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New del Toro is a romance from the Black Lagoon

Director gives cold-blooded amphibian, Cold War love story warmth in 'Shape of Water'

Once upon a time there was a very cold war. Rivulets of intrigue, repression and intolerance twined the cultural landscape. On the outskirts of the nation's capital, defense research laboratories whirred away in secrecy. And it is here, in the unlikely setting of post-Sputnik Baltimore, that Guillermo del Toro's sensuous sci-fi fable "The Shape of Water" takes place.

Inspired by "Creature From the Black Lagoon," both movies' love-struck amphibians hail from the Amazon and bear a definite piscine family resemblance. Director del Toro says he watched the 1954 sci-fi horror classic as a child and was mesmerized by the scene in which the creature, unbeknownst to the heroine, follows her in balletic parallel as she swims in the lagoon.

What would happen, he thought, if the monster won the girl?

This question is answered by his exquisitely beautiful, noirish

tale, in which Elisa (Sally Hawkins), a cleaning woman at the Occam laboratory, rendered mute by childhood abuse, reaches out in sympathy and kindness to an unnamed Amphibian Man (Doug Jones), a laboratory "asset." The two fall in love, releasing each other from their respective captivity.

Worshiped as a god in his native Amazon, the Amphibian Man is tall and sleek, with a glistening

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swimmer's body. When he embraces Elisa, he is confident and masculine, enveloping her with the graceful gesture of a matador.

Otherwise isolated, Elisa has two friends: her gay neighbor Giles (Richard Jenkins), a displaced advertising illustrator who



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is silenced and rebuffed due to his sexuality; and Zelda (Octavia Spencer), a chatty work colleague who serves the purpose of translating Elisa's experience for the audience in real time.

The monsters in this movie are not green-hued quasi-crustaceans, but the company men, government and military, American and Russian, who cannot bring themselves to acknowledge the creature's (ahem) humanity — or that of any "other."

the creature, are more coldly indifferent to pleas of conscience or science on its behalf. "We don't need to learn," says their leader, "we need the Americans not to learn."

To Strickland, who aspires to be a man of the future and reads "The Power of Positive Thinking" at his desk, successful "asset containment" will buy his ticket to a promotion out of the Baltimore backwater. Yet Strickland is imprisoned as well, by the authoritarian hierarchies of the time, which dictate that "decency" is an American export, "we sell it but we don't use it."

The ever-present threat of violence and well-placed reminders that the creature is of a wild and untamed species, prevents the movie from dissolving into unrestrained sentiment. Each of the characters must confront life or death consequences and each must exhibit courage and precision.

Literally a fish out of water, the Amphibian Man is not so much the modern upgrade of the mid-century matinee monster as the adult counterpart of E.T., still protected and supported by misfit terrestrials, now eligible for a romantic partner.

As an improbable romance that we root for nonetheless, the film evokes last year's "La La Land" as well, with its suggestive use of Parisian cafe instrumentals, spontaneous musicality and dreamlike quality.

In "The Shape of Water" Guillermo del Toro has delivered a soulful thing of beauty, drenched in Freudian symbolism, awash in aquatic metaphor and cannily resonate with our times.