

'Forbidden Room' director Guy Maddin discusses lurid filmmaking

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ABSTRACT

Maddin will often substitute title cards for voices, and fill the soundtrack with slowed-down classical music or whispery tape loops. Among them are a '50s-style educational look at how to take a bath; the tale of four men trapped in a submarine and fast running out of air; a yarn about a brave woodsman attempting to save a woman being held captive in a cave; the legend of a volcano that is demanding a human sacrifice; a visit with a couple who live inside a large, constantly moving elevator; and, why not, something about vampire bananas.

FULL TEXT

Anyone who's seen a Guy Maddin film will never forget that they've seen a Guy Maddin film. The Canadian director's features and shorts are grainy, scratchy, jittery, garish, funny, often indecipherable pieces of entertainment. They are living, breathing fever dreams, toggling between oversaturated color and murky black-and-white imagery. Maddin will often substitute title cards for voices, and fill the soundtrack with slowed-down classical music or whispery tape loops.

His films -- among them the feature "The Saddest Music in the World," a Depression-era tale of a "sad song" contest hosted by a double-amputee brewing magnate (Isabella Rossellini) who gets around on two glass legs that are filled with beer, and "Sissy-Boy Slap-Party," a Three Stooges-flavored short featuring gay sailors in a tropical setting gleefully smacking each other with open palms -- have never been box office hits. But he keeps cranking them out, and he has plenty of fans who revere him as a genius.

Though a Maddin movie generally depends more on mood and texture than plotting, his newest, "The Forbidden Room," is home to a plethora of seemingly unrelated stories that either bounce off of or intermingle with each other for 130 intense minutes. He describes it as being made up of "the fragments of 17 lost film adaptations."

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Maddin, 60, is based in Winnipeg but currently lives in Cambridge, where he teaches filmmaking and film studies classes at Harvard. He spoke to us by phone from Toronto, where he's been teaching at Ryerson University during Harvard's spring break. On Thursday he'll be in Boston to introduce "The Forbidden Room" at the Bright Family Screening Room in the Paramount Center at Emerson College, followed by a post-screening discussion. The free event begins at 7 p.m.

Q. What kinds of films were you watching as a kid that might have led to the films you now make?

A. One of my strangest viewing experiences was when I was 8 and went to see "A Hard Day's Night." I remember all these adolescent girls screaming whenever Paul McCartney would bat his eyes in extreme close-up. They would scream and swoon and melt, and so did I. I got caught up in the anchluss of the Beatles. And "Goldfinger" was a formative experience. I was crushed, and haven't recovered yet from the fact that when I went home and looked in

the mirror, I didn't look like Sean Connery. My Aunt Lil would bring me to the more serious stuff. She took me to see "Lord Jim," which I didn't understand at all. But there were also rep houses, where I saw my B-movies. I'd see anything that looked like it would have a scary or lurid element.

Q. You were a math and economics major at school, you worked at a bank, then you were a housepainter. How did you get into filmmaking?

A. I wanted to express myself as an artist, preferably a writer. But I was a good enough reader to realize I'd never be a good enough writer to enjoy my own writing. When I saw Luis Bunuel's "L'Age d'Or," and then shortly after that, [David Lynch's] "Eraserhead," I saw a way in that wasn't the conventional, slick, glossy Hollywood way of making movies. I realized that maybe through some primitive cut-and-paste ways, I could possibly make an effective underground movie, if I just had a couple of good ideas.

Q. Your first one was the short "The Dead Father," which has been said to be autobiographical.

A. I made it about the recurring dreams I had about my dead father returning to visit me, so he could abandon me all over again by dying, which happened every night for many years. I decided to make those the subject of a film. I'm not sure if I succeeded in getting up onscreen the wonderful, mixed, sad, happy feelings those dreams created, but it's been fun trying all these years since. And it was a start.

Q. "The Forbidden Room" is certainly a continuation of trying to get that effect.

A. I really wanted to cram too much into this movie, which is about storytelling as much as anything. It has a Russian nesting doll structure, with a flashback and then a dream within the flashback and so on. There's all sorts of ways of nesting a narrative within a narrative within a narrative. There's a three-act structure, but sometimes they get nine narratives deep. The stories are all written by me and [my co-writer and co-director] Evan Johnson, so they all sort of point in the same direction. The stories work their way in towards a chewy center of concentricities and then back out again, and then back in and then back out. And there's this kind of unsplugging of all the narratives at the end, and it's over.

Q. You've said that the film is made up of adaptations of lost films. What do you mean?

A. Everything is based on an actual film that once existed and once played for millions or thousands or maybe just a couple people, or possibly didn't even quite come into existence. There's an unrealized Aleksandr Dovzhenko sequence in there that was called "Over Barbed Wire" that Dovzhenko wrote but was left unmade at the time of his death. I never saw any of the films, but in some cases I've seen a still, or maybe a couple sentences of synopsis, and we've done our own loose adaptations.

Q. At one point "The Forbidden Room" bursts into a musical segment, with a new tune by the '70s band Sparks. What's the story behind that?

A. They're the only songwriters I know, of the kind of song I needed. They ended up scoring a lost 1931 Greek film called "Fist of a Cripple." I wrote them an e-mail telling them what the plot points were, and said it should be 31/2 minutes long. And about five hours later they had written "The Final Derriere," produced it, recorded it, and sent it. So there's a pop video in the middle of the movie!

Q. You're currently curating the rather esoteric series "Guy Maddin Presents" at the Harvard Film Archive. Was that your idea?

A. No, [archive director] Haden Guest asked me to do it. I'd been getting their programs sent to me for years, and I was always envious of the programming there, and the next thing I knew I was living just a few blocks away from the joint and I was invited to program it. I didn't know how to curate a program, so I decided to do it around movies that I could barely remember seeing. They're not lost, but they're perhaps confused in my memory. But I do recall them being charged and enchanting, and I hope they're the same for people that wander in off the street.

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Illustration

Caption: Scenes from "The Forbidden Room," the latest film from Guy Maddin.

DETAILS

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