

As usual WGI interviews start with the pitch: what's the story of Suspiria?

SUSPIRIA's story centers on a young American dancer who joins a prestigious European dance company in 1977. Within the political chaos of a divided Berlin, she discovers the company is a front for a coven of witches.

It's the second time you work with Luca Guadagnino and for the second time it's a remake, it's a kind of brand of you two?

After a terrific experience collaborating on A BIGGER SPLASH we wanted to find another project to do together. Remaking SUSPIRIA is something Luca has been very passionate about since he was a teenager, so I was fascinated to do it. But I would definitely not call remakes a brand of ours. Nothing we are discussing doing next is a remake.

How did the project get started? Who had the idea of the remake and what was the initial premise for the movie?

Luca has had a life-long connection with Argento's SUSPIRIA. Seeing it for the first time was truly a formative experience for him, artistically. But when we began discussing how we might approach a new vision for the film we knew we wanted to ground the story so that it could be driven by characters with recognizable psychologies and concerns, situated in a very specific time and place. We also knew we wanted to understand the coven thematically as well as dramatically, so we began a long conversation about how a group of intelligent, politically engaged women being denied channels of public power would cultivate private power instead, and what the realities of that might look like.

How do you approach the writing of a remake? How do you work on the original material?

It's different each time. In some cases the structure of the original film (or text) might be appropriate to keep, but usually that's not entirely the case. You also sometimes know ahead of time who the director will be, and other times the whole script is done before a director is hired. The former is always preferable to me. With Luca, for instance, I know he shoots subjectively--that he believes in the primacy of the subjective in cinema--so I tried to keep the page count of my script for SUSPIRIA as low as possible to assist him in this. The first draft was only 99 pages (as opposed to the standard 120), and his first cut of the film was four hours. The fact that our film includes a number of dance and rehearsal sequences is part of the reason for that, but given Argento's film had very little dance, this wasn't a question of adaptation. In general, though, I try to honor the soul of the original even if I cannot keep the body. In offering something thematically and dramatically new to the endeavor, one has to break most of the original's bones in the process, sometimes all the bones.

How was the writing process from a practical and technic point of view? How many time, how many draft?

Luca and I talk so much when we collaborate, we know an enormous amount about what we want before I type a word. That means there is less surprise in the drafting process, in the best way. For SUSPIRIA, I first wrote a comprehensive 40-page treatment based on our conversations and my research, with all of the scene headings in place. You could have scene numbered that treatment,

in fact, in a way that would have been almost identical to what we shot. A lot of the description in the treatment I knew I would use in the first draft, by design, so it was basically like a dialogueless script in and of itself. When I finally wrote the first draft, it was simply an expansion of this treatment. I think I did only two additional drafts after that and then some production rewriting. I like working this way very much, because everything can be deliberate. Luca and I have so much to say, the process needs to be a rigorous one to synthesize it all. And if there is a concept that seems unclear how to pull off, or doesn't quite convince Luca in the treatment, he can have an open mind about it when I execute it completely in the first draft because he knows its *raison d'être*. That keeps us proceeding as equal collaborators as opposed to me feeling like I'm trying to convince him of something, or prove him wrong. And then we pick up the writing process again during post. We always have a healthy ADR budget so that in the editing process with the great Walter Fasano we can revise or reshape the story quite a lot. That part of the process is a real joy because Walter, like Luca, is so humane and intelligent and fearless. We explore so many things in the editing room, I would consider that the last draft of the script.

How was the collaboration with Guadagnino both in the writing and in the production? Did you change the script during the production process, were you involved in creative decision making?

From a screenwriter's point of view, I can't imagine a better collaborator than Luca. The mutual trust is so high. We can say anything to each other at any time, and we very much embrace the ways the other likes to work. We talk and research so much that we usually end up on the same side of nearly every story question quite organically. Of course, he is the final arbiter of all things in the film, but he lets me participate to a degree I think other directors would find astonishing. And I don't take that lightly. I try very hard not to be zealous, so that when I am, Luca knows there is a reason. I think the key is Luca has a very high level of vision and a very low level of ego. That's extremely rare. And neither of us has any real insecurities in our work so we can be quite brave in the process, making sometimes big changes to story during production and post. If there is a question of changing anything in the script at any moment in the process, Luca includes me. For *A BIGGER SPLASH*, I was on set every day, and in the editing room quite a lot. Because I was shooting *THE TERROR* at the same time *SUSPIRIA* was shooting, it wasn't possible for me to be on set as much, but I never felt cut off. I saw dailies and kept in contact with Luca as things came up on set. Because it is such a complex film--four protagonists in synchopated storylines--I was in the editing room, or weighing in on cuts quite a lot. We did a lot of ADR for *SUSPIRIA*, more than I've ever done on a film, but it was not corrective in the way most ADR is. It was a chance for the three of us to make fantastic additions and revisions to scenes and deepen the film. It was a lot of work, but it was extremely productive and always fascinating. I grow an enormous amount making films with Luca. What more could I ask for than that?

Besides the writing, do you think there are any other phases of the production where the presence of the scriptwriter can be useful (rehearsal, location scouting, shooting, editing)?

For me, I feel I can contribute to all of the above. I've also worked as a producer and I've run a television show, which is really much the same job a director has in the world of film, so I bring that experience with me to my collaborations with Luca. I've also done this long enough where I can anticipate to some degree how a director, actor, producer, editor, or designer, etc, sees a problem on the table and try to solve it from a multitude of different angles. It takes some maturity and experience to be able to do that. Luca takes me absolutely everywhere during the course of a making a film and I love him for it. I would follow him to the ends of the earth for it.

But do I think every screenwriter would be helpful at all of these stations? It depends who that screenwriter is and how well he or she can keep the totality of the film in mind as opposed to just defending her or his own interests. But I do think the screenwriter, at minimum, should always be at a read through and should be able to view cuts of a film and offer solutions to story problems that come up in the editing process. I also think the screenwriter should have the opportunity to write all ADR. None of these things is particularly common, and I think that absolutely hurts the process. If you ask me why I think these things are rare, it's because in my experience, directors and actors generally assume they have the ability to do a screenwriter's work when necessary and I simply haven't found that to be the case most times. Luca is rare in this regard. He understands story as much as he understands visual art. If he'd chosen to be a screenwriter rather than a director, he'd be just as lauded for it. I have no doubt.

I read on line that a previewed clip from the movie raised a lot of hype because of the gruesome and the impressive horror style. What is your vision of the horror storytelling?

I think of horror in a similar way to how I think of comedy. Both are genres that use anxiety as their primary currency, and there are many ways to do that. Just as a dozen people might have a dozen different senses of humor, the same goes for horror. And in the same way that comedy writers must be able to write in modes of humor that may not be quite their own, I can write in modes of horror that are not exactly *my* sense of horror. *SUSPIRIA* was partly like that for me. Gore is not intrinsically effective on me, but I can see how it works on other people. When I proposed the scene to Luca where Madame Blanc puts her thumbprints on Susie's hands and feet and then we see how Susie's dance is bludgeoning Olga in another room, that is not my natural sense of horror, but I knew it was right for this film, along with the many other horror moments I proposed that are aggressive in this same way. My own natural inclination for horror is more of what you see in *THE TERROR*, a limited series I made for AMC. I find I'm happiest turning up an audience's sense of anxiety by creating space for what's happening off-screen, or by proceeding into danger without giving a sense of what exactly the rules are. To me, the most loathsome of all horror modes is the jump scare. I find jump scares so cynical and lazy. I can't really enjoy the films coming out of Blumhouse for this reason. Fully admitting I'm in the minority here, I think if you have to "scare" me by startling me with a sudden, loud music cue or by having something spring out of a deliberately uncovered camera angle, that's the opposite of what I'd consider true horror.

I saw on IMDB you also wrote a remake of another horror classic, *Pet Sematary*. Do you think there are many differences in writing a horror from writing a comedy script, as your previous movie? Do you prefer horror and thrilling?

See my answer above. I think comedy and horror have quite a lot in common. But I do prefer a more austere emotional palette. For me to really enjoy comedy, it has to be aggressive, dark, or otherwise political. Physical humor mostly eludes me. People walking into doors or having their pants fall down, etc. To me, those are the jump scares of comedy.

You are also the creator of *The Terror*, a series that has been very well received in Italy and I take the chance to ask a couple of questions about it. How did you come up with the idea and how did you sell the project and get into production?

THE TERROR is an adaptation of a novel by the American writer Dan Simmons. I read the book before it was released and tried to get the rights to adapt it. I was a bit late to the table, so I got

myself hired as the screenwriter instead, back when it was meant to be a feature film. When that fell apart, I followed it around town until it finally ended up at AMC as a ten-part limited series. It was a project a lot of studios and networks were interested in, but not many wanted to risk taking on as it was clearly going to be expensive to produce. It's hard to get anything set in an historical period made, let alone something so expensive. You'd think the fact it was horror would make it easier, but it didn't much. I think most executives loved the story but thought: "What audience is going to show up for a bunch of Victorian sailors and an Inuit woman?" But you can't let those people stop you.

What are the main difference in writing for TV from writing for cinema?

For me, the main creative difference is how well you can unpack your characters. Obviously having ten hours to tell a character's arc is going to take you deeper than having two and have the luxury of more nuance. But from a professional perspective, the difference between being the writer on a film and being a showrunner in TV is huge. In television, the showrunner, in most respects, IS the director. It's the showrunner who is making casting choices, choosing and guiding department heads, interfacing with the actors, mediating production meetings, minding the budget, interfacing with the network and/or studio, working with the editors, working with the composer, guiding marketing meetings, doing press, etc. When a director is sick on a television show, it is the showrunner who often takes over directing. The showrunner is the final arbiter and taste of the show. In film, usually the writer hands in a script, maybe gets one set visit, and that is all. Luca is truly progressive, even subversive, in the way he opposes that model.

Can you give a description of your job as creator of the series and executive producer? Did you work as a showrunner? In Europe this position is not really established yet and I would like to understand how does a showrunner really work in the US.

See above answer.

Can you tell us about the writing process of the series? How does the writers' room work?

For THE TERROR, I created the series, meaning I developed and wrote the pilot and show bible, but since it was my first television show, I had a co-showrunner to help teach me the ropes on such a huge, expensive production. The writers' room lasted only ten weeks and had four additional writers and a dedicated researcher. We "broke" all the episodes together as a group, meaning we discussed every scene in every episode and then outlined them all. Each of the four writers then wrote a first or second draft of one episode apiece, the co-showrunner wrote two episodes, and I wrote four. Then I did all revisions and production rewriting of all scripts from that point forward, often quite extensive rewriting, including nearly all dialogue so there would be consistency in the characters' voices across all the episodes. Normally, an ongoing show would have a much, much longer writers' room, and writers would be doing all the rewriting of their episodes themselves, as well as coming to set for the production of their episodes. But we were a limited series, so the production was more like a ten-hour film than a typical television series.