

Blanchett plays a deliberately mysterious and ambiguous character

'Nightmare Alley' is del Toro's lushly composed love letter to noir

NEW YORK, Dec 22, (AP) — With a touch of Barbara Stanwyck, a sumptuous Art Deco office and a deadly shade of crimson lipstick, Cate Blanchett plays a femme fatale in Guillermo del Toro's "Nightmare Alley" with cunning embrace and subversion of the film noir archetype.

If "Nightmare Alley" is del Toro's lushly composed love letter to noir, the movie's pulpy heart is in Blanchett's conniving psychiatrist Lilith Ritter. She doesn't enter the film until halfway through, when Bradley Cooper's carnival huckster, Stan, catches her eye in his nightclub mind-reading act, and the two begin scheming together. But when she does turn up, Blanchett shifts the film's fable-like frequency, conjuring deeper shades of mystery from the movie's rich tapestry of shadow and fate.

"We tailored the part for her, but she fit in those clothes on the first try," says del Toro.

In period films like "Carol," "The Good German" and "The Aviator," Blanchett has often evoked a classical kind of mid-century movie stardom. But in "Nightmare Alley," an adaptation of the '40s novel first made into Edmund Golding's well-regarded 1947 film, Blanchett slides into one of the movies' most iconic types by trading less on her character's seductiveness than on her razor-sharp intellect.

"What I thought was timely and dangerous about this story was it's an exploration of the truth," Blanchett said in an interview from Brighton, England. "Playing such a deliberately mysterious and ambiguous character I found really challenging because you have to know there's a lot going on, but you're never invited into exactly what she's thinking."

It's one of two roles this December for Blanchett that revolve centrally around American deception and disinformation. There's "Nightmare Alley," currently in theaters, and Adam McKay's "Don't Look

Up," which arrives Friday on Netflix. In the latter, she plays a TV morning news anchor who cheerfully steers the news away from an impending asteroid doomsday and toward lighter subjects — like the sex appeal of Leonardo DiCaprio's scientist.

There may be something timeless about Blanchett in "Nightmare Alley," but to her, both films are characterized by their timeliness.

Privilege

"It was such a privilege to be on a film set in this particular point in human history," Blanchett says. "One should always be alive to the time in which what you're making is going to be viewed. I never felt that more profoundly than making these two films."

Blanchett and del Toro had discussed various projects for years but came together for the first time on "Nightmare Alley."

Del Toro, who calls his kinship with author James M. Cain "profound," had long pined to pay tribute to noir. His affection for the genre runs deep. In his previous film, the best-picture Oscar-winner "The Shape of Water," del Toro explicitly referenced Otto Preminger's "Fallen Angel." An avid collector, del Toro calls the portrait that hangs in Preminger's "Laura" "the one prop I would kill to own."

"I read all of (Raymond) Chandler right before I married," says del Toro. "I'm not sure why."

Del Toro scripted "Nightmare Alley" with film critic Kim Morgan, whom he wed earlier this year. His taste in noir leans toward seedy, rather than the more elegant varieties, and films that inhabit an audacious psychology.

"I like these characters, like Bette Davis in 'Beyond the Forest,' who are too smart for their environment," he says. "I root for them not because I think they do things that are good but because I agree that they

are left without recourse in what seems like a rigged game. That's the noir that I find interesting."

One touchstone for "Nightmare Alley" was 1949's "Too Late for Tears," a nasty noir starring Lizbeth Scott as a housewife who finds a bag full of cash. Tasting a chance for freedom from her husband and more, Scott's character clings to the money. Del Toro and Morgan envisioned Lilith similarly as operating within a male-controlled society.

"Frankly, it's the character I was completely passionate about creating with Cate," he says. "She's almost like an avenger. We said: Whatever happened to her in the past, she's sort of righting the wrongs."

To Blanchett, the term femme fatale suggests a diabolical woman — "like a siren seeking to draw the male character onto the rocks to destroy them for no reason apart from their have diabolical urges."

Blanchett and del Toro instead played with subtle gradations in Lilith's motives. Blanchett thought one line of dialogue was too straightforward, and del Toro agreed in cutting it. But he still quotes the speech a little ruefully: "Do you know what it is for a woman like me to grow up in a town where the smartest man is just a stupid beast?"

"Even though there's nothing explicit that Lilith says about her background, there's a sense that she's damaged goods from the system, that she wants to burn down and she's going to use Stan to do it," says Blanchett. "Her faith in him and the men who run the system is nonexistent."

Del Toro shot Blanchett's scenes with Cooper, he says, like three 5-10-minute miniature plays. Inside Lilith's ornate, wood-paneled office, the two can artists dance — a shifting drama told through blocking and camera movement. It's a chess game that Lilith, inevitably, will win.

Film

Variety



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows Priyanka Chopra Jonas in a scene from 'The Matrix Resurrections.' (AP)

Film

A bumpy ride in 'Resurrections'

'Matrix' reboot rewires its programming

By Jake Coyle

How deep does the rabbit hole go? Deep enough, it turns out, to accommodate at least four movies, several videogames, a comic and countless pairs of sunglasses.

In the 22 years since the "The Matrix" debuted, it has never left us — or depending on your pill of choice, we have never left it. Despite two largely disappointing sequels, "The Matrix" still hasn't quite gone out of style — neither its long leather jackets nor its sci-fi vision of an illusive reality beyond what's in front of us. It's gotten easier and easier to think maybe Morpheus really was onto something about that whole simulation business.

So when green lines of code again rain down across the screen in the opening of "The Matrix Resurrections," it's a little like a warm bath. If we're going to be stuck inside a simulation, at least we have one with Keanu Reeves.

But much has also changed in the 18 years since the last big-screen chapter, "The Matrix Revolutions." This is the first one directed solely by Lana Wachowski, without her sister Lilly. They both had long resisted the idea of another "Matrix" movie, but the death of their parents left Lana craving the comfort of Neo (Reeves) and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), she has said. The movie is dedicated to mom and dad.

And for a long time, "Resurrections" seems to be arguing with itself. Neo is now a dispirited videogame designer, famed for creating the "Matrix" game and struggling to make anything that will capture the same cultural connection. This is maybe not so different for the Wachowskis, visionary filmmakers whose dense, elaborate fantasies ("Jupiter Ascending," "Cloud Atlas") have sometimes sagged under the weight of their baroque architectures and muddled metaphysics. Even the legacy of "The Matrix" is up for debate in this very self-analytical sequel.

"We kept some kids entertained," shrugs Neo, no longer sounding much like "the one." He's now going by his old identity, Thomas A. Anderson.

A sequel to the game, though, is ordered up by the parent company: Warner Bros., which is the studio behind these movies, too. The meta boardroom scene in which this is discussed isn't nearly as fresh as the filmmakers seem to think. It's part of the movie's overwrought first half where new levels of reality are opened and occasionally loop back to the first "Matrix." Familiar scenes are spied again, but this time from a different, unclear vantage point. There's a blue-haired hacker shifting between realms named Bugs (Jessica Henwick, a fine addition) and a kind of Morpheus stand-in played by Yahya Abdul-Mateen II. Laurence Fishburne isn't in this one, and it's not hard to spend the film's 148-minute running time lamenting his colossal absence.

Innovative

There's a lot to process in the movie's first half but a few basic points: Thomas/Neo is living quietly, dourly in a simulation where he and Trinity (Moss) are strangers to one another. But Neo sees her at a coffee shop ("Simulatte"), and there's a powerful, hard-to-explain connection. Reeves and Moss still have a potent chemistry, and one of the movie's chief charms is the resurrection of the less-seen Moss. But in this warped world, Trinity goes by Tiffany and is married with kids. Her husband, cruelly, is even named Chad. Whatever Neo's disquietude, he's pacified by his therapist (Neil Patrick Harris). This "Matrix" movie isn't feverish with newness like the innovative original but pulls from a later chapter in life: the midlife malaise of feeling like you took a wrong turn somewhere long ago.

Realigning all the layers of truth and illusion takes quite some time in "Resurrections," which Wachowski wrote with David Mitchell and Aleksandar Hemon. The first 90 minutes or so are so overloaded with exposition and explanation that by the time

Jada Pinkett Smith's underground rebel leader Niobe pops up and tells Neo, "We have to talk" — you may find yourself murmuring "Please no" and reaching for the nearest blue pill. A lot of sequels and reboots can be criticized for being undercooked; "Resurrections" suffers more from being overthought.

And yet it's often compelling to watch Wachowski interrogate and reconsider her most beloved creation. This is a kind of personal blockbuster-making seldom made and that, flaws and all, I would take over many more slickly composed, more blatantly corporate products.

More than ever, "The Matrix" plays as an allegory not for analog and digital worlds but something more intimate revolving around despondency and self-realization. In its cocktail of pills, therapy and flights off rooftops, "Resurrections" makes an elaborate science-fiction tapestry of medication, depression and suicide. While Neo and Trinity's heterosexual romance drives the franchise (yes, along with those cool, slow-mo bullets), "The Matrix" is about stepping out of normative existence — saying goodbye to old code, to "Chad" — and being reborn in a rule-less, decidedly queer universe. It's a fitting irony that the climax of "Resurrections" features a menacing speech about "sheeple" from Neil Patrick Harris.

But if defying one's heteronormative programming and entering the Matrix was once a balletic finesse, in "Resurrections" the battle is blunter and the tone less exultant. Personal freedom here requires mounting a defense from an alarming onslaught. In the grim culmination of "Resurrections," Neo and Trinity (no longer Tiffany) flee beneath a chilling deluge of bodies robotically controlled to swarm any anomaly. "The Matrix Resurrections" may be a bumpy ride but it's still a trip.

"The Matrix Resurrections," a Warner Bros. release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for violence and some language. Running time: 148 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four. (AP)

Features

ARABIC TIMES

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2021

NEW YORK: Football and other forms of televised competition — the season finales of some popular reality shows — dominated the Nielsen company's weekly list of the most popular shows on television.

Four separate NFL games were on Nielsen's list of the most popular programs in prime-time. As is typical, NBC's Sunday night game, most recently featuring New Orleans' surprise shutout of the Tampa Bay Bucs, topped the list.

NBC's "The Voice," CBS' "Survivor" and Fox's "The Masked Singer" all crowned winners this past week and had fans tuning in. "The Voice," with 7.3 million viewers for the first of two parts on Monday, had the highest numbers.

One television staple, ABC's showing of "The Sound of Music" movie, reached 3.3 million people on Sunday night, Nielsen said.

Fox won the week in prime time among broadcast networks, averaging 5.7 million viewers last week. NBC had 5.1 million, CBS had 3.8 million, ABC had 3.5 million, Univision had 1.3 million, Ion Television had 1 million and Telemundo had 910,000.

Fox News Channel won among the cable networks, averaging 2.2 million in prime time. ESPN had 1.89 million, Hallmark had 1.48 million, MSNBC had 1.3 million and Paramount had 1.07 million. (AP)

COLUMBUS, Ohio: An Ohio school whose legitimacy was scrutinized after its supposedly top-tier football team got clobbered in an ESPN-televized game didn't live up to its billing educationally either: It turned out to be "a scam," according to an investigation by the Ohio Department of Education.

Republican Gov. Mike DeWine said he is asking the attorney general and other officials to determine whether any laws were broken by what claimed to be the Columbus-area Bishop Sycamore High School. DeWine also said he'll work with state education officials and lawmakers on enacting changes recommended by the department to avoid a repeat of the situation.

"Ohio families should be able to count on the fact that our schools educate students and don't exist in name only as a vehicle to play high school sports," DeWine said

in a written statement.

The state found no evidence that Bishop Sycamore enrolled multiple students this year and concluded it didn't meet minimum standards, including for academic offerings and student safety, according to the ODE investigation launched after the team's televised 58-0 loss to Florida-based power-



DeWine



Peterson

house IMG Academy in August.

Bishop Sycamore's report filed with the department for this school year listed only one enrolled student and stated its physical address as a home in a residential neighborhood.

In a call with a department official last month, Bishop Sycamore administrator Andre Peterson characterized his program as a way

to get more exposure for football players who were having trouble getting into colleges, according to the ODE report.

Messages seeking comment were left for Peterson via phone and the school's email address. In previous comments reported by USA TODAY Sports, Peterson had denied there was any "scam"

to the lopsided football game or the school, saying it helped players hoping to compete in college.

ODE concluded Bishop Sycamore wasn't a school but "a way for students to play football against high school teams and potentially increase students' prospects of playing football at the collegiate level." (AP)