimate sound and also big-picture strings."

That elusive dynamic between moments loud and soft, big and small, expanded director Johan Renck's original vision for the score.

"I wanted the music to have this slightly peculiar, not-made-by-human-hands, '70s sci-fi kind of vibe," Renck says. "But on the other hand, Max was key to finding some of the melodic beauty in the score, which I came to love. If you would've asked me in the beginning of the scoring journey if I would've wanted to have that, I would've said, 'No, we're going to create weird music and sounds that are in the realm between sound design and score.'

"I'm so thankful that Max added that extra layer," he says. "He did bring all the mysterious, strange stuff, but then he also brought these big, beautiful melodic transpositions that give me goosebumps every time I hear them."

## FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

For a work of such heft and scope, it's surprising to learn that *Spaceman* began its journey in miniature.

"*Spaceman of Bohemia* started as a short story that I wrote in my last year of college, and originally it was just a punch line about an American astronaut who was stranded in orbit when he received a call from his wife asking for a divorce," says author Jaroslav Kalfař. "So there was the contrast of this larger-than-life mission and the final frontier while being confronted with this incredibly human experience of heartbreak and losing the person you love and going through that while one is so far away from home."

“I was very fond of that short story, and when I started looking for the idea for my first novel – or my first published novel, anyway, because I had written novels before, but none of them felt right – I wanted to write my first novel about my country, about the Czech Republic and about our history,” he adds. “That’s when I got this idea to make this American astronaut Czech and make this story bigger.”

Published in 2017 by Little, Brown and Company, *Spaceman of Bohemia* swelled to nearly 300 pages and made its young author, still in his early 20s, a celebrated rising talent in literary circles.

“Most of the writing took place during my time at New York University, where I was getting my MFA in writing,” Kalfař says. “I was writing this book while I had been away from my home, from the Czech Republic, for nearly a decade, so a lot of the alienation that Jakub feels from Earth and from his home is the same alienation that I was feeling from being so far away from my family and my language and my people.”

“At times it felt very frustrating because I was writing about this thing that was so close to the bone, so raw, so then that made the writing process really difficult,” he says. “Essentially I had the novel finished by the time I finished the program, and it took about another year to find an agent, get it in the shape that everyone wanted it to be in, and sell the book to a publisher.”

Producer Michael Parets discovered *Spaceman of Bohemia* the year it came out and was deeply moved by it.

“I first read it in 2017 and was immediately struck by the originality in the way Jaroslav told this very specific and yet universal story about who we are and how that question is complicated by where we come from and where we want to go,” Parets says. “And for Jaroslav, as a Czech immigrant who left the Czech Republic when he was 15 years old and moved to Orlando, Fla., you could feel that conflict in his writing. To deliver that story in a touching, funny, surprising way in a book that is simultaneously science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism – that was just so striking.”

As a kid, Kalfař was drawn to science fiction, raised on a diet of authors such as Isaac Asimov, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Octavia Butler, as well as the seminal Czech writer Karel Čapek and his novel *War With the Newts*.

Kalfař was flattered when he heard Renck was interested in adapting the book, from a screenplay by Colby Day, into a movie. Yet he was intrigued by how it would fare as a film.

“I was incredibly thrilled because what’s more thrilling than knowing that there are artists in the world who want to make their own version of what you’ve made,” he says. “But I felt troubled because it’s a very, very weird book. And I wasn’t sure how that weirdness was going to translate on the screen or whether the filmmakers would try to suffocate said weirdness a little bit in order to make it more palatable for as big of an audience as possible.”

His verdict?

“I was completely blown away when I saw the film, which I've seen twice now,” says Kalfař. “I feel like the second time was when I saw it truly because I wasn't trying to compare it with the book. I saw it as its own work of art.

“But my favorite thing about the film is the fact that there is no attempt at suffocating the weirdness. The weirdness is all there,” he says. “It is so close to the book in every way, as much as it can be. I think all the people out there who love weird art will be delighted by it.”

As an executive producer on the film, Kalfař was an integral part of the adaptation from the very beginning.

“I was incredibly lucky that the team loved the book and wanted me to be a part of it, so I was asked for my opinion on the script. I sent in notes about what could be changed and suggestions, and then later on after we got past the writing stage, I was also consulted on the Czech-ness of it all,” he says. “I was also incredibly lucky to be able to work with Adam as he was preparing for the role. During the quarantine, we had all these late-night, two-hour conversations about Jakub and about the book, and he was so curious about what it is to be Czech and about Czech history, and we spoke about our fathers. So I felt close to the process the entire time.”

There were differences between his book and the film, of course, which Kalfař both expected and welcomed.

“You can't fit a whole book in a film, so only about half of the book is in the movie,” he says. “But I was surprised how many elements the filmmakers were able to still take from the parts that aren't in the film and incorporate them in very small nuanced ways into what is in the film. There are all these connections I didn't expect would make it in.

“I've learned that what a movie adaptation really shows you is how other people view your characters. Because of course, Johan had his own take on the characters,” Kalfař says. “Adam Sandler had his own take on his character of Jakub too. And to see another artist take this outline of a character and make it their own, that's what I found really beautifully surprising and human. It reinforces my belief in art as a way of connecting people.”

## FILMMAKER BIO

### **JOHAN RENCK** (Director)

Johan Renck is an Emmy-winning director and producer with a variety of celebrated work spanning film, television, and music videos. He is best known for his highly acclaimed work directing and co-executive producing HBO's *Chernobyl*, for which he received an Emmy, BAFTA and DGA Award for his directing, among other accolades. During his time as a music video director, Renck helmed bold work from iconic artists such as David Bowie, Madonna, New Order, and Beyoncé. He also serves as co-creator for the groundbreaking and hugely popular virtual concert residency ABBA Voyage.

*Filmography (Film/TV):*

- CHERNOBYL (2019): Director, Co-EP (all episodes)
- SHUT EYE (2016): Director (“Death”)
- BLOODLINE (2015): Director (“Part 1,” “Part 2”)
- THE LAST PANTHERS (2015): Director, EP (all episodes)
- HALT AND CATCH FIRE (2014): Director (“Close to the Metal”)
- BATES MOTEL (2013): Director (“Trust Me”)
- VIKINGS (2013): Director (“Rites of Passage,” “Wrath of the Northmen,” “Dispossessed”)
- BREAKING BAD (2009–2011): Director (“Breakage,” “Más,” “Hermanos”)
- THE WALKING DEAD (2010): Director (“Vatos”)
- DOWNLOADING NANCY (2008): Director

*Videography (music videos):*

- Sigur Rós: BLÓÐBERG (2023): Director, Writer
- David Bowie: LAZARUS (2016): Director, Writer
- David Bowie: BLACKSTAR (2015): Director, Writer
- Beach House: WILD (2012): Director, Writer
- Lana Del Rey: BLUE VELVET (2012): Director, Writer
- Bat for Lashes: DANIEL (2009): Director, Writer
- Fever Ray: SEVEN (2009): Director, Writer
- Robyn: HANDLE ME (2007): Director, Writer
- Robbie Williams: SHE’S MADONNA (2007): Director, Writer
- Madonna: HUNG UP (2005): Director, Writer
- Robbie Williams: TRIPPING (2005): Director, Writer
- New Order: KRAFTY (2005): Director, Writer
- The Streets: DRY YOUR EYES (2004): Director, Writer
- Beyoncé: ME, MYSELF AND I (2003): Director, Writer
- The Knife: PASS THIS ON (2003): Director, Writer, Cinematographer
- Kylie Minogue: LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT (2002): Director, Writer
- Maxwell: GET TO KNOW YA (2001): Director, Writer
- New Order: CRYSTAL (2001): Director, Writer
- Chris Cornell: CAN’T CHANGE ME (1999): Director, Writer
- Suede: SHE’S IN FASHION (1999): Director, Writer
- Madonna: NOTHING REALLY MATTERS (1999): Director, Writer