

## Lily Cole Opens Up About “MOTH DIARIES”

Written by Michael Gingold

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Mary Harron’s *THE MOTH DIARIES* (currently available on demand and opening in select theaters this Friday, April 20 from IFC Films) has been described as a vampire movie, but that’s not quite right. It’s just as much a modern Gothic mystery, and at its center is a beautiful enigma named Ernessa, played by Lily Cole, who explored her character in an exclusive Fango interview.

In the film, Ernessa is a newcomer to an elite boarding school for girls who draws classmate Lucy (Sarah Gadon) under her spell—much to the concern of Lucy’s best friend Rebecca (Sarah Bolger). Already grieving her father’s death, Rebecca becomes convinced that Ernessa is a vampire, and responsible for the deaths that begin to occur on campus. And yet, as presented by writer/director Harron (adapting Rachel Klein’s novel), those demises could just be accidents and Rebecca’s suspicions of Ernessa might just be jealousy. *MOTH DIARIES* is one of a few notable journeys into the unreal for Cole, who previously co-starred in Terry Gilliam’s *THE IMAGINATION OF DOCTOR PARNASSUS* and later this year appears in the epic screen fairy tale *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*.



**FANGORIA:** Ernessa is a difficult character to get a handle on, because we see her through Rebecca’s unreliable point of view. How concrete was the character on the page, and in your mind when you were performing her?

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**LILY COLE:** That’s a very good question. I was really drawn to the character because, as you said, she’s unusual and hard to pin down, and I love the ambiguity of the narrative in general. You don’t know how much of it is Rebecca’s projection onto her, or how much to believe of what Rebecca’s accusing her of. I tend toward reality, obviously, in terms of the way I approach a character, because it makes it much more tangible and easier to relate to. And I really like the idea of the vampire as a metaphor for the dynamics in human relationships, where something can be manipulative and dark. We played with how far we could push those dynamics, while still having empathy for Ernessa, in a way, even if it doesn’t come across when you see it.

It was actually very interesting when I first saw the film; I was like, “Oh my God, she’s really creepy.” Because I didn’t set out to play her that way; even if you’re ultimately playing a creepy character, you have to empathize with where they’re coming from, to the point of becoming that person.

**FANG:** To your mind, is Ernessa a vampire, or is that just in Rebecca’s mind?

**COLE:** Personally, I like to think that a lot of that is in Rebecca’s head, but I also like to keep it a question mark, because I think that it would be to the film’s detriment, in a way, to say one way or another. I know ROSEMARY’S BABY was one of Mary’s main reference points while we were making it, and I love that film so much. At the end, even though you have that scene that’s quite concrete where you see the witch setup upstairs, you still come away from the film—well, I did anyway—thinking, “Did she just imagine that?” You could compare that to the scene where I’m in the trunk, which is quite definitive visually when you see it. But actually, Rebecca’s gone down this mental journey to such an extent that you don’t know if that’s reliable at the end.

**FANG:** Then there’s the “shower of blood” scene, which could be a fantasy as well.

**COLE:** Yeah, exactly. The way I liked to think of it was that regardless of the vampire idea or the reality or whatever, there’s a truth in the metaphor in terms of why she’s playing with Rebecca, and the alter-ego manipulation, that was really interesting to explore.

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**FANG:** The shower of blood also looks like it was very uncomfortable to film. How was your experience shooting that?

**COLE:** Kind of cool. I like doing stuff that’s surreal, so it was like, when am I ever in a library with red liquid being poured down on me and then watching it. They’d given us these little cameras to film behind-the-scenes stuff, and I just filmed obsessively where it was dripping onto the table and the books, because the whole table became this bloodbath. It was visually quite amazing. I think if I had been doing that every day for three months, it probably would have been a bit much, but as it was, for those two days, it kept its charm in a way. And everyone treats you special when you’re walking around covered in red [ *laughs*].

**FANG:** Did you go back to the source novel while shooting, or were you familiar with it before you even got the role?

**COLE:** I didn’t know the book before I got the role, but obviously when I got involved with the film, I read it. And Rachel Klein came up when we were filming, which was great, and I got to have a conversation with her about the characters, the story, etc. I don’t think I went back to it once we were filming, because I kind of went into the space of the film, if that makes sense, but previously I used it as a big reference point.

**FANG:** Did you ever go to a school like the one in the movie?

**COLE:** Not as extreme, but I did go to a girl’s school, yeah. So I definitely knew about those tumultuous female relationships, and how some girls can be bitches and some can be more gentle. I had—obviously not as extreme as in the film—but sadly, I did see those dynamics all through school, especially in my teenage years. I was always probably more on the side of Rebecca and Lucy than Ernessa, which was why it was really interesting to play this part. I wasn’t the bullying one, but I definitely saw those dynamics. I was bullied as well when I was younger, so it was interesting to turn it on its head and explore it.

**FANG:** Actors and actresses often say it’s more fun playing the villain; did you find that was true of Ernessa, even though she’s not as concrete a villain as usual?

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**COLE:** Yes and no. It was definitely very interesting, and I would like to go back to that territory again because it pushes me as an actress. Trying to have empathy and understand somebody who's cruel is not an experience I tend to have in my daily life, thank God [ *laughs*], so it's challenging to do that. It expands, potentially, my sense of myself. But it's quite dark and not something I'd like to repeat right away, so I was quite happy to do SNOW WHITE afterward. To play a character who's heartfelt and light is a nicer space to be in as an actress.

**FANG:** MOTH DIARIES was kind of a unique experience: You were surrounded by a cast of almost entirely other women, you had a woman writing and directing from a book by a female author. Was there a different vibe on the set because of that?

**COLE:** Yeah; I mean, ST. TRINIAN'S, the first film I did, was predominantly female, and I actually came into it slightly nervous that with a lot of young actresses, there was going to be quite a lot of tension. But I became great friends with one of them and friends with the others. It was a nice dynamic, and didn't feel antagonistic in that way. I love working with female directors—I did RAGE with Sally Potter too—because for one, they're a minority, so the feminist in me is happy to have a female director. But also, with both Sally and Mary, they've got an intuitiveness and a sense of nurturing that's really nice to work with.



**FANG:** Your second film was THE IMAGINARIUM OF DOCTOR PARNASSUS, by the mad genius Terry Gilliam. What was that experience like?

**COLE:** Umm...mad [ *laughs*]. It kind of felt like my first film, because my actual first film, ST. TRINIAN'S, I did because it was a great ensemble to be a part of. There wasn't huge pressure in the part, so I was able to feel out the dynamics of being on set and remembering to say my lines at the right moment—those things that now seem obvious and easy, but are kind of

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intimidating the first time you're actually on a film set. I'm very glad I did that, to get those initial nerves out of the way. But then to go immediately into DOCTOR PARNASSUS and be a lead among very experienced actors was certainly intimidating. And the chaos of the production—I say that with charm and enthusiasm, not with resentment—and how much was going on, and how demanding they were and the lead actors being there every day and every night... I didn't realize it was...not an anomaly, but it wasn't like every experience on a film set. In a way, it was a blessing. I look back on it like a baptism by fire [ *laughs*]. I didn't quite know this wasn't the normal way.

**FANG:** Of course, you all had to deal with the tragedy of Heath Ledger's death during filming. How much did that impact your work on the movie?

**COLE:** I know how it impacted me as a person, but I don't know how it impacted on my work. It was, in all honesty, very challenging, and I didn't realize it until later. I didn't do a lot of interviews afterward, and nobody really asked about that, but coming back was very difficult for everybody because of the emotions involved. Although, to be honest, in a situation like that, actually having something to do and some sense of...not purpose, but a place to put all this emotion in a way that could be valuable... And I didn't really think about the dynamic of playing Valentina, my character, against Tony, Heath's character, with other actors in the role, and that being kind of bizarre, until we actually came to the day and I did my scenes with Colin [Farrell]. I, as myself, was very aware of the tragedy of what was missing and different about the situation, as was everyone else involved, but I was obviously playing a character who was oblivious and trying to play out the same relationship and dynamics. So it was a very weird experience.

**FANG:** Is fantasy and horror something you want to keep pursuing? Are you attracted to those kinds of projects?

**COLE:** Probably they're more attracted to me [*laughs*]. I don't mind. I'm totally open to “real” genres too, and hope to do as many reality-based films as fantasy and horror. But I think that within fairy tales and, as we were touching on, the vampire metaphor, those are often loaded with touch-points in reality that really resonate. Not just with me as an actor, but with audiences, and that's why they still have recurring appeal over the centuries, where you can have this combination of escapism and tapping into, in a subtle way, human dynamics. So yeah, I think a bit of both; the main points that interest me are who's directing it, who's the character, who are the other actors and what's the story. So the genre's not my prime point of focus.

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