

ON SET

A MONSTER CALLS

Life and Limb

A childhood story that features grief, darkness and Liam Neeson as a hulking tree, *A Monster Calls* is not your average family film. Total Film ventures on set of the fantasy tearjerker...

WORDS MATT GLASBY



It starts, as all things must, with an ending. In 2007, British children's author Siobhan Dowd died of breast cancer, leaving behind an outline for her next book, *A Monster Calls*. "She had characters, premise, a beginning but not time," wrote Patrick Ness in the introduction. But "stories don't end with writers". With permission from Dowd's estate, Ness finished the book for her in 2011, with award-winning results.

Heart-rendingly sad, and hauntingly illustrated by Jim McKay, it tells of Conor O'Malley, a schoolboy whose mother is dying of cancer, and who, every night at 12.07, is visited by a monster: the ancient yew tree from the churchyard behind his house, brought to roaring, rustling life. The Monster has three stories for Conor, to carry him through the darkness, stories that "chase and bite and hunt". One thing's for sure, awash with grief and gothic realism, *A Monster Calls* is a tale that sinks its teeth in.

Having proved himself a master of maternal anguish with *The Orphanage* (2007) and *The Impossible* (2012), Spanish director J.A. Bayona would seem the perfect choice to translate Ness' script to the screen. Working with him is super-producer (and "spare battery") Belén Atienza, who oversaw *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *The Orphanage*... basically every decent Spanish-language fantasy of the past decade, and the award-winning team behind *The Impossible* (who call their boss "Bayona" or simply "Jota", pronounced "Hay-otter"). Even with material this tricky – and when was the last time you saw a family film about cancer and talking trees? – you wouldn't bet against them. "It's not a comedy," confirms Bayona when we catch up with him on set in Terrassa, just outside Barcelona. Good job we cleared that up.

Wandering through the backlot, the spectre of mortality is everywhere. Today's scene, a recurring nightmare of Conor's, takes place on a huge,



Harry Potter-ish graveyard based on the moody Manchester cemetery where the exteriors were shot. On real grass, brought over especially from Blighty, stand genuine-looking gravestones modelled on the originals, with the names and dates changed to protect the deceased. Despite the fact we're in Catalonia, it's freezing, the sunlight blocked out by the former TB hospital looming over us.

Kindly, someone from wardrobe fetches TF a massive red puffer jacket, so we can't really complain – especially as its previous owner was *Sigourney fricking Weaver*, who co-stars. On set, giant cranes hold up green screens hinting just how tall the Monster will be, massive wind machines howl, and 12-year-old Lewis MacDougall, who plays Conor, is strapped into stunt wires ready to shoot the next scene. Off to

BOY WONDER
(above) Young lead Lewis MacDougall impressed the star-studded cast.

one side stands Bayona, a ball of fizzing Iberian energy, overseeing two units, six monitors and a crew of smoking Spaniards. "You don't make it easy for yourself do you?" *Total Film* offers. "No," he laughs. "Every time I shoot a film I regret that." And then the nightmare begins...

The book is a classic. It's timeless, powerful and heart-breaking, but at the same time it's talking about things that are difficult to talk about in a way I haven't seen before," says Atienza between takes and telephone calls. "I was really moved. I mean, you read it in two hours; once you start with Conor you *cannot* leave that kid. And when you finish, it stays with you a long time..."

‘MACDOUGALL IS SPECIAL. I WAS TOUCHED BY THE PURITY OF HIS PERFORMANCE’ LIAM NEESON



TAKING ROOT
(above) Director J.A. Bayona on set with the giant Monster model.

With the weight of the film resting on Conor's shoulders, a particularly special young actor was required, and the watchful, wounded-looking MacDougall, who auditioned late in the process and had only recently made his screen debut in *Pan* (2015), fit the bill. "You should always shoot for the Moon," Ness tells us, from Los Angeles. "You might not hit the Moon but you might hit something interesting. I knew I was asking the world of a 12-year-old actor, but Lewis carried every single scene."

"I'd seen Bayona's work, and I was struck with the power and the beauty of the performances that he was able to elicit from those young actors," says Liam Neeson (who voices the Monster) when we catch up later, his voice like spilt single malt. "So I trusted that whoever he found would be something special and, indeed, Lewis is – he never, ever appeared to be acting, certainly with me. He was real, he was present, he was in the moment and was able to convey an extraordinary range of emotions. I was very touched by the purity of his performance."



With Felicity Jones as his mother, Weaver as his grandmother, Neeson as a father figure (albeit in tree form) and Toby Kebbell as his actual (but absent) dad, MacDougall was joining quite an acting dynasty. "Liam has the age and wisdom of the tree," says Bayona. "Then Felicity has the innocence of a mother. It's so unfair when you deal with the idea of dying young, I thought of Felicity, she's not only an extraordinary actress, she can also play a character that resembles a little girl. I like playing with parenthood in films, that moment



An author talks

Going from page to screen with Patrick Ness...

On adapting the book...
"Because of Siobhan and Jim's contributions, I'm the custodian of three people's work. And if the book works, I know *why* it works. So I wrote the script on spec, no studio attached, because I wanted to start the process saying, 'These are the things that I think are important.'"

On writing the script...
"On the first draft, I referred heavily to the novel. But the screenplay has to work on its own. What you lose in words you gain in imagery. The next passes were about setting the book aside and letting the screenplay survive on its own."

On meeting Bayona...
"I'm bad at first meetings – genuinely awful. So there was much awkwardness, but God bless him, he called almost immediately after, and said let's have a second meeting, just him and me, and we did."

On collaborating...
"He brought tons of ideas, and every one was *thoroughly* discussed. [laughs] I really believe my books must be strong enough to stand up to questioning – it only makes them stronger. But it was a really happy process, very collaborative."

On taking a chance...
"Everything's a risk. If making movies is hard, making good movies is *much* harder, but I feel like I said my piece in the screenplay, I found a director who seems to understand and, off we go, let's see what happens." MG

when the kids behave like parents and the parents behave like kids...”

Part of Conor’s journey is getting to grips with Weaver’s dauntingly severe grandmother. But did the team share his fears? “Not really,” says Atienza. “We were so excited: we’re going to talk to Ripley! Our grandmother is so powerful we needed someone with a big personality, she’s not like a sweet old lady. And, of course, Sigourney’s a star so she’s someone you cannot take your eyes away from. It’s like when you see her on the screen the temperature changes.”

It wasn’t the only thing that changed – MacDougall is actually from Edinburgh, and Weaver’s character speaks in a hard-won English accent. “Well, my mother is English and in the beginning I sounded like her,” Weaver tells us, later, in a London hotel suite. “I worked with wonderful dialogue coaches to find the grandmother, because she couldn’t sound like my mother, who went to RADA, I couldn’t sound posh. But once you surrender to the accent and find it, it’s actually a lovely thing, it’s like putting on a lovely coat or something.” On balance we decide not to mention the puffer jacket. When the conversation turns to the more naturally maternal figures she’s played, she tells us that, “Carrie [*Henn, who played Newt in Aliens*] and I are still in touch. She always remembers my birthday, it’s very sweet. She has her own children now, of course...”

With a story this moving – anyone who can get through the book without welling up is made of stone, never mind wood – the live-action scenes, shot in the muted grey-greens of earth and illness, guarantee tears before bedtime. But



what of the tree, or the animated tales it spins? In a nice cinematic touch, added for the film, Conor is a keen artist (like Bayona was as a child, and his father too), so they seem to spill directly from his drawings as if he’s willed them into being himself, a creator as much as a spectator.

A mixture of motion-capture CGI and a gigantic model, left in alarming chunks around the set, the Monster is a striking creation, an Iron Gi-Ent inked from nightmares. “Well, one of the things we’ve been struggling with is trying to make him look as real as possible,” says Bayona. “In terms of the CGI, it should be photorealistic but with weight, like it’s made of wood. I told the people from the VFX company that I wanted him to move realistically.” At this, Atienza cuts in, “It’s funny when you say that a tree has to move realistically!” Bayona continues: “It should be tough, clumsy, heavy, rigid – I don’t want it to look like a CGI character. There’s a moment in the film that references *King Kong* – [pause] the old one – and there’s lots of shots we’ve done with a real hand, real foot, real face, and some of them are clumsy, the hand looks like a puppet and I love that. I love that because it has a soul that you lose in CGI. The VFX guys want perfection, but the soul is in the mistake, it’s in the flaw.”



TREE OF LIFE
(above) The Monster, voiced by Liam Neeson, paying Conor a visit.

For extra soul, Neeson did ten days of motion-capture work so the tree’s movements would match his performance. “You’re put into a body suit with all these little ping pong balls Velcro’ed into the joints, and surrounded by cameras – I had a camera mounted on my head – and you’re ‘on’ all the time,” he tells us. “You’re connected to all these little computer nerds at the side of the stage, so when we shot a scene I was able to see approximately what this creature, this elemental force, might look like. As silly as I felt, certainly for the first day and a half, after that I kind of got into it. It was wonderful, it was just J.A. and myself and Lewis, and we worked very closely. We had a little mock-up of the boy’s house and the back garden, so I was able to get a sense of how big the creature should be and adjust accordingly, to make sure when I was kneeling down or on my hunkers [*haunches*], my knee wasn’t bursting into a house or something.”

Back on the lot, in Conor’s nightmare, we watch the Monster do way worse than that, thanks to the magic of SolidTrack, a camera system that allows the CG’ed creature to occupy the same space as MacDougall (on the monitors at least). A huge, building-



A FAMILY STORY
(above) *Rogue One*’s Felicity Jones plays Conor’s mum.

wrecking brute, it towers over the cemetery set as the earth shakes (thanks to the powerful hydraulics underneath), gravestones topple and deep fissures appear in the ground. Time and again, just as MacDougall’s about to be swallowed by the ground, the wires save him from the abyss. It’s an image that wouldn’t be out of place in *The Impossible*, we tell Bayona, once “Cut!” has been called. So why does he keep returning to scenes of such wrenching child imperilment? “I’ll give you the number of my psychotherapist,” he jokes, “he’ll make a better explanation.”

But it’s not a joke, not even close. In fact, the film looks death squarely in

the face, which is pretty ballsy for an expensive SFX flick. “I think the best way to talk about big things is through fantasy,” explains Atienza, “because big subjects are difficult to explain. Not difficult, impossible. These subjects, most of the time, they relate to mystery. You don’t have answers for them so you need to tell tales to talk about them. And fantasy makes you think about these things, makes you feel them, even if it doesn’t give you any answers, the trip is worth it.”

Weaver finds the story similarly cathartic: “I feel like, for all of us with these problems of mortality and catastrophic illness, the Monster picked us up and put us on his shoulder.”

“The Monster’s there to imbue the kid with life lessons,” says Neeson, “but certainly, when he first appears, he looks incredibly frightening and threatening, you know, as indeed all our innermost fears are, adults as well as kids. We have profound fears and they are ugly and terrifying until you start chipping away at them, when you realise they’re legitimate fears, but the more you confront them, the more they will kind of sustain you through life’s journey, and then eventually not become fears at all...”

“Bayona put it an interesting way,” says Ness. “Reality doesn’t have its own value, it merely is, so to find truth within it, we have to tell stories about it... that’s how we make sense of a universe that seems chaotic and meaningless.” None of which sounds very PG-friendly. “It’s a children’s film with the soul of an adult,” explains Bayona. “But what I like about it is, it’s what we do as filmmakers. We try and make people understand the world better through art. Which is what Conor understands at the end of the story: that art can heal...” In other words, stories don’t end with directors any more than they end with writers.

A Monster Calls opens on 1 January.





A MONSTER CALLS

Tree's Company

Prepare for the most heart-wrenching fantasy movie of the year. Matt Glasby is on set as Patrick Ness's tale of death and dreaming comes to the screen...

Stories are wild creatures... when you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?" So proclaims the eponymous Monster (Liam Neeson), an ancient yew tree called forth by troubled schoolboy Conor O'Malley (Lewis MacDougall) in this dark fantasy directed by JA Bayona (*The Orphanage*, *The Impossible*). He's not kidding... Based on the YA novel by Patrick Ness (showrunner of *Doctor Who* spin-off *Class*), this particular story is wreaking havoc across an entire studio backlot outside Barcelona. Amid the sinewy branches littering the set, the Monster is, quite literally, in pieces. In one corner sits its huge, trunk-like head with red bulbs instead of eyes; in another is a 6ft foot. If Bayona and co do their jobs, it won't just be the Monster who's in bits...

In case you hadn't guessed, *A Monster Calls* is an absolute heartbreaker. "It's a story about a kid dealing with the death of his mother [Felicity Jones]," Bayona tells *SFX* between takes. "When you touch the need to say goodbye, people normally don't go that far when they go to the movies. Especially in fantasy movies, which are so restricted because they cost a lot of money. Studios don't want to disturb the audiences, they want them only to have fun, and I thought they could have a lot of fun watching this film but they can also learn what life is about. I don't want to sound pretentious, but I wanted to make audiences think about it, then send them back home with the film still growing in their minds."

Based on an outline left behind by writer Siobhan Dowd, who died of cancer in 2007, *Monster* was completed by Ness, with some



Jim Kay concept art, from *A Monster Calls Special Collector's Edition*, Walker Books.

reservations. "I was going to say no because of the pressure to write something good," he tells us. "Also, I didn't want to write a book that she would have written, I wanted to write a book that she would have *loved*." Illustrated by Jim McKay, the finished novel received a rapturous reception, and Ness wrote a spec script which attracted Bayona, "a really strong fit" according to the author. "I respect the seriousness with which he is willing to take a young person's POV, which not all movies featuring kids do, and his implicit willingness to let genres bleed, which I believe in very strongly," says Ness. Neeson is more succinct: "I was gripped from page one."

CHILD'S PLAY

On a cemetery set recalling something out of Godric's Hollow in *Harry Potter*, a pivotal scene is in process. Dressed like a typical British schoolboy, MacDougall sprints through toppling gravestones as the earth shudders and

gives way beneath him. Just as he reaches the edge, stunt wires save him. "No accidents for now," says Bayona watching anxiously. "I cross my fingers!" Though levity is in short supply in the film, Bayona did allow himself some fan-boy moments directing Sigourney Weaver, who plays Conor's fearsome grandmother, asking, "Why was she carrying a gorilla when she stepped out of the helicopter in *Working Girl*?" This, we learn, was a reference to King Kong, the ultimate misunderstood monster, who cameos here in a cine-film Conor watches with his mum. "There are probably only 60 kids in the world who watched old cine movies when they were young, but they all grew up to be filmmakers," says Ness, "so that's why King Kong is in there, god love him..." Weaver, for her part, was glad to be working with Liam Neeson, the "best looking tree in the world..." and looks forward to Bayona's next project, *Jurassic World 2*: "I expect to be a) a dinosaur, or b) a bystander horribly eaten by a dinosaur."

IMAGE © 2016 A MONSTER CALLS, AIE TELECINCO CINEMA, SAU, APACHES ENTERTAINMENT, SL, AND PELICULAS LA TRINI SLUW



That kid's *definitely* won the science fair.

The search for the missing contact lens continued.

For his current Monster, brought to life by performance capture and CGI, "We did thousands of designs," says Bayona, "but the more we went into fantasy the less interesting it was. I wanted to keep it very ambiguous, more like an image where you can project your needs, your fears, more than something with lots of horns and tentacles." Just don't mention the E word. "I went to a friend and showed him the final design and he said it looks like an Ent!" Bayona laughs. "I said, 'What the fuck is an Ent?' and then I googled 'monster tree shape' and I saw there were lots of characters that look like Ents. I thought, I don't want my tree to look like a tree, it needs to look like a man, so we threw away those designs, started from scratch and ultimately came up with something much more similar to what's in the book..."

Producer Belén Atienza, who's had a hand in just about every Spanish-language fantasy since 2006's *Pan's Labyrinth*, recalls: "When we went to shoot the performance capture it was the first time for us, and the first time for Liam, so the first few days were like, 'Er, it's an empty space with a [performance-cap] suit...' But little by little you forget about the suit and you start seeing Liam as a tree, a monster, and that was a very beautiful process. The end result is a combination of real effects and CGI. We really like to work with practical effects. We did that in *The Impossible*, we had real water, and it totally changed the tone. The first idea was to do CG water; people said you can't do a tsunami with real water, but the process of working out how to do it 'for real' was much more interesting; which is the case here too. We think it's in the combination of practical and digital FX, so you cannot say what's digital and what's real. If we get there that's great."

Another special effect comes courtesy of Neeson's rich Ulster rumble. "I wanted to use my own accent," he explains. "Because it's old in itself, it's Celtic, and I think in the audience's imagination Irish accents give a kind of weight and an ancient quality." Thanks to a new pre-viz system called SolidTrack, we're given

glimpses of the Monster combined with live-action footage. Colossal and crepuscular, with eyes of flame and scratchy pen-stroke detailing, he more than does justice to McKay's magnificent drawings. In fact, he could photosynthesise an Ent for breakfast...

PAYING IT FORWARD

If the film deals with legacies – the things that we gift those we leave behind – it also, of course, represents one. "This was something that Bayona explained to Patrick the first time we all met," says Atienza. "Siobhan Dowd started this, you very respectfully took her work and made something beautiful, now we're asking for permission to do the same. It's a lovely journey: this woman leaving something behind, Patrick taking it on, and hopefully us doing something at the same level." When asked for comparison points she namechecks huge, haunting fantasies such as *The Iron Giant* and *ET*. They're pretty sizeable boots to fill, but Bayona and Atienza are no strangers to soliciting visceral responses from their audiences.

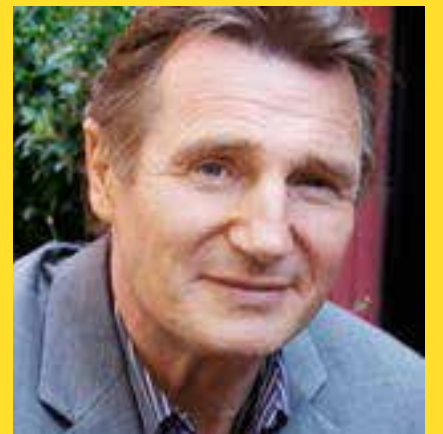
"We had a big problem with *The Impossible*, because people started to faint," says Bayona, citing incidents at film festivals where ambulances were sent for. "Belen called me and said, 'We've had five screenings and five people fainted. Next Friday, the film opens in Spain in 600 screens. Oh my god!'"

In the case of *A Monster Calls*, however, it'll be floods of tears rather than actual floods. "Ultimately it has to be emotional because man understands things through emotion," says Bayona. "It's going to remove the audience from their comfort zones and send them back home thinking about their own lives. That's what I like about movies, making a transformative experience, so you're not the same after watching it." And with that, he heads back to his monitors, to his wild creature of a story, and prepares to wreak havoc once more. ●

A Monster Calls opens on 1 January.

"WE ALL NEED STORIES"

Liam Neeson: a monster talks



What attracted you to the role?

They had me from day one. I remember reading several years ago that Patrick was given this story by Siobhan Dowd who passed away from cancer, you know. Patrick's an amazing writer, and I admired him all the more for working on an original idea from another writer that she wasn't able to complete.

Why does the Monster appear to Conor?

Well, the monster's there to try and teach life lessons, to imbue the idea that nothing is ever as it seems. And, of course, the overriding element in this story is that this boy's going to have to cope with the death of the greatest love he'll ever have in his life, which is his mother. It certainly isn't just a children's film. There's life lessons in it for all of us...

Can stories heal?

We all need, and love, stories, you know. That's why fairytales were written – I'm thinking in particular of Oscar Wilde's beautiful children's stories, that have profound lessons built into them – and they're usually about how complex life actually is. I mean, the stories that the Monster tells the boy, they never turn out the way you think they should turn out, you know, because life isn't like that.

It's quite a legacy to be carrying...

It is. I never met Siobhan and I've only met Patrick a couple of times, but I hope they're impressed with what [director JA] Bayona has done.

REX (1)

GOT WOOD?

Our favourite sentient trees



Apple Trees

The Wizard of Oz (1939)

Scrumptious beware, anyone coveting these chaps' forbidden – but oh-so-tempting – fruit can expect a dressing down as sour as off-cider. Talk about whingeing pomes.



Tabanga

From Hell it Came (1957)

A wrongfully executed South Seas prince is reincarnated as a scowling killer stump bent on revenge, thanks to some good old radioactive fallout in this brilliantly creaky B-movie.



The Whomping Willow

Harry Potter series (2001 onwards)

The thwack of *something* on willow has different connotations at Hogwarts: this secret-passage-guarding-shrub has just chinned a flying car/broomstick/werewolf.



Treebeard

The Two Towers (2002)

The anthropomorphic arbor by which all others must be measured, this irascible Ent – Middle-earth's "shepherds of trees" – is one of the world's oldest, and slowest, inhabitants. Timber!



Groot

Guardians of the Galaxy (2014)

Voiced by Vin Diesel in his least plank-like performance, Marvel's tri-syllabic tree packs a world of meaning into the words: "I am Groot." And, eventually, "We are Groot."