WRITTEN BY
PETER HANSON

DEL TORO's LABYRINTH

A different love that dare not speak its name.

The story begins with a girl. And a creature. And a shower stall in Guadalajara.

While a young boy growing up in Mexico, Guillermo del Toro fell under the spell of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, the 1954 monster movie about a missing-link hybrid of fish and human (screenplay by Harry Essex and Arthur Ross, story by Maurice Zimm). The film's most famous sequence is an underwater ballet during which the creature soars and swoops beneath an unsuspecting beauty. On his first viewing, however, del Toro didn't see much beyond that sequence.

"I didn't know how it ended," he recalls, "and the emotion I felt in the middle of the movie, when he's swimming under [actress] Julie Adams—I thought, *Oh, gee, I hope they end up together.* I didn't know that doesn't happen in monster movies."

Later, even after del Toro learned the creature's grim fate, his fixation on the possibility of a romantic connection lingered. "It became sort of an obsession of mine: Why don't monsters ever get the girl? Every time a monster is carrying off a woman in his arms, it's a moment of horror. Why isn't it a moment of beauty?"

Water was central to another memorable experience during del Toro's childhood, when he decided to transform a shower stall into a water tank. As he describes it, the stall had two tile walls and two glass walls, with all the joints meticulously sealed. It occurred to del Toro that if he placed towels in the gaps on either side of the door, immersion would ensue.

"The problem is I didn't calculate the fact that at one point I was going to need to get out." By the time water reached his waist, panic set in: "I was about to die,

Pages from Guillermo del Toro's journal

Houdini-like!" Young del Toro managed to get the shower door open, flooding nearby rooms.

Along with his memories of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, that soggy episode found its way into del Toro's latest movie, *The Shape of Water* (written by del Toro & Vanessa Taylor), which became an awards-season contender by winning the Golden Lion at the 2017 Venice Film Festival. Offbeat and heartfelt, the picture is simultaneously a creature feature, a political allegory, a romance, and a thriller. It also has musical numbers.

Set in 1962, the film explores what happens when mute janitor Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins) encounters an amphibian-man (Doug Jones) in the government laboratory where she works. Touched by the creature's vulnerability, Elisa rescues the amphibian-man and provides a refuge in her bathtub. Love blooms, leading to the moment when Elisa inundates her bathroom so she and the amphibian-man can swim together. Yet all is not roses in *The Shape of Water*, because relentless government agent Strickland (Michael Shannon) tortures the amphibian-man during captivity, then uses vicious means while striving to recapture the inhuman fugitive.

The Shape of Water is a return to form for del Toro, whose early career reached a pinnacle with the dark fantasy *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). Among myriad accolades, del Toro earned an Oscar nomination for the film's original screenplay. Since then, he has remained prolific in movies and television, directing such big-budget pictures as *Pacific Rim* (2013, screenplay by Travis Beacham and del Toro) and *Crimson Peak* (2015, written by del Toro & Matthew Robbins), as well as co-creating, with Chuck Hogan, the 2014–2017 series *The Strain*.

None of these projects enjoyed the rapturous critical reception of *Pan's Labyrinth*, and several others ran aground. Del Toro was scheduled to direct all three *Hobbit* movies but stepped aside (though he retained co-writing credit on the trilogy). He also developed a remake of his beloved *Creature from the Black Lagoon* that never materialized—but which led, indirectly, to *The Shape of Water*.

"Guillermo didn't seem to feel pressured by all these things that come at you about scripts, like, 'This person has to be likeable,' and, 'This has to happen in the third act.' He had a more open concept. He was not looking for something formulaic. He didn't need to have everything play in such a directly causal way. I had to constantly remind myself of that so I wouldn't be the wrong influence on the script." —Vanessa Taylor

LOVE IS DERANGED GLORY

While tinkering with a *Creature* remake, del Toro says, the narrative of the original film confounded attempts to explore romantic material. "I never found a way to do [the love story] in a B-movie structure," he explains. "It became the one thing the movie was about, and I didn't want to make a movie about a bestial love. I wanted to make a movie about many things, and treat the love affair in an adult way, without condemnation or perversity. I wanted it to be very matter-of-fact."

Not an easy fix. Finally, over a breakfast with novelist Daniel Kraus in 2011, the code was broken. The novelist shared with del Toro a story idea "about a janitor that kidnaps an amphibian-man from a secret government facility. I said, 'That's the way in!' Then I thought about Sally Hawkins, and I started constructing that. I wanted to see what would happen if it was a movie-monster love story directed [in the style of] Douglas Sirk or Frank Borzage—directed in a classical way, but with a very unusual set of parameters."

Made for a price, *The Shape of Water* allowed del Toro to ignore the noise of Hollywood agendas and focus on personal expression. "It was done for $19.5 million, with the desire to make it look like it cost 60," the filmmaker explains. "It was done for a number that allowed Fox Searchlight to market it for what it is, in all its deranged glory."

As he has many times throughout his career, del Toro reached out to a collaborator for help realizing his vision. He worked on a partial rough draft for two years before deciding he needed a co-writer. To build on what he'd written, he chose Vanessa Taylor, whose extensive résumé includes TV (from *Alias* to *Game of Thrones*) and features (she co-wrote, with Evan Daugherty, the 2014 sci-fi action-adventure film *Divergent*, based on the novel by Veronica Roth). Taylor recalls, "I met with Guillermo and he told me the story. I thought it was so cool—the elements of period and fairytale, the thematics of it. I was a big fan of his work—it's just so visually beautiful. I felt like this was something I would really enjoy writing."

Following their sole in-person meeting, the duo communicated through script passes. As Taylor realized elements, she sent sequences to del Toro. Sometimes he added material, sometimes he rewrote Taylor's work, and sometimes he nixed her contributions. Then del Toro shot pages back to Taylor, and she revised his work. Together, they generated a full screenplay, which del Toro later refined as the project neared production.

"Co-writing is a very natural process for me," del Toro says. "You are reacting to someone else's ideas. If you second-guess somebody, and that person also second-guesses you, you immediately enter into a dialectic process that is extremely useful. A lot of people assume I did the tough parts and Vanessa did the romantic parts, but it was exactly the opposite. She came in at the crucial moment of the screenplay, and I am extremely thankful for that. I thought I had a very good handle on the love story, the escape, and all of that, but I felt the movie needed more elements."

Taylor describes their
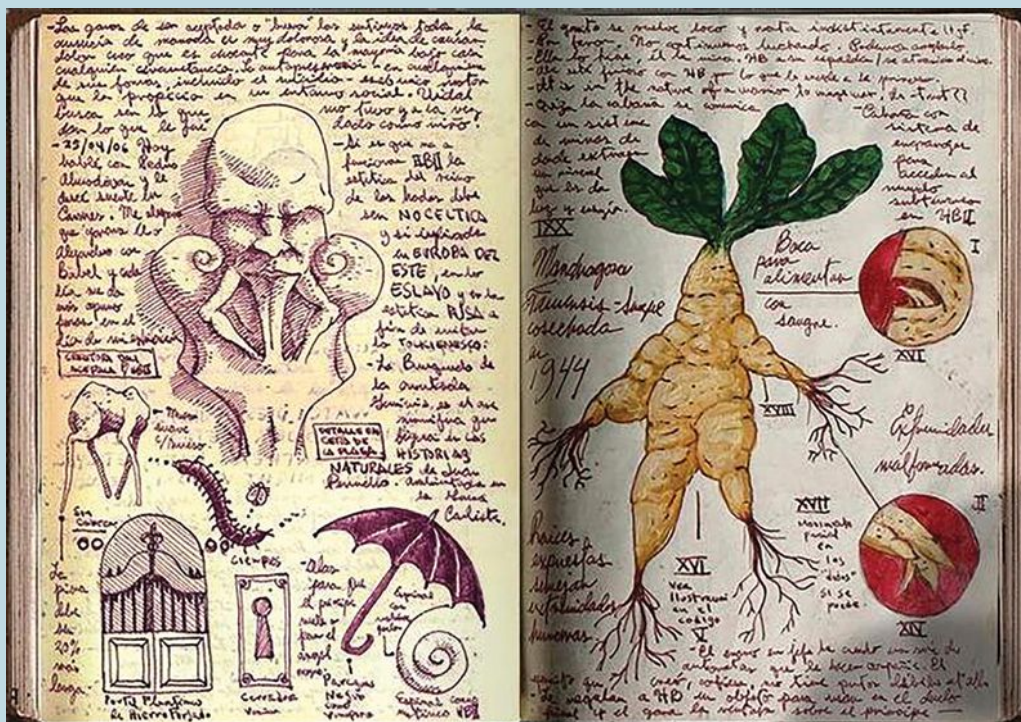
process: "Guillermo probably had more material that he didn't share with me, but what he did share with me was some pages of scene work—dialogue, fully fleshed out—and some pages that were like an outline. Sometimes it was a kernel of an idea, like, 'Now these generals are going to say they're angry about X.' Okay. Where are they? What are they angry about? What's going to happen as a result of that? How is it all going to keep moving forward? How can I make it feel like all these turns are motivated, so everything plays out in an order that makes sense to me? Initially, I thought, *Well, maybe he's looking for someone to be the structure police.*"

Taylor quickly recognized this was not the case. "Guillermo didn't seem to feel pressured by all these things that come at you about scripts, like, 'This person has to be likeable,' and, 'This has to happen in the third act.' He had a more open concept. He was not looking for something formulaic. He didn't need to have everything play in such a directly causal way. I had to constantly remind myself of that so I wouldn't be the wrong influence on the script."

ECHOES OF CAMELOT

Even though *The Shape of Water* has a central love story and a thriller-style story engine, the movie showcases supporting characters for thematic purposes. Giles (Richard Jenkins) is a repressed painter, Robert (Michael Stuhlbarg) is a Soviet agent masquerading as an American scientist, and Zelda (Octavia Spencer) is an African-American janitor working for white men. As del Toro says, "I wanted to make the movie about 'invisible' people rescuing the ultimate 'other,' so you have a closeted gay artist, a Russian spy, a black cleaning woman, and a mute cleaning woman all joining together."

Setting the story in 1962 provided allegorical heft. "I thought it was very important to find a time that was parallel to now," del Toro says. "1962 was the year in which the American dream almost crystallized—the space race, the jet-stream cars, the perfect petticoat wives, ultra-modern kitchens, TV dinners, and all these things. At the same time, it was a time of sexual prejudice, racism, great brutality, marginalization. And then right before the dream crystallizes for real, Camelot ends with the assassination of [John F.] Kennedy, and Vietnam escalates into an era of distrust."

From del Toro's perspective, the lingering allure of the Camelot era is the subtext for a familiar slogan: *Make Amer-*

Vanessa Taylor

ica Great Again. "The America that slogan implies is *that* America," he notes, explaining that the Strickland character is willing to sacrifice any foreigner or minority if doing so helps manifest his own dream of an atomic-age, God-fearing, racially pure America. To Elisa and her friends, the amphibian-man is a beautiful mystery. But to Strickland, del Toro says, "He's a dirty thing that comes *from South America.*"

All the more reason to build that wall.

Taylor says she didn't realize while working on the script how relevant del Toro's themes would be in 2017, but sometimes those born outside America's borders can see the country's harshest aspects more clearly than natives. "You could say that Guillermo was prescient," she notes, "but of course he is an immigrant, so this was always on his mind."

Still, even the most sincere messages get lost if they don't reach people by way of the right delivery device. Del Toro always felt that a fairytale was the appropriate vessel for everything he wanted to say. "I wanted to reverse the plotting of *Beauty and the Beast* in a way which is ultimately very insidious," he says.

Whereas most versions of the tale end with the beast transforming into a human, del Toro wanted to explore how people overcome their fear of the beast. "To me," he says, "monsters are patron saints of imperfection."

Del Toro suggests that the key to making a fairytale work is deciding which elements to complicate. "It's a form of storytelling that has a very wide-eyed view of the good and the bad," he says. "Now that doesn't mean it needs to be naïve, but the way the good and the bad interact needs to be very strong. The Wolf can have complexity outside of his interactions with Little Red Riding Hood. But to Little Red Riding Hood, he needs to function as the Wolf. That is true of the Captain in *Pan's Labyrinth* or Strickland in *Shape of Water.* With Strickland, I made an effort to show moments in which you can choose to empathize with him—you can understand why he is being pressured into action—but the dynamic between the good and the bad needs to be kept very consistent."

Similarly, Taylor believes the film's storytelling was energized by the choice to withhold extensive backstory about both Elisa and the amphibian-man. We learn that she's an orphan and he was worshiped as a god in his native land, but not much else. "I didn't want to get super-specific about any of these things," Taylor explains. "Once you start to dig

down into that stuff, it's very hard to keep making it plausible and not generate all these weird questions."

As in, how was she orphaned? How long ago did natives discover the amphibian-man? And so on.

"I don't want to have a concrete understanding of who she is," Taylor adds, "because I want her future to be open to magical realism—and I want the possibility of who he is to be open, too. If you give her [specific backstory], you've defined her."

Yet *The Shape of Water* isn't some unhinged phantasmagoria; at its core, the movie is a morality tale grounded in human emotion. To that point, Taylor draws a distinction between fantasy stories with dense mythology and what-if stories that place relatable people against magical backdrops. "What makes this type of writing exciting is that the limitations of the real world, which you get into when you tell real-life stories—there's a little break in the wall," she says. "That little opening allows you to be in the world of imagination, to escape the world of physical reality. Whenever someone invites me to play in that type of sandbox with them, I'm like, 'This is gonna be so fun—I can do anything!'"
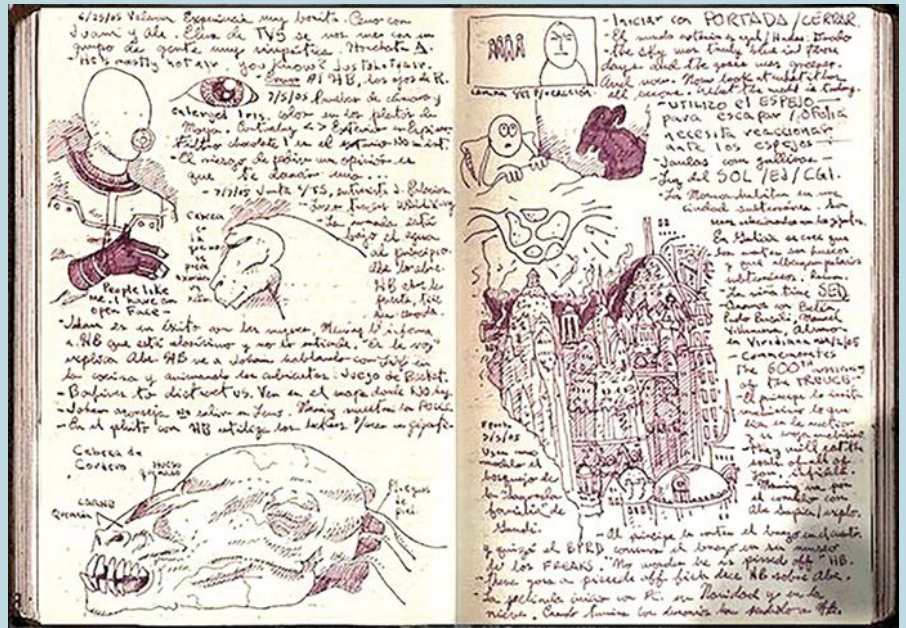
THE DEEP END

Given the unusual nature of *The Shape of Water*, Taylor's license to play encompassed the project's storytelling idiom. As del Toro explains, "One of the things I tried to do from the beginning was to mix genres. I knew that would be the most difficult part—to have it be a musical, a thriller, a melodrama, a comedy, a romance all at the same time—so I didn't hinder Vanessa with [figuring out] that balance. I just wanted her uncensored, unpreoccupied collaboration, because you

Sculptures in del Toro's Bleak House exhibit

only get a first impression once. What I needed was for her to come into my process, and for her to say, 'This is not good, I like this, I respond to that.' That first impression, you only get once. After that, your collaborators have drunk the Kool-Aid and you're all in the same cult."

Taylor says working on *The Shape of Water* changed her thinking. "I found a little bit more open-mindedness about structure," she remarks. "Another thing is I learned something about speed. We were never both working at the same time, so when he would pass the script to me, usually I'd have four or five days, maximum, and whatever it was I was trying to do, the script—however thorough that was—had to fit into that time. Sometimes you assume it's going to take you three months to do X or Y. It doesn't. Working quickly frees you from constraints. If you have four days, it's going to be whatever it's going to be. I found that exciting."

And del Toro's nonverbal approach proved exhilarating. No meetings! No notes! "I loved that Guillermo and I

were having a conversation through a script. He wouldn't call me and say, 'I hated this scene you wrote,' but it would be cut. Or he would cut something of his own and I would restore it because I loved it. I didn't need to have a long conversation with him—I knew what he thought from what he had done. That was really intriguing."

As for del Toro, the politics of *The Shape of Water* are inextricable from the experience of making the film.

"There was a great term that was used in Victorian times, and it's called a 'restorative,'" he says. "I almost wanted to make the movie as a personal restorative. I was coming out of a really, really dark streak—a good nine to ten years—personally and professionally. Very tough. I felt a great need to talk about something that presented my most personal beliefs. I wanted to make a restorative which allowed me to say that in a way that was heartfelt and genuine and unique and personal, let the chips fall where they may."

His benevolent fictional monster, he hopes, might counterbalance rapacious real-world monsters.

"The film's almost like an ointment against the absolute horrors of the society we're in, where it feels like the menace of the 'other' is creating divisions. Sexually oriented, racially oriented, religiously oriented—these phantom walls are erected between us. They don't allow us to see each other. I wanted to show that at the end of the day, we can choose to connect. Perhaps love is too hopeful a message or too wide-eyed a message, but that was the intention—to make a movie that was restorative." WB