

Los Angeles

THE L.A. MAN

FEATURING

Brendan Fraser

IN *RENTAL FAMILY*,
THE OSCAR WINNER
PLAYS A LONELY
AMERICAN IN
TOKYO SEARCHING
FOR PURPOSE

'MALICIOUSLY SET'

Prosecutors say a former Palisades man intentionally started a New Year's Eve blaze that allegedly ignited one of the most destructive fires in L.A. history. The question now is why?

COMING IN HOT

Ray Garcia's *Broken Spanish* returns

OPEN BOOK

Judd Apatow's career as a *Comedy Nerd*

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MORE MALE LEADERS
BEHIND SOME OF THE
CITY'S BUZZIEST PROJECTS
AND MOST IMPORTANT
CONTRIBUTIONS



ROULETTE MODEL

BY CHRIS NICHOLS PHOTOGRAPHED BY IRVIN RIVERA

WARDROBE STYLING SAM SPECTOR AND BROOKE LLEWELYN
GROOMING SONIA LEE, EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS

LOCATION YAMASHIRO HOLLYWOOD

DIGITECH: PHIL LIMPRASERTWONG; PHOTO ASSISTANT: ANDREW LOPEZ; PRODUCTION COORDINATOR: MATTHEW GERETY; GROOMING: SONIA LEE EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS USING BALMAIN HAIRCARE

In the Searchlight drama *Rental Family*, Oscar winner Brendan Fraser plays a lonely American in Tokyo looking for purpose while working at a service that offers temporary friends and family

SOMEWHERE IN HOLLYWOOD, A long-lost hard drive contains a 360-degree scan of Brendan Fraser. In 1999, all 6-foot-2 of the blue-eyed, square-jawed big-screen dreamboat was digitally captured at the peak of his swash-buckling, action-star finest. “You put on the tight pants and unitard and stand in a washing machine of lights and it goes whirr,” the Oscar winner tells *Los Angeles*. “They wanted my body scan so they could re-create me on screen if they needed and also to make merchandise and dolls.” Fraser doesn’t know what became of the files but notes: “Naturally I have concerns. Where does that data go? Who controls it?”

A quarter-century later, Hollywood is challenged by an industry shrinking due to runaway production, with digital effects replacing human art and AI-powered actors like “Tilly Norwood” entering the scene. As early as 2021, a holographic Whitney Houston had a residency in Las Vegas that ran for more than a year. Now, “prompt engineer” for AI films is a new Hollywood job listing and Coca-Cola, Heinz and Nike have made TV commercials using the technology. “You cry, you laugh — [you’re] scared,” director Timur Bekmambetov said proudly after a recent screening of his film *LifeHack*, a movie that takes

place entirely on a computer screen. “It doesn’t matter which tools you’re using.”

While we’re concerned about the impersonal overtaking art, we follow strangers on social media, face self-checkout lanes at supermarkets and order from a digital kiosk at McDonald’s. With evolving technology, synthetic humans, distancing relationships and simulated reality in the zeitgeist, perhaps now is the perfect time for *Rental Family*, a heartfelt drama starring Brendan Fraser that focuses on finding authenticity in an artificial relationship, out Nov. 21 from Searchlight Pictures.

“It’s nice to be shooting in L.A. again,” says Fraser, who relocated from Coldwater Canyon to New York a few years ago to seek treatment for his son. “I can’t remember the last time I shot in L.A.”

Fraser is back in California to work on a film noir with Andy Garcia and to talk about his new movie, in which he plays an American actor living in Tokyo recruited by a company that mitigates uncomfortable emotional situations by inserting a paid actor to play a part. “There are improvements that could be made with regards to mental health issues in Japan,” Fraser says of the film’s conceit. “This is kind of a work-around. There are people who are in need who don’t know what to ask for. When we come back to our very real world after having been in these virtual ones, we understand more about who we are.”

In the film, the salary for an actor playing an elderly woman is 7,000 yen (about \$46), the role of a middle-aged housewife pays ¥8,000 and that of a teenage daughter commands ¥9,000. We’re never told what Fraser’s character, Phillip Vandarpleog, is paid for the part of “Sad American,” mourning at a mock funeral, but whatever it is must be better than waiting out the days alone in his Tokyo apartment wearing sweatpants and lazily spying on his neighbors. “He seems like he’s not doing so great,” Fraser says of his character. “I don’t even know if that guy is an actor, to be honest. There’s a population of expats — Americans, Canadians and Brits — in Tokyo. You can’t really pin down exactly what it is they do but [it’s] typically



“I was the babysitter VHS tape for a long time, and now all those kids are having kids.”

— BRENDAN FRASER



LEFT: T-SHIRT, SHIRT AND PANTS: ISAIA; RIGHT: SHIRT, KNIT AND PANTS: BILLY REID; BOOTS: CARMINA; COAT: MICHAEL KORS; WATCH: PIAGET; COURTESY CH PREMIER JEWELERS

something with the arts. There are a lot of aspirational performers out there.”

The premise of the film is not entirely fictional: Real firms have popped up in Japan, France and even the U.S. offering temporary companions to those who feel isolated. In *Rental Family*, an agency helps clients who are lonely or in need of a fill-in relative. Fraser’s Vandarpleog, whose previous work includes playing trees and toothpaste tubes, finds meaning in his new roles. “I do believe in the value of make-believe and surrogacy,”

Fraser explains. “Everybody wants to feel that we belong.”

Mononymous writer-director Hikari delivers a film that can be classified as part of a genre in which reality is augmented to maintain a suspension of disbelief. *Westworld* did it with robots and *The Truman Show* created an artificial world around Jim Carrey. This spring marked the return of HBO’s 2022 series *The Rehearsal*, a kind of social experiment where producer and star Nathan Fielder lets people practice for

real life situations before they occur by acting them out in full-scale simulations. Fraser sums up the idea: “Theater is life,” he says. “Cinema is art.”

In *Rental Family*, Fraser’s character takes his young charge to an immersive digital aquarium where fish appear to swim among the visitors. “It’s cool ... but it’s fake,” 11-year-old actress Shannon Gorman’s character says. Fraser’s Vandarpleog responds, “You know, sometimes it’s OK to pretend.”

This isn’t the first time a film starring Fraser has examined the conceit of altered reality. In director Hugh Wilson’s 1999 movie *Blast From the Past*, Fraser plays the child of Cold War-era parents that lock the family in a fallout shelter for decades, emerging to find their Valley neighborhood not destroyed by a nuclear blast but by the decay of civilization. “I think it was social commentary about what it means to be a gentleman,” Fraser says. “It came out at a time when Los Angeles was going through a huge reckoning with regard to the respect we have for one another as a society.”

B

BRENDAN FRASER HAS BEEN

a movie star for decades, with fans stretching through generations. “I was the babysitter VHS tape for a long time, and now all those kids are having kids,” he says. “[GQ’s] Zach Barron described me as being as familiar as the furniture in the living room.”

Acting is immensely fulfilling to Fraser. “Another reason I wanted to be a part of this as a career when I started was that I wanted to feel that I belonged. Not much has changed about that.”

Fraser arrived in Los Angeles after receiving his BFA from Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle and acting as “Sailor #1” alongside River Phoenix in 1991’s *Dogfight*. The film enabled the young Fraser to enter the Screen Actors Guild under the Taft-Hartley Act. He relocated to Los Angeles after joining the union. “I had to ask myself, ‘Do I learn on the job or go back to the world of academia and theory?’ So I made the big leap and jumped into the industry with both feet and did pretty well for myself. It was up and down for a lot of the time, but I was definitely persistent.”

After convincing audiences he was a defrosted caveman from the Valley in 1992’s *Encino Man*, Fraser has gone on to work with esteemed directors like Bill Condon (*Gods and Monsters*), Harold Ramis (*Bedazzled*), Steven Soderbergh (*No Sudden Move*) and Darren Aronofsky (2022’s *The Whale*, for which he took home his best actor Oscar).

In *Rental Family*, an actor he befriends has one film that must never be mentioned. Does Fraser? “I used to



think it was *Monkeybone*,” he says. “But I love that movie! How weird it is that we actually got away with shooting it. It was considered not successful for whichever reasons. Now it lands with a different audience that brings fresh eyes to it. It’s rewarding to think maybe we were on to something way back in the day — that we were just ahead of our time.”

Over the course of dozens of films, Fraser has co-starred with Hollywood legends like Robert De Niro in *Killers of the Flower Moon* and Shirley MacLaine in *Mrs. Winterbourne*. His vast body of work lives everywhere, not only in your streaming box, in action figures and your mom’s VHS tapes but also on a constant loop at Universal Studios Florida at The Revenge of the Mummy attraction. “It plays in Orlando a zillion times a day,” he says, adding that for 20 years, “I’ve been entertaining people with my cup of coffee

while they wait to get on the ride.”

Fraser’s next roles fit perfectly into his eclectic filmography. “It’s a bit of a ping-pong sort of pinball-machine trajectory,” he says of his career. In *Pressure*, he plays war hero and future President Dwight D. Eisenhower, landing on the beach at Normandy. He’s awed at the film’s rezzed up archival footage of World War II soldiers, so crisp that you can read their lips and see their breath in the cold. After that is *Breaking Bear*, an animated TV comedy from Julien Nitzberg, whose recent L.A. stage musical *For the Love of a Glove* told the story of Michael Jackson from the perspective of his evil, alien-possessed sequined mitt. Says Fraser of *Breaking Bear*, which focuses on a dysfunctional ursine family that turns to crime to save their forest home from fracking and other human threats: “We’re gonna move fast and break things. There’s

T-SHIRT AND SHIRT: ISAIA



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— JULIEN NITZBERG,
CREATOR, *BREAKING BEAR*

COURTESY SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

something in there to offend everyone. It takes balls of steel to do that.”

For Nitzberg, Fraser was the perfect choice for a project that’s been described as a mob saga with cartoon sensibilities. “We wanted to have someone who brought both comedy and gravitas in a comically bizarre way, and that was Brendan,” says the director. “He just fully inhabits the role in an incredible way. You see his whole body change. Even during table reads he just gives us 250%.”

In recent years, comic book conventions have morphed into pop culture expositions that bring in billions of dollars around the globe. Fraser has done at least four cons this year, posing for photos and signing autographs alongside stars like John Cena, Helen Hunt and William Shatner. “The convention world is where people [find] each other,” Fraser says. “They have a very specific hobby and love playing dress-up and

assuming the mantle of splashy cultural icons. It’s the nerds inheriting the world.”

Some come to hang with Fraser the kindly middle-aged father who can barely tell a dad joke, and others are there to meet their movie-star hero. Which is real and which makes him their therapist?

He loves hearing from those who were influenced by larger-than-life characters like his adventurer Rick O’Connell from *The Mummy*. “I studied history, I studied archeology, I studied Egyptology, I go on digs looking for fossils or ancient civilizations,” fans have told him at the shows. “People have really been inspired by the allure of what that grouping of movies delivered: a fantasy, an adventure, something thrilling, something romantic, something funny, something for everyone.”

He’s met people dressed like his

FAMILY TIES

Clockwise from top right: Mari Yamamoto and Fraser as rental family agency co-workers; *Rental Family* filmed in Japan; Fraser’s Phillip is an actor at a crossroad; Mia (Shannon Gorman) gets a father figure in *Rental Family*; Phillip’s job duties include funeral attendance.



character from *George of the Jungle* and even one with a tattoo of *Monkeybone*. “Hey! We’re still here,” he says. “We’re still doing this!”

Clearly, audiences are hungry for more Brendan Fraser. “It kind of all boils down to how fortunate I feel to be included in this whole enterprise,” he says. “I still pinch myself.” ■