FIRST LOOK AT 007'S RETURN! \$10.95 TWO HUGE POSTERS WORLD EXCLUSIVE URGENT MOVIE **OF 2020** Three countries. One spy. The best-ever **INSANE STORY** access to Bond. PLUS WONDER WOMAN 1984 - BIRDS OF PREY



PREVIEW

WONDER WOMAN 1984

Gal Gadot is back as DC's Amazonian princess, and this time she's popped up in the '80s. Remember Spangles? No, us neither.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

With 2019 now completely over, Team Empire reflect on the highs and lows of the year. Plus: Empire's top 10 films revealed! Will Angel Has Fallen make the cut?

IN MEMORIAM

We remember legendary, charismatic Hollywood producer Robert Evans. The man who once referred to Al Pacino as a "little dwarf".

TRAILER TALK

TRAILER TALK
Much hyped Star Wars spin-off TV series *The Mandalorian* is out now. The Empire Team sit down and discuss the key moments of the trailer.

FEATURES

NOTIME TO DIE

46 Empire charts the story of the 25th James Bond movie, which also just happens to be Daniel Craig's final outing as 007. For real, this time. Honest. No takebacks.

50 1917
As if making a war film weren't hard enough, director Sam Mendes explains the extraordinary and intriguing challenge of staging it all in real time.

A sit-down with Daniel Kaluuya, Jodie Turner-Smith, Lena Waithe and Melina Matsoukas, the team behind this excellent lovers-on-thelam tale.

72 CATSDo you know your Jellicles from your Rum Tum Tuggers? We go face-to-whiskers with the year's maddest musical movie.

BIRDS OF PREY

We were on the set of the DC movie that sees Margot Robbie's bat-wielding anti-hero swap the Suicide Squad for new lady friends.

BONG JOON HO

0 With *Parasite*, the South Korean master of the thriller confirms his status as one of the world's finest directors. He tells us how.

TANGO & CASH

00 As the Kurt Russell/Sly Stallone action comedy turns 30, we examine the madness behind the scenes.

∩/. ZACK STENTZ& 94 ASHLEYMILLER

As they begin their second act, one of Hollywood's best writing teams (Thor, X-Men: First Class) reflect on how they went from the next big thing to, "Who?"

ON SCREEN

Above: Daniel

Craig returns as

busy with his

bridge nights,

model railway

club and meals on

wheels round that

he literally has No

Time To Die.

Below: Will

Coming To

America come

out King in our

Eddie Murphy

film rankings?

Bond, the man so

20 We review Sam Mendes' single-shot World War I film but not in a single sentence: what do you think we are, mad?

JOJO RABBIT

JOJO RABBITaika Waititi takes on Hitler. Taika wins.

SPOILER SECTION

SPOILER SECTION Knives Out and The Irishman. It's what it is.

Director John Landis revisits his iconic horror-comedy.

MARTIN LAWRENCE

Role-by-role with the once and future Bad Boy.

THE RANKING

The very best of Eddie Murphy. Sorry, Norbit.



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THIS

WHEN DANIEL CRAIG was first cast as James Bond, many fans of the franchise thought he didn't have the right ingredients to play the polished leading man that they were used to. But after a five-film run, and producing the two highest-grossing 007 films ever, Craig has established himself as one of the greatest to ever nurse a shaken (not stirred) martini. And now he's about to hang up his gun holster with No Time To Die, his final Bond movie. We caught up with the English actor in New York, where he told us that there was still a story to be told and work to be done. And if the trailer is anything to go by, there's reason to celebrate. The full story is on page 46 where we have a 12-page feature jammed with interviews and photos with all the cast and filmmakers, gathered over three visits to three different countries.

And that's not all. We're also very excited about *Parasite* – the Korean movie tipped for an Oscar Best Picture nomination. We sat down with director Bong Joon-ho in LA to talk about his high-concept thrillers and darkly comic social satire. If you liked *Parasite*, we think you'll really love this interview. Elsewhere, we get in the trenches with World War 1 film 1917 – in which Sam Mendes transforms a drama into a real-time one-take wonder. Even if you're not into war movies – this one is not to be missed. Enjoy the issue.

JAMES COONEY EDITOR



CLASSIC LINES OF THE MONTH

"Tango & Cash was the most screwed-up show I ever worked on, and I worked on **Apocalypse** Now."

p.90

"You can shoot | "We had this cat Bond, stab him or threaten to cut off his nethers, but if you want to really hurt him, aim for the heartstrings."

p.50

lady, who would come in and teach us about the main rhythms of the cat."

p.75

EMPIRE

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GEM OF A MOVIE

I'm very excited about the release of the new Adam Sandler film Uncut Gems. I used to dislike the guy because of stuff like The Waterboy and Happy Gilmore, but I've warmed to him in recent times with his more serious roles and it sounds like Uncut Gems could be his best performance yet.

JARRYD, RANDWICK, NSW

Agreed, Jarryd. Sandler is amazing in Uncut Gems.

MY HAT'S OFF TO YOU

Can I have a hat? I usually spend my days on the couch watching movies so whenever I venture outside my sensitive skin burns in the sun. I'd love to be able to both rep my love for films and this magazine AND keep my nose out of the sun.

PETER, NEW FARM, QLD

We'll send you a hat, Peter, as long as you promise you won't go spending all your days in the outside world, neglecting the magic of movies and the joy of reading Empire.

POSTER BOY

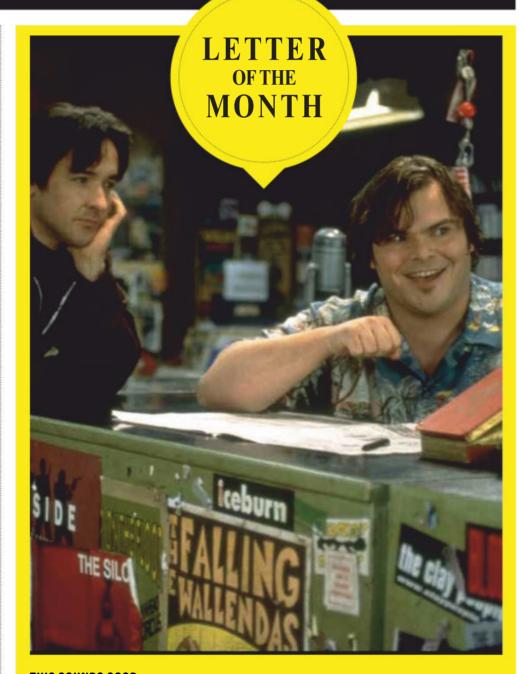
I loved the Star Wars posters in the last issue, especially the artwork by Cliff Cramp and Jeremy Saliba. Their visions of The Mandalorian and Dark Rey, respectively, were compelling. Both posters have pride of place on one wall in my workshop.

PATRICK, VIA EMAIL

Glad you liked them, Patrick. We were super-impressed by Cliff and Jeremy's work. In fact, all the art available from Acme Archives is pretty awesome.

THE BEST BOND!

I'm very excited about the new Bond flick after seeing the trailer. I think Daniel Craig is the best Bond, though my dad



THIS SOUNDS GOOD

While at dinner with a few friends and enjoying a wine or two (OK, maybe a bottle or two!), we began discussing the greatest ever film soundtracks. We all agreed that Tarantino films' soundtracks are fantastic, but my personal favourite is High Fidelity. What do you guys think?

BARBARA, LAUNCESTON, TAS

Good choice, Barbara, we also love the High Fidelity OST. Some of the Empire team are listening to the Purple Rain album right now. It's also a winner.

disagrees with me. When I was a kid I remember liking James Bond flicks and it not being cool, but nowadays it is! I think we've got Daniel Craig to thank

for that in a large way.

KEN, BLACKHEATH, NSW

We've got a feeling you're going to like this issue, Ken.



Writers this month will recieve a double pass to Sam Raimi's twisted new take on horror classic The Grudge, in cinemas January 30

HONOUR ROLE

ISSUE 225

COVER 1:

"This whole galaxy, the whole universe, used to be compressed into a tiny spot this big..." is from Paris, Texas.

COVER 2:

"It'll be the corporations that name everything. The IBM Stellar Sphere. The Microsoft Galaxy. The planet Starbucks" is from Fight Club.

COVER 3:

"The galaxy is on Orion's b- ... what is word?" "The bed?" is from Men In Black.

THE WINNER

Congratulations, Jim Howard. You've scored yourself an *Empire* cap!



[EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT]

MATTER

THAT

FILM MOMENTS

S

NTH



Wonder Woman swings into the '80s

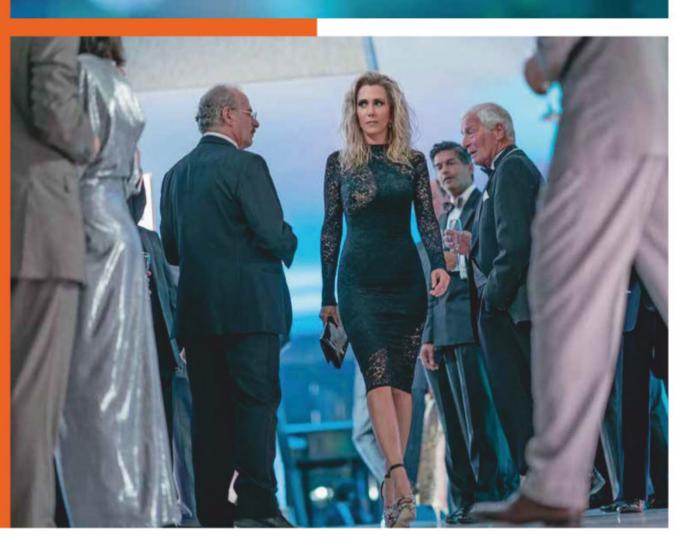
Director PATTY JENKINS on setting Diana Prince loose in the era of excess

"I WANT WONDER Woman to be the James Bond of the superhero world," says Patty Jenkins of the sequel to her 2017 hit. "I set out to make a grand, massive tentpole, \grave{a} la the 1980s." Not just in the style of the '80s either, but set in 1984 — with all the colour and brash confidence of that era.

After helping bring an end to World War I but losing the love of her life, Chris Pine's Steve Trevor, we rejoin Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman more than 60 years on. But for director Patty Jenkins, this was always the right time to return to Diana's story and always the story to tell.

"This story came to me very clearly while we were making the first film," says Jenkins. "There were two things that I cared about. The first was separating it from the first movie. I didn't want to say, 'Here's more of the same.' One of my favourite things about comic books is you can





take these incredible characters and experience such different stories through them, even though they stay essentially the same."

The second reason Jenkins wanted to set this story in 1984 was more thematic, "something I wanted to talk about which is incredibly pertinent to our times but was at its epoch in the '80s." That greed-is-good, me-generation ethos may have been associated with extreme material success, but what came with that? "The truth is, what was going on then would be such an interesting thing for Wonder Woman, an outsider who's immortal, to experience." This is another era to test Diana's compassion and selflessness: how does that look in a time of excess?

It also allowed Jenkins to move definitively away from the grey skies and mud of the Great War into something more colourful, full of the exuberant art and music of the era. She and her team had to find the perfect balance between '80s accuracy and distracting pastiche, acclimating to the period until it becomes simply background. "It becomes easy once your head's in the right place. I want this to feel like you're seeing a movie in the '80s, where all of the accidental '80s-ness feels almost unconscious." So, for Diana's civilian wardrobe, returning costume designer Lindy Hemming conceived styles like that white party gown (above) that stands at the exact halfway point between *Dynasty* and her ancient Greek roots.

But, glamorous and powerful as she looks, Diana is still pining for Steve. "That's where her head's at and what the story is really about. Despite all that she has, still she has a hole in her heart." And then he miraculously reappears. Jenkins won't say how he's back, only that he "came back organically". The pair will be challenged by Pedro Pascal's Maxwell Lord and Kristen Wiig's Barbara, who starts the story as "a brilliant scientist who works at the Smithsonian [who] doesn't know exactly the person she wants to be or know how to pull it off." We see her here as she evolves in a more confident direction that will, we suspect, go tragically off the rails if she becomes the villain Cheetah.

It's a set-up that certainly sounds pretty
Bondian. A globe-trotting adventure that trades
in excess, one that features two beautiful women
(one good, one evil) and a bad guy in a pinstriped suit, with cool gadgets (well, the Lasso
of Truth rather than an exploding pen) and
death-defying action. Diadems Are Forever?
Steve Only Lives Twice? Wonder Woman is back,
From Themyscira With Love. HELEN O'HARA

WONDER WOMAN 1984 IS IN CINEMAS FROM 4 JUNE



The films. The stories.
The stars. The debates.
The cats. From Avengers
to Zombieland, Team
Empire reflect on the
highs and lows of another
thrilling, memorable
and occasionally
perplexing year
in movies

THE YEAR... SCORSESE TOOK ON SUPERHEROES — AND SPARKED A DEBATE ABOUT CINEMA

It seemed like a harmless question. It was early July, and I was sat in Martin Scorsese's New York office. The director had shown me an unfinished cut of his latest epic, *The Irishman*, minus the de-ageing effects, and we were busy chatting about it. I asked if he had looked at the de-ageing work in Marvel's films. And to my surprise, Scorsese gave a fiery criticism of the Marvel oeuvre. "No, I don't see them," he began. "That's not cinema." My guess is you've seen the rest of his thoughts elsewhere.

I knew immediately it would get a reaction. But I didn't know until we ran the quotes in *Empire* in early October just how *big* a reaction. Once they started being shared via social media, arguments raged over whether Scorsese was speaking truth to power or just dismissing something he knew little about. Marvel directors, from James Gunn to Joss Whedon, weighed in. Robert Downey Jr was asked about it. Someone Photoshopped an Infinity Gauntlet onto

Scorsese's arm. A month later, the craziness continues: I write this just after the publication of a *New York Times* op-ed piece by Scorsese, and a defence by Kevin Feige on a podcast. It's been odd seeing this single quote spin into a global talking point. But ultimately, though Scorsese may wish I'd never asked him that question, it's opened up a debate over the definition of cinema, and the state of the film industry, that may have been essential and inevitable. Still, I'm glad I didn't ask him about the Snyder Cut. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**





film transcended tangled narratives and online toxicity, evidently connecting with audiences and pulling in over \$1.1 billion worldwide, giving women and men the headlining female icon the MCU had long cried out for. And then in April came the Endgame behemoth, outgrossing Captain Marvel's tally in its opening weekend alone, and

Rotten Tomatoes review-bombing, incel

boycotts, and men on the internet complaining

that Brie Larson doesn't smile enough. But the

ultimately dethroning Avatar's long-held position at the top of the all-time box-office. It wasn't just a money-grabber — it pushed character and story to unexpected, emotional places. In a year where

Game Of Thrones' final season riled devotees,

Endgame over-delivered with years-in-themaking action pay-offs, perfect goodbyes for Cap and Tony, and universe-altering consequences. Infinity War set vertiginous stakes. Endgame, somehow, vaulted them. The biggest risks now lie ahead. Can Phase Four ever hope to deliver on this scale? Your move, Feige. BEN TRAVIS

a billion from a \$55 million budget. But the risk paid off - a taut psychological study leaning in just enough to its character's mythos, it felt absolutely new, and infinite buzz meant that people just had to go and see what the fuss was about, and to take in a

singular, thrilling performance from Joaquin Phoenix. We don't yet know how this film has altered superhero cinema, but the mouth waters at what might come in its wake. One thing's for sure: Joker is as game-changing as it gets. ALEX GODFREY

THE YEAR... BOOKSMART MARKED A REVOLUTION IN TEEN COMEDY

From its opening images and sounds, through Maya Rudolph's motivational words and Beanie Feldstein's meditative stare, Booksmart was fearless. If it wasn't, it would have been forgotten alongside the countless formulaic reworkings of the teenage girl story. The strength here is that no-one is trying to guess how this world — these fears, these desires, this courage — would play out. The knockout team knows this material inside out, and gifts the audience with a time capsule of ambition, uncertainty and passion when you are young in 2019. Authenticity is vivid, as much in the playful direction from Olivia Wilde (marking her feature directorial debut) as in the open-hearted commitment of Feldstein and Kaitlyn Dever as the on-screen best friends who love each other in the real world too. The endless effort and goodwill poured into the process has made the result effortless to love. It feels like one we will love for a long time to come. ELLA KEMP

THE YEAR... MARVEL TOOK BIG RISKS — THAT PAID OFF

YEAR... CATS WERE

NOT CATS

Captain Marvel,

Pet Sematary,

Cats

In hindsight, 2019 was always going to be astonishing for the MCU. But in January, nothing was guaranteed. 2018's one-two punch of Black Panther and Avengers: Infinity War set a near-insurmountable precedent for Marvel Studios to follow: how do you match two genuine cultural milestones?

First came Captain Marvel in early March, finally delivering the franchise's first solo female protagonist in Carol Danvers - not only battling shape-shifting Skrulls and a complex 1990s origin story, but more insidious forces like pre-release



THE YEAR... THE SUMMER BOX OFFICE SPLUTTERED

It was the phrase whispered everywhere in Hollywood: "franchise fatigue". Once the most fertile season for blockbusters, 2019's summer saw 'safe bets' *X-Men, Men In Black* and *Godzilla* limp to miserable box-office takes. Studio boffins scratched their heads trying to find the common thread, but pointing the finger at franchises misses the point. After all, the latest *Avengers, Spider-Man* and *Toy Story* all sailed past the billion-dollar mark this year. The real common thread was, frankly, these were not very good films. And in an age of greater choice than ever, audiences are now more discerning. We can smell a cynical cash-in better than ever. If it was anything, this summer marked the start of "bad film fatigue". **JOHN NUGENT**





THE YEAR... WE REMEMBERED BRAD PITT WAS A PROPER MOVIE STAR

At the screening of *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood* I attended, it was a *moment*. As stuntman Cliff Booth, Brad Pitt — a movie star so handsome that people still say, when describing relative handsomeness, "Well, he's no Brad Pitt" — climbed up to Rick Dalton's roof, and, in the hot Californian sun, removed his T-shirt, the awestruck crowd around me let out an audible gasp. Quentin Tarantino knew exactly what he was doing. In a film all about movie stars, here was the

quintessential movie star, looking every bit the Steve McQueen-esque matinée icon he's always been. He is flawlessly handsome, of course, but it's his screen *presence* that still stuns, whether fixing aerials in *Once Upon A Time* or fixing space-aerials in *Ad Astra*. After a few years away from the limelight — save for an electrifying one-second cameo in *Deadpool 2* — it was gratifying to see him back up there on the big screen, for us to gasp at. **JOHN NUGENT**

THE YEAR... FEMALE AUDIENCES CAME OUT FOR HUSTLERS

Nobody quite anticipated the success of *Hustlers*, director Lorene Scafaria's whip-smart heist movie about a group of dancers scamming the Wall Street elite — but from the second Jennifer Lopez strode on screen, commanding under a waterfall of money, victory was inevitable. Sporting a complicated combo of sequins and sky-high heels, Lopez, on career-topping form, led a bedazzling ensemble of diverse women to financial and critical acclaim, scoring over

\$140 million at the box office and jump-starting awards rumours for the actor and her co-star Constance Wu. Audience figures from opening weekend revealed a 67 per cent female turnout, discrediting Hollywood's theory that women as cinemagoers don't influence big movie success, and further word-of-mouth on the film's positive message of female empowerment made *Hustlers* one of the first lucrative big-hitters that could not only hang the male gaze out to dry, but have exhaustingly good fun, too. BETH WEBB



Alamy, Disney, Shutterstock



THE YEAR... DE-AGEING VFX CAME OF AGE

After effective younger takes on Samuel L. Jackson in *Captain Marvel*, various Avengers in *Endgame* and Will Smith in *Gemini Man*, it took Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* to redefine the previously maligned art of CGI-assisted de-ageing (cf. *Tron Legacy*). After an initial trailer gave the internet the jitters, ILM refined unobtrusive facial capture tech (no helmet cams or face markers) to make

Robert De Niro, Al Pacino and Joe Pesci look convincingly younger, crisscrossing between several decades. The true testament to ILM's achievement is that you soon — in gangster parlance — fuggedaboutit. It could mean a Martin Scorsese Picture wins a Best VFX Oscar. Not bad for a non-theme park ride. IAN FREER

THE YEAR... ROCKETMAN SWUNG FOR THE FENCES

It may not have hit as big as last year's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, but director Dexter Fletcher's all-singing, all-shagging, all-snorting R-rated musical should be noted for its boldness and bravery. Fletcher claims it is the first major studio film to feature gay male sex, but beyond that, from the glittery fantasy sequences to Taron Egerton's vanity-free performance, *Rocketman* deserves the same kind of longevity as the star it depicts. **JOHN NUGENT**

$\frac{No./3 \text{ Top 10}}{\text{of the year}}$

The cream of the cinematic crop, as voted for by us



2

Avengers: Endgame

Booksmart





The Favourite

Marriage Story





The Irishman

Once Upon A Time In Hollywood





If Beale Street Could Talk

Knives Out





Midsommar

Joker

No./

Marvel's next move: an all-female team

Talk of an all-female MCU team-up has reached fever pitch. Here's what you need to know about its potential

WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT THIS NOW?

Well, because they are. Most recently, Brie Larson has spoken in detail about how she and a group of fellow female Marvel actors approached Marvel Studios head Kevin Feige directly about a potential female team-up movie. Given Feige's own recent promotion up the Marvel ranks (he is now Chief Creative Officer of all of Marvel), and the fact that Feige himself has spoken approvingly of the idea ("It is all about figuring out when and how," he told Vulture), the momentum for the idea is all there.

IS THERE PRECEDENT IN THE COMICS?

Marvel Comics' 2015 series *A-Force*, by writers G. Willow Wilson and Marguerite Bennett and artist Jorge Molina, was the publisher's first to feature an all-female team of Avengers. Debuting as part of the universe-wide *Secret Wars* crossover, the original miniseries featured appearances from just about every Marvel heroine imaginable on a parallel, matriarchal world. The ongoing series that followed introduced a core team, including Captain Marvel and the Inhumans' Medusa.

WHY HASN'T IT HAPPENED YET?

If there's an area in which Marvel have lagged behind DC so far, it's in female-led films. *Captain Marvel*, Marvel's first solo female-led movie, was beaten to the punch by DC's *Wonder Woman* — and now the DCEU is going to be first with a female team movie, courtesy of next year's *Birds Of Prey*. This hasn't been for want of great



A-Force assemble! Singularity encompassing (clockwise) Dazzler, She-Hulk, Captain Marvel, Medusa and Nico Minoru.

characters on Marvel's side, though — and building a big chunk of Phase Four towards uniting the best of them would be a fantastic way of gaining back some ground.

HOW COULD IT TIE INTO THE EXISTING MCU?

In story terms, the timing is perfect, considering the shuffling off the table of the 'old guard' of predominantly male Avengers; the MCU is crying out for some new icons. Teaming up characters like Captain Marvel, Shuri, Scarlet Witch and the Wasp wouldn't necessarily require the original comics' conceit of a "feminist paradise" alternate world to make happen. But introducing Singularity, the A-Force comics' original creation of a "pocket universe"

in humanoid form, would be a way to possibly tie the story to the increasingly cosmic side of the MCU.

WHAT OTHER CHARACTERS COULD GET INVOLVED?

We're already getting She-Hulk and Ms Marvel as additions to the MCU in the near future, and they'd have to be strong contenders — 'Shulkie', in particular, was an integral figure in the *A-Force* comics. But there are many more characters the films haven't even got to yet. The addition of the X-Men to the universe could give us the possibility of the ever-popular Rogue or Jean Grey joining up. Plus, the newly resolved situation with Sony throws open potential appearances from Spider-Gwen or Black Cat. **SEB PATRICK**



INTRODUCING...

Morfydd Clark

BREAKS THROUGH IN DAVID COPPERFIELD, SAINT MAUD AND ETERNAL BEAUTY

ON GETTING INTO ACTING

"I think being really rubbish in school played a big part in me becoming an actress. I have ADHD and needed to find a world where lots of the things that were seen as bad were not just accepted but celebrated. I feel so passionate about drama. It was a real refuge."

ON PASSIONATE DIRECTORS

"Something that's so great about Armando [lannucci, director of David Copperfield] is his boundless enthusiasm. Craig [Roberts, director of Eternal Beauty], Rose [Glass, director of Saint Maud] and Armando are all writerdirectors. I always thought writer-directors would be precious about their work, but actually none of them were."

ON PLAYING A TROUBLED NURSE IN SAINT MAUD

"I've got loads of family who work for the NHS. I feel very passionately about their plight. These people look after us and they're often ignored. I really liked that Maud was at the centre of that."

ON WHAT SHE LOOKS FOR IN A ROLE

"I'm just obsessed with people. I always have been I think that it's the person more than the story or the project. It's a person who I want to be and understand why they do all these things." **BETH WEBB**

> THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD IS TBC IN **CINEMAS IN 2020**









No./ **Why we need Sam** Raimi directing horror again

Empire's resident Sam Raimi superfan Chris Hewitt rejoices that the filmmaker is back where he belongs: directing horror

RECENTLY, ON A trailer for the latest remake of *The Grudge*, my heart soared. For early on, a title card proclaimed, "FROM SAM RAIMI". Three words guaranteed to perk me right up. Three words we haven't seen enough recently. Which is possibly why they were followed by another title card, one that made my heart sink: "A PRODUCER OF DON'T BREATHE AND EVIL DEAD".

No. No to the power of max, in fact. Sam Raimi is not just a producer. He is one of the most successful directors around, able to flit between big-scale blockbusters such as the original Spider-Man trilogy, and lo-fi horrors like the original Evil Dead, and its sequels. Yet you'd be easily forgiven for forgetting that. After all, it's been six years and counting since his last movie, Oz The Great And Powerful. Since then, largely radio silence. It's not as if he's been in movie jail (Oz made almost \$500 million; franchises have been founded on movies that made much less). But nothing since 2013, meaning that the gap on his CV has steadily become Kubrickian. Which might be why audiences need a big card explaining who he is.

Soon, though, they won't need

to. For Raimi is finally returning to his day job, at the helm of an as-yet untitled horror movie that has been described as a cross between Misery and Cast Away. And, in my corner of the universe at least, there was much rejoicing. Sam Raimi is a born film director — a visually inventive type, who can do things with a camera that make other directors look like they're working in radio — and his particular set of skills is very well suited to horror. See The Evil Dead trilogy and the utterly barmy but brilliant Drag Me To Hell for details.

He's been away for so long that it's easy to forget his influence on horror. Upstart talent like Jordan Peele and Ari Aster have redefined the genre in recent years. Raimi now its elder statesman — is almost in danger of being written off as too old-school. But if there's a place for him in the current landscape, it's to remind us all that he was one of the original innovators, a director who - like Peele and Aster — stretched the boundaries of the form. Here's hoping the last few years away will have sharpened his appetite for showing off what he can do. CHRIS HEWITT

Clockwise from top left: Raimi's roster: Bruce Campbell in Evil Dead (1981); Lorna Raver in Drag Me To Hell (2009); Raimi on set of Spider-Man (2002); More Raver scares in Drag Me To Hell.

No./0

The good, the bad, the bonkers

Your guide to the metric ton of films about to land on DISNEY+ — from beloved favourites to the super weird outliers



THE JUNGLE BOOK (1967)

The Mouse House's 1967 classic will be available to stream, alongside *Aladdin, The Lion King, The Little Mermaid* and all your other animated childhood faves. To have not included these masterworks would have caused outrage: for Disney fans, these are the bare necessities, after all.

WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT (1988)

Robert Zemeckis' 1988 cartoon/live-action hybrid remains as remarkable now as it was on release, artfully blending slapstick silliness with gripping film-noir mystery.

STAR WARS (EPISODES I-VII, ROGUE ONE) (1977-PRESENT)

Intimate family drama about a dysfunctional family, centred on a son riddled with daddy issues. Supposed to be pretty good.

THE SIMPSONS (1989-PRESENT)

Thanks to Disney's recent acquisition of Fox, there'll be 30 whole seasons of Springfield absurdity to enjoy when Disney+launches. *Ay caramba* indeed, as El Barto might say.

CAPTAIN MARVEL (2019)

Some, but not all, Marvel films will be free to stream on Disney+ at first. The asskicking origin story of one Carol Danvers is thankfully among the MCU mega-smashes available from the off.

THE CULT GEMS



THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG (2009)

This overlooked effort saw Disney return to its roots: after experimenting with Pixar-style CGI, here was a traditionally animated fairy tale set in the sticky swamps of New Orleans, with charm up there with Disney's best.

A GOOFY MOVIE (1995)

A surprisingly tender father-son story full of Prince-inspired songs, that brought emotive depth to one of Mickey's supporting players. No wonder it's retained a cult following in the years since its release.

THE GREAT MOUSE DETECTIVE (1986)

The titular sleuth from this animation might not have troubled Mickey for his title of best-loved Disney mouse, but there's a lot to love in this Sherlock Holmes reinterpretation.

MEET THE ROBINSONS (2007)

Look beyond the time travel, inventions and dinosaurs in this colourful, whipsmart family sci-fi and there's a touching tale about orphans learning to embrace failure to be found.

THE EMPEROR'S NEW GROOVE (2000)

It took six years for Disney to get right this bonkers buddy comedy about a pampered Incan emperor who gets turned into a llama. Vivid animation and infectious songs made the resulting film as groovy as advertised.

THE... ERM... WTF?



THE CAT FROM OUTER SPACE (1978)

Like *The Aristocats*, if *The Aristocats* had names like 'Zunar-J-5/9 Doric-4-7' and telepathic powers. Can't believe they didn't name this 'Close Encounters Of The Purred Kind'.

THE SHAGGY D.A. (1976)

Cinema history is full of iconic hard-boiled detectives. None hairier, however, than the star of this barking-mad 1976 caper about a canine crime-stopper and a magical ring that allows wearers to shape-shift into Alsatians.

THE BISCUIT EATER (1972)

A heartwarming tale of two boys who overcome their racial differences with the help of a feral dog. Not, sadly, a superhero origin story about a hero able to eat unlimited Tim Tam's.

THE COMPUTER WORE TENNIS SHOES (1969)

Kurt Russell stars in this bizarre romp in which his character, Riley, is turned into a human computer after suffering an electric shock. He's entered into a televised quiz tournament with \$100,000 up for grabs — but mobsters want him dead. Obviously.

THE MILLION DOLLAR DUCK (1971)

A duck wanders into a radiation lab. It walks out able to lay golden eggs. Roger Ebert called it "one of the most profoundly stupid movies I've ever seen". **AL HORNER**

DISNEY+ IS OUT NOW



Tarantino's Once Upon A Time

In Hollywood is due for a rerelease with ten more minutes of footage. Here are five other 2019 films that could use the same treatment

1JOKER

After the popularity of the 'Joker stairs' in New York's Bronx, Todd Phillips adds 20 more minutes of staircase action. A montage where a baby in a pram is pushed down the steps is not a homage to *Battleship Potemkin* — just Joker back on his bullshit again.

2 DOWNTON ABBEY

Realising that the antics of the Crawley family didn't a) have enough drama and b) didn't reach a young demo, Universal reissue it digitally, integrating scenes from Jordan Peele's *Us*; Mrs Patmore's kitchen is overrun with rabbits, the Dowager Countess gets a deep-throaty shadowworld voice, and Carson dances to 'I Got 5 On It'.

3 RAMBO: LAST BLOOD

Addressing criticisms that septuagenarian John Rambo is too cartoonish to be believable, *Rambo: Last Blood* injects more realism, with Rambo holding up queues in post offices, going shopping for elasticated slacks and shouting answers at daytime television quizzes.

4 BOOKSMART

Olivia Wilde's pitch-perfect teen comedy doesn't have a frame changed, but adds a ten-minute coda at the end where Wilde, Beanie Feldstein and Kaitlyn Dever discuss why more people didn't go to see it, sticking pins into voodoo dolls of everyone who went to see *Brightburn* instead.

5 APOCALYPSE NOW: (NO WORD OF A LIE IT'S THE) FINAL CUT

Coppola cuts out the sequence everyone likes (the helicopter attack) and adds 45 more minutes of Colonel Kurtz musing in the dark ("'If' is the middle word in 'life'", "'God' is 'dog' spelled backwards"). IAN FREER



like to make over: Joker, Downton Abbey, Rambo: Last Blood, Booksmart and Apocalypse Now: Final Cut.

PREVIEW





[TREND REPORT]

FLAME-THROWING FUN

From the multiplex to the arthouse, the flamethrower is this year's cinematic weapon of choice

WORDS JOHN NUGENT ILLUSTRATIONS BILL McCONKEY



ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD

"Anybody order fried sauerkraut?"
announces Rick Dalton while torching
Nazis. He admits he's "shit-scared" of the
flamethrower — but not enough to not
crank it out for the film's brilliant finale.



PROF. ANDREIKO HOBBS & SHAW

Luke Hobbs and Deckard Shaw may have managed to beat seven shades of shit out of über-baddie Brixton, but only

Eddie Marsan's nerdy professor manages to set him on fire. He did eventually, erm, get murdered for it.



EMA EMA

Proving that flamethrowers are for everyone, this festival hit from Chilean arthouse darling Pablo Larraín features Ema engaging in a spot of therapeutic pyromania with a homemade

flamethrower. Arty and explosive!



Director Jay Roach on how his Fox News drama BOMBSHELL tackled an early case in the #MeToo era

BEFORE HARVEY WEINSTEIN, there was Roger Ailes. A full 15 months before allegations against the producer triggered the #MeToo movement, Fox News CEO Ailes was hit with his own allegations, with multiple women accusing him of sexual harassment. "It was the year before Harvey," explains director Jay Roach, whose film *Bombshell* depicts the fallout at Fox. "These women came out [with their allegations] not exactly expecting a giant surge of support. I thought that was really interesting: telling the story of early ripples in what later became a giant tsunami of revelations."

Work on a film about the Ailes scandal began almost immediately after the news broke. *The Big Short* screenwriter Charles Randolph began working on a script in late 2016. Roach — who made his name on comedies like *Austin Powers*, but has focused in recent years on political dramas like *Recount* and *Trumbo* — joined the project in early 2017, and together he and Randolph began work almost like investigative journalists, speaking to multiple former Fox employees, often anonymously. It was, he says, an essential part of the process. "Going to primary sources is not just important for authenticity, it

improves the story. You learn fascinating and compelling details."

Roach and Randolph ultimately spoke to around 20 former employees. But the process was complicated. "Many of the women just didn't want to take the risk," Roach says. "But the few that did told us what the other women couldn't." Many of the accounts contributed greatly to the character of Kayla (played by Margot Robbie in the film), who Roach describes as a "fictionalised composite character, meant to represent a compilation of the experiences we'd heard about" — including an excruciating 'casting couch' scene in which Ailes demands sexual favours in return for an on-air role.

Other former employees were legally unable to speak about their experiences, gagged by mandatory non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). They include anchor Gretchen Carlson (played in the film by Nicole Kidman), who told *Entertainment Weekly* that it was a "strange and frustrating reality that I can't participate in any of these projects", but expressed support for the film. Roach agrees that the NDAs are part of the problem. "Women are kept from warning each other," he says. "Gretchen's been lobbying











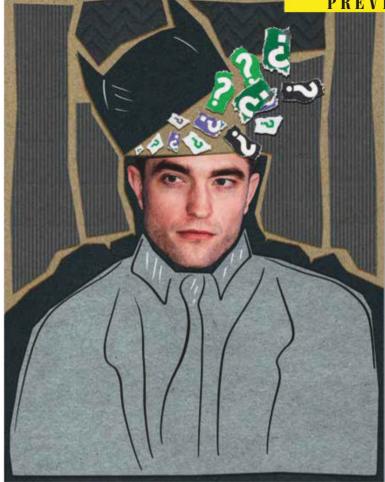


Congress to change it. It's a big theme in the story, and an interesting meta-reality, that in order to tell a story about forced NDAs, we had to talk to people who had forced NDAs."

The script in place, the final piece in the puzzle was the cast — in particular, the powerhouse trio of Charlize Theron, Kidman and Robbie. "I'm a very collaborative director anyway," Roach says, "but in this case — because, you know, I'm a man making a film about women's empowerment, from a woman's point of view — I just completely relied on my actors' sense of things. It's time-consuming but it was such an important part of the process."

The electrifying first teaser trailer, released back in August, generated huge interest and excitement. But it also brought the film under scrutiny from some concerned that a film about the notoriously right-wing Fox News network might glorify the original fake news peddlers as good guys. Roach — who considers himself "left of that political persuasion" — is bullish on this point. "Can we agree about one thing: that women should be safe at work? Isn't that a non-partisan issue?" He admits that issues like equality and female empowerment "tend to be [adopted by] those on the left — and yet these women were just as just as deserving of their perspective." Indeed, anchor Megyn Kelly (played by Theron) repeatedly insists she is not a feminist in the film. But after revealing that she too was harassed by Ailes, she ultimately fights for a feminist cause. "That she is one of the people who helped make this happen," says Roach, "that it was complicated by that reality, made it seem twice as interesting to me." JOHN NUGENT

Top to bottom:
Gretchen
Carlson (Nicole
Kidman) with
Kayla in the Fox
News office;
Director Jay
Roach with
Robbie. "This is
the story of early
ripples in what
would become
a tsunami."



$N_0./9$ "I want to push it as far as possible"

Robert Pattinson speaks to Empire on making his upcoming Batman just as interesting and weird as his recent roles

ROBERT PATTINSON WAS in an airport this May, bricking it. He was off to Cannes for the premiere of Robert Eggers' crazed drama The Lighthouse, nervously anticipating audience reaction, when the news broke: Pattinson, the world had just discovered, would be Batman. "It was terrifying," he tells Empire. "I was also starting Chris Nolan's movie [Tenet] that week. I was slightly overwhelmed. And then the casting stuff got leaked literally as I was getting on the plane to Cannes. I was worried that everyone thought I leaked it. The whole thing was really stressful! It was a very, very intense week."

His weeks are only going to get more intense. Pattinson's film career was big from the start — Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire was his third screen role before knocking out five Twilight movies, but since then he has gone defiantly leftfield, working with the likes of David Cronenberg, the Safdie Brothers and Claire Denis on an eclectic string of art films, shapeshifting from

one bit of weirdness to the next. Now, seven years since he hung up his fangs, he's stepping into the mainstream again — but that doesn't necessarily mean he'll be sacrificing the strangeness. Can he still bring his unconventional intense psychological explorations to Gotham?

"Yeah, I always want to," he says. "The only thing that's more complicated is the rating. As soon as you make something an R-rated movie, you're freed up to do so much stuff." It's unlikely The Batman will be rated as such — there's too much at stake for such a franchise, and it's not an outlier like Todd Phillips' Joker. Still, Pattinson wants to break some barriers. "In terms of the character itself, I want to push it as far as it possibly can go. And I think Matt Reeves does as well. You can do crazy stuff with that part." He wants to get nuts. Let's get nuts. **ALEX GODFREY**

THE BATMAN IS IN CINEMAS IN 2021

BOMBSHELL IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 JANUARY

Getty Images



No./12 Dafriend or Dafoe?

Willem Dafoe has played bad guys and good guys across his career. Where does his character in *The Lighthouse* fit on the scale?

WORDS JOHN NUGENT



SPEED 2: CRUISE CONTROL 1997
The peak of Dafoe's late '90s/early '00s
rogues' gallery was this disgruntled former
cruise worker-turned-ocean-based techterrorist. Dafoe's venomous scenerychewing is fantastically pantomimic.

DA FREAKY FOE



WILD AT HEART 1990

With his pencil moustache, slick hair and prominent gums, Dafoe's blood-curdling hitman is like a creepy Rhett Butler. In a David Lynch film not short of disturbing imagery, Dafoe steals every scene he's in.

No./11

"I'm as surprised and sad as anybody"

Director Tim Miller candidly opens up on the latest Terminator box-office disappointment — and reveals plans for sequels that may never be realised

LIKE THE RUTHLESS efficiency of a terminator hunting down John Connor, the ruthless apathy of US audiences has seemingly put pay to the future of the *Terminator* franchise. Opening on 1 November, Terminator: Dark Fate bowed at number one at the box office but its disappointing gross in America (\$29 million) and globally (\$94 million) means it could end up as a \$130 million loss for studios Paramount, 20th Century Fox and Skydance Media. The lacklustre performance has left director Tim Miller baffled.

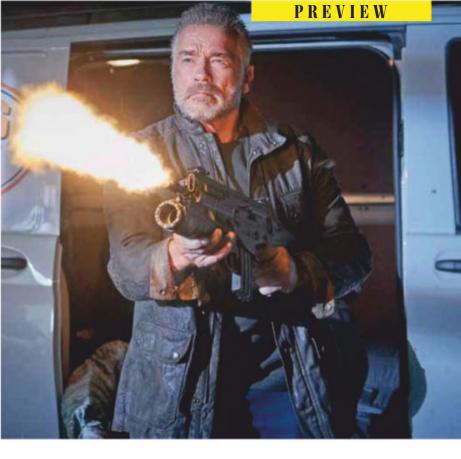
"I have no idea," says Miller when asked about why the film failed to find huge numbers. "[Skydance executive] David Ellison told me it was tracking [box office expectations] fairly well up until the Monday and then it dropped off a bit. We don't really know why. If I were to guess I would just say it was general franchise fatigue and maybe Genysis was a bit too close, a bit too fresh in the memory. I'm as surprised and sad as anybody."

Miller reveals Team Terminator had extensive plans for sequels. "We had originally talked about three movies in total," he says.

"Over time it naturally fell into chunks, but it was all about what is the big, fat story — the arc of these characters — and then it comes down to how do you divide up that pie into three movies." The sequels were being written by Josh Friedman (War Of The Worlds, Avatar 2) and Charles H. Eglee (The Walking Dead, American Gods), yet Miller remains uncertain they will now see the light of day.

"[The opening weekend] certainly makes the chances of it less bright," says Miller. "But we did structure it so I don't feel like this film feels incomplete, in the same way that Terminator 2 didn't."

The project hasn't been a bed of roses for Miller, freely admitting he had creative disagreements with *Terminator* producer James Cameron — "That can be a very healthy process or it can be a very destructive process. I'd say this was mostly healthy," he says with a laugh — but he remains proud of the results, whatever the numbers suggests. "There's always shit I think could be made better," he admits, "but I think it's a pretty good time at the movies, ya know?" IAN FREER



Above: The only thing that could kill Arnie's Terminator is a lack of box office. **Below:** Director Tim Miller.



DA CONFLICTED FOE



SPIDER-MAN 2002

Spider-Man's most famous adversary is played here like Gollum: a good-hearted businessman torn apart by his inner Goblin. One of Dafoe's most cherished villains, which produced an all-time great cackle.

DA AMBIGUOUS FRIEND



THE LIGHTHOUSE 2019

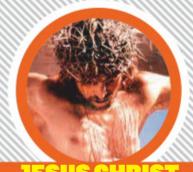
Is heavily bearded wicky Thomas Wake to be trusted? Is there some "enchantment in the light"? What of his mysterious past? And is there some malice in all that farting? The Lighthouse keeps you guessing.



THE LIFE AQUATIC WITH **STEVE ZISSOU 2004**

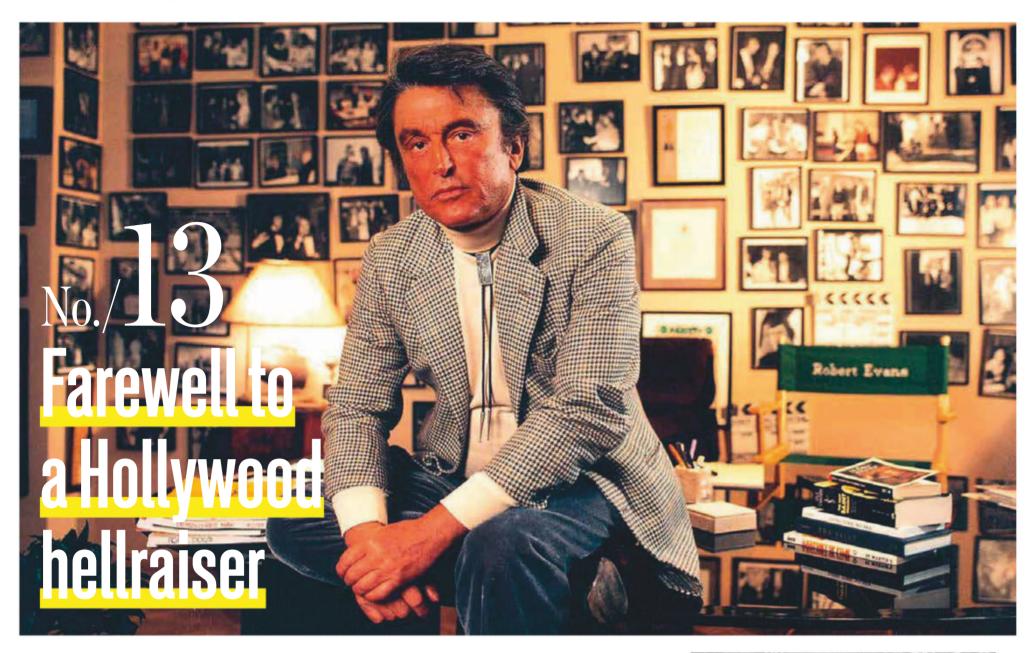
Dafoe has played bad guys for Wes Anderson before. But here he plays a gentle German sailor who only wants Bill Murray's attention. As do we all.

DA JEALOUS FRIEND DA FRIEND TO ALL SINNERS



THE LAST TEMPTATION **OF CHRIST 1988**

Given all malevolent, moustache-twiddling wrong-'uns he's played, it's easy to forget this role. Good Guys don't get more Good than J.C.. Peace be with you, Willem!



[IN MEMORIAM] Legendary producer Robert Evans died at the end of October. We remember a notorious, larger-than-life Hollywood figure

THE PARAMOUNT PRODUCER behind *The Godfather, Love Story, Chinatown* and *Rosemary's Baby*, Robert Evans was the toast of '70s Hollywood and as well-known as the stars themselves for his flamboyant look and hedonistic lifestyle. In his memoirs, he also proved himself to be a master yarnspinner, recounting his wild, cocaine-addled times with no small amount of pomp and self-regard. Here are four of his most iconic, larger-than-life moments.

HE ALMOST CAME TO BLOWS WITH FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

After a testy production of *The Godfather* (during which Evans objected to Al Pacino's casting, referring to him as a "little dwarf"), Coppola wired Evans to tell him exactly what he thought of him. "Your stupid blabbing about cutting *The Godfather* angers me for its ridiculous pomposity," he wrote. "... You have double crossed me for the last time. If you want a PR war or any kind of war, no-one is better at it than me." Evans, for his part, replied with a vague threat: "Dear Francis, do not mistake my kindness for weakness." The two would eventually make up, but for a while, the venom was intense — with Coppola even taking to the witness stand at one point to claim Evans was an "agent of chaos".

HIS WOMANISING WAS LEGENDARY

The mogul was married seven times, and never for more than three years. His maid would deliver his breakfast in bed and include a note of the woman's name he was currently in bed with. He took relish in recounting the time he went to Paris' most high-end brothel with French megastar Alain Delon. But he got a taste of his own medicine when his most famous marriage — to A-list star Ali Macgraw (*Love Story*) — ended sourly. She promptly left him for her co-star, Steve McQueen, in the early '70s. "She was looking at me and thinking about Steve McQueen's cock," he succinctly told *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* writer Peter Biskind.

HE WAS ALMOST WITNESS TO THE MANSON MURDERS

Evans claimed he had been invited over on the infamous night in the summer of 1969, but was busy in the editing room and had declined. Describing his horror at the events that unfolded, Evans chauffeured a distraught Roman Polanski, Sharon Tate's husband, to the Paramount studio lot and had a studio doctor heavily sedate him. He didn't fail to get in a pot-shot at Steve McQueen while he was at it, noting in his memoir that McQueen was practically the only person not to turn up to Tate's funeral.

HE HAD A FEW RUN-INS WITH THE LAW

"Me, the boy wonder of Paramount, almost ended up in the slammer for cocaine, murder, fraud, and prostitution," Evans wrote about himself, seemingly delighting in the muck. In 1980, Evans was arrested for cocaine trafficking and put on a year's probation. Later, while





Top to bottom: Robert Evans at his office; Outside Paramount Pictures in 2006; The producer with ex-wife Ali McGraw in 1970.

producing *The Cotton Club*, he was associated to the murder of a business partner, but never charged. Eventually, an ex-girlfriend of his was convicted of the murder, but his rumoured association to this dark Los Angeles underbelly would ruin his career for a time. Naturally, he would make a Hollywood comeback, and wrote his smash-hit memoir, *The Kid Stays In The Picture*, in 1994. CHRISTINA NEWLAND

Getty Images, New York Times/Eyevine, Shutterstock



Star Wars: The Mandalorian

Unfiltered, uncensored, uncompromising trailer reactions from team EMPIRE

James Dyer (Digital Editor-In-Chief):

Did you know there's a type of curry called The Mangalorean? I had one the other night.

Jamie Inglis (Deputy Art Director):

John Nugent (News Editor): So are people excited for this?

Chris Lupton (Creative Director): I am.

Ben Travis (Online Staff Writer): So, does he ever take his mask off?

James: I don't know. I can only assume he does, otherwise you don't hire Pedro Pascal. Ben: It's not even like Dredd, where you see

his chin. He's fully covered. James: Stormtrooper helmets!

Ben: This shot feels like a very tonal statement of intent. This is after Return Of The Jedi and you're in the lawless badlands. It's quite metal.

John: Well metal.

James: Are these Dewbacks? I'm not sure

that they are. Dewbacks are quadrupeds.

Maybe they're just space slugs.

Nick: I'm a fan of that shot.

John: There's a lot of lovely wide-angle shots. It's all very John Ford.

James: It does have a Western vibe. But then, so does the first Star Wars.

Nick: 'The Good, The Bad And The Ugnaught'?

John: Oh dear.

James: Ah, the Trandoshans! This is the race that Bossk, the bounty hunter from Empire, belonged to.

Chris: These upset me a little bit. Bossk always looked quite formidable, and then these look a little wet and slimy. These look a bit like when they changed the Klingons in Star Trek.

John: I have no idea what you are all talking about.

James: This whole sequence bugs me. It makes it out like freezing things in carbonite is something bounty hunters do. But it was Darth Vader's idea to do it and Boba Fett was not on board with it in Empire. This is bullshit!

John: But he's not Boba Fett. He might have a different approach.

Ben: He has a new ship.

John: The ship looks a bit, in silhouette, like Mickey Mouse ears. A Disney flex?

Joanna Moran (Photography Director): It looks a little bit like 'Little Rocket Boy'.

[mass confusion]

Everyone: What?

Joanna: [after some time] Astro Boy! **Ben:** I love that they've just left [trailer *narrator*] Werner Herzog to be himself.













John: Who's Herzog playing?

Nick: Himself, hopefully. [Werner Herzog voice] "The futility of the galaxy..."

John: So who are the stormtroopers aligned to if there's no Empire?

James: I genuinely don't know. Maybe they're mercenaries.

Ben: The Mandalorian armour has always been cool. But he's got quite a cool no-nonsense fighting style here — shooting and kicking everyone.

Jamie: His armour can stop laser beams. Why can't the stormtrooper armour do that? Chris: Their armour has always been crap,

James: It's a space-rhino!

John: Oh God, there's going to be a full episode of him just shovelling space-dung. **Jamie:** That's definitely a mission where the rhino's swallowed a USB stick or something and he has to just follow it around until it does a shit. [Laughter]

James: This robot is voiced by Taika Waititi.

Ben: So we're going to get this robot [*IG-11*] murdering people and then dishing out pithy Taika lines?

John: I've heard the robot is actually quite naive and innocent. It doesn't understand sarcasm. It's not the average Taika character. Ben: Well, the average Taika character varies from ancient vampire to Hitler, to be fair.

James: That's a handy little shoulder-gun. He looks like the Predator.

John: Oh wow, that's Bill Burr!

Ben: I don't know who he is.

John: He's a stand-up comedian, who has gone on record saying he hates Star Wars. It's quite funny to see him in this.

Chris: This would be a great look to do on Drag Race.

James: Well, this certainly *look*s like a Star Wars film. It's got amazingly high production values.

Chris: I'm quite excited for it.

Nick: I guess the question is whether the character's going to be interesting enough. Boba Fett's quite thin.

John: He's not Boba Fett, though. And the Mandalorian will have more screentime in his first episode than Boba Fett had in the entire original trilogy. He had, like, six minutes.

James: People rag on Fett. There's a lot of Fett-shaming. People don't like him because he has no character, he's just got cool armour. The idea of this, I guess, is that you have a good character and cool armour.

THE MANDALORIAN IS OUT NOW ON DISNEY+

No./14

THE CAGE RAMPAGE

Four films, four foes: here's what Nicolas Cage will be raging against next (and yes, these are real films)

THEME PARK ROBOTS

In Wally's Wonderland,
Nicolas Cage plays a
fairground janitor who is
forced to battle evil
animatronic monsters.
Think Westworld but with
more screaming.

AJAGUAR

In *Primal*, Nicolas Cage plays an animal hunter who is forced to seek revenge after a mercenary escapes confinement on a ship and lets a jaguar loose.

Think *Under Siege*, but with more scratching.

PIG KIDNAPPERS

In *Pig*, Nicolas Cage plays a truffle hunter who is forced to seek revenge after his pig is kidnapped. Think *John Wick*, but with more slop.

AN ALIEN WHO HATES JIU JITSU

In *Jiu Jitsu*, Nicolas Cage plays a jiu jitsu fighter who is forced to fight an alien who comes to Earth every six years. Think *Kickboxer* but with more, er, recurring aliens.

JOHN NUGENT





You may not know his name, says *Empire's* Ben Travis. But screenwriter Steve Kloves could be just what the Potter franchise needs

MAJOR BLOCKBUSTER FRANCHISES don't often take a year off. But when Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes Of Grindelwald received a lukewarm reception from critics and audiences alike (even with a hefty \$654 million worldwide haul, it's the lowest-grossing Wizarding World movie), that's exactly what Warner Bros. did — adding an extra 12 months of prep on Fantastic Beasts 3 to get the magic back. One year on, the third Beasts movie has a November 2021 release date, is officially set to depict Rio de Janeiro's wizarding community, and is bringing all its key players (Johnny Depp included) back — with one important change.

While franchise stalwart David Yates will still direct, this time J.K. Rowling won't be the only one working on the screenplay. After writing the *Fantastic Beasts* and *Crimes Of Grindelwald* scripts solo, she'll be co-penning this entry with Steve Kloves — the screenwriter who, *Phoenix* aside, adapted every Potter book for the films.

It's a move that spells promise. Rowling's gift for character, plot and world-building made Potter a global phenomenon — and it's been evident in the Beasts movies too, with its international witches and wizards, Newt's TARDIS-like, beast-filled briefcase, and a dark tale of another unloved magical orphan in Ezra Miller's tortured Credence Barebone. But those films, Crimes in particular, lacked momentum and proved light on memorable action. Important plot revelations such as the Lestrange family tree and the cryptic prophecy around Credence, easily re-readable on the page, felt



Top: Tina (Katherine Waterston) and Newt (Eddie Redmayne) in *Grindelwald*. **Above:** Alison Sudol as Queenie. **Below:** Part three co-screenwriters J.K. Rowling and Steve Kloves.

rushed and confusing as dialogue even for fans.

While the Potter screenplays aren't perfect, Kloves (who, it must be noted, produced the *Beasts* movies) admirably wrangled Rowling's increasingly lengthy tomes into largely faithful adaptations. In 2021, for the first time in a decade, *Fantastic Beasts 3* will give us Rowling's original story as filtered through the Wizarding World's most experienced screenwriter. As long as her vision remains intact, it's the best of both worlds

 hinting at a telling more tailored for a cinematic experience, as the climactic duel between Grindelwald and

Dumbledore draws near.

And there is plenty of potential yet, with *Crimes*' final reel offering tantalising developments: Credence Barebone apparently revealed as a member of the Dumbledore family, Queenie Goldstein going dark, and Newt becoming more active in the face of conflict. With the dream team of Rowling and Kloves working together, *Beasts* could be fantastic again.

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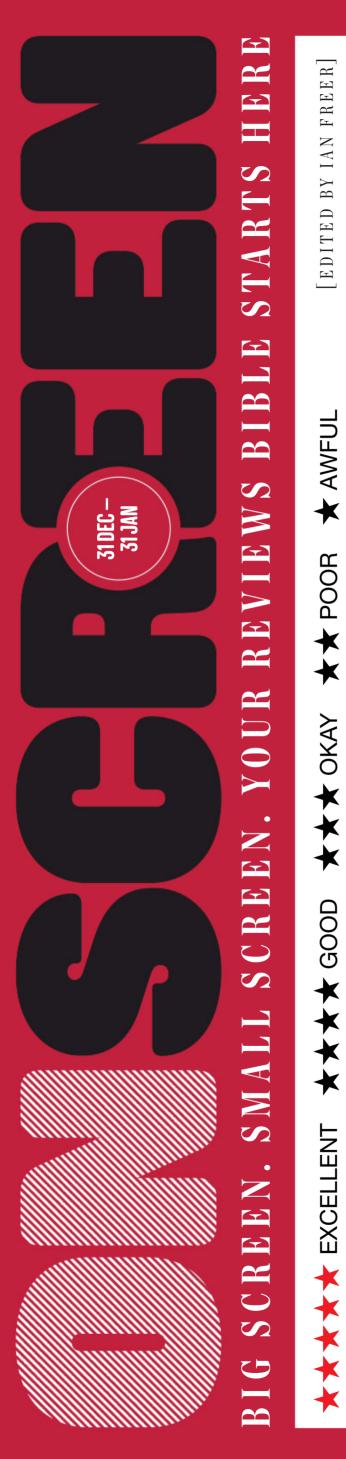


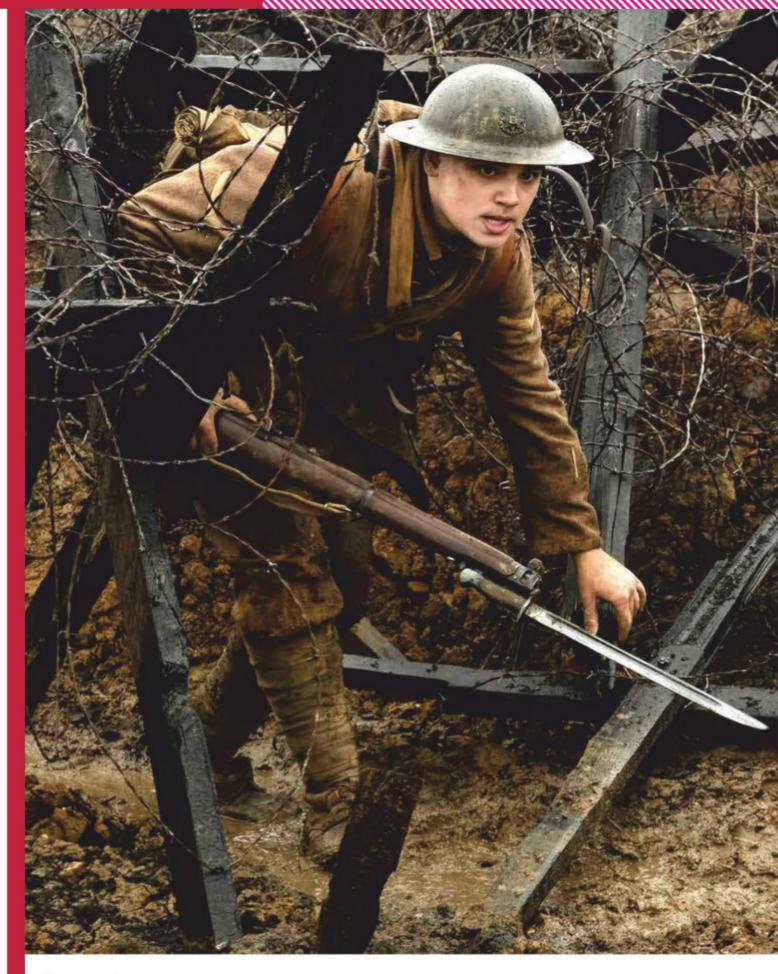




tomorrow and forever.







1917



OUT 9 JANUARY
CERT TBC / 119 MINS

DIRECTOR Sam Mendes **CAST** George MacKay, Dean-Charles Chapman,

Mark Strong, Andrew Scott

PLOT On 6 April 1917 — three years into World War I — two young British soldiers in northern France, Schofield (MacKay) and Blake (Chapman), are tasked with delivering a life-saving message to a distant battalion. To get there, though, they must traverse life-threatening enemy terrains.

TALK OF A tracking shot might usually merit a sentence or two in a film review. A paragraph maybe. Even with Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman*, which presented itself as an unbroken take, the technique was just one of a handful of talking points. But *1917*'s camerawork engulfs the film. It's supposed to. While not quite pretending to be a continuous long take, there is only one blatantly obvious cut. Aliens who have no comprehension of our ways, let alone cameras, would leave the cinema talking about this tracking shot. That's what the film is. Format is front and centre. For the most part it pays off.

We're aware of it within a minute, travelling through the trenches with young corporals Schofield (MacKay) and Blake (Chapman), trudging through the slush, being pushed and shoved by other soldiers — we're in the melee from the off. Summoned to a meeting, the two men are told that they are to deliver a message to the 2nd Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment.



(Colin Firth) has learned, have excellent artillery and defences. They want to be attacked.

Schofield and Blake are charged with setting off over the frontline, through German territory and across the countryside to give the word. In a frankly sadistic move by his superiors, Blake, who is asked to pick an accompanying partner before being briefed, is chosen because his older brother is with the 2nd Battalion, at risk of imminent death. Blake, then, has some extra skin in the game, and the red mist quickly rises. This potential suicide mission is totally doable, he says. Why, then, asks Schofield, have they been given grenades?

The film is thick with atmosphere. Twenty minutes in, as Schofield and Blake leave the trenches, Mendes gives them a rude awakening - a portent of what's to come, perhaps. Due to

and Schofield (MacKay) set off. **Right:** Colonel Mackenzie (played by **Benedict** Cumberbatch).

the insanity of the war — the horror and the madness — there's a surreal quality to much of 1917, and for a large part of it the corporals' quest feels like a dark The Wizard Of Oz or The Lord Of The Rings — they are Sam and Frodo heading into Mordor, and soon after setting off they find themselves in a Hieronymus Bosch hellscape. Here, as with many of its sequences, 1917 excels, every camera move paying off. It's a grim spectacle, but an incredible one.

With Thomas Newman's score providing a creeping dread, here we find flies buzzing around horse carcasses and rats scuttling over human corpses, the faces of the soldiers all but eaten away. It's a waking nightmare, no less so because of the unforgiving daylight. No mood lighting required. That comes later, when cinematographer Roger Deakins really goes for it. In a town bombed to bits, aerial blasts light the place up, making for a ghostly terror.



There are some staggering landscapes in this film. The hell of war is production-design heaven. A playground of the damned.

Schofield's bloodied hand, torn up from a mishap with some barbed wire, is the least of his worries. "Patch it up," says Blake. "You'll be wanking again in no time." It's a tall order to keep things moving when the film slows down, as it does intermittently — the conversation needs to be compelling and while it isn't always, MacKay and Chapman are both great, both convincing, both immensely likeable. There's barely any backstory — as with Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*, it's all about the here and now. Jeopardy comes quickly, and you care.

There is less banter as events become graver. Needless to say, as 1917 goes on, things don't get any happier. Volume-wise, Mendes' crew matches it accordingly: the audio is often unforgiving. There is grandeur to Newman's score, in awe of the apocalypse of it all, and the sound design is off the hook — biplanes roar over us, deafeningly. The cinema seats shake. Much of the action is nail-biting.

There is little respite. Clearly, Mendes wants the camerawork to immerse us in the action, and it does. The camera ducks and dives gracefully, swooping around balletically — it may often be one long shot, but it's never static, never boring. You can only imagine the choreography involved. This is a film that has been meticulously planned, to the inch, to the millisecond. Unfortunately, though, you feel that. Everything is in exactly the right place at exactly the right time and events unfold in neat succession. At times it feels like an installation we're being led through to experience the horror of war.

The technique is a self-imposed challenge for Mendes — everything we see has to suit the conceit. It can be done — it worked gangbusters only last year, in the Norwegian film about the 2011 Anders Breivik massacre, Erik Poppe's *Utøya: July 22*, a horribly tense (supposed)

unbroken 90-minute take. That, though, was far more naturalistic than this, the camera bringing far less attention to itself. *1917* feels stylistically contrived and, as such, it's often not as immersive as Mendes might like.

The same goes for the narrative. Despite the film's heart, sincerity and intention, it is essentially a string of set pieces: What's going to happen next? Which terrain will we visit? What sort of attack will we see? After a strong first half it becomes less engaging — at its weakest, it feels a bit like a *Tomb Raider* game, the thrills and spills slightly superficial, the action in service of the camerawork. There is little complexity overall and it's not particularly thought-provoking. And yet, there is no questioning the skill and the film is often breathtaking. By the end if it all, you feel like you've taken a beating — as it hits its climactic stretch, it's the business.

This is the first screenplay Mendes has written — in fact, he co-wrote it with up-and-coming Scottish writer Krysty Wilson-Cairns (who contributed to the Mendes-exec-produced *Penny Dreadful*). Yet if his films share anything approaching a world view, it's a sort of cynicism — and *1917* only adds to that. There's nothing rousing here, no grandstanding. There is hopelessness throughout, just little slivers of light shining through the murk. Any humanity on display is constantly bludgeoned. Which is fitting, all things considered.

Almost everything you've ever seen in a war film is here. But never quite like this. It is very much a stylistic exercise, but if you're going to do that, you have to really go for it. And *1917* really, really goes for it. **ALEX GODFREY**

VERDICT Although 1917's filmmaking very much brings attention to itself, it's an astonishing piece of filmmaking, portraying war with enormous panache. This is big-screen bravado, and then some.



SEBERG

OUT 30 JANUARY / CERT M15+ / 96 MINS DIRECTOR Benedict Andrews CAST Kristen Stewart, Jack O'Connell, Anthony Mackie

Best known as the pixie-haired American in Godard's Breathless, Jean Seberg's off-screen drama far outstripped her on-screen work. This visually strong but thinly written piece explores the latter part of her life where her support of the civil rights movement saw her become an FBI target. Though it refuses to embrace Seberg's complexities, the film gets by on great production values (Rachel Morrison's cinematography is as luminous as Seberg's pink frock) and strong performances - particularly O'Connell as the (fictionalised) FBI surveillance wonk who becomes increasingly empathetic towards his subject's plight and Stewart in the title role, portraying Seberg's political purpose and personal fragility with skill. IF

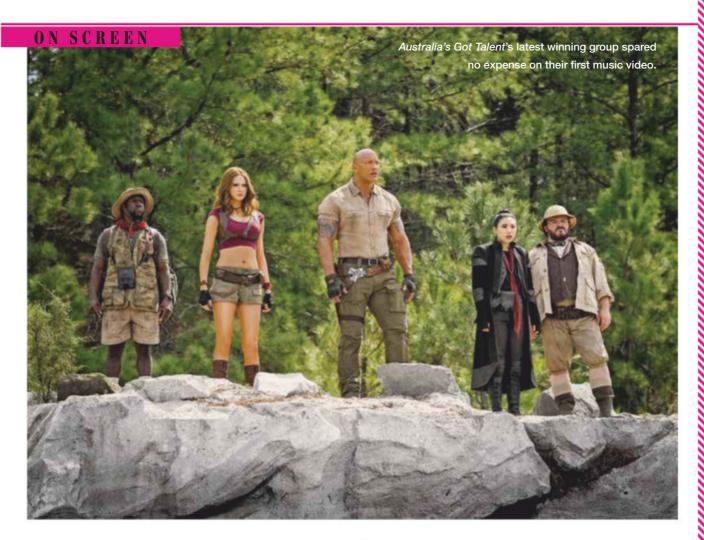


PLAYING WITH FIRE

**

OUT NOW / CERT PG / 96 MINS
DIRECTOR Andy Fickman
CAST John Cena, Keegan-Michael Key,
John Leguizamo

John Cena's inherent likeability has helped him deliver winning comedic performances in the likes of Trainwreck and Blockers, but there's only so much he and his overqualified castmates can do to elevate the formulaic material in Playing With Fire. After saving a trio of siblings from a house fire, Cena's straight-laced superintendent, Jake Carson, takes the uncontrollable urchins into his care until their parents arrive, inevitably learning the value in letting his guard down along the way. But the feel-good moments are not enough to offset the lazy jokes, awkward editing and clunky dialogue. Aiming for harmless family fun is perfectly fine, but it should be executed better than this. AW



JUMANJI: THE NEXT LEVEL



OUT NOW CERT PG / 123 MINS

DIRECTOR Jake Kasdan

CAST Dwayne Johnson, Kevin Hart, Jack Black, Karen Gillan, Awkwafina, Danny DeVito, Danny Glover, Alex Wolff

PLOT In a funk after his life-or-death *Jumanji* adventure, graduate Spencer (Wolff) ventures back into the video game for round two. But the glitching cartridge doesn't just pull in his friends this time — it also nabs his grouchy grandad (DeVito), along with his ex-business partner Milo (Glover).

NOBODY EXPECTED MUCH from *Jumanji:* Welcome To The Jungle, a belated post-Robin Williams reboot-quel. But it ended up a surprise treat — a frequently hilarious body-swap comedy masquerading as a generic franchise revival, its four seemingly cardboard-cutout heroes (including Dwayne Johnson's Dr Smolder Bravestone and Karen Gillan's Ruby Roundhouse) revealed as intentionally clichéd video-game avatars. Jack Black playing a prissy teenage girl proved a particular, peculiar delight.

If Welcome To The Jungle flourished with bright ideas and broad comic performances, this sequel brings more of both. With the body-swap cat out of the bag, returning writers Scott Rosenberg and Jeff Pinkner and director Jake Kasdan tweak the formula — introducing more avatars and two screen legends as new players.

While all four teens are back — Spencer (Wolff), Martha (Morgan Turner), Fridge (Ser'Darius Blain) and Bethany (Madison

Iseman) — this time the *Jumanji* cartridge also spirits away Spencer's grandfather, Eddie (a gloriously grouchy DeVito) and his former business partner, Milo Walker (Glover). In-game, that means Johnson's Bravestone and Kevin Hart's Mouse Finbar cranking it up with laugh-out-loud impressions of Dannys DeVito and Glover, their inner old-timers failing to grasp even the vaguest concept of video games. "Jurgen the Barbarian…is that Barbara's boy?" Hart barks as the gang are filled in on Rory McCann's (*Game Of Thrones*) new villain.

If Eddie and Milo bring frequent guffaws, they also take up most of the plot and emotional conflict, forced to resolve the long-standing rift in their former friendship. But with the film teed up by Spencer's decision to re-enter the deadly game (a dick move his friends don't give him nearly enough grief for), the plot feels disjointed, awkwardly splitting focus between the fragmented original gang and the pensioners.

If the narrative construction is slightly shonky, so too are the visual effects. Ropey CGI saps the set pieces — from hordes of marauding ostriches to, er, hordes of marauding mandrills — of any peril, meaning *The Next Level* rarely lands as an action-adventure movie. It's more successful as a comedy, pushing the body-swapping antics to increasingly ridiculous heights — climaxing on a character note that's truly batshit.

Where Welcome To The Jungle was hampered slightly by an underwhelming third act, that's where The Next Level is at its best. Awkwafina, as new avatar Ming Fleetfoot, proves its secret weapon, and with Jack Black on stellar form, more dance-fighting from Gillan and Johnson displaying his usual superhuman charisma, The Next Level ends up a worthy expansion pack. BEN TRAVIS

VERDICT It doesn't have the surprise factor of the last film and sometimes feels rough around the edges, but *The Next Level* pushes its body-swap antics even further to deliver just as many laughs.



BE NATURAL: THE UNTOLD STORY OF ALICE GUY-BLACHÉ

OUT 17 JANUARY / CERT TBC / 120 MINS DIRECTOR Pamela B. Green CAST Jodie Foster, Alice Guy-Blaché, Julie Delpy

In Green's insightful documentary, the remarkable story of silent film pioneer Alice Guy-Blaché is given the scope and context it deserves. Featuring a wealth of archive materials and new research, Be Natural is presented with a voiceover from Jodie Foster. Blaché, who made her first movie in 1896 and ran her own silentfilm studio in New Jersey, was important and innovative, but often had credit stolen from her by male associates. The doco underlines this with help from talking heads such as Ava DuVernay and Geena Davis. Although the format's fairly run-of-the-mill, it's a commendable revival of the legacy of one of cinema's pioneering female figures. CHRISTINA NEWLAND



SPIES IN DISGUISE

OUT NOW / CERT PG / 101 MINS DIRECTORS Nick Bruno, Troy Quane CAST (VOICES) Will Smith, Tom Holland, Rashida Jones, Ben Mendelsohn

Mixing secret-agent movie parody, bodyswap comedy and mismatched buddy bonding, Spies In Disguise is always enjoyable if rarely innovative. After lone wolf spy Lance Sterling (Smith) is turned into a pigeon by techie Walter (Holland), the odd couple try to thwart a clawedhanded villain (Mendelsohn) from wiping out the world's security forces with a mega-drone. The M:I/007 stylings are familiar, the messaging scattershot and true wit mostly AWOL. Still, there's broad fun to be had with a tiny avian agent struggling in a big world, and there is something refreshing about a kids' action flick built on progressive ideas of pacifism, mediation and gluten-free breadcrumbs. IAN FREER



JOJO RABBIT



OUT NOW
CERT M / 108 MINS

DIRECTOR Taika Waititi **CAST** Roman Griffin Davis, Thomasin McKenzie,
Scarlett Johansson, Taika Waititi

PLOT Ten-year-old German boy Johannes 'Jojo' Betzler (Davis) has grown up in Nazi Germany idolising Adolf Hitler. But when he discovers his mother (Johansson) is harbouring Jewish girl Elsa (McKenzie) in their home, his outlook begins to change — to the dismay of his imaginary friend Adolf Hitler (Waititi).

INSIDE OUT'S RILEY had Bing Bong. Fight Club's Jack had Tyler Durden. Now, in Jojo Rabbit, we get another cinematic imaginary

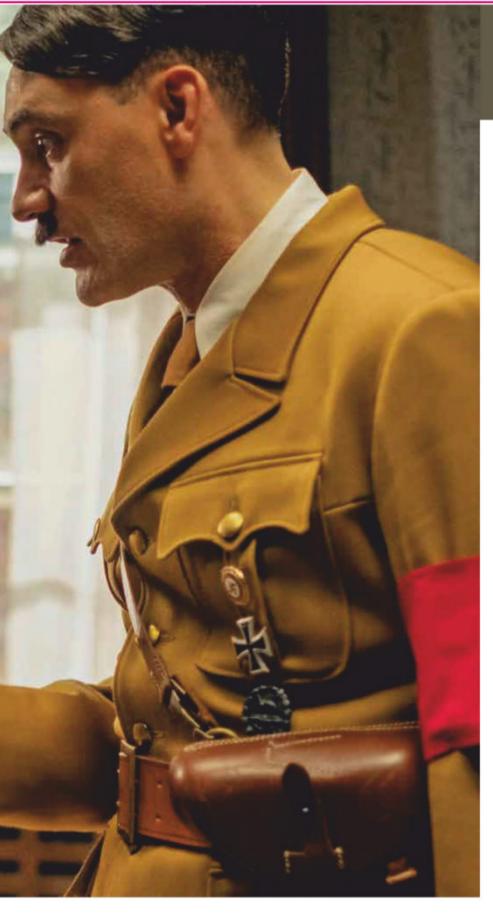
friend for the ages: Adolf Hitler. In Taika Waititi's latest, Hitler Youth boy Jojo's confidant is none other than a goofed-up, gurning version of the Nazi leader played by Waititi himself. If the fact that Waititi is a Polynesian Jew doesn't tip you off to the fact that he's aiming for anything but a respectful portrayal of the mass-murdering dictator, you only have to look at the social media post the writer-director-actor shared after the first week of shooting, complete with the hashtag "#FuckYouShitler".

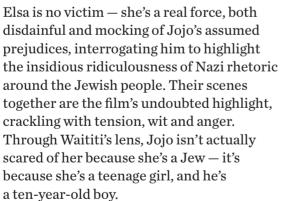
Creating a World War II-set comedy-drama that counts on wringing laughs from one of history's greatest monsters is a big swing, even for Waititi — a filmmaker whose deadpan New Zealand wit and idiosyncratic sensibilities have given us everything from a lo-fi indie romcom (Eagle Vs. Shark) to a vampire mockumentary (What We Do In The Shadows) and a fizzing Flash Gordon-inspired Marvel space opera (Thor: Ragnarok).

If *Jojo Rabbit* is yet another departure — his first war movie and his only period piece — it's also a return to the coming-of-age territory he

explored in *Boy* and *Hunt For The Wilderpeople*. Like those films' protagonists, the titular Jojo (Davis) is a confused kid in search of any kind of father figure. Where Boy and Ricky Baker found theirs in a deadbeat dad and Uncle Hec, respectively, Jojo finds his in an imagined Führer — part inspirational guru, part childish playmate. It's another scene-stealing performance from Waititi, knowingly selfmocking, sometimes surprisingly sweet (this, after all, is a child's self-projected need for companionship and reassurance), but growing increasingly nasty as Jojo's understanding of the world starts to shift.

That's all due to the discovery of his mother's (Johansson) big secret — Elsa (McKenzie), a Jewish teenage girl living in the walls of their house, hiding out until the war ends. When Jojo discovers her — in a sequence smartly framed like a horror scene as he creeps through the dark crawlspaces of the family home — the hateful ideology he's unquestioningly absorbed his whole life is thrown into question. Played with resolve and fierce humanity by McKenzie,





If only the rest of the film were so assured. Where *Boy* and *Hunt For The Wilderpeople* cultivated such delicate tonal palettes — moments of gloriously silly humour sitting alongside grief and insecurity for carefully calibrated bittersweetness — *Jojo Rabbit's* tone often feels at war with itself.

While Waititi's own outsized performance largely hits the spot, when several other characters — particularly Rebel Wilson and Sam Rockwell's daffy Nazis — attempt to play on that wild, aloof, Taika-specific comic register, they struggle.





The pervasive broad slapstick, distractingly inconsistent comedy accents and uncomfortable whimsy nearly unbalances the film.

But the heavier *Jojo Rabbit* becomes in the second half, the more its earlier faults are balanced out. As Jojo's perspective shifts from childhood innocence to brutally forced maturity, the colour of his world literally drains. Alongside a gut-churningly tense Gestapo raid and one deeply upsetting moment of utter heartbreak, the need for laughter — for any kind of levity or humanity in the face of total callousness — becomes far more necessary.

At the heart of it all is Jojo himself. Roman Griffin Davis connects and convinces as a scared kid growing up in a world that he comes to realise is cruel and broken — a naive boy who might claim to "love killing" but, in reality, can't tie his own shoelaces.

It's his vulnerability that stays with you, his growing realisation that he cannot take goodness for granted. And with racist ideologies resurfacing once again in the present day, *Jojo Rabbit* is a reminder that we shouldn't either. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT Taika Waititi's most daring film isn't his most successful. But among the tonal clashes there's real hope, humanity and no-bones-about-it Nazi-bashing at a time when that's depressingly necessary.



THE GENTLEMEN



OUT NOW CERT MA15+ / 113 MINS

DIRECTOR Guy Ritchie

CAST Matthew McConaughey, Michelle Dockery, Jeremy Strong, Henry Golding, Eddie Marsan, Hugh Grant, Charlie Hunnam, Colin Farrell

PLOT American Mickey Pearson (McConaughey) presides over a huge marijuana business, growing weed under the estates of Britain's wealthiest families. Yet when he considers selling up to spend more time with his wife Ros (Dockery), a possible investor (Strong), a Chinese gangster (Golding), a tabloid editor (Marsan) and a private eye (Grant) all begin to circle Mickey's empire.

THE GENTLEMEN IS Guy Ritchie back in his manor. After the big-budget misfire of King Arthur: Legend Of The Sword and the big-budget success of *Aladdin*, Ritchie's 11th feature returns to his roots: the London-based crime milieu of Lock, Stock And Two Smoking Barrels, Snatch and RocknRolla. If it lacks the fizz of his best

efforts, it's an entertaining mix of convoluted plotting, colourful criminals, a heightened feel ("Fuck off back from whence he came") and pig-fucking gags.

In outline, the body of the story is simple enough. American ex-pat and Rhodes scholar Mickey Pearson (McConaughey) graduates from Oxford with a nifty sideline in selling weed to posh students, building a marijuana empire under the grounds of Britain's filthy rich. Yet wishing to dedicate himself to the love of his life Ros (Dockery), he looks to offload his farms to Jewish investor Mathew (Strong). Word gets out that Mickey wants to sell, attracting the attention of debonair triad Dry Eye (Golding), a "Chinese James Bond". Then all hell breaks loose.

Yet, in true Ritchie style, this is complicated by the fact that we are told the story through the eyes of scuzzy private investigator Fletcher (Grant), who is relaying the plot to Mickey's No. 2 Ray (Hunnam) in order to blackmail Ray's boss. Fletcher has fashioned the events into a movie script (named 'Bush') and his pitch sees him as an unreliable narrator — embellishing bits, rewinding bits, even changing the format to anamorphic – as he spins the yarn. We know we can't trust him as he thinks Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* is "a bit boring".

in here (the class divide, the mellowing qualities of middle age, the relationship between the

media and the underworld), but Ritchie mostly ignores this in the rush to tell his story. As such, sidelines — Ray's rescue of the drug-addicted daughter of one of Mickey's benefactors, for instance — feel superfluous to the main plot, while key components, such as Mickey and Ros's relationship, feel underserved.

Still, there's lots of fun to be had. Ritchie's style may be more refined these days, but he has not matured enough to stop the carpet c-bombing, witty subtitles, animated maps, YouTube fight-porn parodies and Tarantinoesque digressions.

McConaughey, Golding and Hunnam are all decent, but the best of the bunch are hanging around the edges: Grant's bizarrely voiced sleazebucket PI (note his delight at Ray's barbecue that warms your legs while it cooks the steaks), Colin Farrell having a ball in a check tracksuit as a boxing coach, and Dockery's granite-hard gangster's moll. "There's fuckery afoot," she says at one point about Mickey's predicament. It's a pretty good tagline for Ritchie's slippery, enjoyable flick. IAN FREER

VERDICT What it lacks in freshness and There's interesting thematic material buried depth, *The Gentlemen* certainly makes up for in cartoon-y bluster and fun details. Welcome home, Mr. Ritchie.







Clockwise from left: Fox anchor Megyn Kelly (Charlize Theron) with Roger Ailes (John Lithgow); Whistleblower hero Gretchen Carlson (Nicole Kidman); Producer Kayla Pospisil (Margot Robbie) with colleague Jess (Kate McKinnon).

BOMBSHELL



OUT 16 JANUARY
CERT M15+ / 109 MINS

CAST Charlize Theron, Nicole Kidman, Margot Robbie, John Lithgow, Kate McKinnon

PLOT As Donald Trump runs for election, Fox News has never been more key to political discourse. But backstage a culture of backstabbing and harassment, led by founder Roger Ailes (Lithgow), is set to be exploded by anchors Megyn Kelly (Theron) and Gretchen Carlson (Kidman) and ambitious producer Kayla Pospisil (Robbie).

THE FIRST THING you notice as she strides, back erect, down the corridor, talking directly to the camera, is the voice. The second: the face. Your brain knows that inside those precise prosthetics, behind that deep tenor, is Charlize Theron as controversial Fox anchor Megyn Kelly. But the transformation (by *Darkest Hour* make-up artist Kazu Hiro) is so authentic, so on point, it's unnerving. The walk and talk though:

an entertaining piece of fourth-wall-smashing exposition that establishes precisely how the beast that both was and is Fox News operates. A necessary narrative foundation for understanding quite how the network was able to be such fertile ground for harassment.

It's fair to say that Theron, as perhaps we expect of Theron, doesn't do things by halves. She trained with a vocal coach to 'do Megyn', eventually losing her voice for three weeks. Her commitment to the film, to the role, is clear, and so it's no huge surprise that this *is* Theron's show. She's utterly compelling as the heart of a triptych of female power rounded out by Nicole Kidman as on-the-outs host Gretchen Carlson and Margot Robbie as wannabe-anchor Kayla.

Perhaps understandably, then, some have already flagged concerns about a 'sympathetic' depiction of Megyn Kelly (who famously declared that Santa Claus had to be white live on air), but this isn't a tale of redemption and it's an uncomfortable truth that not all victims of harassment are 'good'. The women in this film are not gifted absolution, if they even seek it. Their involvement in bringing down one of the most powerful network bosses in history is thoroughly examined, flaws and warts and all. And it doesn't recoil from asking how complicit women can be in the culture, with Pospisil saying to Carlson, "Did you think what your silence would mean for us? For all of us?"

The other topic of already-heated discussion

has been the fact that both the writer and director of *Bombshell* — which is being hailed as the first #MeToo film — are male (Charles Randolph and Jay Roach). But there is no visible impact on the integrity or detail of the storytelling. They patiently, painstakingly paint a picture of the culture, with a light, believable touch — the preferred wide shots, short body-skimming dresses, sticky heat-wrecked hair, transparent desks ensuring the visibility of smooth legs.

From an early confrontation on the studio floor between Ailes (Lithgow) and Carlson after she appears on television without make-up, through to a skin-crawling incident with Pospisil behind the locked door of his private office, the portrayal of Ailes and his abuse is unflinching. And it's here that Robbie emerges as the film's biggest surprise, her initial one-note wide smiles and agreeable nature disintegrating dramatically during a call with colleague Jess (Kate McKinnon). It's a scene that will remain stuck to your skin afterwards; the price that women were expected to pay for so long laid out with devastating clarity. TERRI WHITE

VERDICT One of the most compelling stories of the #MeToo movement is told unflinchingly, empathetically and authentically, with Charlize Theron completely nailing the knotty character of Megyn Kelly.









Clockwise from left: Johnny D (Jamie Foxx) with lawyer Bryan (Michael B. Jordan); Johnny D waits in his cell; Bryan's colleague Eva (Brie Larson); Bryan, full of hope — and fear.

JUST MERCY



OUT 23 JANUARY
CERT TBC / 137 MINS

DIRECTOR Destin Daniel Cretton **CAST** Michael B. Jordan, Jamie Foxx, Brie Larson,
Rob Morgan, Rafe Spall, Tim Blake Nelson

PLOT In this adaptation of a true story, idealistic young lawyer Bryan Stevenson (Jordan) takes on cases of death row inmates, but he risks being crushed by his biggest challenge yet when he tries to represent convicted murderer Walter 'Johnny D' McMillan (Foxx) — a man who's been so brutalised by the system, he finds it almost impossible to trust anyone. Even with Johnny D on side, will a crooked system ever allow justice to be served?

IT'S SAID THAT the worst thing you can give someone on death row is hope. It's a theory that drives urgent legal drama *Just Mercy*, the real-life story of crusading civil rights defence attorney Bryan Stevenson (Jordan) that confronts the systemic racism at the heart of the American penal system.

1980s Alabama and 'Johnny D' McMillan (Foxx) is facing death by electric chair after being wrongly convicted of the murder of a white woman. The system that sent him to prison isn't just corrupt on an individual level, but riddled with a widespread corruption that actively works to end the lives of innocent black men.

Into this brutal landscape strides
Harvard graduate Bryan Stevenson, a fullhearted, righteous law graduate, who quickly
has chunks knocked out of his optimism by
both the discrimination he sees first-hand and
McMillan's rejection of his help. What the
lawyer initially can't comprehend is that hope
can destroy, too. For it's hope that is so often
inevitably dashed. That each man who sits on
death row has witnessed it evaporate under the
boots of the men who've taken the short walk to
the execution chamber.

The chemistry between Jordan and Foxx is by turns brittle, intimate and warm — the two having known each other off screen since the former was just a boy. Individually, they each put in arresting performances.

Jordan carries Stevenson with a constantly shifting mix of pride, hope, anger, fear — digging into a fairly by-the-numbers arc to unearth nuance that other actors would likely have struggled to.

Foxx, however, is something else: it's easily one of the performances of his career — arguably

only *Ray* has seen him better. His Johnny D has a quiet, furious power that you can feel in every jaw clench, every muscle moved. The actor's spoken of his father's experiences — he was imprisoned for seven years for a minor crime — and it's hard not to see a personal hurt coursing through him.

The brutality and horror of death row is iterated powerfully here; from the minor humiliations that keep the men bowed to the smell of the burnt flesh of other prisoners. That said, where the film suffers is in the storytelling: the broad brushstrokes from director Destin Daniel Cretton's hand offering no real room for great subtlety. The complexity on display within the actors' character work is not carried through to the wider direction.

And the biggest surprise — given her pedigree — is the light work given to Brie Larson as Stevenson's colleague Eva Ansley. While this is clearly not her story, and nor should it be, her screen time is sparse and unmemorable. With little back story, context or motivation, her character barely registers. **TERRI WHITE**

VERDICT An important story of injustice inspires but fails to fully ignite, despite two towering central performances from Jamie Foxx and Michael B. Jordan.

A HIDDEN LIFE



OUT 30 JANUARY
CERT TBC / 173 MINS

DIRECTOR Terrence Malick **CAST** August Diehl, Valerie Pachner, Michael

Nyqvist, Matthias Schoenaerts

PLOT Austria 1939. Farmer Franz Jägerstätter (Diehl) is called up to serve in the German army to fight for the Nazi war effort. Yet, when he refuses to swear an oath to Hitler, he is sent to prison and faces the threat of execution for treason. Will he yield or stay to true to his religious convictions?

THERE IS A film buff theory that Terrence Malick makes his best work set in the past. From Badlands (set in 1959) and Days Of Heaven (1916) to The Thin Red Line (1942-43), The New World (1607) and The Tree Of Life ('50s via the prehistoric era), there is something about Malick's lyrical style and ambition to grapple with Big Themes that thrives in timeless period pieces. After mixed responses to his contemporary set-works (To The Wonder, Knight Of Cups, Song To Song),

Malick is back on his historical bent telling the true story of a religious Austrian conscientious objector who chose prison over fighting for the Nazis. The result is the most engaged and urgent he has been for ages.

Set between 1939 and 1943, A Hidden Life centres on Franz Jägerstätter (Diehl), a farmer happily married to Fani (Pachner), picking wildflowers and playing games with his three daughters on a bucolic, very Malick-y Austrian hillside. Yet when Franz is forced to enlist in the German Army (he finds the military drills amusing), he refuses to swear his allegiance to Hitler, making him an outcast in his small community (kids pelt his daughters with mud) and putting him in prison facing potential execution. Malick's screenplay uses Franz's predicament to explore the dynamic between religion and faith, highlighting the failure of the institution who consistently tell him to give in. This is in contrast to the unwavering support of Fani (an excellent Pachner) whatever the consequences.

Where there has been an airy-fairyness to his recent work, here it is rooted in a real world of moral turpitude. Much of this is down to Diehl's performance as a man defined as much as by what he doesn't do as what he does. Without resorting to dialogue, Diehl conveys untapped reservoirs of doubt and torment over what his principles mean for his family. When, in the second half, Malick leans into the Christ

parallels in the story, Diehl always keeps Franz human and grounded.

Employing a new cinematographer, Jörg Widmer, who had previously worked with Malick as a camera operator, the film's striking rustic look is defined by a use of natural light, the imagery flitting between the float-y, giddy quality of *The Tree Of Life* and static misty vistas of the Austrian hillsides that remain impervious to the machinations of humans. All of Malick's divisive filmmaking tics — multiple voiceovers (taken from Franz and Fani's letters), an obsession with nature, a spiritually severe tone, a hefty running time that is Malick's longest to date - are all present and correct, but here they are allied to a more surefooted sense of narrative and purpose. If Malick's contemporary-set films felt like they took place in a high-minded bubble, here he uses history lessons to shine a light on today. "If our leaders are evil," asks Franz, "what are we to do?" It's a good question, and perhaps in 2020 the only question. IAN FREER

VERDICT If you don't like Malick's movies, A Hidden Life won't convert you. But this is the filmmaker on sublime form, putting his artistry and obsessions at the service of something frighteningly relevant.





UNCUT GEMS



OUT 31 JANUARY (NETFLIX)
CERT TBC / 135 MINS

DIRECTORS Benny Safdie, Josh Safdie **CAST** Adam Sandler, Julia Fox, Kevin Garnett, Idina Menzel, LaKeith Stanfield

PLOT In hoc to some very bad dudes, New York jewellery salesman Howard Ratner (Sandler) thinks he has a way out: a rock from an Ethiopian mine that could net him over \$1 million. Problem is, a famous basketball player has talked him into lending it out, and getting it back won't be so easy.

DIAMONDS ARE FORMED under extreme pressure in the Earth's crust. But it seems unlikely that any gem has been subjected to pressure quite as extreme as that which bears down on Howard Ratner, the hero of this triumphant flop sweat of a movie. Howard, a fast-talking dealer of precious stones in New York's Diamond District, is a man in perpetual crisis. He's introduced mid-colonoscopy (the placement of the camera is one hell of a mission statement), wheels frantically between two women (his unimpressed wife and his adoring mistress), and plies his trade in a glass cube of stress (the blaring door buzzers alone will take a toll on your nerves). And that's before you even consider the dead-eyed goons dogging Howard's every step, determined to extract the debt he owes. Howard isn't great with money, you see, or rather he's never happy with the money he's got, always angling for a big score. The film rushes alongside him towards something major: whether that event

will make him or break him is the great unknown.

The idea of a feature-length panic attack, essentially the cocaine-chopper-and-cooking freak-out scene from *GoodFellas* stretched out to two hours, might not sound appealing. Especially when you consider that Howard is played by Adam Sandler, making this his latest Netflix film after such non-classics as The Ridiculous 6 and Murder Mystery. Yet the Safdie Brothers' Uncut Gems proves to be one of the most mesmerising thrillers in a long time, and Sandler is a major reason why it works. It's a career-best performance, reminiscent of his character study 17 years ago in Paul Thomas Anderson's Punch-Drunk Love but even more layered and magnetic. His Howard is instantly iconic: part Job, part Jordan Belfort, part Jerry Maguire, he's louchely attired, balancing out his shady wardrobe and dirtbag facial hair with a Star of David pinkie ring. Rarely stopping to take a breath, he is by turns hilarious, soulful and maddening; drilling down into a character who seems initially cartoonish but becomes ever more fascinating and human, Sandler is totally believable as a rapacious lowlife with big dreams.

"I'm gonna come!" he gasps early on, as he glimpses his latest acquisition, a hunk of rare Ethiopian opal he's procured with great effort on the strength of a YouTube video clip. This mine-dug rock, which shimmers with all the hues of the rainbow and which may or may not have mystical powers, is the film's MacGuffin, Howard's own personal Infinity Stone, and he is hellbent on getting it to auction.

Complicating this goal is a superstitious NBA superstar (former Celtics player Kevin Garnett, playing himself in a meta plot strand that places the story as unfolding in 2012), fake Rolexes, a brace of local gangsters and other factors it's better not to reveal. And doing a masterful job of orchestrating all the mayhem are sibling directors Josh and Benny Safdie, proving once again that they are the maestros of the New York stressmare.

Their 2017 breakout hit Good Time cast Robert Pattinson as a crook hustling around the city's grimier corners in the aftermath of a bank robbery. *Uncut Gems* follows a similar formula, but it's even slicker and more propulsive, evoking such classics as Dog Day Afternoon and After Hours in its ability to wring maximum 'what now?' tension from its milieu. Sequences that promise to deliver some respite from the overriding sense of dread, such as Howard's attempt to see his daughter perform in her school play, have a tendency to spiral out of control. And even his late-night amorous visit to his mistress (played with a winning mix of guilelessness and grit by newcomer Julia Fox) is staged in a way designed to put you on edge, thanks to Howard's inability to do anything without taking some kind of risk.

It's a breathless hustle, a wild ride that threatens to fly off the rails at any moment. But there's actually a meticulous control of every element: the Robert-Altman-on-crack overlapping dialogue (designed to subtly steer your ear to the most crucial information); the ducking-and-diving camerawork (jittery even in quieter, domestic moments); the perfectly cast supporting players (it says a lot when Eric Bogosian isn't the most menacing-looking person on screen); the intense electro score by Daniel Lopatin. All of it locks you firmly inside the head of a man who can't slow down, even if he wanted to. "Boils...locusts...death of the firstborn," he recites at one point during a tense Passover Seder, listing the Biblical plagues. Then he grins: "Hardcore." For Howard Ratner, that's a slow Tuesday. NICK DE SEMLYEN

VERDICT A monumental thriller, which vividly captures its world's specifics and calibrates its snaky plot for maximum nail-bitability. Also easily the best film to ever extensively feature Adam Sandler yelling at a TV.

THE WITCHER



OUT NOW (NETFLIX) EPISODES VIEWED 5 OF 8

SHOWRUNNER Lauren Schmidt Hissrich **CAST** Henry Cavill, Freya Allan, Anya Chalotra

PLOT Itinerant monster hunter Geralt of Rivia (Cavill) roams the countryside slaying beasts for coin while being reviled by almost everyone he meets. Meanwhile, swineherd's daughter Yennefer (Chalotra) discovers an affinity for magic and Princess Cirilla of Cintra (Allan) goes on the run from the army who slaughtered her family.

THE WITCHER BEGINS in a swamp, when a white-haired Henry Cavill bursts from the mire and sets about battling a multi-limbed hellbeast. Thrust beneath the water and half-drowned, flung through the air and near-skewered, he hangs on for dear life, barely able to catch his breath before finally gaining the upper hand and dragging its ichor-soaked carcass away in triumph. As far as metaphors go, it's not a bad one for watching this first season of Netflix's new fantasy series.

With its sylvans, strigas and rampaging kikimoras, *The Witcher* is far from the most accessible show, and for those not already familiar with Andrzej Sapkowski's novels or the Slavic folklore in which they're rooted, it makes for a baffling introduction to the Polish author's world. Cavill's Geralt is a witcher: a professional monster slayer who plies his trade to king and serf alike. A potion-quaffing mutant often treated like a monster himself, he rolls into town, cracks heads and goes on his way - like a medieval Jack Reacher with a pair of bloody great swords.

There are elves, dwarves and the occasional wizard, but that's largely where the similarities

to 'traditional' fantasy end. Here, magic is distinct from 'signs', fairy-tale curses are serious business and arcane traditions such as the 'law of surprise' are as prevalent as they are inviolable. It's a lot to take in and writer/showrunner Lauren Schmidt Hissrich (*The West Wing*) refuses to pander to any who can't keep up.

If you can stay afloat until it clicks into place, however, there's a lot to love here. Cavill is delightfully gruff in the lead, lending the character both stoic charm and physical menace. The Witcher's world, meanwhile, is enjoyably bleak and morally bankrupt, unflinching with its use of gore and rich in challenging themes (incest, infanticide and ethnic cleansing all make an appearance). Like Game Of Thrones, both blood and boobs are in abundance here, and when shit hits fan, it does so to spectacular effect. Breathtakingly choreographed swordplay neatly captures the witcher's whirlwind style of fighting, while the use of magic is wisely understated.

Season 1 adapts most of Sapkowski's short story collection, The Last Wish, which provides a loose introduction to the world, while making Geralt's adventures more episodic than we've come to expect from streaming shows. It's through the secondary narratives of Princess Ciri and the sorceress Yennefer that the show forges its through-line, the three strands gradually converging to set up the larger story arc.

Thanks to a trio of bestselling video games, many will already be familiar with The Witcher's lore, providing a much-needed leg-up. It's the uninitiated who may end up bailing early likely somewhere between two girls being turned into eels and the appearance of a hedgehog knight. But to give up would be to deny yourself a real treat. As with Geralt's swamp beast tussle, there are riches in store for those with perseverance, and *The Witcher's* is a battle well worth seeing through to the end. JAMES DYER

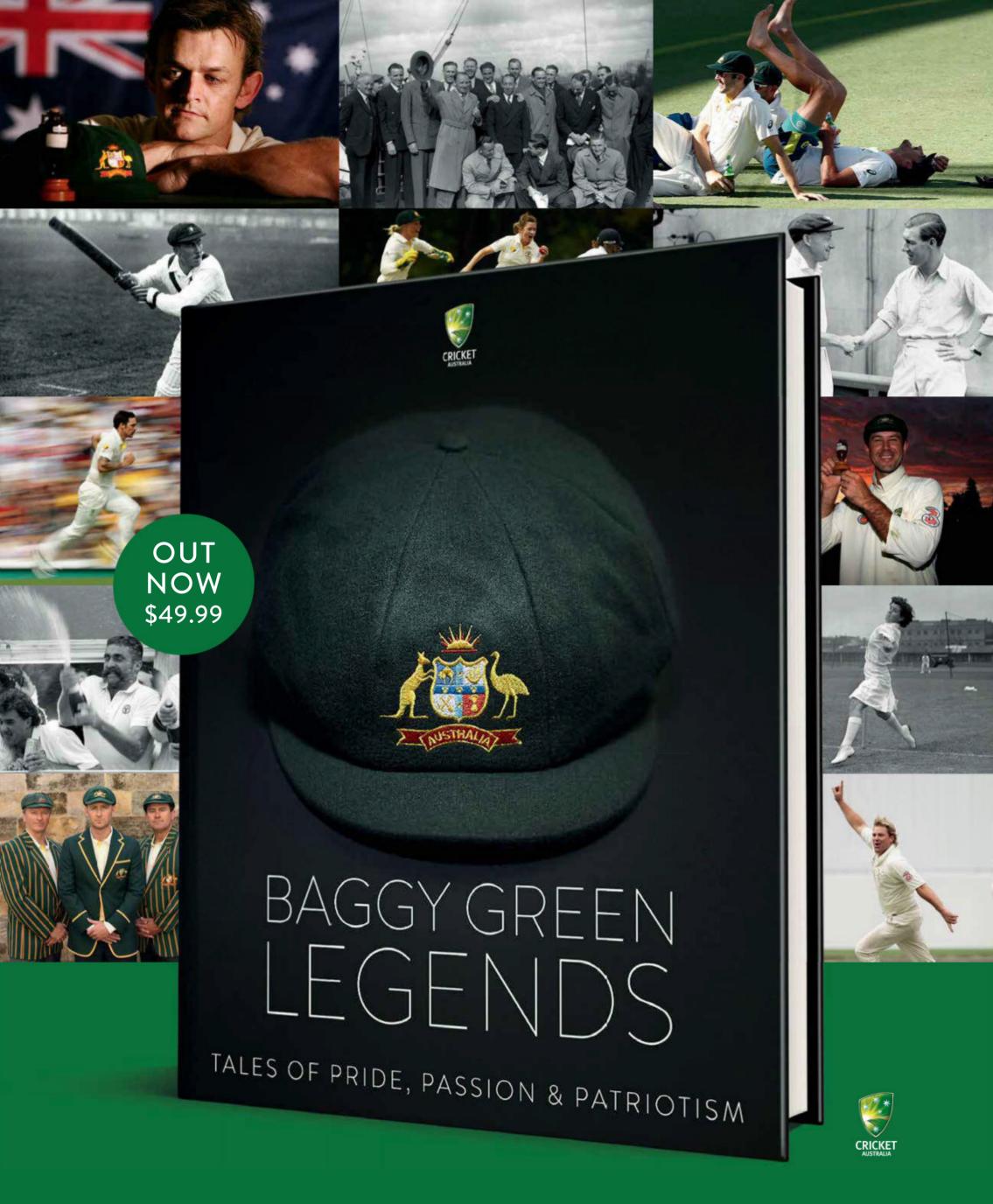
VERDICI A rewarding, if convoluted, fantasy romp with a memorable hero and a vivid, grimdark world.



Your at-a-glance view to this month's reviews



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THIS MONTH'S SPOILER TEAM





STEPHEN GRAHAM Star, The Irishman



NICK DE SEMLYEN
Associate Editor (Features),
Empire



IAN FREER
Contributing Editor,
Empire



CHRIS HEWITT
Associate Editor & Podcast
Host, Empire



CHRISTINA NEWLAND
Contributor,
Empire



JOHN NUGENT News Editor, Empire



The Irishman

FRANK AND RUSSELL

Nick de Semlyen: "What's the problem, kid?" With this question, East Coast crime boss Russell Bufalino (a man who, legend has it, was an unofficial advisor on The Godfather) hoves into the life of truck driver Frank Sheeran. It's a fascinating relationship, not only in the way its tendrils snake into Frank's personal life — Russell is both mentor and de facto family member and in how the de-ageing tech allows Joe Pesci to play a character much older than that of Robert De Niro, once his big brother in Raging Bull. The peculiar friendship reaches its awful culmination on a 1975 road trip, as Russell, who speaks only in obliquities, issues a death sentence for Hoffa: "We did all we could for the man." The look on Frank's face is heartbreaking,



That fateful handshake between Bufalino and trucker Sheeran. and the moment made all the more chilling by dint of the fact Russell is casually mixing up a salad (special ingredients: Catania olives, red wine vinegar from Angelo's guy) as he breaks the news.

2 FRANK IN THE WAR

Ian Freer: Frank's adventures in Italy during World War II are about far more than VFX studio ILM flexing their digital de-ageing muscles. On a character level, it explains some basic plot questions. Not only does it explain how Sheeran can converse in Italian and feel so at home in the company of Sicilians like Russell Bufalino, it also details why a Philadelphia-born truck driver can easily make a career move into becoming a Mob assassin. Sheeran's ease at killing for Bufalino and Hoffa is forged in the moment he forces two German soldiers to dig their own grave and then casually shoots them. He isn't defending himself; he is committing a war crime. Scorsese doesn't labour the point but it's the start of a dehumanising process that once it starts, never stops.





3 JFK AND THE MAFIA

Christina Newland: Although the material on which The Irishman is based — Charles Brandt's book I Heard You Paint Houses — is an educated guess about the JFK assassination, what it posits is believable. Kennedy, helped into office by his father Joseph's Mob connections, refused to pay his dues and, in his struggles with Castro, was unable to get the Mob their casinos in Cuba back. Whether this spelled Kennedy's demise or not, the parallels drawn between Hoffa's relationship with the Mob and the President's make for a fascinating parable about power and corruption.

Stephen Graham: Tony Provenzano was a real qu

Provenzano was a real guy, part of an organised family who also worked for the Teamsters. That's what they did, find legit jobs as ways for people to make shitloads of money. I got to do scenes where I'm on a golf course and stuff like that with the President — which was great fun.

Top to bottom:
Sheeran's
military service
preps him for
his later 'work';
Sheeran, Hoffa
(Al Pacino)
and crew at
the ice cream
parlour; Tony
Pro (Stephen
Graham), about
to kick off.

4 HOFFA VS TONY PRO

Christina Newland: Many of *The Irishman*'s central characters speak in a byzantine maze of euphemisms and stock phrases. Not so, bitter rivals Tony Provenzano (Stephen Graham) and Jimmy Hoffa, whose two escalating confrontations serve as major set-pieces. They also get some of the most furious, incidentally funny lines.

Stephen Graham: For the meeting in Miami where Tony is late, I didn't have any lines with De Niro. For the first take, I felt comfortable and was enjoying it and stuff. Then I just looked across the table and I went, "That's Robert De Niro. Fucking Robert De Niro." I stood up and went for a walk and Marty came over to me and said, "Keep the scene on its toes. Keep punching at them." So during the next take I turned to Frank [De Niro] and said, "So what did you think?" and we had this back

and forth. At the end Marty stood up and he went to me, "That was great." And De Niro and Pacino were like, "Did you feel it? Yeah, it came alive then."

Christina Newland: Stephen Graham is explosively charismatic as Pro, proving he has everything it takes to go toe-to-toe with Al Pacino.

Stephen Graham: During the ice cream scene Al's eating it really slowly and he's got this arrogance about him. I'm, like, really pissed off at him. At the end, he just put a spoon back into the ice cream bowl. And I threw the bowl across this prison canteen. We carried on shooting and I've gone to jump across the table to grab him. Marty went, "Cut," and Al went 'Whoa... whoa. Did you see that, Marty? Did you see the kid frightened me there." And Marty's like, "I know. I told you this kid's great."





6 THE RITUAL OF FOOD

Scorsese's work and *The Irishman* delivers big time. Check out Hoffa's ice cream craving, an ageing Frank and Russell dipping bread into wine — the Catholic rite of Intinction — and hot dogs cooked in beer: the new slicing garlic with a razor blade from *GoodFellas*.

HOFFA'S FATE

Nick de Semlyen: Despite the scenario that unfolds in detail in *The Irishman*, what happened to Jimmy Hoffa in 1975 is still hotly debated. Both historians and the FBI admit they don't know, and officially the Hoffa case remains under investigation, although it's no longer being actively probed. One theory posits that his body was put inside a 55-gallon drum and transported to a New Jersey landfill; another that he was buried under a football

stadium. As for whether Frank Sheeran was telling the truth about being involved, it's certainly suspicious that he switched his story over the years, from denying any involvement whatsoever to claiming the killers were Vietnamese mercenaries. Scorsese himself has admitted he doesn't care. "Whether he killed Hoffa... I'm not interested," he said recently. "It's a matter of the moral choices that he has to make."

lan Freer: The killings in the *The Irishman* are matter-of-fact. This extends to the form. Frank's killings are captured in a straightforward form, devoid of Scorsese razzle-dazzle camera moves. This extends to the shooting of Jimmy Hoffa, who gets the trademark Sheeran quick-shots method, the violence over before it has begun. It's a messy, inelegant death (blood splatters the wall), the verbose Hoffa denied last words.



This page, clockwise from top left: Hoffa's messy, inelegant death; Frank and Russell's dinner becomes a Catholic rite; Silence speaks volumes with Sheeran's daughter Peggy (Anna Paquin).

7 PEGGY'S ARC

Christina Newland: Anna Paquin's supporting role as Frank Sheeran's daughter Peggy has been among the most debated elements of *The Irishman*. Some viewers, annoyed at Scorsese's perceived sidelining of women, cited her lack of dialogue in the movie as a major flaw. But Peggy has the sharpest mind and moral sense of anyone in the film; her silence serves as knowing judgment, even as a frightened child who watches her father kerb-stomp a grocer on her behalf. Peggy is quick on the take and deeply ambivalent, and it's all in Paquin's excellent performance, all sideways

glances and unnervingly long stare. The visual language of the film allows Scorsese to avoid overstating what we know to be true: namely that Frank is a stone-cold murderer. What could Peggy possibly say to him, this patriarch over a family of women; this violent, inscrutable man? She knows, and he *knows* she knows, and this is the uneasy dynamic between them. No words are necessary.

It's only after the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa, a lifelong and close family friend, that Peggy speaks. When she finally does, she says one word — "Why?" — and it's lobbed at her father like

a grenade. Knowing she has long seen through him, he sputters, "Why, what?!" She clarifies, asking why he hasn't made a phone call to the wife of the missing Hoffa. But the crucial moment is the pregnant pause before she responds; a lifetime's worth of accusatory feelings. This is a woman who knows her father is the 'bad people' he claims to be protecting her from. Her 'why' is a question not just about the mechanics of what she seems to know is a Mob hit, but it's also 'why?' as an existential query — why has Frank made a life for them by taking lives from others?

Getty Images



8 THE PHONE CALL

Christina Newland: In the half century we've been watching Robert De Niro on our cinema screens, there's no denying that the bombastic, live-wire performer of *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* has changed. In *The Irishman*, collaborating again with Scorsese after over two decades, De Niro moves more slowly, accordingly with his age; his Frank Sheeran is all icy sangfroid and stilted delivery, coming the closest to showing vulnerability with an occasional sputter in his speech. We spend the better part of three hours watching

Sheeran navigate the murky waters of the Mob hitman and explain his job with sociopathic casualness; but after he is forced to betray and snuff out Jimmy Hoffa, his best and longtime friend, there's a marked shift in proceedings.

In a devastating scene in the privacy of his bedroom, Frank makes a phone call to Jimmy's wife, Jo Hoffa (Welker White), in an unrelenting one-take close up. In murmured, stuttering sentences he tries to tell her not to panic about a murder he himself has committed. Just as Jo

picks up and Frank begins to speak, there's a very quick jump cut — so disruptive and rapid that it seems like some kind of mistake. It's like a frantic heartbeat, or a spike in your gut, or a little filmic reminder that Frank has now entered into the biggest lie and the lowest moral rung of his life. De Niro's raw vulnerability, his inability to finish his sentences, his voice a sort of breathless thrum, is astounding — like nothing we've seen him do before in all his years on the screen.

Top to bottom: Sheeran, devastated, on the phone to Hoffa's wife; An old man's contemplation and collapse; Cinema symbolism for the hit man and his party.



THE SHOOTIST

Ian Freer: Glimpsed on a cinema marquee,
Don Siegel's *The Shootist* is John Wayne's final
film, an epitaph for the Western in the way *The Irishman* is for the gangster flick.
Wayne plays J.B. Brooks, a dying, disabled
gunfighter haunted by the violence
he inflicted on people. Sheeran
can probably relate.



lan Freer: Unlike most gangster films, *The Irishman* doesn't end with the arrest of all the major players. Instead, Scorsese and screenwriter Steven Zaillian give us an extended coda as the toll of Frank's life of crime becomes apparent to him. He is rebuffed by Peggy in a bank, talks to a priest, bargains for a deal on a coffin and languishes in a retirement home playing with the gold ring given to him by Russell. It's a final 20 minutes that plays in a completely different register to the rest of the film, as if the energy and life we thrived on

in the first half has been overtaken by loss and tragedy. It's an ending — a man confronted by his past misdemeanours — that has played out throughout Scorsese's career; Jake LaMotta in Raging Bull looking at himself in a dressing room mirror; Henry Hill in GoodFellas, staring accusingly back at the camera, and Sam Rothstein in Casino going full circle back to where he started ("And that's that," a variation on The Irishman's, "It is what it is"). Yet The Irishman is perhaps the director's fullest expression of a character reckoning with his actions; contemplative, elegiac, moving.



BENOIT BLANC

Nick de Semlyen: Poirot. Marple. Holmes. Blanc. It's one of the nicest surprises of 2019 — Daniel Craig joining the ranks of the world's top super-sleuths on the strength of a single, ultra-tangy performance. His Benoit Blanc is, frankly, a ludicrous concoction: with the voice of Foghorn Leghorn, the appearance of a particularly dapper chartered accountant, and a partiality for tortured doughnut analogies, the character is purest slab-of-ham. But from the moment he piano-plinks his way into the film to the moment he unmasks the villain, Craig is clearly having the time of his life — and the feeling is contagious. "I read a tweet about a *New Yorker*

article about you," one of his suspects sniffily tells him early on. In the real world, Twitter has seen a flurry of demands for the launch of a Benoit Blanc Cinematic Universe, and new adventures for the detective would certainly perk up future winters, should Craig be willing to sign on (Johnson has already said he's on board: "New location; new cast; new mystery. It'd be so much fun"). I hope he does, as Blanc is a perfect delivery system for not just BIG ACTING but nuance, too. Just witness the scene in which he removes his jacket and rolls up his sleeves before reverting to his formal look, all within the space of a single monologue.

Below: Daniel Craig's cocksure Blanc. **Below right:** Gentle humanity from nurse and housekeeper Marta (Ana de Armas).



2 THE BIG SICK

John Nugent: In a massive ensemble of giant A-listers, it came as a hugely pleasant surprise that Ana de Armas (until now, best known to English-speaking audiences as Ryan Gosling's hologram girlfriend in Blade Runner 2049) would play such a pivotal role in Knives Out — or that the role would pivot around puking. As housekeeper Marta, de Armas is the vehicle for Rian Johnson's craftiest plot device: Marta cannot lie, and will vomit at even a hint of falsehood. This is undeniably an opportunity for glorious gross-out silliness the climactic projectile onto Chris Evans' sculpted cheekbones is an obvious highlight. But it's also a clever nod to the audience, a kind of storytelling assurance that no matter how untrustworthy the Thrombey family get, you can always trust Marta. Johnson clearly intended to make a satire on modern America that took the piss out of rich people, but in amongst the snark and smartassery, there is also room for gentle humanity and simple honest-to-god goodness. That it comes in the form of a humble, diligent, virtuous working-class immigrant feels as much a comment on modern America as anything else in the film.





THE POLITICS

John Nugent: In one sense, Knives Out slots neatly into the timeless mould of Agatha Christies past. But in another sense, it is Extremely 2019. In a similar vein to HBO's Succession, Rian Johnson deliberately chooses a wealthy family of potential heirs as a means of subtly ribbing the wealthy and the spoiled — in particular, the wealthy and spoiled family currently occupying the White House. The frequent boast from Linda (Jamie Lee Curtis) that she is "self-made" rings a little hollow when we learn she had a million-dollar loan from her father, echoing Trump's own similarly weak claim. Elsewhere,

the Thrombeys' excruciating debate about immigration reflects the ugly talking points found on any US cable news show; while preppy young Jacob Thrombey (Jaeden Martell) lands somewhere between an alt-right troll and a Nazi, a nod to the scurrilous online forces that got Trump elected (and, occasionally, bombarded Johnson's Twitter feed with hate during the contentious release of The Last Jedi). What's refreshing about this political subtext is how lightly it's delivered: like much of the film, a sly observation rather than a sledgehammer point to make.



E DEDUCTION SEQUENCE

Chris Hewitt: One of the pleasures of the murder mystery is that moment when the great detective gathers the assembled suspects in a library, or a drawing room, or a room with a great big rack of knives, and walks them — and, let's be honest, us — through his deliberations, before unveiling the murderer. And Knives Out doesn't disappoint, although Rian Johnson, as with so much of the movie, doesn't necessarily follow the tried-and-trusted path. In fact, Benoit Blanc only

gathers the key players in the crime - the minute that he has Trooper Wagner (Noah Segan) bring Ransom into the room is, effectively, a declaration to the audience that Chris Evans' cardigan-wearing cad is, somehow, responsible for it. But what follows is an utter joy, as Daniel Craig and his outrageous accent wends a way through a monologue so complicated it's little wonder that it drives Ransom to the point of actual murder. Anyone for a doughnut?



4 BABY DRIVER

Nick de Semlyen: A mansion-set mystery is an unlikely place to find a reference to Edgar Wright's car-chase extravaganza. But Rian Johnson hits the road long enough to drop a nod to his pal's film, having Chris Evans (aka Lucas Lee from Scott Pilgrim!) reference it in a one-liner.

Far left: Jaeden Martell's preppy plotter Jacob; Left: Ransom Thrombey's (Chris Evans) former life as Lucas Lee from Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World



Above: Blanc quizzes Marta. Left: Toni Collette's pseudo-science boho biz owner Joni. Gwyneth Paltrow, much?

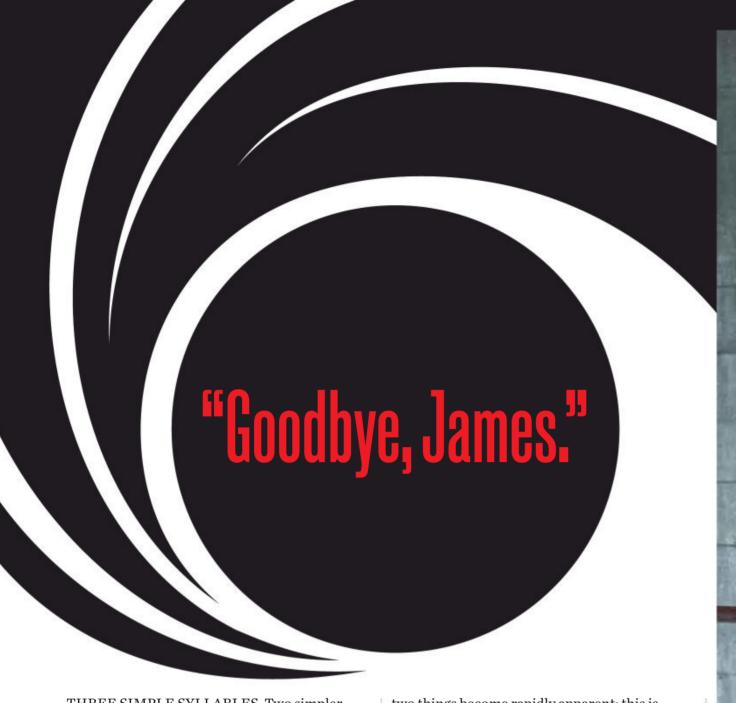
THE BIG REVEAL

Chris Hewitt: Part of the genius of Knives Out is the way Rian Johnson subtly reframes what it is. What starts out as a straightforward whodunnit suddenly swerves, not even halfway through, with the revelation that Marta did it, into a howtheygonnagetawaywithit (not technically a phrase, but go with it) where we're rooting for the killer. Or who we think is the killer. Because, right at the end, Johnson rug-pulls us all, revealing that Chris Evans' Ransom was the dastardly mastermind behind it all, orchestrating Harlan Thrombey's demise in order to have Marta arrested for murder, thus rescinding her claim on Harlan's estate. So it's actually been a whodunnit all along,

a wolf in another wolf's clothing. But, of course, Ransom is only guilty of a few minor crimes - nothing a spoilt rich kid with a great lawyer won't be able to shake — until news filters through of Fran, the housekeeper's, death, for which Ransom is very much responsible. At which point the 'it' in 'whodunnit' isn't the 'it' you thought it was when you first started watching. It's gloriously convoluted, and very clever, and if it makes your brain hurt just thinking about it, you're not alone. But here's one more for you to consider: Marta didn't actually administer a fatal overdose of morphine to Harlan before he took his own life. So, really, whodunnit? Harlan Thrombey.







THREE SIMPLE SYLLABLES. Two simpler words. But their cultural significance is huge. We've heard them plenty of times over the years. Sometimes there's a variation on a theme — "Goodbye, Mr Bond" most often — but the basic gist remains the same. A megalomaniacal villain with designs on taking over the world has lured James Bond, the world's greatest secret agent, into a trap and is about to bump him off.

Today, those words are being delivered in Cuba by Christoph Waltz's Ernst Stavro Blofeld, head of evil organisation SPECTRE and Bond's adopted brother. Well, not quite. To be completely honest, *Empire* isn't in Cuba, but a soundstage at Pinewood Studios that's pretending to be Cuba, while outside the October wind rages and howls. And we're not listening to Christoph Waltz, but a member of the production team on No Time To Die, the 25th James Bond movie, repeating lines, for the benefit of the actors, that will later be dubbed by Waltz. With, we fervently hope, a little more feeling than the monotone mumblings currently emanating apologetically from loudspeakers on set.

Anyway, the gist. At some point in *No Time To Die*, Bond finds himself in Cuba where, along with an associate called Paloma (Ana de Armas), he's wrangled himself an invite to the hottest party of the year — a gathering of SPECTRE's unfinest, the bad and the beautiful, the eye-catching and eye-gouging alike. And as he and Paloma wander around, talking to each other on those little Bluetooth earpieces that come in handy in movies like this, a voice can be heard, broadcasting to the throng.

Blofeld may be in prison in London, but he's still making an appearance of sorts. And

two things become rapidly apparent: this is a big old birthday bash for the bloviating bellend. And he's fully aware that Bond has crashed the party. "Enjoy the spectacular end to our pariah," he tells the commingled. And then, those aforementioned words. "Goodbye, James."

What is Blofeld up to? Will Bond survive? And what will be left of him? *Empire* is not at liberty to say. For now, let's focus on those two very apt little words. Because "goodbye" is right. Welcome to James Bond's last hurrah. Or, at least, Daniel Craig's last hurrah.

f you were under the impression that Spectre, the Sam Mendes-directed 2015 flick which ended with Bond retiring from official duty to drive off into the sunset with his new ladyfriend, Léa Seydoux's Dr Madeleine Swann, was the last time we would see Daniel Craig play Bond, you're in good company. Craig was, too. "I think I was ready to go," he says of finishing that film. "If that had been it, the world would have carried on as normal, and I would have been absolutely fine. But somehow it felt like we needed to finish something off. If I'd left it at Spectre, something at the back of my head would have been going, 'I wish I'd done one more."

Spectre was not an easy shoot. "I did most of the movie with a broken leg," admits Craig, speaking to Empire in a New York studio in early December. And as it wound down, Craig was simply not in a Bonding mood. "There was a part of me going, 'I can't physically do this anymore.' I felt genuinely that I needed to give up for my own self-preservation as much as anything." He even told one publication that he would rather





slash his own wrists than make another Bond. Yet here he is, wrists emphatically unslashed, fifth Bond movie in the can. It's partly the result of a relentless campaign from stalwart Bond producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson, keepers of Ian Fleming's flame, who were determined not to let their man go quietly. "If he hadn't come back, I was gonna go put a duvet over my head and cry for three years," laughs Broccoli.

Let's not kid ourselves. Daniel Craig is not

Let's not kid ourselves. Daniel Craig is not doing *No Time To Die* out of the goodness of his heart. Yet all the gold in Fort Knox wouldn't, in and of itself, have been enough to lure him back. Turns out he had something eating away at him too. Though he's complimentary about *Spectre* ("I'm very satisfied with it"), which represented a creative and commercial dip from the high of 2012's *Skyfall*, perhaps there's a desire to go out in a blaze of glory. And perhaps there's, simply, a sense of unfinished business. "I always had a kind of secret idea about the whole lot in my head, about where I wanted to take it," he says. "And *Spectre* wasn't that. But this feels like it is."

Nobody, least of all Craig, is willing to say this far out what that idea is. But, as the film that would become *No Time To Die* (a Barbara Broccoli suggestion that, it later emerged, she had perhaps remembered from the days when her dad, Cubby Broccoli, turned a book of the same name into a movie called Tank Force) barrelled along the bumpy road towards the starting line, changing directors from Danny Boyle to Cary Joji Fukunaga, one thing stayed firmly in place: the notion that you can shoot Bond, stab him or threaten to cut off his nethers with a laser, but if you want to really hurt him, aim for the heartstrings. "We always like to have a very personal trial for him emotionally," says Broccoli. "We've thrown the book at him on this one."

ver the course of 24 films, via six different incarnations, that span almost 60 years, Bond has been an inveterate womaniser. Legend has it that he has so many notches on his bedpost that his headboard is a gatefold. Yet of all his bedfellows over the years, without doubt the rarest, and most alien to him, has been love. Only two women have pierced the armour surrounding Bond's heart: Tracy (Diana Rigg) in On Her Majesty's Secret Service, who did so so successfully that they wound up getting married; and Vesper Lynd, Eva Green's liaison, in Casino Royale, the movie that introduced Craig's Bond and artfully retconned all the previous Bond films, Tracy and all, out of existence. Spoiler alert, folks: it didn't work out well for either lady. Either side of that, Bond has been the archetypal love-'em-and-leave-'em guy. There's been one hard and fast rule: if he's with a girl at the end of a movie, they won't be around come the start of the next.

It's a rule that's been broken only once, with Eunice Gayson's Sylvia Trench appearing

RAMI MALEK ON GOING FROM OSCAR-

Traditionally, after you win an Oscar, you're expected to do a string of serious dramas that end up at Sundance. You've done a Bond film. Did the fact that would be unexpected entice you? It enticed me that it was Bond. What an extraordinary opportunity. I never thought I would ever be afforded the opportunity to realistically work in this business, you know? To earn a living from it is something I still consider to be extraordinary and a gift. So then to go and play Freddie Mercury, which could have been a disaster, and it wasn't ... and then to have my my phone ring for the 25th instalment of Bond...how could you not?

Are you a big Bond fan?
I am a big Bond fan. It is
a franchise I have loved since
being a child, like so many of us
all over the world. Yeah. I got
introduced to it from my father,
who used to watch those films
back home in Egypt. Roger
Moore, I believe, had spent
some time shooting with
Barbara [Broccoli] in Cairo.

For *The Spy Who Loved Me*. That's the one. So when you get to see the world through the vantage point of a pretty extraordinary spy, there's just a thrill to that. It's an event.

And there's this long line of colourful villains as well. You're the latest in that line. What can you say about Safin?

You know, I woke up this morning and I said, "Do not talk about this character because—"

Well, it's been lovely talking to you.

[Laughs] It's something I'm so excited about and something that I think will be just so thrilling to watch in the cinema. I think he is unlike any villain I've seen in these films before. I hope I can say that. There's a real eeriness to him. Daniel says "misunderstood". But I would say this: he's ruthless, and perhaps he's a product of some other type of ruthlessness. That's about as much as I can tell you.

Where do you start with it? Do you look at previous Bond villains and go, "I'll take a bit of that. A bit of that"? Actors are some of the best thieves in the world. Why wouldn't you learn from the best? Look at [Anthony] Hopkins in Silence Of The Lambs. I went back to that one. I looked at [Javier] Bardem, not only in Skyfall, but in No Country For Old Men. That has to be the greatest villain I've seen in cinema. That's a big one, but I'll go there.

Both of them have a stillness, terrifying stillness, as well. Is that what Safin has?

I think there's a gravity in him. Oh, a weightedness, a stillness that I think arrives from sheer focus. When you're up against the best of the best, you have to be as concentrated and focused as possible. If I went in there and tried to make a carbon copy of someone, what joy or fun would that be for anybody? I guess that may be a lesson I learned from Mr Mercury. If it's not original, then why bother? I've pocketed some things from some of my favorites. But I tried to every day imbue this character with something I thought made sense for the character, but might also at the same time be shocking and unnerving.

That's what you want from your Bond villains.

He is a radical human being. Let's say that.

We heard you speak in the trailer. What is that accent? Where is it from?

I'm using my same dialect coach from *Bohemian Rhapsody*. His name's William Conacher. I wanted to create something that we couldn't quite peg from any particular part of the world. Cary and I talked about it feeling like it was possibly a voice we would have heard centuries ago, but not quite been able to identify.

Bond says, "History isn't kind to men who play God." Is Safin trying to play God? [Smiles] One could ask that same question of 007 himself.



in both *Dr. No* and *From Russia With Love*. So the decision to bring Seydoux back as Swann, the daughter of key SPECTRE Quantum cog Mr White, is interesting. "What else is there in life, other than family and love?" asks Craig. "A lot of the movie is about their relationship, but it's fucking complicated. It's not a straight up-and-down love story, I'll tell you that."

From the off, No Time To Die will see that relationship tested. "We all have our secrets," Bond hisses at her mid-car-chase in the film's trailer. "We just didn't get to yours yet." And those secrets will drive the plot. "It was important for me that we get to understand who Madeleine Swann is," explains Fukunaga. "What's it like to grow up with a father like Mr White? Who's her mother? Why is she the right person to be James Bond's partner?"

The film picks up almost immediately after *Spectre*, with Bond discombobulated by a revelation about Madeleine's past. "He believes she's betrayed him," says Broccoli. "And he has to deal with that pain of isolation, loneliness and betrayal all over again." Which, in typical Bond fashion, drives him to seek a quantum of solace in Jamaica. "It's his spiritual home," says Wilson of the country where Bond's creator, Ian Fleming, conjured him into life. "He leads a simple life there until the world intrudes."

Which it does in the shape of Bond's old CIA buddy Felix Leiter (Jeffrey Wright), who turns up with a gig that will drag Bond into a dangerous, globe-spanning (Italy! Norway! Cuba!) plot that will see him, along the way, constantly flanked and outfoxed by a group of strong, powerful women: Naomie Harris' Moneypenny, de Armas' aforementioned Paloma, Lashana Lynch's Nomi, an MI6 agent who just might have inherited the 007 mantle; and, in an unexpected rug-pull for the character, Madeleine, the woman he thought he'd left behind. "I think the character has learned a lot over the course of the five films," says Broccoli. "In this film, he finds out that relationships are hard! Who knew? It was much easier in the old days, when he left them behind."

Ah, the old days. Not necessarily good ones, either. It's no coincidence that this is the first Bond film to be produced post-#MeToo and Time's Up. Nor that Phoebe Waller-Bridge ("She's a phenomenon," says Broccoli) was brought on board as one of the film's writers in order to, as well as bring the funny and, presumably, have Bond glance at the camera every now and again, make sure the women in the film weren't disposable. "I think Time's Up had had a profound effect on society, thank God," says Broccoli. "About time, too." As one of the most powerful women in film for the past couple of decades, she's been slowly cementing the franchise's feminist credentials, and chipping away at Bond's old-school views. "His attitude towards sex, his attitude towards women, it's all deeply, deeply flawed," admits Craig. "I can't apologise for that. It's not my job to judge the character. But the way you address it is we get

the strongest female characters we can and put those against him." As this Bond gets wiser with the years, and more in touch with his emotions, he's less Mr Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, more plain old Mr Bang Bang.

ang bang, as in explosions. And whizzing bullets. Neither of which will be in short supply in *No Time* To Die. Hardly surprising when you consider how much Bond has on his plate. There's his sinister sibling Blofeld, still pulling SPECTRE's strings despite being banged up. "When you've got Christoph Waltz, you don't want to throw him away. and you don't want to kill him off too fast," says Broccoli of the decision to keep Blofeld alive at the end of *Spectre*. And there's Rami Malek's Safin, the mysterious figure from Madeleine's past who is the film's chief villain: a man so sinister he makes Donald Pleasence's Blofeld look like Charles Grav's Blofeld. "He's someone who's lived in the shadows," explains Fukunaga. "Waiting for the right moment to take the position he thinks is his rightful position: running the underworld."

At first glance, Fukunaga's involvement with No Time To Die seems somewhat incongruous. His reputation, across movies like Sin Nombre and Beasts Of No Nation and the first season of True Detective, is as an arthouse specialist. The one time he tried to play in the studio swimming pool, with It, he departed the project, citing the same reason that put paid to Danny Boyle's involvement with this movie: creative differences. "That was kind of an anomaly," he says. "Every single one of the producers on It, I have follow-up projects with. And here we're doing probably one of the largest films of the year, and I felt like I had Barbara and Michael's protection."

Yet, for Fukunaga, Bond makes perfect sense. A fan of the series since childhood (*A View To A Kill* was the cherry-popper), he actively lobbied for the gig after *Spectre*. "It's a cultural icon, not just in terms of my youth, but what he means to generations before me and after me," he adds. "I've seen every one of Daniel's films in the cinema, which is not common for me. This is the first time I've kind of got re-engaged with it as an adult."

When Boyle exited, Fukunaga came on board, crafting a completely new story. His goal was to retain a feel of classic Bonds. "It's helming in the classic sense," he says. "I'm inheriting a world and shepherding it to its finality in this chapter. There is plenty of room for improvisation, and creative spice, but there's also a strong sense of responsibility to not upset the apple cart."

So it is with the action in *No Time To Die*. There will be all manner of car chases, motorcycle stunts and gunplay, but Fukunaga has been determined not to play catch-up with either the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, or 50-odd years of Bond's own action-packed





And if that means not flinging Craig out of a plane at 35,000 feet equipped with nothing more than a martini glass, so be it. But there will still be plenty of Bondian bang for your buck. *Empire* nipped over to Jamaica, as you do, back in April to watch second-unit director Alexander Witt and his team pull off a major aerial stunt that involves a seaplane (piloted by Bond, of course) evading pursuit by armed police and then flying through a series of giant cranes. And on our visit to Pinewood, we're given a tour of an impressively detailed and vast Cuban street set that will be home to an extended shoot-out and chase sequence. It will also, just a couple of weeks after we get the guided tour, prove to be the place where Daniel Craig shot his last-ever scene as James Bond.

he day: 25 October 2019. The time: godforsaken o'clock. The shot: Bond, running down a corridor. "It was potentially a bit of an anti-climax, because they usually are," recalls Craig. "Actually, it was very emotional. The whole crew came round and gathered outside. Everybody was hugging each other. I tried to make a speech and couldn't get it out."

Unlike the MCU, where an actor can only be sure that they won't be called back for additional shooting when they're at the premiere, Bond doesn't do reshoots. James Bond May Return In Whatever The Hell Bond 26 Will Be Called, but Daniel Craig will not: this is the end of a journey that started almost 15 years ago, when he was unveiled to the world's press and immediately was subjected to a barrage of abuse. One website, danielcraigisnotbond.com, launched petitions to have his licence to play Bond revoked, and worked themselves up into a frenzy about the very notion of a blond actor playing Bond. "I hope they're very happy," he laughs. Happy is exactly what he appears to be. By the time this movie comes out, he will have played Bond for 14 years, longer than any previous actor. And even if five films isn't quite enough to match the quantity of Connery and Moore's output, it's more than he imagined himself making all those years ago. "I was completely ready to just go, 'That's the way I see Bond. You don't like it? Fair enough," he says. "One of the biggest reasons I did *Casino Royale* is the line, 'A vodka martini, please.' 'Shaken or stirred?' My reply was written in the script as, 'Do I look like I give a fuck?' And that's it. That's the reason I did it. Because what I could not do, and what I refused to do, was repeat what had gone before. What was the fucking point? So I'd rather have just done one and gone, 'Okay, swing and a miss. There you go. Tried my best."

That didn't happen, of course. *Casino Royale* was a bruising, modern-yet-classic affair that

The trailer confirms that Nomi is a double 0 agent. That must be exciting.

It is. For a woman, for a black woman to be a double 0 agent in 2019, it's pretty big. We have amazing, forward-thinking producers, because this wouldn't necessarily be happening in 2019 in the real world. It could, but it's still a 'could' and I think whilst things are still a possibility and not a definite, then we still have a ways to go.

But you've heard the rumours.

What rumours? There are always rumours about everything.

Rumours that the double 0 is followed by a 7.

That was well-worded. Well done! [Laughs]

Can you say anything about that, that there might be a black, female 007?

I can say that, though the reactions to such a rumour have been varied; I love that the conversation is even happening. And I think that's really exciting for long-running fans, new fans, but also young people who would potentially have that as not even an idea, as something that is just normal for them. That's really special for me. Whether something like that is happening or not as a fact, at this point doesn't even matter for me. The conversation is enough. As a fly on the social-media wall, it's bleedin' brilliant.

Nicely put. How did it come about?

I did a play at the Royal
Court in London last year that
Barbara Broccoli produced
[Ear For Eye]. She saw it and
I think enjoyed my performance.
And told my agent that she
wanted me to tape for a
mystery project, which I didn't
have a clue what it could be.
[Laughs] No, I knew it could
be Bond.

What did you decide to put on the tape?

Oh, no-one's asked me that before. I put on a *Casino Royale*

scene. I put on the train scene with Eva Green and Daniel.

When they first meet?

Yeah. And the second tape was an M scene. And the audition was another scene from *Spectre*, I think. Which was exciting because it was like, "I'm playing M today." So in my imaginary Lashana world, I was M for five minutes.

Bond is almost this poster boy for privilege and white privilege and moneyed power. It seems that Nomi is going to pull the rug out from under his feet.

She is that person. I think she's just been waiting for the opportunity to have that moment with him where she could just stop him in his tracks. It's a strong message as to how the franchise is reflecting the world. I feel like they're always ahead of the time. So to have a young black woman be as in charge as she is, to have her natural hair in MI6 in the workplace, to not have to explain herself and apologise for herself and for her height and for her skills is special and is just something I just never see in the real world, let alone in cinema.

The term 'Bond girl' is horribly reductive, but it doesn't seem to apply to either yourself or Paloma [Ana de Armas]. Were you wary of that label?

I feel like I didn't need to care about it because Barbara had it handled so well. We were in close conversation throughout from day dot. I didn't want there to ever be any "eek" moments where audiences will feel uncomfortable knowing where we've come to in the world. The franchise represents the world so well, it would be a shame to go backwards. I don't want Nomi to be generic in any way. We have an opportunity to really speak volumes in this movie and I want every single message to be loud. I want to shout from the rooftops that she can give Bond a run for his money.







turned doubters into believers. And now Craig is a man so at peace with his choice to walk away from Bond that he's just ordered a peppermint tea with honey. In front of a journalist. "That's your opening paragraph," he laughs. "'He ordered a peppermint tea with some honey.' It's fucking writing itself, this!" Paragraph 24, actually. And it was stirred, not shaken.

We won't know the details of Bond's exit for a few months yet. But that won't stop speculation and scuttlebutt. It seems unlikely that he'll finish the film back at square one, ensconced once again in MI6. A more solid union with Madeleine — marriage, perhaps? — could also be a contender. Then there's the D-word of the title. One rumour that dogged Danny Boyle's departure was his alleged desire to bump off Bond. But thematically it seems like a good place to leave Craig's character, who was a coldblooded killing machine when we first met him in Casino Royale. If you track Bond's career for long enough, then the law of averages says that at some point his luck will run out and he'll meet a violent end, whether that's at Blofeld's birthday bash or at Safin's hands. And another major franchise last year showed that you can kill off your lead character with grace and emotion, and make their actions matter.

Of course, it's unlikely that Bond will find time to die in *No Time To Die*. If it was a sticking point with Boyle, it's hard to see Broccoli, Wilson and Craig go down that route without him. It would also really piss off Alan Partridge. Most likely, the series simply recasts, as was once tradition, or the reboot is rebooted. "It was there before me and it's certainly going to be there after me," says Craig. "It may be that the slate is wiped clean and they begin again. That's what happened with me. But I'm not worried. It'll be a new person, and that'll be exciting."

Broccoli and Wilson say that they haven't thought about Bond 26, or who that new person might be, just yet. "We'll have to see," says Wilson. "It hasn't entered our mind." And why should it? Why focus on tomorrow when a) it never dies and b) today is still right here. Craig hasn't officially handed in his company lanyard yet. But this time there's no going back. There will be no persuasion, no last-minute recantations or revocations. "It's pretty devastating," admits Broccoli. "He was reluctant to do the role originally, because he knew it was going to change his life. The fact is, when you take on this role, you're Bond for life. But he's risen to the occasion. I couldn't be more proud of him."

There's only one way to put it, really. In the immortal words of Ernst Stavro Blofeld, and a dozen megalomaniacs before him: goodbye, James. •

NO TIME TO DIE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 APRIL

Double trouble:
Nomi and James
team up. Main,
right: A covert
Bond readies
his weapon.
Right: Bond
visits adoptive
brother Blofeld
(Christoph
Waltz) in the
clink. Seemingly
he forgot the
birthday card.

Above:











When Amblin Partners boss Steven Spielberg — who evidently knows a thing or two about making war movies — first read Sam Mendes and Krysty Wilson-Cairns' script for *1917*, he gave the filmmakers some simple feedback: "People won't be able to breathe." Set on 6 April 1917, the story follows two British soldiers, reserved Schofield (George MacKay) and cheeky chappie Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman), on a perilous mission to deliver a letter that will call off an attack and save 1,600 lives, including Blake's brother.

It's a taut, thriller-like premise that honours the sacrifices made by a generation. Yet what Spielberg responded to also lay in the execution. As conveyed in the script, Mendes plays out the action in real-time and as if in one continuous shot. "The reason for doing it like that is to make the barrier between the audience and the characters as invisible as possible," says

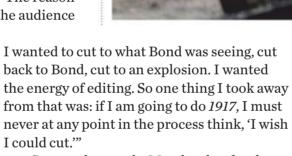
Mendes. "The way into the movie is very simple, very direct." Even for the director of an Academy Award winner (*American Beauty*), two James Bond films (*Skyfall, Spectre*) and that one where Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet shout a lot (*Revolutionary Road*), it has proven the filmmaking challenge of his life.

"Whatever happens to the movie," Mendes says, "the experience of it was like nothing else I've ever done."

THE IDEA

If the story of 1917 was inspired by the memories of Mendes' grandfather Alfred, the form came from a long-standing interest in the power of the long take. This passion stretches back to a shot in his sophomore feature, 2002's Road To Perdition, in which the camera follows Mob enforcer Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks) into a 1930s Chicago dive. "Only half of it was in the movie," recalls Mendes. "It was a stylistic exercise but the scene didn't demand it in the way it needs to." Thirteen years later, Mendes tried again, beginning the pre-credits sequence of Spectre as one seven-minute take following Bond on a mission through the Day Of The Dead parade, into a hotel, up in a lift, through rooms, onto a balcony and across Mexico City's rooftops.

"I remember on *Spectre* thinking, 'I am going to do the whole opening sequence in one shot,'" he says. "But it got to the point where it got self-serving stylistically and I needed to cut.



Spectre also taught Mendes that for the film to work as a seemingly single shot it had to be built from the ground up. After writing a treatment, Mendes reached an impasse and brought in screenwriter Krysty Wilson-Cairns (Penny Dreadful) to turn the one-shot, real-time idea into a workable screenplay. "It's really hard," laughs Wilson-Cairns. "When I write I like to have as much reality as possible. I was trying to think of 107 consecutive minutes in my life that were interesting enough to render on film. That's not happened in my lifetime. The challenge is crafting a beginning, middle and end that feels dramatically satisfying but also feels organic. That's a real razor's edge."

From Hitchcock's *Rope* to episode six of *The Haunting Of Hill House*, filmmakers have often played with creating the illusion of a continuous take. But Mendes' first port of call was *Birdman Or (The Unexpected Virtue Of Ignorance)*, Alejandro González Iñárritu's Oscar-winner that sent a camera roving backstage in a Broadway theatre. Although *1917* promised to be even more complex.

"I loved *Birdman* as a movie and Alejandro is a filmmaker I admire hugely," Mendes says.
"But it's in one very contained environment and













Clockwise from main: **Schofield** (George MacKay) and Blake (Dean-Charles their perilous mission; **Director Sam** Mendes issues instructions; DP **Roger Deakins** and crew on set; Schofield and Blake take a breather.

it goes around almost in circles. That's almost the point. It's much more dreamlike and has these surreal interludes. 1917 is a ticking clock that never goes back on itself. It only goes in one direction."

The action follows Schofield and Blake through trenches to No Man's Land, over open countryside and rivers to bombed-out towns. The camera crosses a broken bridge and survives a plane crash. Planning to the nth degree was critical. So was a master cinematographer.

THE DREDARATION

Roger Deakins first discovered that Mendes planned 1917 as a single shot when he read it on the cover of the screenplay. "I was initially worried that it was kind of a gimmick, but it was definitely not," says Deakins. "It was integral to the way he wanted to tell the story." The cinematographer on 11 Coen Brothers films and (finally) an Oscar-winner for Blade Runner 2049, Deakins had worked with Mendes on Revolutionary Road, Skyfall and perhaps most pertinently on Iraq War movie Jarhead.

"The approach on *Jarhead* was very different to this," says Deakins. "We shot 95 per cent of that film handheld — it was much more of a spontaneous thing. On *1917*, everything had to be worked out before we started building sets, let alone started shooting for real."

The reason that everything had to be worked out so meticulously was that Mendes didn't

have the luxury of shortening or extending scenes in the edit — a trench had to be the exact length of a dialogue exchange. The process started with Mendes and Wilson-Cairns acting out dialogue scenes in Mendes' kitchen — "I'm not entirely believable as a World War I soldier, sadly," says Wilson-Cairns. "I don't have that in my repertoire" — to get a sense of timings. Then a broader team, including Deakins and the actors, went to a rehearsal room — cardboard boxes marked out trenches — before they finally headed on location to Salisbury Plain.

"We looked like a bunch of lunatics," said Mendes. "If you saw us in rehearsals, you would have seen a bunch of middle-aged men and women in puffer jackets and two blokes in World War I uniforms. The actors were always in uniforms, so in that sense they were in character for months. By the time they came to shoot, they'd not only done the scene, they'd done it on location in the clothes."

Rehearsal became about more than exploring character and scene-work, leaning heavily on Mendes' theatre experience. "When we were rehearsing, we were dictating and laying down the rhythm of the piece," says George MacKay. Along with MacKay and Chapman, actors in supporting roles — Colin Firth, Andrew Scott, Benedict Cumberbatch — turned up to nail the pace. The only actor who missed out on the extended rehearsal period was Mark Strong, who shares a dialogue scene with MacKay that involves walking along a convoy of trucks.

"Months before the scene, we had someone out in the field pretending to be Mark Strong so we could count the number of trucks, so his conversation would end on the last truck," says Mendes. "So Mark came to set on the day, walks down the convoy, gets to the last truck and goes, 'My God, that's lucky, what a coincidence. It's just perfect that I came here on the last line.' I just looked at him and said, 'Mark, that is not a fucking coincidence."

THE SHOOT

After nine months of prep, 1917 was shot over four months in spring 2018 on location in Salisbury Plain, Glasgow Docks, the River Tees and Bovingdon Airfield in Hertfordshire. To keep track of the complex action, Mendes and co worked off two scripts — one regular version and another with maps and schematics charting the journey of the camera in relation to the actors. With the camera in the heat of battle, the director and DP were based in horse boxes far away from the action.

"It was a bit like doing a live performance in the middle of a field," says Mendes. "I was saying, 'Action!' on top of a hill, and by the time I said, 'Cut!' they couldn't hear me — they were 500 yards away."

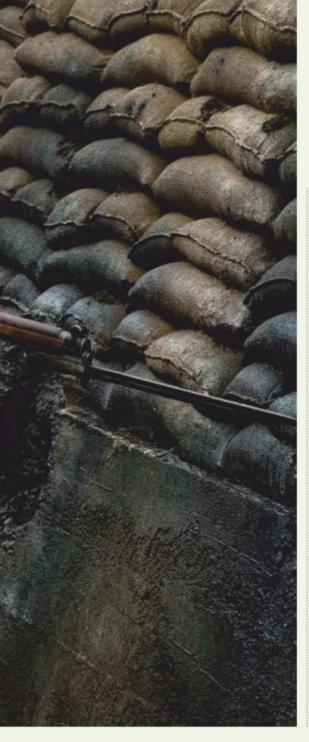
One of the biggest challenges of pulling off the illusion of real-time is keeping continuity with the weather. Mendes and crew spent hours











Clockwise from main: Schofield takes aim; Mendes MacKay and Chapman in the trenches: Mendes and Deakins put their stars through their paces: The Tommies feel the full force of the German artillery: Schofield averts his gaze as the bodies pile up.





waiting for cloud cover — "I was adamant I didn't want to shoot in sunlight just for the feel of the film," says Deakins — not shooting at all during the first three days. They used the time to constantly rehearse some of the most complex camera moves imaginable. Even then, practice didn't make perfect.

"On a normal movie, the first or second take is gold dust because it has adrenaline and electricity," says the director. "But on 1917 often the first ten takes we would burn through with technical issues — a camera didn't pan at the right speed, someone dropped a prop. Often you wouldn't get up to your technical peak until take ten or 20. By that time the actors are potentially going stale because they've done it 20 times and they know you can't use any of the previous takes. You have to do the whole scene and it has to be great. And this is the 27th take."

As well as the painstaking attention to detail, 1917 also needed new kit to bring it to life. Deakins utilised a prototype of the new ARRI Alexa Mini LF, a small compact camera that could get into nooks and crannies but still deliver super hi-res images. Mendes and Deakins put the new-fangled gizmo through its paces, attaching it to cranes, then having burly grips run with it before handing off to an operator on a speeding motorbike.

Camera stabilisation rigs such as TRINITY (a long arm that can go to the floor or overhead height) and 'stable eye' (a gimbal carried on two poles but operated remotely by Deakins) helped 1917 avoid what Mendes calls "the seasick-y Steadicam thing": he was after a camera style that almost nullified the human presence of an operator. "It's very difficult to be objective with a handheld camera," says the director. "With a handheld camera it feels like someone's point of view. Here, there is a neutrality: you can be subjective and objective at the same time."

This ballet between cast, camera crew and boom operator made surreal viewing for those on the sidelines.

"I was watching this just thinking, 'These guys are fucking mental," says Wilson-Cairns. "I can't imagine another group of people who have achieved this to the level they've achieved it at. I'm obviously biased. I love it. I am a minute away from getting a '1917' tattoo."

Adding to the madness was the duration of takes, the longest single take coming in at eight-and-a-half minutes. While even a legend like Deakins felt the heat — "The longer it goes on, you think, 'This one's really working, I hope I don't blow it right at the end" — the cast found the long takes beneficial for their performances.

"It allows you to lose yourself in the scene," says Chapman. "The thing about this film is that it never felt fake. I can honestly say there were so many scenes we did that I was so lost in, I couldn't stop crying afterwards. I felt it helped my performance".

Mackay remembers the shoot being like Fartlek training — running 450 metres in mud bent over at right angles, going back to the beginning, repeat until you drop — but found comfort and sustenance in the communal effort. "Everyone is doing it with you," he says. "If you drop a line, it's the same thing as the camera team not hitting their mark. It's the same idea that is echoed in the story about doing things for a bigger purpose and getting out the way of yourself."

And when it all came together the feeling was euphoric.

"Every rehearsal seemed impossible in my head," recalls Chapman. "'How the fuck are we going to do this?' But when we did it and it worked, it was honestly like a celebration among the crew. We'd all be out of breath but we'd just look each other and go, 'YESSS! That was it."

But things didn't get any easier once the shooting stopped.

THE EDIT

Mendes is understandably cagey about talking about the tricky task of finessing 1917's oners into an almighty seamless continuous shot. He wants viewers to be immersed in Schofield and Blake's odyssey, rather than on the look-out for filmmaking sleight-of-hand. But like everything to do with the film, the merging of invisible cuts was planned from the get-go. "It was the thing we talked about the most very early on and then it became the least important," says Mendes. "You'd be amazed how many of the shots are just one shot." Deakins plays down the part played by digital manipulation in merging cuts, adding, "For the most part a lot of the joins you could have just left as they were without any help." Still, Mendes gives us a little clue.

"Sometimes transitions are best placed at the point of highest drama rather than the time you would expect them, which is a nice calm bit, when we are panning from right to left across a neutral landscape and we can put a little snip in there."

The filmmaker insists he is not on any form of anti-editing crusade. "Some of the greatest moments in the history of movies are a cut," he says. "You can't shoot *Lawrence Of Arabia* striking a match and go to the desert in one shot." Yet he was so conditioned by 1917 to a nocutting policy, he was temporarily concerned about going back to making movies in the conventional way. It simply took watching a film on a flight to bat away his fears.

"I watched Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* and I thought, 'That's what you do, you just make a great movie,'" he says. "You don't look at *Cabaret* and think, 'Ooh, what a shame it's not just one shot.' It's unbelievable editing. He has a great sense of rhythms, intensely cut sections, and sections that play almost on their own. But that's the thing. You choose the style to suit the material. And not the other way round."

In other words, don't expect 1918 any time soon. •

1917 IS IN CINEMAS FROM 9 JANUARY

BLAZING

3

TRAIL

Queen & Slim

A TENDER ROMANCE AND AN

UNFLINCHING LOOK AT WHAT

IT MEANS TO BE BLACK IN 21ST
CENTURY AMERICA. EMPIRE

ASSEMBLES ITS WRITER,

DIRECTOR AND TWO STARS

FOR A FRANK, FREEWHEELING

CONVERSATION ABOUT WHY IT

NEEDED TO BE MADE

WORDS AMON WARMANN PHOTOGRAPHY SHAYAN ASGHARNIA





THE START: A TINDER DATE. AND NOT A PROMISING ONE.

A God-fearing, unambitious Costco employee named Slim (Daniel Kaluuya) sits down opposite a cynical lawyer named Queen (Jodie Turner-Smith), who's had a bad day at work. As he drives her home, it doesn't look like they'll see each other again. But then a white police officer pulls them over, and the situation erupts into violence. Queen and Slim go on the run, pursued by the law and forced together, gradually realising they have much more in common than they initially thought.

A protest movie made in reaction to numerous recent incidents of police brutality against African Americans, Queen & Slim is unpredictable, gripping and vital. Which makes it all the more impressive that three of the key players responsible for bringing it to the screen are, in relative terms, Hollywood newbies. It's the debut movie of director Melina Matsoukas, previously best known for a series of visually striking music videos, including several for Beyoncé. It's based on the first film screenplay by Lena Waithe, creator of Master Of None (for which Matsoukas has directed two episodes) and sidekick in Ready Player One. And it features the first starring performance by the UK-born Jodie Turner-Smith (in 2017's Newness, she was credited only as 'Statueseque Woman').

Completing the quartet is Daniel Kaluuya, a newly minted movie star hot off the success of *Get Out* and *Black Panther*. Each of them poured their heart and soul into *Queen & Slim*, ensuring





it remained uncompromising from script to screen. *Empire* sat down with the foursome on a hot November afternoon in LA to find out how they got it on the road.

This is not your average film. How hard was it to get it through the system?
Lena Waithe (writer): The great thing is the system chased the movie, not the other way around. I was trying to impress myself with a script, and then I was like, "Okay, I want Melina." I didn't have actors in mind or anything. I just knew I had to make it with Melina.

Melina Matsoukas (director): Lena is a hustler. Let me tell you, that's why she's here

today, because she didn't ask for permission. She's like, "Oh, you're gonna fucking pay attention. I know my worth." But you're right — they did chase it. We made a list of the people we wanted to work with. And we met with them We took a lot of meetings.

Waithe: A lot of meetings.

Matsouksas: And we did a budget to figure out how much it was gonna cost to get it made how we wanted to make it. I remember even at the beginning I was like, "I'm not shooting this movie for a couple million dollars." I wanted to shoot in three states. I wanted to shoot on film. I wanted it to have a soul that we can't recreate digitally. That's going to have a cost attached.









Above, top and middle: Kaluuya, Turner-Smith, Waithe and Matsoukas in conversation. Above: Queen (Turner-Smith) and Slim (Kaluuya). Below far left: Matsoukas and Waithe on set.

But they wanted this story because it's different. It's from us. It's by us.

Waithe: We had this list of demands. It's got to be shot and released in the same year because I knew how urgent it was. I was so afraid that somebody else would come up with the idea. So I was like, "Let's get this out first."

Matsoukas: What's beautiful is it's kind of an independent film with a studio push. It's the best of both worlds.

Waithe: I think it was a smaller movie than what it's ultimately become. This is her first feature. My first feature. I know what the rules are. But I was like, "I don't give a fuck. This has to be me and Melina's vision. And if it is, I know it will work."

Matsoukas: We got final cut. We got to choose our actors and actresses and our crew.

Daniel and Jodie, what did you make of the story when you first read it?

Daniel Kaluuya (Slim): It's funny, because when I read the script I had the same feeling when I first read *Get Out*. I have a friend who articulates it well. He said, "You should only make a film if you've got something to scream about." With *Get Out* it was like, "Hoo-whoo-whoo-whoo!" And with Queen & Slim it was like, "It's urgent, man." I was zipping through the pages. It had that visceral thing you can't teach. Lena had all those emotions and was able to

make it coherent and simple, so it was accessible to people that don't understand the specificity of this experience. Jordan [Peele] did the same thing with a horror.

Matsoukas: We actually called Jordan for his advice before we started.

Waithe: We did. He to me is a revolutionary. He, to me, is an icon. I say they're gonna write about him when he's gone, because he did a thing that completely changed the trajectory for all of us. This movie doesn't happen without the success of *Get Out*.

Jodie Turner-Smith (Queen): This is a portrait of Black life and Black survival and Black love that I don't think has been seen in this way. To come onto it, especially because it was Lena and Melina's first feature, I felt like I was coming into this pocket of greatness. And I felt like the most rookie person. And I was like, "I have to show up excellently. I cannot be the weak link in this."

Queen and Slim meet on a Tinder date, and it takes them a while to realise their initial impressions of each other are askew. What did you all learn about each other through this experience?

Matsoukas: I had a whole other version of Daniel in my head before we met. And then he rolled up and there was this familiarity. And I was like, "I get him. I understand him without having to say a word." And I realised that my perception of you was completely wrong. Kaluuya: With Melina, I've always felt that she was in my universe. She felt very familial. I grew up in a house full of Black women, so I just got it. And I don't think she understands how much the Losing You video [shot for the Solange song] means to me: she captured the flamboyance, the flair, the humour of Africa. I also remember her car was crazy, and she looked fly as shit. Lena, I love her work, and she was just really easy to talk to. We met at a screening of Get Out, with Chance The Rapper, and connected. Waithe: I met Jodie in the audition process, and you don't really get a chance to have a real conversation or anything like that. It's all business. But she was very much in character. **Turner-Smith:** When I go into a room I always walk in with as much of the energy of what I'm doing as possible. Just for myself. And I don't even know where that choice even really came from, but when I went in for Queen & Slim I put a boundary around myself and my exuberance. Kaluuya: I remember when she left the room I described her as being politely disrespectful. Fundamentally, we are going against the tide. So you have to know yourself. You have to know what you want, and you have to be assertive of what you want and say - this is me. And Jodie in that room had that "This is what I'm about" vibe. I really respected and identified with it. And then getting to know Jodie...she's just a really special, open, generous soul. **Waithe:** It was also hard to relate to Jodie some days, because I feel like I'm so steeped in Black culture and oppression that I don't necessarily lean into the joy as easily. But I think as I've matured and grown since the filming process I'm aware that this is what Blackness can be.

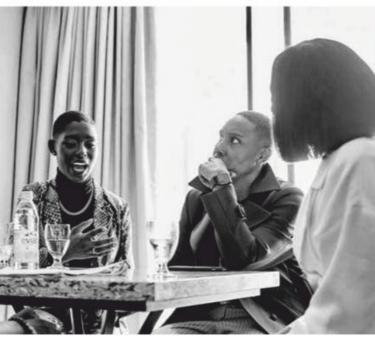
There's a memorable moment midway through the movie where Queen and Slim have their photo taken together on the hood of a car. Where did that come from? Matsoukas: One of the greatest themes in our film is legacy, and the mark that you leave behind. And how sometimes Black people are more celebrated in death than in life. And the image is what we leave behind, right? It's an archive of a time. It's a commentary on the time. And so I knew how important that moment would be. And it was scripted that way. Junior [a man Queen and Slim encounter on their journey, played by Jahi Di'Allo Winston] takes



It can be joyful 24-7.







a picture and I knew I didn't want it on an iPhone. **Waithe:** Did I say it was on an iPhone originally? **Matsoukas:** That would have made sense. But I hate iPhone pictures.

Kaluuya: That was the day with the lightning, right?

Matsoukas: Yes. There was a lightning storm so we had to shut down shooting for four hours of our day. We lost so much time. It was torturous. But we needed that, we needed to suffer. We needed that trauma to be able to tell this story and relate to the people we were honouring. One of the four Black photographers we brought down was Andre Wagner, who's a still-life photographer who shoots in this documentary vibe of black-and-white film. We re-set up the shot that we had shot in the scene, and he snapped for, like, 15 minutes. And we walked away with an iconic moment.

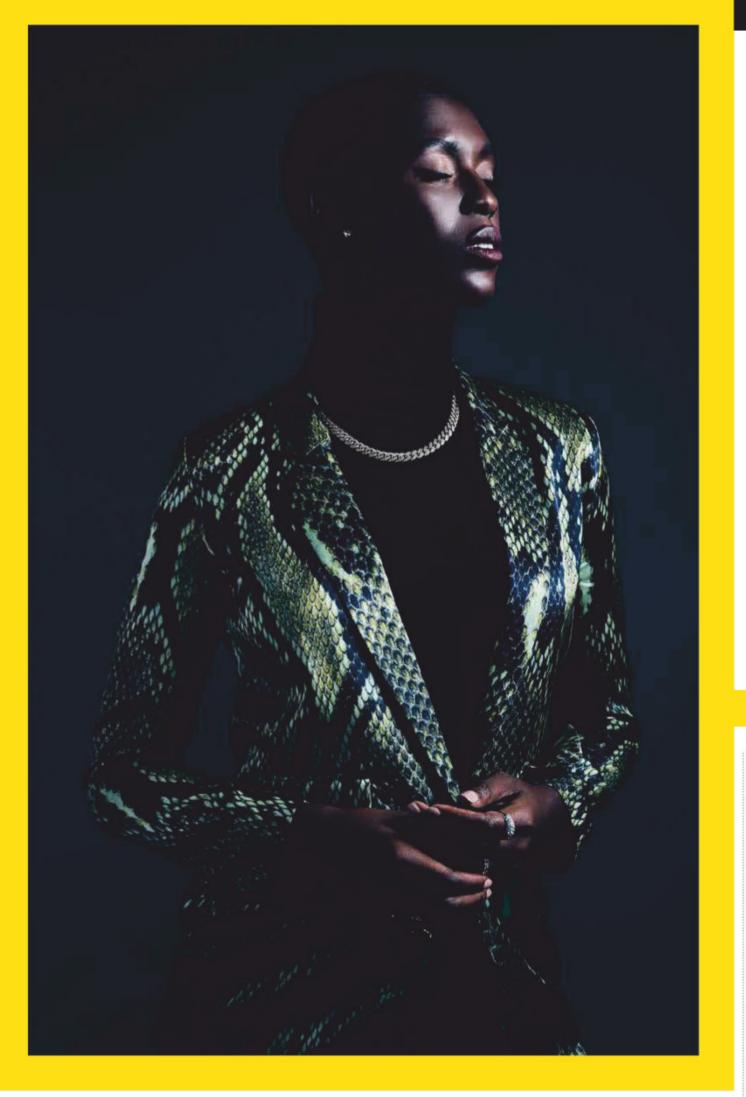
Queen & Slim touches on the idea of 'Black excellence': Queen feels the need to achieve great things, but Slim says, "Why can't

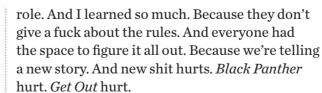


we just be ourselves?" Did you feel that pressure to be excellent while making this? Turner-Smith: I definitely felt that, and that exchange between Queen and Slim is one of my favourites in the movie because it is so true. This question is posed to Queen because it's obvious that in her life she uses that as a way to protect herself and also as a way to kind of become something bigger and not vulnerable. And so that pressure is always there, especially when you inhabit those spaces because you're representing your whole race. You have to work twice as hard to have half as much. There's constantly this drive to be the best version of yourself.

interesting thing is when I first started writing it, I just wanted to be honest. I didn't wanna sugar-coat. I didn't wanna pull any punches. So then once Daniel got involved and once Melina agreed to it, that to me is when I started to say, "Okay, well, if we're all going to be involved than we can't fuck it up." But ultimately for us we wanted Black people specifically to feel this in a real way. It was us trying to do right by our people.

Kaluuya: One of the best descriptions I've heard of the film is that it feels uninterrupted. You know what I'm saying? You realise how many films you've seen that have been interrupted





Y or Z. You've put yourself in a film when you shouldn't — it's not about you.

Matsoukas: Right. You're stripping the culture.

by notes from people that don't know. From

perspectives that have no authority to say X,

Kaluuya: We live in a day and age where you have to be specific to be general. And that was what was so amazing when I saw the first cut. It made me happy to be a part of this orbit of people that really fought for this kind of unapologetic storytelling.

Waithe: Right.

Kaluuya: It's Melina's first feature film. It's Lena's first feature script. Jodie's first starring

Like those movies, *Queen & Slim* packs a punch. How have preview screenings been going?

Waithe: This movie was not put through the studio system, and I think that's why we've had some strong reactions. After the BAFTA screening this dude had tears in his eyes. After another screening a dude came up to me and he couldn't speak.





Facing page, far left: The conversation continues in West Hollywood. Here, top: An on-the-run Slim calls his dad. Above: Queen knows how to ride a vintage Pontiac.

Kaluuya: I can't wait for people in Africa and the Caribbean and South America to see it. They're going to realise that they are included in a storytelling medium that can sometimes feel a bit alien.

Turner-Smith: The biggest thing that always resonates with me is what I heard about the Howard University screening and how the students there responded to it.

Matsoukas: Our first screening after I completed the film entirely was at Howard Homecoming with 1,600 Black students. And it was a very interactive experience. It resonated deeply. I felt like I was a rapper at a rap concert. I was sitting in the audience and they were literally screaming at me through the entire film, and reacting to moments that I didn't even know were in there.

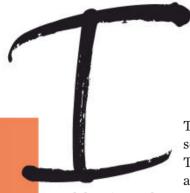
Kaluuya: I was so pissed I couldn't come. I saw the footage of it and it was like, "Oh my God, I know what this film's gonna become."

Waithe: It's unfiltered. It's pure. And I think when it's pure you do have that, "What is this?" type of feeling. To me the greatest compliment was M. Night Shyamalan tweeting that watching this movie reminded him of how it felt watching Boyz N The Hood for the first time. Because that movie shifted things for people. Then before that, Do The Right Thing shifted things for people. And to me, I want to be in the line with those films where we change the conversation. And make other Black directors say, "I wanna do that. Fuck the system." ●

QUEEN & SLIM IS IN CINEMAS FROM 31 JANUARY

An Oscar-winning director. The world's biggest pop stor. A classic West End Musical Judi Dench with a tail. The biggest gamble of the year. Ever since the trailer dropped the world has been mesmerised by Cats. Ne journey deep inside the maddlest, milkiest film of 2019





T WAS A day that, at first, seemed like any other. Thursday 18 July. People around the world were

celebrating Nelson Mandela Day, Anton left the *Love Island* villa, and Mexican drug lord El Chapo was beginning his life sentence in prison. In San Diego, thousands attended the first day of Comic-Con, with Tom Cruise making a surprise appearance on stage to hype up *Top Gun: Maverick*.

The day was winding down. And then, at 10.07pm UK time, it happened. Accompanied by the slightly menacing promise, "This Christmas, you will believe," the trailer for *Cats* was unleashed online.

First we saw humanoid forms scuttling across a dark, neon-lit alleyway. Then the swoosh of a tail. A maudlin song, 'Memory', kicked in, enhancing the feverish and surreal mood. And famous people began to appear, looking... different. Dame Judi Dench, both covered in fur and wearing what appeared to be a coat made of, well, fur. James Corden, encased in some sort of hairy tuxedo, appearing to spit in someone's mouth. Taylor Swift, shaking catnip out of a bejewelled decanter. Some of the performers looked plausibly feline. Others — strange and whiskery — resembled escapees from the island of Doctor Moreau.

Roughly two minutes and 24 seconds after the trailer appeared online, the world went berserk. Jordan Peele shared a version of the trailer soundtracked by music from his doppelgänger horror *Us.* "Internet reacts in horror to 'demented dream ballet'," read one headline in *The Guardian.* "This is what the people in *Bird Box* were seeing," said an online commenter. Naturally, someone photoshopped Nicolas Cage's face onto a cat.

Watching all of this hysteria unfold was the British director of *Cats*, Tom Hooper. "I was just so fascinated because I didn't think it was controversial at all," he tells *Empire* of his reaction to the reaction, in his first major interview about the film. "So it was quite entertaining. *Cats* was apparently the number-one trending topic in the world, for a good few hours at least."

Filmmakers made of less tough stuff might have baulked at some of the feedback, such as the online post that read, "Will God forgive us?" After all, the reputations of a beloved musical, Hooper himself and perhaps an entire species hung in the balance. But instead of panicking, the unflappable director just did what he always does in tricky situations.

He got back to work. It was just another day, after all.

SO UNIQUE IS *Cats*, it seems, without question, like a major risk. Yet its composite parts are as close to sure bets as you get. Taylor Swift — the biggest pop star in the world — doesn't just star as the "statuesque" cat Bombalurina, but has co-written a new song for the film with *Cats*

creator Andrew Lloyd Webber that has "Oscar campaign" written all over it. Award-winning thesps Dench and Ian McKellen will appeal to older generations. And don't think Corden — one of the biggest late-night TV hosts in America — won't belt out 'Memory' on a special episode of *Carpool Karaoke*.

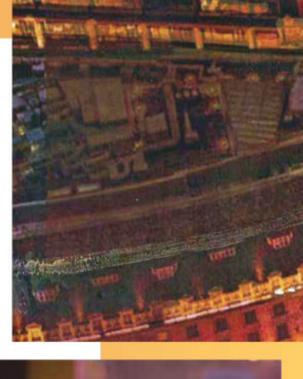
At the centre of it all, meanwhile, is Hooper, the man behind critically acclaimed Oscarwinners *The King's Speech* and *Les Misérables*. He isn't, he admits, a keeper of cats. ("I'm sadly allergic to them," he admits. "I had to grow up in a pet-free household, apart from a couple of tortoises.") But he is a lover of *Cats*, having had his mind blown by the West End show as a ten-year-old.

"I think what I liked most about it was that it didn't feel patronising, as a kid," he recalls. "It touched on some quite adult themes. The music became this portal through which you accepted the strangeness of the feline world." He also enjoyed the way the musical implied that cats could talk — if we learned to understand them. "You just need to know *how*, that's what it's saying. That's an amazing concept."

His enthusiasm is shared by people across the world. Cats is one of the longest-running musicals in history, first debuting in London's West End in 1981 and arriving on Broadway a year later. In the United States, it ran for 18 years (or 7,484 performances), and following a 16-year hiatus, it returned again in 2016. Many of the peculiarly named characters, such as Rum Tum Tugger and Bustopher Jones, are based on T.S. Eliot's 'Old Possum's Book Of Practical Cats', which was first published in 1939. Lloyd-Webber initially set the short stories to music for fun - though lyrics are typically written to music, he had been intrigued to see if the lyrical quality of Eliot's work would lend itself to him flipping the process on its head.

The story is simple, if bleak. Rather than stick to common cat canon declaring each kitty has nine lives, Lloyd Webber conceived of an

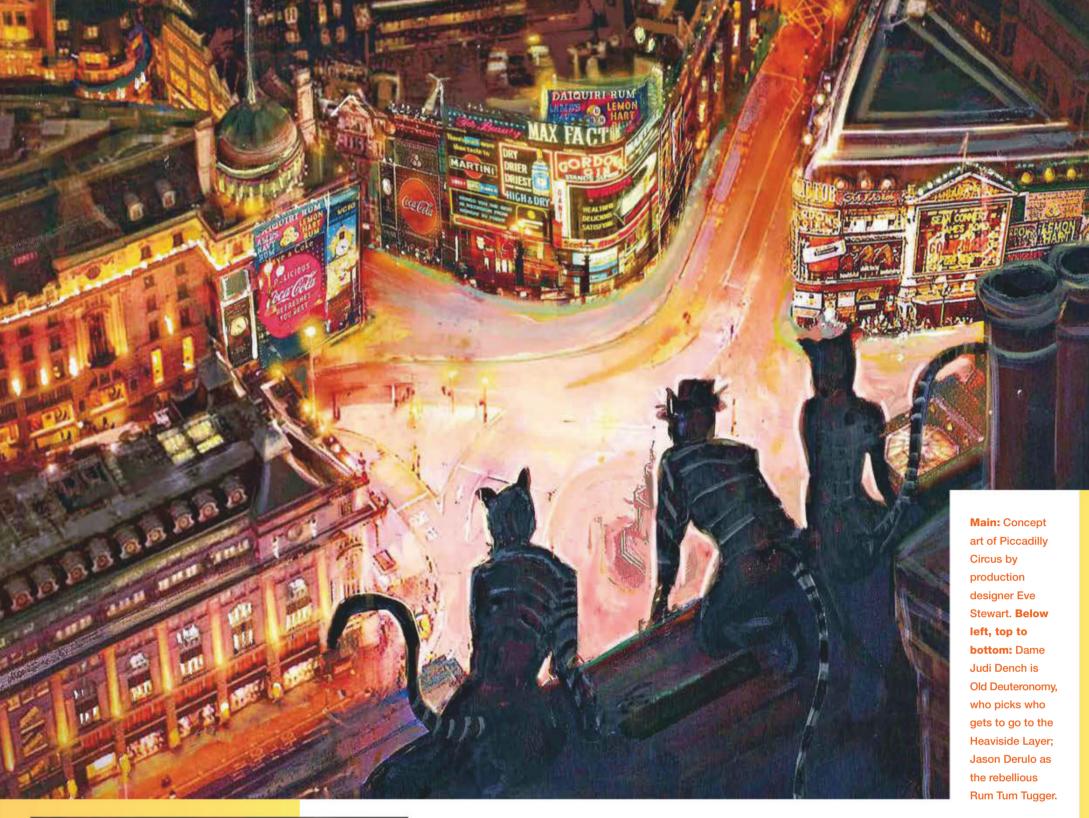
Below, top to bottom: Jennifer Hudson as Grizabella, who sings barnstormer 'Memory'; Francesca Hayward as Victoria; James Corden is Bustopher Jones.















annual winner-takes-all competition wherein a group of cats converge and argue their case for receiving the highest accolade of all — the opportunity to blast into space (initially on an old tyre, but in later versions, in an actual flying saucer) and escape this mortal plane altogether, before being reincarnated. This event was called the 'Jellicle Ball', named after the 'Jellicle cats' that attended it, presided over by Old Deuteronomy, who is old and wise and, though Brian Blessed played the part in the original, is now played by Dench.

Cats' second life began at the tail-end of Hooper's Les Misérables experience in summer 2012. "I was walking through Soho with [theatre producer] Cameron Mackintosh — I hadn't quite finished Les Mis yet, but it was towards the end, and I just thought, 'God, you'll be very sad if you never make a musical again," he says. "I'd learnt so much about how I liked to approach the musical form. Les Mis was special because a film had never been done of it before — I liked that challenge."

He'd already begun wondering, then, what he could possibly do next. And then it struck him: could cutting-edge technology refresh a theatrical mainstay? "I wanted to make something that a ten-year-old now, like I was then, could fall in love with," he remembers. "Maybe what's happened with visual effects might allow a new language of handling the

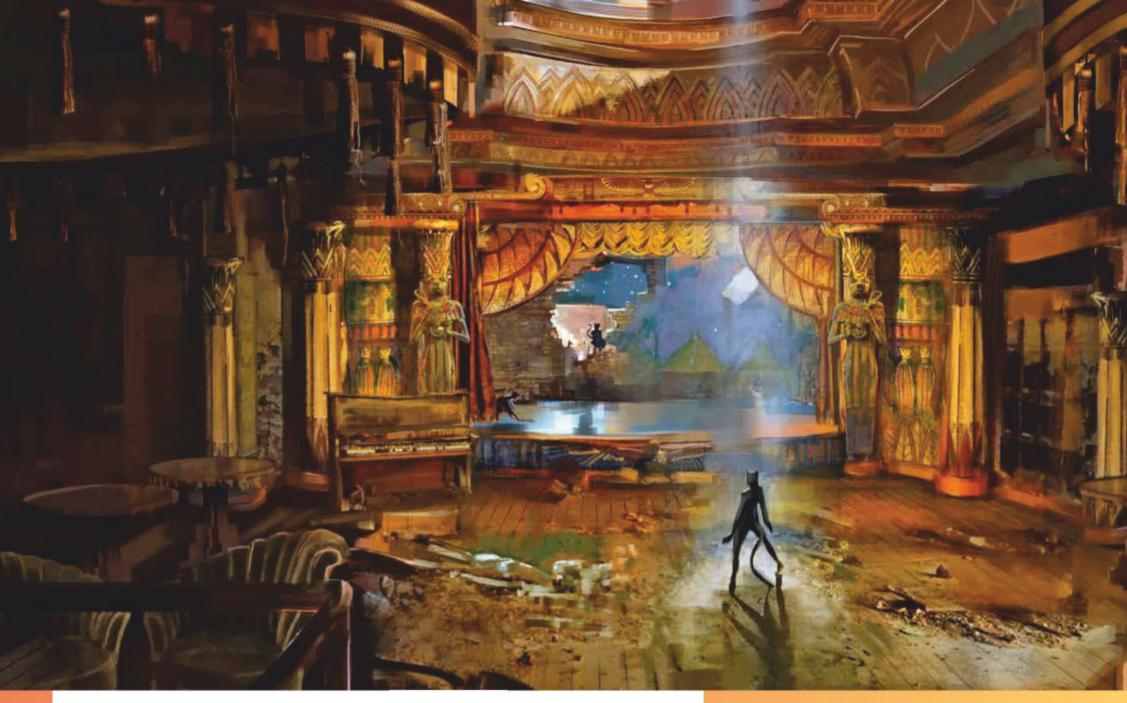
'human cat' look that isn't just Lycra and crazy make-up."

He didn't know if the world was ready for state-of-the-art anthropomorphic felines, but Tom Hooper was on a mission. He was going to herd some cats.

SIX YEARS LATER, in 2018, Hooper's vision was finally taking shape. Not only had he assembled a who's who of singing, dancing, rapping entertainers — including Idris Elba, Jason Derulo and Francesca Hayward — but he'd enrolled them all into 'cat school', workshops designed to break them down and systematically rebuild them as cats.

"We had this cat lady, who would come in and teach us about the main rhythms of the cat," explains Jennifer Hudson, who was cast as rejected glamour-cat Grizabella. "They studied cats, they were experts in their mannerisms. So as humans, we communicate with our eyes. But cats? They lead with their noses. If we like somebody, we may smile at them, but a cat will rub up against you or start purring. Some days, that would be the only thing we'd do."

This feline remodification academy proved an intense experience. "We all had to find our own cat," Hudson says sagely. Ballet dancer Hayward, whose role as shy audience



surrogate Victoria marks her acting debut, remembers, "There were definitely moments where I was pretending to be a cat and I'd think, 'How has my life turned out like this?' In a good way! We'd study videos and look at the anatomy of cats, just to try and understand how we could incorporate it into our work. But I had an advantage: cats are notoriously light on their feet, and that's what I do every day. Most people, when they jump, land on their heels, but I'm trained to land on my toes."

When the five-month shoot began at Leavesden Studios outside London, Hooper avoided green-screen as far as possible, instead constructing massive sets full of oversized furniture, the better for the actors to feel like they were frolicking around our world the way a cat might. Those sets included gargantuan alleyways and bicycles the height of a single-decker bus. For a huge set-piece taking place in a house, a hangar-sized studio was transformed into a cavernous dining room, and one key scene, taking place at Trafalgar Square, saw the famous bronze lions recreated at quadruple the size.

While the backdrops were largely done in-camera, the catification of the cast was a digital process, with special "digital fur" technology being deployed to fuzz up each performer. "You don't have to use motion capture, because you've got it all on camera," explains Hooper. "It's fascinating how in just a few years the choices have opened up — or in this case been pushed to open up — in order to tell this particular story."

Coming early on in the post-production process, the reaction to the trailer allowed the director to make changes. Though not

Above: More
concept art
by Eve Stewart.
Right: Taylor
Swift plays
elegant,
self-assured
feline
Bombalurina.

necessarily extreme ones — the footage might have surprised viewers but didn't lead to a Sonic-style rethink (the digital blue hedgehog's upsetting 'human teeth' led to the release being pushed back three months). "We'd only finished shooting in March, so all the visual effects [in the trailer] were at quite an early stage," explains Hooper. "Possibly there were, in the *extremity* in some of the responses, some clues in how to keep evolving [the production]. When you watch the finished film, you'll see that some of the designs of the cats have moved on since then, and certainly our understanding of how to use the technology to make them

work has gone up, too."

The director's conversation with *Empire* is a rare break for him; he is working as many hours in the day as he can physically manage. "It's seven days a week, for as long as I can stay awake, because I'm working with visual-effects teams in Adelaide and London and Montreal," he says. "Time-zone-wise, there's nothing stopping me working around the clock." He estimates that 2,500 people are working on the effects across London, India, Australia and Canada; how many of those were dedicated to grooming Ian McKellen's tail remains unknown.



to bottom:
Hayward shows
off her feline
dance moves:
Laurie Davidson
is magician cat
Mr Mistoffelees;
Sir lan McKellen
is, aptly, Gus The
Theatre Cat.







One film has been on Hooper's mind as he's conjured up his digital moggies, and it just happens to be the second-most successful one of all time. Ten years ago, James Cameron's *Avatar* created photo-real blue aliens. For his Jellicle epic, Hooper is pushing technology even further. "That ability to blend the real and the imaginary into a believable, coherent entity wasn't there," he says. "So James had to use virtual characters, based on performance capture. We're able to blend digital whiskers with the specificity of an actor's eyes, and what their mouth is doing."

It's complicated, fiddly stuff, but the meaning is simple: Rum Tum Tugger could be about to change the game.

LIKE JAMES CAMERON, Hooper is a man who doesn't give up easily. He has an otherworldly belief in what he's doing, even when it seems nobody else shares that belief. "What is risky can change depending on the outcome," he says, coolly. "When I took on *The King's Speech*, everyone at the time, bar one or two entities, turned down financing it. They said, 'Who is going to be interested in a stuttering king?"

As it turned out, a lot of people, enough to generate \$411 million in box office and four major Oscars. *Cats* is a wild card that could have an even greater pay-off. As all the hoopla raged outside his window, Hooper remained focused, remembering the exhilaration he felt when he first saw the musical, the joy when he listened to the cassette tape of *Cats* songs which played in his parents' car until the tape wore out, and the determination when he first decided to take the risk, on that Soho pavement seven years ago.

And where you might see silly creatures prancing about, he sees a tale that couldn't be more important, one that's evolved considerably in the move from stage to screen. "The story in the musical is pretty famous for being bleak — somebody could even argue non-existent," the director says. The new version, co-written by Hooper and Lee Hall (*Billy Elliot, Rocketman*), is deeper and more uplifting. "Everyone is competing for a new life. But the stakes are the highest levels of redemption and rebirth. Perhaps people will be surprised by how much emotion there ends up being."

So, hang on: could *Cats* be a film that changes the world? "We're living in a dark period politically," Hooper concludes. "I want to transport people away from that to a mad, fun world, and go on a joyous ride."

And with that mission statement, he bids goodbye to *Empire*, heading back into Abbey Road for a scoring session, on the final stage of his journey. If his instincts are correct, all the memes, jokes and Nicolas Cage Photoshops will soon be just a memory.

CATS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 26 DECEMBER



A GUIDE TO THE BIZARRE WORDS AND PHRASES THAT POP UP THROUGHOUT THE TALE

JELLICLE CATS

This phrase is used as if describing a particular cat tribe, but basically all cats are Jellicle cats as far as the musical and the poems it is based on are concerned. The term apparently comes from poet T.S. Eliot's infant niece trying to say "dear little" cats.

POLLICLE DOGS

If all cats are jellicle cats, all dogs are Pollicle dogs. And yes, the same baby niece tried to say "poor little" dogs and garbled it again.

Cute kid, or just incompetent speaker?

You decide. It doesn't matter much because dogs are presented only through cat mockery in this story.

JELLICLE BALL

Once a year, all the Jellicle cats assemble to make the 'Jellicle choice' (see below) and cut some rug — aka displaying their "terpsichorean" (dance) powers. A successful Jellicle Ball involves dazzling ballet routines and lengthy self-introductions.

JELLICLE CHOICE

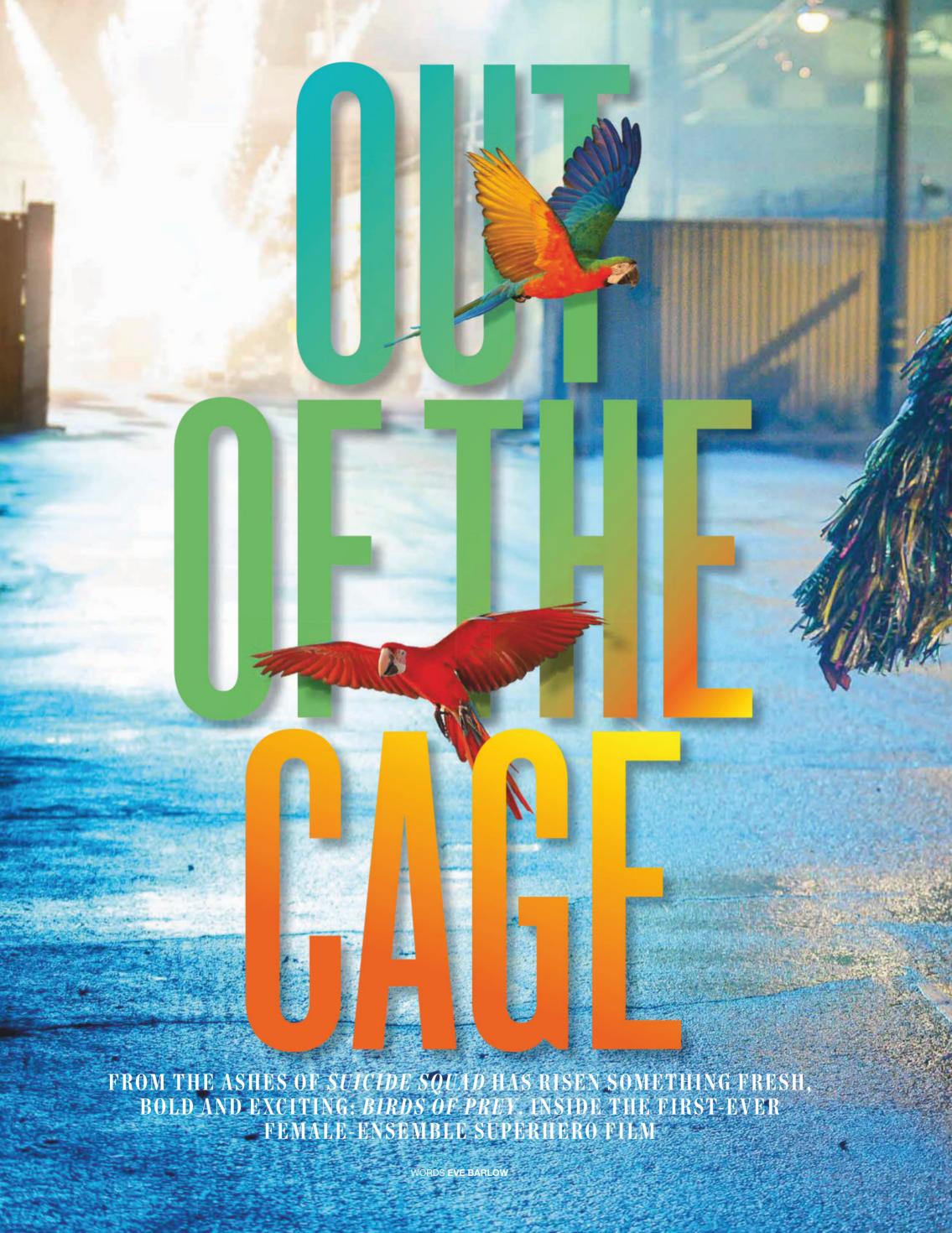
Each year, Old Deuteronomy (Judi Dench) chooses one cat to go to the 'Heaviside Layer' (see below), which means they will be reborn and "come back to different Jellicle life". Yes, our heroes are basically a death cult and this is their reaping.

THE HEAVISIDE LAYER

A layer of ionised gas between 90km and 150km above the Earth, if you're a scientist. For Jellicle cats, however, it is their heaven, where presumably they are greeted by Ceiling Cat from the old '00s meme and after-live happily ever after.

THE HIDDEN PAW

One of several nicknames for 'The Mystery Cat'
Macavity (Idris Elba), who is a sort of Jellicle
Satan. As his menacing look (sinister hat, yellow
eyes) suggests, he is a Bad Dude who threatens
Old Deuteronomy. He's also called the
'Napoleon Of Crime', and if that sounds familiar
it's because T.S. Eliot was a big Sherlock
Holmes fan and modelled him explicitly on
Professor Moriarty. HELEN O'HARA







Of Prey Robbie drove the process, picking Hodson to write the script, and breaking away from the genre's formula to actualise her squad.

It has proven cannily well-timed. In the three years since *Suicide Squad*, #MeToo and the Time's Up movement have encouraged Hollywood's women to stop holding their tongues. "It's such a great time in the culture to be telling these stories," says producer Sue Kroll. "The fact it's being done as such a big, populist, commercial undertaking with DC is just really exciting." The film seeks to tackle thoroughly 2020 questions. Who is Harley without the Joker? Who is the woman without the man? And how is she bolstered by the other badass women surrounding her?



THE ANSWERS LIE in the lengthily titled *Birds Of Prey: And The Fantabulous Emancipation Of One Harley Quinn.* "Emancipation" is the optimum word. On set, everyone is keen to emphasise that this movie is separate from *Suicide Squad*. Gone is the gratuitous violence. In its place is a movie about women, by women, for *everyone*. It's driven by the female gaze, right down to the choice of footwear. "If we veered towards a heel that you couldn't walk in we said, 'No!" says costume designer Erin Benach, who ensured the looks were fun but also pragmatic for all impending ass-kicking. Harley is DIY. She wears caution tape as an accessory. "Harley's the life of the party at all times. She can dance anybody into oblivion."

Even the structure is breaking DC ground. It's not macho — led neither by CG explosions nor a linear plot. "I was so desensitised to blowing up buildings," says Robbie. "I wanted to do something more contained." The Gotham we enter is not the Bat's Manhattan, but the grittier, scrappier Brooklyn or Queens. It's street-level. We get a peep into aspects of the city that we haven't as yet been privy to. The Black Mask club, for instance, is like a private members' bar; a secret society where lowlifes and fat cats meet, and where Harley shows off her dance moves. Yan explains that the narrative is designed to echo the disorganised chaos of Harley's mind; to feel like a tale breathlessly told to you by a girlfriend. It jumps around everywhere. You hang on to its threads hoping it'll make sense in the end. "It's Harley's brain. It captures a crass humour women have," the director says.

Above: Robbie flies again as agent of chaos Harley Quinn.

Below right: Director Cathy Yan laughs with her star/producer on set. Bottom: Ewan McGregor (or is that Bono?!) slicks up as Roman Sionis/Black

When we meet Harley, she's freshly broken up with the Joker. He dumped her. "She's trying to own it," says Robbie. "That felt like a real way to deal with a break-up. It's not clean and easy to be a strong woman. It's so hard." Harley's heart is trashed as she's picking her life back up. Her rent-controlled apartment is above a Chinese restaurant. "It's a bit of a mess," says Kroll. *Empire* gets a peek at a one-bed flat filled with the candy wrappers Harley's been eating her feelings through, and video cassettes from cartoon binges (Bugs Bunny, etc). There's a onesie decorated with sad smileys on the settee. And there's a pet hyena called Bruce (a back-handed nod to the Bat?). "Harley is a lover of unusual pets," laughs Kroll.

In a minute-long sizzle reel shown to *Empire*, the humour and freshness pops immediately. Harley has cut her bangs. She's crying her rivers. "She's a bit more Courtney Love than Debbie Harry this time," says Robbie. Co-dependent and addicted to the Joker, she's hit rock bottom. "She says, 'I'm single, I don't need him, fuck that guy.' But if the Joker were to text her, 'You up?' she'd run. She'd fall to pieces."

Harley has to prepare to find out who she is without her demented ex-boyfriend. And without his protection, she also has to contend with everyone in Gotham who is now after a pound of her flesh. Robbie was keen to explore the mental-illness aspect, and Harley's childlike nature. For instance: she sleeps with a stuffed beaver — Beavy.











"I sleep with my bunny that I've had since birth," confesses Robbie. "Why does Harley feel attached to a toy? People attach themselves to childhood things when they haven't dealt with the past."

BIRDS OF PREY may be a day in the life of Harley, but crucially it's not all about her. One woman can't tell every woman's story. "Harley on her own is like a kid in an empty playground. Where is the fun?" asks Robbie. The DC world is full of amazing female characters to mine, and the choices here are an intentional move to diversify the women as much as possible. During her path of self-discovery, Harley meets a young girl — Cassandra 'Cass' Cain (played by Ella Jay Basco). Cass has a bounty on her head courtesy of nightclub owner Roman Sionis, aka Black Mask (Ewan McGregor), and his henchman Victor Zsasz (Chris Messina) — a serial killer with scars all over his body to represent his kills. Harley discovers that the other Birds Of Prey are all invested in Cass's protection and have gripes with Roman. They're forced together reluctantly.

It's no mean feat that this is the first female ensemble superhero venture. The diversity in age and background of the female cast has allowed for a myriad women's perspectives. In the DC series, the Birds are a team of female superheroes with a revolving-door policy. Robbie's adaptation

chooses the most motley of crews: Black Canary (Jurnee Smollett-Bell), Huntress (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) and Gotham's under-appreciated detective Renee Montoya (Rosie Perez). They don't get along. "I didn't want Charlie's Angels," says Yan. "I didn't want them to look like they were in a sorority." It aspires to be a more realistic look at complex female relationships. The Birds are each emancipating themselves from something distinct. Unkeless puts it best: "The act of making the movie has been a layer of manifesting what the movie is about: unique, smart, talented women who come to work with one another."

So without further ado, let's meet the Birds. First up: Black Canary. We first get introduced to her as Dinah Lance — a ferocious street fighter whose mother's demise left Dinah orphaned. "Dinah's closed off from the world and wants nothing to do with cleaning up Gotham. She's like, 'Fuck Gotham,'" says Jurnee Smollett-Bell. Dinah also doesn't like Harley. "She thinks Harley is annoying as fuck." Eventually she comes around. Smollett-Bell was forced to reckon with the question of why women are in denial of their potential. Her emancipation comes when she stops getting in her own way. The rigorous martial arts training almost got in Smollett-Bell's way. "It was so gruelling!" she laughs. "It was important to push my body beyond. That's what Dinah has done."

Cass is a 12-year-old street urchin in baggy clothes that hide all of her stolen wares. Unlike the origin story of the comics, Cass isn't taken under the wing of original Batgirl Barbara Gordon, but Harley. Their dynamic is that of sisters. Robbie became a mentor to 13-year-old Basco off-screen, too. This is her first feature. "This movie will change the industry forever," says Basco, proud to represent the Asian community

alongside Yan. The casting of Rosie Perez as Renee Montoya — a gay police officer who has forever been overlooked and dismissed — gives the group a further dimension. Perez brought her experience as a Puerto Rican "quasi-straight" woman growing up in poverty to Renee, in addition to her experience of HIV/AIDS activism. "She's trying to understand that it's not just where you fight, it's how you fight," she says of Renee. "Sometimes you have to get off your own soapbox, understand that you're not alone in the struggle, that you need a team. Renee has been screaming and swallowing that anger, then waking up with a hangover, not understanding how that got in her way."

The final piece in the puzzle is the militant Huntress, dressed in fishnets, leather, and with braids in her hair. Born Helena Rosa Bertinelli, she is the daughter of a powerful Mob boss. As a child, her family were murdered in front of her. She trains to become an assassin to avenge their deaths. Next on her list? Roman. Mary Elizabeth Winstead has always been reluctant to act in a comic-book franchise for fear of being oversexualised. "This was momentous," she says of working with so many women. "It's something that was denied to me for so long. It just wasn't on the table."



DESPITE THE GANG mentality, Harley remains isolated in one aspect: she's not a hero like the other Birds. There is no grand arc in which she becomes a changed person. "She's not a good guy, she's never gonna save the day," says Robbie. She's a catalyst of chaos. Robbie concedes that come the end credits Harley at least feels "a little less shit about herself". She is almost over the Joker. The task of pushing her story on is physically and emotionally draining, even without the task Robbie has of producing the film. Harley is constantly stimulated. "She can react in a million different ways," says Robbie. "It's knackering. Yesterday we were all having lunch, and a cake came past and I said, 'Ooh, cake!' And someone went: 'How much of Harley do you let stay around?!"

Four years ago, nobody was asking for a *Birds Of Prey* movie. Now it's exactly what the unhinged doctor ordered. "It's funny," says Robbie. "The #metoo movement changed the relevancy of every project. It either became very timely or it became totally inconsequential. It's fortuitous that this movie has become important. Four years ago that's not what motivated it — I just wanted to hang out with a girl gang."

And it's already proving painful to say goodbye. That's why Robbie is considering sequels or solo spin-off films for the characters. She says she hadn't felt at home on a set like that since the three years she spent doing *Neighbours* in Australia. "I guess what you should take away from all this is that *Birds Of Prey* was just like being on Ramsay Street." She laughs once more. Perhaps for Harley Quinn and her version of Gotham, good neighbours have become good friends. •

BIRDS OF PREY: AND THE FANTABULOUS EMANCIPATION OF ONE HARLEY QUINN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 6 FEBRUARY Bong Joon Ho, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in the Viceroy L'Ermitage Presidential Suite, Los Angeles, on 1 November 2019.

SUSFE NSE



COMPARISONS TO HITCHCOCK. BUT HIS FILMS ALSO

HAVE A STRONG SOCIAL MESSAGE, AND HIS

LATEST, PARASITE, IS NO EXCEPTION

WORDS AL HORNER PHOTOGRAPHY ART STREIBER ONG JOON HO has set movies in monster-infested sewers, on trains travelling through post-apocalyptic blizzards, and in abattoirs awash with the blood of giant pigs. Look a little closer, though, and the South Korean director's films actually all take place in a single setting.

"In my films, you really see the

people on the bottom rungs," says the filmmaker. "Normal human beings in conditions in which they can no longer act human, in situations where they become treated like ghosts." Bong's heroes tend to live at the foot of a ladder that's impossible to climb. The people far above, meanwhile, are incompetent idiots, living lives of luxury, oblivious to the desperate, daily struggle of those beneath them. It's these strugglers' stories that Bong has dedicated his career to telling.

Parasite, Bong's latest razor-sharp, darkly comic social satire, pushes this concept to new extremes. The less you know about it going in, the better: all you need to know is that it's thrillingly unpredictable, the film scuttling between genres like cockroaches between floorboards. It's part slapstick comedy, part home-invasion horror, part family drama and part pulse-pounding heist film — think Ocean's Eleven if Clooney and co, instead of attempting to steal millions amid the bright lights of Las Vegas, were simply trying to scam their way out of the gutter, into minimum-wage jobs. "It's a story about capitalism," its maker shrugs and smiles, running a hand through his soft, black mop of hair.

Empire greets Bong in Beverly Hills, a place that epitomises the class divide at the heart of his work: on the palm tree-adorned street outside the hotel where we've arranged to meet, members of LA's 60,000-strong homeless population hold cardboard signs up at passing sports cars, hoping their wealthy drivers might stop to give them change. For our photoshoot, a hotel room has been set up to resemble the fancy, modernist house in which much of Parasite takes place. "Uh-oh! You blocked up the hole to downstairs, right?" Bong jokes as the shoot begins, referencing a passageway in his film that contains a dark secret. It's no surprise to find the 50-year-old in a playful mood. Parasite, after all, another masterpiece from the Daegu-born director, has met with a wave of acclaim, proving a runaway cult smash and his biggest success by far.

In May, the film was named the first Korean film to win Cannes' prestigious Palme d'Or. Since then, it's shattered records for a foreign-language film in America, with the movie expected to surpass \$20 million at the US box office. It's also predictably gone down a storm in the director's homeland, where previous social thrillers like *The Host* and breakout thriller *Memories Of Murder* elevated him to rock-star status long ago, way before his Cannes triumph. After *Parasite*, his long list of admirers, dubbed 'the BongHive' online



and including many famous fans (see sidebar on p87), is now bigger than ever.

"I didn't expect it all," says Bong of the film's success, speaking via a translator and sounding a little bemused. Who can blame him? Mainstream audiences don't normally bug out over films like *Parasite*, a twisty Korean-language meditation on class inequality that's somehow ended up one of the most-talked about movies of the last 12 months. Why has it resonated so powerfully with audiences around the world? And how exactly did he dream up the film's distressing message and imagery, both of which infest your brain for days after you watch it? The answer's simple, Bong laughs: "I lived it."

PARASITE STARTS SIMPLY enough. The Kims, led by bumbling patriarch Kim Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho), are an impoverished family who spend their days folding pizza boxes for cash in a crummy basement apartment. They live in squalor, pissed on — literally and figuratively — by a world that views them as no better than the roaches they share their home with. So when word reaches them of a wealthy family, the Parks, who need a tutor for one of their pampered children, they smell an opportunity. A plan is hatched that will allow all of them to worm their way into the Parks' home and onto their payroll. A series of dark discoveries and farcical fights later, it all unravels violently.

Bong can relate. Well, sort of. In the late 1980s, while enrolled at Yonsei University in the Sinchon neighborhood of Seoul, the budding filmmaker used to tutor children for extra cash. "The nature of that job lets you enter somebody's home and witness their private lives. I wouldn't go as far as to call it a guilty pleasure, but there is a certain enjoyment that comes with seeing the interiors of these people's lives," he confides. When it was time for him to move on from his post as tutor for one particularly wealthy, well-paying family, a thought occurred to him: why not recommend a friend take over? This idea then mutated in his mind. "I never put this into practice because, well, I'm not a con artist," he giggles. "But I did

Above: Director Bong Joon Ho with Tilda Swinton on the set of 2017's *Okja*. **Below:** Ko Asung in breakout hit *The Host* (2006). **Bottom:** John Hurt, Chris Evans and Jamie Bell in 2013's troubled production, *Snowpiercer*.





think about it: how a group might infiltrate a family home like that."

For years, this idea festered in his subconscious, as Bong went about realising his childhood dream of becoming a filmmaker. The son of an industrial designer father and professional housewife mother, he had grown up in Daegu devouring as many movies as he could. Spielberg thrill rides like Close Encounters Of The Third Kind and Jaws were particular favourites. "The films that really flow in my bloodstream are the American genre films I watched growing up," he says today. "I watched a lot of American crime, action and sci-fi." As he learned to make movies himself in the early '90s, completing a two-year program at the Korean Academy of Film Arts, he found himself gravitating towards a brand of cinema that at once paid tribute to American film and culture, and also retaliated fiercely against it, savagely skewering its capitalist values.



"I love to take the conventions of American genre films, then brutally break them," he explains. This was especially apparent in 2006's The Host, Bong's international breakout success. After making his name in 2003 with crime drama *Memories Of Murder*, about cops on the hunt for South Korea's first serial killer, The Host saw him turn his ambitions towards an Americanstyle monster movie that would harbour a sly anti-American message. Hidden inside this Godzilla-style flick were metaphors for the Bush administration's reckless foreign policy and misused military might. The film's monster, a mutated fish creature with a sweet tooth for children, is created in the movie after a US officer orders 200 bottles of formaldehyde be dumped down a drain leading into the Han River. (As with *Parasite*, the idea came from personal experience: after reading in a newspaper about a real-life formaldehyde incident, Bong cast his mind back to his adolescent days staring into the Han River, daydreaming about the mysteries it might contain.)

That movie made a decent \$2.2 million at the American box office, impressed one Quentin Tarantino (who promptly listed *The Host* as one of his favourite movies released since the early '90s) and put Bong firmly on Hollywood's radar.

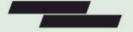
After another South Korean hit in 2009, the astounding *Mother*, Bong carried his anticapitalist warnings into his first English-language movie, *Snowpiercer*. It didn't exactly go to plan. Bitter fights between Bong and distributor Harvey Weinstein threw the Chris Evans-starring satire's release into disarray, delaying the movie and ultimately sabotaging its box-office impact (the director was given the choice between a wide release of Weinstein's cut and a very limited release of his cut; Bong chose the latter). Critics lauded his tale of the last human survivors of a climate apocalypse all the same, championing its powerful commentary about the gulf between what Bong calls "the haves and have-nots".

"I'm very focused on the human condition," says the director, explaining the forces within him that keep him returning to the subject of inequality in his movies (his *Snowpiercer* follow-up, 2015 drama *Okja*, explored similar territory, this time through the prism of animal rights). "The environment around humans, the basic level of decency we should keep. I grew up in a middle-class family but went to school in a neighbourhood where the gap between rich and poor was very high. Some kids lived in very fancy apartments. There was one kid, on the other hand, who lived in a greenhouse in a farm field, whose classmates avoided him because he supposedly smelled. I was close to him. He used to come to my house."

Bong grew up sandwiched between people at opposing ends of the economic spectrum like this — exposed from an early age to the ways the rich might discriminate against the poor, the invisible hierarchies that offer advantages to those who have money and punish those who don't. Six movies into a glittering career, at the top of the economic ladder himself, you might have thought Bong would be done drawing attention to the injustices of that system in his movies. But he wasn't.



Instead, after *Okja*, he returned to his memories of tutoring, for that family with seemingly infinite riches. He sat down at his laptop and, over a whirlwind two-month writing period, something new tumbled out. *Parasite* was born.



BONG NEEDS TREATMENT. At least, that's what his doctor once advised him. "He told me I should be on medication for two things: my anxiety and my compulsions," the director reveals. He laughs, because these two things are what he credits with for the creation of the beautifully constructed visual world of *Parasite*. "I'm very obsessive. I obsess over getting the exact image that I want and I can't relax until I have that image in my hands. And because of my anxiety, I'm crazy meticulous in my preparation process. That's the only way I can not panic."

The meticulousness that went into *Parasite* was next-level, even by Bong's standards. Rather

than hire an existing expensive-looking house to film the scenes set in the Park family home, he and production designer Lee Ha Jun designed and constructed their very own lavish hilltop home, so they could imbue every inch of it with metaphor and meaning. When it came to the Kim family's home, they created an entire floodable street. "We built their entire neighbourhood in a giant swimming pool. I don't think that had been done before," he says. Every element required hands-on attention from Bong — all the way down to creating convincing sewage water for a scene viewers won't forget in a hurry. "We had to think of the density and viscosity, to make sure it looks real. And at the same time, for our actors, I was thinking it'd be great if they all didn't get a skin disease from it," he jokes.

When they finished, Bong and his team of collaborators had no idea what they had just created, what exactly they had on their hands. "As a filmmaker, I'm always concerned whether my film will break even. I had a lot of worries about *Parasite*. On one hand, this film is very fun.



Above and below: Song Kang-ho as struggling Kim Ki-taek in *Parasite*; The character's children, Ki-jung (Park So-dam) and Kim-woo (Choi Woo-sik), pose for bathroom selfies. **Bottom:** Bong and *Parasite* winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes this year.





But it's also very raw and realistic, which can make people uncomfortable." He and his team had created a profound, elegant thriller that broke new cinematic ground and blurred the barriers between horror and hilarity. "It's very natural to me to have two or three emotions mixed in one scene — or even one frame," Bong laughs. But would its unflinchingly honest depiction of the dog-eat-dog dynamic of capitalism cut too close to the bone for audiences who live that experience daily? "There were definitely concerns," he admits, playing with the pieces of a chess set built into the table we're sat at.

He needn't have worried. *Parasite*'s reception has been so overwhelmingly positive, there are even whispers of Best Picture and Best Director

nominations at 2020's Oscars. A win would be unprecedented: no Korean film has ever been nominated for Best Foreign Language Film, let alone Best Picture. "I think right now I'm very unsure," he says. "But I never imagined I would win the award at Cannes, either."

He's similarly tight-lipped about his next projects. Bong has two films currently in development — one a Korean-language drama shrouded in mystery, the other an Englishlanguage offering inspired by a 2016 news article that he's looking to shoot in London. "Sorry, but it's confidential," is all he'll say on the matter of those.

Whatever comes next, it's unlikely Bong will abandon the themes of inequality and capitalism that he's spent over 15 years engaging with in his movies. Maybe that's the reason *Parasite* is striking such a chord: the worse the problem gets, the more global audiences crave narratives that sum up and process capitalism's capacity for cruelty.

"Look at Jordan Peele's *Us*," Bong exclaims, drawing attention to another 2019 movie about a financially comfortable family who meet their disadvantaged mirror images, with distressing consequences. Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* covers similar thematic ground, and there's echoes of the movie's eat-the-rich message in Todd Phillips' *Joker*, too, he points out. "All those great filmmakers, it's not as if we decided to form an alliance to interrogate this issue. It happened naturally and I think it's easy to understand why. Creators always reflect their worlds and the times that we live in."

Parasite's popularity is bittersweet for Bong. "When I first created the film, I felt it was a very Korean story full of Korean nuances and context. I'm coming to realise that wasn't the case," he says, reflecting on how universal its tale of systemic poverty is proving to be. The local problems he wanted to distil into Parasite are, the film's resonance around the planet seems to suggest, also problems worldwide.

Until the ladder between rich and poor becomes easier to climb, or is done away with altogether, don't expect Bong Joon Ho to stop doing what he does best. Making movies about those at the bottom, the ghosts looking up from the gutter.

KING BONG

He's the director every director worships, as these plaudits prove



1. QUENTIN TARANTINO

In 2013, Tarantino turned up to Busan Film Festival, explaining to reporters he'd come on a whim "to hang out with Bong". Describing *Memories Of Murder* and *The Host* as "masterpieces", he added, "Of all the filmmakers in the last 20 years, Bong has something that [1970s] Spielberg had." Which probably helped ease the blow for QT when *Parasite* pipped *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood* to the Palme d'Or this year.

2. GUILLERMO DEL TORO

The Pan's Labyrinth mastermind was the first to congratulate Bong on his Parasite triumph at Cannes. "Rarely have I been as delighted by an award — a truly deserving filmmaker and a great guy [to] boot!" the director wrote on Twitter, where he's regularly singing the Korean's praises and debating his finest work. "Everybody loves The Host but [Memories Of Murder] is pristine," he wrote in 2015.

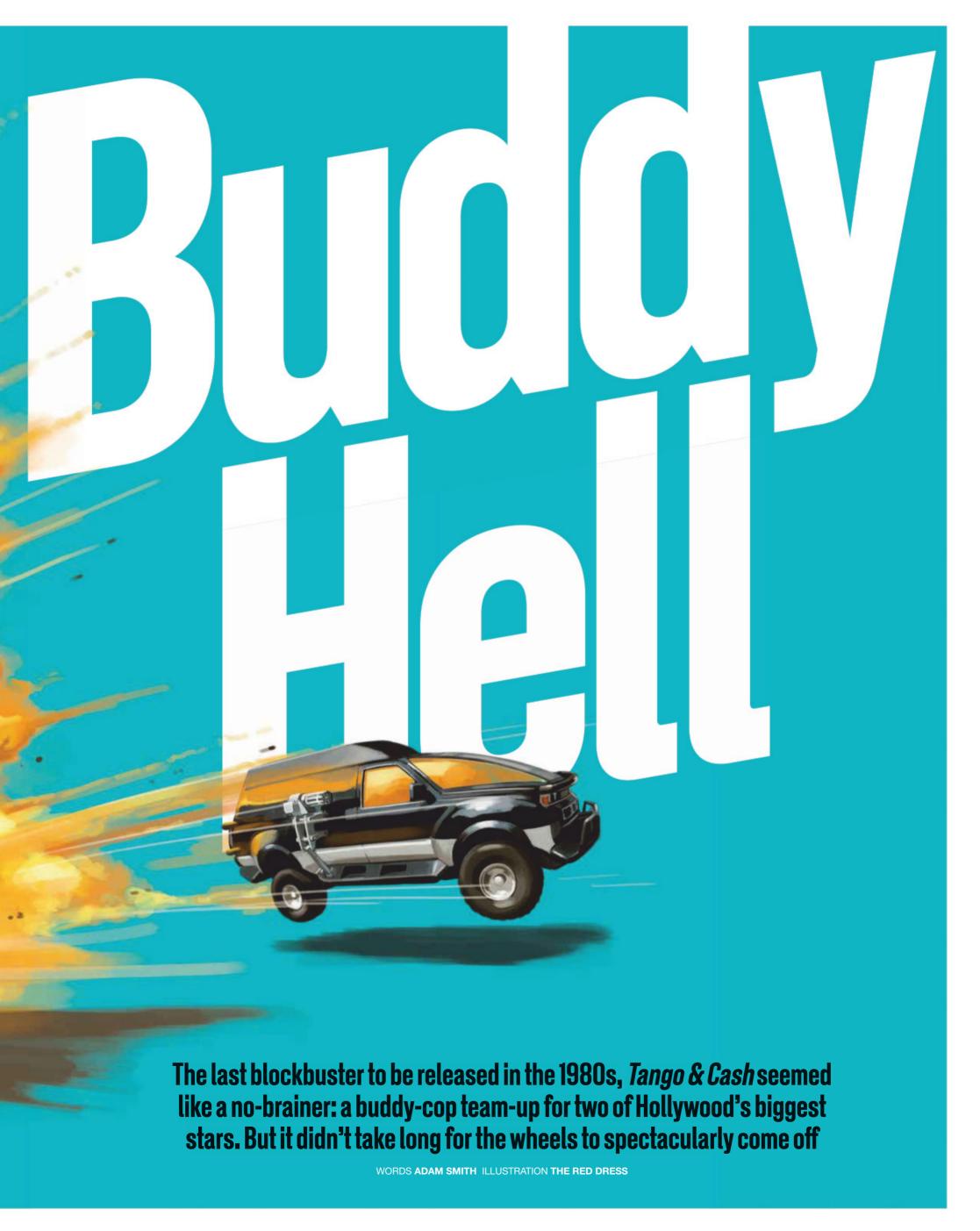
3. ARI ASTER

"This film is astounding," the Midsommar director said of Parasite earlier this year, going on to call Bong and his film "peerless right now in genre storytelling. Dizzyingly efficient, funnier than anything, totally bananas, and deeply deeply sad." Such was Aster's admiration for Bong's latest, he wrote an entire essay for Film Comment unravelling its brilliance.

4. THE SAFDIE BROTHERS

"Don't ask questions, don't read about it, just see it," the *Uncut Gems* director duo implored followers on Twitter earlier this year. "Director Bong and his incredible cast will use your mind as a host as they show you how absurd our invisible rules are." A host, you say, Josh and Benny? See what you did there, fellas.







MID-SUMMER, 1989. Inside the offices of Hollywood mega producers Peter Guber and Jon Peters, a production meeting is in full swing.

"I don't care if it fucking farts, I want Peter to fucking shoot it!" Jon Peters screams at line producer Larry Franco, referring to British second-unit director Peter MacDonald. "Whatever it is, action or dialogue, I don't care. You gotta get Peter to shoot it!"

"I hired you to be the policeman," yells Peters. "The *fucking policeman*! You gotta figure it out! You gotta figure out how to make this work!"

"Jon..."

Welcome to the daily hellscape that is the life of Larry Franco, line producer on *Tango & Cash*. The grunt of the producing fraternity, a line producer's role is to supervise the day-to-day running of the project, planning the logistics of the complex, expensive operation that is a Hollywood movie.

And on *Tango & Cash*, as Franco was discovering, it also involved being yelled at. A lot.

"Tango & Cash was the most screwed-up show I ever worked on," Franco tells Empire. He pauses, then adds, "And I worked on Apocalypse Now."

RELEASED ON 22 December 1989, Tango & Cash was the last Hollywood movie of the 1980s, and the decade that didn't so much forget taste as ball-gag it, tie it to a gurney and torment it with pliers, couldn't have chosen a more appropriate movie with which to make its exit. It was, it is, one of the most deliriously crazy studio movies of all time. Nominally a buddy-cop movie in the Lethal Weapon vein, it departs whatever rails it was ever on almost immediately, with an opening sequence in which Sylvester Stallone stops a speeding tanker packed with cocaine with nothing but a pistol and a quip. "Fuck you!" a drug goon declares. "I prefer blondes," is Stallone's reply. The repartee is typical of the film's otherworldly dialogue, which is composed almost entirely of half-baked zingers and enthusiastic snark. The scene concludes with Stallone declaring, "Rambo's a pussy!"

Meanwhile, villain Jack Palance acts in a wholly different movie, one playing, it seems, entirely in his head, occasionally sniffing rats and delivering lines such as, "Ray Tango! How he loves to dance! He waltzes in and takes all my drugs, and then tangoes back out again!" Stallone dons specs and plays it intellectual. Kurt Russell wears a dress. And all the while Harold Faltermeyer's synth score twangs and whines, a strange anthem to weird times. Jack Palance sniffs rats!



Tango & Cash began not as a screenplay but as a fevered notion — half story note, half deal memo — that flashed through the unique mind of legendary executive Jon Peters.

"I got a call from my then-agent at CAA [the Creative Artists Agency]," screenwriter Randy Feldman tells *Empire*. "He said, 'You should go over to Guber-Peters. Jon has this idea about two cops and one gets involved with the other one's sister. It's kind of like *The Quiet Man*."

The IMDb's plot summary of *The Quiet Man*, in which John Ford directed John Wayne in 1952, is as follows. "A retired American boxer returns to the village of his birth in Ireland, where he finds love." If there ever was a scene in *The Quiet Man* in which John Wayne shoots a tanker full of cocaine, it ended up on Ford's cutting-room floor. Feldman suspected that whatever was fermenting in Jon Peters' imagination was unlikely to be anything like *The Quiet Man*.

"It did seem like something was off," says Feldman. Nevertheless, he went to meet Peters and asked him what was on his mind. "Jon got kind of angry," he remembers. "He yelled 'What, you've got no ideas? Why are you wasting my fucking time?" Jon is a very volatile, kind of difficult guy. He can have a single conversation





Top right: 'Gabe' Cash (Kurt Russell) and 'Ray' Tango (Sylvester Stallone). **Above, top to bottom:** Cash in drag with Katherine 'Kiki' Tango (Teri Hatcher), Tango's younger sister; Cash, Kiki and Tango take cover in the desert; "Nice hair!" Kiki looks on admiringly at Cash's splendid mullet.



with you that ranges from, 'You motherfucker, I'm going to kill you, you'll never work again,' to, 'Hey, we're partners, I love you!'"

Finally, Peters remembered that it was he who had called the meeting. "He pitched me this thing that was rich cop/poor cop, East/ West side. They pal up, they go to jail. The idea didn't seem that exciting to me. We'd already had *Lethal Weapon...* but there's this idea of one-upmanship between them that I found interesting. But what really turns out is that he wants to put Stallone and Schwarzenegger in the same picture." Indeed, Schwarzenegger would circle the project briefly. After a brief time with Patrick Swayze attached (he left to star in *Roadhouse*), the role finally went to Kurt Russell.

As for the director, Feldman was expecting Peters to name one of the rosters of action-helmers who had refined the '80s action flick to a titanium edge: McTiernan, Harlin, de Bont. Instead, Peters informed Feldman that the director would be Andrei Konchalovsky. "So I was flown to Paris to meet Konchalovsky," says the writer. "I found him at the Molière Theatre doing Ibsen, so, you know, it immediately seemed like he was an odd choice to do this."

Konchalovsky was indeed an odd choice. A respected auteur and collaborator with the



"The happiest guy I saw on set when I visited was the DoP. And he'd just been fired."

RANDY FELDMAN SCREENWRITER

legendary Andrei Tarkovsky in his native Russia, he had made a handful of films in Hollywood afterwards but had only had one Englishlanguage hit, *Runaway Train*, from a screenplay by Akira Kurosawa. Nevertheless, the two hit it off. "He is this very bright guy, very intelligent and erudite. But he was wrapped up in this idea of almost making light of the kind of iconic hero that Stallone was. I mean, he had this idea of Stallone climbing up this huge phallic structure during the prison escape. It was almost a subversive, subtextual agenda he had for the movie."

But if Feldman had concerns about the director, he kept them to himself. And anyway, by the time 'The Set Up', as it was then titled, was midway through shooting in the autumn of 1989, it was doing a pretty good job of deconstructing itself.

THINGS HAD BEGUN to go awry from the start. It quickly emerged that almost nobody was entirely happy with Feldman's screenplay. "The actors were getting along great but [with the crew] there was a lot of groaning and dissatisfaction. Andrei was unhappy very soon into the shoot,"

says Feldman. "Actually the happiest guy I saw on set when I visited early on was the DoP, and he'd just been fired." (Barry Sonnenfeld, who shot for only a few days.)

Overseeing the second unit was British crew member Peter MacDonald. "Andrei was an odd choice," MacDonald tells *Empire*. "I think he thought he was making an art-house piece. But that wasn't what was on the cards. And, of course, he was Russian. I don't think he ever really understood the buddy-cop *Lethal Weapon*-style film."

Amid the daily chaos of the production, there were four versions of *Tango & Cash* being shot. There were the remnants of Randy Feldman's darker, more realistic tale; there was Andrei Konchalovsky's critique of the very idea of a Hollywood action movie; there was Jon Peters' increasingly gonzo comedy flick; and there was whatever Sylvester Stallone, an Oscar-winning screenwriter himself for *Rocky*, and thus famously happy to rewrite anyone, came up with during his lengthy sessions at the keyboard in his trailer every morning.

In the middle of it all, Larry Franco valiantly tried to hold the show together. "It was pretty much the most chaotic experience of my life," he recalls. "I was waving my hands saying, 'This is out of fucking control!' And nobody's listening. Jon Peters is running around, showing up on set in his tennis outfit, just off the court, in his big Rolls-Royce, or whatever the fuck he's driving that day. I've never experienced anything like that since."

Barry Sonnenfeld wasn't the only early leaver. Daphne Ashbrook, who had been cast as Tango's sister, was let go midway through the shoot. "I had to reshoot the dance sequence with Teri [Hatcher] because they had employed another actress, and then decided it hadn't worked out," says MacDonald, whose second unit was now frantically shooting incomplete sequences that would normally have been covered by Konchalovsky's unit, which spent the mornings cooling its heels while Stallone reworked the screenplay.

And then there was the third act. Or rather, there wasn't. "We never really had an ending," says Feldman. "At one time, it was at an airport. Then at a compound. I remember one meeting when Larry and I were at Peter Guber's house in Beverly Park [in LA] where all the bigwigs lived. This is Friday, and we're due to start shooting the scene on Monday. Peter is, 'So, they get to the airport and they roar onto the Tarmac and... Well, we'll finish the meeting there.' I walked out with Larry and he said, 'Look, you gotta give me pages for Monday. I know where we're shooting but I don't know what we're shooting.' It was this completely crazy process."

The final straw for Feldman, though, would come with the film's nightclub sequence. A lightning bolt of inspiration hit Peters about how to further improve the already insane story. Cash was, he informed Feldman, going to escape the club in full drag, an idea pregnant, he declared, with zany comedic possibilities.

"I just said, 'You know, I don't really think that's very funny," Feldman remembers. "It wasn't really organic to the thing. I mean, it's not like we were making *Some Like It Hot* or something. Jon gave me all this, 'I'm gonna kill you,' stuff, so I went down to the set and told Kurt they wanted me to write a scene where he was in drag. He said, 'Well, I've done a lot of stupid things on film, but usually I don't do them on purpose.' There was a huge fight and they kind of said, 'Well, why don't you just go to Hawaii for a couple of weeks?""

Feldman would do no further work on the screenplay. As well as the ongoing rewrites he had completed no fewer than 11 drafts, though much of his work was changed. "I had no problem with Stallone, he was great to me. But he's got very definite ideas about what he wanted to do. Much of the dialogue attributed to me is actually Stallone's. It was a crazy situation." (The final title itself came from the star, who had once known a guy called Tango.)

The problem of the missing third act would finally resolve itself when Jon Peters found himself driving past one of the massive roadworks then plaguing the Los Angeles freeway. He was immediately smitten with the giant earthmovers carving their way through the landscape. Like a Golden Age studio head spotting a promising ingénue, he decided he would make them stars.

"He came in and told me, 'We need to get eight of them,'" recalls MacDonald. "I said, 'Jon, they're, like, half a million each. I can probably get you two.' So really we had to build the end sequence around those earthmovers."

Deciding to locate the scene in a quarry, MacDonald finally presented a beautifully lit model of the proposed set, complete with earthmovers, to Peters and [Warners production chief] Mark Canton.

"Spartacus!" said Canton and walked out.

Baffled, MacDonald followed him out of the room. "What do you mean,



"It was pretty much the most chaotic experience of my life."

LARRY FRANCO LINE PRODUCER

'Spartacus'?" he asked.

"I always say *Spartacus* when I'm impressed," replied Canton.

"I said, 'Mark, you have to remember in *Spartacus* they all got crucified."

Konchalovsky was, inevitably, the first to get nailed up. "I was shooting the

big fight at the prison and I got a call from the studio to go back to Warners immediately," remembers MacDonald. "I said, 'Well, I've got the two stars and 30 stuntmen.' They said, 'No, it's very important.'"

"I walked into the conference room and there's Jon Peters kind of grabbing hold of Larry and

yelling, 'I'm a fucking Valley boy! I'm gonna beat the shit out of you!'" remembers MacDonald. "I thought, 'Hmmm, this is a good meeting.""

Amid the chaos, Mark Canton informed Macdonald that they intended to fire Konchalovsky.

"But it's okay. We've got Al to take it over," Canton had said.

"And I said, 'Al who?'"
"Albert!" said Canton. "He's directing the Batman videos!"

"Perfect," said MacDonald.

IN FACT, ALBERT Magnoli was much more than a pop promo director. The director of the *Batdance* and *Partyman* music videos was by then also Prince's manager, and in a meeting at Warner Records when he got the call. "I was told there was a call from Mark Canton and I could take it in the other room," Magnoli remembers.

"We're having some trouble with *Tango* & *Cash*," Canton had said. "We want you to take over."

Magnoli asked how soon he would be needed. "Tomorrow," had been Canton's reply.

"It was Thursday," Magnoli remembers.
"I said that was impossible. By the earliest,
Monday." He started reading the screenplay
on Friday night. On Saturday morning he
called Canton.

"Mark," Magnoli said, "there's something wrong. There are only two acts, nothing after page 85. Who's going to get the third act done?"

"You are," Canton replied.

In the end, it turned out that Canton had found a man with exactly the right skillset to get Tango & Cash finished. Magnoli's first move was to bring screenwriter Jeffrey Boam onto the project, persuading the writer to work overnight. During the day he and the cast would shoot, from 10am on the dot, and discuss the next day's scenes as they filmed. "By two or three in the afternoon I would call Jeffrey with a punch list of what the next day's scenes would be. He would work overnight and then I would read in the car on the way to work the next day. That was the procedure from day one, and it allowed us to complete this enormously intense schedule that we needed to have completed by October at the latest."

"At first he seemed an odd choice," says Larry Franco. "But he had a lot of energy. He broke out the Steadicam and he's running around. We were gonna get it done."





Clockwise from bottom left: Cash, wishing he'd brought a jacket; Tango prepares to face down a tanker truck full of cocaine; Kurt and Sly go full John McClane; Crime lord Yves Perret (Jack Palance) looks for more rats to sniff; Cash hits the highway in true late-'80s style.

"We also needed an editorial army under one general," Magnoli says. "We needed a guy to come in and make decisions about how this thing is going to be shaped. And that's when Stuart Baird arrived."

"The studio wanted to know whether they had a picture or not," Baird, who would become one of Hollywood's legendary fixers, tells *Empire* from his Los Angeles home. "How much was missing? Did it make sense? I said the only way I'll know if we can make a film out of what has been shot is for me to sit in the cutting room and go through all the material."

What the editor watched was an alarming constellation of fragments: action sequences completed but missing framing dialogue, pieces of sequences without reaction shots, whole scenes MIA and little sign of anything beyond white space after page 85.

Tango & Cash was, then, a movie that seemed to be in the unconventional position of having been shot before it had been written. "They called me into a big meeting and I had to sit there at the head of the table in the conference room at Warner Bros. and tell them they hadn't got a picture," says Baird. "Which wasn't what they wanted to hear."

"My discussions with Stuart were very simple," remembers Magnoli. "'What do you need that you don't have? How quickly do you need it?' Finishing this movie took a village. The time frame just didn't allow for any ego. The time frame allowed for people to get together and get it done."

With Magnoli funnelling footage to Baird, and Baird furiously cutting, *Tango & Cash* just made its US release date of 22 December.

For Randy Feldman, as perhaps for everyone since, the experience of finally seeing the completed film was a disconcerting one. "I went with my agent to the premiere at the Grauman's Chinese [in Hollywood]," he recalls. "They played the first scene, which I realised I had nothing to do with. I was just kind of, 'Who wrote this?' There was some very odd stuff in there. I mean, I didn't write a scene in the prison shower with the soap. I was a young writer and you want the movie to be very close to the script you wrote. But there was a next time and a next time."

Feldman pauses. "There is one thing I'd finally like on the record, though," he says. "The rats. You should know that I had nothing to do with the rats."

THE FALL GUYS

BY DAN JOLIN

In 2011, Zack Stentz and
Ashley Edward Miller were
the hottest new screenwriting
team in Hollywood. Then they
disappeared. Eight years later, they
tell EMPIRE their cautionary tale;
revealing the tough reality of
a writer's life in Hollywood





cruel. On 8 June, the social-media monster's memory-dredging algorithm coldly dumped a particularly painful 'On This Day' at the top of Zack Stentz's feed. It was a story the screenwriter had shared eight years earlier, from industry website *Deadline*. Wrapped around a photo of Stentz and his writing partner, Ashley Edward Miller — all smiles, leaning on an incongruous red telephone box — the article proclaimed them as "Rising Scribes", whose sudden, recent success with *Thor* and *X-Men: First Class* heralded a glorious, A-list career.

The piece detailed all their big indevelopment projects: a high-budget disaster/action film for Skydance Productions; a juicy TV pilot for Fox; a cinematic remake of '80s show *The Fall Guy*; and a top-secret, major franchise script, also for Fox, mysteriously dubbed the 'Knight Project'.

As Stentz drily commented in a Twitter thread, "These guys must have been on top of the world and ready to conquer TV and features, right?" Wrong. Not one of those listed projects got in front of a camera, and it was five years before either he or Miller would receive their next credit. "Screenwriting," Stentz tweeted, "is not for the faint of heart."

Discovering what happened to them is not so much a matter of asking, "What went wrong?" It is more about scraping away Hollywood's bright, self-confident veneer to reveal the gnarly reality beneath. "There is a pressure to put out the idea that everything is success and we're always going from flawless victory to flawless victory," Stentz tells *Empire*. "But Hollywood careers are full of peaks and valleys that we rarely share with the rest of the world." Now, he thinks, it's time to share.

ACT I: SET-UP

Stentz and Miller met online in the mid-'90s, during the protean days of newsgroup Usenet. Their mutual love of *Star Trek* drew them to the same science-fiction-TV message board, and they struck up an email correspondence, soon realising they were both aspiring screenwriters.

Stentz was a journalist in California, who'd written for *Esquire*, *Sports Illustrated* and, for a stint, *Meat And Poultry*. Miller was based in the suburbs of Washington DC, a former school teacher currently penning technical proposals for a defence contractor. What they shared was the heart-on-sleeve passion of child-of-the-'80s geeks. When we meet, Stentz sports a T-shirt featuring Falcor, the white, hairy dragon from *The NeverEnding Story*. Miller, meanwhile, speaks to *Empire* from San Diego Comic-Con, where he's been participating in





panels about the best movies never made, the greatest films of 1989, and his personal favourite: Starship Smackdown.

Miller. Right: Frankie Muniz and Hilary Duff in Cody Banks.

"If Zack and I haven't always had the same point of view, it's always been a very compatible point of view," Miller says. "We started writing together because the writing life is lonely and difficult, and sometimes you just need a friend." In 2000, they landed their first-ever gig, in the TV writers' room of Gene Roddenberry's *Andromeda*.

The decade preceding their big *Deadline* splash was dominated by small-screen work: on UPN's *Twilight Zone* revival, *Terminator* spinoff *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* and highly regarded reality-blending drama *Fringe*. Before *Thor*, the only movie they'd authored was 2003 Frankie Muniz vehicle *Cody Banks*, a gig they secured because it required a quick write. "We said, 'We write six episodes of television a year. Three weeks? We can do that!" Miller laughs. "Our entire career feels like it's been a series of inadvisable bar bets. 'Yeah, hold my beer and watch *this!*"

It was their rep for swift turnarounds which, in late 2008, got them into a meeting room with Marvel Studios, to talk *Thor*. "They needed a script in a hurry, because then the film was scheduled for 2010," Stentz recalls.

It was a dream gig: a big franchise movie with a rising studio, about characters they loved. They also got to work with Kenneth Branagh, a particular thrill for Miller, as Branagh's *Henry V* had inspired him to take Renaissance Lit classes at college. "Who could ask for more than to find yourself sitting in a conference room with Kenneth Branagh, reading your script out loud?"

Their X-Men: First Class gig wasn't quite so

dreamy. When the pair were summoned to 20th Century Fox in 2010, the studio had a script that wasn't working and a release date that was a mere 14 months away. It was time for another inadvisable bar bet. "We convinced them we could write a new script in two weeks," says Stentz. And they did, logging what Miller calculated as 400 hours of work in ten days. "X-Men was wild, dude," he says. "I was half-insane by the time we dropped that first draft."

Thanks to a strange quirk of scheduling, *Thor* and *X-Men: First Class* were released within 28 days of each other, despite there being a year between the two writing jobs. After ten years of hard, keyboard-hammering graft, their moments had finally arrived: credits on two huge, successful movies, their agent's phone "ringing off the hook", interview requests...

Stentz and Miller were in London when the *Deadline* piece posted on 8 June 2011, there as guests at MCM Comic-Con. They knew it was coming, because they'd been asked for a photo, with Stentz's wife snapping the chuffed pair on a London street (hence the telephone box). Even so, it was an adrenalin rush to see the finished article. Stentz remembers the time well.

"We're walking around London and literally every billboard and every ad on the side of a bus is for either *Thor* or *X-Men: First Class*. That can make you a little full of yourself. I like to think I wasn't an outright douche-bag about the whole thing — we still flew economy class back to the States!"

The most important thing was to capitalise on the moment. "When you're in a position like that," Stentz continues, "you try and be strategic about it. We made choices that at the time seemed very savvy. We attached ourselves to some sure-thing movies and sure-thing TV shows. All of which turned out not to be such sure things."

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ACT II: CONFRONTATION

The first "sure thing" on Deadline's list was the untitled disaster movie for Skydance. Stentz's stepfather was a 20-year veteran of the Coast Guard and told him about a training video, titled Learn Or Burn, about how to fight a fire on a ship. "It seemed like such a fascinating and terrifying thing, I thought, 'Let's do something about a fire on an aircraft carrier," says Stentz. Blending The Poseidon Adventure and The Towering Inferno, it set its spectacular conflagration around a heist, with one of the firefighters leading a gang stealing pallets of cash intended to pay off Afghan warlords. The two writers attended San Diego's naval firefighting school for a couple of days, and spent three days on an aircraft carrier by way of research. But, says Stentz, "ultimately our bosses just weren't clicking with the movie, and it died a very quiet death."

Next down was their pilot for Fox TV, an adaptation of Lev Grossman's novel *The Magicians*. "Oh dude. Now *that* was



a disappointment," says Miller. Fox insisted it didn't want the show to just be "Harry Potter in college", so he and Stentz put together an "incredibly insane" pitch which was, "What if the Harry Potter kids graduated and it turned into Less Than Zero [Bret Easton Ellis' novel about disaffected college students]? Fox said, 'What the hell is this? We wanted Harry Potter in > college!" However, the Sci-Fi Channel (now Syfy) loved it, happily snapped it up, and soon the series was in pre-production. "[They] said to us, 'Think about the department heads you want to hire, this is going to go!" Stentz says. "And then it didn't."

According to Miller, while Sci-Fi's West Coast team was in love with the concept, the bigwigs in New York weren't convinced and killed it. The fact that *The Magicians* would eventually be made at Syfy in a different form offered no solace. "Nobody saw it coming," he says. "That was a tough day, because the world suddenly doesn't make sense for a little bit."

The collapse of their reboot of *The Fall Guy* wasn't much easier to handle. The original Lee Majors-starring show concerned a Hollywood stuntman who moonlighted as a bounty hunter, using his action-hero skills to save the real-world day. "Our script was much more like a film-noir mystery with a down-on-his-luck stuntman as the lead," explains Stentz. "We wanted to take the basic premise, but do something a little deeper and more interesting with it."

The pair powered through dozens of drafts. "It almost went three times," says Stentz. "At one point it was going to be Hugh Jackman, then Mark Wahlberg, and then The Rock — and the Rock version came closest to happening. Then he decided not to do it. And because he has six more movies lined up, it's no problem for him. But this project we had worked on for two-and-a-half years suddenly came crashing to a halt."

The final big project listed by *Deadline* was

the biggest by far. So big that, to this day, neither Stentz nor Miller is allowed to say much about it. However, Stentz does confirm that the untitled 'Knight Project' was in fact 20th Century Fox's hyper-ambitious 'X-Men Vs. Fantastic Four'.

"We were actually going to do that before we did *X-Men: First Class*, back in spring of 2010," he reveals. "Fox had a plan of simultaneously doing a hard reboot of both the X-Men and Fantastic Four universes by combining them into a shared universe." This unmade crossover epic drew on Marvel's *Civil War* storyline, involved a fight between Wolverine and Mister Fantastic, and teased a Skrull invasion. The theory goes, Fox needed

MILLER: "I GET OFFERED THE COOLEST SHIT IN THE WORLD."

this project as a backstop to retain the rights to all their characters in case *First Class* didn't do well. But after that film succeeded, the studio realised it could keep *X-Men* running with the new cast, then rebooted (with far less success) *Fantastic Four*.

Often, admits Miller, the frustration was hard to bear. "These scripts are our babies and we want our babies to grow up and be healthy and happy. But unfortunately in the screenwriting world, very often our babies get hit by buses." He laughs. "The buses are everywhere!"

For Stentz, self-doubt was the greatest enemy. "As the setbacks accumulate, it starts

to eat into you. The phone doesn't ring as often, the assignments you get put up for are a little less than they were, and you start to think, 'Okay, maybe it's me. Maybe I'm doing something wrong.'

However, the truth is, Stentz and Miller's post-2011 trauma is more the norm than the exception for feature screenwriters. "When you're working in the feature world, you are lucky if you get a movie produced," says Miller. "You can have a full, complete career and not have one produced credit. The screenwriter life is not what people understand it to be."

Miller seems admirably unscarred by it all. "It's gotta be about the work, man. And I get to do the coolest shit in the world, whether it gets made or not. It's like: 'Okay, cool. I just got paid a lot of money to write fan-fiction. Awesome!"

Stentz is rather more bruised. "It's tougher than it should be," he maintains. "There are a lot of people in the business of developing things for year after year, and throwing writer after writer at them. On one level, it's hard to complain too much, because you're being paid six figures each time. But it is demoralising, because you go into it as an artist who wants to reach an audience, and often you're not reaching that audience. Screenwriters are highly paid — at least when they're working — but they're lower on the totem pole than perhaps they ought to be in the feature world."

ACT III: RESOLUTION

The main casualty of Stentz and Miller's Development Hell half-decade was, well, Stentz and Miller. In 2015, the pair mutually agreed to end the partnership. "We were evolving in different directions," says Stentz. "Ultimately we decided it was better to dissolve the writing partnership and remain friends than the other way around."



Above: Not your average summer camp in Stentz's *Rim Of The World*. Right: Miller's latest writing credit is for the Netflix series *Black Sails*, starring Toby Stephens.

Miller had, he says, "hit peak ray gun", while his partner was keen to stick with science-fiction. "It was very amicable," he says, "which makes it sound like a divorce. I guess it kind of is. But we still talk and text and sit next to each other at our kids' swim-meets. We just became different writers."

Soon after the split, they each received their first credit since X-Men: First Class (Stentz on CW's The Flash, Miller on Black Sails), and today they're both active on a variety of projects. Miller is working on two features (he can't say which), while Netflix, he says, "handed me an animation show". Stentz also has a couple of animation shows in the works, including Jurassic World spin-off Camp Cretaceous, plus a possible sequel to his recent Netflix kids' sci-fi adventure Rim Of The World, along with DC Comics adaptation Booster Gold (about "an awful douche-bag from the future"). There is also still the possibility that the last script the pair ever wrote together, a remake of John Carpenter's Big Trouble In Little China — set to star The Rock (him again) - might yet come together. "We leaned even further into Chinese mythology with a prologue showing Lo Pan getting cursed," Stentz says of the script. "He's a more tragic and sexy villain, à la Gary Oldman in Dracula. And the second act is Jack and Wang fighting their way through the layers of Chinese hell."

Miller, positive as ever, points out that, despite how it looks from the outside, he never stopped working. "The demand has never gone down," he says. "My reputation is not about two movies released in 2011. It's about the last script I turned in." There are screenplays he and Stentz worked on that never went public. *Men In Black 3*, for example, and *Ride Along 2*. They even wrote a *Top Gun* sequel for Skydance.

(How much the upcoming *Maverick* draws on it remains to be seen.)

No matter how dark things may have got, it is obvious they still love what they do for a living. "There are things that have disappointed me, but I process the disappointment," says Miller. "I feel great about where I am." Rejection, agrees Stentz, is something you need to learn from. "You have to take the right lessons from it. Maybe it's not time to quit, but to change direction and shake things up. In my case it was being willing to blow up a 15-year writing partnership and strike off on my own." While he's not nearly as upbeat as his former partner, it's clear there's nothing he'd rather be doing.

He shares a memory, one more recent than Facebook's recent 'On This Day' reminder. One that's far more welcome. It's from a day during the production of *Rim Of The World*, summer last year. The crew were shooting on the Angeles Crest Highway in the mountains above Los Angeles, in 35-degree heat. Stentz was sweaty and miserable, until he walked over and checked a monitor. It framed an image of the film's four young leads on their bikes, riding down the mountain road into a spaceship-blasted war zone. An image which had only previously existed in Stentz's mind's eye. An image which had inspired the entire story.

"Those are the moments I really treasure," he says, "where my imagination has been made reality in such a crazy and amazing way. That's when I think, 'Wow, right now, this is the best job in the world."

STILL MISSING IN ACTION

STENTZ & MILLER'S UNMADE SCRIPTS
HAVE PLENTY OF HEAVYWEIGHT
COMPANY IN DEVELOPMENT HELL



AKIRA

FIRST ANNOUNCED: 12 APRIL 2002 Warner Bros.

optioned Katsuhiro Otomo's cyber-epic in 2002, planning a live-action remake. However, directors including Stephen Norrington and Jaume Collet-Serra came and went, while screenwriters such as Gary Whitta and Steve Kloves sought a way to Westernise the story. Just as it looked like it was going ahead with Taika Waititi at the

THE CROW

FIRST ANNOUNCED:

14 DECEMBER 2008
The remake of Alex
Proyas' supernatural
thriller has been hit
by legal issues,
bankruptcy and deal
collapses. It looked
like it might be
a Bradley Cooper
vehicle, then one for
Tom Hiddleston, then

it finally looked like a dead cert with Corin Hardy directing and Jason Momoa in the lead. However, in June 2018 Hardy made the "hard decision" to quit after the film lost Sony as its distributor.

THE LEGEND OF CONAN

helm this year, it was

put on hiatus again.

FIRST ANNOUNCED: 25 OCTOBER 2012

Arnold Schwarzenegger was up for returning to the role of burly broadsword-swinger Conan in a film that would, promised producer Chris Morgan, be "Conan's Unforgiven". Yet Universal canned the project in April 2017, citing concern about the film's relevance to the marketplace. Arnie and the original film's director, John Milius, remain keen.

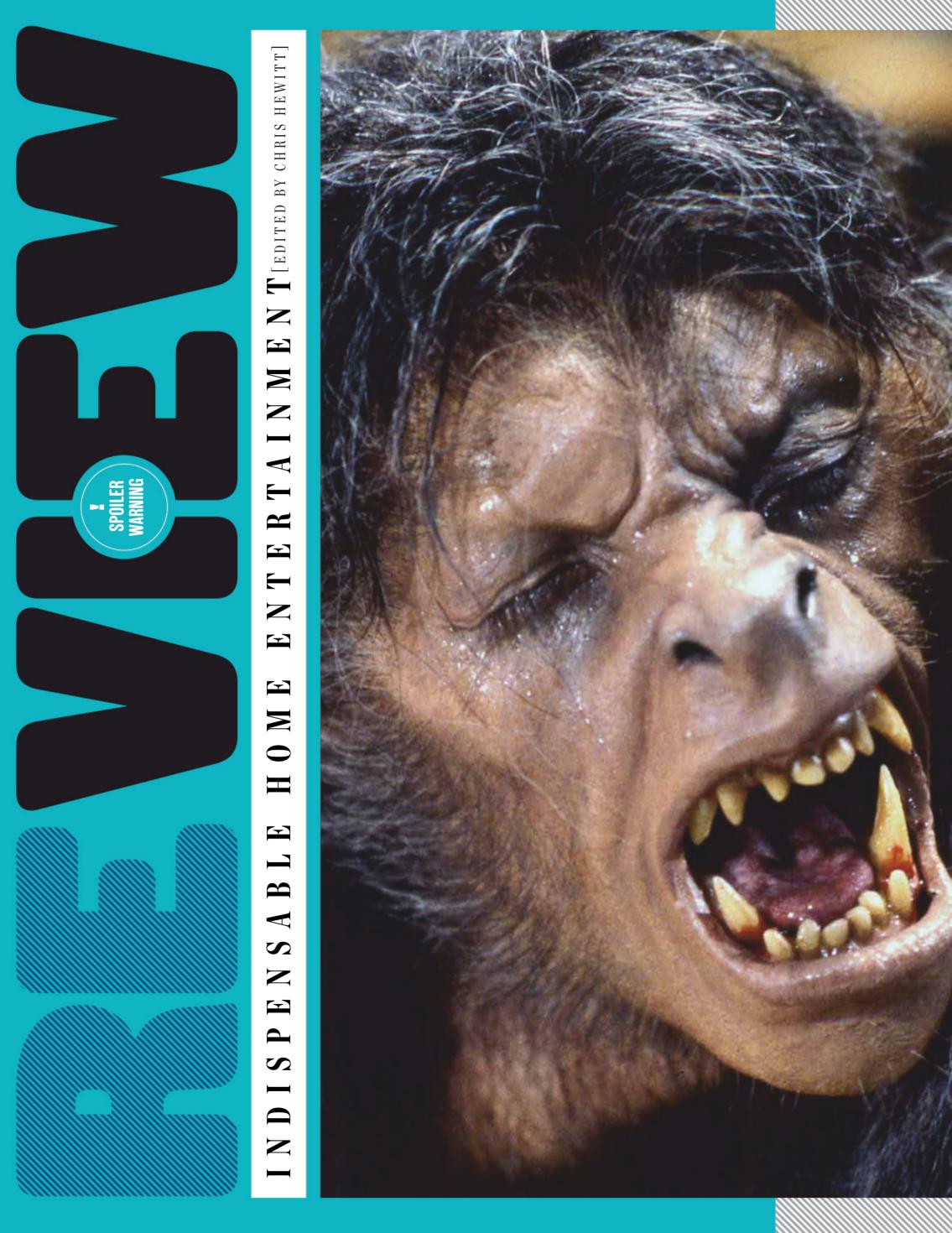
GAMBIT

FIRST ANNOUNCED: 30 JANUARY 2014

In early 2014, producer Lauren Schuler Donner announced a solo adventure for the card-hurling X-Man, starring Channing

starring Channing
Tatum. But they
couldn't get a director
to stick: Rupert
Wyatt, Doug Liman
and Gore Verbinski all
boarded then jumped
ship. Redevelopment
plans were underway,
but after Disney

acquired 20th Century Fox, it cancelled the project.





YOU DON'T SIMPLY interview John Landis about An American Werewolf In London. You hang on for dear life as the writer-director hurls lengthy anecdote after lengthy anecdote at you, barely pausing for breath. But when said anecdotes concern one of the greatest horror movies of all time, that's no hardship. An American Werewolf In London turns 38 this year — not a round number, but enough to warrant a brand-new Blu-ray re-release of this tonally dexterous, often hilarious, often terrifying horror landmark. Which prompted us to call Landis at his LA home to take a walk down Memory Lane. And stay off the moors...

An American Werewolf In London is a rare example of a horror-comedy that works in both areas.

What's interesting is that I think it's funny, but I don't consider it a comedy. The humour makes it more realistic. It's a big concept to swallow — it's quite something to take the leap to believe, "Yes, in fact I am a werewolf. I will turn into a monster." You laughed when I said it because to a fairly intelligent person, it is ridiculous.

So you primarily see it as a horror film?

It's a very straight line. The first time we meet Jack [Griffin Dunne] and David [David Naughton], they're in a truckload of sheep. The first place they go is The Slaughtered Lamb. It's not subtle.

Has American Werewolf become respectable in its old age?

There were people who recognised it. One of the things you lose with age is that you can't see how radical it was. I wrote it in 1969 when I was 18 or 19, when I was a gofer on a movie called *Kelly's Heroes* in the former Yugoslavia. The script I made in 1981 is pretty much the same script. There's just one change — I was in London for a long time in 1975, working on a James Bond movie called *The Spy Who Loved Me*, and there used to be cartoon cinemas that showed a programme of really good 35mm prints of



classic Warner Bros., MGM and Disney cartoons. These cinemas were very strange. There were basically bums in there, getting out of the cold, and children whose parents had dropped them off. In the original script, it's the exact same sequence [where Naughton's David makes his final transformation into the werewolf], except it's a Road Runner cartoon playing on the screen. The people in the theatre are mostly small children. When David starts to turn and shouts, "Run!", that was to small kids. And when I did location scouting in 1981, half the theatres were gone. The ones that remained were porno theatres. I just figured, it'll be a porno theatre. It's the same scene, but with no children in it. I looked at all these films and I didn't want it to be a Russ Meyer film because he's American. I looked at all the British stuff. They were making 'What The Plumber Saw', 'What The Window Washer Saw'. I called them, 'Oops, My Knickers' movies. They were just terrible movies. I thought I'd buy one but couldn't find anything interesting or erotic enough. I figured, "Fuck it, I'll shoot one." That's how 'See You Next Wednesday' got in there. That's the only change from the script I wrote in 1969.

That part feels so British. In fact, so does the entire movie. Did that come from your experiences?

I'd been to London several times. I knew the city. And when I made *Werewolf*, I wanted it to look like London. I wanted people of colour. In '81, the British film business was still very unionised. Equity had about three black people in it. So I wanted the extras to represent the city, and I was fought. The compromise I got was I got 150 people into the union. And many, many years ago, when I met Gurinder Chadha for the first time, she told me how much she loved *Werewolf* and she laughed that it had Asians in it! She said it was the first British movie she ever saw where the Indian wasn't Peter Sellers.

So, let's go back to when you first wrote the script. What was that Yugoslavia experience you'd had?

I witnessed a bizarre burial that really stuck in my

head and was so odd. It was in the crux of a crossroads. There were two Greek Orthodox priests with incense and candles and holy water and all that stuff, and there were a bunch of gypsies. They looked like they had just come from wardrobe. It looked like I was on the set of The Wolf Man. There was a body on the ground lying there, and the body was wrapped in a canvas-like shroud, and then wrapped around the shroud were rosaries and garlands of garlic. I was like, "What the fuck is going on here?" I was with a Yugoslav guy named Sasha. He was very educated, spoke many

Top to bottom:
Director John
Landis on set;
Mid-transformation;
The make-up and
prosthetic teams
go to town.



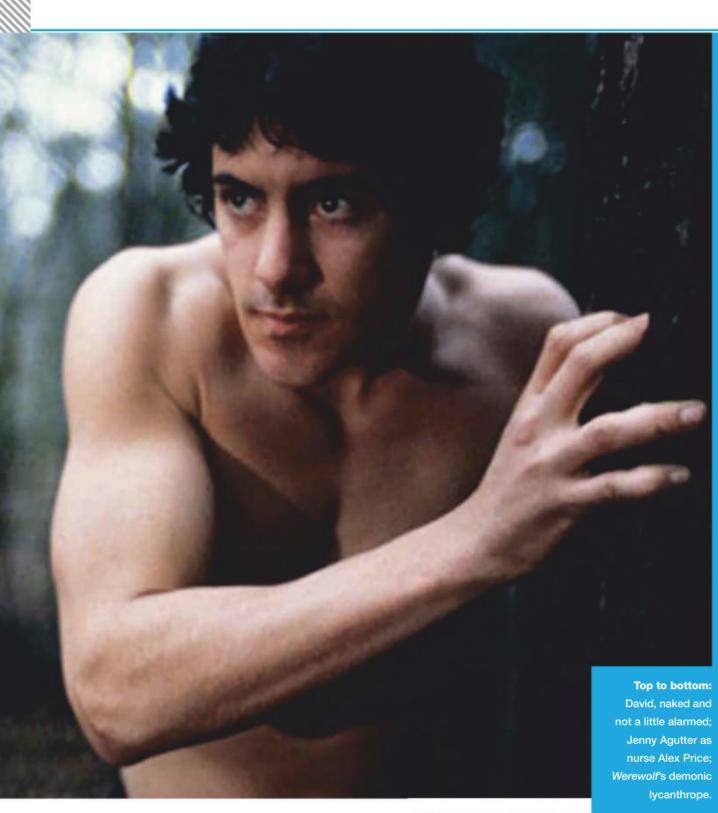




languages. He asked them, "What the hell is going on?" The guy had done something bad, and they were burying him. They dug a hole maybe nine or ten feet deep, not that big, and they put him in feet first. They covered it up, they had holy water and then they used asphalt to repair the road. It was wild, but it meant we had to wait in the car for an hour. Sasha went to talk to them and came back giggling. He said they were peasants and they were taking precautions so that his body wouldn't get up and cause trouble. I was gobsmacked. I was like, wait a minute, two weeks before this the United States had just landed a man on the moon. and these people were concerned about the living dead. I was so taken with it that I thought, "This could be a good movie. The supernatural, that's fun." I didn't want to do a slasher.

What inspired you to make the connection from that burial to werewolf? Wouldn't vampire be the natural direction to go in?

I did a lot of thinking and a lot of research. When you think about monsters and the supernatural, most of what we accept as traditional lore was invented in modern times. Bram Stoker invented so many things that we still say, "Well, that's how vampires work." The Wolf Man, as opposed to Frankenstein and Dracula, is an original monster, from a screenplay by Curt Siodmak. He invented a great deal of what we accept as werewolf lore. Werewolves traditionally are just evil, rapacious monsters. It's the Big Bad Wolf. Little Red Riding Hood. In Dracula, Stoker had Dracula turn himself into a wolf. Witches would turn into wolves. France was historically the country that had the most werewolves. They killed hundreds, if not thousands of people for being lycanthropes. What Siodmak did was, he made Larry Talbot [played by Lon Chaney Jr] the victim, which is very interesting. When Larry Talbot turns into The Wolf Man, it has none of Larry Talbot. It's a rapacious killing machine that is remorseless and soulless. In the Wolf Man movies, Lon Chaney Jr is always waking up going, "Where was I last night?" He's another one of The Wolf Man's victims. I was taken with that idea. American Werewolf is very much a variation of The Wolf Man. The whole idea of werewolves is to take a ridiculous premise and



make it as real as you can, which is why it was funny. Unfortunately for me, the script was very much liked. But people would never give me the money. I got a lot of jobs from it. I got the Bond job from it! Cubby Broccoli loved the script. I said, "Well, why don't you make it?" He said, "Are you kidding?" Everybody's reaction was, "This is too frightening to be funny, or this is too funny to be frightening." I had it for many years. It was only because of the commercial success of *Kentucky Fried, Animal House* and *Blues Brothers* that I was able to make it. Even then it was a negative pick-up.

How much of the budget was set aside for music clearance? All the songs in the film have the word "moon" in them, by artists like Creedence Clearwater Revival and Van Morrison.

All those songs were in the script. There were three songs I wanted that I couldn't get. Two versions of 'Blue Moon', one by Elvis Presley on his first record. It's just ethereal. And Bob Dylan's 'Blue Moon'. And the other was the Cat Stevens song, 'Moonshadow'. That was supposed to be the song under the main titles. It's this lilting, wonderful song that, if you listen to the lyrics, is about dismemberment. At that time Cat Stevens wouldn't allow his music to be in an R-rated film. Bob Dylan at that moment literally became a born-again Christian for a year. But we did get everything else.





I have to ask about the transformation scene. In that script in 1969, what did you write?

It was pretty much beaten out in the script. It talked about it being in bright light and it talked about it being incredibly painful. The actual choreography of it, we had to figure out. Rick [Baker, make-up genius] insisted, and he was correct, as he usually is, that I do a very strict storyboard so he wouldn't build anything that wouldn't be used. My intention was to do it with no cutaways. I ended up cutting away to Mickey Mouse at one point. I couldn't make it work without that one cutaway, plus I thought it was pretty funny. Rick and I first made Schlock together, and I gave him the script of American Werewolf then, in 1971. We discussed it at length and I thought, "This is going to be my next movie!" Which, of course, it wasn't.

Had you made Werewolf in 1971, it couldn't have been as sophisticated...

It wouldn't have been as good. For so many years I'd been telling him, "We're going to make American Werewolf," and when we finally got the money I called him and said, "Guess what? We got the money, we're going!" He went, "Uh-oh." I said, "What do you mean, 'Uh-oh?" He said, "I'm kinda making a werewolf movie." And Joe Dante had hired him to make The Howling. And Rob Bottin was his assistant. I just flipped out because about five or six years before that we, but really Rick, had invented the concept of what he called 'change-o heads', the concept of stretching of the skull. We had mapped out all these things. I immediately said, 'Oh shit, how long have you worked on it?" He'd

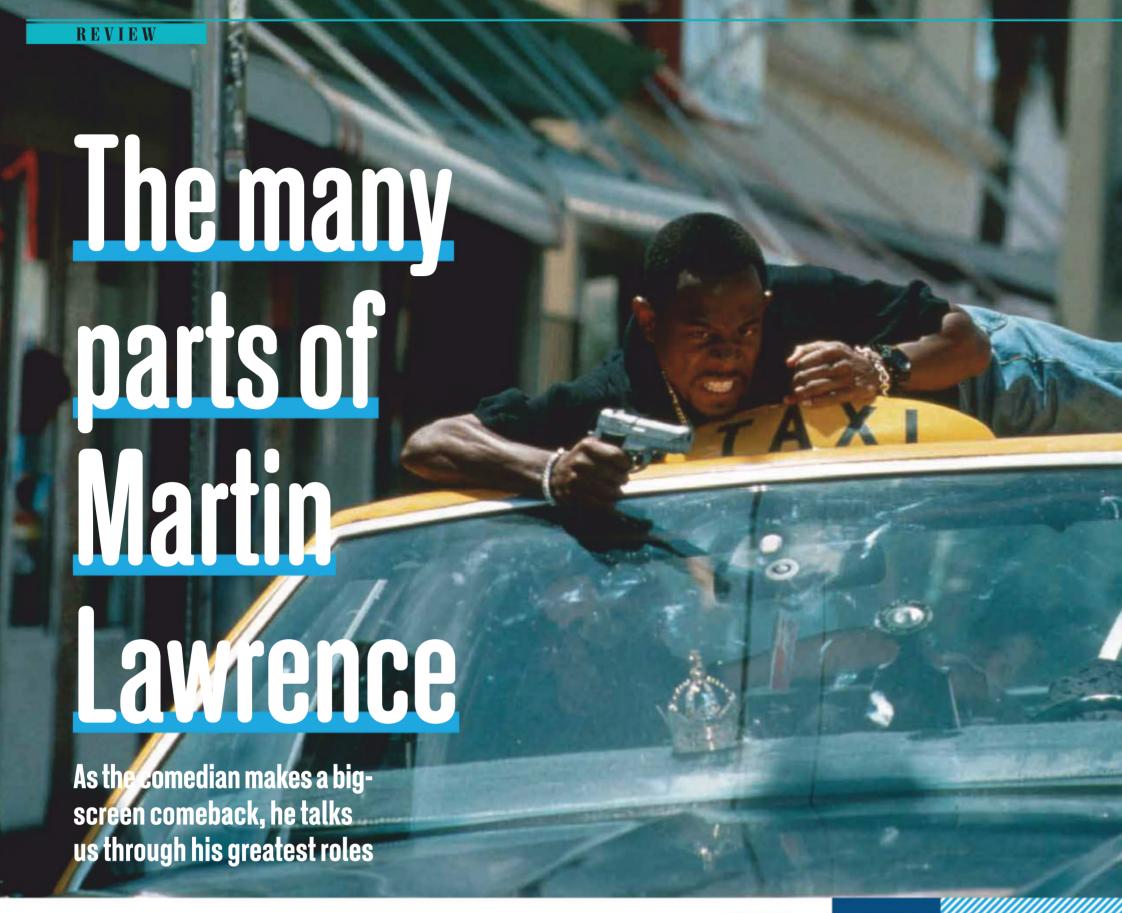
been on it two weeks. I said, "You didn't show Joe the change-o heads, did you?" "Well..." "YOU MOTHERFUCKER!" He really was a schmuck. I'm still mad. [Laughs] He could at least have asked me. The bottom line is he left *The Howling* and he left Rob Bottin to do it.

So, with all this in mind, given your experiences, were you sympathetic to David Naughton's plight as he endured the make-up?

That sequence was the last week of filming. We'd actually wrapped. That was a second unit. It was just the people who

needed to be there to do that. Rick and David would show up at Twickenham at two in the morning. We'd get there at eight and he'd be ready at 9.30am and he'd come out and shoot the piece. Then he would go back and come out two hours later and we'd shoot another piece. Poor David... But *American Werewolf* is a movie I'm very fond of. I got to make it the way I wanted, which was very untraditional at the time. It's strange. I don't know that I've ever made a good movie, but I've sure made influential ones! CHRIS HEWITT

AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON IS OUT NOW ON BLU-RAY



IT'S BEEN EIGHT years since Martin Lawrence — once one of the most popular movie stars in the world — has made a film. That was *Big Mommas: Like Father, Like Son*, a film which really tested the integrity of the *Big Momma's House* franchise. But, after almost a decade out, Lawrence is back in a big way. There's next January's *Bad Boys For Life*, which will see him return alongside Will Smith, but first he crops up in an extended cameo in the new Harmony Korine film, *The Beach Bum*, playing a character called Captain Wack. So we asked him to talk us through some of his standout movies...

DOTHE RIGHT THING (1989)

Lawrence's first role, as the loudmouth Cee, came in Spike Lee's classic snapshot of New York City life...

"It's great. It's the movie that started my career, and I had a lot of fun doing it. I thank Spike for the opportunity, and it's great. I remember Robi Reed was the casting director and Spike was in town. He came to the Comedy Act Theater, which was a famous comedy club here in Los Angeles. And he was coming to look at [US comic and actor] Robin Harris at the time.

And so we met at a hotel and he was talking to Robin, and Robin told him he should take a look at me at the comedy club. And I performed that night and then he cast me in the movie. On set he mainly told me to do me and have fun. I remember that my character [Cee] talked with a lisp. And I remember I wasn't gonna do it. And Spike said, 'What happened to the lisp?' I said, 'I'm not gonna do it,' and he said, 'No, no, do that!' and that's why Cee talked the way he did."

BOOMERANG (1992)

His first film with Eddie Murphy, Lawrence is a lot of fun as Tyler, the best friend of Murphy's character in Reginald Hudlin's underrated romcom...

"It was fun. For me it was the first time I got to work with Eddie Murphy. I was working with the guy I looked up to, my idol. So I was just happy. I was playing his friend and so all I had to do was be a friend and bring the comedy and just have fun with him, and it was a great experience for me. Chris Rock is also in the movie, and he's one of the best comedy minds we have. I'm glad he was in that movie with us."







BAD BOYS (1995), BAD BOYS II (2003), BAD BOYS FOR LIFE (2020)

As detective Marcus Burnett, Lawrence forged a solid double-act with Will Smith in two insane, testosterone-fuelled Michael Bay actioncomedies. The threequel, some 17 years after Bad Boys II, is imminent...

"The car chase sequence in Bad Boys II was a crazy shoot. Will was actually driving in some of those scenes, and he had to keep control of the car while everything else was happening. It wasn't easy, it was very dangerous. Michael Bay would have the contraptions where the car flips over your head and all that, so those were my real reactions you were seeing on screen. We don't dwell too much on ageing in Bad Boys 3 [Bad Boys For Life]. It's more about putting on the cool glasses, and stuff like that. And no, I still don't know the lyrics to the Bad Boys song!"

LIFE (1999)

Lawrence's most demanding acting gig by some distance, reteaming with Murphy for Ted Demme's decades-spanning tale of two black men who are wrongfully imprisoned...

"Back then Eddie told me he was going to call me in a couple months to do a movie with him, and he stuck to his word. And then the rest was history. We did this movieand I had a great time. Eddie is one of the best talents out there — he's so sharp, he's quick on his feet, so smart, and he's a great joy to work with."

BIG MOMMA'S HOUSE (2000)

By now a huge star in his own right, Lawrence made a string of high-concept comedies like Black Knight and National Security. This one, in which he played a cop who goes undercover as a large black woman, was the biggest hit, spawning two sequels...

"That character in that film was something that I really wanted to do. I had just come out of a coma [caused by severe heat exhaustion while exercising]. And I wanted to do a franchise movie, and I thought Big Momma could be a movie that could turn into a franchise. I based it off my mother and grandmother. And thankfully we got the opportunity to do three of them."





THE BEACH BUM (2019)

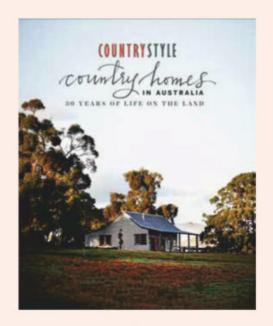
Lawrence's comeback gig is a brief but eyecatching cameo, in Harmony Korine's comedy about a stoner, played by Matthew McConaughey...

"I just found something I like to do, and enjoy. I got a call from Harmony that he wanted me to do this movie. I always wanted the opportunity to work with Matthew McConaughey in a movie, so it was a no brainer. I was able to just go do a day, and get my feet wet. The fact that Captain Wack was his own man, and that he has his own boat named Success, the way he lived his life in a free-spirited and carefree way, I enjoyed playing a character like that. Unfortunately I didn't get to work with Snoop [Dogg], but it was a lot of fun." AMON WARMANN

Top to bottom: As the life-loving Captain Wack in Harmony Korine's Beach Bum (2019). alongside Matthew Reteaming with **Eddie Murphy** in 1999 prison drama Life; A big hit in Big Momma's House (2000).

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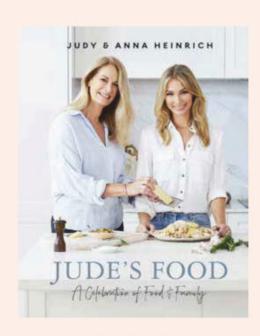
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Titanic

THERE ARE LEGENDARY stories from the *Titanic* set. The spiralling budget. The thunderous tantrums. An aggrieved crew member lacing the lobster chowder with PCP, sending 50 stoned members of the crew (including Cameron and Bill Paxton) to hospital. James Cameron, in the middle of a scene, snatching a hat he didn't like from Kate Winslet's head and throwing it into the sea. Then there are the legendary shots, and none more so than this: Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Rose (Winslet) finally getting to first base on the ship's bow, the sunset swirling around them. And they needed real-life magic to make it happen.

It was the autumn of 1996, midway through the humongous 160-day shoot, where a full-scale replica of the Titanic was docked at the Rosarito coastal resort. The first part of the scene had already been filmed, but Cameron, naturally, demanded the perfect sunset for the money-shot: "The kind of brooding sky that's

simultaneously beautiful and foreboding." In the eight days they had set aside to get it done, though, such a sunset was not forthcoming. "We had horrible, bald, blue skies seven days in a row, where the sun went down to the horizon with just no character whatsoever," he later said.

On the eighth day, the sky was still overcast. The gaffer, John Buckley, looked up that afternoon and said, "The cloud cover's not gonna break." Cameron disagreed: "I've got a feeling," he said, because James Cameron probably can control the weather. Indeed, as they moved down to the bow, "The sky opened up with this glorious rosy light." Even the wind picked up, blowing the funnel smoke exactly how he wanted it. Elsewhere, preparing for another scene, Kate Winslet was hurried to the bow. Seeing the sun, she yelled at Cameron to, "Shoot! Shoot now!"

With mere minutes until the sun disappeared, there was no time for rehearsals, which King and Queen of the film world: Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet make movie history. lent the scene a "tentative, real quality" said Cameron. "Everything was rushed. Even the centre of the shot is a little bit out of focus." But they got it, on take one. That idyllic sky was "exactly what God gave us that day," he said. As for the kiss itself, it had been rehearsed in "forensic detail" four weeks earlier, Cameron drawing lips on his hands to show his leads exactly how he wanted it. "Whether they remembered that a month later, I don't know," he said. "Probably not."

Weeks later, different angles were shot of Winslet and DiCaprio at Digital Domain's studio in Los Angeles, with CG sky eventually matching the reality, needed for the transition of the ship into the modern-day wreck, where the pair would fade away, lost in time. "It's one of those great moments in the making of a film, where everything comes together," said Cameron of the live-action sunset take. The emotional whack of the film, of everything that came next, hinged on this moment. It really was magic. ALEX GODFREY

TITANIC IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY
AND DOWNLOAD

INSTANT Trivia



Before they kiss, Jack sings some of Blanche Ring's song 'Come Josephine In My Flying Machine' to Rose, and she laughs. In a deleted scene preceding this one, they had drunkenly sung it to each other.

٠,

For the shot of Jack leading Rose up to the rail, Cameron used a painted backdrop of the sky. He was never satisfied with it though, and for the 3D conversion years later replaced it with

5

On set, DiCaprio and Winslet would spoof this shot, singing Bette Midler' 'Wind Beneath My Wings to each other. Some people just cannot take things seriously.

How to upgrade your career

LEIGH WHANNELL, the writer/director of sleeper hit *Upgrade*, on making it behind the camera. (Eventually.)

"MY PATH TO directing was a long and winding one," says Leigh Whannell. And that's something of an understatement. As of this moment, the Australian multi-hyphenate (like Garth Marenghi, he's 'plus actor') is in a very good place. After years of struggle, his next movie, an ingenious-looking take on The Invisible Man, is one of the most anticipated of 2020, while his last, the cyberpunk horror thriller *Upgrade*, has steadily grown its reach and reputation as one of the best cult movies of recent years. The title of that movie doesn't appear to have been an accident — from the Saw movies to the Insidious franchise, Whannell has upgraded his career an inch at a time. Here, he tells us how he did it.

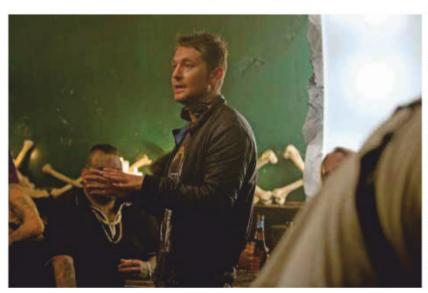
KNOW YOUR LIMITS (AT FIRST)

From the beginning, Whannell wanted to direct. There was just one small problem.

"I made a couple of terrible student films. One, called *The Demise Of Fallon Thomas*, was about a punk band that kills the people who see their shows. It was the worst student film of all time. After I was done with it, I was convinced that I was terrible at directing. But I had met this other student, James Wan, at film school. He was great at directing, and the thing that he hated was writing. So we teamed up."

FIND YOUR OWN VOICE

Together, Whannell and Wan created a couple of horror juggernauts — the *Saw* franchise and the dimension-





bending lunacy of the *Insidious* films. Wan stepped aside on *Insidious: Chapter 3*, which gave his friend a shot at directing. But while successful, it taught Whannell a valuable lesson. "It felt like it was still attached

"It felt like it was still attached to James. I couldn't say, 'Hey, I'm going to do *Insidious 3* in black-and-white, and it's gonna be set in Poland, and it's going to be about cattle farmers stealing from each other.' I had to stick within the parameters of what an *Insidious* film was. So *Upgrade* felt like the first movie that was entirely me. It was the first time I was able to say to the world, 'This is who I am as a filmmaker.' And it felt great."

EMBRACE GENRE

By and large, Whannell has worked within the horror genre. That's not by accident. "I think the snobbery around horror is really high. But people like Robert Eggers and

Clockwise from above: Grey Trace (Logan Marshall-Green) in cyberpunk action-horror movie Upgrade; Lin Shaye's Elise in Insidious: Chapter 3; Drag her! Elisabeth Moss as Cecilia Kass in The Invisible Man. **Below left:** Writer-director Leigh Whannell on the set

Ari Aster and Jordan Peele have been able to work out what a great cloak horror is for great art. And the creative freedom of the horror genre is underrated. With Saw, the first film that I wrote, we had the villain totally win. And people loved it. In what other genre could you do that? Can you imagine if you were watching Speed and the final scene was Dennis Hopper plugging Keanu Reeves in the head with a shotgun? The audience would tear the theatre apart. And while *Upgrade* is not strictly a horror film it has enough of those horror influences to be a bit more nihilistic. You can smuggle complicated themes into horror. It's so malleable."

BE PATIENT

This may be the most important thing of all. Patience has defined Whannell's career, whether it's plugging away as a writer for so long before getting a shot





at directing or watching as *Upgrade*, which initially struggled commercially, found an audience.

"I do love the fact that people have discovered *Upgrade* in their own time. I feel like it comes very honestly. David Fincher once said, 'Films are not about the opening weekend. It's about where the film is in ten, 20 years' time.' And he's exactly right. A lot of my favourite films were mercilessly torn apart when they were released, like John Carpenter's *The Thing*. The world caught up to it. With *Upgrade*, we didn't have a huge advertising campaign or a giant movie star in the lead. No-one was being told to go and see this movie by billboards on buses and Happy Meals. It's been a word-of-mouth movie. And I love word-of-mouth movies." CHRIS HEWITT

UPGRADE IS OUT NOW ON BLU-RAY

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THIS MONTH

IN THE LINE OF DUTY WRITER JEREMY DRYSDALE WATCHES THE EPIC THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING FOR THE FIRST TIME



I'M NOT CONVINCED that the rules to this game are any more onerous than 1) pick a film you haven't seen from a list and 2) don't write any more than 750 words about it, but I'm going to add a third: don't pick the film which runs at nearly three-and-a-half hours — at least not if you're on a deadline.

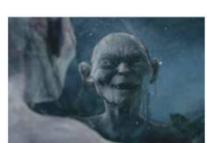
So anyway, here we are. On the basis that so much happens and I understand so little of it, having never seen any of the other films or read the books, this is going to be a slightly esoteric review which leaves the reader with a sense of tone, an impression of mood and a comprehensive lack of detail. Honestly, I'm at 130 words already, just telling you that.

We start with Sméagol's origin story, in which he kills for the ring and promptly stops washing and loses his body hair. Then Frodo somehow has the ring, but I can't watch this bit

because his nails are bitten down to the quick and that makes me feel so ill I have to go and clean the bathroom. I could tell you that we then see Orlando Bloom and Ian McKellen on horses, but we're only just on the opening titles so let's hurtle past Merry and Pippin, who are two of the most annoying characters in any movie and I really have no idea what happened there because I obviously fastforward so fast I risk whiplash.

Because I've skipped a bit, I inexplicably arrive at a section in which People On Horses have a conversation with a tree, which throws me







slightly until either Merry or Pippin find a bowling ball in the river, which distracts me until I type it up. 'Talking tree, bowling ball, either Pippin or Merry, ffs' is all I've written, so that will have to do.

A quick aside here to say that there's a 'drinking ale from flagons' scene in which the flagons are obviously empty, and I find that quite annoying in a general sense. The music is great, though. Very evocative. And Sméagol, back now, is great. So much depth in those eyes and he's clearly the best thing in the film, so I can't stop watching him — I particularly love the scene in which he argues with his own reflection, which is allowed to run long because Peter Jackson cares more about character than running time. And Peter is right, even though I'm on a deadline.

We should move on because there's a lot more film to see than there are words available, but the battle which takes up the middle section of the film is utterly thrilling and it is here that the depth given to the characters pays off, because I'm genuinely rooting for the guys I now feel I know - except for Merry and Pippin, obviously. Frodo is captured by a bad guy — and the bad guys here are relentlessly unpleasant — and is rescued by Sam, who up to this point has appeared to be more-or-less entirely useless. In fact, not only does Sam save the ring, but he inspires Frodo up onto the top of a huge CGI mountain so they can then throw it into a fire and destroy it. (I think somewhere called Mount Doom is involved, which is a great name for a place unless you have to live there.)

At this point, about 17 hours in, I could bang on about the intersecting action, which shows how Sam and Frodo represent the internal struggle as they try to destroy the ring, and assorted orcs, elves, irritating small people, enigmatic knights and wizards represent the external struggle as they battle to the death — but you already know that and I'm reeling from the booming soundtrack, the hugely long fight scenes and the massive chunks of impenetrable

dialogue. All you need to know is that they finally do it. Whatever 'it' actually is.

And we're there. Ta-da!
Look, I accept you won't have gauged a complete overview from my summary — or perhaps any kind of useful information at all — but on the plus side
I sat through a three-and-a-quarter-hour movie so you didn't have to, so a little appreciation would be very welcome. (That appreciation can be shown, incidentally, by going to see my film. It's much shorter than this one and Merry and Pippin aren't in it.)

IN THE LINE OF DUTY IS TBC IN CINEMAS



Chris: *Dolemite Is My Name* is Eddie Murphy's comeback after a while away. It's a fantastic film, but it also made me a little sad. Watching it, I was like, "Where has this Eddie Murphy been?" Amon: It was great to see a return to R-rated Eddie Murphy. Around '96, with The Nutty Professor, that's when we started to get the PG era of Eddie Murphy. The pre-PG era is still prime Eddie Murphy for me. James: I wonder if that came from him having a wobble. He was in these really foulmouthed R-rated films, he was a foul-mouthed stand-up, and he had great success. Then he started to hit a bum run. Then he did *Nutty Professor* and Shrek and whatnot. It feels like he played it safe for ages. **Nick:** It happens with a lot of comedians when they start

having kids and they start making films for their kids. They stop being that person they were. It's great to see him back. *Dolemite* is awesome. **Terri:** Isn't it also a reminder that he's a fucking amazing actor? We shouldn't forget *Dreamgirls*.

James: Or his Oscars incident where he got up and walked out. Chris: Apparently he does that at all awards shows. Once his category is done, he gets up and goes. It could be interpreted that he wasn't happy about losing out to Alan Arkin and let's be honest, he probably should have won.

James: It was all made right because *Norbit* won an Oscar. Chris: *Norbit* did win an Oscar! James: Balance was restored to the Force.

Chris: You wonder what great

Eddie Murphy projects we've been denied over the decade, if someone had said, "We'll team you up with a Will Ferrell or a Ryan Reynolds." A lot of his best work is when he's bouncing off people, like a Steve Martin or a Dan Aykroyd. James: He needs a straight guy. I always liked him best when he was the crazy one and was reined in by Nick Nolte, or Taggart and Rosewood in Beverly Hills Cop. **Amon:** I think another thing that elevates Eddie is that a lot of comedy today, the improvisation will go on and on and won't necessarily serve the scene. But prime Eddie Murphy, when he improvises, it always serves the scene. James: When he was firing on all cylinders, he was amazing. That scene in the bar in 48 Hrs. is what made Eddie Murphy.



JAMES DYER

Loves *Raw* and *Delirious* so much he's been seen clad in a red leather jumpsuit.



CHRIS HEWITT

For him it's between Eddie Murphy in *Bowfinger*, or Eddie Murphy in *Bowfinger*.



AMON WARMANN

Has seen Coming To

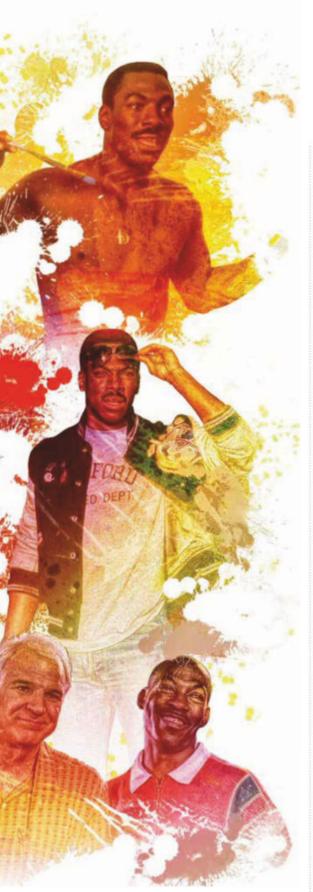
America roughly 300 times.

Think that means he likes it.



TERRI WHITE

Once accidentally threw away a copy of *Boomerang*. Don't worry — it came back.



Nick: He was raw. It was his first film, he hadn't acted before. But they shot that scene with real tough guys and he came in, super confident, and smashed it out of the park. Walter Hill told me he leaned over to his producer and said, we're gonna get rich.

Terri: To do that in your first feature...

Amon: Right out the gate...
Terri: People talk about natural charisma. That's effortless, natural movie-star charisma.
Chris: Great moustache too.
James: It's very hard to pull off a moustache well. Eddie
Murphy without a moustache would be weird to me.

Chris: Want a hot fact? He's had a moustache in every liveaction movie he's made bar one. **James:** Is it *Holy Man*?

Chris: No.
Amon: Norbit?

Chris: Correct.

Nick: That explains the Oscar. **Chris:** Anyway, when did we first get into Eddie Murphy?

Amon: Coming To America was the first one for me. That movie is one of a handful of films that you watch growing up with your family and you can watch it all the time and you're still laughing out loud at everything. It's my favourite comedy of all time.

Nick: It's got a lot of heart. He's playing a really sweet character, an atypically naive character, but it's incredibly sweary. I was rewatching *The Nutty Professor* and the Dave Chappelle character is screaming about bitches and titties. What is this film? Who is it for?

Terri: Even the dinner scene, with the nana saying, "It made me moist."

Chris: And it ends with a massive fart-off.

Nick: But *Coming To America* is great.

Amon: There are so many comedies where you could point at one scene and go, that's the funniest scene. *Coming To America* is a legitimate debate. There's so many.

James: Anything in the barbershop.

Nick: It was the first time he'd played multiple characters.

James: He had a real obsession with Peter Sellers when he was younger. That's where that comes from. Especially in *Nutty Professor*, he was trying to be Sellers, he was trying to do everything.

Amon: If I could only watch one Eddie Murphy film for the rest of my life, it would be *Coming To America* and I've already watched it about 300 times.

Terri: It's such a wonderful love story.

Nick: Would you say
Boomerang is the other great
Eddie Murphy romance?
Amon: For sure.

Terri: A), it's so sexy. B), I think we forget how seismic it was at the time. It was a romcom with a predominantly African-American cast. The whole subversion of the objectification of women in the workplace and how he's passed around and treated like a toy, it's such an interesting film in so many

ways. It's sexy as fuck.

Amon: It's also the movie that taught me the importance of co-ordinating my clothes. I am indebted to it for that.

Terri: I got into Eddie Murphy with *Coming To America* as well. Me and my brother used to quote it to each other a lot, especially, "The royal penis is clean," which seems weird in retrospect.

Nick: Beverly Hills Cop for me. There are real stakes. It's like Midnight Run where you've got funny stuff in the middle but around it is serious stuff and serious actors.

Terri: He's still only 23 and he holds the attention. It's not opposite a Dan Aykroyd or a Nick Nolte. Twenty fucking three! When I was 23, I was bleaching my hair until I was bald and crying over boys.

Nick: You weren't running rings around the LAPD?

Terri: I was not.

Nick: Were you putting any fruits or vegetables up tailpipes? **Chris:** In the North, 'banana

chris: In the North, 'banana up a tailpipe' means something very, very different.

Nick: *Beverly Hills Cop* is my number one. It was a Stallone movie until it wasn't, and that would have been a very different and terrible film, as *Cobra* proves.

Chris: Whenever I first got into Eddie Murphy, it was *Trading Places* and *Beverly Hills Cop*. They're not out and out laughers, I would say. They get the story right and the characterisations right. But they're not obsessed with laugh-out-loud moments. **Nick:** The comedy comes out of the characters.

James: There's not a lot of love in the room for *The Golden Child*, is there?

Chris: Like you, I grew up with it. I loved *The Golden Child*. Then I saw it again last week. Sorry mate, it's a stinky piece of shit.

James: It's batshit crazy. **Nick:** It's got a dancing Pepsi can.

James: Charles Dance as a winged demon.

Amon: The one thing I'm grateful for is that, "I want the knife," moment.

Chris: Alright, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

THE TOP TEN



BEVERLY HILLS COP

1984)

James: "A worthy winner and Eddie's finest hour. A perfect blend of action thrills and fast-talking Murphy humour, it showcases everything that made him such an '80s comedy boss."



COMING TO AMERICA (1988)

Amon: "This marked the first time Murphy played multiple roles and each one is still iconic."



TRADING PLACES (1983)

James: "The most flat-out funny of Murphy's films with an epic gag rate. Look at that escargot!"



48 HRS (1982)

Nick: "Few debuts are as fiery as Murphy's turn as the 'Roxanne'-loving, redneck-baiting Reggie Hammond."



DOLEMITE IS MY NAME (2019)

Nick: "Murphy has a blast stepping into the shoes of one of his heroes. A rip-roaring, profane return to form."



DREAMGIRLS (2006)

Terri: "Ample reminder that Murphy is a spectacular dramatic actor too. A stripped-back, blistering performance."



BOOMERANG (1992)

Terri: "Strikes a blow for African American representation on screen, and one of the romcoms of the '90s."



THE NUTTY PROFESSOR (1996)

Amon: "Murphy's charm and likeability shine through, whether he's in or out of the fat suit."



BOWFINGER (1999)

Chris: "Before *Dolemite*, this was both the last great Steve Martin movie and the last great Eddie Murphy movie."



BEVERLY HILLS COP II (1987)

Chris: "Has some prime moments of Murphy improv — such as the scene where he requisitions an entire house."

AGREE? DISAGREE? WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:
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IT CHAPTER TWO

OUT NOW (DVD, BLU-RAY, DOWNLOAD) / CERT MA / 170 MINS

DVD BR 🕙

Where you land on this concluding chapter of Andy Muschietti's mammoth Stephen King adaptation will likely depend on your feelings on the first. For me, what it lacks in the Stand By Me-ish charm of the previous outing, it makes up for in sheer ambition. The brilliantly cast grownup Losers (Bill Hader and James Ransone are uncanny as the older Richie and Eddie) are saddled with a batshit plot involving interdimensional magic and ancient rituals - and instead of shying away from it all, Muschietti leans in. If it's not always effective, it's frequently remarkable - when did a horror movie last go this big, cranking up the genre on such a grandiose blockbuster scale? Beneath all the set-pieces, the explorations of PTSD and smalltown bigotry - and the characters you've come to deeply care for — remain. Viewed as part of the whole, it's a flawed victory. BEN TRAVIS



PAIN & GLORY

OUT 14 JANUARY (DOWNLOAD), 21 JANUARY (DVD, BLU-RAY) / CERT MA / 114 MINS

DVD BR 🕙

You have to wonder sometimes whether Pedro Almodóvar's best films are all truly, deeply personal, or if he just has the capacity to make them feel as if they're rooted deep in his psyche. Certainly, this one appears very close to the bone, with Antonio Banderas (on revelatory form) playing film director Salvador Mallo, now crippled with various ailments. He is essentially retired when a screening request puts him back in touch with faded star Alberto Crespo (Asier Etxeandia) and with the latter's heroin habit, and Mallo starts down a rabbit hole of memory, regret and a struggle with his own mortality. If that sounds dreary, don't be deterred: this is as witty, colourful and sensual as you'd expect of the director. But it's also a mature and moving look at a former hellraiser all grown up and wrestling with his failure to die young. Glorious is a fitting word for it. HELEN O'HARA



HUSTLERS

OUT NOW (DOWNLOAD), 15 JANUARY (DVD, BLU-RAY) / CERT MA / 105 MINS

What if The Wolf Of Wall Street, but with women? The elevator pitch for *Hustlers* might need a bit of solidifying, but the end product by Lorene Scafaria is an exhilarating look into a team of swindling strippers who did a Robin Hood on their Wall Street clients, and made it out alive to tell the tale. It's a resolutely feminist picture, led by Jennifer Lopez in an incandescent return to form, alongside Constance Wu, Lili Reinhart and Keke Palmer — not to mention Cardi B and Lizzo fleetingly because, well, why not? Writer-director Scafaria adapts the story from a New York magazine article and brings it to vibrant life with fierce confidence, dismantling long-held misconceptions about strip clubs while still shading the light and dark of the shifty crimes these women committed. It's astonishing fun — and hopefully a major awards vehicle for everyone involved. ELLA KEMP



WESTERN STARS

OUT 15 JANUARY (DVD), 19 JANUARY (DOWNLOAD, BLU-RAY) / CERT PG / 130 MINS

DVD BR

2019 truly was The Year Of The Boss, cinematically speaking. First, Jim Cummings used one of Bruce Springsteen's best songs, Thunder Road, as the basis for his quirky indie of the same name. Next, Gurinder Chadha used a bunch of his songs as the framework for her slightly less quirky Blinded By The Light. Now, Western Stars sees Springsteen rock up with a quiver full of brand-new songs from his latest album. What sets this apart from your usual concert flick (although Springsteen is on mesmerising form, sounding as good at 70 as he did 40 years ago; that the songs are some of his best in years doesn't hurt) is a series of interstitial videos, written and co-directed by Springsteen, which shed light on the themes that continue to drive him; and the emotional scars he is still hoping to heal as he enters his eighth decade. Triple-bill it with Thunder Road and Blinded By The Light for the ultimate Boss night. CHRIS HEWITT



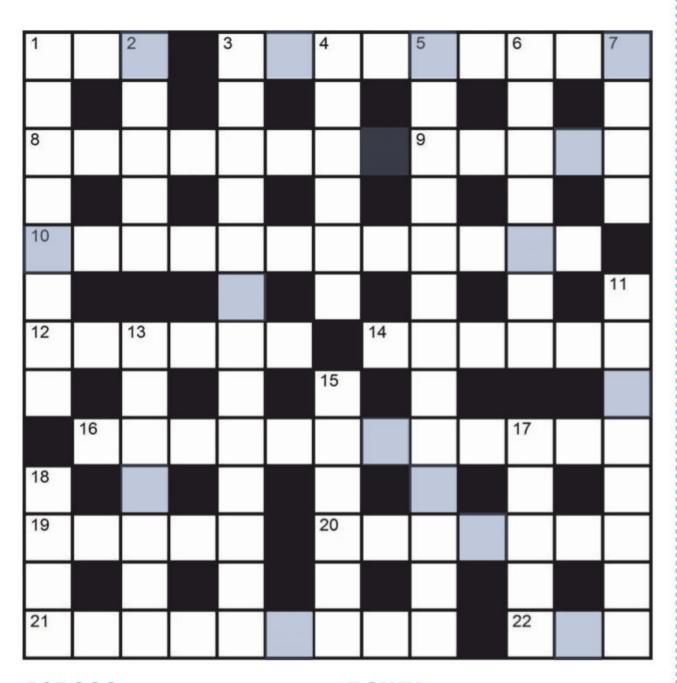
LITTLE MONSTERS

OUT **NOW (DOWNLOAD, DVD, BLU-RAY)** / CERT **MA** / **94 MINS**

DVD BR

Criticising Little Monsters for failing to break new zombie film territory misses the point, because it's still gory fun! You can even forgive it for relying on overseas imports because Lupita Nyong'o is superb as the slightly unhinged kindergarten teacher Miss Caroline, while Josh Gad is suitably horrid as a MILF-fixated kids TV host. The film tells the story of Dave (Alexander England), a loser sleeping on the couch at the house of his sister Tess (the always excellent Kat Stewart). When he takes nephew Felix to school and meets his teacher Miss Caroline, he eagerly volunteers to assist when her class goes on an excursion to a nearby farm. Unfortunately, they have to contend with selfish alcoholic Teddy McGiggle (Gad) AND a zombie holocaust. The most pleasant surprise in this flick are the children in Miss Caroline's class. These little monsters can act! DAN LENNARD

CROSSWORD AND GIVEAWAYS



ACROSS

- 1 In which Julie Andrews famously went topless (3)
- 3 Ang Lee's innovative 2019 sci-fi thriller (6,3)
- 8 Richardson or a 2003 film starring Christina Ricci (7)
- 9 This Todd Haynes directed film received six Oscar nominations (5)
- 10 This film's lead character was Emmet Brickowski (3,4,5)
- 12 Jeanne, femme fatale of French New Wave (6)
- 14 Eddie, recently Professor Andreiko in *Hobbs & Shaw* (6)
- 16 Maze Runner sequel released in 2018 (3,5,4)
- 19 Chameleon voiced by Johnny Depp (5)
- 20 Jenny, seen in *The Avengers* and *Captain*America: The Winter Soldier (7)
- 21 Vin Diesel's 2003 vigilante venture (1,3,5)
- 22 Carney, Best Actor Oscar winner in 1975 (3)

DOWN

- 1 Next Year (Alan Alda) (4,4)
- 2 Gabriel a Razzie nominee for *Stigmata* (5)
- 3 Film in which the title roles were played by Elle Fanning and Alice Englert (6,3,4)
- 4 James who made his screen debut in *The Near Room* (1995) (6)
- 5 He was Harley in *The Favourite* (8,5)
- 6 They were tender in this Bruce Beresforddirected release (7)
- "Her heart, Her soul, Her language are a mystery" ran the blurb for this 1994
 Jodie Foster film (4)
- 11 An Elizabeth Olsen starrer previously titled *Thérèse* (2,6)
- 13 Pop diva who debuted in 2012's Battleship (7)
- 15 Where Robert Redford met Lena Olin in 1990 (6)
- 17 American (Kristen Stewart) (5)
- 8 This killer whale sought revenge in 1977 (4)

DECEMBER ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Allure, 4 Arwen, 8 David Lean, 9 Yul,

10 Lepke, 12 Stevens, 13 Courtney Chase, 15 Russell, 17/20 Angel Has Fallen, 19 N.W.A., 22 Clean, 23 Pee Wee. DOWN: 1 Abdul, 2 Liv, 3 Red Heat, 4 Annie, 5 Wayne Wang, 6 Nelisse, 7 Let's Get Lost, 11 Paul Shane, 13 Chronic, 14 Charade, 16 Ethan, 18 Lange, 21 Law. ANAGRAM GRETA GERWIG

WIN! 'DORA AND The Lost City of Gold' on DVD

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INSPIRED by true events, this flick follows the life and times of French New Wave icon and FBI target Jean Seberg as she battles fame, love and J. Edgar Hoover's long, overreaching arm of the law. To celebrate the film's January release, we have 10 double passes to give away.



TO ENTER, TELL US YOUR ALL-TIME FAVOURITE FRENCH FILM.

WIN! 'GEMINI MAN' ON DVD

CONSIDERING Will
Smith films generally kill
it at the Box Office, you'd
think DOUBLING the
amount of Will Smith
would ensure a Box
Office smash. Well, that
didn't quite pan out for
Gemini Man, but it is still
a fun, action-packed,
all-out visual assault and



we've got 10 DVDs to give away.

TO ENTER, TELL US WHAT YOU WOULD DO IF YOU HAD A BODY DOUBLE.

COMPETITIONS END

31 JANUARY

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The Searchers Chosen by BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: "The last scene of *The Searchers*. John Wayne was the epitome of opting out for individual freedom, but spends the entire picture attempting to reunite a family. At the end of the picture he sweeps Natalie Wood up in his arms and brings her back to the cabin. They all run inside the cabin. The camera's sitting on the inside of the cabin, looking out into the desert. He's standing there. He grabs his arm, the wind comes up, brushes his hat for a moment, and he turns and walks away into the desert. It's gorgeous. We stole a little bit of that for *Western Stars*. A very little bit."

EXT. JORGENSEN HOMESTEAD — DAY

Mose Harper (Hank Worden), Mrs Jorgensen (Olive Carey) and Lars Jorgensen (John Qualen) are on the porch of the homestead. They see something in the distance.

It's a group of men on horseback, coming towards them over the horizon. Laurie Jorgensen (Vera Miles) runs onto the veranda in excitement. She knows who the men are — and that her beloved Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter) is amongst them. She dashes out into the dusty scrubland to meet them.

The group arrives. Ethan
Edwards (John Wayne) leads
the group. He has, in his
arms, a girl. It's Debbie
(Natalie Wood), the Jorgensens'
daughter, returning home
after being held captive for
many years.

Mrs Jorgensen's face crinkles with emotion upon seeing her daughter. She blows into a napkin. Her husband motions to Ethan and Debbie with his pipe.

Ethan dismounts from his horse and tenderly helps Debbie down. At this point, singing breaks out on the soundtrack. It's Sons Of The Pioneers with the last verse of 'The Searchers (Ride Away)'.

SINGING: A man will search his heart and soul...

Mose, sitting on the porch, barely comprehending what he's seeing, puts on his hat and sits back in his rocker, a huge grin on his face.

Ethan carefully carries
Debbie towards the waiting
Jorgensens, whose arms are
outstretched to receive their
long-lost daughter.

SINGING: Go searchin' way out there. His peace of mind he knows he'll find...

Ethan sets Debbie down.
Her mother embraces her.
Seemingly shell-shocked,
Debbie looks at her mother and
father, and they begin to walk
with her into the house.

SINGING: But where, oh Lord, oh where?

The camera tracks back, until:

We're inside the home, looking out at the landscape.

Ethan sets foot, gingerly, on the veranda. Behind him, Martin and Laurie are hand in hand. Ethan steps aside to let them pass into the house.

Then Ethan stands alone in the doorway, framed by the blackness. He clutches his right arm, thinks for a second, then pivots and begins to walk away, heading back out into the empty desert.

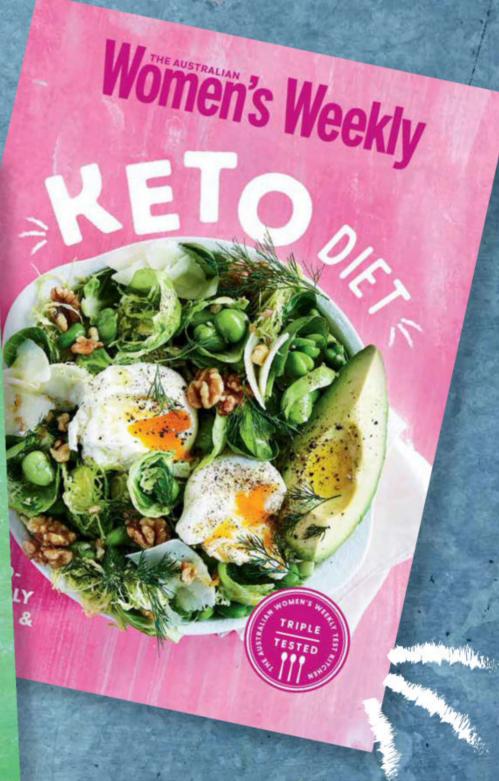
SINGING: Ride away, ride away, ride away...

We hold the shot for a few seconds, then the music swells, and the door slams shut. Darkness fills the screen.

Women's Weekly

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