During a Summer of one week of superheroes after another, we have a bit of an anomaly this week; a sequel that may in fact be a sequel to two different movies. "Hellboy II: The Golden Army" may be the second film about the big red demon who fights on the side of good, but Mitch says it is visually much closer to Guillermo del Toro's inventive fantasy "Pan's Labyrinth". Mitch liked this one, and he reviews it for us tonight on The Cleveland Fan.

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The result? A stunning combination of high art and lowbrow, anarchic comedy with lots of action thrown in. The main characters are all back, led by the most unconventional choice for a "leading man", 58 year old Ron Perlman under a ton of makeup and prosthetics, along with the super skinny mime Doug Jones as the mentalist fish creature Abe Sapien, and Selma Blair back as the pyrotechnical Liz Sherman.

Hellboy hasn't changed a bit since we've last seen him. He is still a Cuban cigar loving, beer swilling working stiff of a superhero. Just your average Joe trying to earn his paycheck. That is, if your Average Joe also has filed down horns, a tail, and an oversized rock for a right hand.

Two things are really driving Red (as Hellboy is known to his friends) nuts; his inability to get out and about, and his domestic relationship with Liz. Red had been the ultimate bachelor for so long, that he's having some problems adjusting to the needs of a woman. And when that woman can erupt in real flames at any moment...well, let's just say that it's a good thing the big guy is fireproof.

This stress ends up making life even more difficult for Tom Manning (Jeffrey Tambour), the head of the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense (BPRD). Red is addicted to television, and therefore wants to be on it. Manning must try to keep the organization a secret. But when a new threat comes from the underworld in the form of a very un-Tolkien like elfin Prince and his oversized bodyguard (a creature that is nearly impossible to describe), the entire BPRD team is exposed thanks to some creative manipulations of events by Red.

There is a saying that goes "Be careful what you wish for, for you will surely get it." Red finds out that publicity may not be all that great, not when you look like...hmmm... Satan?

But there is only so far del Toro can go with that direction...because humans being shocked at Red's appearance aren't nearly as fun to make as creepy creatures. Hence getting much more into the story of The Golden Army. Eons ago, a truce was formed between Man and the mythical creatures now living in the Underworld, led by King Balor. His son, Prince Nuada, disagreed with the truce, and is trying to find the three pieces of a crown that will allow him to call the indestructible Golden Army to fight for him and conquer mankind. His twin sister Princess Nuala disagrees, and flees to the surface world to protect that last piece, falling under the care of Abe.

I probably just wrote more about the plot than the writers actually did in creating the plot. Because what really matters here are the characters and the visuals, both of which are done with extraordinary skill by del Toro. Perlman seems much more sure of himself in this movie. He is a man who is completely comfortable acting in heavy makeup, a skill that was first displayed in the cult television hit "Beauty and the Beast" as the half-man, half-lion Vincent. His depiction of Hellboy is one of a fully developed character. Of course you are going to laugh at his grouchy demeanor, his lack of couth, and his love of massive amounts of Mexican beer (the scene where he and Abe get soused while listening to Barry Manilow while lamenting about love is a classic). But Big Red is also a Big Softie; he loves cats, his feelings can be hurt, and his love of Liz is very apparent.

However, it is the style of the movie that stands out just as much as Perlman's acting. Del Toro has been given free reign to let his over-active, amazing imagination run wild, and this results in some incredible scenes. The Troll Market underneath the Brooklyn Bridge (think of the Star Wars' Cantina scene with trolls and ogres), the battle with the gigantic Elemental, the freakish Angel of Death; these scenes were unbelievable in their originality and their "wow!" factor. Guillermo del Toro truly is one of the most ingenious directors working today, and you can tell his love of the craft throughout the film.

It is easy to see why Peter Jackson chose del Toro to take over the director's chair for the upcoming "Hobbit" movies, although it will be interesting to see where del Toro goes visually with the type of characters already so etched into our minds from the Lord of the Rings trilogy...but that is an argument for another day.

For now, del Toro has done the improbable twice. The first for even making a success out of an obscure comic about a demon, using lesser known character actors in the lead roles, and the second in making the sequel far more amazing than the first. The door is wide open for a third film in this series. As long as del Toro and Perlman are connected with the project, you can count on me to be there to see it.

My Rating: Frank Ryan (3 footballs)