



presents

THE FORBIDDEN ROOM

A FILM BY GUY MADDIN AND EVAN JOHNSON

2015 Sundance Film Festival
2015 Berlin International Film Festival
2015 Toronto International Film Festival
2015 New York Film Festival

Canada | 120 minutes | 2015

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Kino Lorber, Inc.
333 West 39th St. Suite 503
New York, NY 10018
(212) 629-6880

Publicity Contact:

Ryan Werner, (917) 254-7653, ryan@cineticmedia.com
Charlie Olsky, (917) 545-7260, charlie@cineticmedia.com



Logline

A submarine crew, a feared pack of forest bandits, a famous surgeon, and a battalion of child soldiers all get more than they bargained for as they wend their way toward progressive ideas on life and love.

Synopsis

THE FORBIDDEN ROOM is Guy Maddin's ultimate epic phantasmagoria. Honoring classic cinema while electrocuting it with energy, this Russian nesting doll of a film begins (after a prologue on how to take a bath) with the crew of a doomed submarine chewing flapjacks in a desperate attempt to breathe the oxygen within.

Suddenly, impossibly, a lost woodsman wanders into their company and tells his tale of escaping from a fearsome clan of cave dwellers. From here, Maddin and co-director Evan Johnson take us high into the air, around the world, and into dreamscapes, spinning tales of amnesia, captivity, deception and murder, skeleton women and vampire bananas. Playing like some glorious meeting between Italo Calvino, Sergei Eisenstein and a perverted six year-old child, *THE FORBIDDEN ROOM* is Maddin's grand ode to lost cinema. Created with the help of master poet John Ashbery, the film features Mathieu Amalric, Udo Kier, Charlotte Rampling, Geraldine Chaplin, Roy Dupuis, Clara Furey, Louis Negin, Maria de Medeiros, Jacques Nolot, Adèle Haenel, Amira Casar & Elina Löwensohn as a cavalcade of misfits, thieves and lovers, all joined in the joyful delirium of the kaleidoscopic viewing experience.

Director's Statement by Guy Maddin

We just have too much narrative in our heads, so much 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!



Interview with Guy Maddin, 2015 Sundance Film Festival.

Film Comment, February 4, 2015, Interview by Emma Myers.

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Guy Maddin's phantasmagoric opus, *The Forbidden Room*, comes packaged with a warning: "Stay safe, and have fun!" reads the filmmaker's statement in the press notes. Working with co-director Evan Johnson, the enfant terrible of Canadian cinema has fashioned something like a series of cavernous, roiling story chambers in which viewers can safely enjoy an onslaught of deranged narrative excess without enduring any actual bodily harm. But it's impossible to stay safe amidst the explosive color, hypnotic superimpositions, and lurid intertitles, and while Maddin neophytes may find the experience of *The Forbidden Room* akin to a brain aneurysm (in a good way), movie lovers with any sense of humor will gleefully lap up the overflowing bounty of cinephilic pleasures and polymorphous perversities.

The Forbidden Room grew out of Maddin's interactive *Seances* project, which resurrected lost films from the silent era by re-writing and shooting them live in Montreal's Phi Center and The Pompidou Center in Paris, sometimes with nothing more to go on than a title. The new feature spits out serial-style adventures in spasmodic fragments: a stranded submarine crew must rely on air bubbles in their breakfast flapjacks for oxygen; a lumberjack goes on a quest to rescue a maiden from a pack of wild wolf men; a woman holds her own inner child at gunpoint; a man has a lobotomy in order to cure himself of a paralyzing obsession with bottoms; and a mustache induces melancholic memories. The directors' imaginations prove bottomless: there's also a skeleton orgy, a bone-breaking orgasm, and an absurd educational video on how to take a bath (narrated by a smarmy Louis Pregon clad in an all-too-revealing silk robe). As is the case with most of Maddin's work, lust, shame, and fetishism abound as the



film navigates the nether regions of the human body and psyche with playfully archaic euphemism.

The 58-year-old filmmaker has assembled his best cast in years to bring these ludicrous narrative nuggets to life. Fans will be equally pleased to find familiar stock players like Pregon and new-to-Maddin heavyweights like Mathieu Amalric, Charlotte Rampling, and Elina Löwensohn utterly at home in his singular world.

FILM COMMENT met with the self-deprecating director at Sundance, where *The Forbidden Room* premiered in the New Frontier section, to talk about everything from fetishism to color timing.

The director's statement in the press notes for this film is phrased as a warning of sorts against the explosion of narrative and potentially of the viewers' subconscious. Can you talk about your conception for the film in relation to your *Seances* project and how you managed to condense such a huge expanse of material into a feature film?

The *Seances* project started first—that's how Evan [Johnston] came on board [first] as a researcher. As we talked more about the interactive element, which was really pioneering stuff, he just had so many great ideas that he became co-creator of that project. We realized we wanted to make a feature because as we were re-writing our own adaptations of these lost films, along with Robert Kotyk, our third screenwriting colleague, a lot of our own personal concerns just kept reappearing in our melodramatic reductions.

The stories came to us as reviews or one-sentence plot synopses. There were some that just had such intriguing titles and that would inspire us to write something. It was almost like being a police dog, trying to track something big down based on a sniff of one small item and it became clear that we had a chance to make a very different kind of narrative...well, there *are* movies with [multiple] narratives in them and ironically, those are usually the narratives I don't like. They bore me—they feel longer than they are. I'm slowly working towards making a lean, fast-paced movie that everyone can understand but that



somehow has a Bressonian simplicity, too. But in the meantime, I'm just a hack so, that's kind of hard to do.

That director's statement is literal. We just had too much narrative and had to pare it down and make it all fit. I was inspired by the writings of Raymond Roussel, who wrote *New Impressions of Africa* [1910] and *Locus Solus* [1914]. The way he nests stories within stories within stories just delighted me.

In addition to Evan Johnson, you also collaborated with the poet John Ashbery on the film. What was his role?

I asked John to pick any title from this big list of lost movies we had to write and he chose *How to Take a Bath* [37], which is a lost Dwain Esper movie. He was an exploitation producer and director in the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties—I think he was the distributor of *Freaks* [32], and he directed *How to Undress in Front of Your Husband* [37]. After John wrote the monologue for it, we realized that it was the best framing device for the movie. From there, it was just a matter of going inside the bathtub to make the submarine movie and then finding an excuse, or a more far-fetched connector, from one story to another. Ashbery was channeling The Amazing Criswell. The closest thing I had to Criswell is Louis Pegin.

He's great in this movie.

Yeah. It's really hard to find Canadian actors that *both* look and sound great. He's from Montreal so I was able to use him in the Montreal shoot. Due to how that portion of the film was financed, I wasn't allowed to use anyone from outside of the province, so I used an all Quebecois cast, which I was thrilled to do because they've got a great star system of their own and I was completely new to it. I cast Clara Furey, who is Carole Laure's daughter, as the female lead. She's a dancer and she's really wonderful.

Did you have an audition process? You've cast quite a few of your regulars here but also have some new faces.

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No, I don't like auditions. I don't like the pressure, the fear you smell in the room. I had what looked like an audition—I would shoot people while they were telling me their earliest childhood memory. It was a way of getting used to their faces with the camera. By the time 10 minutes had passed, I'd filmed their faces from every angle and we'd gotten to know each other a little bit. That was in Montreal. In Paris I made friends with a casting director who knew all the adventurous actors that were willing to throw themselves into odd independent projects. I just met people for coffee or lunch and explained the project . . . and I guess assured them that I was sane.

I kept fearing Charlotte Rampling and trying to wrap quickly in case she got mad at me and slashed my skin open with a bullwhip. I'd make sure all her scenes were done first—out of fear and respect—but then she'd end up lying around for hours because she liked being on set so much. She was real sweet.

On a technical level, this is one of your most complex—and colorful—films. Can you explain that part of the process in terms a Luddite might understand?

I'm kind of a Luddite too—the effects are all Evan. While the boys are taking care of the soundtrack, and tuning color palettes, and things, I just sit in a rocking chair and write the intertitles. I never wanted to make color movies before because I felt the palettes meant too much, that I wasn't smart enough yet to say enough with the color.

***Careful* (92) is beautifully done in color—it looks like old hand-tinted photographs.**

Yeah. I knew what I was doing there—I insisted on just using two colors at a time and I was being cautious. But I didn't have reason for color again until now.

There are just so many variables that you can have in a movie and I wanted to make color one of them here. Evan and his brother Galan—who is the production designer and the graphic designer on the film—really worked on palettes and color timing. They're basically self-taught; over the course of the project they just taught themselves. We color-timed all the rushes—the movie wasn't edited and



then color-timed, they actually color-timed 4,000 hours of images. It's very time-consuming, but very important to get into the mood and the flavor. It's just too hard to edit with this really hideous, raw video. Especially for a movie like this, where the *look* matters so much.

What about for something like the superimpositions and double exposures? Do you have an idea of the effects you want to use while writing and shooting each individual piece, or does that only come into play in the editing room?

I synch really well with my editor, John Gurdebeke, and editing really *is* filmmaking. I've often said that if he wants to be called a co-director that he's welcome to the credit. He says: "No thanks, I'd rather be paid." [*Laughs*] Filmmaking is just ridiculously collaborative. Sure, every now and again one of us will suggest slightly fewer double exposures, or maybe a few more.

You have this recurring edit of cutting to and from the same image rapidly, messing with its temporal unfolding. In a previous interview you likened this to foreplay, explaining that your movies are all about the tease rather than the completion.

[*Laughs*] Yeah, it's a technique Rebecca Sandulak [DP of *Cowards Bend the Knee*, 03] and I worked out when we were making *Cowards*. We wanted to create the effect of a daydream about, say, your favorite romantic moment. The way you might think to yourself about a memory: "Wait, I didn't go slowly enough, I didn't enjoy that enough." So you go back in your head and work back up to that moment again—and then stop there for a while, and then maybe just rock back and forth before zooming off to the next thing you want to daydream about. There's a little bit of that left in our editing style. It really fit with *Cowards* perfectly, because it was a *remembered* story; I wanted the way of remembering this story of mine to be neurological and skittish like that. It's really just scrolling in Final Cut Pro, and it's just part of our vocabulary now. We're trying to get off it—it's a bit like poppers, very easy to get hooked on.

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Fetishism is always prominent in your films. There's fetishism in a literal way—Isabella Rossellini's glass legs in *The Saddest Music in the World* [03], or in this film, the mustache, the bone breaking—and then there's the fetishism of silent movies as a form.

I'm an obsessive, I know. But it's like I don't believe in ghosts unless I'm holding a camera, or engaged in a project. Then ghosts are handy things and I believe in them as story elements. It's the same thing with fetishes, I guess. I find myself only believing in them when I'm holding camera. They're very useful because they focus all the attention on one thing for a while. You've got to tell a real human story—you've got to condense it down to a few minutes. In this movie especially—some of these stories are whole life times concentrated into a few minutes.

I remember trying out *The Dream of a Mustache* on my granddaughter as a bedtime story when she was 4, and saying to her, "There's a dead man lying on the floor." She really loved hearing about this dead man on the floor with a mustache. And then I said, "Well, the mustache had a dream," and she said, "This is getting too scary," and made me stop. And I thought well, this is good—she's buying it, and being frightened by it at the same time.

I realized later that the bone breaking is just *Vertigo* [58]. I'm going to be busted. But I like the idea of just remaking a woman. And if you're a bone-knitting specialist, I guess that you would do it by breaking, re-breaking, and then setting.

It was so eroticized.

Yeah, we just downloaded a bunch of hard-core porn moans.

With regard to silent films, I just don't believe the film industry ever should have let go of that language—it evolved hastily, but I don't think it should have jettisoned that vocabulary when we still have room for it. So I just keep everything, using some discretion while doing so. But I didn't actually particularly like silent film until I started making movies. I was accused of making silent films years before I actually made one—I just made films that reminded people of

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them. I guess I've always approached novel reading and movie watching as if approaching a fairy tale. And when it came time to finally write about stuff, I just thought everything is happening within the precincts of the fairy tale somehow. And silent movies are just one step closer to fairy tales: they have to have types in them. There's something mannered about the writing style. It's very liberating.

You've said in the past that melodrama for you is human nature *not* being repressed, rather than human nature exaggerated. Does that theory still hold true for you?

Yeah. I think good melodrama un-inhibits the truth. It might redefine screaming "I want my cha-cha heels" in *Female Trouble*, but if there's some truth in it, it will feel right. What I find really strange is when a movie doesn't have the courage to be melodramatic because it's considered to be a disgraced art form, so the plot will be melodramatic but the performances will be pitched to contemporary naturalism. It just seems ball-less—that's not right, that's gendered: it just seems chicken. You should have the courage to meet the preposterous, psychologically true premise with the performances and color scheme. So someone like Almodóvar, or John Waters, Kuchar, Lynch, Buñuel—they do it well.

You're often placed in the same camp as those directors, but it seems the comedy in your work is the most overlooked element—everyone wants to discuss your films in a very serious way. This movie is hysterically funny.

Yeah, I had a good friend tell me—this was back before I started getting bad reviews—"You get really good reviews, but the feeling I get from those reviews is that I'm going to be tested after I read them, or I'm going to have to write an essay." Which is sort of like saying stay away! It's just too serious. But me? Serious? I'm a goofus.

Do you have any favorite silent films that you find on par with or even more deranged or absurd than your own work?

There's some, I almost feel like not telling... but I will. I love the Alexander Dovzhenko that seems to be outside his canon—*The Tip of My Mother's Purse*

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[aka *The Diplomatic Pouch*]. Almost anything by Dovzhenko other than his canonical films, *Arsenal* [29] and *Earth* [30]—they're great, I love them but they just seem too reverential in their views. His other stuff is eccentric beyond comprehension. [Aleksandr] Sokurov is just amazing, though he's not silent—I don't know where he gets his ideas from. I like those guys [Leonid] Trauberg and [Grigori] Kozintsev from the Soviet Union—the eccentrics—they had long careers well into the Fifties and Sixties but I like their silent films. One of their first films was *The Overcoat* [26]—the un-subtitled version is on YouTube, and it's so strange. There's so much still that hasn't been released. It's nice to know there's still material to be discovered. Being a guest director at Telluride this past fall was wonderful because the festival director, Tom Luddy, would send me all kinds of things to look at. I saw a Lupu Pick movie called *Sylvester* [24], and that one is really wonderful and strange. I don't know if that will ever come out. There's one copy at the George Eastman House.

This is one of your least autobiographical works—and also the least “Canadian.” You’ve said that *My Winnipeg* [07] was an attempt to exorcise the city from yourself. Is this project proof that was successful?

It really is. You cure yourself of your subject when you take on a film, and you become so sick of it. You're already sick of it before you're finished making the film—and then you have to sit through a sound mix and screenings and talk about it a lot.

I thought the flapjacks were perhaps a reference to some obscure Canadian silent film in which flapjacks solve all problems.

[Laughs] Yeah, it seems like it would be. My leg is broken! Quick, a flapjack! Evan cooked that one up. The flapjacks just keep reappearing. We only have so much imagination. “I know, we need a flapjack here!”

Criterion just released a DVD of *My Winnipeg*, so I suppose you relived it to do the special features.



I did, yeah. Evan did the special features—the four cine-essays. One on Elms, one on puberty . . . I think I’m incorrectly credited as co-creator of those but Evan created them himself as part of an ongoing project of documenting the city. I love them—it’s great to have my co-director working on *My Winnipeg retroactively*. I’m very proud of the movie and very proud of the Criterion release. It saved that movie—its earlier release got tangled up in some bankruptcy proceedings. I was indulging myself in a lot of self-pity being the only director of a movie without a DVD, and now it’s got the best.

Director Biography

Guy Maddin is an artist, writer, and the director of 11 feature-length movies, including *My Winnipeg* and *The Saddest Music in the World*. He has won the National Society of Film Critics Award for Best Experimental Film twice, for *Archangel* and *The Heart of the World*. His latest project, *The Forbidden Room* premiered at Sundance earlier this year. During the 2015 – 2016 academic year, Maddin will be a Visiting Lecturer at Harvard University.

Co-Director Biography

Evan Johnson is a writer and filmmaker living in Winnipeg. He has been working with Guy Maddin since 2009.

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Credits

Directed by.....Guy Maddin

Co-Directed by.....Evan Johnson

Written by.....Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, Robert Kotyk

Additional writers.....John Ashbery, Kim Morgan

Story editor.....Kim Morgan

Producers.....Phoebe Greenberg, Penny Mancuso, Phyllis Laing,
David Christensen

Supervising producers.....Jean du Toit, Emmanuelle Heroux, Liz Jarvis

Director of Photography.....Stephanie Weber-Biron, Ben Kasulke (Paris)

Editor.....John Gurdebeke

Production designer.....Galen Johnson

Set designers.....Brigitte Henry, Chris Lavis, Maciek Szczerbowski

Costumes.....Elodie Mard, Yso South, Julie Charland

Sound.....Simon Plouffe, David Rose, John Gurdebeke, Vincent Riendeau,
Gavin Fernandes

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Cast

Roy Dupuis.....Cesare
Clara Furey.....Margot
Louis Negin.....Marv / Smithy / Mars / Organizer / Mr. Lanyon
Celine Bonnier.....Eve
Karine Vanasse.....Florence Labadie
Caroline Dhavernas.....Gong
Paul Ahmarani.....Dr. Deng / Speedy
Mathieu Amalric.....Thadeusz M___ / Ostler
Udo Kier.....Count Yugh / The Butler / The Dead Father / Guard / Pharmacist
Maria de Medeiros.....The Blind Mother / Clotilde
Charlotte Rampling.....The Ostler's Mother
Geraldine Chaplin.....The Master Passion / Nursemaid / Aunt Chance
Marie Brassard.....Mysterious Necklace Woman
Sophie Desmarais.....Jane Lanyon
Ariane Labeled.....Alicia Warlock / The Chambermaid
Amira Casar.....Mrs. M___
Kim Morgan.....Kim
Elina Löwensohn.....Sister