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DIABOLIQUE CONTENT

WRITER KEVIN LEHANE AND FX SPECIALIST SHAUNE HARRISON'S
IRISH HORROR-COMEDY GRABS PINTS — AND FACES.

IT'S LAST CALL for drinks and you'd better include yourself in this round, as your life may well depend on it. *Grabbers* is the sleeper hit that astounded critics and audiences alike when it was unleashed on the UK festival circuit in late 2012. Now the film is about to hit stateside screens, and *Diabolique* spoke with two of the individuals without whom *Grabbers* would not be possible: writer Kevin Lehane and special effects artist Shaune Harrison—the men behind the monsters.

Set on the fictitious Erin Island, *Grabbers* is the tale of a misanthropic Garda (police officer) named Ciarán O'Shea (Richard Coyle), who becomes lumbered with an eager, young city officer Lisa Nolan (Ruth Bradley) who has been assigned to the island for a two-week stint. O'Shea seems happiest when he has a drink in his hand—a stark contrast to the teetotal and precocious manner of his new partner. Subsequent action results in their discovery of the 'Grabbers' (the moniker is allocated to the creatures by a local), which descend upon the unsuspecting rural Irish community in a vicious and terrifying way. One deterrent is discovered, however: if the townsfolk remain drunk, the monsters will leave them alone due to their inbuilt aversion to alcohol.

Taking refuge in the local bar, the populace begin to consume their weight in stout, whiskey and poteen (Irish moonshine). Hilarious without being exclusively colloquial, *Grabbers* is a significant turning point for Irish cinema, genre or otherwise. It has, however, been a long and arduous road to get to this point. "The script was originally written in 2007, and it took about 3 years to get anybody to read it," explains Lehane. "I began without having any connections in the industry, and just wrote it as a film I would have loved to see on a Friday night. It spawned from there."

The catalyst for *Grabbers* came while Lehane was backpacking. Having had terrible problems with mosquitos, he was advised by a fellow traveller that if he ingested large quantities of Marmite

(divisive yeast extract spread) that the source of his irritation would be repulsed and leave him be. When it was finished, he began knocking on doors—"Without any success." He adds: "You learn very quickly within the industry not to take 'no' as a literal 'no,' because it usually means 'not yet.' I had one company who approached me two years after initially passing on it wanting to work with me on it. I made sure to remind them that they had initially turned it down." Once Lehane became more familiar with the doggedness that is required to succeed within the film business, he began to make progress. "I managed to get one person in particu-

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lar to read it," he says. "[Working Title] helped me get it out, and suddenly everybody was interested in making it. It snowballed from there."

2009 onwards was when things really took off for Lehane. "I met Jon Wright and the producers Kate [Myers] and Tracy [Brimm], and within 12 months of that sit down meeting, we were shooting the film." The shoot lasted approximately two months, but





filming was split over the Christmas period. “It was a full year in post-production,” Lehane adds, “because there were a lot of visual effects and it’s quite a low budget production, so it took its time.”

FX wizard Shaune Harrison, who cut his teeth working for Image Animation (*Hellraiser*, *Nightbreed*) in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, came to *Grabbers* via Jon Wright. After coming on board, however, Harrison initially had some trepidation about the magnitude of Wright and Lehane’s ideas. “I asked him what it was about and he said, ‘Imagine a giant octopus in the sea,’

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to which I replied that I couldn’t do it, as that’s CG,” he remarks. “He had no designs whatsoever at that stage, and it was so early on.” And what did this small crew have to work with? Not a lot it would seem. “There was a £3 million budget. The first thing they asked was ‘How can we do this cheaply?’ Paddy was adamant that he didn’t want everything made [digitally]. They simply didn’t have the means to do so. We knew we had to get creative.”

The low budget may have set challenges for the SFX team, but it meant that Lehane could become more involved. The tightness of the crew meant that his presence on set was far greater than most writers are

usually granted in an adaptation of their work. “As it was such a low-budget production, I was included a lot more,” Lehane says. He elaborates, before hinting: “The fact that I’m Irish was a big help. One of the producers was French-American, the other was English. Jon claims he’s Irish, but he left when he was about 12, and he’s got a strong Herefordshire accent. I was relied on as the Irishman on the production.”

Once the team was on the same page while developing their concepts, the film’s titular creatures became priority number one. “The *Grabbers* themselves were always intended to be a creature which lay somewhere between a spider and an eel, that moved like tumbleweed and had this long tongue which would shoot out at things,” Lehane says. The ecology of the beasts was also considered: “I knew it was something which needed rain to survive, so it was going to be wet. I intended to make *the* definitive tentacle creature. I wanted to make the ecology of the monsters really robust, and to give them a life cycle and their own idiosyncratic characteristics.” This belief in his monsters, and the foresight of meticulously defining their world, allowed Lehane to immerse them within Erin Island in an effective and natural manner.

Harrison was given the task of developing one of the largest creatures. “We had the mother grabber, which was called Grabberella, and that was six feet in diameter. We had to work out how many tentacles we were going to attach. It became 13. That was a very strange number to work with. Even when I was drawing it initially, it was so difficult to get 13 on there, so they had to be double layered.” This star-like creature, with its vicious looking mouth at the centre, remains one of the most memorable monster images used within the film.

Not all the creatures made it from the page to the screen, however. “We had little creatures originally called Jumpers, which had two little legs and would hop, like chickens,” says Lehane. “Then they would lose those legs, like a reverse tadpole and would grow tentacles.” So, why

did these beasts not make it into the final cut? “When we started to do concept work with Paddy Eason and Jon, they ended up looking like an entirely different species. We didn’t have time to answer all of the questions which these creatures would arise.”

Not all of *Grabbers*’ creatures proved to be such a massive challenge. “The eggs were simpler,” Harrison notes, “as they were just balls. My wife made these beautiful translucent silicone eggs, which had so much depth and feel to them, they had so many veins and stuff inside.” Everything then took on a new and exciting pace, as a new member joined the team. “[Concept artist Paul Catling] came in and nailed every design first time. I had recommended him, and it was great that he joined the crew. His production paintings were beautiful.”

With a definite vision of how to proceed and a clear sense of the budgetary limitations put in place, Harrison was ready to rise to the challenge. “Because I’d worked at Image Animation in the ‘80s and ‘90s, it was nice to return to that old school vibe. We were working on the fly and that made us more creative. Jon wanted that ‘80s feel and we gave him ‘80s effects,” he says. Lehane, too, was intent on capturing *Grabbers*’ ‘80s feel. “The definitive era for the monster movie was the ‘50s, but the ‘80s had its fair share as well,” says Lehane. “I grew up with *Grem-lins*, *Jaws*, and the John Carpenter films; they were all what excited me back then.”

Lehane continues: “Everyone is chasing the Amblin aesthetic at the moment, and that’s essentially because everyone in power in the industry today grew up with the same reference points. I don’t know if everyone’s being very successful at it, but they’re definitely trying. *Grabbers* was definitely aiming to be an Amblin movie set in Ireland.”

Although *Grabbers* strays from the Irish stereotype which is oftentimes placed on screen, its marketing campaign has been largely focused on the alcohol consumption it depicts. “I tend to focus on the story as a whole, rather than one element of it,” says Lehane of the possible

mixed messages sent out by that marketing scheme. “It’s structured as a mystery; you expect it to go a very different route than the way it does. Then the alcohol got pushed front and center.” It’s hard to know if this was a sore point or not; if it were kept secret, it would make *Grabbers* a movie with one of the best midway plot twists in recent history.

Lehane sticks to his guns in respect to the integral part of the story which the alcohol serves. “It’s their only weapon,” he explains. “They can’t fight back, so they do what they have to do to take themselves off the menu. It’s not any excuse to get drunk, it’s the last resort.” Being well versed in Irish cinema, Lehane knew exactly what he didn’t want from *Grabbers*. “I didn’t want it to fall into the trap of everyone speaking Irish and dancing jigs at the crossroads, with livestock crossing the roads, holding up cars and stuff,” he stresses. “I didn’t want to portray Ireland as living in the ‘50s while the rest of the world is moving at warp speed. You see that a lot in other Irish films, where they just focus on the parochial. [*Grabbers*]’ setting is somewhere that’s real and those characters do exist. It can be truthful to Ireland without being all ‘Begorragh’ and ‘Bejesus.’”

The Irish have a rich tradition of monsters in both folklore and mythology, as well as in later literary offerings, yet there seems to be an inherent lack of quality Irish horror in contemporary cinema. “I think it has a lot to do with budgets to be honest with you,” Lehane surmises. “We tend to be hampered by that. We were putting 35 foot monsters on screen that were eating people and throwing things about the place. There are a lot of restrictions; you can’t shoot at night, because you get penalized a lot. This whole notion that you hear on sets around the world where people are shooting 18 hour days, busting their asses to get the best of everything on screen while they have that window to shoot the film – that really isn’t the case in Ireland.” This restrictive nature may be part of the reason why the interior photography was relocated to Belfast, in Northern Ireland, which is under differ-

ent laws to the Republic. “You can’t move your unit base too quickly, or too far from where people are living, as you will have to pay a fortune to put the crew up and there’s many other things like that which make it very difficult,” Lehane says about filming in [southern] Ireland. “We know we can’t pull off those big cinematic projects. Hopefully *Grabbers* will turn the tide on that a little bit.”

One instance which beautifully encapsulates the chaotic shoot of *Grabbers* comes from Harrison: “The most terrifying shot for me was when they set fire to the Grabber, as it was the only one we had.” The scene was, however, integral to the story and so it was necessary to ignite the beast. “It was an expensive prop and Jon kept saying to me ‘Don’t make it perfect, make it look like it’s just come out of the sea,’ so we were using all sorts of things, including adding brown sugar to it, to give it a crustiness. Then they set it on fire. It was silicone and so it was fireproof, but even so, I was wary. Jon assured me that they’d just set fire to a corner of it, but the entire thing went up and I glanced over at Jon in absolute fear. It was a 3 minute take, and by the end I was just a wreck. It was okay in the end, thankfully,” he breathes, with an audible sigh of relief.

“It was a crazy shoot,” says Harrison, “but it was really like an old fashioned creature film, which I loved, because I hadn’t done one in such a long time. I’ve worked on so many movies in the last few years which have had endless money and people involved, and to go back to something with such a small budget and crew was great.”

by Colin McCracken

