

● ANDRÉ ØVREDAL: SCARY STORIES' NEW HORROR MASTER

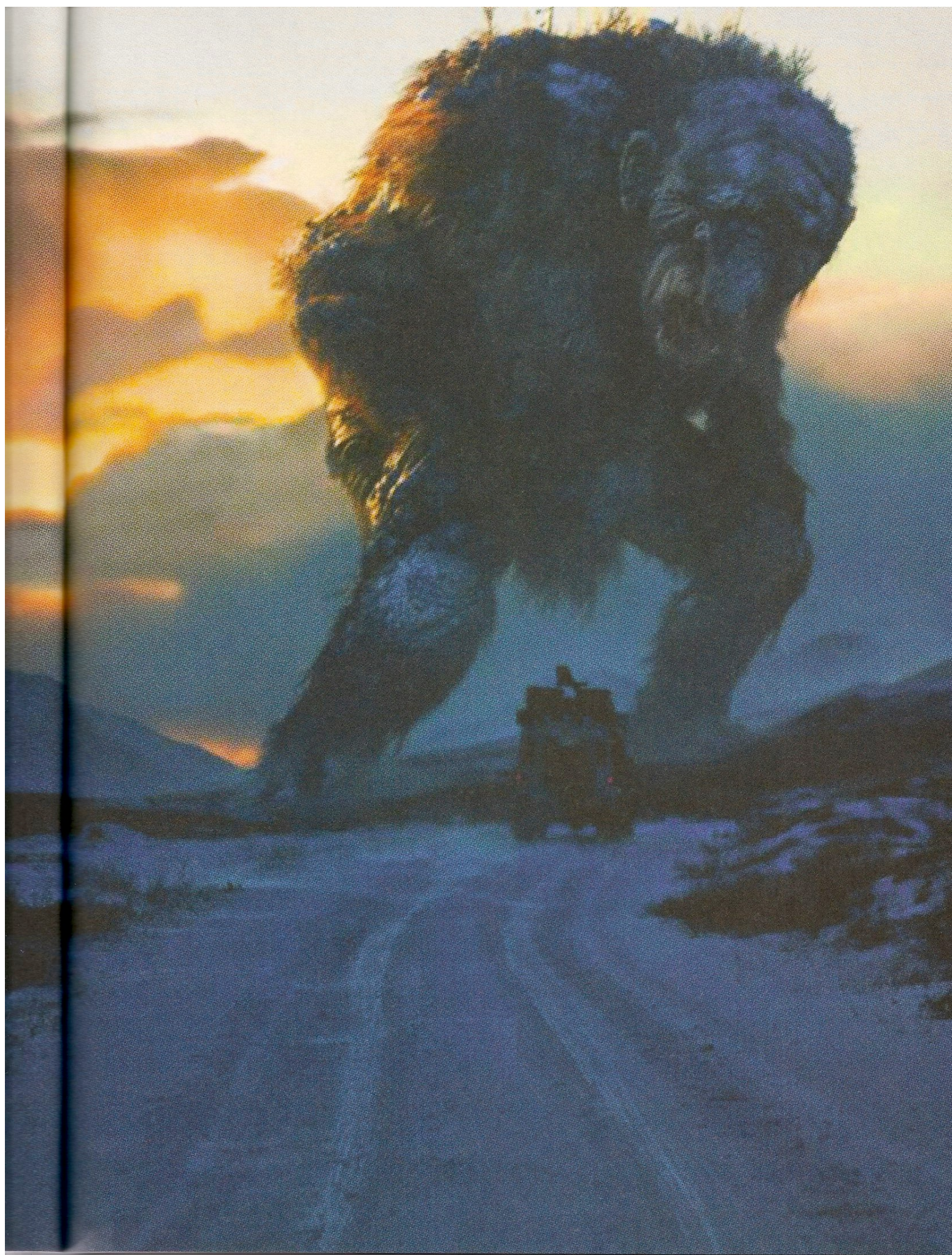
by OWEN WILLIAMS

When *THE AUTOPSY OF JANE DOE* first cracked open in 2016, critics were quick to observe the abrupt shift in style from its predecessor, *TROLLHUNTER*. Norwegian director André Øvredal had broken out internationally with the chaotic found-footage folk horror, but *JANE DOE* was something else entirely: contained where *TROLLHUNTER* was sprawling; austere where *TROLLHUNTER* was informal; unsettling where *TROLLHUNTER* was just fun.

The scrappiness of *TROLLHUNTER* was, according to Øvredal himself, uniquely necessary for that particular project, whereas the controlled camera of *JANE DOE* was much more in keeping with his work in commercials. Found footage isn't a "natural" way to make films, he explained: a documentary format is simply expedient when a story requires a lot of exposition, and a shaky camera is useful when the budget requires characters to look away from the monsters as often as possible. *JANE DOE*, by contrast, doesn't blink.

"André is genuinely very gifted, and very exacting," mused its heavyweight star, Brian Cox. "He's one of these directors that very much knows what he doesn't want. He doesn't storyboard, so it's a long process to find out the shot that he does want. So that can be quite exhausting. But he's usually right, and he's got a very good cameraman [Roman Osin] who's very patient with him. He's got a great sensibility about him."

TROLLHUNTER, Øvredal's Norwegian-language feature debut, involves a film crew investigating Hans (comedian Otto Jespersen), who they believe to be a notorious poacher until the outlandish truth is revealed. It turns out Hans is the lone in-the-field employee of a shady government subsection dedicated to the control and, where necessary, eradication of Norway's indigenous mythical creatures. Trolls are real, immense, diverse in subspecies (we encounter Ringlefinches, Tosserlads and a Mountain King) and, in one sequence, extremely flatulent. They chew tires as if they were gum and can smell the blood of a Christian man, but can be fooled by hunters doused with slimy compounds of troll stench. Pylons keep



them fenced in remote locations, but when they encroach on civilization Hans takes them out with UV lights which either turn the trolls to stone or make them explode, depending on age. The film's ragged camerawork belies some impressive creature FX, their designs based on the fairy-tale illustrations of Scandinavian artists like John Bauer and Theodor Kittelsen. Filming took place in rugged locations across Norway.

THE AUTOPSY OF JANE DOE, meanwhile, largely plays out in a single location: the basement mortuary of father-and-son coroners Brian Cox and Emile Hirsch. When the police bring in a mysterious body for investigation, recovered pristine in the foundations of a violent crime scene, the pair uncover layer upon layer of mystery. Their beautiful, porcelain-skinned Jane Doe (Olwen Catherine Kelly, actually providing a sly performance despite being motionless on a table), has suffered a litany of horrifying injuries: her wrists and ankles shattered; her tongue cut out; her lungs somehow burned to a crisp; sliced and stabbed; mutilated internally; forced to swallow a cloth covered in occult glyphs; the inside of her flesh similarly tattooed... and all without leaving any external sign. "She doesn't even have a broken nail," Cox marvels. The solution dates back to the Salem witch trials of 1693, and the result is a long, dark night.

JANE DOE's writers Ian Goldberg and Richard Naing name-checked David Lynch and the atmospherically sinister early work of Roman Polanski among the film's influences. And yet beneath that ominous surface are elements betraying that it's the work of TROLLHUNTER's director after all. Even given projects that seem wildly different tonally and stylistically, Øvredal's sensibility remains in evidence to link them. Despite his perhaps mischievous protests that TROLLHUNTER wasn't within his normal wheelhouse, JANE DOE is quietly a goofier movie than it's usually given credit for. It's not even above a cheap jump scare from a cat.

Crime scene prologue notwithstanding, JANE DOE kicks off with an autopsy sequence cut to the down-home hillbilly foot-stomping of British blues-rockers the Temperance Movement—so while the film may be chilly, it isn't that austere. For all its formal aesthetic and thoughtful narrative eddies swirling around father-son relationships and the historic abuse of women, its escalating mystery is so outlandish that it flirts with absurdity, while the thunderstorm outside gives the autopsy room the atmosphere of Frankenstein's lab. This is a gothic melodrama and, Salem-centric specifics aside, the whole narrative could easily be transplanted to a castle in Bavaria. Cox and Hirsch are the Baron and his Igor, wondering what the hell's going on with the thing on the slab (Jespersen in TROLLHUNTER, on the other hand, is Van Helsing). Roger Corman might have made that film in the '60s. He'd have appreciated that it didn't need much finance.

Both TROLLHUNTER and JANE DOE involve a conflict between science and the supernatural; the encroachment of the old and unknowable on the modern and rational; intelligent characters facing opponents that can't be defeated with reason. JANE DOE may be gothic, but in



its own way it's simultaneously just as much folk horror as TROLLHUNTER. Fundamentally it's a film about a witch: we're just dealing with the aftermath of her story in a century far past the original events.

"We don't really believe these things anymore," Øvredal says, "so I really like mixing them in with the modern world and seeing what happens. I'm really interested in pitting rational human beings against the incomprehensible."

In short, it's little wonder that its director caught the eye of Guillermo del Toro. Øvredal was on his radar as soon as TROLLHUNTER smashed its way across the world. Like the early del Toro, Øvredal has been alternating English-language and homegrown projects (he followed JANE DOE with the Norwegian MORTAL, a "superhero, northern mythology-based romantic action road-movie, set in fjords and beautiful landscapes," shot in late 2017 but yet to be released). And when del Toro decided to cede the direction of SCARY STORIES TO TELL IN THE DARK and step back into a producer role, Øvredal was his first and only choice as his own replacement. But that's another tale...

