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Peele may leave you puzzled in powerful 'Us'

Writer-director Jordan Peele's chilling "Us" continues to haunt long after the theater lights go up.

Peele ("Get Out") seeds the brain-teasing film with clues until the very end, when viewers must mentally reconstruct the story fragments rattling around their shaken brains.

After an opening night screening of "Us," the audience did not buzz with appreciation or rumble with applause. It sat dazed in stunned silence wondering what had just happened.

So many portends, parental fears and plot holes. So much dread and disquieting self-reflection.

Should one walk away or buy a ticket to the next showing, to figure it all out?

"Us" is the story of a comfortably middle-class family, the Wilsons, who vacation at the northern California beach house of their late parents.

Once, as a little girl, , Adelaide (Lupita Nyong'o) drifted away from her quarreling folks on the Santa Cruz boardwalk and wandered into a fun-house, an eerily empty hall of mirrors. Lost in a maze of her multiple reflections, little Adelaide is confronted by a doppelganger who has a sinister grin and a strangling grip.

Now an adult and still traumatized by the experience, Adelaide doesn't want to return to the beach with her own husband and children. She's afraid something bad will happen.

Of course it will.

The actors in "Us" all play dual



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roles, a privileged character and their shadow side.

The remarkable performances propel the movie beyond what might otherwise have been an extended "Twilight Zone" episode and distract us from numerous (and perhaps unanswerable) questions raised by the story.

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Their credibility gives us permission to double down on the movie's murderous identical family conceit.

Winston Duke ("Black Panther") plays the genial dad, Gabe, who has no idea what he's up against. Gabe makes a halfway-valiant effort to protect his family, yet the existential threat that confronts the Wilsons cries out for a strategist with mom skills.

Shahadi Wright Joseph and Evan Alex, who play the family's children, will certainly become go-to child stars of their generation, as Jodie Foster and Haley Joel Osment once were of theirs.

But face it: "Us" belongs to Lupita Nyong'o, who plays both Adelaide and her villainous mirror image, Red, with authenticity and authority.

First on the scene in 2013's "12 Years a Slave," Academy Award-winner Nyong'o has soared to the top of her profession. With "Us," she proves herself as a leading actor who can carry a movie — a beauty from whom it is impossible to turn away.

Peele, originally a comedian known for his impression of President Obama, was an adolescent horror buff. He deploys comedy and chills — the two great outlets for societal anxiety — to manipulate his audiences and brings to "Us" a comedian's facility for timing, suspense and surprise.

Peele also upends the horror movie convention of disposing of black characters early in the plot. And he eerily distorts the lively rap tune "I Got Five On It," a celebration of smoking marijuana, to create the movie's unsettling score.

Peele said the hip-hop hit reminded him of the theme from "Nightmare on Elm Street."

Embedded in "Us" is Peele's political commentary that we of the U.S. who mindlessly and unknowingly enjoy our comforts while others suffer, can no longer ignore those on the dark side.

There is no "them" without "us."