

# Latin Horror is Luchagore. An Interview With Luchagore Productions

CALEB J. GREEN

## About Luchagore Productions

Luchagore Productions is an award-winning horror production company, based in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Founded in 2013 by Gigi Saul Guerrero, Luke Bramley, & Raynor Shima for their love of making films in the horror genre. Luchagore has produced over 18 short films and commercials, most notably the *M is for Matador* segment of *ABC's of Death 2.5* and *El Gigante*, which is their company's most successful film, winning the attention and awards of festivals worldwide. The team has most recently created an anticipated horror/action series *La Quinceañera* with Warner Brothers and Stage 13 Network, which has won the Audience Choice award at Morbido Film Fest. I interviewed Guerrero and Shima about the origins of the company, Latin themed horror, and why *El Gigante* is so important to them.

GREEN. So the first question I really have for you is basically how did Luchagore come to be?

GUERRERO. Luchagore started way back in film school. Before it was officially Luchagore, back in 2010, it was just myself and Luke Bramley in film school, here in Vancouver. We were the only horror fans in our class. The only ones interested in killing people on screen. So, it was just such a quick friendship with Luke and myself, so all of our assignments and projects were horror. From there, Luke was like "We should DO this all the time!" I was like, "Yeah!" So, we just started slowly meeting other people. We met Raynor, who actually went to our rival film school. We were the first group with both competitive schools working together. So, Raynor brought some of his friends from his school, and, it was Luke and myself with some of our friends from our school. Then, slowly, we started building a team like that, because everyone had the same passion for genre

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3

Copyright © 2018

film. I do have to credit Luke for coming up with the name Luchagore, which I hated at first. Before we met Raynor, it was during film history class, which was super boring, and Luke turned around to me and whispered, “Hey! What do you think of Lucha-GORE?” And I just gave him this look like “WTF, man?” And he looked at me like, “You know? It’s a play on words! So like luchador but it’s Luchagore.” He’s super white. He’s like the whitest man ever.

GREEN. I can tell by the story, actually.

GUERRERO. Right? And I just looked at him like with a straight, Latina face of “No, it’s super shitty.” And then two years later, in our last year of film school, we’re friends with Raynor and we’re making our projects. Our first big project is called *Day of the Dead* and I’m like, “We need a team name for sure now.” So I look at Luke and say “Hey! What was that name you said during history class a couple of years ago? Remember I hated it. What was it?” He’s like “Luchagore?” And I’m like “Yeah! Luchagore Productions! Great idea, Luke! Let’s keep it!” And he hated me for at least two days. And it just stayed. I don’t know why I hated the name. Now I think it’s awesome. It’s just perfect. In short, how it came to be is just in film school you connect with the right people. And we just weren’t afraid to keep making content with no budget and to make a brand. And it was amazing when we met Raynor, and it just kind of came to be with us three, just like “Okay, let’s start something and just make something super special.” Officially Luchagore came about in late 2012, after *Choose Your Victim*, an interactive web series we did in school where people could choose who dies next and how. So that was the project Luke and I wanted to graduate with.

SHIMA. You guys made promo video for it at school.

GUERRERO. So yeah, it was the project for our final year at school. But again, nobody wanted to work on it because it was a crazy horror idea that would last for months to make because we had to keep making episodes for the viewers who were voting who dies next and how. So, that’s how we secretly brought people from the rival film school into our school and our sets. A lot of the teachers thought Raynor and his friends were in the first or second year at our school.

GREEN. And this was a risky thing to do? To bridge the schools?

GUERRERO. Very risky. Here in Vancouver, those schools make fun of each other all the time. And it's just known for those schools not getting along. So, we had to do that to finish our project for *Choose Your Victim* which worked and we finished it. Funny enough, Luke and I ended up getting the graduation award for excellence in filmmaking, which we laughed really hard at. Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do to finish a project. Because of *Choose Your Victim* we really connected as a team, and, it was then that we were like "Okay, we should be something, we should be a name." And Raynor was super into the name Luchagore. It was just meeting the right people at the right time. If it wasn't for that final project *Choose Your Victim* it wouldn't have formed.

GREEN. I'm interested that this came together in this way across these two rival schools. I'm also interested in the resistance to the name. Because, I can see resistance to it for being on the nose from your white friend being like "Here's what I know about you!"

GUERRERO. Exactly!

GREEN. But in terms of what you were talking about with a brand, so much of your brand and so much of the work that you've put together is about identity in this way. So, I'm interested in the name and how that relates? Were you always interested in doing work that has to do with identity in this way? Or did you feel like "Well, I've picked this name so now we have to do work like this"?

SHIMA. I think, in general, we all have this passion for horror. And I think when Luke mentioned to Gigi way back about the name and then Gigi finally thought it's a great name and this is what we're doing. I think it reflects on what we're passionate about, definitely in the horror community because it's one of the biggest fan bases that are pretty loyal. They're REALLY loyal.

GUERRERO. They're more passionate fans.

SHIMA. Really passionate. More passionate than like comedy or drama. Maybe Sci-fi has a similar fan base. But the horror community is STRONG. It's really, really strong with filmmakers. But, yeah, we never really thought if we were going to do something else. I guess, for instance, carrying the name, we did our

first major series with Warner Brothers T.V., and, it's called *La Quinceañera*, and it's not a horror series at all. It's actually...

GUERRERO. A violent drama.

SHIMA. Yeah, a violent drama, a coming-of-age revenge story that has horror elements in it. So, I think even with the name the way it is, we can really take it anywhere we want to go.

GUERRERO. I think the great thing about not just the name Luchagore, but, how we're branded is it's almost like if you see Luchagore on something now, it's a signature. There are going to be things that people are going to connect and be like "Fuck yeah, that's Luchagore." So, when people see this Warner Brothers show, which is going to be the biggest thing we have coming out this year, it's a very different thing from what our fans have seen. But what the studio saw is that we have a signature element that fans love. So, now it's really up to us with future work, like Raynor says, it's almost like a stamp. Sure, we will make something different for a client or whatever, but you can still tell it's us. You can still tell it's Luchagore. So, to us, it's super important and it just hit me, like, "That's a great name. What am I talking about?" Everyone says "Luchagore, it's so cool." When you hear that, it's super neat. But, yeah, at first, my white friend telling me that, I was like "You are so dumb. What are you talking about." But afterwards, it makes sense. Like Latin horror is Luchagore. And it doesn't necessarily mean that we're Lucha Libre fans or that everything we do is Latin, it just has a cool ring to it, too. Also, what Luke really liked at the time, before we met Raynor, was it just had this element of he's white and I'm Mexican, so let's have a name that's a bit of both. You know, nothing too specific, but it just kind of represents a lot of stuff. So now, it's up to us to keep it that way. Just a brand of life.

SHIMA. Yeah, I don't think anyone's ever really questioned us like "Oh, that's a horrible name, you should change it later on." You know, Warner Brothers was like "We really want Luchagore to be a brand on this." So, I guess it's okay.

GUERRERO. Yeah, that's how they approached us, too. "We just really want the Luchagore brand." And we're like "Okay! Check mark." I love the name.

GREEN. You're like "Warner Brothers just told us we're a brand!"

GUERRERO. Yeah, exactly! Now we just got to make more money.

GREEN. You're always missing that one step before profit.

GUERRERO. Exactly, but it's all worth it.

GREEN. Going back all the way to before you thought about making film, what drew you to horror specifically? Just as a film fan.

SHIMA. Yeah, I think for me, horror films I've grown up with since I was a kid, and, I've always enjoyed it. Even though they scare the crap out of you and they make you feel things and all that. Generally, there is just something unique with horror films that people love to watch. People love to be scared. People love to be afraid, to feel that tension. Almost like they're being threatened but they're not really threatened, the characters on screen are. That's always been something that really enticed me into getting into filmmaking as well. Just that film is really so much damn fun once you get into the swing of things and being able to tell those stories to people. And telling unique ideas, especially with the Luchagore brand having this Tex-Mex feel to it, and having the Latin culture in our stuff was something that we haven't really seen. That was a new breath for us to bring into the horror community, to bring that style of storytelling into the horror world. I just always, always enjoyed wanting to be a part of that. I'm not the kind of person that can be in front of a camera, I'm more or less a good person to be behind the camera and behind the scenes. That was more or less what I wanted to do. It's great to just to be a part of that.

GUERRERO. I agree with everything that Raynor said. A fun story about how I got into horror was that I wasn't allowed to watch any of it, like at all. It was extremely frowned upon in my family. We're Mexican, right? A very Catholic family and household. That stuff is a no-go. Mexican culture is very spiritual. We have a lot of superstitions. You know we have the Virgin Mary and all that jazz. So, that kind of stuff, for my family, was a big no. So, of course, me being me, I was like "Ooh, I wonder why!" So, curiosity just grew to the point where I stole a VHS copy from Blockbuster of Chucky. Like, I stole it. From that moment I was like "Being scared is the coolest thing in the world." I didn't watch much of it, because I was too scared to see it. And, of course, I got in trouble. It wasn't until I was going to turn 10 that I all I wanted to go see *The Exorcist*, because at the time

it came back out. It got re-released. They had deleted scenes added and new color, I think.

GREEN. They added the spider walk in, down the stairs.

GUERRERO. Yeah, exactly, it was in the '00s, or the late '90s because I was going to be 10. I was like "I'm going to be two digits now. I'm old enough." I made this big deal to my mom. I was like "It's not fair!" So, of course, my very Mexican mom was like "*Okay! You wanna get scared? I'll prove you a point!*" So she let me and my cousin go see it, and, I came out crying. I realized how much I loved how scared I was. I thought Linda Blair was in my room for like 2 weeks. No other genre makes you relive it like that. The terror. Like what *Jaws* did to people. Like, no other kind of movie is going to make you be so scared to go into the shower. Or *Arachnophobia*, like being afraid of spiders coming out of the bathtub. No other movies are going to make you relive it in your house. So, that's the ultimate thing with horror.

SHIMA. Yeah, I think the thing with horror, too, is, not that there are always going to be blockbuster hits, but generally the ones we see that are so successful are reaching a younger demographic. I think that's smart, too. You have to adapt to the changing times of this developing, fast-paced world we live in. So, that's a challenge, but it's exciting to try something different and people really resonate with it.

GREEN. I want to focus on some of the work that you all have produced. Do you have any projects that stick out as your favorite or are particularly personal to you and why?

GUERRERO. For me, from our short films, it would have to be *El Gigante*. Because that was the first short that we had a budget for. We did a Kickstarter for it and that was a success. Every short, before and after, has been self-funded and a no-budget kind of deal. What we were able to make with *El Gigante*, still considering it low budget, is just Luchagore. If I have to pick a short that represents us, if someone doesn't know who Luchagore is, I would say watch this and you will know exactly who we are. It would be that one. Although, it's an older one, and all the shorts after *El Gigante* are better from the technical side of

things. They look better and more advanced. Still, *El Gigante* has all the things of who we are with no boundaries.

SHIMA. It's taking everything that we've learned before and putting our blood into that one.

GUERRERO. Now, the Warner Brothers show coming out soon, *La Quinceañera*, that is a very personal project for me as well. There is a lot of my background and culture in it. I think it's going to be the show that will bring, not necessarily more respect to Luchagore, but new doors and new opportunities to show that we don't just do *El Gigante* style gore and horror. We can actually be bigger. So that's a project I'm so excited for the world to see. I'm dying inside. Just release the damn thing, you know! It's going to be incredible when people see that.

SHIMA. Yeah, *El Gigante* is really the one that threw us out there. Even the previous stuff we did before, we weren't as recognized, but we were on that kind of uphill battle. And once we got the funding for it, we were really passionate about the story and the novel. So, once we wrote that first chapter into a short film, the Kickstarter funding just made us really focus hard and just practice our skills and make this solid as possible. Because the intent was to make a full-length feature, so we really wanted to use this as a proof of concept. So, we really wanted to use our skills at the highest level and make it happen. It was just a huge success on our end and a huge success on the festival circuit and helped get us recognized around the world. Which is amazing on that end. And it ran for forever. That's something that we still have in the back of our heads, it's not done yet. We're waiting for the right people to come along and the right timing. Everything takes time. I would say recently, it would have to be *La Quinceañera*. As a team, that's something that doesn't really come along too often. When we were approached to collaborate with this new program, that was a huge opportunity for us to have a bigger budget and be able to work with people from L.A. who are well recognized and have these assets to hand down to you and train to be a better filmmaker. Being able to work on a larger scale was another stepping stone for our careers to be able to look back and be like "Wow!" It really took a lot out of us to make that and to make that happen. Especially the time frame we had to get this done and the ambitiousness of the project doesn't go

unrecognized. I really hope people see that and see we really tried to pour as much as we could in with the amount of time we had.

GREEN. I love what you're saying about *El Gigante* as a proof of concept. I'm sure it occurred to all of you that is very similar to Sam Raimi and *The Evil Dead*. Thinking about wanting to extend it beyond, what was it about the novel and the story that appealed to you?

SHIMA. First off, the story, which was written by our amazing, talented friend, Shane McKenzie, it's kind of like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with a crazy Mexican twist. That's what really kind of drew me into it as well. It's uniqueness and not necessarily similarities to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but it was breathing new life into that kind of universe. The characters, especially *El Gigante* and the family, they were just so unique on their own. It was almost more interesting when the family was in the picture than the two main characters. I was always like "Fuck! This is great! What's going to happen?" Shane is a very descriptive writer. He's just able to place you in an area and make you envision it. It's engaging and very fast-paced. That's just something I really loved about it and it really grasped me. Just the Latin culture he infused in it, even though it's dark, twisted, and sick.

GUERRERO. Just the book brought back the old school horror that we all fall in love with. *Texas Chainsaw*, Freddy Kreuger, *Halloween*, all of those films. This book really brought those kind of villains back. Like Raynor was saying, when they were in the picture, you were excited. All those horror films back then, it was about the villains. It was about the bad guys, really. We're not going to wear Jamie Lee Curtis on a t-shirt. We're going to wear Michael Myers. Let's be honest, right? It was all about the bad guys. That's what this book is really about. We were like "Holy shit!" *El Gigante* can really be, and still today we want it to be, a new villain. We can see the *El Gigante* family being a part of the horror family, really. People are just going to love that guy. Like, Jigsaw became a new one, and, like you have all these new ones, but, *El Gigante* has this old school vibe to it. The book is atrocious. You just can't put it down. You feel the dirt and the smell in the book. It's so descriptive. Immediately, we were all so into it. And yeah, it's Mexican, it's horror, it's everything we love. It's Lucha Libre. Just the combination was already everything our team loves. So it was a match made in Hell.

GREEN. Both of you bringing up the family and relating it to the family in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* reminds of some academic work I've seen about *Texas Chainsaw* and how it represents the '70s. When apocalypse culture was huge, and people became obsessed with the idea the world was going to end, and this family is how people are going to survive after the world crumbles. This is what we will be like. So, hearing you say that makes me think about *El Gigante* as this Mexican Leatherface and what that represents. How that family works in terms of culture and how we see the U.S./Mexico border. I don't know if that's intentional.

GUERRERO. No, it totally is. The social commentary of border crossing, I've never seen anybody do it this way where it's not so in your face. I've seen a couple border crossing horror films that were very much on the nose about it. I mean, the first horror film I made was about border crossing and it was called *Dead Crossing*. It was about zombie border guards that eat Mexicans when they cross. The thing about *El Gigante* is even though it touches on that subject, I think it does it a lot more subtly and I think it's a lot more fun. It's not necessarily about that, even though it relates to the cruelty of it. Because it is a problem that we face today, badly. I remember, one of the first things Raynor and I thought was it's subtle, but it's there. We really wanted to showcase that. That whole scene in the beginning with the mom and daughter, and you have the coyote, all of that is not in the book. That does not exist. So, we wrote that just so there is a reality to it. So, there is a connection for the view to understand, yeah, that shit happens. You know? That horrible stuff you just witnessed is true. It is happening today. All that, we added on to it so you can really feel for our lead character, who does not quite escape this situation, unfortunately. But I think that's also what makes *El Gigante* so impactful is that we set it in a reality world, and then brought a new...just kind of built a Luchagore world around it. At the end of the day, what *El Gigante* shows is a lot of tragedy, with a lot of social commentary with it. Including the cannibalism, which has been a problem in Mexico. You know? There have been a lot of stories where people have been fed human tacos, or tacos made out of stray dogs. Stuff like that. Not just in Mexico, but you hear stories from all over the world of people eating people. It was really interesting to us, although *El Gigante* does touch on border crossing, it does not touch on that in such an explicit way. It's not a story where you have one side or the other, the Mexicans crossing who are bad guys bringing drugs and the police who are the good guys, or films where it is the other way. We sympathize with the immigrants

who are trying to cross and the Americans are torturing them. It's always one or the other and you have to pick a side in those films, but in *El Gigante*, it's not really about that. It's just the fun of Mexicans eating Mexicans, and you don't have to pick a side. That was so interesting in the story. There is a corrupt sheriff. There is good people and bad people, and it's all about this creepy-ass border town. It's awesome. The book doesn't have the typical border-crossing elements. So, we try our best to make that feature happen.

GREEN. The end of the movie, with people being served the meat, any time I see that kind of consumption in a movie, it's hard for me not to think of consumption as a culture. I think that's the zombie metaphor that Romero was working with, especially in *Dawn of the Dead*. And Stephen King's *Thinner*, in terms of consumption coming out of 1980s culture. So, it's interesting to hear you point those parts out. Because the beginning with the coyote and the end are the parts that really stick out to me the most. Something I'm curious about, I know you're based out of Canada, but are all of you from Canada originally?

GUERRERO. Everybody is except for myself. I'm from Mexico. The only other people in Luchagore that are not from Vancouver, are our sound designers who are from Mexico City, our composer is from Kansas. But everyone else that works on the sets is from Canada.

GREEN. That's really interesting to me. Denver is not quite the Southwest, but I have lots of friends and colleagues from the Southwest here. I have a close friend who grew up near the border and they were telling me about coyotes, and how they operate in the open and with pretty much immunity. People have written about the border as an important concept in Latinx/Chicanx theory. It stuck out to me as something that was being focused on by this company from Canada. So, I wanted to ask if the border is something that is thought about that much in Canada and the northern part of the continent.

SHIMA. I don't necessarily think...because Canada likes to hide all of that stuff.

GREEN. I'm from the Midwest, so I get the idea of politeness upfront and darkness underneath.

SHIMA. The only stuff we hear about is major breaking news from the U.S. Yeah, all that other stuff you hear, that we were just talking about, it's very rare we hear about it other than general worldwide news. Generally, up here, the media shelters Canadians from what's going on. You really have to do your own thorough research to look into it. I love news, and I love following what's going on in the U.S. For me, it's a valuable source for ideas.

GUERRERO. What I'm used to in Mexico is you see the gore, and the deaths, and the hangings by the cartel in the newspapers on the street corners. I remember taking Raynor and Luke to Mexico and that was the first thing that shocked them was the front cover of the newspaper. The moment we moved here was the first thing we noticed in Canada was the peacefulness. You got to do your research. Even when you watch the news, some of the stuff you watch on the news, if it's not a big thing, the worst thing you will see is a car crash. I agree, with Raynor, a lot of the stuff you go to look up. It's not necessarily shelter from here, but it's not something that is announced.

GREEN. I just have one more question. I know you're all excited for *La Quinceañera*, but beyond that, what do you hope for your future?

GUERRERO. I think we can both say a feature!

SHIMA. I think, yeah, right now, after learning so much from *La Quinceañera*, during that time we were still trying to make *El Gigante* and then we had to put that aside. I threw it to Gigi, let's still make a feature. Even though it's a series, we shot it like a feature over 20 days. We still haven't made something that's ours yet. We've come up with the idea of making a low budget feature, but something that is totally doable with the resources we have. I don't want to say too much about it, but it's something that takes place on a boat and we've been developing it since Summer 2017. We just recently finished the script. So, our next goal is to get this feature funded and turn it around before next year. I'm really excited about it and I know Gigi is excited about it. Just the whole crew because we haven't made anything in a while.

GUERRERO. Yeah, we just made a couple of shorts recently.

SHIMA. No more shorts, right?

GUERRERO. Yeah, we started a hashtag. #NoMoreShorts. We have 18 of them. It's too many, man. *El Gigante* is something that we know, in our hearts, deserves a budget, deserves experience and world-building that the book has. So, if we got to pull a Martin Scorsese and wait 5 years to make something we really want, we will. It's worth it with *El Gigante*. I'm actually glad nobody wanted to fund us originally, because we would have messed that up. Seeing how much we've learned over the last couple years and what we've made since then, we have that skill that we were missing before. Even just developing this new feature, just the timeliness and our commitment is already a different style. We already knew what we wanted to do and where to go with it. Now, we just kind of understand more, even the business side. You need to get funded to make a feature. So, we just need to make something that is low budget, that is super good, still our signature, and it's something we can get funded easier than something as big as *El Gigante*. And we're so pumped.