



Cinefex | blog

SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

“Wendy” – Q&A with Benh Zeitlin & Jason Hamer

by **Joe Fordham**

Posted on **May 6, 2020** by **Joe Fordham**



Searchlight Pictures' *Wendy* was one of the last films to open in North America before the coronavirus pandemic darkened cinemas worldwide. The film opened, in limited release, after its Sundance Film Festival premiere where critics heralded *Wendy* as filmmaker Benh Zeitlin's second feature – following his Oscar-nominated postdiluvian fantasy *Beasts of the Southern Wild* – which they described as a loose retelling of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. For general audiences, the production seemed far removed from previous Pans by Walt Disney or Steven Spielberg, recent remakes by P.J. Logan or Joe Wright, or even revisionist takes, such as Marc Forster's Barrie biopic, *Finding Neverland*.

For Zeitlin – and his sister and co-writer, Eliza – the project was a labor of love eight years in the making. The production was another genre-bending tale, featuring non-professional child performers in contemporary settings with only a semblance of J.M. Barrie trappings. Gone was the flying boy, and his wandering shadow, who transports Wendy Darling and her brothers from Victorian London to a Neverland populated by mermaids, fairies, pirates, Lost Boys and the

fearsome Captain Hook.

Instead, the film depicted Wendy (Devin France) as the youngest of four ragamuffin children, living with their single-parent mother (Shay Walker) above a trackside Louisiana burger joint. One night, a strangely elfin boy lures Wendy's eldest brother Thomas (Krzysztof Meyn) onto a passing train. After a dreamlike pursuit by rail and sea, the children confront Thomas' kidnapper, Peter (Yashua Mack), on a primordial island. There, other vagabond children look to Wendy as their savior from a tribe of decrepit elders. Wendy's brother James (Gavin Naquin) rapidly transforms into middle age (Kevin Pugh) and a mysterious sea monster – the Mother spirit – lurks in the island's volcanic innards.

Cinefex caught up with Benh Zeitlin and creature effects supervisor Jason Hamer to discuss the origins of the project, and their experience – working with Eliza Zeitlin as production designer, and visual effects supervisor Jasper Kidd – turning Peter Pan mythology on its head in the bold and imaginative fantasy film.



CINEFEX: Where did *Wendy* spring from?

ZEITLIN: My sister Eliza and I grew up in a house of folklorists. Our parents implanted the idea that myths are an important aspect of how we understand the world; how myths are passed down, retold and reinterpreted as time goes on. Those ideas have always been very close to me. And more than any specific version of *Peter Pan*, we were influenced by the character and the myth of Peter. The bones of this story are so timeless they continue to exist in people's imaginations. All our lives, my sister and I dreamed of having a chance to reinterpret this story. For us, this story was not about escapism, which is often interpreted as the central idea of *Peter Pan*. We wanted to tell a story about growing up, and how complicated that is. We were 30 and 28 years old, and there were many themes that were cresting for us that felt universal – about how to grow up and not grow old.

CINEFEX: Is there a real 'Darling Diner' that inspired your story's opening?

ZEITLIN: The original vision of the Darling's Diner was based on a hamburger restaurant called Bud's Broiler, in New Orleans. That was formerly a railroad station master's house, with a track that ran alongside. Our idea was to film in that diner and to control the trains outside. We quickly learned that it was impossible for us to control the traffic on that track because it was a national rail system. Instead, we found a non-profit group, the Louisiana Steam Train Association, which has its own stretch of track and several antique train cars. We used those in the film, and they were operated them for us. We then designed a building, with architecture and a structure very similar to Bud's Broiler, and built that from scratch on an empty plot adjacent to their train track.

CINEFEX: How did you get the children jumping from the Darling Diner roof onto the passing train? They very convincingly leap back and forth.

ZEITLIN: Our mandate was to shoot things for real. When we were talking about how to replace the concept of Peter and the children flying, we discussed what could we do that would be as thrilling, dangerous and spectacular for a kid as flying? That's how we came up with the idea of the characters jumping onto a moving train. The only visual effects we did in those shots were to digitally remove the wires supporting the children. The kids were on harnesses with wires attached to a line above the train, and then another safety line guided them from a crane. If they missed the jump, they wouldn't have gotten hurt. But they had the courage and they ran and jumped. We filmed it just as you see it.

CINEFEX: What led you to shoot on 16mm? The film had a very visceral, handheld photographic style, but looked as gorgeous as 35mm.

ZEITLIN: That's all credit to our cinematographer, Sturla Grøvlen. He used several different film stocks. Much of the film was set in Neverland, filmed in blazing

sunlight. A lot of that we shot on 50D Kodak VISION3 50D color negative film, 7203. That is very clean grain, and almost indiscernible from 35mm. We wanted the film to feel handmade and a little rough around the edges. Sturla managed to find a balance between that aesthetic, capturing our incredible landscapes with real majesty on the film stock.



— Filming “Wendy” on location. Director of Photography Sturlen Brandth Grovlen, writer/director Benh Zeitlin, performers Devin France, Krzysztof Meyn, Gage Naquin and Ahmad Cage. Photo by Mary Cybulski. © 2019 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation All Rights Reserved.

CINEFEX: The credits indicate you filmed in Monserrat and islands in that area. How did you select those areas for Neverland?

ZEITLIN: The three areas we shot on were Montserrat, Antigua and Barbuda, which are neighboring islands. Neverland has historically been played as a riff on the colonial British imagination of the Caribbean. One of the things that we wanted to revise and dismantle was exactly that. We wanted to shoot in this region; but to portray it in a way unlike how it appears in postcards and cruise ship commercials. We wanted to find wild and natural locations that hadn't been disrupted by any human hand. To accomplish that, bringing our film production out to those places for every day of the shoot, was like planning an invasion. It was incredibly complicated to reach our locations and then to set up filming with children and old people. The degree of difficulty for our production team, figuring out how to do these things safely on a daily basis, was as high as it could possibly be.

CINEFEX: Working in such a wild environment, with children climbing volcanoes and sword fighting, how did you plan your shoot?

ZEITLIN: It was like the Mike Tyson quote, ‘Everybody has a plan until they get hit in the face.’ That was our daily experience. I meticulously storyboarded every shot. I had those boards on separate cards, and I made notes on the back of each one, summarizing what I needed for each shot. When we got to set, half the time the cove where we were supposed to shoot had turned into a whirlpool of whitewater; or a beach had been washed away. Our plans were constantly dismantled, and we had to figure out how to adjust on the fly. That same principle applied to how we worked with our child actors. If one of them became tired, or got in a bad mood, I'd maybe give their lines to another character. Every day of shooting, we had to be very agile to get what was essential for our scenes while facing a great number of unpredictable elements that you would normally never design into a filming process.

CINEFEX

WENDY creature effects



CINEFEX: One of the most unique parts of the film is the Mother spirit. What was the concept for that enormous glowing sea creature?

ZEITLIN: Our idea was that nature has a joy to it. The spirit that we attribute to humans as joy, ecstasy and euphoria, you can sense that in nature. We wanted the Mother to be born of that joy and the protector of that spirit. In the mythology of the film, a volcanic eruption spits this creature up to the surface of the water, and there she meets Peter and becomes his protector. Our personal mythology around the creature was that she had been living down at the center of the Earth. We took inspiration from microorganisms that breathe from hydrothermal vents in the deepest chasms of the oceans, from cephalopods and bioluminescent creatures that live down there. And then, we blew her up to enormous proportions. Design-wise, Eliza was the mother of the Mother.



— The Mother spirit of Neverland, a giant sea creature, as realized by production designer Eliza Zeitlin and her team.

CINEFEX: Eliza had a team building the Mother for almost a year before you started photography; and then plans changed. How did Eliza and Jason Hamer collaborate to create the creature?

ZEITLIN: The idea was to shoot the Mother puppet in live water, on location in Antigua during principal photography. That plan went a little sideways. We brought out to the Caribbean the puppet that Eliza and her team designed and made. But the forces of the ocean can never be properly estimated. We very much knew what Mother was and what she was supposed to look like the whole time, based on the design that my sister and her team created. Eliza designs and fabricates as one process, so the creature took shape as she fabricated it. When Jason entered the process, we moved to a more locked-in design, and continued to work on the puppet that they constructed for principal photography. We later had a miniature shoot, and the final result is a blend of those two creations, as well as several full-scale elements.

CINEFEX: Jason, you were initially handling prosthetics for the film?

HAMER: Yes, in the story, when the children stop 'believing,' they start aging rapidly. Wendy's brother James tries to halt the aging process in his hand by cutting off his arm. We aged his hand. He then begs Peter to chop that off, in an attempt stop his aging process. For that, we made a stump that he wore after. We also created some subtle silicone prosthetics, which we used to age the young actor. We enlarged his nose a little, and we gave him a lip appliance with a little bit of hair punched into it.

CINEFEX: When you expanded your role to help out on the Mother puppet, what areas did you focus on?

HAMER: Benh's sister, Eliza, had done some beautiful work and created a stunning model of the Mother. We ended up coming back to that. Carlos Juante did some conceptual art for us to figure out how we could incorporate the design motifs that Eliza had established. Mother had a cuttlefish look, but she illuminated from within. And she's very mysterious, so you're not supposed to see that much of her. One of our nature references was the blanket octopus, which is an absolutely gorgeous creature with huge 18-foot sails of what look like a chiffon.



— Mother spirit concepts created by Carlos Juante at Hamer FX.

CINEFEX: To make something that floats in water, that you can puppeteer and that glows is a tall order. How did you bring those criteria together?

ZEITLIN: It was funny, because in the early stages of conceiving how we would create the Mother, we were watching videos of a visual effects artist we admired who'd worked on just about every single one of our favorite effects films. Two years later, Jason mentioned, 'I know this guy who might be able to help us.' And that was the same guy, Bill Bryan, who helped to inspire a lot of the techniques we used.

HAMER: Bill is the master of 'plastic bag effects' underwater work that he developed with Steve Johnson on films like *Species* and *Phantoms*. We used a lot of the technology that Bill used to make the jellyfish on Barry Levinson's sci-fi film, *Sphere*. That kind of tentacle technology was key, using

different fabrics to see what performed in water, and then incorporating those with heat-treated plastics to give certain qualities. Some of the tests that Eliza had done were amazing, shooting lights through plastic, which they had seen in one of Bill's videos. We incorporated a lot of those early tests.

CINEFEX: How big was the Mother creature?

HAMER: Eliza and Benh established the size in their puppet as a 40-foot sea creature. It was a massive beast. They had a 55-gallon ballast, using big barrels that they filled with air to keep it above the surface, and then they planned to flood those to take it below the surface. They also had a huge grid of LED lights to create internal bioluminescence, with a diver inside. But that ended up being uncontrollable in the ocean, and the creature's rigid foam carapace kept it afloat. But we used that as our scale, and then worked with the design to create something that we could build and puppeteer. We figured we could get a projector inside a four foot creature, and that was ultimately where we landed, with a four foot miniature.

CINEFEX: What did Bill build for you?

HAMER: The biggest contribution that Bill made was the Mother gullet. That was massive, like soccer-goal-sized rig that we immersed in water and illuminated through the side of a glass water tank. It had a series of layers of plastics, including a dark layer of deep tissue, and different grades of plastic sheeting that Bill stretched and dressed over that. The plastic is like a painter's drop cloth, and Bill used different thicknesses to create various textures.

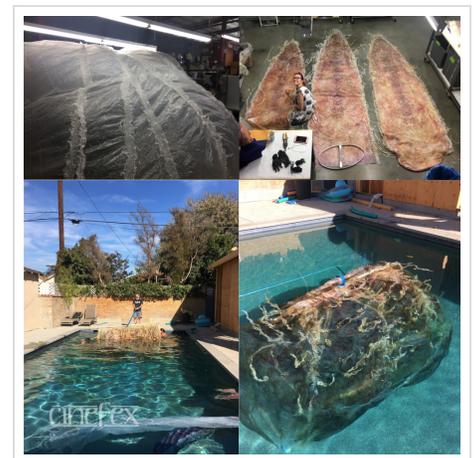
CINEFEX: How do you apply paints that stood up to underwater filming?

HAMER: We used Copic markers diluted with alcohol. The chlorine in the pool tends to strip that out. Unfortunately, you can't touch that up, so by the end of the shoot, everything was pretty clear. The lighting did a lot of the work for us, and having the dark layers behind the lighter layers gave that something to dance on. Tom Killeen painted the puppets, and then we dressed Mother's skin with lots of tiny details of colorful sea sponge pieces, like Eliza's puppet.

CINEFEX: What was her mechanical structure?



— When Wendy's brother James begins to age rapidly, Peter urges him to halt the process by severing his age-infected hand. Hamer FX supplied makeup effects to simulate the onset of aging, and created prosthetics for the severing.



— For Mother spirit performer interactions, Hamer FX employed a wide range of fabrication techniques to create creature parts, including tentacle technology that

HAMER: It was a Speedrail frame. Bill patterned that to blend it with the gullet. The center of the gullet was a stiff fabric that he manipulated to make it feel bulbous. We used Sea-Doo scooters, the kind that SCUBA divers use to propel themselves underwater, and we inverted those to create movement in the water. Our puppeteers took position behind the gullet and used the Sea-Doos to blow it out. Meanwhile, puppeteers above the pool pulled rods and strings. We tested that at home in my pool, and then shipped it to Louisiana and filmed at the University of New Orleans nautical engineering tank.

creature effects artist Bill Bryan used to build a full-scale Mother gullet. Creature artist Alex Waldron paints Mother tentacles. Bill Bryan attends a gullet test in Jason Hamer's swimming pool.



- For full-body shots of the Mother spirit, Hamer FX built a four-foot puppet. Effects artist Ernesto Cornejo sculpts the Mother miniature as a clay maquette.

CINEFEX: How did you build the four-foot puppet?

HAMER: The silicone skin sat loosely on a core of fiberglass and vacuform shells. We made it that way so that we could keep it in motion with the Sea-Doos. We attached two rods to the puppet's core. When we dipped the puppet in the pool, water filled the puppet with a natural buoyancy, and the fabrics and the plastics did what they wanted. The main puppeteer up top kept her alive, moving back and forth, and then the propelled water animated the rest.

CINEFEX: How did you shoot scenes with the children underwater interacting up close with the creature?

ZEITLIN: All shots of the children directly interacting with the Mother's face we did with Eliza's full-scale puppet. Jason's team also built a large section of Mother's face and eye, but we ended up using Eliza's creation there.

HAMER: And we made full-scale elements of Mother's 12-foot sails that the kids could swim with in the cenote, where we filmed in Mexico. We made those out of chiffon that we dye-sublimated using a print that creature designer Neville Paige made for us.

CINEFEX: Benh, how did you direct scenes of the children communicating underwater with the Mother?

ZEITLIN: How the Mother was going to express her feelings, and how we were going to emotionally connect to her, was a huge question for us. We felt that movie audiences at this point are so accustomed to watching computer-created creatures, we didn't want to fall back on the tropes of digitally animating facial expressions, or having her speak in a humanoid way. We wanted audiences to feel connected to something they could feel in their bones was real and not synthesized with a computer. We came to the idea of her internal light as her emotional communication device.



- In addition to the miniature Mother puppet, and full-scale interactive pieces, Hamer FX created a 9x9-foot closeup creature section, with a mechanical eye for underwater filming. Ernesto Cornejo, Brian Van Dorn and Pepe Mora detail the 9-foot sculpt.



- The Mother spirit miniature contained a fiberglass core that Hamer FX mechanical designer Terry Sandin articulated with a four-paddle lip mechanism.

CINEFEX: Mother appears enormous in scale with the children. How did visual effects supervisor Jasper Kidd pull those scenes together for you?

ZEITLIN: Jasper was a real wizard in terms of figuring out tiny elements that could be combined with the puppet, such as adding particulates so fine that they almost didn't read on-screen. Those details gave her the scale necessary to sell the illusion. Jasper comes from a painting background, and that sense of artistry, and that sense of approaching effects not just as a technician, but as a painter and as an artist, really helped us make her something emotional.

CINEFEX: How much did you shoot on location in Mother's underwater cave?

ZEITLIN: The caves were in the Yucatan, outside of Tulum. The main one was called Sac Actun. Jasper made an incredible find – a diver who shoots 360-degree photographs of real internal caves for an online project, essentially to be able to explore these places from afar. We were able to license a complete 360 cave, which wasn't the same caves that we shot in. We blended our caves that were shot live, with another cave that Jasper created.

CINEFEX: Let's delve a little more into those visual effects. Tell us, Jasper, how did you make the Mother cave

extensions?

JASPER KIDD: For all of the wide shots of the cave we commissioned a cave diver to Lidar scan a huge cave in Slovenia. We ended up with a beautiful color scan that had over 80 scan locations in a half mile of cave and 400 million points of data. This gave us the foundation for all the natural beauty and organic complexity of a real location. I re-projected those textures into about 20 pieces and hand-sculpted in all the high-resolution detail in Pixologic ZBrush, retaining the cave's original shapes and color. We then translated all of the lensing from our previs to the cave, and enlarged the miniature puppet to 10:1 scale. We rendered that in Maya and Arnold with layers of VDB dust clouds and particles that we simulated in Houdini. And we blended the final CG cave environments with plate elements Benh had shot on location.

CINEFEX: The film took shape over two years in editing, and there are several visual effects companies listed in the credit roll, including Phosphene and Break/Enter. Did you pull from all quarters in postproduction?

ZEITLIN: Phosphene supervised the shoot. Jasper's company, Brake/Enter, took over in post and did 100-percent of our visual effects. I met Jasper through his partner, Ilia Mokhtareizadeh, who was working on the visual effects for *Maniac* along with my co-composer Dan Romer. He'd been working in commercials and pulled together an all-star team of visual effects artists as a home-made operation, and they took on challenges that probably would have intimidated a larger visual effects house.

JASPER: I had been working at The Mill when I met Benh on *Wendy*. I was really excited about the project and we built out a company from the ground up to take on the entire film's VFX. We handled over 300 shots with a small crew of eight people that were fully dedicated to bringing *Mother* and the film to life. To be part of such a small team and to be so close to the process was a once in a lifetime experience.



— Hamer FX artist Tom Killeen paints the Mother miniature.

CINEFEX: There's tremendous atmosphere to the scenes when the Mother rescues Wendy in its glowing gullet. What did you shoot for those interactions?

HAMER: Our mechanical designer, Tim Ralston, built a sled, like a little boat, and fitted that inside the gullet. That was filled with LED panels. He built that on a fiberglass shell, coated it with silicone, with wiring sealed in a silicone tube, and waterproofed it with layers of caulking. We controlled the Mother's lighting from the surface via a computer that ran different programs to create lighting effects.



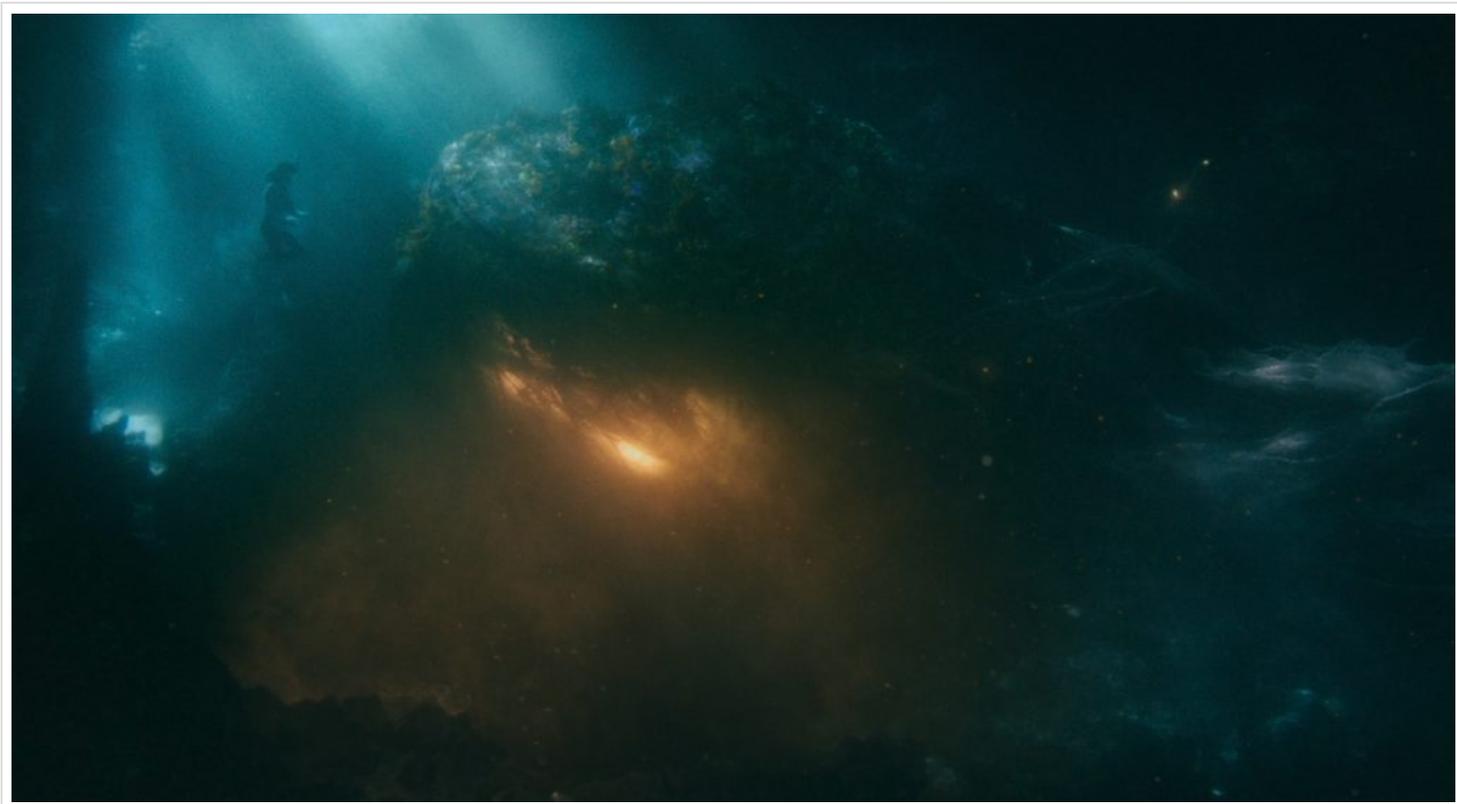
— To create the Mother spirit's internal lighting, Hamer FX used a pico projector, and an internal structure of LED lights. Hamer FX electronic designer Tim Ralston equipped electronics with water-tight casings for underwater filming.

What really helped tie those scenes together was when Jasper projected caustic lighting effects on the creature. That really helped convey the scale on the miniature. Jasper planned the shoot with previs, showing how in this environment the kids needed to be a certain distance from the creature, using a certain lens. Jasper brought a lot of his knowledge of shooting with miniatures to make that work.

CINEFEX: At the end of the film, when Mother appears to die, she emits streams of little fiery elements bleeding off into the ocean. What was the brief for that scene?

ZEITLIN: It goes back to an idea that we articulated in Wendy's voiceover about 'the first laugh of the first child breaking into a million glowing pieces.' The Mother's glow is her life force. We imagined her joy as a burning bright light, like lava, tied in to the Neverland volcano. When she gets punctured, her joy, or her life force, bleeds out of her to the bottom of the ocean and then reanimates, when her spirit returns.

CINEFEX: What did you shoot for that?



— Wendy confronts the Mother spirit. Photo Courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures. © 2019 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation All Rights Reserved.

HAMER: About two years after the shoot, we shot some visual effects elements for Jasper. We made little hollow rock shapes out of clear urethane and injected those with Cyalume liquid, like the military use in glowsticks. We then set up a shoot in my pool, where we blacked out the sides and added a small piece of ocean floor, with tiny rocks to scale. We strung the lava blobs on monofilament and ran them past the camera. Jasper grabbed those elements and accentuate them into his effects.

ZEITLIN: We used those elements a little bit. But the primary elements on screen in that scene were live burning underwater thermite reactions, which we shot in a custom tank in Ventura California with Coatwolf Productions supervised by Evan Glodell.

CINEFEX

WENDY *visual effects*



CINEFEX: The Mother spirit was a lovely visual metaphor. It goes beyond any notion of Peter Pan being a pejorative or infantilizing force. It comes across as something very vital and powerful in your film.

ZEITLIN: Thank you. We wanted to capture the movement of a live puppet underwater, and the whole reason for doing that was that there were certain unpredictable ways the water reacted with the puppet that could not be predicted or synthesized. We shot take after take and looked for moments where this inanimate object appeared to come to life. This film invited chaos at every turn and we searched for miracles, rather than staying within the limits of what could be imagined.

Wendy is now playing on home video at 4K UHD/HD/SD. Soundtrack by Dan Romer and Benh Zeitlin is available on streaming platforms, and Milan Records compact disc.

- [Wendy official website.](#)
- [Wendy at Facebook.](#)
- [Hamer FX.](#)
- [Break/Enter.](#)
- *Beasts of the Southern Wild* in [Cinefex 132.](#)

Addendum: This story has been edited to include special guest star speaker Jasper Kidd. Thanks to Josh Penn, Hamer FX, Shelby Kimlick, Chris Bess, Searchlight Films.

CRAFTYAPESVFX

Feature Film & Television

CRAFTYAPES.COM



STAR TREK: PICARD