

A Puppet's Dark Night of the Soul

by Nancy Stetson

PABLO PASTORAL, A ONE-FOOT TALL WOODEN puppet with blue luminescent eyes, lives a life of perpetual struggle.

The marionette's story is told in seven episodes — or chapters — in *El Tormento de Pablo Pastoral* [*The Torment of Pablo Pastoral*], a film series that can be viewed on YouTube or at PabloPastoral.com.

"With Pablo, I really wanted to create an iconic character very relevant to these times," says director Logan Crannell, who created the lead character and wrote the story. "I wanted him to be like Charlie Chaplin's tramp, or Cantinflas, who is a Mexican version of Charlie Chaplin.

"I wanted to create an iconic character that was always put into really hard situations and difficult times and all the odds are stacked against them, but it never breaks their spirit. They keep fighting.

"That's the story of my life," he adds. "I've projected a lot of my life onto his. I never expected it to be so personal, I just wanted to make a puppet show. How did it get so intense and so personal? I wasn't planning that, but that's what happened."

Pablo Pastoral just showed up in his life one day, Crannell says.

"I was at a low point in my life. I had a house party, and the next morning I woke up and there was

a marionette puppet on my porch. I don't know how it got there."

Crannell sat down and started talking to the puppet as if it were his therapist. He began doing this regularly.

"I started wondering about him, and he became alive to me in a way. The first name that popped into my head was Pablo Pastoral, and that stuck."

When the puppet was attacked by his neighbor's dog, Crannell pieced Pablo back together. But when he became serious about making a movie using marionette puppets, he decided to build Pablo from scratch.

"He needed to be literally my creation," he says. "It took a lot of time."

One challenge: the puppet's face needed to express various emotions, although it doesn't move.

"That was the key," Crannell says.

"If it didn't sell, it wouldn't work right. I knew I had to get it right.

"I probably repainted the expression on his face 50 or 60 times. His face needs to convey everything and nothing at the same time. You're looking at this puppet's face for three and a half hours and it never changes. As he experiences all these different emotions and feelings, that expression has to work. It was difficult to make him look happy, sad, all at the same time."

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Pablo has a rakish thin mustache, a slash of red paint for a mouth, and sports a head of wild thick, black hair.

"His hair was influenced by Joan Jett's," Crannell says. "I loved her look. I thought: I gotta give Pablo some Joan Jett punk rock hair!"

He also painted the outside of Pablo's eyes blue, instead of white.

"I thought, 'Wait, what if I painted his entire eye blue, divorced from reality?' That's it! That's what finally made me realize I found the right look. His eyes are very piercing, luminescent."

Crannell began collecting vintage marionettes made in Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s. These antique puppets fill out the rest of the cast.

"A lot of them were super damaged, so I had to repaint something, make new clothes or [restore] missing arms or legs," he says. "I brought them back to looking good. They just have so much personality and their character is so defined. Whoever made these things, 80 or 90 years ago, they were telling their own story. It was fun to continue what they created and give them a new life."

composing the soundtrack

He tapped his friend and long-time collaborator, Wallace Mecham, to compose the music.

"We really wanted to do something different musically in each chapter," says Crannell. "So we pushed really hard to change the musical style and influences for each story."

"We wanted each story to be completely different from the one before it: a character study, a western, a family drama, an action movie."

Mecham and Crannell have a long history of collaborating together.

"We're so creatively hooked at the hip, it's insane," says Mecham. "Logan said, 'It's our story, like addiction and substance abuse and suffering. We need to write ourselves into this as a success story.'"

But Crannell wouldn't tell him the plot or how the movie ends.

"I literally watched every scene and listened to the vocal actors, all these talented people, and figured out how not to get in their way. I watched the puppets, and asked myself: are they feeling hope, pain, happiness, despair? And I played to that and tried to match those frequencies."

The puppets, he says, can't express emotion on their faces, so his music needed to do that.

He wrote the soundtrack in a year.

The project pushed him to write some of his best work, Mecham says.

"Wallace and I were both in a bad space in our lives then," says Crannell, "and we needed to project all of that onto an object, a puppet,



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in order to heal ourselves and become better artists and happier people, in general.

"We projected all of our pain we've been through in our lives onto him, and through telling the story, as Pablo heals we heal. It was a very therapeutic process for both of us."

But he knew the visuals and the music could only take the story so far.

"Without the right voice actors, it would fail," he says. "It took me about eight years to find [the voice of] Pablo, but when I heard the work of Valentin Angel Fernandez, who's based in Argentina, I knew I had him. He gave Pablo his soul."

a labor of love

The movie took Crannell 16 years to complete. "It wasn't expected to take this long, it just ended up that way," he says.

He began *Pablo Pastoral* in 2009.

In 2017, he moved to Fort Myers to be closer to his family.

It was bad timing; Hurricane Irma hit two weeks later. He was without power and water for 28 days.

Then Hurricane Ian destroyed all his sets in 2022, which he'd spent six years building. "I lost everything, except the puppets," he says.

He finished shooting the movie in a hotel room, flipping the bed up against the wall to give himself more space.

"I was too pissed off to give up," he says. "I thought: 'You destroyed all my sets, my house. I'll show you!'"

The sets, he says, were by far the hardest thing about the movie. He created 32 different sets, all 8 feet long and 4 feet high — a scale model set of all the locations.

"I had to build the entire town the characters live in," he says. "I had to make it real."

Crannell now works on the campus of the Alliance for the Arts in the Union Artist Studios.

going public

"One of the hardest things is when you make it public, and it's not your world anymore, it's everyone's," Crannell says. "You ask yourself: Was it worth it? Are people going to enjoy this? Should I have kept it for myself?"

"When you put so much heart into everything and you put it out there, it's the point where you're the most unsure. You have to see what happens."

The movie's finding its audience, and the feedback has been vindicating, Crannell says.

"I've had people call me up crying and saying, 'Thank you, because you helped me come to terms with a loved one that I lost, and it made me feel better.' That was huge for me. Wow, the story is connecting with people. We did something right."

"All that matters to me and Wallace is that it finds its audience."

"Pablo is a dreamer. He has all this love in his heart. And he wants to share the best parts of himself with someone. He doesn't have much luck finding that. He lives in a very violent and uncaring place."

"It's a story that I think a lot of people can really connect with," Crannell says. "It's about transcending a negative place you're in physically or emotionally."

"It's about transcending your pain." ●