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# CIFF: Filmmaker wanted to "bend the genre" with Alberta-shot dark western **The Thicket**

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Peter Dinklage in *The Thicket*. Photo submitted. cal

There was a lot of talk about fathers on the Alberta set of *The Thicket*.

In fact, the film is dedicated to British director Elliott Lester's father, who died a week after making his son promise he would take the reins of the dark western. Lester's father tended to look over the scripts his son was considering and strongly encouraged him to do the film, which he had been attached to for a few years. *The Thicket* stars Peter Dinklage, Levon Hawke, Esme Creed-Miles, Metallica's James Hetfield, Leslie Grace and Juliette Lewis.

Lewis plays a ruthless gang leader named Cut Throat Bill and is the daughter of character actor Geoffrey Lewis, who died in 2015 and was a veteran of more than 200 films, including a number of westerns.

"He had done a movie called *High Plains Drifter* where he played a villain," says Lester, in an interview with Postmedia. "For her, Cut Throat Bill was a callback for him. She speaks about her father quite a lot."

While *The Thicket* does not seem like a family movie, per se, the vibe was appropriate.



Juliette Lewis in *The Thicket*. Photo submitted. cal

The film, which will screen Thursday, Sept. 19 at the Jack Singer Concert Hall as part of the opening gala for the Calgary International Film Festival, has some definite hallmarks of the classic western, but it is essentially a story about family, or more specifically the lack of family.

Hawke, who is the son of actors Ethan Hawke and Uma Thurman, plays Jack Parker. After the death of his parents in turn-of-the-century Texas, Jack is quickly thrust into another drama when the murderous Cut Throat Bill and a gang of ruthless outlaws kidnap his sister, Lula (Creed-Miles). He enlists the help of Reginald Jones (Dinklage), a bounty hunter who eventually leads a band of outcasts that includes a former slave named Eustace Howard (Gbenga Akinnagbe) and a prostitute named Jimmie Sue (Leslie Grace) in pursuit of Bill, who plans on taking Lula to a beautiful but chilling no-man's land called The Thicket. Throughout the action, we learn snippets of the characters' backstory and what they all have in common.

“With all of the characters, I was trying to expose this idea of humanity,” says Lester. “There was the notion that everybody was an orphan and everybody was looking for a home and what does it look like. Reginald Jones doesn't have a home, doesn't have a family. Eustace doesn't have a home, doesn't have a family. Jack is losing his family. Bill never had a home. She has this dysfunctional gang that acts as her family.”

The Thicket was initially set to be shot in Spain. Dinklage, who is also a producer of the film and is probably best known for his Emmy-winning turn as Tyrion Lannister in HBO's *Game of Thrones*, has been attached to the project since 2014, having optioned the 2013 novel by Joe R. Lansdale. The initial production was derailed by COVID. Lester was friends with the late David Von Ancken, who had worked as a director and producer on the Alberta-shot AMC western series *Hell on Wheels* from 2011 to 2016. Before he died in 2021, he introduced Lester to Chad Oakes and Mike Frislev, the Calgary-based producers from Nomadic Pictures, who were behind *Hell on Wheels*. They were also producers of 2006's *Broken Trail*, another Alberta-shot western directed by Hollywood icon, and Lester's friend, Walter Hill. Hill approved of both the screenplay and the location.

Nomadic “became the film's champion” and helped bring the production to Alberta in late February and early March 2023. For one very frigid month, the film was shot in various locations outside of Calgary including Albertina Farm on the Bow and Highwood rivers, CL Ranch west of Calgary, the Bow River Ranch near the Springbank Airport and on the Stoney Nakoda reserve.



The Alberta-shot western *The Thicket* will open the 2024 Calgary International Film Festival. From left, Leslie Grace, Gbenga Akinnagbe, Levon Hawke and Peter Dinklage. Photo courtesy, Calgary International Film Festival. [cal](http://cal)

“It was -35 C,” Lester says. “We shut down because sometimes the windchill was so bad. We couldn’t cope at times. Human beings are not meant to be out there in period clothing. But we persevered. It was really interesting because the Calgary crew were so used to it. They really kept me going. They were a real inspiration.”

Conscientious students of the genre may detect some allusions to well-known westerns, including John Ford’s 1956 classic *The Searchers* and even Clint Eastwood’s 1994 revisionist classic *Unforgiven*. But Lester says he actually went out of his way to avoid obvious tropes of the western. One of the conditions he had was that the character of Cut Throat Bill be changed from a man to a woman, although there is some initial confusion about what gender she is. The costume design and other aesthetic touches — including Grace’s afro hair stylings — were among the nuances that Lester says “believe the genre.”

“You’ve got really, really strong female leads, you’ve got a completely diverse cast,” he says. “I consciously made sure that you never heard the N-word because even though you probably weren’t aware of it, I wanted to make a conscious choice to show that Eustace was a truly free man.”

Lewis exudes a concentrated creepiness as Cut Throat Bill that only strengthens the film's sense of existential dread that seems to overcome everyone as they near the mysterious "thicket" for the film's climax.

"It felt like he would feel too trope-y as a male," says Lester about the decision to change Bill from a man to a woman. "While those characters did exist, I wanted to bend the genre a little bit, which I think was important. As a director, you have an obligation to change the optics of things and I felt like I had the vehicle to do it."

Lester, whose previous work includes the crime thriller *Blitz* with Jason Statham and the HBO drama *Nightingale* with David Oyelowo, will be walking the red carpet at the Jack Singer Concert Hall on Thursday alongside Dinklage, Grace, Oakes and Frislev. He says he is looking forward to returning to the city and hopes to film here again.

"There wasn't one negative experience around that crew," he says. Had we gone to Spain, I don't think we could have achieved the same results. It would have been impossible. The guys have a shorthand and it was lovely to watch. They all knew each other. They were all so willing and able."

*The Thicket opens the Calgary International Film Festival at 8 p.m. on Sept. 19 at the Jack Singer Concert Hall. There will be a red carpet gala featuring Peter Dinklage, Leslie Grace and Elliott Lester. The film festival runs from Sept. 19 to 29 at various venues. Visit [ciffcalgary.ca](http://ciffcalgary.ca).*