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'THE WOLFMAN' GIVES
BENICIO DEL TORO A ROLE HE CAN
SINK HIS TEETH INTO

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BY FRANK LOVECE
Special to Newsday

Vampires and zombies have staked their own popular patches of film and TV, if the "Twilight" movies,

HBO's "True Blood," the CW's "Vampire Diaries" and a brain-full of living-dead movies are any indication. Will "The Wolfman," opening Friday, now give werewolves their day in the sun, so to speak?

It depends. Like zombies and vampires, the werewolf may need to be, well, re-groomed: The "Twilight" vamps are daywalkers who glisten in sunlight, and zombies, who almost invariably shambled through the years, sprint like they're in sneaker commercials in the likes of "28 Days Later" (2002) and the remade "Dawn of the Dead" (2004). Werewolf movies have become so laden with mythology, you wonder if "The Wolfman" can offer anything new under the moon.

"It's an action-packed movie, and the wolves are ferocious and have great speed," allows co-star Anthony Hopkins, speaking by phone from California. That's not an inconsiderable difference from the quick but hardly superhuman lope of most movie werewolves. More subtly, says director Joe Johnston, the title character played by Benicio Del Toro is a "wolfman" — one word — as opposed to Lon Chaney Jr.'s character in the 1941 Universal Pictures classic "The Wolf Man," of which this is a remake.

"I don't know that it con-

sciously signals anything," Johnston reflects. "I don't think anybody said, 'Hey, let's make it one word.' But it did become integral to the character. It identifies him as an entity that's not a wolf and not a man. I think that sets it apart from the original, and it gives him his own species. He's a wolfman."

Split into two packs

Should the movie pull it off, that's an intriguing distinction. From the start, with the 1913 silent short "The Werewolf" — which filmed a genuine wolf as the creature — werewolf movies have largely been split into two packs, that of the "Wolf Man" and that of the "WOLF Man."

With the former, the man is the true identity — a tragic monster who knows not what the beast does and is eaten away by guilt. With the latter, the true identity is the wolf with a human mind, and the only things eaten away at are you and me. Free-spirited predators who live to hunt, these werewolves don't identify as human. When they take on human appearance, they're wolves in sheep's clothing.

The tragic monster was the standard for years, with Universal's "Werewolf of London" (1935) and "The Wolf Man"

each giving us an innocent man afflicted through the bite of a supernatural creature.

"A person, usually a man, becoming an out-of-control, animalistic killer is more relatable than somebody becoming a vampire or creating a Frankenstein monster," suggests Michael Weldon, author of "The Psychotronic Video Guide" (St. Martin's, 1996) and a long-time authority on genre movies.

Brad Steiger, author of "The Werewolf Book: The Encyclopedia of Shape-Shifting Beings" (Visible Ink, 1999), says it was Chaney's indelible acting that made "The Wolf Man" the model for years to come. "The pain we saw in his face, that of a good man who's under this curse and trying to fight it, became representative of all of us," Steiger says. "We have to



Hair, hair: See the "Wolfman" trailer



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continually keep the wolf in us in check."

That remained so decades later, he says, when "An American Werewolf in London" was one of three 1981 werewolf films. "We saw our dancing Dr Pepper guy [David Naughton, of that era's familiar soda commercial] stretch into this wolf, and he was so human that we could relate to the agony of what it might be like to transform."

In the interim, we'd related to greater or lesser extents to teenage werewolves (1957's "I Was a Teenage Werewolf" with a young Michael Landon), biker werewolves (1971's "Werewolves on Wheels"), a divorced dad werewolf (1973's "The Boy Who Cried Werewolf") and European werewolves, notably Hammer Film's "The Curse of the Werewolf" (1961) starring Oliver Reed, which upped the blood and sex quotient.

Low-budget fare

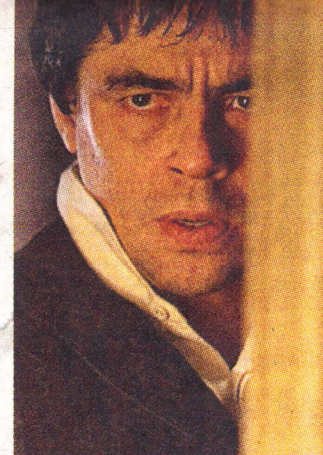
Yet, after the vogue that gave us "The Howling" and "Wolfen" (both 1981), "Stephen King's Silver Bullet" (1985) and the Michael J. Fox comedy "Teen Wolf" (1986), we stopped relating. Werewolves began stalking mostly low-budget, direct-to-video fare — though concurrently, the were-

wolf-as-metaphor aesthetic became prominent: While literal werebeasts do appear in director Neil Jordan's "The Company of Wolves" (1984), Mike Nichols' "Wolf" (1994) and Christophe Gans' "Brotherhood of the Wolf" (2001), the archetype is used more as a psychological linchpin than a monster-movie trope.

With CGI easing the way, lessening dependence on tricky and expensive special-effects makeup, werewolves returned and went all action-y in the "Underworld" trilogy (2003-2009, with a fourth scheduled for 2011) and all romantic in the teen-novel-based "Blood & Chocolate" (2007), featuring a swoony female werewolf, and in the "Twilight" films.

So, are the stars and moon now aligned for a werewolf-movie vogue?

"If we want to see a true revival, it's time to get back to the folkloric roots of belief in werewolves, and start telling some new stories," says genre buff Noel Clay, creator of the Web site werewolf-movies.com. "I think the time has probably come for us to do away with silver bullets, full moons and all of the other Hollywood mythology we've inherited from the 1940s."



Benicio Del Toro takes a turn for the worse in "The Wolfman."



Clawing into the past

We think of it as taking place in some misty past, but the 1941 Universal classic "The Wolf Man" actually takes place in what was then present-day England. The new remake, "The Wolfman," with Benicio Del Toro replacing Lon Chaney Jr. as the cursed Lawrence Talbot, shifts the action to the 19th century. Otherwise, the story follows the outline of a prodigal son returning to dad (Anthony Hopkins in the Claude Rains role) and falling for Gwen Conliffe (Emily Blunt, succeeding Evelyn Ankers). Added is Hugo Weaving as inspector Francis Aberline, a fictionalized version of the real Frederick "Francis" Abberline of the Jack the Ripper case.

The 19th century "seemed to be a darker period, which fits this dark story," Hopkins says. "There's something baroque about Victorian England. There was a dark, subterranean world in British society in that time. Beneath the polite, genteel, frigid, upright Victorian manners was a seething cauldron of sexuality and violence."

The movie's release date did some time-shifting of its own. Originally set for Nov. 12, 2008, with a different director, it got rescheduled for Feb. 12, April 3 and Nov. 6, 2009, and Feb. 10, 2010, before settling on Friday.

— FRANK LOVECE

In "The Wolfman," opening Friday, Del Toro has some bad hair days. The 19th century setting gives the film a darker feel.

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The company of werewolves

Even a man who's pure at heart and says his prayers by night may not be familiar with some of the most interesting werewolf movies out there. If you've seen the classics, from "The Wolf Man" (1941) to the 1981 trio of "An American Werewolf in London," "Wolfen" and "The Howling," then you're ready to sink your teeth into these lesser-known gems. Call it claws-and-effect.

The White Reindeer / Valkoinen Peura (1952) — Lobby your local cinema society for this Golden Globe-winning foreign film and Cannes Grand Prix nominee, which played U.S. theaters in 1957. Not available on video, and only sporadically screening at the likes of BAM, this hauntingly beautiful tale of a werewolflike creature in Finnish Lapland, where it was filmed, uniquely captures the agony of loss and the emptiness of vengeance. One of the best cinematic adaptations of folkloric shape-shifter myths, it captures the soul of how those legends originate.

The Company of Wolves (1984) — Neil Jordan ("The Crying Game," "Interview With the Vampire") combines three stories by feminist author Angela Carter within a retelling of "Little Red Riding Hood," with wolves as symbols of a preadolescent girl's fears and desires. Stephen Rea, David Warner, Angela Lansbury and Terence Stamp star.



MORGAN CREEK PRODUCTIONS PHOTO

The big bad wolf comes knocking on Mariel Hemingway's door in "Bad Moon."

Bad Moon (1996) — Michael Paré, newly infected by a werewolf, goes to stay with sis Mariel Hemingway and her son. But who knows his secret? The family dog, Thor, a protective German shepherd that can smell something's not right. Eric Red's film explores the werewolf as animal.

Ginger Snaps (2000) — A Canadian film released in the United States a year later, it's a rare film featuring a female werewolf — in this case, a high schooler (Katharine Isabelle) accursed with the most horrific puberty metaphor since Stephen King's *Carrie*.

Dog Soldiers (2002) — Released theatrically in its native U.K. before debuting on cable Stateside on what is now SyFy, it's a tough, relentlessly naturalistic film of six soldiers trapped in a cabin as werewolves lay siege.

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ting gives the film a darker feel.