

mother's prayer

our mother who art underfoot,
hallowed be thy names,
thy seasons come, thy will be done,
within us as around us,
thank you for our daily bread, our water, our air,
and our lives and so much beauty;
lead us not into selfish craving and the destructions
that are the hungers of the gluttoned,
but deliver us from wanton consumption
of thy vast but finite bounty,
for thine is the only sphere of life we know,
and the power and the glory, forever and ever,
amen

adapted by
rebecca solnit



mother!

paradise.

could there be a more ominous sound than an unexpected knock at the door?

Mother (JENNIFER LAWRENCE) and Him (JAVIER BARDEM) live in a seemingly idyllic existence in a secluded paradise. But the couple's relationship is tested when man (ED HARRIS) and woman (MICHELLE PFEIFFER) arrive at their home uninvited. Answering that knock disrupts their tranquil existence and as more and more guests arrive, mother is forced to revisit everything she knows about love, devotion and sacrifice.

Paramount Pictures presents a Protozoa Production of a film by Academy Award® nominated director, Darren Aronofsky (*Black Swan*, *Requiem for a Dream*): Academy Award® winning actress Jennifer Lawrence (*Silver Linings Playbook*) and Academy Award® winning actor Javier Bardem (*No Country For Old Men*) in “*mother!*” co-starring Academy Award® nominee Ed Harris (*The Truman show*) and Academy Award® nominee Michelle Pfeiffer (*The*

Fabulous Baker Boys). Costume designer is Academy Award® nominee Danny Glicker (*Milk*) and editor is Academy Award® nominee Andrew Weisblum (*Black Swan*). Production designer is Philip Messina (*The Hunger Games*). The director of photography is the Academy Award® nominee Matthew Libatique (*Black Swan*). Executive Producers are Jeff Waxman, Josh Stern and Mark Heyman. Produced by Scott Franklin and Ari Handel, the film is written and directed by Darren Aronofsky.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

“mother! begins as a chamber story about a marriage. At the center is a woman who is asked to give and give and give until she can give nothing more. Eventually, the chamber story can't contain the pressure boiling inside. It becomes something else...”
... Writer / Director Darren Aronofsky

a mad time to be alive

The relationship thriller began when Writer / Director Darren Aronofsky spent five fevered days at his keyboard alone in an empty house. The Academy Award© nominated filmmaker knows he might be pressed about the result – Why such a dark vision? His answer? Look around:

“It is a mad time to be alive. As the world population nears 8 billion we face issues too serious to fathom: Ecosystems collapse as we witness extinction at an unprecedented rate; Migrant crises disrupt governments; A seemingly schizophrenic U.S. helps broker a landmark climate treaty and months later withdraws; Ancient tribal disputes and beliefs continue to drive war and division; The largest iceberg ever recorded breaks off an Antarctic ice shelf and drifts out to sea. At the same time we face issues too ridiculous to comprehend: In South America tourists twice kill rare baby dolphins that washed ashore, suffocating them in a frenzy of selfies; Politics resembles sporting events; People still starve to death while others can order any meat they desire. As a species our footprint is perilously unsustainable yet we live in a state of denial about the outlook for our planet and our place on it.

“From this primordial soup of angst and helplessness,” continues Aronofsky, “I woke up one morning and this movie poured out of me.”

His other six films gestated with him for years, but this? In 5 days, he was holding a rough draft of *mother!* in his hands. “Within a year we were rolling cameras.”

Two years after that long weekend, Aronofsky's film was headed for its world premiere at the 74th Venice International Film Festival (Aug. 30 – Sept. 9), selected to compete for the prestigious Golden Lion Award for Best Film. Its North American premiere is set for the 42nd Annual Toronto Film Festival Sept. 7-17. It opens nationwide Sept. 15.

Aronofsky admits ***mother!*** is hard to slot into any one particular genre, and that's because even he can't fully pinpoint where everything in this film came from: "Some came from the headlines we face every second of every day, some came from the endless buzzing of notifications on our smart phones, some came from living through the blackout of Hurricane Sandy in downtown Manhattan, some came from my heart, some from my gut. Collectively it's a recipe I won't ever be able to reproduce, but I do know this concoction is best served as a single dose – in a shot glass."

a roman candle

After initial readings from trusted allies, Aronofsky's feral concept made its way to Jennifer Lawrence, Academy Award© Winner (*Silver Linings Playbook*) and three-time Oscar nominee (*Joy*, *American Hustle*, *Winter's Bone*). Her response was "very visceral, very strong," he recalls. She committed to the film immediately. For Aronofsky, this created a path for getting the film made. He recalled: "When you have Jen Lawrence, you have a movie."

Lawrence saying yes was about more than adding a home invasion horror tale to her repertoire.

"One of the greatest things that can happen to you as an artist is to be a part of a movie that starts conversation because it's an original idea, completely unique," says Lawrence. "Even though we're shooting things that are eerie, the allegory is so much bigger. It's what it *all* means.

"There's a million different facets to this movie that certain people are going to relate to, be scared of, intrigued by," continues Lawrence. She describes the lure of playing mother, the adoring wife and muse to Javier Bardem's enigmatic poet: "Falling in love is scary. Being vulnerable? Terrifying. Not letting yourself be vulnerable? Also, terrifying.

"It's one thing to make something lukewarm," says Lawrence. "It's another to make something scalding hot. This? It's a Roman candle. An explosion. A riot of a movie. An expression. Initial feedback: "There's definitely a moment in this movie where some will say, 'Darren, you're taking this too far' and storm out of the theater. But I wouldn't have been

there if I hadn't already thrown the script across my hotel room in New York and thought this guy is crazy. But he has to take it all the way. I think he was right to not shy back and be afraid.

As for that Roman candle, expect an unsettling metaphoric ride that will shock and jar audiences. Lawrence's dark summation: "A creator always needs a muse. As long as the universe is expanding, men will be using women."

always a rule-breaker

Once Lawrence and her co-star Javier Bardem, the Academy Award© winner (*No Country For Old Men*) and two-time Oscar nominee (*Beautiful, Before Night Falls*) were onboard, momentum kicked in.

Aronofsky then did something else he'd never done before: A three-month rehearsal in a secluded Brooklyn warehouse. Producers Ari Handel (*Noah, The Fountain*) and Scott Franklin, Academy Award© nominee (*Black Swan*) joined the threesome for the script workshop. By the last two weeks, three-time Academy Award© nominee Michelle Pfeiffer (*Love Field, The Fabulous Baker Boys, Dangerous Liaisons*), four-time Oscar nominee Ed Harris (*The Hours, Pollock, The Truman Show, Apollo 13*), Domhnall Gleeson (*Ex Machina, Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) and his brother Brian Gleeson (*Snow White and the Huntsman, Assassin's Creed*) had joined the collaborative process. (Oscar nominee Kristen Wiig (*Bridesmaids*), who plays herald, wouldn't join the production until later.)

Aronofsky had a scale blueprint for the house taped out on the floor and he and his collaborator Matthew Libatique, the Oscar nominee (*Black Swan*) and cinematographer on six of Aronofsky's films, shot a test version of the entire film. There were no walls in the rehearsal space, just the tape on the floor demarcating the space they would ultimately build, recalls Aronofsky. "Nonetheless we did every single shot, every single scene. Andy Weisblum, my editor, cut it together. We were able to look at a 90-minute version" sans hair and makeup. "Basically we were getting a sense of the camera movements, the progression and arc of the characters throughout the film before we ever started to shoot."

This was important because Aronofsky was determined to shoot the film exclusively from mother's point-of-view, which meant limited options for Libatique. Libatique's choreography with the camera moved around the house "in long single shots that were handheld, upstairs, downstairs, around narrow hallways," adds Franklin. "While moving in

one direction, he would pan to the left and to the right, to catch the action in a room in the center of the house.”

And that wasn’t the only challenge. With only a handful of wide shots when mother is alone, “basically, the film is either shot over her shoulder, on her face or what she’s looking at. That’s an incredibly limited amount of shots to take back to the edit room,” concedes Aronofsky. With a running time of two hours, 66 minutes of it is close-ups of Lawrence “yet you wouldn’t realize it,” says Aronofsky. “If Jen, at any moment, wasn’t working there weren’t many places to go. She had to be endlessly specific and good. If this had been a normal studio picture and I didn’t have a great collaboration with Paramount, I think they would have been terrified because there was no typical coverage.”

Says Pfeiffer: “Darren set a very high bar for himself, thus everyone else. We were doing these wild, crazy, master long shots that went on forever, going down halls, upstairs, downstairs. You’re sort of in the shot, out of the shot, jumping over cables, hiding behind the camera. You have to remember your lines and not fall down. But I think we all approached it with a really great attitude and we were all very excited and enthusiastic about the challenge of it all.”

During the rehearsal period, Aronofsky confesses he was anxious – Lawrence seemed so relaxed, the role was so different from anything she had done and he was uncertain whether the part he envisioned for her was possible. But by the time they reached the start of production in Montreal, he realized it was her process – she was finding mother. “I actually probably didn’t meet the character that Jen portrays in the film until the first day of shooting when she showed up in costume, hair and barefoot,” he says. “She’s barefoot the whole movie. mother started to come alive in front of me. The amount of raw talent was insane.”

from tape to walls

Since the house is essentially a character in the film, finding the perfect structure was critical. When a search through the northeast for an existing house failed to find exactly what he wanted, Aronofsky tapped Production Designer Philip Messina, who previously collaborated with Lawrence on *The Hunger Games* franchise as production designer, to build one instead. Though as Franklin notes, “The entire movie takes place in this one house, but it was quite the construction job. At the beginning of the movie it feels like its 85% finished,

but it changes and morphs. It goes through many levels of destruction.” Since the story takes place entirely in the house it could have felt claustrophobic so “the challenge was to figure out how to make this one location constantly surprising,” he says.

Aronofsky and Messina embarked on a long design journey to craft a house with the right aesthetics, delving deep into architectural research. They found inspiration for this singular home with its expansive wrap-around porch from a real but unusual style. “We were really excited to find these Victorian homes, which were actually built in the octagon shape with eight sides. The number eight actually really ties in with our allegory really well,” he adds. Aronofsky also liked that the shape allowed the audience to see what was going on in several rooms at the same time, essentially bending the walls. In a sense the design beckons the unexpected, and jumpstarts “our invention of this Escher-esque home.”

“Ultimately we went up to Montreal and we actually built the house -- twice. The first time we built just the first floor out in the field, in a beautiful field. And that allowed us to do all the daylight sequences and we shot those all in order. Then we built the full three-story house in a sound stage in Montreal and we were able to do the night sequences,” said Aronofsky. “As the film progresses it goes more and more into the darkness, into the night and we were able to sort of shoot that whole journey there in one long challenging swoop.”

For the actors, moving from an imaginary rehearsal space to a real wood and plaster set was transformative. “I started forming my relationship with the house in a warehouse where there was just chalk drawings of the outline of the house because that’s when we were doing our rehearsals and that’s when I was kind of starting to find who mother was,” remembers Lawrence. “Once we got to Montreal and on that set, it happened,” she says. Her imagination was fueled by how mother would walk down the stairs, hold the banister of the staircase, perceiving it like a living entity because “of the intensity of her emotions tied to the house. “ Lawrence describes how interacting with the physical house helped bring mother to life, “I was mostly, always barefoot so I could feel the house. I knew my character’s reaction to the house was going to be internal. I was actually able to work with the house after using *only* my imagination in the warehouse. It was incredibly helpful.”

cast and characters

“we spend all our time here. i want to make a paradise.”

...mother

“When you first meet my character, you realize how much love and passion she’s put into this home,” explains Lawrence. “She’s rebuilt her husband’s house that burned down before she knew him, as much as she can, because she loves Him and she wants to make this perfect environment for them. She puts her entire heart into it... a real passion project for her. He is this amazing artist who needs praise. He needs to be worshipped and she is willing to give that. She is in awe of Him. At a certain point, he gets used to her gaze, to her reading everything and loving it. He needs new stimulation. That’s heartbreaking in any relationship if you feel you’re not enough. [She’s] this woman who’s given everything to try and be everything for this artist, and [yet] he’s not stimulated by her.

“When Ed Harris (man) knocks on our door, that’s the first time we have another character there that’s not just Javier or me. And he’s a complete stranger, which is exciting for Javier’s character and invigorating and a little scary for mother. “The way that [Him and man] hit it off is intimidating...that only continues to grow throughout the movie.”

“all i’m trying to do is bring life into this house.”

...Him

To say Javier Bardem’s character is elusive would be an understatement. At the center of their house is his office, the sanctuary where he works and where his most valuable possession is kept, a mysterious object from the life he lived before meeting mother. And the mystery only deepens as the film goes on.

“Javier’s character has an inherent darkness,” notes Franklin. “His character evolves throughout the film in a subtle way and you realize the character traits he has towards the end of the movie, he’s had all along. He just hid them.”

Michelle Pfeiffer, who plays woman, Ed Harris’s wife, says Bardem’s ability to play this character is a testament to what a great actor he is. “Javier is like a big teddy bear, very sweet. He is so good at playing these really evil, menacing characters” but in reality nothing could “be further from the truth.”

And for veteran thespian Bardem, playing opposite Pfeiffer, Harris and Lawrence, was the best kind of fuel for the fire.

He described Lawrence as “an actress with no limitations, no boundaries. Considering the difficulty of this role and what my character puts her through, she doesn’t need to be hurt in order to create the pain she is experiencing. She is so committed. She is willing to go as far as she needs to and that takes an incredible strength to do what she has done. To take these risks, to do what she did, as an actor it says a lot. She is very brave.”

“love at first sight.”

“same here.”

...man and woman

The tension between Bardem & Lawrence’s characters begins to bloom when Harris’ character, man, arrives at the house.

“He is this loose electron who comes flying into their nucleus. Things start to get stranger and stranger,” says Aronofsky. As an actor, Aronofsky describes Harris as “game to play anything; completely goes into it and after it. I don’t think he ever does anything that’s not real.”

Harris describes his character’s relationship with his wife (Pfeiffer) as very “affectionate.” Says Pfeiffer: “We represent, as a couple, a lot of what may be missing in (Him and mother’s) relationship. My character is kind of a mirror for Jen’s character. I sort of am there to sow doubt into Jen’s psyche.”

In casting Pfeiffer, Aronofsky says the choice was triggered by the memory of a directing class he took in film school. “One thing (his instructor) said that stuck with me about Michelle was ‘It’s rare that you get such beauty and such talent in one package.’ Nothing has changed since that comment 25 years ago. She is a tremendous beauty but the depth of her skill is remarkable.” With her character there had to be a mixture of seduction and aggression. She found those moments and maneuvered them with ease, he says.

For Pfeiffer: “Making this film was really hard work and an incredible amount of fun. I loved working with this group of actors. Ed and I had a real synergy. Jennifer is a very complicated person in the best possible way. She’s hilarious, one of the funniest people I’ve ever met and wickedly smart.”

But the arrival of man and woman is only the beginning.

“We have these two sons played by the Gleeson brothers and they’re having their own problems. My character is dying,” explains Harris. “We’ve arranged for the inheritance

but one of them is not very happy about it.” The sons arrive, played by real life brothers Domhnall and Brian Gleeson, and “come into the house and disrupt things even more,”

Everything escalates from there.

As more and more people arrive in the house, mother presses Him to make them leave.

But for Him, the stimulation he needs has finally arrived.

the vessel

“mother is definitely a psychological thriller and you will recognize its relevance to our world now,” notes Producer Scott Franklin. “It has a thriller aspect to it, creepy and discomforting but it is kind of in a genre of its own,” explains Franklin. “mother is the vessel and all of the themes unfold through her eyes.”

”I’ve never seen stories, ideas woven together in this way. I’m still thinking about it. Darren and I are still having conversations about it,” says Lawrence.

“It starts as one kind of film,” notes Producer Ari Handel. “You think you know where you are. Then it slowly takes you further and further. At no moment during those two hours are you able to ever rest and say, ‘Oh, I’m in *that* movie. I know the rules of this world.’ Darren always wants to take the audience somewhere unanticipated”

According to Pfeiffer, from the beginning Aronofsky was mysterious about the symbolism of elements in the film but she knew “there was nothing random in every single choice, every single frame, every single word. There were certain things that were very important to him in the wording, in my dialogue.”

Despite the pedigree talent and vast experience this troupe of actors brought to the film, Lawrence makes it clear that while Aronofsky is a collaborative leader and inclusive of actors’ input in the process: “There wasn’t really any improv. Darren writes it, creates it, he’s a very specific visionary. I try to figure out what that means and where mother fits into his vision.”

“When Darren sat down to write this story one of the main things he was thinking about was the way that human beings live on this planet and what they do to this planet,” says Handel. “And he wanted to dramatize that by shrinking it all the way down: to one relationship in one house.

“I remember when, a few months after we were deep in the script, he came across this book, *Woman and Nature*, by Susan Griffin. It was a piece of ’70s philosophy that also sketched a parallel between how men sometimes treat women and how people treat the planet. That book reaffirmed for us that we were going to be able to make these two stories, the story of a relationship, and the story of our world, both work at the same time.”

Continues Handel, “I think that environmental layer in the film is part of what makes it so disturbing. Yes we empathize with mother - and Jen’s performance is like a tractor beam pulling us along with her - but I think we also sense that each one of us is also part of that insatiably churning and ravenous crowd that is tearing her world apart.”

mother of invention:

post production

As Aronofsky and his collaborators embarked on the editorial process, they entered into the most complicated edit of Aronofsky’s career, which would ultimately last close to a year. Described his editor, Andrew Weisblum: “Because of the strict rules we set for ourselves with the subjective grammar, along with the nearly real-time, linear structure, I didn’t have the usual bag of tricks: I couldn’t use a cutaway, I couldn’t use a simple master to convey geography or relationships, I didn’t have a two shot, I couldn’t cheat structure by pulling things out or repurposing.

“But those limitations are the mother of invention,” continued Weisblum. “When you set those boundaries for yourself it forces you to rethink what those options are, and we came up with inventions that people never discover. By constantly having this tight, subjective relationship with Jennifer whether it’s her POV, her face, or her over-the-shoulder, it was about tracking with her with her. If she doesn’t look at something how do I convey to the audience what’s happened? Once we had the mountain of footage, through alternates and experiments, we had to figure out how to get the narrative beats across, the emotional beats, and the character. In addition to using sound to fill in the gaps where we’re not seeing what we want people to know, we also had to look to visual effects to manipulate the tone of the movie and pose ideas that are really subjective on top of what we had in our footage.

One big question that emerged was the film’s score. Aronofsky had signed on celebrated composer Jóhann Jóhannsson (*Arrival*, *Sicario*, *The Theory of Everything*). But as

Aronofsky and Jóhannsson began to explore different options they realized the best option was also the boldest. And so again, Aronofsky broke from convention.

“A big challenge of the film was to do it without music,” Aronofsky says. “It wasn’t because we didn’t have the possibility of great music. I was working with one of the best composers in the world. But the problem with music was that it kept tilting (the story) in a certain direction.” And so, after spending months exploring different musical directions, Aronofsky and Jóhannsson decided that the best score for the film might be no score at all.

Described Jóhannsson: “*mother!* is a film where half measures have no place and after Darren and I had explored many different approaches, my instinct was to eliminate the score entirely. Erasure is a big part of the creative process and in this case, we knew we had to take this approach to its logical extreme.”

Said Aronofsky: “Where the film works is the audience doesn’t know where they are: They keep looking to Jen to see where they are, but Jen’s character doesn’t really know how to take certain things. She’s constantly flowing between different emotions, different thoughts. We wanted the audience to lean into that, to not give them any relief by allowing them to lean back on something that easily gives you emotion.”

release

With the project shrouded in mystery for more than a year, Aronofsky began to whet his audiences appetite with a brutal poster of Lawrence by artist James Jean (*Fables*, *The Umbrella Academy*). It was released on mother’s day, followed by another portrait of Bardem this summer. After fans digested the stunningly beautiful, yet disturbing poster art they began to parse the artwork for clues about the film’s subject, debating the meaning of the smallest of details. Engaging their curiosity, Aronofsky turned his Twitter account into a destination point for *mother!* clues. But the filmmaker has taken great pleasure in pulling back the curtain slowly.

“I’m not really good at doing genre movies. *π (Pi)* tried to be sci-fi but it never really got there,” Aronofsky explains. “*Noah* wasn’t quite your classical biblical movie. No one knew if *Black Swan* was a ballet movie or a horror film. This film? There are things that are scary and spooky, thriller and romance, things that are surreal. “But you know the best movies are the ones you keep talking about afterwards. And that comes from pushing boundaries, trying something different,” he adds. “When I was a young filmmaker I

happened to be in a coffee shop and it was near the NuArt (Theater) in L.A. where π (*Pi*) was showing and this guy came in with his 18-year-old daughter and a few of her friends. They were sitting there debating about what the movie was about. It was a big moment for me, like eavesdropping on a conversation about something you worked really hard on – a great feeling.

“The worst thing to me,” he continues, “is a movie where you are entertained but in a couple of hours you’re like ‘Oh, what did we see tonight?’ As a director, you want to give people something to think about. This movie? There will be a lot of heated conversation and that’s kind of the fun.”

As for that question Aronofsky anticipates – Why so dark?

“Hubert Selby Jr., the author of *Requiem for a Dream*, taught me that through staring into the darkest parts of ourselves it is there we find the light.”