



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

# Guillermo del Toro in Conversation: Animation for All

Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio* had its world premiere at the BFI London Film Festival and has gone on to receive huge critical acclaim and awards attention. We are delighted to welcome Guillermo del Toro to BFI Southbank to talk about his long term passion for animation, his journey in making his first animated film and the importance of recognising animation as being a medium that is for everyone. This event will be hosted by the BFI's Justin Johnson and features clips from some of del Toro's favourite animated films alongside a discussion about the making of *Pinocchio* with a guest appearance from his fellow director Mark Gustafson.

## Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio*

Humanity may be made of crooked timber, but in Guillermo del Toro's take on Carlo Collodi's 1883 children's classic, it's the attempt to force us straight that does the damage. Del Toro's errant wooden boy – lovingly conceived and nurtured into the world over most of two decades by the Mexican director, modelled on Gris Grimly's illustrations for a 2002 edition of the book – is a natural free spirit, a born-wild child with stick limbs, a rosette of carved hair, open, unvarnished features and a nose for trouble. Where other characters in the film see a potential model Italian youth, or a ticket to riches, or even a surrogate son, del Toro gives us a puckish innocent driven by curiosity and affection, whose need to become 'real' is an embrace of love, loss and mortality. Around him, the film condenses Collodi's picaresque fable as a helter-skelter tumble through the perils of patriarchy and fascism in a 1930s Italy rife with false idols and warped father figures.

For all the 20-plus film versions of Collodi's story of an animated puppet – including at least four in the last three years, with two of those in as many months – del Toro is right to express surprise (and delight) that none have turned to stop-motion puppet animation for the task. He shares directing credit with Mark Gustafson, the director of animation on Wes Anderson's stop-motion *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009); the armature puppets were made by Manchester animation house Mackinnon & Saunders (who also supplied *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, as well as *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride*, 2005, and *Frankenweenie*, 2012); and the animation was performed by Portland's ShadowMachine, with supplementary work by del Toro's Centro Internacional de Animación in Guadalajara. Ambition, cutting-edge skills and a thousand-odd days of shooting have produced a marvellously rich and lively calibre of animation, a soaring interplay of lighting and camerawork and puppetry that raises the bar for the expression of character and action in this style.

What's surprising – though it's perhaps an obvious corollary – is that the switch to stop-motion means that *Pinocchio* really isn't so different to his

animated maker and neighbours: they're all the same matter under the surface, though the bare-wood Pinocchio doesn't get to hide it. Little wonder, then, that del Toro makes Pinocchio's birth scene rhyme with that of Frankenstein's monster, similarly unholy progeny. As with Robert Zemeckis's algorithmically ordained reanimation of Disney's *Pinocchio* starring Tom Hanks (which premiered on Disney+ in September), del Toro's film opens elaborating a back story in which Pinocchio's carpenter father Master Geppetto (David Bradley) is wracked by grief for a real lost son (clear-throated Gregory Mann, who also voices Pinocchio), killed in a senseless act of violence at the end of World War I. One stormy night, a sozzled Geppetto lets fly at an oak tree on his grounds, dragging its trunk into his workshop for some angry woodwork before collapsing asleep, whereupon, in one of the film's looser bits of exposition, floaty-eyed spirits coalesce into the blue-fairy Wood Sprite to give the boy life. (This being a film about surrogates and doppelgangers, both Sprite and her underworld sister, the griffin-like Angel of Death, are voiced by Tilda Swinton – adding another to her portfolio of double acts to follow *Hail, Caesar!*, 2016; *Okja*, 2017; and *The Eternal Daughter*, 2022.)

The townsfolk are of course suspicious of Geppetto's spirited sprig, though Pinocchio, struck by the church sculpture of a wooden Jesus on his cross, innocently wonders 'why people love him and not me' – a succinct shot/countershot beautifully crystallising del Toro's lapsed Catholicism. But a larger-looming authority figure is the local blackshirt, Podesta (Ron Perlman), who admires Pinocchio's 'good Italian wood' and insists he be sent to school to learn discipline; Pinocchio's later truancy, however, raises a red flag: he may be a 'dissident – an independent thinker'. One of del Toro's masterstrokes is to translate Collodi's boy-trapping Land of Toys ('Pleasure Island' in the Disney adaptation) into a fascist paintball bootcamp – no donkey metaphors required – where no sooner have Pinocchio and Podesta's put-upon son Candlewick made common cause than they are forced into gladiatorial combat.

Disney's original 1940 *Pinocchio* emerged in a world sliding into political savagery and horror. Del Toro's (like Zemeckis's, and Matteo Garrone's 2019 prosthetic-effects version) arrives in an era of rekindled grievance and chauvinism, one in which aspiring tyrants incant lies and the previous president of the US fibbed so incontinently the *Washington Post's* Fact Checker felt compelled to invent a 'Bottomless Pinocchio' rating. Facing such adult wickedness, del Toro – conjuring the monsters of European fascism a third time after the Spanish-set *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) – upends Collodi's instructional moralism, in which it's the wayward Pinocchio who needs civilising restraint. Just twice does Del Toro's Pinocchio find his tell-tale nose growing (and not straight but branching at all angles; it has to be chopped back down, like del Toro's Hellboy shaving his horns): the first time in a gush of imagination-flexing, the second a moment of creative deliverance, or big white lies. The small-spirited mendacity of the adult world, by contrast, comes to a point in a diminutive role for a banally murderous Benito Mussolini.

Not that the world of art and entertainment is an escape from cruel vanities. Pinocchio's pied piper, Count Volpe (Christoph Waltz) – a combination of three Collodi characters: tyrannical circus master Mangiafuoco and tricksters the Fox and the Cat – proves an impresario of the highest duplicity. (He has his own brutalised underling, the monkey Spazzatura, whose grunts and

shrieks are given virtuoso expression by Cate Blanchett.) Ewan McGregor's Sebastian J Cricket, Pinocchio's would-be guardian and biographer, is also prone to pomp and pontification, though as a dapper yet frequently flattened insect he also marks the film's intersection of gothic macabre and cartoon levity – he's del Toro's most garrulous bug, with his own slapstick powers of revival. Down in the underworld, we also meet death's-head mafiosi rabbits; above, in the hazardous Mediterranean, we find the monstrous whale and naval mines on the journey home to true familial love. How the film keeps all these plates spinning is a wonder, but the musical numbers, composed by Alexandre Desplat with lyrics by del Toro, Patrick McHale and Roeban Katz, are nimble and witty. Most of all, the film exudes all the joy it preaches, giving and breathing life into its world, then embracing it, in all its wonky wonder.

**Nick Bradshaw, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23**

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#### IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

**Film Sounds: A Conversation between Mark Jenkin and Peter Strickland**

Sun 29 Jan 13:00

**Chinese New Year: Year of the Rabbit: What About China?**

+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, BFI London Film Festival Programmer

Sun 5 Feb 14:30

**BFI Expanded: Shifting Perspectives:**

**A focus on Female and Non-Binary creators in XR**

6-12 Feb

**Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI**

Mon 6 Feb 18:30

**UK Premiere: Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman**

+ intro with director Pierre Földes

Mon 6 Feb 20:45

**Preview: Joyland +Q&A**

Wed 8 Feb 18:00

**BFI Future Film Festival**

16-19 Feb

**Preview: Subject + Q&A with director Camilla Hall and**

**contributor Margaret Ratliff**

Fri 17 Feb 18:10

**Preview: The Strays + Q&A**

Mon 20 Feb 18:15

#### REGULAR PROGRAMME

**Relaxed Screening: The Hidden Fortress + intro & discussion**

Mon 30 Jan 18:00

**Member Picks: Sunshine**

Thu 2 Feb 18:15

**Seniors: The Long Memory + intro and Q&A**

**with film historian Marcus Powell**

Mon 6 Feb 14:00

**Shadow + intro and discussion**

Wed 8 Feb 18:20

**Art in the Making: Edward Hopper + intro by Steven Foxon, Curator**

**BFI National Archive + Night Work**

Thu 9 Feb 18:30

**African Odysseys: Free Renty: Lanier v. Harvard + intro and Q&A**

Sat 11 Feb 14:00

**Silent Cinema: Neil Brand Presents Laurel and Hardy**

Sun 12 Feb 16:00

**Woman with a Movie Camera: Galentine's Day:**

**The Parent Trap 25th Anniversary**

Mon 13 Feb 20:15

**Projecting the Archive: I'll Get You for This (aka Lucky Nick Cain) +**

**intro by Rosie Taylor, Curatorial Archivist, BFI National Archive**

Tue 21 Feb 18:20

**Experimenta: Right of Way + Q&A with artists Dan Guthrie, Ufuoma**

**Essi and Arjuna Neuman, hosted by Jonathan Ali**

Thu 23 Feb 18:10

**Film Wallahs: Kekee Manzil: House of Art**

Fri 24 Feb 20:40

**Course: Filmmaking for Artists: Beginners Filmmaking Workshop**

Sun 26 Feb 10:30-16:30

**Relaxed Screening: Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jô)**

**+ intro and discussion**

Mon 27 Feb 18:15

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