

A Fairy Tale with a Twist

GRETEL AND HANSEL

BY JEREMY REED, PRODUCTION DESIGNER

Nearly everyone I know has their favourite Stanley Kubrick film. Mine is his acclaimed adaptation of William Makepeace Thackeray's satirical novel, in which a likeable young Irishman turns into a conniving manipulative rogue. I am of course referring to the visually ravishing *Barry Lyndon*, whose exteriors were filmed in County Wicklow, otherwise known as the 'Garden of Ireland,' owing to its verdant beauty. Therefore, when director Osgood Perkins sent me the script for *Gretel and Hansel*, explaining that the intention was for all of this project to be shot outside of Dublin at Ardmore Studios in County Wicklow, I was pretty damn excited to say the least.

The films Osgood has directed have all had a certain quality about them. They have a mournful sadness which is very real, and his characters show how to survive when their lives become sad and scary and begin to decay. There was a challenge proposed to

me by Oz, whereby we would make a film about the Brothers Grimm fairy tale that no one was expecting visually, something younger audiences would be intrigued by. The illustrator Arthur Rackham was deeply animated by the Brothers Grimm spirit and his illustrations of their fairy tales have since influenced generations of artists. Under certain circumstances, his work would have been an excellent starting-off point for my research for this film, but Osgood had wishes for something very different and unexpected in the portrayal of this world. Hence, I started feeling out ways to create an anachronistic world, one which would give a chronological inconsistency to the arrangement and juxtaposition of the characters, events, objects, architecture and décor.

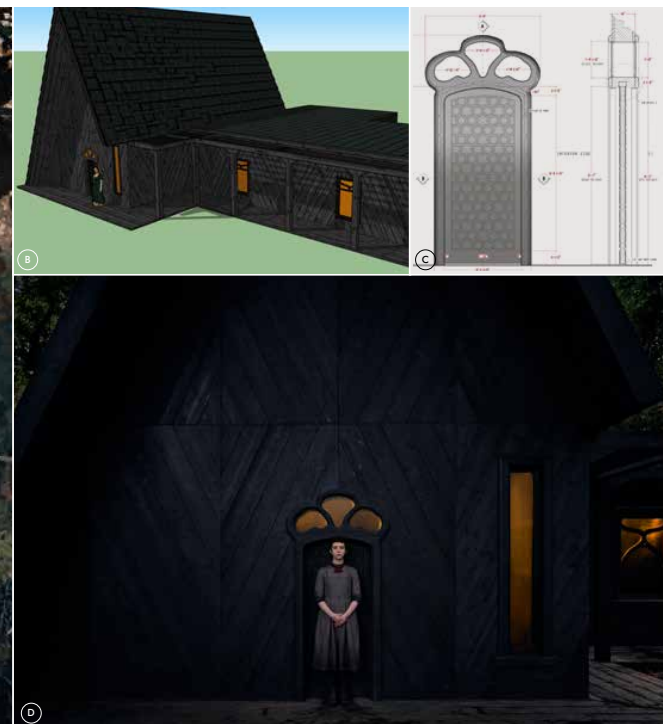
Although Osgood stuck with the iconic outfit for the infamous wicked witch, he did not wish for her house to be made of candy. But that does not

mean that her house, a pointed and architecturally odd dwelling that seems larger on the inside than it looks on the out, isn't magical. It is definitely a structural anomaly, like so many elements should be in fantasy. Without trying to sound precious, it was a combination of wanting to be vanguard or progressive or visionary, or whatever word sounds the least full of shit. Telling a story that has been told before is a tricky thing. Telling a story that has been told over and over for centuries is even trickier. The only way to get there is to acknowledge the source, and all the beautiful work that has been done before, that that this production is, in a sense, trying to build on.

Before flying to Ireland on a pre-scout, I had already built up a world of references to show Oz, so we could sit together and start on sketching once we met up. We had strayed away from the idea of a gingerbread house for the witch, so I pulled my

visual references quite freely from varied historical periods. Oz is a "less is more" kind of person, so I had honed my choices toward the less ornate periods of architecture, especially periods which had suffered under a malevolent rule or famine caused by war, where a grim reality might have pervaded over their world. Outside the stage, most of the shooting would be in the woods, as this is where the exterior of the witch's house would be built, and where the village the children grew up also had to be erected.

Osgood and I discussed the witch's character as being someone who has been abused and abandoned, and then has had to cope with that. So, we took a modernist, naturalistic, humanistic look at a deeply hurt person, and we tried to find out where this woman is coming from and at the stage in her life we have met her. She has entered into a magical bargain that requires her to kill



A. WITCH'S HOUSE, DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION DONE IN PHOTOSHOP BY JONATHAN MCGONNELL.

B. WITCH'S HOUSE SKETCHUP MODEL BY BRENDAN RANKIN.

C. WITCH'S HOUSE. DOOR DETAIL DRAWN BY MARY PIKE.

D. GRETEL OUTSIDE THE WITCH'S HOUSE. PRODUCTION STILL.

children, and we wondered what kind of effect that would have on a person in the long term. Every addicted person comes to feel not so great about it. They get more of what's needed to feel less bad, but then feel bad again. That is a loop and she is caught in it. The house interiors built onstage would not fit into the same scale house built for Holda in the woods. Some of the rooms would be of epic proportions but would make sense if they were situated underground. I drew inspiration from the Third Reich's architect and manipulator of scale and proportion Albert Speer, and the grand architecture of Mussolini's Italian fascism. I punctuated her architecture with severity and brutality. Holda's house contains many elements that are recognizable, such as the chevrons on the exterior façade, taken from the gates to the concentration camps. These motifs can also be seen on grills, on firepits and ovens throughout the house. Black metal clad A-frame expressionistic architecture supplied modernistic meaning. I viewed her house as more sci-fi, possibly a darkened gun metal grey scorched stealth bomber.

Before returning to Ireland, I prepared sketches so that the Set Designer Brendan Rankin would be able to generate both the working drawings and 3D models of Holda's house for construction. I was informed by the studio that I had to start construction from the first day of preproduction, so that all the interiors would be built before the first day of shooting. The weather would be rather unreliable at this time of year in Ireland, so substantial rain cover would be needed. Shooting would be October through December, and there is a very good reason Ireland is overrun by such pastures green. Christine McDonagh, the Art Director in Ireland I was fortunate enough to work with, helped find an excellent set decorator by

the name of Jenny Oman, whose work is exquisitely detailed, along with a quite brilliant Graphic Artist by the name of Anais Mulgrew. Oz and I were just blown away by her illustrations for Holda's book of recipes and spells. Designing of the interiors of Holda's house have been among my most satisfying endeavours in recent times. It was important to give credence to not only the character of Holda the witch but also her back story and to illuminate her darkness. She is allowed to be an addict, but also to feel grief and shame.

As the too few weeks of preproduction flew by, a brutalist and severe world was taking shape, and Osgood and I were filling it up with all the styles, tastes and epochs we liked. While the sets were going up on stage, Holda's house was being built in the woods along with the Gretel and Hansel's village where they lived with their stepmother. The work was being continued steadfastly by the crew, often in the pouring rain. I have seen the world come to a grinding halt when it rains in Los Angeles, but in Ireland it made no difference whatsoever to the Irish construction crew. The outside façade of Holda's house was clad in scorched planks of wood in a chevron pattern, the front door and the interior doors of the house were influenced by the decorative doors of the Coptic religion, further proof of the Holda's past travels. The layout and look of the exterior were seemingly reminiscent of post and beam in 1970s California, another obvious anachronism. My favourite part of the house exterior is the staggered wooden roof tiling pattern, handmade by the plasterers, and inspired by the deconstructive forms of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Unlike the original fairy tale, the witch's abode is not covered in gingerbread or sweets, so there is very little in the appearance of the actual house from the outside to seduce young children,

apart from an old wood and metal slide. What a famished child alone and lost in the woods would be desperately searching for is to be found inside; warmth, security from wild animals and food, all the food one can eat.

When it came to designing the look of the village, Osgood had a few rules, no thatched roofs, no cobbled anything, no villagers with chickens and steaming pots, none of that. As soon as all that is dismissed, other stuff comes to the fore. What I like about fairy tales is the feeling that they are their own world. They do not care about world events or things that are happening, they are a parable. They are instructive, they are lessons about living. They are their own world, so it gives a freedom to do what one likes. The design of the architectural elements was chosen from doors and windows of the Viennese Secession, which reveals a combination of modernity and symbolism.

Another interesting feature of the village was when Gretel goes for a job interview. It was decided that the creepy older man who interviews her actually runs the equivalent of a pornographic empire. The room where he interviews Gretel was a perfect example of decaying splendour, just as his porn empire is beginning to turn to dirt, he is viewed as clinging to vestiges of his former glory. We used the idea of triptych mirrors to heighten both the confusion of the viewer and of Gretel, and hand-painted coloured glass panes in the window mullions, to echo the windows of the working girls in red light districts.

The design of the interiors for Holda's held a great challenge for everyone, as their look would reveal the living core and soul of the much-maligned witch, and how would we best push past the expected image of her that had been ingrained in past culture. The unending cycle of luring children, murdering children, eating children—where does that come from? Much of the action took place within the confines of Holda's kitchen. I went for a split-level room with a slanted ceiling. Different levels to enhance and show the differing opinions and conflict between Gretel and Holda, with a slanted ceiling to add claustrophobia. There were floor-to-ceiling windows at one end of the room, which had a modern stained glass feel. At the

A. HOLDA'S BOOK OR RECIPES AND SPELLS. GRAPHICS BY ANAIS MULGREW.

B. VILLAGE EXTERIOR. SET PHOTO.

C. GRETEL'S JOB INTERVIEW. PRODUCTION STILL.

D. HOLDA'S KITCHEN, DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION DONE IN PHOTOSHOP BY JONATHAN MCGONNELL.

E. HOLDA'S KITCHEN. SET PHOTO.

F. HOLDA'S KITCHEN. PRODUCTION STILL.





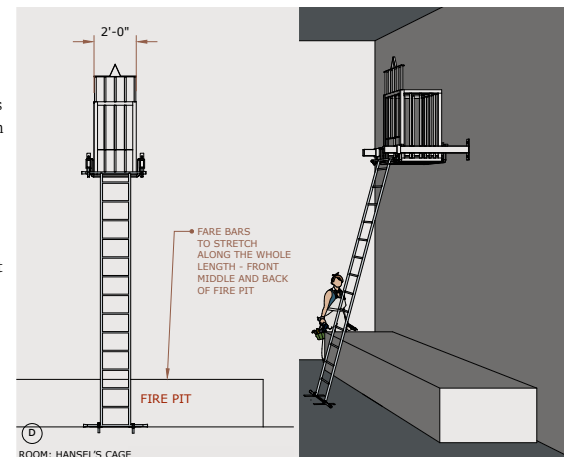
opposite end, was a raised level which led off the kitchen to the children's sleeping quarters with an ornate art nouveau railing. This level housed the windows at the front of the house, but also had a mural painted on its wall inspired by Matisse's cut-outs, and Breugel's *Hunters in the Snow*. This style of mural also featured on two of the walls in the children's bedroom. The slanted ceiling in the kitchen was made up of a series of chevrons, again using the motif from concentration camp gates and German sentry boxes. The floor to ceiling fireplace was sculpted by the plasterers to look as if it was constructed of large flagstones, but arranged in clean modern vernacular architecture, it even had the chain mail curtains found in 1970s Californian fireplaces to help give it an overall modern feel. Anachronisms running rampant. Jenny Oman helped to fill the space with immense detail and elevated the appearance of the room with her esoteric ideals and timeless decoration. The children's bedroom was sparse with two wooden beds, and a rug that was actually painted

onto the wooden floor. There were wooden slats that ran floor to ceiling on the wall behind the two beds. These repeated slats stood in metaphorically for the bars you would find on a typical jail cell, therefore the children would seem to be prisoners of the witch. All the doors in the house were designed as pocket doors that slid back into the walls when open, as opposed to hinged doors. This made entering a room a little bit more awkward than usual, and I felt this also gave the effect of the doors being pneumatically powered, as in a spacecraft. The doors all had incredibly ornate carved patterns on them, inspired by the old Christian Coptic religion. The door lintels were all low, as the witch had them made to suit the height of the children. The crew got the hang of the unusual door heights very quickly, so there were no banged heads when going in and out of the room.

The largest set of the film was reserved for Holda's underground chamber, which was fondly called her 'killing room.' It had 20-foot-high ceilings hewn

from the earth, and was then covered in white-washed bricks, all handmade by the plasterers. It was entered by way of a concealed staircase that led down from a broom cupboard. This large white space is the room where Gretel discovers the awful cannibalistic truth about the witch, and the real reason that the bounteous supply of food is neverending, when the world outside is wrought with famine. The proportion of the room was inspired by Italian fascist architecture, the room was stripped bare with all white for the walls. Jenny Oman had a not only huge, but also rather magnificent Nordic ash table made for this room, as much of the action revolved on and around it, I only hope it found a good home after the show, as it was a glorious piece of furniture. I was also quite taken by the body parts that were made by the incredible prop makers and are poured onto the table from a barrel by Holda, so that she might turn them into food for the children to unsuspectingly gorge themselves on.

Gretel and Hansel places an empowering feminist spin on the Grimm fairy tale, and simmering underneath is the idea of a mother who is equally creative and destructive. The witch really loves and respects Gretel as much as she wants to destroy her. The main lesson the witch tries to teach Gretel is that she alone has the power to shape her future, not any authority figure. The reality that Gretel has grown up in is one where she thinks young women are disposable and she should expect the least of everything. But when she arrives at the witch's house, she learns that's upside down. Holda is the most powerful creature by far. **ADG**



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Christine McDonagh,
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Irina Kuksova,
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Brendan Rankin, Mary Pike
Set Designers
Jonathan McGonnell,
Illustrator
Anais Mulgrewd,
Graphic Artist
Jenny Oman,
Set Decorator

A. CHILDREN'S BEDROOM.
GRAPHICS BY ANAIS
MULGREW, PAINTED BY
MURALIST ALAN LAMBERT.

B. CHILDREN'S BEDROOM.
DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION
DONE IN PHOTOSHOP BY
JONATHAN MCGONNELL.

C. KILLING ROOM. DIGITAL
ILLUSTRATION DONE IN
PHOTOSHOP BY JONATHAN
MCGONNELL.

D. HANSEL'S CAGE.
CONSTRUCTION DETAILS
DRAWN BY IRINA KUKSOVA.

E. KILLING ROOM.
PRODUCTION STILL.

F. KILLING ROOM.
PRODUCTION STILL.