

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF ANIMAL HOUSE...
A DIFFERENT KIND OF ANIMAL.



AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON 1981 (U.K.)

Director John Landis **Producers** George Folsey Jr, Peter Guber, Jon Peters

Screenplay John Landis **Photography** Robert Paynter **Music** Elmer Bernstein

Cast David Naughton, Jenny Agutter, Griffin Dunne, John Woodvine, Lila Kaye, Joe Belcher, David Schofield, Brian Glover, Rik Mayall, Sean Baker, Anne-Marie Davies

1981 was horror cinema's year of the werewolf, with the release of both Joe Dante's *The Howling* and John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London*. While Dante's American-set film was a hip, self-reflective affair full of in-jokes about horror history, *American Werewolf* offered instead what appeared to be a simpler and more traditional horror story. A man is bitten by a werewolf while visiting a wild part of the English countryside, and subsequently becomes a werewolf himself when the moon is full. Scenes of violence, gnashing, and slobber follow until this unfortunate lycanthrope is killed and returns to his human form for the last time.

What makes *American Werewolf* not just distinctive but also a mini-classic of the genre is the way in which this simple story is realized. The most notable original feature is the groundbreaking special effects make-up designed by Rick Baker for the werewolf transformation scene. In earlier horror films, transformations of this kind had been achieved through a series of decorous fades from one stage of the monstrous make-up to another. By contrast, *American Werewolf* offered a painful-looking metamorphosis that seemed to be taking

◀ Landis's previous comedy smash success *Animal House* was referenced on the poster, letting audiences know that while this was indeed "a different kind of animal," the humor might have a familiar bite.

place in real time before our astonished eyes. Equally impressive was the spectacular throat wound suffered by the hero's friend (who returns from the dead to warn the hero of his fate), which managed to be both utterly appalling and disturbingly beautiful. However, there is more to *American Werewolf* than simply its werewolf transformation scene. In particular, it has a winning sense of humor that enhances some

“I WAS TRYING TO MAKE A CONTEMPORARY VERSION OF AN OLD MOVIE.” JOHN LANDIS (DIRECTOR)

stock horror situations without ever descending into parody. For example, the opening scenes playfully conjure up an over-the-top version of the rural gothic—the local pub being called “The Slaughtered Lamb” is an especially nice touch—but also deliver genuine suspense and horror. Similarly, the film’s conclusion, in which the hero turns into a werewolf while in a pornographic movie cinema, and subsequently causes mayhem and a multiple car pile-up in Piccadilly Circus, is in part played for laughs but manages to be thrilling as well.

Undoubtedly, the film’s use of its British locations has a touristic quality, with international favorites such as Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square mingling with some stock British stereotypes. At the same time, these settings and stereotypes bring a freshness to *American Werewolf* that helps to make it one of horror cinema’s more memorable werewolf stories. **PH**

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Not only did Richard Baker win an Oscar for Best Make-Up, but this was the first movie to ever win that award—the category was created especially for it in 1981.

