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Jeff Goldblum's 'The Fly' might just land an Academy Award

By JACK MATHEWS
Los Angeles Times

HOLLYWOOD — It has been 54 years, almost the entire span of the era of the shriekies, since Fredric March won an Oscar for "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," the only moment in Academy Award history where a person was nominated for best actor for work in a horror film. By the full moon of next February's nominations, perhaps the spell will be broken.

Jeff Goldblum's performance in "The Fly," a genre-spiced story of romantic tragedy and horror, has been scaring up that kind of talk. Critics have dared to use that kind of language. And though it may be difficult to get enough academy voters to sit through what Newsweek's David Ansen correctly termed the "gross-out movie of the year," it is hard to imagine finding five more effective or moving male acting performances in one season.

Goldblum, working through four stages of progressively grotesque and remarkably realistic makeup, has created one of the most sympathetic man-monsters ever seen on screen, and the best work under this much latex since John Hurt's Oscar-nominated performance in "The Elephant Man."

In fact, there is a stronger parallel between the title characters in "The Fly" and "The Elephant Man" than there is between the title characters of this version of "The Fly" and the campy 1958 science-fiction original. The flyman in that movie was an ordinary housefly with the superimposed ghostly head of actor David Hedison, squeaking in a Mr. Bill voice, "Help me, help me."

In David Cronenberg's horrific remake, the fly and the scientist are not so conveniently paired. In this version, the two creatures become molecularly fused during a teleportation experiment, causing Goldblum's Seth Brundle to slowly metamorphose into a mutant hybrid, a lumpy, twitching fellow with human memories and feelings intact, plus an evolving digestive system that results in the most repulsive feeding scene since John Belushi lunched in "Animal House."

Remaking "The Fly," which became the nation's No. 1 box-office draw after its release Aug. 15, was a daring move. The idea is ridiculous, and the possibility that people would laugh it off the screen must have occurred to everyone involved. It certainly occurred to Goldblum, and to makeup artist Chris Walas, who combined to make the fly so... human.

"I was very concerned about that," Goldblum said, in a telephone interview from London, where he is currently shooting a movie for the BBC. "I knew it would take a lot to make it work. The makeup had to be good. Everything had to work. But I liked the character immediately. I knew we were going after something interesting with the human story, particularly the way he changes."

"Sometimes, you just have to say, 'Here goes nothing,' and let it come out. See what happens."

Goldblum said Cronenberg allowed him more say in the shaping

of his character than he had ever had in a film role.

Although Cronenberg held fast to the notion that they were making a horror story, he allowed the romance between Brundle and a science magazine writer (Geena Davis) to move forward, and for

Brundle to remain sympathetic all the way to the end.

The success of the character, and ultimately of the movie, hangs on the fact that people can feel the Brundle character — a scientist with a childlike nature and an ironic wit — long after they cannot

recognize him.

"The thing did change a bit," Goldblum said. "Originally, my character did become meaner near the end.... That all changed. It became clearly more romantic."

Walas had nearly 30 people working on the preproduction design of Brundle's various stages of flymanity. He also designed several puppet creatures, the final form of

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