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Guillermo del Toro on His Love Affair With Monsters, Crimson Peak and Being a Fanboy;

BYLINE: Jenelle Riley

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Guillermo del Toro has always been terrified and captivated by the supernatural.

His latest big-screen endeavor, *Crimson Peak*, marks the ninth movie in which the director explores otherworldly phenomena, and incorporates a recurring element of what he calls horrible beauty. The opening scene of the film, which hits theaters Oct. 16, was inspired by a ghostly encounter his mother had as a child, and was undoubtedly drawn from his own fears.

Born and raised in Guadalajara by a poet mother and businessman father, **del Toro** had his first spectral experience at around age 12. While in a room that once belonged to his late uncle, the boy heard the older man's voice. Though the young **del Toro** was already deeply interested in the supernatural, and had even told his uncle to send him a sign if there was something beyond death, he wasn't prepared for an occurrence. I got very scared, he admits. I ran away.

Jason Madara for Variety

Since then, the supernatural has been a favorite on-screen subject for **del Toro**, be it embodied by vampires (*Cronos*, *Blade II*, his current FX series *The Strain*) or other fantastical creatures (the Oscar-winning *Pan's Labyrinth*, the *Hellboy* movies). Even in real life, he courts spirits. He searches for haunted places, reveals *Crimson Peak* star Jessica Chastain. Every time he goes to a hotel, he asks for the haunted room.

For years, much to his disappointment, nothing happened. That is, until the filmmaker was location-scouting in New Zealand for *The Hobbit*, a movie he was attached to direct at one point. He and a small group stayed at the Waitomo Caves Hotel during the off-season, when the place was practically deserted.

They opened it just for us, and I took the haunted room, he recalls. I was in my room watching *The Wire* on DVD, and I heard a murder happening right in the room. It was a woman screaming and a man sobbing, and it was so scary. It lasted for 15 or 20 minutes.

So, finally given his wish, what did **del Toro** do? I got paralyzed, he admits. I put on my earphones and watched *The Wire* all night until the sun came out.

If what happened was both frightening and absurd, it was a scene befitting a **del Toro** film. That realization prompts a hearty laugh from the 50-year-old director, who has been married for nearly 30 years to his high school sweetheart, Lorenza Newton, with whom he shares two teenage daughters. By his account, they lead a pretty normal, domestic life, with homes in

Los Angeles and Toronto. And despite his imposing figure and penchant for dark material, he is known to sing on the sets of his movies.

Del Toro spent his childhood drawing creatures and designing makeup and special effects for his own short films. He has an entire building in Los Angeles called Bleak House his man-cave that's dedicated to thousands of props, posters and memorabilia from the fantasy world. In fact, he often dons a ring from Miskatonic University the fictional college portrayed in stories by horror writer H.P. Lovecraft.

Associates describe **del Toro** as the ultimate geek.

When creature actor Doug Jones first met the director on the set of his sophomore feature *Mimic*, he recalls a man who mostly wanted to talk about the makeup artists Jones had worked with. Indeed, **del Toro** began his film career doing effects makeup, and even formed his own company, Necropia, before becoming a full-time director.

What sat across the table from me was an 8-year-old **fanboy** tucked into a roly-poly man's body, says Jones, who would go on to bring several of **del Toro**'s creatures to life, including the titular fawn and the horrific Pale Man in *Pan's Labyrinth* and Abe Sapien in the *Hellboy* films. As a director, that's what makes him so in touch with his audience, Jones continues. He makes movies that give all of us a geek-gasm, because he knows what those feel like.

But there are aspects that elevate **del Toro**'s movies from mere creature features, and have earned him the respect of audiences and more elusive for genre directors critics. His 2006 masterpiece *Pan's Labyrinth* combined the fantasy world of princesses and talking fawns with the real-life horrors of 1944 post-Civil War Spain. The Spanish-language film, nominated for six Oscars, including screenplay and foreign-language film, won three statues.

Also nominated that year: Mexican directors Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro G. Iñárritu, who with **del Toro** form the power trio known as the Three Amigos. Since then, Cuarón and Iñárritu have gone on to win director Oscars, and Cuarón believes it's only a matter of time before **del Toro** joins them.

Cuarón recalls meeting **del Toro** when both were directing episodes of the 1980s Mexican anthology series *La Hora Marcada*, a show similar to *The Twilight Zone*. They were standing outside the producer's office and began talking about an episode Cuarón had done that was inspired by a Stephen King story. We talked about Stephen King for a good 45 minutes, recalls Cuarón, and then he said, There's something I don't understand: Why is the story by Stephen King so good, and your show is so bad? And he started to explain to me why it was bad. And he was absolutely right. And that was the beginning of an endless friendship.

Jason Madara for *Variety*

Cuarón connected **del Toro** and Iñárritu when the latter was editing his feature debut, *Amores Perros*, and after watching a rough cut, **del Toro** flew to Mexico and spent two days with Iñárritu advising him on the project. The three have worked together closely ever since, and Cuarón says the same brutal honesty **del Toro** displayed with him when they first met is key to their successes. Our job with each other is to be completely impolite and play devil's advocate, Cuarón says. We know that whatever we say is out of caring.

Del Toro earns praise for the detailed production values of his movies, the performances he elicits from actors, and the deep affection he has for his **monsters**, taking care to fashion unique and original creations that are much more complex than mere villains. In short, he won't demonize his demons. Who else would make two movies about a creature from Hell who doesn't just learn about humanity, but embraces it with all its complexities and foibles?

In his films, you can see he's in **love with monsters**, says Barcelona-based Studio DDT's David Martí, who has provided makeup effects for most of **del Toro**'s movies and, along with his partner, Montse Ribe, shared the Academy Award for makeup for *Pan's Labyrinth*. He has a sympathy about the ugliest ones, the horrifying ones, says Martí. And he makes them look beautiful.

It's no surprise that one of **del Toro**'s favorite movies is *Frankenstein*, the classic tale of perhaps the original misunderstood **monster**; he hopes to one day bring his version of the tale to the big screen.

Crimson Peak has its share of **monsters**, and some of them take human form. But the film is also an intricate romance, one that

suggests **love** is the most frightening thing of all. Set at the turn of the century, it tells the tale of headstrong Edith Cushing (Mia Wasikowska), who falls for the mysterious Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston) and goes to live with him and his imposing sister Lucille (Chastain) at their English estate. On this mountainside covered in blood-red clay, Edith is visited by spirits that hint at a dark family history. The film marks **del Toro**'s first true ghost story since his 2001 feature *The Devil's Backbone*, and the director has slipped in some references to that movie in his latest.

Yet **del Toro** does not consider *Crimson Peak* a horror film he repeatedly refers to it as a gothic romance. Talk to him about influences, and he's more likely to cite Henry James than Stephen King. Gothic romance is a curious little beast, he notes. It's a mix between the atmospherics of a fairy tale or a horror movie and a **love** story that reveals the darker side of **love**.

He admits he briefly considered serving up *Crimson Peak* without supernatural elements. But gothic romance needs that element of fairy tale terror, he reasons. It needs to be a little arch; the melodrama needs to be a little heightened. If you remove the ghosts, curiously, the acting style needs to change and be more grounded. And then, for me, the movie deflates.

Del Toro allows that because of the genre and the fact he knew the film would have an R rating, it was never going to be an easy sell. He and co-writer Matthew Robbins, who previously collaborated on *Mimic*, began scripting the movie around 2006, selling it shortly thereafter to Universal. The problem is the studios say horror has a very low ceiling, budget-wise, and they were giving me a budget of \$35 million, says **del Toro**. And I said I need \$50 million.

While the Stateside box office for **del Toro**'s movies might not always appear impressive, he says they do well on ancillary platforms. For example, the domestic returns for the *Hellboy* films might not be Marvel-sized, but they made a lot of money on Blu-ray and DVD, **del Toro** maintains. Meanwhile, foreign receipts aided the \$180 million-budgeted *Pacific Rim*, which grossed only \$101 million at the domestic B.O., but took in \$309 million internationally.

Legendary Entertainment was among the producers of *Pacific Rim*, and Jon Jashni, the company's president and chief creative officer, says he loved working with **del Toro** on the film. He engenders a sense of family, and he's a great leader, Jashni notes. You can be a visionary, but if you're not a leader, that vision isn't always realized.

Jashni and Legendary chairman and CEO Thomas Tull were looking to collaborate with **del Toro** on another picture when the director raised the prospect of *Crimson Peak*. Jashni and Tull came on board as producers with **del Toro** and his producing partner Callum Greene, and the film was budgeted at \$55 million, with Legendary fully financing the project, and Universal releasing.

Though he's deep in promotion for *Crimson Peak*, **del Toro** says his next film will be a small, independently financed movie that he is keeping under tight wraps. Though it was rumored that a sequel to *Pacific Rim* was halted, such reports seem premature.

Jason Madara for Variety

As far as I'm concerned, it's not cancelled, just postponed, **del Toro** says. Right now, we have to put a budget and screenplay together, present it to Universal and Legendary, and they will make a decision. Echoes Jashni: The movie continues to be in development, and we're still working on it with him.

As for *Crimson Peak*, the grueling three-month shoot was exacerbated by a freezing Toronto winter. Speak to the cast, however, and you hear a common thread about the production: It was a difficult time, but worth the struggle.

With her character constantly in peril, Wasikowska admits that maintaining a level of terror over long periods of time wasn't easy. When you read the script, (Edith) is panicked and scared for an hour of screen time, she says. But in reality, that translates to months of being exhausted and breathless.

Chastain, who had previously appeared in the **del Toro**-executive produced *Mama*, was initially approached about the role of Edith, yet found herself gravitating toward the dark and menacing Lucille. I'd never done anything like that before, she says. And most directors, they don't really have a big imagination. But he trusted me, even when I didn't know if I could do it.

Chastain admits she had a difficult time making the movie; she was flying back and forth between filming *Crimson Peak* and *A Most Violent Year*, and playing a character as tightly wound as Lucille was draining.

Says **del Toro**: It was hard to see Jessica go through it; she's normally of a very sunny disposition, and she really was sort of depressed and dark during the shoot. But she really wanted to go there to understand Lucille, because everything Lucille does, she does for **love**. It's just the wrong kind of **love**. She understood that, and it took her to a very dark place.

The director says he came up with simple solutions to help his actors achieve heightened emotions. For a scene where Lucille needed to be in what **del Toro** calls a hyperstate, he says, I told her the character would be charged with adrenaline. So you should have a really big espresso and then another big espresso.

After filming was over, Chastain says she emailed **del Toro**. I told him I was really drained and it was tough on me, she recalls. But I would never take anything back.

Wasikowska agrees: It was long hours, and he does not let you phone it in. You want a director who pushes you, but doesn't bully you. **Guillermo** has the perfect balance of being incredibly supportive but also making sure you're on top of your game.

Del Toro loves to give his cast ownership of their roles. In pre-production, he hands each actor a backstory of about 10 pages. We go over it and agree or disagree on points until we have a common biography, and everything is guided by that, he says. I want that all done in pre-production, because the last thing you want to be doing on set is discussing a theory when you're shooting. On set, you want to tell them in 20 words or less what they need to do to adjust the performance.

The writer-director also isn't precious about making script changes. Hiddleston took on Thomas after the role was vacated by Benedict Cumberbatch, and **del Toro** says the character changed dramatically. Tom brought a layer of almost childlike vulnerability to a character that was originally going to be so much colder, so much more aloof, says the filmmaker. I did a rewrite after meeting him, and Thomas became so much more.

Hiddleston recalls a climactic scene where Thomas and Edith trade impassioned monologues. They were eloquent and poetic words, he says. **Del Toro** requested a read-through, and asked for feedback. We both agreed it was a little speechy, Hiddleston notes. On the spot, the two reduced the dialogue to less than 20 words. It was something we just rewrote in the moment, because we realized it was all that was needed.

Hellboy star and frequent collaborator Ron Perlman says there's a reason actors endure so much for **del Toro**. The brilliant directors, that's what they do, he notes. They transform you into a world that very few people could even conceive of, much less create the architecture to depict on screen. And it's going to be challenging, it's going to be a place that's very unknown to you and could be uncomfortable to you, but if you take the journey, you're going to go on a ride that you would not normally get to take.

The director says it's unlikely he'll ever make a film without **monsters**. I need an element of horrible beauty in most of the movies I make, he muses.

But if he did try a change of pace, he says he'd still want to maintain a sense of dread. It would probably be about World War II or a crime noir, he explains. I'm not easily scared in real life, but I'm scared of crime and politicians.

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