

“MAMA”: First Report and Photos

Written by Trevor Parker

Tuesday, 23 October 2012 11:18



A tiny, bespectacled girl backs into a silent bedroom and shakes her sister awake. In a panicked whisper, the girl warns her groggy sibling that “Mama” has returned. The kids scramble down the stairs and rush toward the relative safety of the front door—but something is there, waiting. A weird, walking cobweb of a woman freezes as she spots the girls, then surges at them in a horrifyingly disjointed, reptilian scuttle.

This is the thrust of Andy Muschietti’s short film *MAMÁ*, a compact stroke of terror that left sufficient impression on filmmaker Guillermo del Toro to prompt the latter’s involvement as executive producer for the full-length version with the slightly altered title *MAMA*, currently in postproduction. (The Spanish-language short is freely available on YouTube, and can be seen at the bottom of this page). Universal Pictures releases the movie January 18.



Producer Barbara Muschietti recalls *MAMA*’s journey to this point: “[Andy and I] do commercials in Spain, and we’re mostly known for our comedy. We wanted to show people we could do something with suspense and horror, because we love those genres. It’s all we ever wanted to do. And so we produced this little...sequence, it wasn’t even a short. Eventually, we slapped credits on it and started sending it to festivals. We just wanted to show people we could do something with atmosphere.”

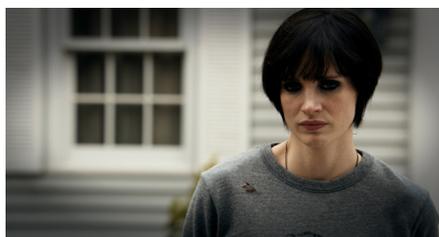
Andy adds that they were working on launching a separate ghost-story feature called *THE YEARNING*, using the same style and suspense as their short, until the reception to *MAMÁ* became too strong to ignore. “What happened later was that people who saw it were so intrigued by the story behind [the Mama character], it drove us and motivated us to write a screenplay about that.”

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The expanded storyline poses the scenario of children reared and raised by a ghost—and one much more maladjusted and dangerous than the heartwarmingly benign cast of spirits populating Neil Gaiman’s similarly themed *THE GRAVEYARD BOOK*. “These two girls are abandoned as babies in the forest, in dire circumstances,” Barbara says. “One is 18 months old, the other 3 years. They’re found five years later, and their uncle takes them in with his girlfriend. And of course, how the hell have these two little babies survived for five years? In a snowy forest, in a broken-down cabin?” The answer is, simply, Mama—some sort of eerie entity with enough maternal instinct to protect children in need, but capable of jealousy and frightening vengeance when her charges are transplanted out from under her.



MAMA stars Jessica Chastain, hot off unanimous raves for her work in *THE TREE OF LIFE* and *THE HELP*, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau from *GAME OF THRONES* and little actresses Megan Charpentier (who played young versions of Amanda Seyfried’s characters in both *JENNIFER’S BODY* and *RED RIDING HOOD* and the Red Queen in this year’s *RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION*) and Isabelle Nélisse. As for Mama herself, the Muschiettis have recruited a ringer, Javier Botet, who will be very familiar to fans of a few other topnotch Spanish imports: the [REC] movies. The slender, 6-foot-7 Botet appeared as [REC]’s freaky recurring ghoul, “the Medeiros girl”—that elongated nightmare who looked as if rotting skin had been spun over a popsicle-stick skeleton. In creature test footage screened for *FANGORIA*, Mama/Botet comes across as some twitchy, unholy progeny of Jack Skellington and Samara from *THE RING*.

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“Javier’s contract was the first one drafted for the movie,” Barbara says. “We just went to him and said, ‘You have to be Mama, there’s no option!’ We did a mechanical test with him, in a warehouse using some strings [to affect] his movement. We showed it to Guillermo, and Guillermo just flipped out.”

For the Muchiettis’ part, securing Del Toro’s involvement was as fortunate a blessing as the neophyte filmmakers could hope for. “Having Guillermo, and his trust, opens a huge amount of doors,” Barbara says. “He’s amazing, the best godfather ever.”

Del Toro himself is just pleased to be able to provide support to upcoming artists. “I’m used to working with and producing for first-time directors,” he notes. “When they’re the real deal, and Andy is the real deal, it’s very satisfying. With Andy’s short, and his commercial reel, it was clear.” He goes on to explain his philosophy toward the often indefinable duty of producer: “Pedro Almodóvar taught me everything I need to know about producing, which is, ‘I’ll be there if you need me, and by f**k, I won’t be there if you don’t,’ ” del Toro laughs. “That’s the best role for a producer. If you just want to get your way and want to make the movie the way you yourself would direct it, you shouldn’t produce. If you want to direct through the producing role...don’t. It’s castrating for both sides. With this movie, every choice Andy makes is a different choice than I would make, but it’s a solid choice.



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“At this stage, I’ve done over 30 films, but now and then a first-time director will prove me wrong,” he continues. “There’s no satisfaction in being right in a mistake, but there’s huge satisfaction in being wrong. Like in JULIA’S EYES; when we did that, there is a sequence that is 20 minutes long where the director said, ‘We’re not going to see the face of anyone except the actress for those 20 minutes.’ I said, ‘You’re insane! You’re a young man, you don’t know better...’ At that moment, I actually left the project. But I kept thinking about it, I came back and said, ‘Fine, f**k it. Prove me wrong.’ And he did! That scene is, in my mind, 20 minutes of virtuoso staging.”

Del Toro’s experience also allowed him to forewarn the Muschiettis about the drudgery of the studio grind. As Barbara remembers, “He called us and simply said, ‘OK, let’s make this movie. You want to do it in Spanish or in English? You can do it with Telecinco or you can do it with Universal.’” Regarding which continent’s studio mechanism might be more favorable, she says del Toro put it to them bluntly: “He said, ‘It’s basically the same thing; it’s like eating a shit sandwich. The content and the color and the texture will be different, but it’s still shit.’ He just meant that it wouldn’t be any easier if we shot it in Europe with TV money. Their executives would also want a star there, and to give notes on the screenplay.

“One thing [del Toro] was very clear on,” she adds, “was that if we did it in Spanish, we’d have a \$3-million budget, and then we’d be furious when someone made the version in English with a \$30-million budget. In that case, we might as well do it in English from the get-go.”

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