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The Forbidden Room

Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson

Producer David Christensen, Phoebe Greenberg, Penny Mancuso, Phyllis Laing. **Production companies** Phi Films (Montreal, Canada); Buffalo Gal Pictures (Winnipeg, Canada); National Film Board of Canada (Montreal, Quebec, Canada). **Director** Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, Robert Kotyk. **Screenplay** Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, Robert Kotyk. **Director of photography** Stephanie Weber-Biron, Ben Kasulke. **Production design** Galen Johnson. **Set design** Brigitte Henry, Chris Lavis, Maciek Szczerbowski. **Costume** Elodie Mard, Yso South, Julie Charland. **Sound** Simon Plouffe, David Rose, John Gurdebeke, Vincent Riendeau, Gavin Fernandes. **Editor** John Gurdebeke.

With Roy Dupuis, Clara Furey, Louis Negin, Céline Bonnier, Karine Vanasse, Caroline Dhavernas, Paul Ahmarani, Mathieu Amalric, Udo Kier, Maria de Medeiros, Charlotte Rampling, Geraldine Chaplin.

DCP, colour & black/white. 130 min. English.

Premiere 26 January 2015, Sundance Film Festival

World sales Mongrel International

A submarine in distress, a lumberjack who mysteriously appears to the crew – wasn't he just in the dark forests of Holstein-Schleswig rescuing the beautiful Margot from the claws of the Red Wolves? A neurosurgeon who digs deeply into the brain of a manic patient; a murderer who pretends to be the victim of his own killings; a traumatised young woman „on the Deutsch-Kolumbianisch Express somewhere between Berlin and Bogota“; seductive skeletons, zeppelins colliding, and a hot bath that seems to have triggered the whole thing. Guy Maddin's rampant, anarchic film, co-directed by Evan Johnson, resembles an apparently chaotic, yet always significant eroto-claustrophobic nightmare that never seems to want to end, in which the plot, characters and locations constantly flow into one another in truly enigmatic style. The countless fantastic plotlines are structured like the intertwined arms of a spiral nebula – all of them inspired by real, imaginary and photographic memories of films from the silent era now lost, to which the half-damaged nitrate print aesthetic also pays fabulous homage.

Christoph Terhechte

Stay safe!

We just have too much narrative in our heads, so much that we feel our brains are going to explode. With this film, we set out to create a controlled setting, an elaborate narrative network of subterranean locks, sluice gates, chambers, trap pipes, storm sewers and spelunking caves where all the past, present and future films in our large heads might safely blow! Where no one will be hurt by the spectacular Two-Strip Technicolor havoc we'll wreak on the screen, knowing the whole thing will drain away by credit roll. Stay safe and enjoy!

Guy Maddin

"I've finally figured it out, this filmmaking business"

What can you tell me about your forthcoming feature, *The Forbidden Room*?

Guy Maddin: *The Forbidden Room*, my eleventh feature, was just completed and will have its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January of 2015. It is blessed with some of my favourite actors, Roy Dupuis, Mathieu Amalric, Udo Kier, Charlotte Rampling, Geraldine Chaplin, Maria de Medeiros, Adele Haenel, Sophie Desmarais, Ariane Labed, Jacques Nolot, fantastic newcomer Clara Furey (who is such a star!), and of course my longstanding muse, Louis Negin, who has never been better. It was shot entirely in the studio, or in many small studios, but, strangely, in public studios, over three weeks at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and another three weeks at the Centre PHI in Montreal, where any visitor to those institutions could simply walk up and watch us shoot, watch the movie stars act, at very close range. I think this is by far the best picture I've ever made. It was so strange to script a movie that would be shot in public, without giving away the exact plot to that public. And the movie is in fullest, fuller-than-full colour – more colourful than any other movie ever made. How's that, you ask? I'm feeling very proud now, like I've finally figured it all out, this filmmaking business. Of course I had a lot of help from great collaborators.

What is the connection between *The Forbidden Room* and your ongoing *Seances* project?

Well, they were both shot in public in Paris and Montreal, but there are big differences between the two. While *The Forbidden Room* is a feature film with its own separate story and stars, *Seances* will be an interactive narrative website, or app, that anyone online can visit and play with. It's produced by the sexy new incarnation of The National Film Board of Canada. I never thought I'd use the word sexy to describe the NFB, but it's so amazing now. The *Seances* site/app will launch in 2015, shortly after *The Forbidden Room* is released. I'll describe the workings of *Seances* in the next interview, closer to launch date. I can say that the museum installation in which we shot all our footage was called 'Spiritismes' in Paris, and 'Seances' in Montreal, but *Seances* is the final and only title now. It's a website where anyone online can hold 'séances' with the spirits of cinema, lost and forgotten cinema. The site has really evolved in recent months. It was going to be title-for-title remakes of specific lost films, but we found as we went along that the spirits of many other lost movies, and the spirit of loss in general, haunted our sets and demanded to be represented in front of our

cameras. I'm really excited about the results. No one knows, in spite of what might have been previously reported on Wikipedia and even in earlier interviews with me, what's finally going to launch, but I feel we have something original on our hands – all this boasting, I'm so sorry! I'm not usually like this. But Noah Cowan, back when he was one of the directors at the Toronto International Film Festival, told me he didn't think it was possible to make art on the Internet. That comment, from my dear friend, whom I owe \$60 by the way, reminded me of what people said about cinema when it was starting out, when the Moviolas and Kinetoscopes were considered artless novelties, so I felt the challenge to do this, to make internet art, to really reach everyone out there online who might be inclined to like my stuff. So while I shot the two projects at the same time, and under the same lost cinema spell, *The Forbidden Room* and *Seances* are two distinct entities, on two distinct platforms.

How did the writing process for *The Forbidden Room* and the *Seances* project differ from your previous films?

Since the beginning I'd always written with my best friend George Toles. When I started this project it was a pet obsession of mine. I started the writing process alone, way back in 2010. I had no idea where I wanted it to go. I just knew I wanted to adapt as short films a bunch of long-lost feature films. Almost every director whose career straddled the silent/talkie era has a number of lost films on his or her filmography. Some poor directors have lost almost their entire bodies of work, though they aren't alive any more to grieve over this. I wanted to shoot my own versions, as if I were reinterpreting holy texts, and present them to the world anew as reverent and irreverent glosses on the missing originals. I hired a former student of mine, Evan Johnson, as my research assistant, and he got into the project so much that he soon became my screenwriting partner. He brought on his friend Bob Kotyk to help, and soon the three of us got a lovely chemistry going. It helped that they were young and unemployed and had all the time in the world and little interest in money, because the project soon got very large. Every day we discovered more and more fascinating things about lost cinema, every day the conceptual tenets of the website and the feature evolved, became complicated, tangled themselves up in our ardent thoughts, and then suddenly became simple. It was kind of a miracle the way we figured it all out, whatever 'it' is! I asked George back to join us, but I know I had hurt his feelings by starting up without him. Thank God we remain friends. My wife Kim Morgan and I wrote three days' worth of shooting material as well – that was a blast. And even the great, great, great American poet John Ashbery chipped in with an enormous contribution, a screenwriting event that gave me gooseflesh of awe and soiled shorts – shat drawers of awe.

At one point, you were planning to shoot the *Seances* films Factory-style, in a Warhol-like process. How and why did you abandon that idea?

Well, I never really abandoned the *Seances*. They were called 'Hauntings' back in 2010 when I first took a stab at shooting adaptations of lost films, but once completed these were to be installation loops rather than short films. I did complete eleven of them for Noah Cowan, who installed them as projections for the opening of his Bell Lightbox Building, the nerve centre of TIFF (Toronto International Film Festival –Ed.). I deputised a bunch of talented young filmmakers I had met in my travels

to shoot these ‚Hauntings‘ in a factory situation. My writing partner Evan Johnson ran the factory under the job description Hauntings Coordinator. He had a business card made up that read, Evan Johnson – Hauntings coordinated, Coordination of Hauntings. His job was to keep churning out movies with a production team made up of wildly disparate styles and talents hired to direct a bunch of films all at once, all in the same room. This was a chaotic situation. I think before this, Evan’s biggest professional responsibility had been pouring toxic detergent into Rug Doctor machines. But he kept this wild affair going for a few weeks while I directed *Keyhole*. It was genuinely surreal watching all those silent films get shot, sometimes as many as six at a time, a row-upon-row productivity resembling, I imagine, those porn factories of urban legend. Ah, silent film, post-dubbed porn! I really wish we’d made our Hauntings Factory into the setting of a reality show. It looked and sounded so eerie, hearing almost nothing, while each in its own little circle of light, a half-dozen films made themselves in an otherwise dark room. We were going to shoot a lot of titles – a hundred! – but we were underprepared and definitely underfinanced, so we aborted the project after we had finished enough movies for Noah. Evan was stripped of his Hauntings Coordinator epaulettes – disgraced! But shortly after he became my full partner on these new projects. He is my co-director on both *The Forbidden Room* and the *Seances*.

What more can you tell me about your writing process for The Forbidden Room and how it differed from your process on previous films?

It was pretty much the same as with George. We found ideas we liked, argued and wrote. I really like to collaborate. I can’t write alone. I’m amazed I can even answer these questions alone.

What are your current plans for the Seances website/app?

The technicians at the NFB have cooked up some incredibly cinematic doodads for this super-sophisticated app. When all the kinks are worked out, which will be sometime early in the new year, movies will be watched in ways that perhaps the chestnutty old metaphors of cinema long ago ordained movies should be watched, in ways that surpass mere streaming, something more haunted, like ghost or soul streaming!

Psychological realism still holds sway, tyrannically, even amongst writers and filmmakers who are not otherwise interested in realism, but you consciously work to create melodramatic characters and situations. Mostly, writers work to avoid melodrama. So why write melodrama?

I think it’s easier to achieve psychological realism with melodramatic methods. Think of the psychological plausibility, or truth, in the greatest old fairy tales, the Bible, in Euripides, in a Joan Crawford or Barbara Stanwyck film, in Expressionist painting – in cave painting! There is every bit as much truth in these works as in all of Chekov, and more than in a security camera feed. And surface realism does not guarantee psychological truth, I think it merely misleads the viewer into thinking he beholds reality, when in fact the story beneath the surface might be very dishonest. I’ve always defined melodrama as the truth uninhibited, liberated, not the truth exaggerated as most people feel. I just watched John Waters’ *Female Trouble* – not realistic at all on the surface, but pure truth to its toxically melodramatic core.

What ruins melodrama?

Same thing that ruins all bad art, I guess: charmless dishonesty. There can be horrible melodrama too. I don’t like all of it. I just adore it when it’s done well. It feels more universal. I like all sorts of narrative genres; I don’t limit my tastes to one brushstroke. I’m a bit puzzled by people who eschew all melodrama. Don’t they realise they’re watching it in almost everything they view? Especially in reality television, which is usually, but not always, bad melodrama, but also in the straightest most ‘realistic’ movies. There, melodrama thrives in disguise. Isn’t all art the truth uninhibited to some degree? Sure, some art is the truth mystified, but honesty is usually exposed in some, sometimes inscrutable, way.

What is the key to writing strong melodrama?

I’m not sure; we’re still trying to do it. I would imagine even the great screenwriters and directors would admit that it’s different each time out, that sometimes it works and other times merely dullness results.

Interview: Jonathan Ball, January 2015



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Guy Maddin was born in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1956. He studied economics at the University of Winnipeg. He is an autodidact and shot his first short film, *The Dead Father*, in 1985. Maddin is an installation artist, screenwriter, cinematographer and filmmaker. He has also mounted numerous live performance versions of his films around the world, featuring live music, sound effects, singing and narration.

Films

1985: *The Dead Father* (26 min.). 1988: *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (72 min.). 1989: *Mauve Decade* (7 min.). 1990: *Archangel* (90 min.). 1991: *Indigo High-Hatters* (34 min.). 1992: *Careful* (100 min.). 1993: *The Poms of Satan* (5 min.). 1995: *The Hands of Ida* (30 min.). 1997: *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (91 min.). 2002: *Dracula – Pages from a Virgin’s Diary* (73 min.). 2003: *The Saddest Music in the World* (100 min.). 2004: *Cowards Bend the Knee* (60 min.). 2005: *My Dad Is 100 Years Old* (16 min.). 2006: *Brand Upon the Brain!* (Berlinale Forum 2007, 95 min.). 2007: *My Winnipeg* (Berlinale Forum 2008, 80 min.). 2008: *97 Percent True* (51 min.). 2009: *The Little White Cloud That Cried* (13 min.). 2009: *Night Mayor* (Berlinale Forum Expanded, 14 min.). 2011: *Keyhole* (94 min.). 2012: *Mundo Invisível* (70 min.). 2015: *The Forbidden Room*.



Evan Johnson has been working with Guy Maddin since 2009. Johnson lives in Winnipeg, Canada.