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How Mexican Directors Conquered Hollywood

Ioan Grillo MARCH 3, 2018

From left, Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro G. Iñárritu at the Gotham Awards in 2006. Credit Stephen Lovekin/WireImage for the Independent Filmmaker Project, via Getty Images



MEXICO CITY — In 1960s America, a cleaning woman who can't speak and lives next door to a gay artist falls in love with a humanoid sea creature held in a government lab for Cold War experiments. It sounds like a pitch that would make Hollywood producers screw up their faces and scream, "Next!" But the Mexican director Guillermo del Toro not only procured a \$19.5 million budget for "The Shape of Water" but also made it into a commercial and critical success, in the running for 13 prizes at the Academy Awards ceremony on Sunday.

If Mr. del Toro wins the best director award at the Oscars, it will be the fourth time a filmmaker from Mexico has taken the prize in five years, all with unconventional films. Alejandro G. Iñárritu won in 2015 for "Birdman," the bizarrely hilarious tale of an aging superhero actor trying to get serious on Broadway, and he did it again in 2016 with "The Revenant," a radically different western focused on a quest for revenge in subzero temperatures. Alfonso Cuarón triumphed in 2014 with "Gravity," a sci-fi story that many said was impossible to make, before it made over \$723 million at the worldwide box office.

Referred to as "The Three Amigos," the title of a book about their transnational cinema, these directors are not the only Mexican filmmakers who have won recent accolades in Hollywood. There is also the cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, who has three Oscars; Rodrigo Prieto, who shot "The Wolf of Wall Street," "Argo" and "Brokeback Mountain"; and another Oscar winner, the production designer Eugenio Caballero.

The Amigos' success shows the strength of an artistic circle; they are longtime friends who have encouraged one another to take risks. They began making their films when the Mexican industry was at a low in the 1980s, dominated by raunchy movies about escort bars and overshadowed by telenovela soaps. The Amigos bucked the trend with dark stories about H.I.V., inner-city dogfights and historic horrors.

Their early Hollywood movies, such as Mr. Cuarón's "Little Princess" (1995) and Mr. del Toro's "Mimic," (1997) had moderate success. In the 2000s, their triumphs got steadily bigger, as did their budgets; "Gravity" cost \$100 million.

Most of their major films have not been explicitly about Mexico, but their background comes through in subtle ways. "Del Toro's films show a belief that people have in spirits

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and demons that you find in small Mexican pueblos,” said the film journalist Salvador Franco. Mr. del Toro’s style can also be compared to the literary magic realism of Latin America as he mixes serious dramatic moments with sea monsters and fairies.

The films of Mr. Iñárritu break from the moral optimism of Hollywood to portray a more dysfunctional world. In “The Revenant,” this comes out in a reimagining of the western to show how tough life really was on the frontier of the 1820s. Mr. Cuarón displays Mexico’s sharp class awareness, looking at intersections of the rich and poor in films such as “Great Expectations.”

In contrast, the Pixar film “Coco,” nominated this year for best animated feature film, is a wide-open celebration of Mexican culture directed by an American, Lee Unkrich, with a Latino cast. It broke box office records in Mexico.

The Amigos directors have not turned their cameras on a topic that telenovelas, Netflix series and movies on both sides of the border have focused on — the drug trafficking that contributed to a record 29,168 homicides in Mexico last year.

Mr. del Toro himself suffered from violent crime when gangsters kidnapped his father for ransom in 1997, making him and his family leave Mexico. His hurt and struggles come out beautifully in his own distinct style of cinema, in stories that flip between real life and the magic of fairy tales.

Even as this circle of filmmakers has triumphed, however, Hollywood has yet to embrace Latino actors. A study by Stacy L. Smith of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism found only 3 percent of speaking characters in the top 100 movies of 2016 were Latinos, a result that prompted protests by the National Hispanic Media Coalition.

“We’re not asking for equity anymore,” said the president of the coalition, Alex Nogales, in a January news release. “We’re demanding it.”

The remarkable successes of these directors — and the ways in which they’ve made their heritage part of more-universal movies — is a reminder of how ethnic and cultural diversity can enrich the movie industry.

Hopefully by next year’s award season, audiences will see it in front of the camera as well.

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Mexico's cinema powerhouse: The three amigos who are sweeping the Oscars

Award-winning Mexican directors Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón have been close friends for decades

[CECILIA BALLESTEROS](#)

Mexican director Guillermo del Toro, who picked up four Oscars this Sunday for his film *The Shape of Water*, belongs to one of the most talented trios of the so-called new golden age of Mexican cinema. Colleagues and friends, Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Del Toro are not only from the same generation (the “Three Amigos,” as they are called in Hollywood, were all born in the 1960s), they also all got their start with Cha cha cha films, a production company they founded together in 2007. Although the company no longer exists, it spearheaded some of Mexico's most iconic films.

With the Best Director award for *The Shape of Water*, Del Toro has entered the history books. The victory marks the fourth time that a Mexican director has won the prize in the last five years. Cuarón was awarded the Oscar in 2013 for *Gravity*, and Iñárritu in 2014 for *Birdman* and in 2015 for *The Revenant*. Over the course of their spectacular cinematic careers, the friends have swept up a total of 25 Oscars.

The image from the Cannes Film Festival last year of mariachis celebrating with Mexican film stars Salma Hayek, Alfonso Cuarón, Gael García Bernal, Emmanuel Lubezki and Del Toro is likely to make the rounds again after the triumph of yet another Mexican director and in celebration of a long friendship that began in the 1980s. The friendship between the Jalisco-born director and his two older mates from Mexico City started on the set of *La Hora Marcada*, a Mexican version television series by Televisa styled after the famous *Twilight Zone*. Del Toro was director's assistant and Cuarón worked on special effects. The two wrote and directed the stories with the help of Emmanuel Lubezki – known as *El Chivo*, or the goat – another close

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friend and the only cinematographer to win three consecutive Oscars. He was later introduced to Iñárritu, who was working in radio.

From that moment on they were inseparable, despite Hollywood fame and the distance between them: Cuarón lives in London, Iñárritu and Del Toro in Los Angeles, although Del Toro likes to tell the press that he would live “wherever the currency exchange takes me.” His family left Mexico permanently in 1998 after his father, a car businessman, was kidnapped for 72 days. It’s said another close friend, director James Cameron, was prepared to give him a million dollars to pay the ransom.

Del Toro grew up in Guadalajara, one of Mexico’s biggest cities, in a normal, upper-middle class family but was never ostentatious and had few luxuries (his colleagues from the Science Institute remember he wore plain white Dunlops when Nike and Adidas sports shoes were in fashion). White, chubby, kind and very popular with his fellow students, Del Toro loved tales by writer H.P. Lovecraft, the ghost stories of his grandmother’s mansion (a woman who was a big influence on the young director – she performed two exorcisms on him), and his mother’s passion for tarot cards and strange pets (crows, white rats). These unusual tastes gave Del Toro’s works a touch of darkness but as a person he was always cheerful. “Our group relied on his engine of laughter and jokes,” his friend Javier Cañedo told Mexican newspaper *La Reforma*. “In the fourth semester of prep school, more women joined the class and he and I began to woo them, so much so that it was called ‘the class of lust’. Both of us married former classmates from school, he to Lorenza Newton.”

The films of the three friends have little in common, although each has a very recognizable style and work on a mix of big productions and more intimate films. Del Toro’s movies look at monsters and horror fairy tales (with the exception of *The Shape of Water*), Iñárritu works on dramas, and Cuarón on reinventing genre clichés. The three constantly seek each other’s advice, they appear in the credits of each other’s films and are their harshest critics. “I tell them if what I see is trash,” says Del Toro. “That’s what friends do.” “Guillermo is the master of curses,” says Iñárritu. “There’s no film I make that doesn’t get run past them, by their eyes and hands,” says Cuarón.