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'Encounter' lead was supposed to be white. Then the director met Riz Ahmed.

In the sci-fi film, Ahmed plays Malik Khan, a Marine Corps veteran trying to save his two sons from a mysterious threat of alien parasites.



— Riz Ahmed in "Encounter." Amazon Studios / Courtesy Everett Collec

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By Saba Hamedy

When director Michael Pearce was first developing his sci-fi thriller "Encounter," the original script was written for a white male actor.

But then Pearce, who co-wrote the script with Joe Barton, met with Riz Ahmed.

“When I met Riz I looked at the script in a different way,” Pearce told NBC News during a virtual press junket last week. “And I asked myself the question, ‘Why can’t we diversify the casting options for this film?’”

Conversation and criticism within the industry have spurred studios to rethink diversity onscreen, though many say representation is still lacking. For Pearce, once he began working with Ahmed, he wanted to make sure he did the role justice.

The film, which starts streaming Friday on Amazon Prime Video, follows Malik Khan (Ahmed), a Marine Corps veteran trying to save his two young sons from a mysterious threat of alien parasites.

Once Ahmed was cast, the two went through the script together, “beat by beat,” Pearce said.

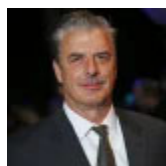
"It wasn't a case of racially blind casting. We wanted the film to be cognizant of the character's ethnicity," Pearce said. "We made some small tweaks with regards to the people he encounters in the film. There's an extra layer of tension that is salient in those scenes."

Ahmed, known for his Oscar-nominated performance in "Sound of Metal," said they decided to make the script more “specific,” with adjustments such as changing the lead character from Marcus to Malik. And Jack to Jay.

“I guess that changes things a little bit because it makes him [Malik] seem like more of an outsider,” Ahmed, who is British-Pakistani, told NBC News during the press junket. “I think you don't normally see a family like this in films like this, so that's what was cool about it.”

Of course, Pearce added, they didn't want the film to "be on the nose or make characters say explicitly racist remarks." Instead, he said they bet on a "smart audience" reading into the subtext.

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"We were careful about going through script and saying let's make this character's ethnicity play a part, but it's not their defining feature," Pearce said. "It's a universal story."




At times in the film, Ahmed's Malik is reliant on his sons, Jay and Bobby (played by Lucian-River Chauhan and Aditya Geddada), to help them evade dangerous situations.



The three actors have a clearly unique bond, solidified by the fact that they filmed during the pandemic.



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"We didn't have to be prepared to bond," Geddada said during the news junket. "It just came out of nature."

"It did come out of nature," Ahmed echoed.

"We just bonded. Remember the tattoo battles?" Geddada said.

"We went on a cool road trip adventure, remember guys?" Ahmed added.

"We made up a ton of songs," Geddada said.

When asked to perform one of the trio's made-up songs, Ahmed joked that the public should stay tuned for an album from the "three musketeers."

Pearce said it was Ahmed's "humanity" that made him the perfect person to play the lead. "I knew the audience would stick with him and be rooting for him even as he turns out not to be the perfect dad," Pearce said. "There's a toughness about him ... a lot of grit and determination. I just felt like I could buy him as a Marine. I hadn't seen him play that kind of role before. The combination of someone, the character who has tough exterior but vulnerability there, I find that mix exciting."

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