

Guillermo del Toro Recalls Most Toxic Hollywood Experience: Working for the Weinsteins

Exclusive: Guillermo del Toro suggests his fascination with showbiz nightmares is informed by his experience of working with Bob and Harvey Weinstein.

[David Crow](#) January 27, 2023



Photo: Getty Images

[Guillermo del Toro](#) is keenly aware of the motifs and themes that occur, and occur again, in his work. He often embraces them. For instance, the Mexican

auteur freely [suggested to us last month that his latest film](#), the Oscar-nominated [Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio](#), is part of a spiritual trilogy with *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006)—movies that all deal with childhood innocence enduring beneath the shadow of fascism and oppression.

Yet another element that frequently goes overlooked in his oeuvre is that of the artist and their commercial benefactor; the creator and the exploiter. This dynamic is given a fatally noirish bent in del Toro's last Best Picture nominee, [Nightmare Alley](#) (2021). That film, which is based on a William Lindsay Gresham novel of the same name, sees a small-time carnival huckster learn how a "Geek" is made—which in the early 20th century referred to poor souls on skid row who were convinced by carnival barkers to bite the heads off live chickens. It's what the audience wanted to see?

And the thread continues even in more optimistic stories like *Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio*. Only this time, a little wooden boy named Pinocchio is fooled by circus owner Count Volpe to dance for real-life fascist Benito Mussolini. That bond of self-destruction, between the talent and their employer, lingers in the director's mind. So when we sat down with del Toro, we asked if this relationship is a naturally occurring phenomenon in the entertainment industry... and his answers were illuminating.

"One hundred percent," del Toro says with a deep laugh. "It is the essence of the drama [of creation]. Whether it's high art or low art, it is the enshrinement of pain to provoke an insight or the notion of catharsis."

The filmmaker notes that "the Geek" concept, immortalized as a metaphor for showbiz by the original *Nightmare Alley* book, demonstrates this drama at its basest level, but it's perpetuated throughout the decades at all levels, including in his own industry experiences.

“Most audiences during the Depression, they would go and see the Geek and would basically leave the tent saying, ‘Well I guess we don’t have it that bad!’” del Toro explains. “And you can do that in a more narrative form. You can show an arc of redemption where he gets [a new lease] on life or you can show the possibility of change. But ultimately, there is someone in the cycle that is working the business. There is somebody using that pain and that art as a commodity, invariably because it’s sustaining an entire industry, whether that’s a traveling carnival that has to pay for transportation, gas, lodging, food, or the entertainment business that employs thousands of people. There’s always been a Count Volpe.”

Indeed, as the filmmaker confirms to us, he too has had a run-in with Count Volpe.

Says del Toro, “My worst experience, or experiences, in show business—the worst by a mile and a half!—is *Mimic* in 1996, '97 with the Weinstein company.” The director refers to his first English-language film, the sci-fi/horror hybrid based on a screenplay he co-wrote with Matthew Robbins. The film starred Mira Sorvino and was about a new breed of monstrous cockroaches living within the tunnels of New York City. It was also one of the worst experiences of del Toro’s life after both the movie’s producers from Miramax, Bob Weinstein and Harvey Weinstein, became unhappy with the daily rushes they were seeing.

Bob flew up to the film’s on-location shoot in Toronto and [reportedly stormed onto the set to lecture](#) del Toro on how to direct a movie. Eventually, Bob attempted to fire del Toro from the project altogether until Sorvino refused to allow the Weinsteins to replace him with another filmmaker. Even then, the Weinsteins insisted on getting final cut of the film in the editing suite. A collaborator of del Toro’s said afterward that the set was like being in a prisoner of war camp.

Looking back on it now, del Toro says, "It was very much finding yourself trapped in the fine print or in a completely dire circumstance in which you had to learn to flip things so you could completely function. So I did get my Pinocchio moment where you're able to turn the tables. I survived it. I finished the movie, and I had a career afterward. So it's a miracle. It could've gone wrong, but if you survive it that makes you a lot more resilient."

Del Toro found a way to put the chicken down and leave the tent.

Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio is streaming now on Netflix.

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