

Transcript

'Turning the Horror Genre on its Head': An interview with Myriam Cyr

Myriam Cyr

Ken Russel like turned the horror genre on its head with Gothic.

So when I met Ken Russell the first time and it was to play this part of this woman called Claire Claremont, I had never heard. I'm an Acadian, so I'm a French Canadian. And so I wasn't very familiar with English literature and I knew Frankenstein, of course.

And I knew Mary Shelley, and I really didn't know who Claire Clairmont was. The way I was cast is an actress was supposed to play the part, and I don't remember her name, but she dropped out for some reason. And so I was a young graduate of Lambda.

And I just signed with my agent, then Kate Feist, who unfortunately is no longer with us.

So I went up for this audition. Of course, it was all very nerve wracking because it was Ken Russell. And at the time, Gabriel Byrne wasn't, or I think he was starting to be quite well known. And so I had to audition with him. And then I remember that Ken Russell asked me to twirl in the room so he could see me.

And then I was offered the part. And that was it. I had heard of Ken Russell, of course, because he was by then such a famous director having done seminal films. And I knew this was extremely important.

But what I wasn't ready for was that he really was a bit of a genius. He knew everything. He is to this day and I've been really lucky, I've worked with some rather amazing people in my life. He's one of the most knowledgeable people I've ever, ever come across. So he knew everything about, but not just film, but art and artists and music.

And so he had a very peculiar a particular, not peculiar, but particular way of working that's really unique to him and that I never encountered since.

And so I was terribly gung ho to do lots of research on her, and he said absolutely not, read nothing. I want you to know nothing about her. I just want you to be you.

And clearly I had some kind of energy that he really, really liked. And so obviously I'm a good student and I said OK, well, he told me. But obviously, you know, through the course of getting ready for the film, I, you know, I found out who she was.

And I also knew she was, you know she was really deeply in love with Byron and, you know, and I think it was unrequited love because he basically slept with tons and tons of people and but at the time, of course, she was completely devoted to him.

What Ken wanted me to do with Claire Clairmont was to represent the free spirit of the Quartet, if you will.

Because Shelly, of course, Percy Shelley is known as the Wild Man, but Claire Claremont was his pendant.

And the girl who was absolutely wild and crazy against Mary Shelley's much more demure way of facing the world. So the performance is very physical and Ken had us running all over the place and I think that was because she represented also youth untouched.

Already, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley have been a couple for some time. She's worried. Mary Shelley. She's in the this is the weekend that's going to give her the idea of Frankenstein.

And so Claire Clairmont is the again, is the free spirit who runs all over the place. It was loads and loads of fun obviously and it was. And what was really interesting in the way Ken Russell works, or worked was that he would lock us up in a room and say, figure it out.

And then he'd give us half an hour, an hour, so we would ourselves figure out all the movements and what we were going to do. Then he'd come in and we'd have to do a little performance for him and say, OK, we're doing it this way.

And then he would say, OK, so we'll do one chop from here, one chop from there, one chop from here, we'll do that. We'll cover this. And what was incredible about him was that everything he shot, he used. Nothing ever ended up on the cutting room floor and he's the only one I've ever worked with where he apps and he would do it like a painting, so he filmed like one paints and it was, it was amazing.

The least favorite part was I think, you know, running around naked with rats covered in mud. That was not one of my, like favorite moments, but at the same time it was amazing. You know, when they let the, all these rats come out. And of course, they're all tamed rats and or I don't know if they were rats or mice, but I think they were rats.

And at the time, I didn't know that you could have pet rats. But obviously you can and so you know, having all of that happened. So there was a rap Wrangler. And so that was a quite, quite an intense experience.

One of the things that was terribly important to Ken Russell was the creative aspect of the characters, what made them be who they were?

And how they found inspiration and he was not. Ken Russell was not interested in politics in, in terms of the film. I'm not talking about his personal life. He was really, really interested in the mechanisms of creativity.

I just also want to say a little thing about Stephen Folk, because what was really wonderful is, Ken did shoot his script.

Really, he had created the universe on the page and with all the intricacies, and so I you know, I'm, I'm to this day terribly grateful to him and he's just a terrific writer.

When the film came out, I well, of course I was. I was very excited. What was really incredible about the film itself, it was exactly how he had said it would be. I mean that really, everything we saw was on the screen and that was huge and, you know, and I think it's a beautiful film, I mean beautiful.

It's a Ken Russell film. So it's but it's very painterly. I think the film and I think that's very much in keeping with who he was, and everything around the film was informed with his extraordinary

knowledge, and so the poster of Gothic, for example, is a representation of a painting by Fusilli, who was Mary Shelley's mother.

Mary Wilson Croft had an affair with the painter who did the painting. That's you know, that's the poster. That what I loved about Ken Russell, is that his universe was complete? It was full, it was fully rounded. Funnily enough, throughout my career I ended up doing other movies on Frankenstein.

And I did a movie for Disney called Frankenstein and me, with Burt Reynolds. And then I did another movie with Roger Corman on Frankenstein, and then and then I became very interested in who Claire Clairmont was. Because of course she is the lesser-known figure, and she really was an interesting woman.

Ken Russell had a really profound impact on me. He really in many ways, helped determine the types of choices I was going to make, like working with Stephen Berkoff working well with Al Pacino. I was always looking, I think I was, I had had such a wonderful experience because of his kind of extraordinary knowledge.

And so I was there on in very attracted to people who have things to say and telling stories that matter. And I think that's really been the guiding principle throughout my career.