



Guillermo del Toro

# Nightmare Alley

## Nightmare Alley

Directed by: Guillermo del Toro  
©: 20th Century Studios,  
TSG Entertainment Finance LLC  
a Double Dare You production  
Presented by: Searchlight Pictures  
in association with: TSG Entertainment  
Produced by: Guillermo del Toro, J. Miles Dale,  
Bradley Cooper  
Unit Production Managers: Regina Robb,  
Melissa Girotti, J. Miles Dale  
Production Accountant: Wendy Gaboury  
Location Manager: Vince Nyuli  
Post-production Supervisor: Douglas Wilkinson  
1st Assistant Director: Myron Hoffert  
2nd Assistant Director: Penny Charter  
Script Supervisor: Dug Rotstein  
Casting by: Robin D. Cook  
Screenplay by: Guillermo del Toro, Kim Morgan  
Based on the novel by: William Lindsay Gresham  
Director of Photography: Dan Laustsen  
Camera Operator: Gilles Corbeil  
Still Photographer: Kerry Hayes  
Visual Effects Supervisor: Dennis Berardi  
Visual Effects by: MR. X, Company 3  
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Geoff Hill  
Film Editor: Cameron McLaughlin  
Production Designer: Tamara Deverell  
Art Director: Brandt Gordon  
Set Decorator: Shane Vieau  
Concept Illustrator: Guy Davis  
Property Master: Chris Geggie  
Costume Designer: Luis Sequeira  
Make-up Designer: Jo-Ann MacNeil  
Hair Designer: Cliona Furey  
Music by: Nathan Johnson  
Score conducted by: Alfonso Casado Trigo  
Sound Designer: Nathan Robitaille  
Production Sound Mixer: Greg Chapman  
Re-recording Mixers: Chris Cooke, Brad Zoern  
Supervising Sound Editors: Nathan Robitaille,  
Jill Purdy  
Stunt Co-ordinators: Jamie Jones, Darren McGuire  
Magic Consultant: Michael Close  
Dolby Sound Consultant: Thomas Kodros  
Animal Wrangler: Rick Parker  
Unit Publicist: Lisa Shamata  
Cast:  
Bradley Cooper (*Stanton Carlisle, Stan*)  
Cate Blanchett (*Dr Lilith Ritter*)  
Toni Collette (*Zeena the Seer*)  
Willem Dafoe (*Clem Hoatley*)  
Richard Jenkins (*Ezra Grindle*)  
Rooney Mara (*Molly Cahill*)  
Ron Perlman (*Bruno*)  
Mary Steenburgen (*Mrs Kimball*)  
David Strathairn (*Pete*)  
Holt McCallany (*Anderson*)  
Peter MacNeill (*Judge Kimball*)  
Mark Povinelli (*The Major*)  
Jim Beaver (*Sheriff Jedediah Judd*)  
Tim Blake Nelson (*carny boss*)  
Clifton Collins Jr (*Funhouse Jack*)  
Paul Anderson (*geek*)  
Lara Jean Chorostecki (*Louise Hoatley*)  
USA-Mexico 2021  
150 mins  
Digital  
Black & White version (Sat 23 May)  
Colour version (Sat 30 May)

It was 1993 when Guillermo del Toro first discovered *Nightmare Alley*. The 29-year-old Mexican director had just finished post-production on his debut film, the baroque vampire tale *Cronos*, and was over at the house of his star, Ron Perlman, when the novel was first mentioned.

'We were watching a laserdisc of *Elmer Gantry* [1960],' del Toro remembers, 'and Ron said, "You know, there's a part I'd love to play: Stanton Carlisle in *Nightmare Alley*." So I read the novel, I watched the 1947 movie on a bootleg VHS, but the rights were with Fox and they wouldn't sell us them. So we abandoned the idea. But I loved that novel.'

First published in 1946, William Lindsay Gresham's *Nightmare Alley* is a novel that mesmerises all who read it. Beginning amid the low-life world of the carnival freak show, it follows its mendacious antihero Stanton Carlisle on a hell-bound journey from carnie huckster to fake high-society spiritualist and beyond, a downward spiral of despair rendered in bullet-hard pulp prose and gutter-baroque slang, suffused with the language of psychoanalysis and the mythos of the Tarot. Like a curse or a bad penny, eventually the novel came back around into del Toro's life when he began collaborating with the film critic Kim Morgan.

'We'd been exchanging opinions on movies for many years,' del Toro explains. 'Then in July 2017 we started to write together and Kim said, "What about *Nightmare Alley*?" I thought that was a brilliant idea. We wrote it as an exercise, over a year, in complete freedom because we thought, "Nobody is ever going to finance this.'"

'The novel and Gresham's life were both a big pull towards writing the script,' Morgan says, via email. 'The novel really digs into our flawed human nature and fears and also contains a spiritual and esoteric layer that was really powerful. I love the language of the novel, the grit and beauty and sadness. [It's a book] about how people are preying on others but also how we deceive ourselves.'

The pair read everything by Gresham and everything about him, piecing together a life as strange and tragic as the novel itself. A soldier in the Spanish Civil War, a magician, pulp writer and alcoholic, Gresham did his drinking in the Dixie Hotel in Coney Island, where all the carnies hung out. He was horrified and beguiled by tales of the carnival geek, an alcoholic or drug addict who bites the heads off snakes and chickens in return for his next fix. 'Gresham was so haunted by the idea of the geek,' says Morgan, 'that he had to write it out. *Nightmare Alley* revealed such a fusion between himself and Stan. I became fascinated by Gresham. And the geek – I don't think he ever got rid of it.'

A bestseller for most of 1946, *Nightmare Alley* was sold to Hollywood and made into a 1947 movie, directed by Edmund Goulding and starring matinee idol Tyrone Power as the doomed Stanton Carlisle.

'The first thing we said was, "Let's not look at the first movie,'" del Toro says, 'because we were not doing a remake. Researching Gresham became the thing. He catered to our obsessive personalities because there was so little material available on him.'

Following the success of *Nightmare Alley*, Gresham wrote a second novel, *Limbo Tower*, which flopped. The money ran out, the drinking increased, along with his rages and attacks on his wife, Joy Davidman. He sought refuge in the Tarot, yoga, Zen, Dianetics. None of it worked. Joy left him for C.S. Lewis. In 1962, discovering he had cancer, Gresham booked himself into the Dixie Hotel in Coney Island and took his own life. In his possession was a business card that read 'No Address. No Phone. No Business. No Money. Retired.' On the rear were the words 'You Would Rather Die Than Face Truth.'

## Guillermo del Toro

### Mimic

Fri 1 May 20:40 (Director's Cut); Sat 16 May 18:00

### The Devil's Backbone

El espinazo del diablo  
Sat 2 May 20:45; Thu 14 May 18:10;

Sat 23 May 12:30

### Blade II

Mon 4 May 18:15; Fri 15 May 20:30

### Pacific Rim

Sat 9 May 11:30 BFI IMAX (+ Q&A with Guillermo

del Toro); Tue 12 May 20:25; Fri 22 May 18:15

### Crimson Peak

Sat 9 May 14:45 (+ Q&A with Guillermo del Toro);

Wed 13 May 20:30

### The Shape of Water

Sat 9 May 18:00 (+ intro by Guillermo del Toro);

Wed 27 May 20:35

### Pan's Labyrinth

El laberinto del fauno  
Sun 10 May 13:45 (+ Q&A with Guillermo del Toro);

Mon 18 May 20:40; Sun 31 May 12:20

### Frankenstein

Sun 10 May 17:00 BFI IMAX (+ intro by Guillermo

del Toro); Sun 17 May 17:55; Wed 27 May 17:50;

Sun 31 May 15:10

### 25 and Under:

#### An Introduction to Guillermo del Toro

Wed 13 May 18:30 Blue Room

### Cronos

From Fri 15 May (+ intro by Guillermo del Toro on

Fri 8 May 20:30)

### Hellboy

Sat 16 May 20:35; Sun 24 May 15:00

### Hellboy II: The Golden Army

Wed 20 May 20:30; Sun 24 May 18:15

### Guillermo del Toro Sip and Paint

Sat 23 May 15:00 Blue Room

### Nightmare Alley

Sat 23 May 20:00 (Black & White version);

Sat 30 May 17:40

### Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio

Mon 25 May 15:25; Sat 30 May 12:10

### Guillermo del Toro Quiz

Wed 27 May 18:00 Blue Room

### With thanks to

Cai Mason, Lisa Taback, Imogen Munsey and the Netflix team, Gary Ungar

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

'We came to the conclusion that *Nightmare Alley* is very much "The Spiritual Autobiography of William Lindsay Gresham,"' del Toro says. 'If all art is self-portraiture, this is blatantly so.'

Initially, it seemed like Morgan and del Toro's *Nightmare Alley* script, and their research into Gresham, would remain little more than a writing exercise. Then, in 2018, del Toro's tenth studio film, *The Shape of Water* was nominated for 13 Academy Awards, winning four, including Best Picture. Suddenly, he was free to make anything he wanted. The director saw his chance.

'After *Shape of Water* I could have done whatever movie I chose,' del Toro says with a chuckle. 'We went to Searchlight Pictures and they said, "OK, we can develop *Nightmare Alley*." I said, "Let's make a classical movie that isn't getting made anymore; a dark, existential character study. A *noir*." True crime and *noir* are things I've been obsessed with since I was a kid, but I'd always stayed within the world of fantasy and horror, a world I was comfortable with. Starting on *Nightmare Alley* I was a little scared.'

Del Toro's first concern was that no one would want to play Stanton Carlisle. Leonardo DiCaprio was interested but then dropped out, before Bradley Cooper signed on, taking his first lead role since *A Star Is Born* (2018), which he also produced, wrote and directed.

Stanton is a difficult character to play; deceitful, unreadable. One of del Toro's first directing decisions was to always film Cooper in the shadows or shoot him from behind. 'In a lot of scenes I thought it was very important that you don't see his face,' del Toro says. 'I thought Stan lies so much that you should know he's lying without even seeing his face.'

Another of the film's themes is Stanton's unawareness of his place in the world. When he arrives at the carnival he is welcomed by the outcasts and freaks who work there, who know he carries trouble with him. These are good people who are willing to give him a home, but Stanton believes he is superior to that world and moves on. 'Stan is no different a character from the caretaker in *The Devil's Backbone* [2001],' explains del Toro, 'or the captain in *Pan's Labyrinth* [2006]. These are people who believe they're better than their station, that they deserve better. One of the things I did was to show Stan repeatedly waking up and finding himself at a different stage in his life. This is the type of guy who doesn't know how things happen to him. He doesn't know where life is taking him.'

That dreamlike quality extends to the film's stylised, symbolic design. Stanton walks through a series of circles and portals on his nightmare journey, replaced by a series of narrowing corridors in the second half that funnel him towards his destiny. At the same time, an intense use of greens and reds suggests a psychedelic rendering of old three-strip Technicolor.

'My cinematographer, Dan Laustsen, and I decided we wanted to use classic 1940s studio cross-lighting,' explains del Toro, 'with very deep shadows almost like a cerograph' – an engraving from wax – 'where you have a base for the blacks and another base for the colours. Gabriel Figueroa, a colleague of Gregg Toland, once explained to me that you get the midtones in black and white through greens and reds.'

Del Toro also refused to use drones, jump-cuts or other modern filming techniques, filming travelling shots with a mini crane. He built an entire exterior set for the carnival the size of a football stadium. Then, in March 2020, the production was shut down amid rising concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic, not resuming until that September. The long break was, del Toro says, 'a blessing', during which time his relationship with Morgan developed into a romance. 'I started writing the movie with Kim Morgan,' he says, laughing, 'and I ended up writing the last draft of the movie with my wife.'

Andrew Male, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2021-22