

VARIETY

Juliette Lewis Talks Working With Peter Dinklage in ‘The Thicket’ and Explains Her Surprise Exit From ‘Yellowjackets’: ‘I’m Good for a Series for Two Seasons’

By: Marc Malkin



Samuel Goldwyn Films /Courtesy Everett Collection

Juliette Lewis has a very good reason why her horseback ridings skills are so impressive in her new thriller, “The Thicket.”

“I’m a third-place ribbon barrel racer,” Lewis says on this week’s episode of “Just for Variety.” “I was an equestrian. I grew up riding horses before I was 12. So the first thing we did in Calgary

[where the movie was shot in the dead of winter] was get on a horse. They wanted to check us out, how you rode. I got a very good rating with my horse riding.”

In the Elliott Lester-directed movie (in theaters Sept. 6), based on Joe R. Lansdale’s book of the same name, Lewis plays Cut Throat Bill, a violent hardened outlaw at the turn of the 20th century who kidnaps a young girl (Esmé Creed-Miles). The girl’s brother (Levon Hawke) hires a bounty hunter (Peter Dinklage) to rescue his sister.

Cut Throat Bill, written in the original book as a man, is vicious, Lewis says, and “devoid of humanity, where you cannot feel another person’s pain and you actually relish their pain. That, I don’t relate to.”

But she adds, “I can imagine how someone could get there.”

Cut Throat Bill is such a great name. I’m glad they didn’t try to change it to Cut Throat Mary.

They were like, “How do you justify Bill?” Her original name is Wilhelmina. I don’t know how Wilhelmina goes into Bill, but it does.

Why would you even have to justify it?

We don’t. She doesn’t. That’s what I love. I was basically given all these ingredients and then, “How do I make this real, a real person?,” from the mangled voice because she survived a near decapitation and then you hear her legend before you meet her. She’s her savagery and everyone thinks she’s a man.

How did you find that voice?

I was in my kitchen and I read a certain line from this script that talks about her gravelly voice or something, and I just tried it. In different roles, I’ll use either more of a base in my voice or a higher pitch, softer. I’m happy that I could go that low. I didn’t know I could until I tried it. It was hard to yell in that range. So many things that were hard, but you’re sort of just walking the walk of trying to make something really real and rich.

Do you go off set and go to Starbucks and use that voice to order a cappuccino?

No, I did not [*laughs*]. And ironically, if people quote lines from movies I’ve been in or, “Hey, talk like your character,” they’re gone. I’m like, “What?” I don’t even know how to do it. It’s funny.

Which of those characters is the one that everyone always says, “Give me that line?”

It runs the gamut from “Christmas Vacation,” “What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?” and Mallory, of course, from “Yellowjackets.” That’s always a compliment when they remember things I said.

The weather is its own character in “The Thicket.”

It was so freezing and it was so uncomfortable the entire shoot. That was really helpful, though, for the role I was playing. She's not a comfortable person. Sometimes they CGI breath or the horse's breathing, but we didn't have to do any of that. We learned about this thick face cream you have to use because your skin is freezing and it'll turn into chapped leather. And they were like, "Don't worry, you'll get used to it." Because it was 20-below, I never physically experienced that in my life. I was a big fan of "The Revenant." I really loved that movie. But when I first heard we were going to the snow, I was not jumping to that because I'm a California-blooded girl. It was a challenge.

You shot in only 22 days so you couldn't waste any time. It doesn't matter how cold or painful it gets, you got to shoot.

That is correct. I am at an age now where I get to reminisce fondly of the good old days of the '90s when we shot things in four months. "Cape Fear" was four months. "Natural Born Killers" was four and a half months. Now you're lucky if you get eight weeks. But it's a testament to how wonderful the people are in every department. And the director on this movie, Elliott Lester, was so passionate and maintains enthusiasm and team spirit morning to night.



Peter Dinklage in 'The Thicket' *Samuel Goldwyn Films /Courtesy Everett Collection*

Were you a "Game of Thrones" person before working with Peter?

I have not seen a single episode. I don't think he knows that. Sorry.

I love your honesty.

I don't think he'll care. I was just a Peter Dinklage fan. I've seen his work. There's certain people you go, "Oh, that one. That one. Wow, that one takes me somewhere." And there's such a deep resonance. You can't describe it when you see someone so fully present in anything they do and so much their own thing, but such depth. It's a highlight of my career and it reminds me of when I worked with Robert De Niro in "Cape Fear." There's sort of a transcendence that takes place where you touch on such a truth between these two people and we're barely talking. There's all this stuff that's there when those characters meet.

Now that you've loved working with Peter so much, are you going to watch "Game of Thrones?"

[Laughs] Do not put that as a quote, like, "I think I'll watch 'Game of Thrones' now. Peter's pretty cool." No.

It's a particular genre.

It's a particular genre. I'm weird. I like music or documentaries. I know, I'm one of these people. However, I have gotten into some shows. I got into "Baby Reindeer" and then it broke my heart. It was so difficult.

I do have to talk to you about "Yellowjackets." People were very upset that you weren't coming back. Did you know you were going to be killed off?

I very much knew. I think I'm good for a series for two seasons. It's a different kind of work. So what do I want to say? I can't wait to see the third season. I think the writing team is so phenomenal. They had many storylines that were always to be realized, and so that's what they're doing. For me, there's so much in our industry with series that's exciting, but in my creative DNA, I like moviemaking. It's something I thoroughly understand with a single director, a finite period of time and knowing beginning, middle and an end. And I really relish those confines.

When you signed up for "Yellowjackets," do you say to them, "Hey, two seasons, that's enough for me. I can't do more than two?"

No, I didn't say that. We just worked stuff out... I did say very other specific things, but I finished "Yellowjackets" and then I went right into "The Thicket," which is not a joyride, but it was all perfect for the movie.

Is there a role back in the day you really wanted and it got away from you?

I always wanted to play a jazz singer. You know what I wanted to do? Well, it's a moot point because it's hard to get the rights, but it was Anita O'Day. She was not the most beautiful looking jazz singer. She did bebop and she would sort of do scat and she, like all the singers of that time, lived a wild, colorful life.

Did you try to get the rights?

I did for a minute. And then there was a remake I wanted to do of a Fellini movie, one of my favorites, “Nights of Cabiria.” Giulietta Masina, she’s almost Chaplin-esque in it. It’s poignant and funny and whimsical. I really love that movie. I don’t know how you get rights to that, but that was a dream of mine for a second.

This Q&A was edited and condensed. You can listen to the full interview above or find “Just for Variety” wherever you download your favorite podcasts.