

The Man Who Opened the “SHUTTER”

Written by Charlie Hamilton
Monday, 31 May 2010 10:43



With SHUTTER ISLAND, Martin Scorsese’s ultra-stylish (and oddly underrated) salute to ’40s noir and color-crazy Mario Bava horror movies hitting DVD and Blu-ray June 8, Fango sat down with the man who created the eerie, Freudian frightfest in print: best-selling, Boston-born author Dennis Lehane. The author—whose novels also served as the blueprints for Clint Eastwood’s MYSTIC RIVER and Ben Affleck’s GONE BABY GONE—is no stranger to mining the darker recesses of the human condition, but SHUTTER ISLAND is the closest he has come so far to creating a horror show.

FANGORIA: You’ve been garnering attention from some of Hollywood’s biggest names: Three of your books have been filmed, and each one was helmed by an Oscar winner. They’ve received massive amounts of praise, box office and awards; where’s your head at right now?

DENNIS LEHANE: I just feel ridiculously lucky, and very blessed. It keeps things all in perspective when you look at it that way.

FANG: You’ve a novelist, you’ve written for the stage and TV and your work has been adapted for the big screen—which audience do you find toughest to please?

LEHANE: Probably stage. Yeah, when you think about it, that’s the high-wire act of all high-wire acts.



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FANG: When writing characters in your novels, do you ever compare the visual in your mind to, say, an actor or actress?

LEHANE: No, no, never. I actually don't do much in terms of visual, physical description of my characters. You don't see much “Paul had brown hair and blue eyes” in my books. I go back to the whole idea that it doesn't matter what a person looks like until it matters, but in general, if you're just a normal-looking human being, it's not really important what you look like, but what you do. The character's actions matter. That's why I'm never too disconcerted when I hear casting choices. I'm never sitting there thinking, “Oh, but that guy had brown hair.”

FANG: On to SHUTTER ISLAND—were you a fan of Scorsese's previous works?

LEHANE: Yes [*laughs*], of course. I mean, he was a huge influence on my work. He was my favorite director.

FANG: Scorsese is known for being very much in his element with period pieces. Did that give you a sense of confidence that your novel was in good hands?

LEHANE: Just knowing it was in Scorsese's hands was fine with me. And I knew what shape the script [by Laeta Kalogridis] was in. You have to understand, you're already halfway there—well, not halfway there, but certainly 20 percent to a really good movie—when you have a solid script. Someone could still come in and screw that up, but it's harder. And we already knew we had a great screenplay in our hands by that point. By the point that Marty came in...

FANG: How close were Leonardo DiCaprio and Ben Kingsley (as U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels and the suspicious doctor he investigates) to the characters you created? Were they close to what you envisioned?

LEHANE: In the end, yeah, Leo was. If, when I wrote the book, somebody had said to me that Leo DiCaprio was in, then no, he was too young then. Teddy is a big, broad-shouldered guy.

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Leo was about the right age by the time he played him, so yeah, he was perfect. Ben was not physically, I'd say, quite how I saw the character, but that's really irrelevant. Know what I mean? He made the character his own, very quickly.

FANG: You've stated before that you're not interested in adapting your own novels, but were you asked if you were interested in scripting SHUTTER ISLAND?

LEHANE: I don't think we ever had that discussion. Maybe way, way back, long before Phoenix Pictures or anybody was really involved. Maybe at one point it might have come up. But I recused myself from the job very quickly. Not the guy to do it...

FANG: Did you get to go down and see the set, meet the cast, watch some of the filming?

LEHANE: Oh yeah, I did. I visited the set, like, three times. But the truth be told...I don't want to sound like I'm just so hip and jaded, but the truth is, if you spend a little time in the movie industry, you will realize that a movie set is the most boring place on the planet. It's hard to quantify how boring, if you're not an actor or the director or the cameraman. But it is stultifyingly dull. So I popped in, did my handshakes, met the people I wanted to meet and was right back out again.

FANG: That's a pretty good gig.

LEHANE: [*Laughs*] Yeah, it's really sweet.

FANG: You're credited as an executive producer; did you have much say in the casting or any other elements of the film?

LEHANE: No, it was all preproduction. Which is all [I needed to do], up to a certain point. Once you bring in Martin Scorsese, he's a 600-pound gorilla. He just does whatever he needs to, and that's why you hired him. And when it came to casting, we knew 'cause it was Marty that it was

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immediately going to be Leo. I had nothing to do with [choosing the actors]. That was left up to the director and the casting director, as it should be. I just feel we'd be much happier and probably produce a lot more good films if people just understood their roles a little bit better. And as executive producer, I want to be involved in leading up to the point where we actually get a Martin Scorsese. Once you do that, talent's on board—get out of everybody's way. 'Cause all you can do is screw things up from that point on. So I just stepped back and off they went.

FANG: Visually, how close is SHUTTER ISLAND to what you imagined while writing the book? Are there any changes you might have made?

LEHANE: No, the physical grounds, where the hurricane takes place—all that looked much like I had in my head. Where the movie differs has to do with the cinematic palette he worked with, in terms of, like, the backdrops and the way the film was shot, which pays homage to a lot of films from the 1940s. That's something that, of course, I didn't have in my head, because I was writing a book. And so it was mind-boggling to watch. Truly awe-inspiring when I started to see what he was doing with his visuals.

FANG: The dream sequences play a pivotal role in the foreshadowing of the twist ending; how do you feel Scorsese handled those?

LEHANE: Again, I thought he did great. You know, they're so in-your-face. They're very Grand Guignol and disturbing on so many levels. But they're visually striking. Like nothing you've ever seen before.

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