

Jessica Chastain Saves the Drama for “MAMA”

Written by Trevor Parker

Wednesday, 16 January 2013 16:28



It's not often that an actress rides into the motion picture world on the crest of as much hype and critical adoration as has Jessica Chastain. Rarer still is when that actress entirely validates the hype surrounding her, as Chastain most definitely has, garnering her second Oscar nomination in as many years. With her ruthless CIA operative in ZERO DARK THIRTY currently ruling the box office, audiences can catch a different side of Chastain's acclaimed range when director Andy Muschietti's ghostly fable MAMA hits theaters this Friday.

FANGORIA caught up with Chastain on the MAMA set, during the shooting of some of her key scenes. As Muschietti calls for action, Fango watches as Chastain's reluctant caregiver Annabel starts to show frustration over her new and unwanted duties. She shouts at the two small girls (played by Megan Charpentier and Isabelle Nelisse) who have been left in her care, slamming their bedroom door behind her as she storms off. Muschietti calls cut, and as the scene is reset, it's obvious that the Juilliard-trained Chastain is no precious, standoffish Method actress, as she sits relaxed and chatting with the crew between takes.



Before the day's filming begins, Chastain, her trademark fiery tresses lopped short and dyed black, describes her role in MAMA: "Annabel plays bass guitar in a punk band, and she's very much living the life of never wanting to grow up and have responsibility. She's got a great boyfriend [Lucas, played by Nicolaj Coster-Waldau of GAME OF THRONES], but she's not at

Jessica Chastain Saves the Drama for “MAMA”

Written by Trevor Parker

Wednesday, 16 January 2013 16:28

the stage where she thinks she'll settle down and have a family. She's kind of in a holding pattern. Against her own wishes, she gets stuck with the responsibility of caring for two young girls, and she doesn't know anything about how to deal with kids. They come with...something else, and Annabel has to contend with that as well.”

That something else is an enraged spectral presence, determined to reclaim its tiny charges at any cost. Chastain gushes about playing alongside the real live Mama, embodied by Spanish creature performer Javier Botet of the [REC] series. “Javier is 6-foot-7, and he's *so* skinny!” she laughs. “He's amazing, physically, what he can do with his body. It's great to have him here, because I don't have to act with greenscreens. I don't have to fake it—he really does give you goosebumps!”

Muschetti based this feature (which he scripted with his sister Barbara and Neil Cross) on his MAMÁ short film, a highly effective smidgen of terror that impressed Guillermo del Toro enough to join the full-length project as executive producer. “I loved the short,” Chastain says. “I'm a huge fan of these kind of films. My best friend and I, we go to [horror] movies all the time. We rent them at home; sometimes we're able to finish them, sometimes we're not, because it's just too scary!”

“That friend came to my house, and I said, ‘I've got to watch this [MAMÁ] short. I read the script, it was interesting, and I haven't met with the director yet, but they sent me the short. Do you want to watch it with me?’ We watched it on my computer, in the daylight. At first we were like, ‘Oh, that's a beautiful shot, down the staircase in one take, that's very clever, I'm liking the camerawork...’ Then when the creature came out, I was really blown away by it. Because in addition to being terrifying, it actually showed that the director had sensitivity. It wasn't a gratuitous kind of horror, and the girls were so incredibly sweet. I loved the little touches—each little gesture that says who the characters are. Not that there's anything wrong with this, but sometimes [a director] comes from video games or something that's purely visual, and [their work] lacks the emotional. I felt emotional during that three-minute clip.”

When selecting parts that interest her from the flood of scripts sent her way, Chastain says she relies on an inner compass. “I always get a feeling about someone,” she says. “I just follow my instincts in choosing every role. I did it when I was thinking about [the psychological thriller] TAKE SHELTER. I met with Jeff [Nichols, director], and I had the same feeling when I met with Andy—someone who has their own point of view, and not just a technician who has been hired to tell a generic story. Andy has his own vision, but he's also incredibly collaborative and listens to my ideas on my character. I find that very inspiring, artistically.”

Jessica Chastain Saves the Drama for “MAMA”

Written by Trevor Parker

Wednesday, 16 January 2013 16:28

“What really got me is that I met Guillermo first, and he had just seen me in *THE DEBT*. He was talking to me about the idea of a female character who is allowed to be strong but still allowed to be vulnerable—because for some reason, a lot of females in movies are either one or the other. He talked about *THE ORPHANAGE* and that brilliant actress [Belén Rueda], and how the intensity was so high. The stakes are always really high [in horror movies]. I thought, ‘Wow, that’s interesting. I’ve never done that as an actor before, where I’ve had to sustain that intensity for a long time. I’ve also never done anything where sometimes the scene is one line, or no lines. I’ve always done movies that were more like plays.

“MAMA is very script-driven, but the camera is also a character,” she continues. “When building the tension, two people don’t come in and start talking about how they’re feeling—it doesn’t go in this playlike structure. It’s more like, ‘OK, this is the scene where I open the closet door.’ [Laughs

] And that’s a very important scene, because of what can happen when she opens that door. So I was really interested when Guillermo was talking about what all that meant. I always approach everything like I’m taking a class—so this is my class in the genre, to see if I can do it. And it’s hard work!”

Chastain is also pleased that Muschietti is charting a detour from the typical Hollywood themes that tend to get shoehorned into any movie concerned with the family unit. “When I first met with Andy, and he was talking to me about the character, I wanted to make sure we weren’t doing a movie about ‘a woman who didn’t want to be a mom, and now look how wonderful it is,’ you know? Andy said, ‘It’s not about that. Annabel becomes a hero of people.’ It’s about this woman who’s not necessarily unlikable... [Laughs] Well, I hope unlikable; I always want to push things more than they’ll let me. She starts out a bit self-centered, not very generous or compassionate. And through the relationship she develops with these girls, she learns how to be a good person and to put herself at risk to save others. You actually have the making of a hero in this story.”