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How 'Us' Pulled Off Subtle Differences in Costumes, Design, Music for Parallel Characters

By **Daron James** ▾



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“Us,” [Jordan Peele](#)’s second outing as a director, following his 2017 critical and box office success “[Get Out](#),” revisits similar psychological horror-thriller territory. But this time the stakes are, well, doubled.

In the new film, to be released by Universal on March 21, Adelaide Wilson, played by Lupita Nyong’o, returns to her childhood beachside home with her husband ([Winston Duke](#)) and their two children (Shahadi Wright Joseph and Evan Alex). Suddenly they find themselves clawing to stay alive, as four people who look just like them seem hell-bent on killing them.

The main challenge for the film's below-the-line team was to keep the story grounded in realism while escalating the horror — and keeping the characters and their doppelgängers well defined.

For production designer Ruth De Jong, “Us” represented a collision of two worlds she previously created: the tragic reality of “Manchester by the Sea” and the strange uneasiness of “Twin Peaks.” “Jordan wanted to make the surroundings in ‘Us’ very true to the characters, but push other areas to be very disturbing,” says De Jong.

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The concept of “horror in broad daylight” became one of the film’s guiding design principles. Peele was adamant that the visual textures not be grungy or dirty, as might be expected of the genre. For example, in designing the beachfront property, in Adelaide’s family for decades, De Jong, alongside set decorator Florencia Martin and property master John Harrington, detailed the Santa Cruz, Calif., location with a history drawn from the cultural experience of being an African-American family, including furniture with warm hues and textures.

The trio also keyed on socioeconomic differences between the Wilsons and their white friends the Tylers (played by [Elisabeth Moss](#), Tim Heidecker, Cali Sheldon and Noelle Sheldon). The Tyler home’s design is more modern and cold. “We didn’t want to paint anything with an obvious stroke but rather keep things subtle so it visually felt natural,” notes De Jong. “Where we landed was a great marriage between the departments.”

Preproduction planning also propelled the cinematography of Mike Gioulakis (“Glass”), who primarily used a single camera to frame the relentless nightmare as each actor had his or her own team of double, photo double and stunt double for their separate roles. Costume designer Kym Barrett differentiated the identical characters with color — reserving blood-red jumpsuits for the doppelgängers — as well as subtle changes in hair and makeup. The actors solidified the unique looks via their performances.

With the idea of duality a perpetual theme in the narrative, editor Nicholas Monsour (“Keanu”) studied the characters’ motivations before diving into details. In the early stages, he approached the project without much prior input from Peele and was able to respond to the material with fresh eyes and find character connections that were not necessarily planned. “Actors can’t help but be themselves even in different roles,” says the editor. “You can find little moments that allow you to stress the similarities or differences between the person and their doppelgänger. We always looked for ways that would add to the strength of the character or the craziness of the movie.”

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Editor Nicholas Monsour

Blurring the line between music and sound effects pushed the creepiness. Supervising sound editor Trevor Gates (“Get Out”) crafted an aural landscape from organic elements to ground the horror. “Jordan wanted the audience to have a feeling of dread, but he didn’t want us to come out and tell [people] that something was wrong,” says Gates. “He wanted us to build a soundscape that made you have a feeling of horror, but you couldn’t quite put your finger on why you felt the way you did.”

Elements were developed to evoke emotions based on sonic characteristics, while subtle shifts in background ambience were intended to leave viewers feeling out of place.

Sound also embraced the emotion of the characters, enhancing every breath, scream, cry and physical exertion in the performances. Rerecording mixers Ron Bartlett and Doug Hemphill (“Blade Runner 2049”) used ribbons of sound that weave through the story as motifs to make the audience feel the action rather than just be aware of it. Both visually and sonically nothing was off the table; the goal was to make it feel real.

A visceral score enhanced the differences between characters and doppelgängers. “Jordan really likes sounds that are unfamiliar [because] unfamiliarity when we can’t identify something always triggers our sense of fear,” says composer Michael Abels, who also scored “Get Out.”

String instruments became a focal point because of their subtlety, but the composer made their sound more terrifying. The human voice – vocal phrases of moans of anguish and despair – thickened the dread. “The first full piece of music heard in the main title is a battle cry,” says Abels. “It’s a vocal piece where you can’t understand what they’re saying, but it’s clear something evil is coming.”

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