



## A Vampiric Romp Through Boyle Heights *NIGHT TEETH*

BY JEREMY REED, PRODUCTION DESIGNER

A



B



C

This is Los Angeles in the 21st century...  
AND VAMPIRES ARE MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER.

If Bram Stoker was still alive and Stephen King was his best mate, one could imagine the fun these two might have conjuring up a vampiric world for modern-day Los Angeles. Since Bram Stoker's seminal novel, *Dracula*, the figure of the vampire has been a persistent presence in Western popular culture. Though largely the remit of adult audiences, the vampire has become increasingly present in books and films for children and younger adults. There has recently been a changing of the positioning of the undead within adult and young adult narrative that has seen an increasing romanticisation of the vampire, which constructs it as both inspirational and aspirational within, or indeed outside of, an increasingly consumerist and globalized world. *Night Teeth*, the film, explores this continuing presence of vampires within the

realms of contemporary Los Angeles society, with strong visual narratives that reveal their existence in a world not of their making, but one that they are hell-bent on controlling in order to survive.

The story revolves around Benny, and one particular night in Los Angeles. He is a college student, and after getting to know him, the audience wonders if he actually knows what a vampire is, as Benny seems a little confused with what he witnesses firsthand. These blood-spattering events unfold through Benny's eyes, as the young student witnesses a fierce battleground, one in which he has become an unwilling participant. A conflict which is between his elder brother, Jay, who is hellbent on revenge, and the uber vampire, Victor.

British director Adam Randall is the person responsible for inviting me to become part of this cinematic team, one that would endeavor to paint a neo-noir world that would be appealing without being too dark or distracting. Eben Bolter, another Brit, was the cinematographer on *Night Teeth*, and what followed were conversations between the three of us regarding the use of neon lighting in this universe. I actually quite like the appeal of neon lighting; it creates magical and moody imagery. (Magical and moody pertains to vampiric tales.) There is something ever so beautiful about bursts of primary colours in electric hues. Having interior and exterior locations bathed in neon light would help produce an intoxicating modern movie experience.

This world of neon imagery would contrast with the greyer world of Benny's East Los Angeles. He experiences the craziest night of his short existence; beyond anything he could ever believe

would happen to him. In a way, not only are the events that occur terrifying for Benny, they are also surreal, and the bright lighting helps create this unnerving atmosphere. There was a complex web of ideas on the table, and how they were assembled and consumed, would depend on the structural framework. The high-contrast lighting and shadows would augment the drama and the vibrant colours would inspire the incredible energy.

After the scouts had been accomplished, I went to Europe to continue with concepts, and worked once again with Jonathan McGonnell, who had also been the brilliant concept illustrator on *Gretel and Hansel*. I like to combine elements that do not necessarily belong together in order to give the film an unexpected look. I feel the environments traveled through as the story unfolds are important to building each character's role. A designer can help achieve this by dwarfing them

**B.** LAUNDROMAT SET CREATED AND BUILT INTO IN AN EXISTING EMPTY LOCATION IN LOS ANGELES. ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN MCGONNELL FINISHED IN PHOTOSHOP. WALL MURAL CREATED AND PAINTED BY ALEXANDER STOLIN.

**C.** BLOOD COLLECTION ROOM. ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN MCGONNELL. SET BUILT ON STAGE IN NEW ORLEANS.

**A.** VICTOR'S HOUSE.  
ILLUSTRATION BY  
JONATHAN MCGONNELL.  
SET BUILT ON STAGE IN  
NEW ORLEANS.

**B.** VICTOR'S HOUSE,  
WINDOW MURAL BY  
ALEXANDER STOLIN.

**C.** VICTOR'S HOUSE.  
PRODUCTION SITLL BY DP  
EBEN BOLTER.



in some spaces or making them overshadow their surroundings in others. It is fun to play with scale as the production goes merrily along, by using the aesthetics of the environments to mirror the shift in power.

In defining the environments, it is Benny's character arc that was the most noticeable. As this night unfolded, he was learning life's lessons, and dramatically changed as a result. He grew in stature through the film. His background colours became more ebullient, the lighting became brighter as he travelled closer to hero status. The desolation of the desert sets contrasting with his fierce desire to save his loved ones. This is where he most shone in the narrative.

Zoe is one of the passengers that Benny drives on this fateful night, and seems more at home in the older, classical styles of architecture .This

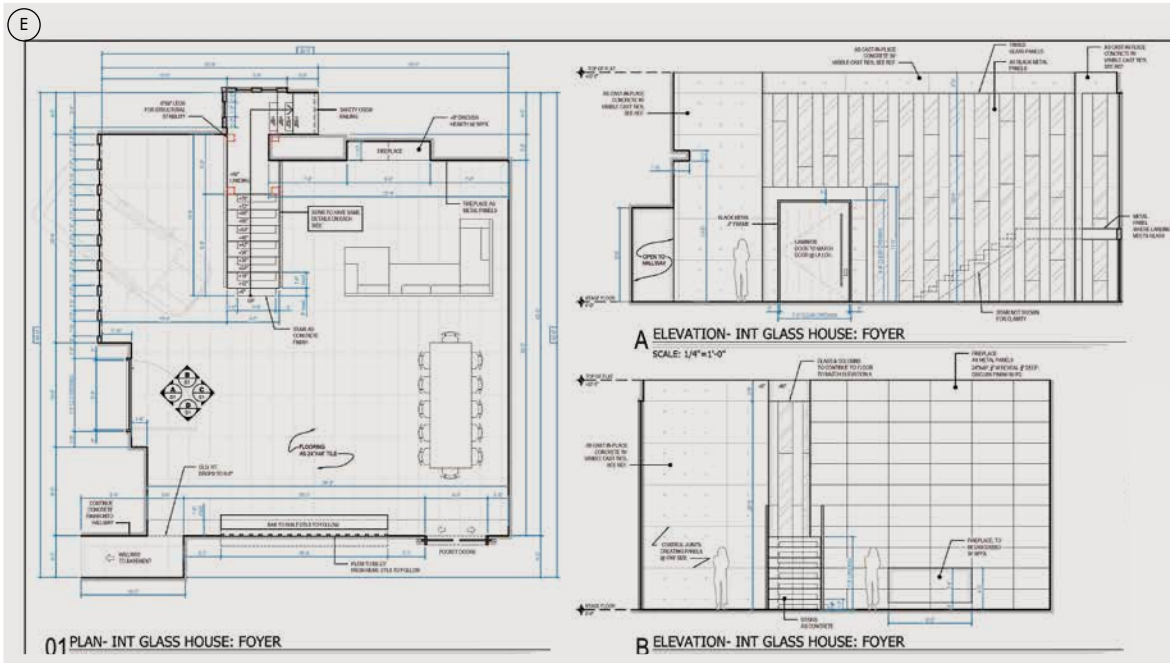
may seem to belie her apparent young age when first seen, but she is in fact, a couple of centuries older, and she tends to go where she feels most comfortable. My feelings are that she may have started her journey in life in Eastern Europe, with a Slavic heritage, and was surrounded by the neoclassical splendour of Europe at that time. Victor, the uber vampire, has chosen a more brutalist structure as his domain, which makes sense as modernism has always been at the forefront of the sinister lair in film. If any genre has defined the association between dastardly goings-on and modern design, it has been the action thriller, and this project stayed true to that notion. Just like any master criminal, hell-bent on world domination, Victor has chosen to inhabit a remote, precariously sited modern hideaway.

I remember that I had more fun collecting references for Victor's abode than any of the other sets. I must admit that my thoughts did go toward the Bond villain and nemesis Ernst Stavro Blofeld (*Diamonds Are Forever*), who commandeers a house of poured-in-place concrete with sweeping views of what is supposedly the Nevada desert. In actuality, it is the Arthur Elrod House, the sine qua non of bachelor pads, designed by John Lautner, and located in Palm Springs. Lautner's

signature California baroque aesthetic—soaring interior spaces, curving forms, dramatic vistas—is ideally suited to film, and his houses appear with unparalleled regularity in Hollywood productions. In seemingly every case, they play host to less-than-savory characters. The architecture of evil is from the late modern period, and Victor's glass and steel architecture will be instrumental in establishing his character and malevolent mood. Its reflective glass curtain will be unwelcoming and unsettling as it does not reflect the spaces behind them. The striking modern design of Victor's house is a trap...a highly seductive site of crime and deception. One can imagine that its sheer size is a symbol of the owner's wealth, and the modern aesthetic signifies a cool calculating demeanor that allows Victor to mediate between the legitimate and corrupt worlds of Los Angeles.

**D.** VICTOR'S HOUSE.  
ILLUSTRATION BY  
JONATHAN MCGONNELL.  
SET BUILT ON STAGE  
IN NEW ORLEANS.  
ALEXANDER STOLIN MURAL.

**E.** VICTOR'S HOUSE.  
PLAN AND ELEVATIONS BY  
JESSICA OCHOA.





not necessarily fit the same scale indicated by the established exterior. Some of the rooms needed to be of epic proportions as the production had every intention of crashing a massive 4 x 4 Suburban through the window facade of the house. The car would need to come to a stop somewhere in this cavernous main room, and the window the car explodes through was rather on the massive size.

After a couple of weeks of pre-preproduction creating concepts, I returned to New Orleans and, with the Art Department starting up proper, embarked on the next stage of design. Seven weeks of preproduction (with Christmas sandwiched in the middle) before principal photography would start. I would be joined by Jim Gelarden (Art Director), Kristin Bicksler (Set Decorator), Henry McGee (Graphic Artist) and Set Designer Jessica Ochoa. To better understand the motivation for the world that needed to be created, understanding who the two main conflicting factions are in this tale would help. There has been a truce in existence for more than a century in Los Angeles between a group of vampires and another group of humans who are headquartered in Boyle Heights, with neither crossing the boundaries laid out and maintained by their antagonists. These are modern-day vampires who have evolved beyond their ancestral

Victor's home is no doubt a form of architectural stylization, it could be called "theatrical realism" or "hyperreality by design." I tried to give Victor's lair a menacing look, while at the same time being slightly tongue-in-cheek. These villains are megalomaniacs, so they have enormous spaces built out of reinforced concrete, and then filled with priceless paintings and antique furniture. I mix it all up and try to have a sense of humour. New Orleans-based scenic Alexander 'Sasha' Stolin actually designed and painted a "priceless" piece of art for Victor's living room. It was a gorgeous 16-foot by 12-foot fresco that was backlit, and it absolutely stole my breath away. The house interior for Victor built onstage would

**A.** VICTOR'S HOUSE AFTER SUBURBAN CRASH. ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN MCGONNELL.

**B.** BENNY'S BEDROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.

**C.** LA LAUNDROMAT. PRODUCTION STILL.

**D.** LAUNDROMAT MURAL. GRAPHIC LAYOUT. BY ALEXANDER STOLIN. GRAPHIC LAYOUT BY GEOFFREY MANDEL.

**E.** BOYLE HEIGHTS STREET MURAL. BY SERGIO ROBLETO. PAINTED IN BOYLE HEIGHTS.



**F.** VAMPIRE VIP ROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.

**G.** HOTEL HALLWAY. ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN MCGONNELL.

**H.** HOTEL HALLWAY. PRODUCTION STILL. BUILD ON STAGE NEW ORLEANS

**I.** BOYLE HEIGHTS STREET MURAL. BY SERGIO ROBLETO. PRODUCTION STILL.

counterparts. Wicked, evil beyond repute, and extremely hard to kill. There are also the humans from Boyle Heights who are led by Benny's older brother Jay. Jay masquerades as a limo driver, but, I would hazard a guess, probably heads up an illegal narcotics enterprise. Money derived from narcotic sales would be the elusive symbol he is after to attain power and status. His elaborate gun handle could be construed as an attempt to copy the cartels south of the border. He definitely has a double life, working as a driver to seem legitimate, but seemingly a little brazen with the ornamentation in his life when revealing his other side. Most likely born and raised in East Los Angeles, Jay is descended from the humble agrarian ancestors who made the first pact with the vampires after they settled in LA just after the First World War. Victor's origin is unknown. When did he start his emigration from his homeland, when was he turned, what atrocities of war has he lived through? What horrors caused by man alone, has he witnessed through his eyes? Has he seen so much evil from man, that his disdain for them knows no bounds?

Regarding the sets and their actual design, the night proceeds through a really exciting character





arc. The story begins with the mundane household where Benny has lived his young life. His bedroom is a conduit which reveals his imagination, his musical aspirations, the dreams that linger beneath his daily life, his world is about to be exposed to an alternate plane. His isolated suburban malaise will be transformed by the supernatural. When he first meets Zoe and Blaire, the two vampires he is unwittingly driving to his supposed demise, he is thrown into a world unfamiliar to him. One of the first stops Benny makes is a private club, where the interiors harken back to beautifully ornate neoclassical Parisian hotels. Here the vampires go to perform some bloodletting, but are in an environment which I felt they would find comforting, due to the leanings and stylings of the ornate neoclassical architecture. The long corridor between the elevator and the bloodletting room being a play on the long corridors of Versailles, where French courtiers would vie for the attention of the king. The corridor was lined with these wonderful sconces of elephant heads that Kristin discovered, a perfect metaphor for the superhuman strength a vampire possesses. Elephants, of course, are renowned through history for their bravery in battle and incredible strength.

This night involves many stops, the reason for this is revealed. The trio visits one particular storied vampire's house which has an almost Caligula-esque vibe, and it has an incredible lawn filled with flowers that emit a cacophony of red light in

the dark. A decadently metaphorical red canopy of blood! Had he been a modern-day vampire, Tiberius himself might have found this den of vice a suitable modern-day replacement for his villa on the Isle of Capri! Onto another pit stop, a VIP room at a vampire hangout club, which witnesses a deadly fight and is ironically constructed of Frank Lloyd Wright pre-Columbian blocks. The blocks are completely covered in a black automotive finish to give them a modern twist. The irony here being that the vampires have constructed a room that harkens back to the ancestral lineage of their human enemies, Jay's gang and their Mayan roots. Hallucinogenic images were projected on the ceiling of the room during the fight in order to emphasize the struggle that Benny is having attempting to come to grips with everything that is happening to him during the evening. There is a feeling of a sacrificial Aztec chamber, and the hallucinogenic images on the ceiling are a reminder of the drugs administered to the Aztec sacrificial victims. I rather liked this set to be honest, it felt like the Stygian underbelly of decadent vampire nightlife.

After a delay due to COVID, the production made its way to Los Angeles, for part deux of *Night Teeth*. In dear old Los Angeles, I was joined by Art Director Timothy Hildebrandt Stuart and set decorator Debra Echard. We still had four weeks of shooting, actually a very important four weeks as the scenarios we would film in Los Angeles, especially the nighttime driving exteriors, were critical in order to convince

the viewer that they had never left LA. My favorite set filmed in Los Angeles is the opening laundromat, where the audience first meets Jay. 'Sasha' Stolin created and painted an incredible mural that wraps around the entire interior of the laundromat. It was one hundred feet in length, and told the history of both factions, how the vampires had come from Eastern Europe escaping religious purges against them, and how Jay's and Benny's forefathers had established an agrarian foothold in East Los Angeles. In fact, all the murals that were painted in both New Orleans and Los Angeles are a wonderful sight to behold, and there were indeed many of them.

Benny's psychological anxiety is prevalent throughout the narrative of this film as its story unfolds, and my greatest desire with regards to the look of the film was to drive and suggest this anxiety. Benny goes from a place designed to offer nurture and safety and is thrown right down the proverbial rabbit hole. Each environment will suggest in a wry manner, a portent of what the future holds for Benny this night. I humbly consider this film to be a bit of a romp, and with that territory comes the playfulness with how all the design elements were mixed together, and I hope that the tongue-in-cheek side shows through in the final design of *Night Teeth*.

Great thanks must also be given to Netflix and 42 Films for getting this film started and finished in extraordinary circumstances. **ADG**

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Geoffrey Mandel (LA),  
Graphic Artists  
Alexander 'Sasha' Stolin,  
Mural Artist  
Kristin Bicksler (NO),  
Debra Echard (LA),  
Set Decorators

**E. BLOOD COLLECTION ROOM. PRODUCTION STILL.**

**A. HOTEL ELEVATOR. SET PHOTO.**

**B. BLOODLETTING ROOM. ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN MCGONNELL.**

**C. BLOODLETTING ROOM. BUILT ON STAGE NEW ORLEANS. PRODUCTION STILL BY DP EBEN BOLTER.**

**D. FOOD TRUCK MARKET. ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN MCGONNELL.**

