

# UPFRONT

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## RAIN CAUSES DELAYS

Weather conditions push back construction at St. Albert Botanic Park. See page 29.

# The Last Panel Review: The Black Phone

BY SCOTT HAYES  
 Staff Writer

The movie premise is a parent's worst nightmare, and a nightmare for the child as well: a kidnapping.

In *The Black Phone*, a serial kidnapper is haunting Denver in the late 1970s and the police are stymied. One girl, Gwen, has psychic dreams that include clues to The Grabber. That ability helps when her 13-year-old brother Finney is the next one taken.

Finney receives his own tips for survival from the voices that come from the black phone: a disconnected rotary phone in his basement prison. The voices are those of The Grabber's previous victims. As Gwen and the police narrow their search to save Finney, Finney and his supernatural friends conspire to help him find a way to escape on his own before it's too late.

It's a gripping tale, one that begs for a few voices to discuss its elements.

For this *Gazette* movie critic's last panel review, I have enlisted the assistance of an important and savvy filmgoer. I believe families should watch films together and then talk about them. After all, film is an influential art form and can affect people in their own lives. Having that important conversation afterward can also help people to understand plots and characters and motivations better as well.

So I was joined by my 20-year-old son Jackson Hayes to help me out with my last review for *The Gazette*. Along with being a movie fan (as you'd expect with me as his father), Jackson has also worked at the Landmark Centre in Jensen Lakes since it opened in 2018.

Having this guest commenter was also important to this father/son review because the film has a compelling father/son back story. Joe Hill, the writer of the short story upon which this was based, is one of the sons of Stephen King. Hill is certainly not riding off King's ample coattails here. He has made a strong name for himself with novels,

short story collections, and other writing projects for which he has received awards. This film was adapted for the big screen, but not by him.

*The Black Phone* was inspired by Hill's childhood experiences of watching King's *It*, and while the influence is certainly there, this piece is highly original and rewatchable thanks also in large part to the strong acting here by Ethan Hawke as The Grabber and young actors Mason Thames as Finney and Madeleine McGraw as Gwen, among several others. The directing was pretty astute, also.

## In conversation

Here's an abbreviated account of the conversation Jackson and I had after the show:

JH: It's been a long time since I've actually seen a well put together, all-around ... I don't even want to call it a horror. It was inspirational. There was a lot of time and thought put into this movie. I was not expecting that at all.

SH: What were you expecting?

JH: My expectations have dropped down to the floor because of these really bad, poorly put together movies. This was a really good movie. I actually feel very glad that I watched it ... and refreshed.

SH: Did you have expectations because it was the son of Stephen King who wrote it, and Stephen King wrote *It* ...?

JH: I didn't even know that Stephen King's kid wrote it until my general manager told me two seconds before you walked in the door. I was thinking about that during the movie. Actually, I totally do see that. There are definitely some aspects, maybe not directly from Stephen King, but there is just obviously some influence there.

SH: In the first version of the short story, the villain was a clown. The filmmakers realized that they couldn't do that; there would be too many similarities with *It*. They changed the villain to be a magician, which I think worked really well.



JACKSON HAYES/Photo

Guest reviewer Jackson Hayes joins his dad, *Gazette* movie critic Scott Hayes, for a father/son panel review of *The Black Phone*, now playing at Landmark Cinemas.

JH: I would say that worked way better.

SH: What about the acting?

JH: I always talk to my co-workers about how I'm not actually that big on kid actors. But ... oh my God. Maybe not the best, but I was definitely taken aback, especially during the emotional scenes of both the girl and the boy crying. I was breath-taken. Nice to see. I've never seen a kid actor do that on the spot. There are some really good kid actors these days, like [in] *Stranger Things* and a few other movies ... the 2017 *It* remake. I loved it; it was awesome.

SH: You would recommend *The Black Phone* to others?

JH: Highly recommend it.

SH: I had a thought that watching this made me think that it might translate nicely as a stage play as well. What do you think?

JH: No.

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## REVIEW

### The Black Phone

★★★★☆

Starring *Mason Thames, Madeleine McGraw, Ethan Hawke, Jeremy Davies, E. Roger Mitchell, Troy Rudeseal, and James Ransone*

Written by *Scott Derrickson and C. Robert Cargill, based off of the short story by Joe Hill*

Directed by *Scott Derrickson*  
 Rated: 14A for coarse language, frightening scenes, substance use, and brutal violence  
 Runtime: 102 minutes

Now playing at Landmark Cinemas in Jensen Lakes

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