

Outside, Over There

Astonishing, dark visions

PAN'S LABYRINTH: Written and directed by Guillermo del Toro. Cinematography, Guillermo Navarro. Starring Sergi López, Maribel Verdú, Ivana Baquero, Doug Jones and Alex Angulo. Picturehouse, 2006. R. 112 minutes. In Spanish with English subtitles. ★★★★★

A haunting melody runs through *Pan's Labyrinth*, the new film from writer, director and producer Guillermo del Toro (*Hellboy*, *The Devil's Backbone*). It shivers through the opening narration and turns warm when hummed by Mercedes (Maribel Verdú), a quietly rebellious housekeeper in an old mill in the Spanish woods. Composer Javier Navarrete's sweetly ominous theme delicately captures the feel of del Toro's breathtakingly beautiful, horrifying film, in which one girl's adventures in a strange otherworld run parallel to the horrors of this world.

Pan's Labyrinth begins when wide-eyed, quiet Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) travels with her mother to a remote outpost in the Spanish countryside where her mother's new husband, Captain Vidal (Sergi López), works to crush rebel fighters after the Spanish Civil War. Vidal is not interested in Ofelia, only in the baby her weakened mother is carrying, and that's for the best: The Captain is a vicious, unrepentant killer who mocks the rebels for believing all people are equal, and López's restrained performance gives him a terrifyingly casual confidence in his actions.



Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) meets the Pale Man (Doug Jones) in *Pan's Labyrinth*

Ofelia wants to go home — until she discovers the labyrinth behind the mill. In the center is a staircase that seems to lead to the center of the world. There, Ofelia meets a faun (Doug Jones) — a creeping, creaking faun, sinister and alluring, nothing like sweet Mr. Tumnus — who calls her “Your Highness” and tells a story: a runaway princess, a prophecy, three tasks to complete. From the faun, Ofelia receives a book that

guides her through the appointed tasks, for which she must be brave, true, perceptive and wise. The faun's world and the magical tasks evoke story after story: Ofelia wears a dress

tic visions, yet every one has an underlying darkness. There is no cuteness here. These are adventures from the Grimm side of things, not the Disney side; here, you mustn't always do as you're told, and, when sent to retrieve a magical token, you're likely to get very grimy on the way there and back again.

It is not only Ofelia who gets grimy. The aboveground scenes in *Pan's Labyrinth* are dirty and spare, all cold rooms and muddy paths warmed only by small fires and the gentle attention Mercedes pays Ofelia. Sometimes, for all the richness of Ofelia's otherworldly adventures, the brutal, dark-toned world above nearly edges out the film's inspired magical offerings with a ferocious bleakness that only in the end gives way to hope (for some). But when it is balanced, and it far more often is, *Pan's Labyrinth* layers the

very like Alice's as she sets off for the first task, and later she is faced with a sumptuous feast from which, like Persephone in the underworld, she has been told not to eat.

There is nothing Ofelia can do about the captain and her unpleasant new home, but she can do plenty with the help of the faun, his chittering fairies and the stories she understands so well. But her tasks are hardly easy. Del Toro creates astonishing fantas-

tic on the realistic in a delicate way that lets you choose what you believe — and what you see: Do you see history, or do you see fantasy? The power of imagination or the inevitability of pain? A movie about adults, or a movie about one brave young girl? Like Ofelia, you may see one thing; like Vidal, you may see another. **CW**

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