

# A Different Kind of

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Dwayne Johnson & Co.  
*Race to Witch Mountain*

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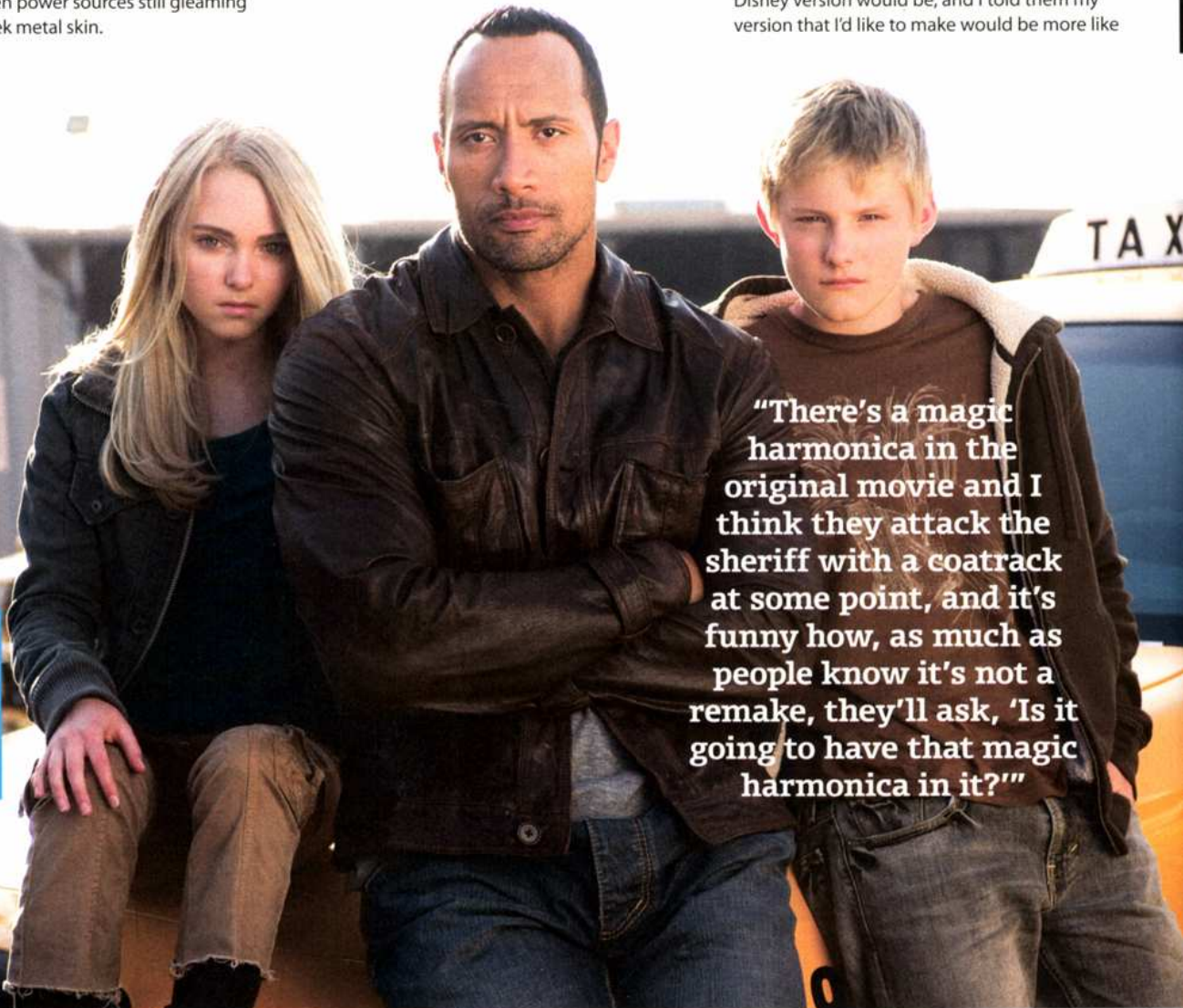
**S**outhern California soundstages often hold unexpected sights, but when walking onto the set of Disney's three-decades-later quasi-follow-up to *Escape to Witch Mountain*, you'll forgive this particular geek for not expecting too much—*Race to Witch Mountain* is a middling-budget effort from Andy Fickman, the director of comedies like *She's the Man* and *The Game Plan*. But as we weave our way through a sprawling warren of raised, self-contained research laboratories, massive storage tanks ringed with catwalks, cavernous walls of white tarp and massive industrial-load-bearing members, the whole thing opens up to the sight of a big, silvery, captured UFO, alien power sources still gleaming from inside its sleek metal skin.

Four humans stand at the bottom of an exit ramp for the craft, preparing to confront the unknown—at least they look like humans. Two very recognizably are Dwayne "Don't Call Him The Rock" Johnson and Carla Gugino, a face familiar from roles in everything from TV's defunct *Threshold to Spy Kids* (she's the mom), *Sin City* and *Watchmen* (she's the original Silk Spectre). They're joined by two creatures of slightly more questionable origin: young Tony (Alexander Ludwig) and Tia (AnnaSophia Robb), two slight and very, very blond siblings who might just be of extraterrestrial origin. And as the original Disney film concerned a young boy and girl who

were really aliens shipwrecked on Earth, we're more than suspicious that Ludwig and Robb are playing characters who are not of this earth.

In fact, this Tony and Tia look a lot more like the characters described in Alexander Key's novel than did the stars of the 1975 Disney adaptation, Ike Eisenmann and Kim Richards. But is *Race to Witch Mountain* a return to the book, a sequel to the Disney movie, an update or what?

"It's one of my favorite movies growing up as a kid and I didn't want to remake it because I loved it so much," says director Andy Fickman. "They gave me a script that was very much a comedy version, very much what you would think the Disney version would be, and I told them my version that I'd like to make would be more like



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A jaded ex-con (Dwayne Johnson, center) and two extraterrestrial children (AnnaSophia Robb and Alexander Ludwig).



Johnson, the kids and special guest star Carla Gugino prepare to go to Witch Factor Seven.

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the '70s action version. It's very '70s conspiracy/paranoia, like a *Parallax View* or *Three Days of the Condor* or *Collateral*. Then for us we went back to the book and found that it had some of those elements about not trusting adults and not trusting the system, and by the time Disney made it in 1975 they watered that down a little bit. I stuck more with the thematic paranoia of the book than I did with any of the actual story points. There's a magic harmonica in the original movie and I think they attack the sheriff with a coatrack at some point, and it's funny how, as much as people know it's not a remake, they'll ask, 'Is it going to have that magic harmonica in it?'"

Nope, no magic harmonica, but these two whiz kids adrift on Earth from another world do have some kind of secret weapon in Johnson, who's made a game go at movie stardom since leaving his identity as WWF Wrestling's The Rock behind. "Dwayne's character is a guy whose parents died when he was 16, he came to Vegas and wanted to be in NASCAR, and had gotten in trouble stealing cars and becomes a driver for a crime boss in Vegas," executive producer Andrew Gunn explains. "He's been in prison, so that's where he gets his survival skills. It's him as Steve McQueen in this movie—that sort of quiet loner who drives a cab, and he's stuck like a hamster on a treadmill driving up and down the strip, and the only relationships he has last from here to here—he doesn't want to know who you are, he doesn't want to hear any stories, but then these two kids

get into his cab and ask him to drive them to the desert, and from there he's being chased by Ciarán and these black SUVs and then attacked by this assassin from another planet."

Ciarán Hinds, whose impressive body of work ranges from playing Julius Caesar in HBO's *Rome* to an ill-fated Israeli bomb-maker in Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, admits he didn't get much screen time with Johnson. "I hardly see him at all. We have telephone conversations because I track him down through satellites, so a lot of the confrontation takes place that way. I met him socially, though, because we had the same agent—I didn't know about the WWF and I thought, 'How can this guy be a wrestler?' He was so charming in person."

Far less charming is the movie's alien assassin, created by Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff of ADI. "Tom and Alec had worked on the *Alien* and *Predator* movies, and they were excited because since *AVP* there's been a shift away from practical suits to just straight CGI characters and multiple monsters instead of just one monster. This is a guy in a suit and we hide it for a lot of the movie, and he has two looks, one with battle armor, but in the final fight with Dwayne his helmet gets

knocked off and we get the guy behind the helmet. He's from the same planet as the kid so he's humanoid, and we came up with a backstory of 'What if they sort of grew these people as their military?' When he's opened up you see this armor is kind of growing out of him."

Eww. Well, revolting but impressive! Since the original Disney movie couldn't be bothered to come up with more than a few low-grade special effects, this relaunch clearly intends to aim a lot higher. "We're the small movie masquerading as a big movie," Fickman says. "We certainly have our CGI, but we're doing as much of the movie practically as possible. I don't want to have people standing on a green screen environment and tell them, 'This is supposed to be our underground lab.' So how do we find it and build it then? We went to NORAD and got unlimited access, and they haven't given that much of a tour since *WarGames*. When we went there, we were fascinated by all the white tarps—this is one of the most expensive military installations in the nation, but 2,000 feet below ground. When we worked on this set we kept getting away from the idea of 'OK, they know about aliens so they've created this high-tech futuristic facility.' It's more like, 'Where would they take a 747? Where would they take a Russian Mig?' I love those '70s action movies, and for me, the more real it becomes, I'm more invested in it as an audience member. We're trying to keep our fighting real—we brought in Scott Rogers who did the *Bourne* movies and

*Spider-Man*, and Mike Justice, one of our head stunt coordinators, was in the Iron Man suit throughout that movie, and we got excited about doing stuff that feels real.”

That makes the contrast between the gritty, industrial look of the government compound and the glistening metal polish of the full-size UFO that much more eye-catching. “When we started designing, I went through maybe a hundred UFO books,” Fickman says. “I didn’t want it to be a ship that didn’t fit in with mythology of UFOs that had gone before. We thought of it basically as a family sedan for these people. We did a lot of research, and even at NORAD they had a sign up where they’d Photoshopped in a UFO and it said ‘Cheyenne Mountain: Ready for Anything.’ If you look at the set here you see these giant springs, which is something we saw at NORAD—there are interior buildings all mounted on springs and the buildings are all connected by bridges that can disconnect and seal off all the buildings individually in case of an attack.”

Johnson’s co-star in the film, Carla Gugino, seems equally prepared for anything—she’s wearing a costume that’s so cool-looking and so perfectly fitted it takes five minutes of our interview time for her to explain that it’s not a futuristic uniform, just the result of her own infallible fashion sense. While Dwayne Johnson and Ciarán Hinds only have an episode of *Star Trek Voyager* and *Tomb Raider 2*, respectively, to their genre credits, Gugino has played so many sexy scientists that she’s just about lost count.

“It’s funny, I was thinking the other day, in *Threshold* I played a contingency analyst, in *Snake Eyes* I played a rocket scientist, in *Chicago Hope* I played a neurosurgeon. I guess I’ve somehow hoodwinked people into thinking I’m intelligent. Andy Fickman was actually a fan of that show *Threshold* that I did, and I thought I didn’t want to do something that was too similar to that. This character was the last one added in the script, and I felt like we had to get her perspective

because what’s happening to her is basically the most exciting thing to ever happen to her in her life, and it’s what she’s spent her whole life preparing for, and now she has these aliens in front of her who’ve manifested completely differently than she’d expected because she’s a hard scientist. She’s taught at a couple of universities and has probably been fired a few times in a polite way because of her beliefs. Now she’s relegated to giving lectures at UFO conventions in Vegas.”

One of the film’s set pieces is the Vegas UFO convention, with director Gary Marshall playing a crackpot UFO authority and booths full of UFO community denizens. “What’s wild is when we were shooting the UFO convention, all the booths were filled with real people—like Whitley Strieber is there, and I actually have a scene with Whitley Strieber,” Gugino points out. *Holy Communion!*

Gugino did plenty of research on UFOs for her role, but she’s an old hand at conventions. “I’ve been to Comic-Con for *Sin City* and *Threshold* and I’m going for *Watchmen*—I love fans because I was a fan of things when I was growing up, and to know that you’re making people feel the way you did when you were a kid, going into a theater, is really great. I’m a big fan of Indiana Jones, I’m a big Batman fan, and I’m a big Bob Fosse fan—there are elements of *Watchmen* that actually remind me of *All That Jazz*.” Gugino even cops to being a bit of a nerd growing up. “I was a total academic and got made fun of as a kid for speaking too clearly, and I was valedictorian but I started acting very early on, at age 13, so I missed really going seriously into academia.”

If Gugino is the experienced genre hand on the set, Hinds is the master thespian, with work that goes back to John Boorman’s *Excalibur*. Hinds says Fickman showed him the 1975 Disney version of the film while convincing him to play the update’s main human heavy. “I really liked the idea of it—innocence in a world that had completely lost it. But they filmed the original in this very simplistic

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way with simple effects, and Andy’s bringing this into the modern world with a lot more energy and drive. The idea is they’ve been aware of all this stuff from the ‘50s or ‘60s, and my character is working for the American government, I suppose, in a way, to protect them.” Hinds is surrounded by high-tech gadgetry in the movie—but not in real life. “I’m a bit of a technophobe. Yet at the same time I read bits of Hawking about black holes or scientific developments about cloning or whatever. But I only discovered the internet like last year—I still write with a pen and I’m not gadget-oriented, I don’t have a GameBoy or any of the games people play now. I see guys of 40 now with these things and now, all the people who were reading paperback books, now you see them with their face in a computer.”

Director Fickman says kids who grew up on the Disney live-action film and are now discerning adults, or even people who just read the book, will all have something to hang their hazmat suits on in the update. “In some ways it’s a little more like the original book, but it was also equally important to me to get the kids from the original movie, Kim Richards and Ike Eisenmann, and there are a lot of cookies from the original movie in the film—Gary Marshall drives the exact same Winnebago that Eddie Albert does in the original, and inside the Winnebago there’s a record album called *Eddie Albert Sings*. The big nightclub scene is named Ray’s after Ray Milland, so we tried to take every opportunity to reference the original film, and Disney was great in letting me do what I wanted to do visually—I wanted it to be more *Blade Runner* than *Sky High*, more Kubrick than my own movie *Game Plan*.” And Ludwig, who plays the new movie’s Tony, says ‘70s icons Richards and Eisenmann do not go to waste in the new movie. “They actually help us escape, so there’s some question about whether they’re the original characters or not,” he says, after reminding us that his Tony can condense and expand his own molecules (his sis is telepathic and telekinetic).

For Fickman it’s a nice upgrade from comedies. “The studio was asking me if I felt daunted by the challenge and I told them I’m having a ball—who would think I would get to have a giant UFO army base set? This is like something you would dream of having to play with as a kid. That makes having to solve the problems more palatable.”

Gugino, Robb, Ludwig and Johnson prepare for a close encounter of the Rock kind.

