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LOS ANGELES FILM AWARDS

*EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW with
multi award winning filmmaker
JAMES M. STORM*



An Interview with James Storm ("Meet My Pet Monster")



Growing up in the 1980's, filmmaker/artist James M. Storm loved the "My Pet Monster" Saturday morning cartoon series almost as much as he loved the unique and colorful toy line. To James, the world of "My Pet Monster" was a fascinating universe full of adventure, possibilities, and friendship. However, just as fast as it seemed to arrive, the world of "My Pet Monster" vanished from TV and toy shelves alike. Left behind was nothing except 12 animated episodes and one lackluster TV movie. The "My Pet Monster" line had seemingly faded away, but James, like a lot of fans his age, felt as if the "My Pet Monster" story had never reached its full potential. As a young filmmaker, James decided that someday he would create a "real" "My Pet Monster" movie. A movie that real fans could love and be proud of.

Before we talk about Meet My Pet Monster, please tell us about your journey as a filmmaker. How does a 6-year-old kid with a VHS camera and a crew of neighborhood kids become a successful filmmaker and storyteller?

Relentless perseverance. I started making back yard movies one day and I just never stopped. I had an intense drive to tell my stories. I did whatever I had to do to make my movies and make them as often as possible. I recruited the neighborhood kids to be my cast and crew. Even at that young age I was working all the time. I would produce a backyard feature or two almost yearly. Some of those kids stayed with me all of these years and our films just kept getting better and better. By the time I graduated high school we were all well seasoned filmmakers. It's what I had to do to push the boundaries that I needed to push. My instinct was right. Now we function like a well-oiled machine with dozens of festival wins under our belts.

What are some of the milestones you're proud of throughout your career?

Every film I make is a milestone because I'm always trying to go the extra distance and create content that is spectacular and hard to replicate. It took 4 years for me to make my post apocalyptic, sci-fi adventure film "BEYOND NARGIDIA" (2001). A lot of people told me I wouldn't finish that film but I did, so I've always been very proud of that. In 2004's "MOUNTAIN SURVIVAL" I performed some of the most dangerous and death defying on-screen stunts of my career. Those are always major bragging rights. More recently I completed a documentary film called "The ELECTRIC CYCLE RACING LEAGUE" (2022) that took 6 years to produce and it's a spectacular film wining many awards. In the last year we released several feature films including "MEET MY PET MONSTER" (2022), which cumulatively have won us literally dozens of awards. I was also recently awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Film for my human rights piece called "FEAR OF LOVE". That was a major highlight moment of my career. And lets not forget winning LAFA has been a spectacular accomplishment for us. We are very proud of this.



Let's chat about Meet My Pet Monster, for which you won Best Director (Feature), the Honorable Mention: Indie Feature, the Honorable Mention: Actress, and the Honorable Mention: Score. Matt and Hanna are wannabe young scientists with a common goal: to find a pet monster. What attracted you to create this fan film? Tell us about the process of converting this animated children's story into a live-action comedy.

Honestly I was tired of watching all of my favorite 80's franchises get remade, rebooted, and destroyed by a careless Hollywood system. I knew it was only a matter of time before My Pet Monster was exploited and ruined and I didn't want the legacy of my favorite 80's character to be some terrible CGI abomination. So I decided to take matters into my own hands and make the ultimate fan film. I knew I was the right fan to make it great so I produced this film out-of-pocket with plans to put it online for free. It's my gift for the fans. The film itself is an amalgamation of themes and characters from across the entire My Pet Monster universe. Taking into account the film, the animated series, the toys, the comic books etc. I had to note all of the best elements from these different sources and then put them all together into a cohesive story. It was almost like making a period piece. I had to do countless hours of research and analysis of all the original content I could find. It was very important to me to be true to the original source material and to blend it all into the new official cannon.

Did you draw inspiration from other films/ tv shows that deal with monsters and/or forbidden friendships?

My Pet Monster was already a semi spoof on Steven Spielberg's E.T. the Extra Terrestrial. So it was easy to play off of that. My film was designed to resemble a Jim Henson style 80's B horror film. So I took some inspiration from similar films of that era like Harry and the Hendersons, Garbage Pail Kids, Dark Crystal etc. I did countless hours of research into puppeteering and performance art. I even did an in-depth study of Sesame Street and the Muppets in order to really absorb the tricks that the masters use to bring inanimate objects to life.



The scene where Matt introduces the monster to Hanna works just wonderfully! Even though the audience already knows in the previous scene that Matt found the monster and brought it home, you were able to create the drama and make the audience feel exactly the same feelings as Hanna, revealing the monster for the first time there. Then we find out that the monster is not as scary as it seems. Can you take us to the first time you discovered the monster yourself, as a viewer of the original film?

I remember seeing the big blue monster toy for the first time in a Target store when I was about 7 years old. The moment I saw that crazy monster grin with his massive teeth, hideous green nose, and the punk rock hair I knew I had met a friend for life. As a child of the 80's I grew up watching the original movies and animated series obsessively and even some of my original backyard movies were little monster movies featuring the original toys. This was another reason why I really wanted to make my fan film. I wanted to finally make the film I wish I could have made as a 12-year-old kid.



If we were to ask you to name one element that was important to you to keep from the original series (besides the character of the monster that looks the same, of course), what would it be, and why?

Although I wanted this film to have a darker tone than the original movies I also wanted it to maintain the absurd humor of it all. Lets face it, the entire premise of this film is on the silly side but that is the charm. Entering the monster into a dog show for example. It's ridiculous that anyone would mistake this hideous monster for a pure bred dog but it's fun because of the absurdity. People are always dumb as hell in horror movies. My Pet Monster has always felt like a subtle criticism of the usual horror movie tropes. My Pet Monster is like the anti – E.T. the Extra Terrestrial. Instead of this mysterious and majestic alien from the depths of space full of wisdom and knowledge, we give you a freaky looking monster found in a hole in the ground. He's a wild monster that poops and slimes on everything yet he's your best friend. I think that's hysterical.

Michael Owens (Matt), Raven LaFey (Hanna), and even the scientists (Sean Christian Sprigle and Marten Borg) and the TV star BJ Zarccone (Rex Stalker) all did a really good job. It seems like they clearly understood the energy you were looking for from each of the characters. What was your casting process like and how did you enlist your key crew?

I knew from the very beginning that the cast had to be flawless for this movie to work. If the cast didn't believe in the monster then the audience would never buy it. I went through the usual public channels to hold auditions for new talent. It was a grueling three-hour pitch/ audition process where we interviewed a dozen people or so. In the end, no one was really up to the challenge. So I was forced to ask my "A list" actor friends to audition. I was humbled and relieved when they said yes. Marten Borg, for instance, is an amazing actor/ stuntman in LA and we have worked together on many projects so he was cool enough to come on board. Lead actor Michael Owens was a new recruit who dominated the auditions so we took a chance on him. This was his first movie and he hit a home run. We are very proud of him. Actress Raven LaFey is one of our company stars. She is unbelievably talented, gorgeous, and completely overqualified for a film like this. So of course I was thrilled when she said she was in. She got the vibe of this film right away. BJ Zarccone, Sean Sprigle and Lorenzo Coppotelli who played Rex Stalker, Dr. Eugene Snyder and the Monster, are all childhood friends of mine and have been on the crew for decades. It was suddenly so completely obvious they were all meant for their respective roles in this film. It was destiny. I don't know how I didn't realize it sooner; it would have saved me a lot of time.

How was the process of working with the actors and how did you manage to convey the vibe of the film to them?

As I mentioned before, there was a grueling three-hour pitch presentation that I had put together that discussed the history of the franchise, showing clips of the film and the animated series. We also broke down my screenplay and more. This was just the beginning. It was very important to me that the crew understood exactly what they were getting themselves into. We were in for a brutal six-month film shoot and everyone had to be on his or her "A" game. In the end, all of my actors were so professional and dedicated. They all understood what I was trying to do and they went out of their way to help me do it. It was very inspiring.



Working with a puppet monster presents some additional challenges on set. What were some of the tricky parts to handle during filming?

I really wanted this film to feel like an 80's B horror movie. I didn't want to use any CGI in this film for authenticity sake. But that meant I couldn't cheat either. So I had to figure out creative ways to keep all of the effects together in camera. We built furniture with false bottoms to hide the puppeteers for example. I used the original vintage toys from the 1980's as our monster characters. This was a challenge because I had to convert them into puppets or animatronics. It was almost more difficult to do it this way because instead of engineering a character from scratch I had to find ways to build the animatronics into the pre existing plush toys. The Monsters were almost always covered in slime or monster poop so at the end of the day the crew was too. It was appropriately gross on set.

When Hanna suggests calling Dr. Snyder, a conflict develops between her and Matt, who is afraid that the doctors will experiment on the monster. Matt's resistance at this point gives viewers a chance to get to know the monster, but you chose to jump right to the moment when Hanna returns, two weeks later. What was behind this choice?

Kids and adults today have incredibly short attention spans. I knew it would be very easy to lose the audience if the timing of this film wasn't exactly right. The typical "movie formulas" were not going to work for a film like this. So I experimented with a technique I like to call "A.D.D. filmmaking". I deliberately paced this film similar to that of a Saturday morning cartoon. Fast and to the point allowed Hannah and the audience to experience the highlights of the previous two weeks' antics through a flashback montage. It allowed for better delivery of the punch lines while moving the story along. I figured I'd let Hanna and the audience experience the monster for the first time at the same time. Let's see it all through her eyes then we can get on with our story.



The set design and the visual effects in the film are relatively simple, but in an amusing way, they fit the atmosphere of the story and the shooting style. If you had a bigger budget, would you do things differently?

I would have liked to see the monster perform a lot more physical action. It would have been nice to have the time and budget to see the Monster run around more, do more damage and be a lot more independent rather than sitting on a couch or riding around in a backpack. With that said, I felt like I actually had to hold back a little. The story arc was written as a trilogy so I had to leave myself some room for expansion in the next films.

At some point, Matt tells Hanna: "The monster doesn't need scientists, he needs a friend", and makes it clear to her that the monster has feelings. Beyond the comedy, what message did you want to convey to viewers?

On a deeper level I would say that this film is a criticism of the scientific industrial establishment. Today scientists are treated like they are holy men. It's simply not true. Science has always been weaponized, politicized, and manipulated for personal gain every day, on all sides, just like religion is. The character of Dr. Eugene Snyder is the perfect embodiment of what I like to call the arrogance of science. Dr. Snyder doesn't have altruistic intentions. He doesn't care about the well being of the monster. He hides behind his reputation. He just wants to further his agenda of greed and power by exploiting the monster. Great atrocities and crimes against humanity have been conducted in the name of science. Scientists are not always wise men. Sometimes they can be agents of death. Our world has an infinite amount of "experts" and "prophets" and plenty of people to worship them. Frankly I'm sick of them both and very few of them actually deserve my respect because no one really knows what's going on.

You've directed dozens of films before, but every project is a little different. What were the main takeaways from directing this project?

Making movies with puppets and animatronics is deceptively hard work. These guys at Lucasfilm or Jim Henson studios make it look easy but it's actually insanely tedious and mind-bogglingly difficult work. I now have an unbridled respect for all of these people that make puppet magic. If I'm flipping through the channels and I see Sesame Street come on I freak out. These actors must be damn geniuses. I'll never look at Sesame Street, The Muppets, or even Snuggles (fabric softener mascot) the same way again.



One of your favorite quotes is "I strive to make every frame of my films picture perfect." Can you explain why every frame matters?

A movie's timeline is the filmmaker's canvass. So why wouldn't I want to fill every inch of that canvas with spectacular imagery? I only have this short amount of time to tell a great story. Every moment should count. I've never understood these filmmakers that waste screen time with useless dull filler. I want my audience to be able to pull a frame from anywhere in my movie and have a fascinating example of color, light, and composition. No single frame should ever be wasted or taken for granted in a film.

If you had an unlimited budget, what would be your dream project to bring to life?

I currently have several amazing novels written that with an unlimited budget I would love to see produced into feature films and films series. I would also love to go back and finish a few long-overdue sequels to some of my earlier films like "BEYOND NARGIDIA" (2001) or MOUNTAIN SURVIVAL" (2004).



What's next for Meet My Pet Monster, and what's next for you?

“MEET MY PET MONSTER” (2022) will soon be released online for free for the enjoyment of fans and movie lovers alike. As I mentioned before the story was designed as a trilogy. Now with the success of this film there is no doubt we will come back to the My Pet Monster universe to complete the sequels. As for me personally, I’m currently writing one of my most important and anticipated projects to date called “WHERE THE DRAGONS SLEEP” (2024). It’s a semi autobiographical adventure novel about the crew and I as we struggle to produce our indie films against the backdrop of a cruel dystopian Hollywood.

Is there anything you wish to add, or someone you'd like to thank?

I want to give a shout out to the great actor Mr. Mark Parr. He played the Monster in the original 1986 My Pet Monster TV movie of which I was obsessed with growing up. He is a big fan of our film projects and I’ve had the wonderful opportunity to get to know him over the past couple of years. I know they often say “never meet your heroes.” That’s not always true. In this case I got to grow up and become friends with the OG Monster himself, which is just the coolest thing ever. I hope our film made you proud, Mark.

I would also like to thank LAFA for giving me the opportunity to participate in this most excellent interview. Being part of this film festival has truly been a life changing experience.

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