



L to R: Co-directors Peter Spierig and Michael Spierig on the set of 'Jigsaw'.

THE SPIERIG BROTHERS

Genre specialists Peter and Michael Spierig (*Daybreakers*, *Predestination*) are set to deliver the *Saw* franchise's latest instalment, *Jigsaw*, into cinemas this November, while their anticipated feature *Winchester* – starring Helen Mirren and Jason Clarke – is slated for release early next year. The directors speak to Jackie Keast.

The Winchester Mystery House is considered to be one of the most haunted houses in America. Firearm heiress Sarah Winchester began building the extravagant San Jose mansion in 1884. She believed she was haunted by the spirits of people killed by the Winchester repeating rifle, and saw the house's construction as a way to keep the evil spirits at bay. Labyrinth-like, the house has over 160 rooms.

The Spierig Brothers' upcoming film, *Winchester*, is based on Sarah's story, and packs an almighty cast in the form of Helen Mirren, Jason Clarke, Sarah Snook, Angus Sampson, Eamon Farren and Bruce Spence.

The twin writer-directors, Peter and Michael, were first introduced to the *Winchester* story when they were finishing *Predestination* at Sony; an exec showed them a copy of a draft script penned by Tom Vaughan.

"Michael and I dug into that material and basically did a page one re-write. [We] delved into the mythology of the real place, and we were fascinated by Sarah Winchester – which is the lead part that Helen Mirren plays – and her true story," Peter tells IF.

Michael adds they were further drawn to the project after a trip out to the house itself. "The house is so mesmerising and so fascinating that we instantly fell in love with it and we felt we had to tell a story about it."

The brothers worked on the script for around two years, which Peter says is standard for the two of them. "It's always a long process writing a script. Michael and I have written all our movies with the exception of *Jigsaw*, which we did do a polish on the script of as well.

"The scriptwriting process is, I believe, the hardest part of the whole filmmaking process. To stare at that blank page and to come up with something that is going to connect with people is daunting.

"When you're dealing with real people as well, you have these responsibilities and you want to do it right."

In terms of cast, Michael says Helen Mirren was always their first pick to play Sarah Winchester.

"It was a dream – you know: 'Who would be great for this?', 'Helen Mirren would be great for this.'

"We were fortunate enough to go out to her and she responded extremely positively. Peter and I met her and she's a wonderful person; really kind, really smart.

And it actually didn't take much ultimately to convince her to do the movie."

The directors also asked Sarah Snook – one of the stars of their last film, *Predestination* – to join the film at Mirren's request.

"Helen really loved Sarah's performance in *Predestination*, and said 'Can that girl come play my niece in the movie?' and I said 'absolutely, I'll give her a call'."

The twins shot a portion of the film at the real Winchester house – these days a popular tourist attraction – but recreated many of its rooms to scale at Docklands Studios Melbourne.

"It was a very weird thing to go to the actual house, then go to the stage and it's almost identical," says Michael.

"Our production designer Matthew Putland – he did our first movie [*Undead*] and *Predestination* – did such an amazing job recreating things as accurately as possible."

While *Winchester* is an American tale, Michael says they chose to shoot in Australia – where they have made all of their films except *Jigsaw* – in part because they have an established team here.

"We've done three or four movies with a lot of the same people; some



On the set of 'Jigsaw'.



A photograph of the real Sarah Winchester, who is portrayed by Helen Mirren in the Spierig brothers' film.

of them have done all our films. There's an element of family and trust, and shorthand when you do things quickly. And this film was shot very, very quickly."

Peter adds: "It's funny, here we are making a film about a Californian house, shot in Melbourne, directed by Australians and starring an English woman. And the great thing is you can do that."

"We've made three films that we've shot in Australia that are set in American cities. The level of talent in Australia, especially actors, is really, really good. We always feel we can confidently bring projects back here and fool everybody."

Michael says audiences should expect *Winchester* to be a "creepy haunted house movie in the classic sense" with fascinating, real characters steeped in mythology.

"What's exciting about that is that Helen has never done this type of movie before, and I don't know why.

Also somebody like Jason Clarke has never done a horror movie, or... a haunted house type thriller movie before."

Peter adds: "One of the things Michael and I loved about the story was that it is about a woman who is haunted by... an invention that killed millions of people. You can make parallels to the modern day, absolutely."

While *Winchester* is slated for release early next year, the Spierigs have also helmed *Jigsaw*, the eighth film in the *Saw* franchise, due in cinemas in November.

Michael says Lionsgate, who released *Undead* and *Daybreakers* in the US, approached them to direct. While they were initially hesitant, he says the script was clever and had an attractive thriller investigation element.

"We went in and sketched our version of a *Saw* movie. Our version of it was going to be less brutal, less

vicious. It's still gore-y and goo-ey and sort of fun stuff, but it's a less vicious version of the series.

"We sort of went in with that pitch, assuming that they were going to say no. But they really liked our take on it."

Michael says the end film is "wild and awesome", and that taking on an established franchise was a fun change from their other work.

"Every time we finish a movie, to spend two years developing our next project can be quite arduous. And Peter and I love being on set – I think that's what we do best. So to take on someone else's writing – to take on an established franchise, I really liked it."

Peter says while he expects that he and Michael will always continue to write and develop their own projects, he agrees he doesn't want to always sit "in a dark room writing all the time."

"To get a piece of material,

something like *Jigsaw* and try and put our spin on it is great. There's other material coming our way that we'll do the same thing with."

The twins, who are from Brisbane, now spend quite a bit of time in the US. But Peter says when talking to Americans about bringing projects down under, the response is always positive.

"*Jigsaw* was out of our control, but I would have loved to have taken that back to Australia as well. That would be our dream, to take American money, and come back to Australia. That I think is the ideal scenario for making movies, and usually it works out okay if the dollar's strong. We've got such good crews and such great facilities here that it's very realistic."

Michael adds that part of the reason he likes working in Australia, and with Australian actors, is because "it just feels like you're working with friends all the time."

"But we've had nothing but great experiences working in the US too, so I think we've been really fortunate. That's where the blockbusters are I guess. If you want to play in that field you have to go there."

Peter believes that what makes him and Michael stand out over there is that they do their own thing.

"We've always said 'this is how we're going to do it. We might lose the job by pitching it this way, but this is how we're going to do it.'

"And Michael and I aren't the kind of people that will just sit around and say yes to every studio note. That's just not how we operate. We've got some pretty clear ideas on how we want to make something and why we want to do it."



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