

# FEATURES

## ‘Black Phone 2’ star Hawke talks Freddy Krueger comparisons

Brendan Morrow  
USA TODAY

Ethan Hawke didn’t want to play a villain. Now he has his own Spirit Halloween costume.

The actor returns in “Black Phone 2” (in theaters Oct. 17) as the masked child killer known as the Grabber, a part that has expanded his family’s footprint on the Halloween season: Both he and his 27-year-old daughter, Maya Hawke, have iconic roles in horror properties that inspire plenty of costumes.

“Last Halloween, there were probably 15 people that came to our house trick-or-treating dressed as the Grabber,” Hawke says. “And there were probably six that came by dressed as Maya’s character from ‘Stranger Things.’ So it felt like a coup d’état for the family.”

Hawke even got in on the fun one Halloween by dressing as the Grabber himself, allowing him to blend in as an average “Black Phone” fan.

“I was just another guy dressed as the Grabber,” he says. “They didn’t know I was the real Grabber!”

Based on the short story by Joe Hill, the first “Black Phone” centered on a boy, Finney (Mason Thames), who is held captive by the Grabber and must figure out a way to escape by communicating with the spirits of his kidnapper’s previous victims. It was a critical and commercial hit in 2022, but Hawke almost didn’t take the role of the Grabber in the first place due to his longtime aversion to playing villains.

“I noticed that once you start playing evil people, if the movie’s successful, it’s very hard for audiences to accept that you’re not evil once they’ve been afraid of you,” the actor explains. “It happened to Jack Nicholson in ‘The Shining.’ Now, his laugh seems scary.”

But Hawke put those concerns aside due to his desire to continue “working with good filmmakers” and evolve his career as he got older. “Part of it is my age,” he says. “You change or die, right?”

“Black Phone 2” sees Hawke go through another shift: While the Grabber was a living, breathing human in the original film, he returns as a fully supernatural entity who threatens Finney and his sister, Gwen (Madeleine McGraw), from beyond the grave.

In one disturbing scene, the Grabber states that going to hell stripped him of his humanity. So Hawke saw the task this time as playing the personification of sin itself.

“What does sin walk like?” Hawke



Ethan Hawke’s Grabber returns to haunt his victims from beyond the grave in “Black Phone 2.” PROVIDED BY SABRINA LANTOS/UNIVERSAL PICTURES

says. “What does sin sound like? That was just kind of how I thought about it. It’s almost like playing a gargoyle.”

With the Grabber unable to return in the flesh, he now terrorizes his victims in a dream world, making comparisons to Freddy Krueger from “A Nightmare on

Elm Street” inevitable.

Hawke embraces that comparison, noting he was inspired by Robert Englund’s “iconic” portrayal of Freddy.

“I thought a lot about Robert Englund. It was hard not to,” he says. “The body language is so inspiring, how to

communicate character through body language.”

That’s key for a role that requires Hawke to be able to perform without showing his face. “As soon as you put on a mask, it almost feels like Greek theater,” he says. “I get into that aspect of it.”

Hawke initially didn’t want to make another “Black Phone.” The star dislikes sequels and has rarely done them in his career, outside of Richard Linklater’s “Before” trilogy – and those were a different beast because they weren’t made due to the previous movies being successful, he said: “It was anything from a money grab. The first movie didn’t make any money!”

But he changed his mind after hearing that director Scott Derrickson had a curveball planned: to flip the script by centering the narrative of “Black Phone 2” largely on Gwen, who was more of a secondary character in the original.

“He had a really amazing idea to invert the lead of the film, to follow (Gwen), and to follow them through trauma recovery,” Hawke says. “The whole first film is about young people growing up in an unsafe world, where the grown-ups, the parent class, are incredibly disappointing, and they have to take responsibility for themselves. The second one had the really smart idea of saying, ‘Well, what happens after that? How do you recover from that experience?’”

Since he started playing the Grabber, Hawke has had to make sure embodying the role doesn’t take a psychological toll. “You have to take care of yourself,” he says, adding that “playing somebody who’s disgusting all day long” is “going to have an impact on you.”

The pivot to a more fantastical villain in “Black Phone 2” made things a bit easier on Hawke. “Because it’s less real, it becomes a sense of play, almost like an opera or something,” he says. “Whereas the first one, I had to be careful about it. You can imagine it, and then you have to be really careful about coming out of character.”

If the Grabber truly is Freddy Krueger for a new generation, that would suggest Hawke returning for many, many more installments. And despite admittedly not liking sequels, he doesn’t think he’s left the role behind just yet.

“When I finished the second one, I thought, ‘I’m not sure this is done,’” he says. “I feel like there might be more to do here. Now I’m asking questions about him, even more questions than I used to have.”

## Slapping Julia Roberts was ‘not ideal’ for Ayo Edebiri

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Ayo Edebiri has dabbled in on-screen violence before. But playing a member of a teenage fight club in the comedy “Bottoms” is one thing. Slapping the taste out of Julia Roberts’ mouth is a whole other.

“One of the worst things I’ve ever had to do,” Edebiri says in a Zoom interview alongside Roberts.

In director Luca Guadagnino’s psychological thriller “After the Hunt” (in select theaters now, nationwide Oct. 17), Yale philosophy professor Alma Imhoff (Roberts) is up for tenure and hosts parties with her psychiatrist husband Frederik (Michael Stuhlbarg) for their friends and colleagues, including Alma’s fellow instructor Hank (Andrew Garfield) and her star student Maggie (Edebiri).

When Maggie accuses Hank of sexual assault, Alma’s torn between her prize protege and her close confidante. Soon, her life begins to spiral as Alma desperately tries to keep one of her own secrets hidden and her relationship with Maggie turns combative. That conflict comes to a head in the middle of campus in the film’s most intense scene, as Alma verbally belittles and demeans her until Maggie snaps and suddenly smacks her mentor.

Roberts loves the dialogue in that moment, with “Alma just ticking down the list of all the ways that she sees this girl exposed,” she says. “It’s great when



The collegial relationship between Maggie (Ayo Edebiri, left) and her professor Alma (Julia Roberts) falls apart in “After the Hunt.” PROVIDED BY YANNIS DRAKOULIDIS/AMAZON MGM STUDIOS

a character hits that tipping point and these are the electric moments that really bring us to the edge of our seat.”

But the slap itself was “tough,” Edebiri says. “You are enacting violence on another person and your fellow actor. That takes a lot of trust and just solid foundation of communication and safety. And then when that person is God’s gift to planet Earth, Julia Roberts, it’s not ideal.”

There was some trepidation. Edebiri admits she needed to have a conversation with Roberts about it “because I

was not looking at her in the eye the closer that it was getting to that moment. She was like, ‘It’s OK. You ultimately can slap me and must slap me but, like, let’s do it and do it right and then we won’t have to do it too many times,’” she recalls with a laugh.

Adds Roberts: “Let’s not belabor it. Bring it, but don’t hurt me.”

The Oscar winner wanted Edebiri “to feel comfortable” because “it’s harder to slap someone than to be slapped in a scene. And I’ve been slapped by Sean Penn,” Roberts quips, referring to a heat-

ed scene in the historical drama series “Gaslit.”

“I’m here to tell you, I will take Ayo any day of the week. But I slapped him back pretty good.”

One of the hallmarks of Guadagnino’s movies, like the Oscar-nominated “Call Me by Your Name” and “Challengers,” is the way characters are driven by “intimacy and honesty,” Edebiri says. “They create friction, and definitely (in ‘After the Hunt’) that’s a moment that friction was literally created.”