

DVD Select: 'Labyrinth' a frightening yet powerful adult fairy tale

by Robert_J_Hawkins

In a video prologue to his very adult fairy tale "Pan's Labyrinth" (New Line, 4 stars) the visionary writer-director Guillermo del Toro offers some compelling reasons to watch his film. "This movie almost destroyed me," he says with an almost unfathomable calm and wisp of a smile. "It took away 45 pounds of my body (he still looks like a gentler Michael Moore); many sleepless nights; and a lot of love."

There you have it, in the future, when a director calls his movie a "labor of love," think first of Guillermo del Toro. For he has set the new standard for obsessive devotion to a vision.

"Pan's Labyrinth" is the story of young Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) who travels with her sickly mother to a remote Spanish outpost in 1944 to be with her new father, the sadistic Capt. Vidal (Sergi Lopez). The countryside is thick with anti-fascist rebels and Capt. Vidal clearly revels in the oppression of the peasants as he hunts them down.

'PAN'S LABYRINTH' - 'Pan's Labyrinth' is about a young girl and an army officer who escape into a fantasy world following the Spanish Civil War. CNS Photo courtesy of Teresa Isasi. Ofelia quickly discovers that there is a magical aspect to this region - large bugs that transform into woodland fairies, an ancient labyrinth that leads to a gateway to another world. The gateway is guarded by a towering, age-old faun who presents Ofelia with three challenges which she must complete to enter the kingdom beyond the door.

Is it the fevered imagination of a desperate young girl or real magic? Ofelia (and the story) moves so seamlessly between the two worlds that the viewer becomes her willing companion to wherever her mind takes us. And the ever-expanding brutality of Capt. Vidal's world makes Ofelia's fantasy one the preferable destination - even if it is populated with strange and dangerous creatures. They are less treacherous than Capt. Vidal.

For fans of "Pan's Labyrinth," the double-DVD package is an extraordinary delight. Del Toro has spent an enormous amount of time and resources to unlock the code of his fantasy for his fans.

Probably the most insightful feature is the first, "The Power of Myth" in which del Toro explains the many fairy tale influences which inspired this story. "The true power of the fairy tale," he says, "was in the fact that it was very simple and, at the same time, very brutal."

Clearly he is not thinking about source material, not the sanitized Disney version of fairy tales which so many of us grew up with.

Del Toro spent years formulating his story. He filled numerous journals with sketches and notes. And so, when the time came, he not only knew what he wanted to create but - down to the tiniest detail - what it should look like. The fairy-tale world in "Pan's Labyrinth" is "a world that is inaccessible to you but fully formed."

He sees this story as one "about choice and obedience." Almost every major character is confronted with this dilemma, none more so than Ophelia who must navigate treachery in the real world and in the three challenges of the netherworld.

There are allusions to classical fairy tales throughout - the rebels in the woods are not unlike the hunters who rescue Little Red Riding Hood from the wolf, del Toro notes. The classical magical numerology of three is also developed throughout - three doors, three tasks, three fairies, three key women, three fascists.

One feature on the disc introduces fans to the actor Doug Jones who has spent half his 18 years as an actor in one fantastical latex body suit or another. Here, he plays the ancient Faun and the faceless Pale Man. His thin, athletic body is an expressive instrument that speaks loudly to the camera through mounds of make-up and costuming. And he's a pretty funny guy when not in disguise.

Del Toro also talks about the color scheme - cold blues and grays for the real world, warm reds and golds in the fantasy world and muted greens in between. Shapes and textures of objects inform their environments as well.

Other bonus stuff includes a note-by-note dissection of the theme song; a peek at a number of del Toro's notebook pages; an interview with Charlie Rose; and design scrapbooks.

You think you've seen "Pan's Labyrinth," but once you've been schooled by del Toro, you'll be seeing it in a whole new fantastic and brilliant light.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Seraphim Falls" (Sony, 3 stars) Five years after the Civil War, Col. Morsman Carver (Liam Neeson) is on a relentless single-minded quest to kill his arch-rival Gideon (Pierce Brosnan). Revenge takes on a life of its own, all-consuming. The reasoning isn't clear until the final third part of the film, but that enables you to free the mind of prejudices and relish the hunt.

"The Fountain" (Warner, 2 1/2 stars) Very trippy business in which a research scientist (Hugh Jackman) races to find a miracle/mystical cure for his dying wife (Rachel Weisz). The pair exists simultaneously in three eras. Jackman is also a conquistador sent by Queen Isabel of Spain to find the Tree of Life in the New World. In a third sequence, he is a futuristic space traveler trying to preserve the dying Tree of Life in a glass sphere as they zip through space toward the final Nebula. It is all very cosmic and the less you try to make sense of it all, the more it makes sense. Zen, no? A work of passion from the director Darren Aronofsky ("Pi," "Requiem for a Dream").

"Stomp the Yard" (Sony, 2 stars) Well-worn plot about an outsider (this time an angry urban brother) dropped into a college environment where he brings street sensibilities to gown tradition. Not without huge cultural conflicts of course. Remember "Drumline"? Here the competition is among fraternities, which execute a complex and aggressive form of choreographed dance.

ALSO THIS WEEK

Animated tale of a boy out to save his grandfather's home in "Arthur and the Invisibles"; Joey Lauren Adams is an animal rights crusader who teams with a sportswriter-turned-superhero in the quirky romantic comedy "Bunny Whipped"; from Argentina, a heartwarming drama about a man's quest to understand what it means to be a father and in turn, what it means to be a son in "Family Law"; and finally the Spanish-language teen comedy and festival favorite "Casi Casi."

DOCUMENTARY OF THE WEEK

One side-industry of the controversial Iraq War has been documentaries about the war. "The War Tapes: Special Edition" (Docurama, 3 1/2 stars) is a bit different. Director Deborah Scranton put video cameras in the hands of 10 soldiers in March 2004 and let them find their own truths. You won't easily forget their stories from the Sunni Triangle.

IT CAME FROM TV

"M-A-S-H: Goodbye, Farewell and Amen" (Fox) The much-celebrated last episode of "M-A-S-H," which aired Feb. 28, 1983, is packaged in a three-disc set that includes the two-hour finale, tons of bloopers, features and other stuff previously only available in the complete 11-season box set "M-A-S-H Martinis & Medicine Collection."

Other TV stuff, of lesser stature: sixth season of "Home Improvement"; HBO's "Creepshow 3"; first season of George Peppard's posh detective "Banacek"; BBC's "Monarch of the Glen" season six; the ninth season of "Frasier"; the fourth season of "Wings"; and volume two of the animated "American Dad!"

FROM THE VAULTS

"Becket" (MPI, 1964) Which shall be served, God's will or the king's? The tormented question in this Oscar-winning (Best Writing) classic sets up an actor's dream of a duel between King Henry II (Peter O'Toole) and his closest friend and adviser the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas a Becket (Richard Burton). With just those two names, can't you hear the theatrical lions roar? Add Sir John Gielgud as King Louis VII of France, and you have theatrical history. No wonder this newly refurbished film was nominated for 12 Oscars in its day.

"Michael J. Fox Comedy Favorites Collection" (Universal) As the boyishly charming actor struggles fiercely against Parkinson's Disease why not honor his legacy? A quartet of his comedies are in this box: "The Hard Way," "The Secret of My Success," "For Love or Money" and "Greedy."

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

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