

# personal demons

WORDS MATT MUELLER

**Based on the film that most terrified him as a child, *Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark* is Guillermo del Toro's pet project, 15 years in the making. Now he's hoping it will scare you as much as it scared him...**

**W**hen he was a wee lad growing up in Guadalajara, Mexico, Guillermo del Toro used to stay up past his bedtime watching American gothic-horror series and made-for-TV movies with titles like *The Night Stalker*, *The Night Strangler* and *Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark*. It helped having "neglectful parents who never told you off", and del Toro's not the only one who calls that "fortunate". Who knows where he'd be now if his boyhood imagination hadn't been flamed by these dark gothic fantasies?

*Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark*, a 1973 ABC TV movie that del Toro believes to be one of the most frightening productions ever, left an enduring impression. "There are probably 20 films that have scared me in my life, and I've rarely been so scared and thrilled as I was watching this..." >>

**DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK**







Fear factor: (left) the demon-like creatures from the original TV movie.

What struck him most about the tale of Sally Farnham, the neurotic housewife who starts to hear sinister voices coming from her bricked-up fireplace, was the reveal (SPOILER ALERT!) of what lived behind the grate: “these fierce little creatures. You’re used to power and menace coming from size, and it was so much more scary and perverse in a way to see how terrifying these little creatures were. The severity of their faces, their pale wrinkled nature... It was not brute force, it was how smart these things were.”

Cut to several years later, when the success of his masterful debut *Cronos* had lured him Stateside, and one of del Toro’s first undertakings was tracking down the rights to *Don’t Be Afraid Of The Dark*. It took him nearly four years; he co-wrote a script with Matthew Robbins changing Sally from a phobic housewife into a lonely little girl, sold it to Bob and Harvey Weinstein at

Miramax... and watched it vanish into a deep, dank hole. After the Weinstein’s left Miramax, del Toro returned to find his baby, blew the dust off the script and began the concerted push to haul *Don’t Be Afraid Of The Dark* onto the big screen. First mission? Find a first-time director, since del Toro was about to head down to New Zealand to take up reins on *The Hobbit*.

Enter Troy Nixey, a comic-book artist who collaborated with Neil Gaiman and *Hellboy*’s Mike Mignola and had made an eerie fantasy short called *Latebkey’s Lament* that was more than mildly inspired by del Toro’s aesthetic. It struck a chord with the Mexican filmmaker and he convinced Miramax they’d found their guy. While del Toro had created a typically elaborate, folklorish backstory for *Dark*’s cellar-dwelling pests, it was Nixey who was tasked with conceiving the look of the homunculi.

“I dialled into a hairless mole-rat early on in terms of their wrinkles and that something so small can look so fierce,” says Nixey. “You wouldn’t want to hold one in your hand.” He also found unnerving inspiration in *Titicut Follies*, the infamous 1967 documentary that exposed the treatment of patients at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the criminally insane. Due to the homunculi’s minuscule size, the decision was taken to go full CGI rather than rely on del Toro’s favoured methodology: animatronics and puppetry. “The only other solution we contemplated was to create oversized sets and have people in suits,” del Toro notes, “but we weren’t that type of budget.”

Initially, we see very little of the homunculi in the movie, which features Alex Hirst (Guy Pearce) and his interior decorator girlfriend Kim (Katie Holmes) approaching the finish line >>



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GUILLERMO DEL TORO

Behind the scares: (left; from top) writer/producer Guillermo del Toro with young star Bailee Madison; director Troy Nixey with Madison and Katie Holmes; Nixey has a laugh with Guy Pearce between takes.



**DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK**







Things that go bump:  
Bailee Madison hears  
noises in the walls.

**‘These days horror movies are too fair: the hero survives, everything is fine. I’m not a believer in that type of ending. I like evil to stay alive...’**

**GUILLERMO DEL TORO**

on a total refurbishment of one of those giant, spooky Victorian mansions that say ‘Bad things will happen here’. Their plans to finish the job and get the house into *Architectural Digest* magazine are scuppered somewhat by the arrival of Alex’s sad, introverted daughter Sally (Bailee Madison), who is dumped on the self-absorbed couple by her negligent mother. She promptly finds a big spooky cellar containing a big spooky furnace, where rasping voices emanate from within asking her to set them free.

Set in Rhode Island, the film ended up being shot in Melbourne, Australia – close enough to Wellington for del Toro to nip back and forth. “Peter Jackson was super nice about it,” says del Toro. “He gave me the greenlight to go whenever I wanted.” Nixey and del Toro have different recollections about the frequency of del Toro’s visits: keen to stress his independence, the director calls them “occasional” while del Toro puts it that “I was on set for 90 per cent of the time.” It was del Toro’s passion project, so it’s no surprise he would want to keep close tabs on it.

The writer/producer was determined to keep *Dark* away from the fetid tropes that hover around horror. No scream queens, for one thing... It’s Pearce who’s the dim one here, while Holmes’ Kim is smart and resourceful and fights back against the trollish menace once she accepts what’s happening. As for Madison (who del Toro calls “heaven sent”), she answers the question that haunts every haunted-house movie: why don’t they just bloody leave? Sally attempts

exactly that but, being 10, can’t get far before her sceptical guardians drag her back...

“Sally is not submissive, she’s a tough cookie,” says del Toro. She does do some screaming, though, with Nixey guiding his young star in the fine art of high-pitched shrieking. “I pride myself on the fact I taught her to scream,” he smiles. “The scariest problem I had with Bailee was the restrictive hours she could work. But once we got her in the scene, she was incredible.” While little Suri Cruise was ensconced by the monitors telling Nixey to be quiet during takes (“I had to tell her it was OK for me to talk,” he laughs), Madison was bearing the brunt of homunculi mischief...

The little terrors stay hidden at first, shadowy shapes in the dark that aren’t revealed in all their bug-eyed, sharp-clawed, spindly-limbed glory until late in the day, as they skitter and scuttle across floors and up walls seeking out screwdrivers, razors and other sharp implements to stab, slash and impale with. “I love that they’re so relentless,” says del Toro. “There is nothing redeeming about these little guys.” Adds Nixey: “They take great pleasure in being horrible little bastards.”

Although the film was shot two years ago, *Don’t Be Afraid Of The Dark* found itself mired in further limbo after Disney decided to offload Miramax. But its fiendish scares couldn’t stay hidden forever. Finally emerging from the dark, it’s like the culmination of a journey that began all those years ago with del Toro cowering behind a cushion as *Dark*’s bleak ending unfolded. With a minor deviation, he’s kept it intact and hopes it chills modern audiences to the bone the way the 1973 model did to him.

“Part of horror is not being fair and these days horror movies are too often fair: the hero survives, the monster is destroyed, everything is fine,” says del Toro. “I’m not a believer in that type of ending. I like evil to stay alive...” **TF**

***Don’t Be Afraid Of The Dark* opens on 7 October and will be reviewed in a future issue of *Total Film*.**

# home sweet holmes

**Don’t Be Afraid Of The Dark** sees Katie Holmes reignite her career as a woman protecting her family in an old dark house...

**K**atie Holmes enters a cavernous conference room on the 18th floor of New York’s Waldorf Astoria hotel, fashionably dressed and fashionably late, with three minders in tow and a gold pendant inscribed with the letter ‘S’ (for Suri) dangling from her neck. Tall, willowy, beautiful and tremendously well groomed – the Ohio-born actress has all the glamorous physical attributes of a big-time Hollywood star. But she’s arrived with her guard up...

When she sits down opposite *Total Film*, Holmes is friendly enough, but the smile is noncommittal and the answers avoid controversy. Is she sweet, jaded or just determined not to be misquoted? On the attractions of *Don’t Be Afraid Of The Dark*: “I’m such a fan of Guillermo’s,” she says. “I was thrilled and honoured to be asked.” On the challenges of acting opposite a child actress (Bailee Madison) who spends most of her screen time terrified out of her wits: “It was wonderful working with Bailee. She is so talented and it was fun to go on this journey with her.” On whether she felt it was important that her character be strong and not the genre’s typical screaming victim: “I love this character, I love the strength that she shows to protect this child and I love seeing strong female characters on the screen.”

But let’s not be too hard on her. Travelling around the globe with barriers permanently erected seems to be the unfortunate reality of her life. If she’s adopted a siege mentality due to the pressures of being Mrs. Tom Cruise, it’s no wonder with the toxic publicity that trails in their wake, story-seeking journos seemingly determined to question every aspect of their lives and careers. It’s a crying shame: the actress, who



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**KATIE HOLMES**

turns 33 this year, is by all accounts a lovely, kind-hearted woman, and she strolls up to del Toro in the Waldorf to give him an affectionate embrace and a big kiss on the cheek. There's also the fact that, when she burst onto the scene in the late '90s with her *Dawson's Creek* afterburners on, Holmes was one of Hollywood's most promising young actresses. She brought sensitivity, warmth, toughness and smarts to roles in Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm*, Doug Liman's *Go*, Curtis Hanson's *Wonder Boys* and the indie hit *Pieces Of April*.

Lately she's stepped out of the limelight somewhat, though she's kept on working. She did Broadway with Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, a few smaller films (*Thank You For Smoking*, *Mad Money*) and the high-profile mini-series *The Kennedys*, in which she portrayed pillbox queen Jackie Kennedy. *Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark*, however, can be viewed as something of a comeback.

"Beyond the public celebrity, people should remember what a great actress she is," del Toro points out. Holmes repays his faith with a modulated turn that sees her transform from distracted self-absorption into a strong, fiercely protective mother figure. By the end, you'll be cheering her on as she battles the miniature fiends with all her might and... well, it would be churlish to reveal what happens. But suffice to say that *Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark* serves as a timely reminder of what Holmes can bring to the table.

But are there any career ambitions left to fulfil? "My ambition has never changed," she replies. "I've always wanted to be an actress and I'm excited to be a part of a lot of different films and I'm proud of *Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark*. It was a wonderful experience..." **MM**