

FIRST WORD: ATTACK THE BLOCK 2

JANELLE MONÁE
MEET THE
FUTURE OF
HOLLYWOOD



AUGUST
2020

EMPIRE



007
RETURNS
NEW INTEL ON
BOND'S DEADLIEST
MISSION YET

THE BIG SCREEN PREVIEW



CINEMA'S COMING BACK. THE LATEST WORD ON THE HOTTEST FILMS

TOP GUN: MAVERICK
TOM CRUISE'S
SKY-HIGH EPIC

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THE FUTURE

IN STEPHEN KING'S *The Stand*, an apocalyptic thriller which I'm currently reading for a bit of light relief, it's mentioned that the last film released in movie theatres before they go dark is a *Nightmare On Elm Street* sequel. In the book, of course, those pandemic-hit theatres never re-open. Fortunately, we don't live inside Stephen King's head, and a throng of exciting movies is looming large. That's right, the answer to the question, "What was the last thing you saw on the big screen?" need no longer be, "Vin Diesel in *Bloodshot*."

Inside this issue, we catch up with a whole host of Hollywood stars and directors, finding out what they have in store for us when their creations finally arrive. And it's an electric mix. There are rollercoaster-ride blockbusters. There are dramas about the human condition. There's a long-awaited Steven Spielberg musical. There's even something called *Monster Hunter*, in which... well, you can probably guess. After months devoid of giant screens, fresh popcorn and thundering sound, Hollywood's raring to get going again. And so, frankly, are we.

Until then, there's plenty within these pages to keep you busy. We catch up with the writer of last year's *Queen & Slim*, Lena Waithe, to discuss how the Black Lives Matter movement is impacting the film industry, and the work that remains to be done. Janelle Monáe, one of the most exciting stars working today, tells us how she's shaking things up. There's even the latest on *Labyrinth 2*, a sequel worth doing a magic dance about.

In short, the future is looking bright. And don't let Stephen King tell you different.



Nick De Semlyen

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TURN TO PAGE 54 FOR DETAILS ON HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

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MAKING THE SUBSCRIBER COVER



Designer Timba Smits works on the cover. From the preview, he's most looking forward to *No Time To Die*: "I have fond memories of seeing every Bond film since I was a kid and still get the same amount of excitement seeing every new one."

ADVENTURES IN ZOOMING PART 1



Winemaker, farmer, actor and all-round nice guy Sam Neill spoke to News Editor John Nugent on Zoom about his heartwarming social-media feed (and why he decided to share a bath with Hugo Weaving). Read the full story on page 12.

ADVENTURES IN ZOOMING PART 2



The erstwhile Hellboy and ongoing crusader against idiocy, Ron Perlman, became the latest actor to appear on an *Empire* writer's laptop screen. Read his freewheeling interview with contributing editor Dan Jolin on page 16.

CONTENTS



TAKE 20

08 BLACK LIVES MATTER
Actor-writer-activist Lena Waithe shares her thoughts on the vital ongoing protests.

12 SAM NEILL
The Kiwi legend on the short films he's made during lockdown. Not one of them is a remake of *Event Horizon*. What a waste.

13 TRAILER TALK
Team *Empire* talks all over the first look at *Bill & Ted Face The Music*. We're not worthy! We're not worthy! Schwing!

14 HOLLYWOOD GOES BACK TO WORK
How productions are resuming during the pandemic. Spoiler: very carefully.

16 RON PERLMAN
The veteran actor is still giving 'em hell, boy.

28 PINT OF MILK
Talking dairy products with Anya Taylor-Joy.

FEATURES

55 THE BIG-SCREEN PREVIEW
Masks on, hand sanitiser at the ready. Cinemas are throwing open their doors, so we're shining a spotlight on the films set to fill them (well, mostly fill them). Featuring: Cary Joji Fukunaga on *No Time To Die*, Patty Jenkins on *Wonder Woman 1984*, Edgar Wright on *Last Night In Soho*, Cate Shortland on *Black Widow*, plus many, many more. And more new pics than you can shake a golden lasso at.

80 CAROLCO
The incredible inside story of the studio that helped Arnie and Sly bestride the 1980s like two giant colossuses. Colossi? Colossuses just looks weird. We should probably look it up. Anyway, the point is that Arnie and Sly were massive. Colossus-massive. And Carolco helped them get there.

86 JANELLE MONÁE
Not content with dominating the music scene for

the last few years, Ms Monae has been low-key conquering movies and television too. Now, with *Antebellum*, she takes her first lead film role, and Hollywood, by the scruff of the neck.

92 THE OMEN
Director Richard Donner and screenwriter David Seltzer on the spooky goings-on behind the scenes of one of the greatest horror movies ever made.

98 MICHAEL BIEHN
An audience with the man who took on the Terminator, went toe-to-toe with a bunch of Aliens, and stared into *The Abyss* until it stared back at him. Our original plan, to run a bunch of snaps of him on vacation and call it Mr Biehn's Holiday, was cruelly nixed. Some people don't recognise genius, that's the problem here.

Above: Anya Taylor-Joy and Matt Smith enjoy their *Last Night in Soho*. Pre-Covid, we hasten to add. **Below:** The divine, um, *Divine in Female Trouble*.

ON SCREEN

30 DA 5 BLOODS
Spike Lee takes on the Vietnam War movie. Spike wins.

32 THE OLD GUARD
Charlize Theron as an immortal warrior? That one never grows old.

47 SPOILER SECTION
Da 5 Bloods, *The King Of Staten Island*, *The Vast Of Night*.

REVIEW

104 FEMALE TROUBLE
John Waters on his trash classic.

112 ROCKY RANKING
The life and times of Robert Balboa.

116 DAVID COPPERFIELD
Armando Iannucci's Dickens adaptation.



Photofest. Spine lines issue 377: Newsstand: "A hero. Not the hero we deserved, but the hero we needed. Nothing less than a knight, shining" is from *The Dark Knight*. Subs: "A hero! A hero! I knew the sea would bring us a hero!" is from *Beowulf*

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COMMENT OF THE MONTH

THIRTEEN REASONS WHY

It's taken me three years to realise this but *Empire* now publishes 13 issues each year instead of 12. Thanks for the extra value. And for managing to entertain us, despite there being no cinema releases at the moment. I've always found your most fascinating articles to be about films, personalities or events that have no connection with what's going on at the moment, your recent Edith Head article being a great example.

DAVID THOMPSON, MANCHESTER

Thank you for your kind words, David. Please have this Picturehouse membership in gratitude — it's good for one year. Or as we like to call it around here, '13 issues'.

THREE'S COMPANY

Please sort out an argument for me. Will Keanu Reeves be the first actor to have ever appeared in three trilogies? I say yes, my friend says no, but has no examples. I know this will change when *John Wick 4* comes out but for now? Over to the smart folks...

OLIVER CURRAN, VIA EMAIL

Good pub-quiz question! Keanu's trilogy hat-trick (The Matrix, John Wick, Bill & Ted) is not unique. There's Ian McKellen (X-Men, The Lord Of The Rings, The Hobbit) and Anthony Daniels (all three Star Wars trilogies), to name two. Can any readers think of more triple-triptychs?



NOTHING MAKES ME HAPPIER THAN LEAVING THE SHOP WITH MY NEW COPY OF @EMPIREMAGAZINE. IS IT STRANGE I LIKE THE WAY IT SMELLS EVEN? I CAN'T EXPLAIN IT BUT I DEFINITELY DO.

@POPTARTDICTATOR



WHAT IS EMPIRE PLANNING FOR DICK TRACY'S 30TH? I EXPECT NO LESS THAN 5 COVER VARIANTS AND AN EXCLUSIVE MADONNA SUBSCRIBERS-ONLY COVER.

PETE KEYS

FAMILY REUNION

It's been about 20 years since I last subscribed to *Empire* magazine. I used to get a mini-rush of adrenaline when the postman dropped the latest issue through the door and I'd sprint downstairs and read every word. I took the decision to subscribe again last week, but I followed the times and I went digital, so now I can read every word through the app! (Which immensely pleases the wife as I can't hoard piles upon piles of *Empire* magazines.) I'm delighted to be part of the family again, feels like I never left.

DANNY MARSDEN, VIA EMAIL

The prodigal son returns! Welcome home, Danny. There are leftovers in the fridge if you're hungry.

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In memory of our friend Kate.



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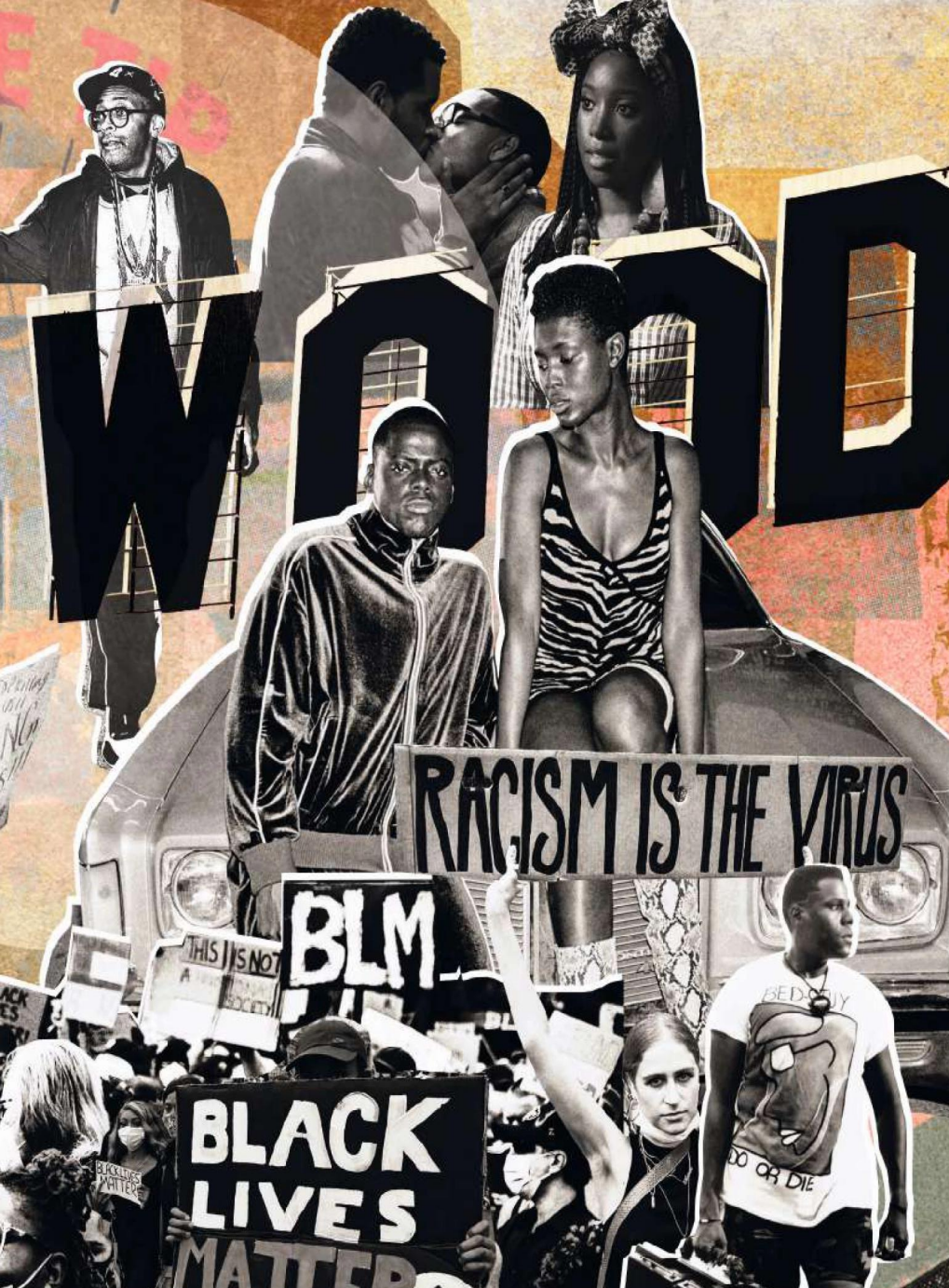
THIS MONTH'S FILM MOMENTS THAT MATTER [EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT]



No. / Black Lives Matter: what happens next?

Actor, activist and *Queen & Slim* writer **LENA WAITHE** reflects on the movement that has shaken the world – and Hollywood

ILLUSTRATION PETER HORVATH



LAST YEAR'S ACCLAIMED romantic drama *Queen & Slim*, which dealt head-on with police brutality and racism, has taken on profound relevance in the wake of worldwide protests following the killing of unarmed African American George Floyd. Its searing and thoughtful take on race and intersectionality is typical of its screenwriter Lena Waithe; since she first emerged a decade ago, she's been both a groundbreaking writer (as well as *Queen & Slim*, she won an Emmy for her work on comedy-drama *Master Of None*) and in-demand actor (with roles in *Ready Player One* and *Westworld*). *Empire* caught up with her to discuss her reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement sweeping the globe, and how she hopes it could lead to real change in Hollywood.

How have you personally been dealing with everything that's been going on?

I think we're all trying to figure out what our role is in the revolution. For me, it's to keep voicing that there is an intersectionality when it comes to Black people and queer people. That they do not exist separately, that they can also exist in one body and they often do. I've also been giving money

directly to Black protesters who were on the ground. Helping them pay their bills, their rent, gas money, groceries, whatever it may be. You know, I'm still writing all the time, because it is also a time for artists to pick up their pens, pick up their laptop, pick up their iPad and to tell stories.

There's lots about *Queen & Slim* which rings even truer today. Have people reached out to say they've discovered or rewatched it?

I've definitely seen people have tagged me on Instagram and Twitter. I've also seen that the movie has popped up on a few lists. The truth is Black artists don't wait for a revolution to tell the truth. We never have. And we tell these stories because we're trying to — in a way — not just shock America but tell them that this is the country in which they live. You know, we're not making these things up.

Great strife often leads to great art. Do you think this should lead to more art about Black joy, more hard-hitting fare, or both?

Both, absolutely. Because there could also be Black artists right now — and in my view they have this

right — [who want] to write about everything but what's happening in their world. I think that is true creative freedom. I tend to lean towards [hard-hitting] stories, but it's not a prerequisite. Somebody could be writing a comedy right now. It doesn't necessarily have to be about us raging against the machine, because a lot of us have written about that and maybe we want to write about something new.

Are you optimistic that the Black Lives Matter movement can lead to change, especially in Hollywood?

I do think change is coming because now people can't get away with the same old shit. You just can't. And I think that with Black Hollywood, particularly, we all talk together, we all know each other, we'll see each other. We're very activated. We're all communicating with each other even more. But it is going to be a long road because there are definitely some places that aren't making these changes anytime soon, and I think all we can do is provide a safe space for the few Black people that are in these spaces to speak up.

For years, Spike Lee has said that we need more Black people in the gatekeeper roles.

If we put up a picture of the heads of studios, streaming services, networks — that would not reflect America. And I think that is the harshest clue of reality that we can see. The people that literally control and determine what we as a nation see every day are white and male. That's a very powerful thing.

#OscarsSoWhite has continued to be an issue, but filmmaker Ava DuVernay has just been elected to the Academy's Board of Governors. Hopefully that can push things in a better direction?

Yeah, absolutely. And we're already starting to see that. I just hope that we figure that out. I'm not telling them to give anybody handouts. But at least judge us fairly. See our work. Amplify work. Because it does affect the bottom line. People say awards don't matter. There are literally bonuses in your contract if you get nominated, if you win. It changes the way the industry looks at you and the way you move. Like it or not, you have a longer career if your work is acknowledged. I mean, I'm a prime example of that. Look at the difference in my story before and after I won an Emmy.

What can audiences do? How much do viewing choices shape things?

It's all about supply and demand. And I think audiences should know they have a right to demand more from their entertainment. Black Twitter, online, people writing think-pieces, op-eds... they should continue to talk about and have dialogue about art. I really want to see more art that makes us squirm, more art that makes us uncomfortable. That's what *Do The Right Thing* was for me. *School Daze* did that for me. *Dear White People* does that. We have to continue to make work that isn't always easy for audiences. And I think audiences can go with us on these difficult journeys. **AMON WARMANN**



How to stage a rodeo (without getting stomped)

From broken necks to broken hearts, acclaimed drama **BULL** uses bucking beasts to tell an emotional story

SET IN SUBURBAN Houston, Annie Silverstein's gentle drama *Bull* focuses on a paternal relationship between 14-year-old Kris (a brilliant Amber Havard, making her debut) and troubled rodeo rider Abe (a just-as-brilliant Rob Morgan). Having won acclaim for her 2014 short *Skunk*, Silverstein initially set out to expand it — but was drawn to the world of Black rodeos. Here she tells *Empire* how she brought a unique world to the screen.

FIND THE STORY

"I had met a man while location-scouting for *Skunk* who came from a well-known Black rodeo family. I didn't realise there was this culture of African-American cowboys that dates back to slavery. They were doing the ranch work. When slavery was over, they weren't allowed to participate in white rodeos, so they started holding their own. Meeting this man inspired the character of Abe."

DO THE RESEARCH

"My husband Johnny McAllister co-wrote this with me, and we wanted to really start researching it to

make sure that we were reflecting the community accurately. We went to a travelling Black rodeo and met a bullfighter [the North American style which involves distracting the bull, rather than violence] named JW Rogers, who invited us to basically follow him around for several years, and became Rob's stunt double. Rob spent a lot of time with JW, learning how to hold his body, so that the body language would match."

BEFRIEND THE BULLS

"Bulls are incredibly powerful. But these bulls are really trained — they know their job is to go out and buck when the gate opens. A couple of guys said we should get on a bull, just to see what it feels like. It was a huge bull, but they assured us it would be very calm in the chute — it wouldn't start bucking unless they opened the gate. To assure us, they put an eight-year-old boy on first. This tiny child. So then we *had* to get on. And then got off, quickly. But I actually felt quite peaceful being on top of the bull. For that brief period, I had some small taste of the the connection a lot of riders feel."

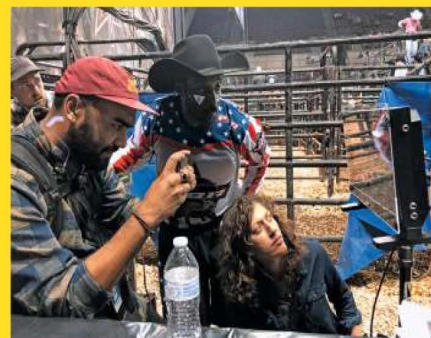
EMBRACE THE DANGER

"During our research, one of the bullfighters who we'd become friends with broke his neck while bullfighting. But as soon as he was out of the hospital, he started wearing a brace and went bullfighting again. These insane injuries are part of the culture. A lot of the moments that look hairy in the film *were* hairy. We captured live rodeo rides. JW, as Rob's stunt double, was fighting just like he would normally fight."

ALEX GODFREY

BULL IS ON DIGITAL FROM 3 AUGUST

Clockwise from left: Ride 'em, cowboy! A scene from rodeo drama *Bull*; Director Annie Silverstein, Rob Morgan (who plays Abe) and crew check the dailies; Morgan on set; Okay, big guy, you win...



SMALL
TALKLOCKDOWN
SPECIAL

CHARLIZE THERON

Hi, Charlize. How's life been treating you in lockdown? Are you binge-watching anything at the moment?

No, I am home schooling. And I've just been told that the computer isn't working right now, so that's great [laughs]. If I didn't have to do this part of quarantine I think I'd be okay with it, but the home schooling is just... Yeah.

Do you have kids?

No, I don't. Hence my lockdown experience being very binge-watch-heavy.

Oh my God, I hate you right now [laughs]. Honestly, I thought making action movies was hard. But this...

How often do you watch your own movies?

If I catch one on television I'll watch a bit of it. But I'm never like: "Okay, tonight I'm going to sit down and watch myself!"

What about films you've produced with your production company [Denver and Delilah Productions]?

When you produce something, you see it in the editing room, the sound mix, the test screenings... I'm not kidding, every movie I produce I've probably seen 150 times before it's even come out.

TOM ELLEN

THE OLD GUARD IS ON NETFLIX

FROM 10 JULY



No. 3

The Alien Queen is not dead yet

Director Ridley Scott has said the *Alien* franchise is set to "re-evolve". Xenomorph expert Ian Nathan considers four directions it could take

ALIEN: BACK INTO THE RIDLEYVERSE

Development on the next prequel has been halted, but not abandoned. "I'm in tune with where 'Covenant 2' would go," Ridley Scott maintained in 2017. 'Alien: Awakening' was to refocus on the Engineers still at large, inventing planets like giant, bald Ridley Scotts. Engineers Vs. Fassbender would ensue; Scott's new direction will likely bring The Company, aka Weyland-Yutani, centre stage. Less as Peter Weyland's megalomaniac plaything than a corporation of Burkes running a biological-warfare division.

ALIEN: RESET

Disney, which is now in possession of the franchise, might equally see this as a chance to go back to basics, back to the B-movie DNA that sustained *Alien* and *Aliens*. Which was the intention of

Neill Blomkamp — to literally hit the reset button in the wake of *Aliens*, with Ripley, Newt and Hicks intact. James Cameron, while promoting *Alita: Battle Angel*, hinted at discussions with Disney about reviving Blomkamp's reboot; producer Walter Hill has even sent Sigourney Weaver a 50-page treatment, with the tagline: "In space, no one can hear you *dream*." However, speaking to *Empire* last month, Weaver seemed sceptical about returning to Ripley.

ALIEN: RESUSCITATED

There is a pantheon of unmade *Alien* scripts Disney inherited with Fox. One of these might, with a little nursing, offer up a vivid approach. Is there mileage, yet, in Vincent Ward's monkish wooden planet (flipped into a prison world in *Alien³*), or Joss Whedon's Earth-centric 'Alien: Revelation', or British

screenwriter Stuart Hazeldine's 'Alien: Earthbound', featuring the xenomorph-infested Antarctica Station (a reference to *Alien*) tethered to Earth? A recent novel, *Aliens: Phalanx* by Scott Sigler, pitches xenomorphs against medieval knights; that just happens to be two of Scott's favourite jingles combined.

ALIEN: THE SERIES

The good money remains on the *Alien* heading to television. With R-rated body horror not conducive to Disney+ family values, it would be more likely to appear on Hulu (in which Disney has a 60 per cent stake). One report claims Scott has been part of discussions over an anthology format, unveiling a different aspect of the *Alien* universe each season, including a return to LV-426, with new Colonists and new Marines, the *Aliens* having survived being nuked from space.



No. 4 Inside Sam Neill's one-man film studio

The *Jurassic Park* actor's social-media feeds have been a tonic during lockdown. He explains how he lifted the internet's spirits in dark times

THE SLOGAN FOR Two Paddocks, the New Zealand wine company owned and run by Sam Neill, reads: "In the cheering up business since 1993." It is a principle the 72-year-old Kiwi actor has tried to apply to his social-media presence too, ever since he was "reluctantly" persuaded to join Twitter by his Two Paddocks colleagues in 2011.

Social media can be a toxic place, he acknowledges; he wants to be the antidote. "Everybody's angry about everything. I'm very sad that nuance has disappeared. So," he says, with the gentle smile that made Dr Alan Grant a father figure to millions, "I just try being stupid instead."

Neill's social-media feeds have quickly become a beloved corner of the internet, famous for wholesome dispatches from his New Zealand farm and its menagerie of celebrity-monikered animals: yoga with Taika Waititi the pig; cuddles with Meryl Streep the chicken. But when the lockdown hit, his online presence suddenly took on a vitally soothing function.

"I just thought, 'Let's offer people some words of comfort,'" he recalls. Neill began

posting simple to-camera videos with grandfatherly messages of reassurance; the response was immediate. "They were saying, 'That's the only nice thing I've heard today.' Perhaps people do need to hear something optimistic. Things were very bleak there for a while. They still are in places."

His messages of hope — occasionally delivered with a ukulele — eventually graduated into something more elaborate. On 1 April, 'Cinema Quarantino' debuted, with the short film *Das Leek*, effectively a one-minute-43-second dad joke, in which Neill pretends to wee in a water fountain. "The main principle of Cinema Quarantino is that it is *not* quality," says Neill, giggling. "It has zero ambitions. I just thought, 'Let's just make some little films on our iPhones with absolutely zero production values — terrible continuity, no respect for eyelines.'" Each short is given the prefix 'Das' — *Das Bad*, *Das Fone Hell*, *Das Bog Roll* — as a faux-arthouse nod to German war film *Das Boot*. ("I never understood why they just didn't call it 'The Boat,'" Neill ponders as an aside. "Why did that one have to stay in German?")

The operation is ruggedly homemade. Neill films himself on his phone, or enlists his partner, the Australian political journalist Laura Tingle, as camera operator; his friend Hugh Morris-Clarke helps with editing. "I just text a few mates, then we dream up an idea and usually I end up writing the script from what we've concocted and see what comes out." Those "mates" have included such esteemed acting talents as Helena Bonham Carter (starring as Neill's mobile phone), David Wenham (on the hunt for toilet roll) and Hugo Weaving (who 'shared' a bath with Neill, through the magic of cinema).

When we speak, Neill is days away from flying to the UK to resume filming on *Jurassic World: Dominion* and slipping back into the khaki chinos of Dr Alan Grant. But even as life starts to return to some sort of normality, Cinema Quarantino's art will prevail. "The new *Jurassic* will mean a lot of trailer time," he says. "The devil makes work for idle hands... I'll keep my hands busy when I'm stuck in my trailer. As per." The cheering-up business, it would seem, is booming. **JOHN NUGENT**



TRAILER TALK

Bill & Ted Face The Music

Unfiltered, uncensored, uncompromising trailer reactions from team **EMPIRE**

John Nugent (News Editor): The Wyld Stallyns are back! Are people excited?

Nick de Semlyen (Acting Editor): I watched the first *Bill & Ted* in Slough in 1989 and my love only grew from there. These films mean a lot to me. They can bring joy, even if you're in Slough. I can't wait for it, personally.

Chris Hewitt (ReView Editor): I have no emotional connection to the first two movies.

Ben Travis (Online Staff Writer): I think it'll be fun.

Nick: I just think Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter love these characters and want to bring them back. It's a miracle that this film even exists, but I am pleased that it's here. I'm excited by the Orion logo alone.

John: Does Orion even exist anymore?

Nick: I think it's an '80s throwback. Love it.

John: Ah, the classic *Bill & Ted* pose.

Joanna Moran (Photography Director): This feels a bit cringey to me — they look a bit like idiots.

Alex Godfrey (Acting Features Editor): They were always idiots, though.

Joanna: Yeah, but they were 20-something idiots. Now they're nearly 50. It's like, when do you stop being idiots?

Chris Lupton (Creative Director): I was thinking the same thing about the people who work for *Empire*. [laughter]

Nick: Inspector Clouseau was a funny older idiot. And he didn't even have an air guitar, which makes things ten per cent funnier.

John: Are they levitating?

Alex: It's very Jedi Council. A kooky future.

Ben: The guy on the right, I'm pretty sure, is Win Butler, from Arcade Fire.

John: Woah! Good spot!

James Dyer (Digital Editor-In-Chief): Keanu Reeves should not be allowed to shave.

Liz Beardsworth (Production Editor): I definitely prefer him with a beard.

Chris Hewitt: He'd look good with short hair and no beard, but not long hair and no beard.

Chris Lupton: He's got a portrait in his attic, that man.

Nick: I'm very happy to see Comedy Keanu Reeves again. It feels like he hasn't made an all-out comedy since, I dunno, *The Devil's Advocate*?

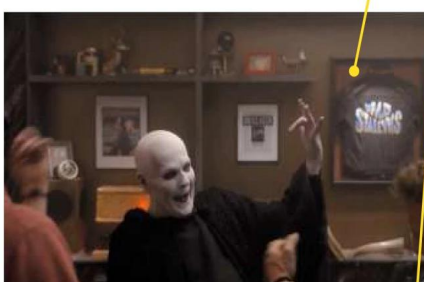
Chris Lupton: What did [director] Dean Parisot do before?

Alex: *Galaxy Quest*!

Nick: It's hard to remember which one's Bill and which one's Ted. I'm genuinely not confident I could say which is which, even now.

John: They're like Ant and Dec. A single entity.

Nick: Can I just say, I really hope they don't



bring Station back. I find Station one of the most upsetting characters. Just horrible. For those who don't know, Station was like a weird alien aardvark. He looked like something from *The Dark Crystal*.

Alex: That's their daughters — that's Samara Weaving and Brigette Lundy-Paine.

John: They're not in this trailer much. But they seem very much like fathers, like daughters.

Joanna: Is it called 'Face The Music' because they didn't know they had kids and now they have 20 years of child support to pay?

Nick: I think they know about their kids. They married the princesses from the first film.

Alex: That's canon.

Nick: I think they're in hell here.

Alex: They look like they're on Coruscant.

Chris Lupton: Mustafar!

Alex: It's interesting that the entire look of this film seems to be based on the *Star Wars* prequels.

Joanna: I'm liking the mid-century aesthetic inside hell, though. Nice furniture.

James: I love that William Sadler as Death hasn't aged at all. He looks exactly the same.

Nick: Well, he's Death.

James: For William Sadler alone, I'm prepared to watch it.

Alex: Future *Bill & Ted*! They somehow don't look older than Present *Bill & Ted*.

John: They look like the kind of guys I used to see in my gym. They were also the main reason I stopped going to the gym.

Nick: Buff Alex Winter is incredible.

James: I'm not sure that's even a muscle suit on Keanu.

Joanna: What does Alex Winter's tattoo say?

Nick: "Heinous"!

Alex: I thought that was a fun trailer. I think it knows exactly what it is.

Nick: I'm hoping it will have a great script.

A lot of comedies now are just improv, throwing funny lines about. The *Bill & Ted* films actually have great scripts.

James: There is not one funny joke in this trailer. Which does not bode well.

Ben: Is "bode" short for "bodacious"? [laughter]

Chris: That's funnier than anything in the trailer. A bold gambit to not have any jokes in it.

Nick: [defensively] It's more of a mood piece.

John: I think it'll be most excellent.

Nick: They're enjoyable characters to spend time with — pleasant, breezy, slightly stupid, charming, scruffy. I don't think it's overstating things to say that this film could save the world.

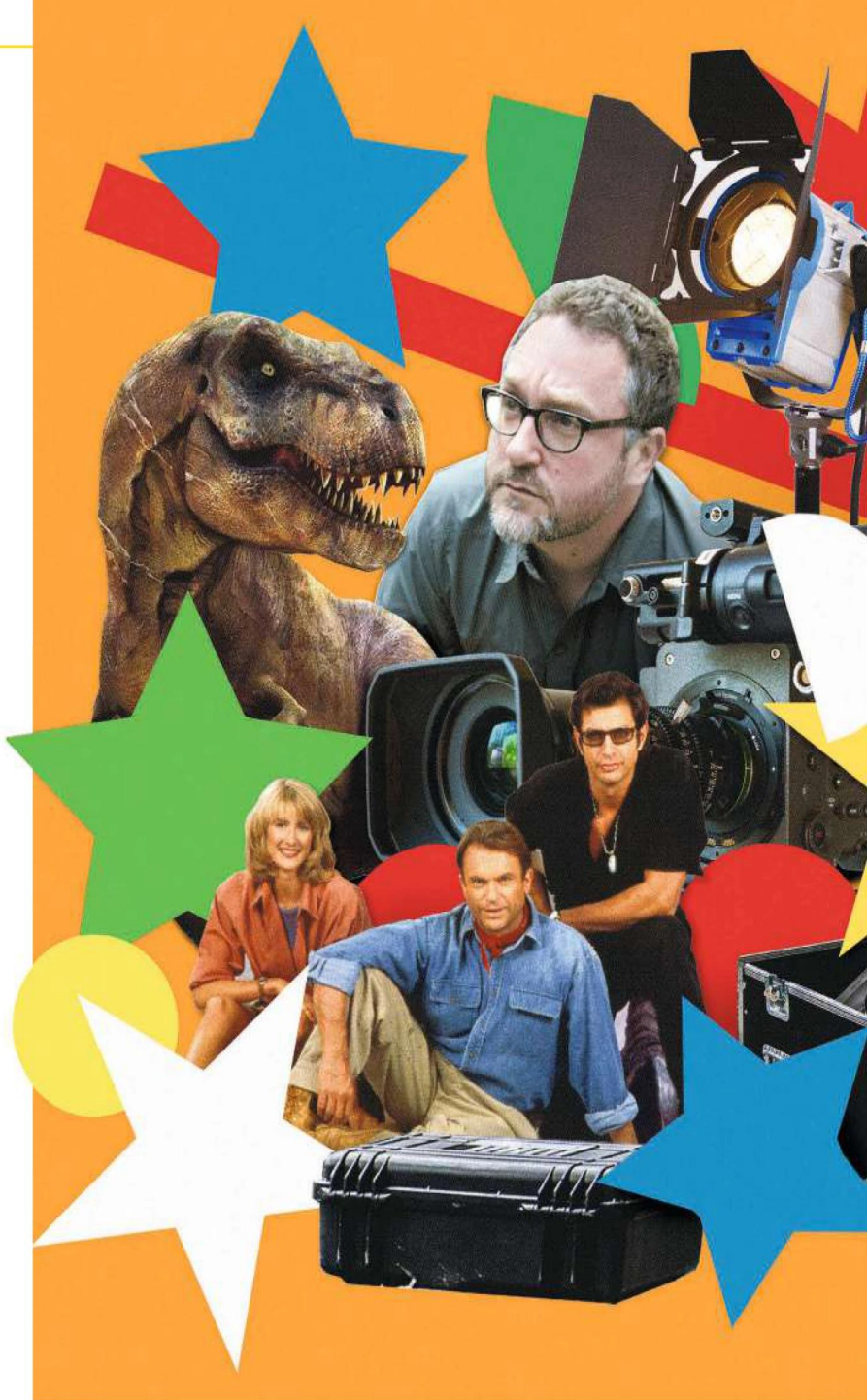
BILL & TED FACE THE MUSIC IS IN CINEMAS FROM

21 AUGUST

No. 5 How Hollywood found a way

Post-lockdown, movie shoots are back on, including *Jurassic World: Dominion*. We talk to its director, and others, about what lies ahead

ILLUSTRATION JAMES TAYLOR



HOLD ONTO YOUR butts — film shoots are getting back underway, with *Jurassic World: Dominion* leading the charge. In mid-June, 90 days after productions around the world were shut down to halt the spread of coronavirus, Hollywood finally got the green light to get back to work, with Colin Trevorrow's trilogy-closer the first movie to resume shooting in the UK, from 6 July. At the start of lockdown, industry insiders questioned how movie sets would be able to safely function in a post-Covid world. After all, bringing to life hair-raising T-Rex attacks and tense velociraptor stand-offs requires busy sets, full of hundreds of people. How do you manage that in a socially distanced manner?

"*Dominion* was already the biggest creative challenge of our lives, before the lockdown," says Trevorrow, whose latest instalment of the dino franchise is able to resume shooting under strict new safety measures devised by the UK government. Meeting these new guidelines has meant installing 150 hand-sanitiser stations and 1,800 safety signs around Pinewood Studios, as

well as antiviral "fog" machines, deployed nightly to deep-clean the set. Masks will be compulsory for everyone but the actors, and physical distancing will be encouraged. "It will take some getting used to, but film crews adapt to changing conditions for a living," continues Trevorrow. He reveals that the production has even benefited in some ways from the lockdown. "The shooting schedule really worked to our advantage — the first four weeks we put to film were mostly sequences with dinosaurs in them. So that allowed us to get a head start on VFX and workshop some of the newer elements without the pressure of a looming deadline."

Following in *Dominion*'s Brachiosaurus-sized footprints at UK studios will be other eagerly awaited movies. Disney's live-action *The Little Mermaid* remake, *The Batman* (starring Robert Pattinson as the Caped Crusader) and the third instalment of the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise are among other titles due back into production in the UK imminently. It's not just in Britain that cameras are starting to roll again,

though. In New Zealand, where the virus was quickly contained, production was able to resume early on James Cameron's *Avatar 2*, while Los Angeles County have also announced new guidelines, allowing studios to open their doors once more this summer.

With Covid-19 still looming large, sets at home and abroad are doing everything to ensure safety of cast and crew. Even in New Zealand, where only 1,163 cases have been recorded at the time of writing in contrast to Britain's 304,000, precautions are thorough. "To keep the maximum safety levels and mitigate risk as much as possible, we'll be rethinking everything — even things like catering," says Annabelle Sheehan, CEO of the New Zealand Film Commission.

Major movies haven't been shut down entirely — Trevorrow has been in contact with his *Dominion* production designer, editor and VFX team on a daily basis. But although they're now out the other side, the director admits that the next few months are unlikely to be a walk in the (Jurassic) park. "I'm confident our guidelines



BACK IN ACTION

Jurassic World and Avatar sequels aside, which sets are going back to work — and how far had they got?

THE MATRIX 4

Lily Wachowski's unexpected sci-fi sequel began filming (with some wild stunts spotted by locals) in February in San Francisco, and was expected to move to Berlin in mid-March. According to *The Wrap*, the cast signed eight-week extensions to their contract, with production aiming to resume in early July.

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE 7

Christopher McQuarrie's action sequel had begun filming in February in Venice, only to be suspended at the height of Italy's outbreak. Filming is set to resume in September, according to star Simon Pegg, who told *Variety* it will "begin with the outdoor stuff", which he said "feels fairly doable".

THE LITTLE MERMAID

Disney's live-action reboot of the animated favourite was only a week away from cameras rolling at Pinewood Studios in the UK before the lockdown hit. *The Guardian* reported that filming is now finally set to start; star Halle Bailey told *Entertainment Tonight* she is "very excited for when we start back again".

ELVIS

Baz Luhrmann's biopic of the king of rock 'n' roll began filming in Australia in January — but halted in March when its star, Tom Hanks, became one of the virus' most famous sufferers. He and wife Rita Wilson have since recovered; in a press conference, local officials confirmed work on the film will resume "as soon as possible".

THE BATMAN

Matt Reeves' superhero reboot began filming in the UK in January; it is one of several blockbuster productions given the green light to resume by the British government. Robert Pattinson said in a recent interview with *GQ*, however, that he hasn't used the lockdown to stay in shape: "Literally, I'm barely doing anything."

FANTASTIC BEASTS 3

Filming was set to begin on the third film in the *Harry Potter* spin-off series in mid-March, but Warner Bros. halted production before cameras had started rolling. The sequel — directed by *Potter* stalwart David Yates — is set to restart at Hertfordshire's Leavesden Studios in July, according to *The Guardian*.

JOHN NUGENT

jonplandau
Stone Street Studios

View Profile



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5,615 likes
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Used my iPhone to snap a picture of our first shot back in production on the Avatar sequels.

Avatar sequels producer Jon Landau shares a glimpse of their New Zealand set.

will keep us safe," he says. "The hard part will be constructing a creative environment within all the precautions. Once the cameras roll, we have to forget our world and live in the world of the movie. That may take some practice." Sammy Sheldon Differ, costume designer on upcoming Marvel blockbuster *The Eternals*, agrees, saying that big question marks exist over how exactly film-industry employees will be able to do their jobs while maintaining a two-metre distance. "I'm not sure how, for example, I'd be able to do a costume fitting without getting up close."

Many challenges lie ahead. But Trevorrow, for one, is confident that they can be overcome. "When a production like this stops, it affects hundreds of people," he says. "I've been really moved by the way everyone has shown support for each other. These past three months have been met with a collective strength and resilience that I'm deeply grateful for. We're all fired up to get back to work. This is what we do, and we're all eager to get back out there and do it." **AL HORNER**

No./6

“It would be a horrible waste of life to play it safe”

[THE Q&A] As he moves into his eighth decade, the fire in **RON PERLMAN**'s belly is still burning bright — on and off screen

IT'S HARD TO believe that two-time Hellboy Ron Perlman has just turned 70. He shows no sign of slowing down, either in terms of work — he has two movies out in the next few months, including revenge thriller *The Big Ugly* — or his political outspokenness; only two days after our mid-June Zoom chat, he tweet-challenges Republican senator Ted Cruz to a \$50,000 charity wrestling match. Perlman claims to be a “lazy fuck”, but we don't buy that. He ain't shy, and he certainly ain't retiring.

How are you getting on, 12 weeks into lockdown?

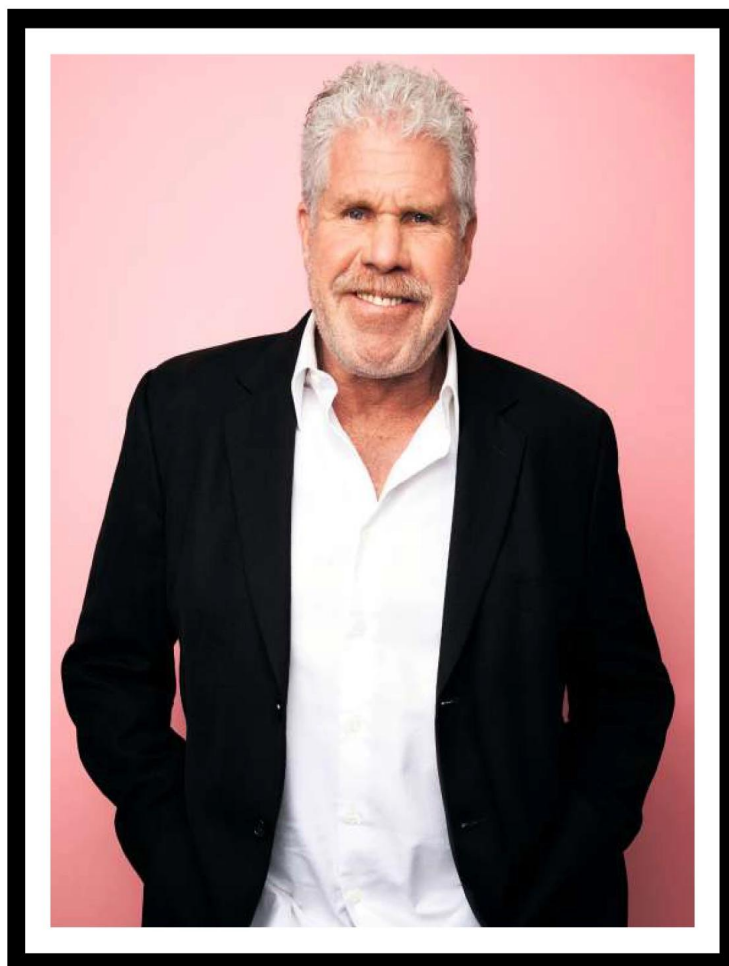
The lockdown has been surprisingly illuminative of how good I am sitting around the house and doing absolutely fuck all [laughs]. This interview is the closest I've been to showbusiness in months!

Welcome back! At least you have a new movie out, *The Big Ugly*, with Vinnie Jones. How did you two get on?

Well, Vinnie and I go way back. He's a fighter for very good causes, in a territory that I've been dallying in for the better part of a decade now: the raising of independent cinema. So I had sympathy for the cause, but primarily I had a tremendous admiration for the role he was asking me to consider.

It's an interesting character: an oil-man gangster with a strong moral code. Is that what hooked you?

That's exactly what hooked me. Preston is an oil man who is environmentally conscious, which in the world of oil guys has turned him into a pariah. But he's also a good ol' boy from Virginia. So the character was an opportunity for me to try to tip the hat to both impulses and find a balance in-between.



He makes a great speech about the Confederate flag being a loser's flag. Did you have any input into that?

It's all in the script, by Scott Wiper. I'm very tempted to tweet it out, because we're being forced into that struggle over whose country it is and,

Top: The great, Republican-baiting Ron Perlman. Above: As conflicted oil man Preston in *The Big Ugly*.

you know, white supremacy and all of those things.

You don't hold back on Twitter. Do you ever regret speaking out?

No. I regret some of the tweets I've put out [laughs], but I try to speak from the heart. It would be a horrible waste of life to stand for nothing, to play it safe, and to be somebody who never makes waves and doesn't piss anybody off.

Later this year, you're appearing in Paul W.S. Anderson's *Monster Hunter*. How was that experience?

It was great. One of my best friends is Tony Jaa, who plays

the title character. Paul is a beacon of positivity, and Milla [Jovovich] is just a dream.

You and Milla have *Hellboy* in common; she starred in the David Harbour version. Did you compare notes?

I didn't realise she was in *Hellboy* until very late in the game, and then finally when I broached it with her, it was a subject that seemed better left unexplored [laughs].

So you've never seen Neil Marshall's *Hellboy*?

No. It would only provoke me into whatever things I didn't need to add to my list of grievances [laughs].

What can you tell us about your upcoming Guillermo del Toro collaborations, *Nightmare Alley* and the animated *Pinocchio*?

Nightmare Alley is a remake of the 1947 Tyrone Power movie. It's my favourite noir film. I started talking about it around 12 years ago, and Guillermo wasn't aware of it. It's a huge movie, like a Greek myth. Guillermo fell in love with it, and I thought if there was ever somebody who could really honour its hugeness, it was him.

And *Pinocchio*?

I won't say too much, but it will surprise everyone. No-one's ever seen this take on it. It's an exposé on fascism. It's powerful.

Finally, could you ever play Hellboy again?

If Guillermo were to say, “You know what, Ron? We need to finish the trilogy,” I'd be there in a heartbeat. But without him I have no interest. And I just turned 70. So I would actually go down in history as being the oldest superhero! **DAN JOLIN**

THE BIG UGLY IS ON DIGITAL FROM 24 JULY

No./7 Can Ryan Gosling break the Wolfman curse?

After four decades of studio howlers, is a new moon rising for the horror icon?

WHEN THE SUN set on Universal's Dark Universe, the moon also faded on a mega-budget adaptation of the Wolfman starring Dwayne Johnson. Intriguing as The Rock in a full-body wig sounds, you can't help but feel he dodged a silver bullet, given Hollywood's recent werewolf history.

It's been 39 years since *An American Werewolf In London*, the last pedigree studio horror. Ever since, *The Curse Of The Were-Movie* has dogged Hollywood at every step. Mike Nichols' *Wolf* was plagued by reshoots and a revolving cast; Wes Craven's *Cursed* saw the Weinsteins nix FX guru Rick Baker's work in favour of PlayStation2 CGI; and *The Wolfman*, Universal's last remake, ballooned into a \$150 million gothic theme park that forgot to build a ride.

There's a lesson to be learned here: all the truly great werewolf movies this century, whether *Ginger Snaps*, *Dog Soldiers* or *Late Phases*, have been Poundshop indies that took risks and stamped their own twist on the

were-myth. With *The Invisible Man* making box-office gold from a \$7 million budget, Universal turning to Ryan Gosling for a leaner standalone Wolfman has serious *Joker* potential: take an icon, drop the baggage of mythology and do something leftfield. And Gosling was *born* leftfield.

The casting is inspired. Gosling's yet to star in a full-blown horror, which is odd given he's a closet goth with a lifelong Universal Monsters obsession that last surfaced in musical form on his 2009 *Dead Man's Bones* album. On it: a track called 'Werewolf Heart' that sounds like a Wolfman audition tape (sample uplifting lyrics: "You'd look nice in a grave.../Death is on my face").

Based on a pitch from Gosling himself and scripted by *Orange Is The New Black* writers Rebecca Angelo and Lauren Schuker Blum, there are tantalising hints of something genuinely subversive, with Gosling rumoured to be playing a lycanthropic



anchorman howling, not at the moon, but the media. Imagine *Network* with fangs. Or *Nightcrawler* with fleas. Either way, redirecting the rage towards satire rather than spectacle suggests Gosling's Wolfman could do for Fox News what 1970s cult classic *The Werewolf Of Washington* did for Watergate. It's been a long time coming, but we could finally see a werewolf studio movie with genuine bite.

SIMON CROOK

Above: Cry wolf! Ryan Gosling, set to get his teeth into one of horror's most enduring icons.

[TREND REPORT]

No./8 SCI-FI MASKS

Masks are 2020's must-have accessory — but these cinematic visions are a level beyond

WORDS JOHN NUGENT
ILLUSTRATIONS BILL MCCONKEY



OXYGEN MASK TENET

At the time of writing, it's unclear what exactly the oxygen masks are in Christopher Nolan's mysterious thriller. Are they time masks? Do they reverse your breathing? Do the masks... wear you? With Nolan, nothing's off the table.



NOSE TUBE DUNE

As a key part of the 'stillsuit' worn by the Fremen on the desert planet of Arrakis, these nose tubes help keep you cool (and handily convert sweat and pee into drinking water). If it's good enough for Timmy Chalamet, it's good enough for us.



TASKMASTER'S MASK BLACK WIDOW

The enigmatic baddie in Marvel's next outing mimics his enemy's moves and weaponry — hence this hooded mask, reminiscent of Iron Man's helmet (if Tony Stark was part of some goth bike gang).

No. 9 Meet the future of movie musicals

The director behind *Hamilton*, *In The Heights* and now *Fiddler On The Roof* — **THOMAS KAIL** — is not throwing away his shot



AT THE GENESIS of generation-defining musical *Hamilton*, director Thomas Kail was, as they say, in the room where it happened — a small New York City theatre in 2011, where Lin-Manuel Miranda, after debuting mixtape track 'Alexander Hamilton' at a White House poetry jam, performed new cut 'My Shot' for a live audience. "In that moment I knew there was a live version of the show," says Kail.

Four years later the fully formed *Hamilton* hit Broadway, astonishing audiences with its hip-hop retelling of America's no-longer-undersung founding father, complete with an intentionally diverse cast, and Kail as its director. Before the original cast — including breakout stars Daveed Diggs and Anthony Ramos — faced their final curtain-call, Kail directed the filmed version of *Hamilton*, now streaming on Disney+, which he calls "a cinematic version of what it was like to be in the Richard Rodgers Theatre on three days in June 2016".

Kail had form presenting theatrical experiences with a filmic sensibility, having directed Fox's broadcast TV event *Grease LIVE!* For *Hamilton*, he recorded two performances with live audiences from a multitude of angles, and shot one day on stage. "I'm as influenced by movie musicals as I am by live productions, so I knew there was an opportunity to harness the energy in the



HAMILTON IS ON DISNEY+ NOW

theatre, but allow you to have proximity to performance that would be quite different," he explains. "Here, everybody has the same seat."

If *Hamilton* is technically Kail's first movie, in the years since the 2016 shoot he's moved further into the realm of film and TV. Last year saw the arrival of *Fosse/Verdon*, the Emmy-winning drama about legendary choreographer Bob Fosse and Broadway dancer Gwen Verdon ("Even when I make a seven-hour limited series, it's about the theatre"), with Kail executive-producing and helming five episodes. Next, he's bringing *Fiddler On The Roof* back to the big screen. "It's my favourite musical," he says. "The original movie is fantastic. I want to make something that can live alongside it, and exist as a version of the show as told cinematically that embraces our affection for the original film."

Moving fluidly between theatre, film and TV, Kail is emblematic of the increasingly varied shapes musicals are taking. "There are so many incredible forms for musical storytelling to exist in," he enthuses. "Think about Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, or what the movie *Chicago* did 20 years ago. What I'm most interested in is finding the right medium for the message. I'm excited to see where musicals go, because they keep redefining themselves. I'll be there — hopefully making it, but definitely buying tickets for it." There's a million things he hasn't done — but just you wait. **BEN TRAVIS**



Clockwise from main: Lin-Manuel Miranda in the New York production of *Hamilton*; *In The Heights*; Michelle Williams and Tyler Hanes in *Fosse/Verdon*; 1971's *Fiddler On The Roof*; Director Thomas Kail.

No./10

THE FIRST FILM OUT OF THE GATE

Director Derrick Borte on his Russell Crowe road-rage thriller *Unhinged* becoming the big-screen's comeback movie



Unhinged moved its release from September to July — the first major film to release post-lockdown. Why?

We were getting the film ready for our September release date — and then I got a call from the head of the studio, asking what I thought about going for a more aggressive release date. It was bold! My concern was obviously whether it would be safe for people to go to the movie theatre.

Was this film always meant to be seen on a big screen?

Absolutely. [The studio] always planned to go wide theatrically. That absolutely influenced the way that we approached everything. I saw it in a test screening with 450 people, and it's such an immersive theatrical experience. You could feel the tension in the room.

How does it feel to be the canary in the coalmine, so to speak?

I'm excited. At the same time, I want to make sure that the people in charge are doing what they need to do so that anyone who comes out to this movie is doing so in a protected manner... and is in good hands. I think that's what is happening.

Why should this film be the first one people see after lockdown?

Unhinged is a wonderful thrill-ride. It's escapist fare that will hopefully distract and entertain — and serve as a first step to being able to get back into movie theatres. I think this film does a great job.

JOHN NUGENT

UNHINGED IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 JULY



No./11

What it feels like to go deaf

How immersive new drama *Sound Of Metal* depicted a drummer's descent into deafness

SOUND OF METAL depicts the unravelling of one man, as Ruben (played by Riz Ahmed), a heavy-metal drummer and former addict, slowly loses his hearing. It's a process that's rarely shown on screen. But for debut director Darius Marder (a co-writer on *The Place Beyond The Pines*), it was important for the audience to feel that downward slide first-hand.

"We cut in and out of omniscience to a first-person experience — a point of hearing, rather than a point of view," Marder explains. The film forces the viewer to hear what Ruben does, muffling noise as soon as the first rupture hits; ingenious use of sound design was a key storytelling tool. "We mic'd the inside of skulls underwater to capture how Ruben would hear himself swallowing or blinking."

The ingenuity went beyond sound design, though. To play Ruben, Ahmed immersed himself in a realistically deaf world; rather than a total quiet, Marder explains, deafness manifests in low frequencies. "He wore two custom-made earpieces which emitted a white noise, a piercing whine he had to live with. Rather than just putting cotton in his ears, he actually couldn't hear his own voice."

The role had other demands. Ahmed also learned the drums from scratch, and transformed himself physically to match. "Drumming is a wonderful thing because there's no way to cheat it," Marder says. "And [Riz] was getting into a drummer's body shape — really cut, really lanky." Plus, there was the small matter of communicating via American Sign Language — which requires immense patience and emotion. "50 per cent of sign is in your eyes and face," explains Marder, "which is why hearing people have such a hard time doing it. When Riz realised he wasn't used to emoting with his face, he



Clockwise from main: Riz Ahmed learnt to drum for the film; Oh, and sign language as well; Drum roll, please.

started crying. He realised it was such an emotional breakthrough."

For all the obstacles of a new disability, the biggest challenge for Ruben is making peace with himself — what Marder calls "a silence of the soul". It's no easy feat. "If anybody thinks Ruben is good to go, he's not," Marder says. "But he's just reached something profound. It's the first time where he actually accepts something. Maybe that's my Buddhist upbringing — the only way toward healing is acceptance." A specific disability, then, but a universal story. **ELLA KEMP**

SOUND OF METAL IS DUE OUT LATER THIS YEAR

No./ 12

Two Weeks To Live



[ON-SET REPORT]

After saying goodbye to Westeros, **MAISIE WILLIAMS** is back on TV. *Empire* drops in on her “survivalist comedy”

WHERE: Bourne End, Buckinghamshire

WHEN: 10 December 2019

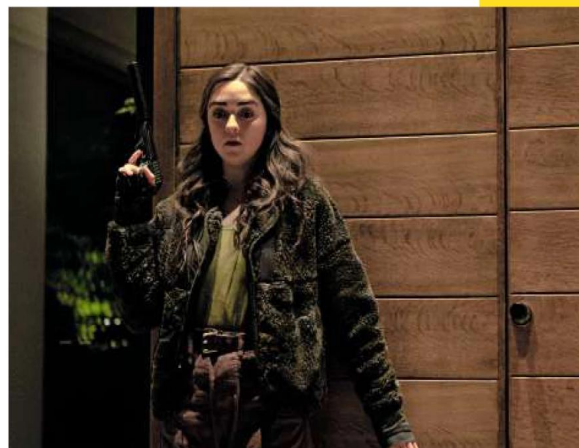
WHY? To visit the set of Maisie Williams' first TV outing, post-*Game Of Thrones*. She made her name for ten years as the heroic, kick-ass Arya Stark, and some of the badassery of that character seems to linger here: *Two Weeks To Live* sees her as Kim, an imperilled combat-trained survivalist who has lived off the grid for most of her life, heading back into the real world to exact revenge on the gangster who killed her dad. It gets awkward.

WHO'S IN IT? Williams, naturally, plus *Fleabag*'s Sian Clifford, as her no-nonsense, F-word-loving survivalist mother, Tina. Taheen Modak, Mawaan Rizwan, Sean Pertwee, Jason Flemyng, Kerry Howard and Thalissa Teixeira are in the mix too.

WHAT DID WE SEE? How the other half live!

Today's action takes place inside a £4.5 million mansion that looks more like a Californian beach house than a Home Counties suburban residence. Massive exterior lights flood the kitchen to offer some semblance of brightness as Tina aims a crossbow at brothers Nicky (Rizwan) and Jay (Modak), demanding to know, “Which one of you fuckers is Nicky?” A short-lived *Spartacus* moment between the two lads earns a giggle, and later Kim stumbles into the scene with a hemp sack over her head and body, having been captured by her overzealous mum who wants Kim to return home.

IS THIS ARYA 2.0? Kim might be handy in a fight, but she's still a fresh character for Williams to play with. “I think the cool-girl-who-fights has been done before and with Kim she's a bit of an idiot at times,” Williams says. “She's like an alien who's just landed: kind of ditz, but with childlike wonder.”



WHAT ABOUT THE FIGHTING? The show will boast an epic fight scene, choreographed by Jo McClaren, that pays homage to *Game Of Thrones*. “I've never worked with a female stunt coordinator before,” Williams says. “She takes into consideration the difference in athleticism of men and women, the flexibility, the mobility. It was phenomenal.” Before adding: “I can do fist fights now.” **HANNA FLINT**

TWO WEEKS TO LIVE IS ON SKY ONE AND NOW TV THIS AUTUMN

Getty Images, Shutterstock



No./13

“I want to do a horror movie that’s different”

After the singular success of *The Love Witch*, director **Anna Biller** exclusively dishes on her next film: a feminist horror with a bite

“THINK *REBECCA MEETS The Red Shoes* meets Hammer horror,” teases Anna Biller. “With shades of *Frenzy*.” The lockdown may have paused plans for *Bluebeard*, the filmmaker’s follow-up to *The Love Witch*, but her vision for the film seems crystal clear.

Her third film will be loosely based on the gothic folk tale of the same name. Originating from French legend, *Bluebeard* tells the tale of a woman who marries a nobleman — one who, it turns out, is not only a philander but harbours a murderous secret (hint: there’s a magic key, plus a room bursting with blood and corpses). Biller has chosen this narrative, she says, to shake up the genre for a modern audience. “I want to do a horror movie that’s different from anything out there,” she explains. “You see these women getting slaughtered in horror movies and it’s usually by some sort of entity or stranger. But in real life, most women are murdered by an intimate partner, and that to me is the scariest thing.”

An avid cinephile who delights in classic Hollywood, Biller found her inspiration for *Bluebeard* when she realised a lot of her favourite films share a common theme: women in peril. “*Dial M For Murder*, *Gaslight*, *Rosemary’s Baby*,” she lists. “They’re

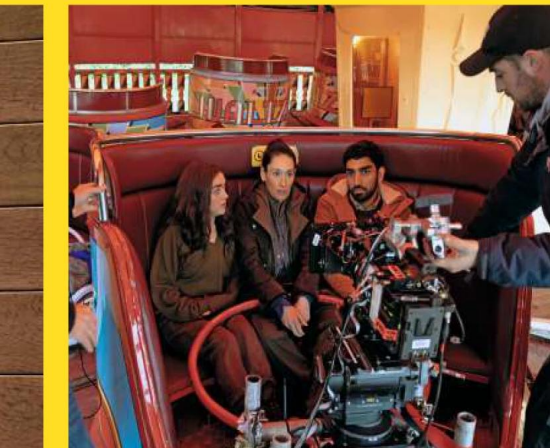
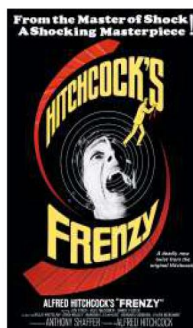
satisfying because they’re mysteries in which men are the mystery. They show women using their superior skills of empathy and intuition to solve a problem.” As with *The Love Witch*, Biller will be applying her distinct visual flair to *Bluebeard* with an aesthetic she likes to call “gothic Technicolor”.

“The imagery draws on gothic-romance novel covers which feature women with great hair running from castles at night,” she explains.

“And Technicolor movies — namely horror films from the 1950s through to the 1970s — created this gothic atmosphere with lurid colour, using reds and blues to capture blood and moonlight.”

With the script and concept art complete, Biller is hopeful that the film’s development will roll forward as studios gradually begin to reopen their doors. Until then, the filmmaker promises that, despite being prompted by women in peril, *Bluebeard* will hold an important message of empowerment.

“I think that the film will validate women today,” she says. “It tells them that their fears and fantasies are not silly, and that they as audiences are worthy of films made for them.” Here’s a modern female horror hero sorely needed. Keep the fake blood on standby. **BETH WEBB**



No. 14

The anatomy of a frog

With new unscripted show **MUPPETS NOW** arriving on Disney+, puppeteer **Matt Vogel** breaks down the essential elements that make up Kermit The Frog

THE PERSONALITY

Kermit is the unofficial leader/wrangler of the Muppets. He heads their theatre troupe but also acts as mentor, confidante and — for Miss Piggy, at least — romantic target. “He’s the calm at the centre of the storm,” says Matt Vogel, who has performed as Kermit since 2017. “He’s the one reining in the chaos. Sometimes he gets swept up in it, but usually he’s reining it in.” There can also be an irritable edge to Kermit, which Vogel says is vital to his comedy. “You see a lot of snarkiness in Jim [Henson]’s original performance. I like to bring some of that to my performance. Kermit’s not going to let you walk all over him.”

THE VOICE

Everybody does a Kermit impression. Most of them terrible. Vogel learned his from the greatest living authority. “Of course, I had hours of footage of Jim Henson to watch. But I worked with Brian Henson [Jim’s son and chairman of The Jim Henson Company], who oversaw the process of becoming Kermit. He knows better than anyone how his father did Kermit’s voice.” Vogel says a lot of people bungle their Kermit voice because they’re speaking from the wrong place. “If you look at videos of Jim, his mouth doesn’t move a lot. A lot of people think the voice comes from the back of the throat, but it lives much more forward, in the mouth.”





Unleash the goblins!

After decades of waiting, cult favourite **Labyrinth** is getting a sequel – but why now?

THROUGH DANGERS UNTOLD, and hardships unnumbered, it has fought its way here... 34 years after the original was released – and six years after a follow-up was first officially mooted – the promised sequel to Jim Henson's beloved, bizarre cult fantasy *Labyrinth* appears to have finally found its way out of the development-hell maze. With *Doctor Strange's* Scott Derrickson replacing Fede Álvarez (*Don't Breathe*) as director, and a fresh script by Maggie Levin (writer-director of *Miss 2059*), the Magic Dance is back on.

Of course, there are reasons to be cautious. The '86 original's core creative team are sadly no longer with us: Henson, with his vision and puppetry genius; Terry Jones, whose script was witty, edgy and boldly surreal; and David Bowie, who wrote the songs, played baby-snatching Goblin King Jareth, and distracted us all with *that* massive bulge.

But there's good cause for optimism, not least the resounding success of last year's epic *Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance*. Wisely avoiding full-on CGI, the Henson Company-produced Netflix series proved that practical puppetry can feel just as impressive, beautiful and emotionally engaging to 21st-century viewers as it did in the mid-'80s (even more so with

Above: Bowie tries to distract Jennifer Connelly with his magic ball. **Below:** Director Scott Derrickson with fantastic beasts Ludo (left) and Hoggle.

a subtle touch of digital augmentation). The wealth of talent is still there, and we can be sure every ounce of it will be spent on a new *Labyrinth*, not to mention the possible welcome return of Hoggle, Ludo and Sir Didymus.

Plus, both Derrickson and Levin have a knack for horror (Levin wrote the 'My Valentine' episode of Hulu's *Into The Dark*), so we can expect an even darker fairy-tale tinge than in the original. And there's so much potential storywise, whether we're re-entering the circuitous subconscious of an adult Sarah (Jennifer Connelly), experiencing an all-new maze in the fevered mind of one of her offspring, or unleashing fresh goblins from the imaginations of entirely new characters.

The biggest question, though, is who could possibly fill Bowie's codpiece – sorry, shoes – as the new Jareth? Connelly herself would be an interestingly twisted choice, while there's an undeniable appeal to any of the other fan suggestions offered thus far: Tom Hiddleston, Tilda Swinton, Janelle Monáe, Jemaine Clement. We'd add Lin-Manuel Miranda to that heady mix: he's got the charm, he's got the tunes, but most of all he could definitely rock those tights.

DAN JOLIN



THE SONGS

"Singing as Kermit is easier than speaking," says Vogel. Part of that is because he has an emotional template for the songs, which he can imitate. "I have the definitive recordings of 'Rainbow Connection' and 'It's Not Easy Being Green', which is Jim doing them. So I can try to live in that place as I sing the song." (Don't expect new show *Muppets Now* to have much singing, though – it's entirely improvised.)

THE MOVEMENT

"A lot of the Muppets are built from foam and other internal stuff...Kermit is really a glorified sock puppet," says Vogel. That actually gives him a wider range of expression than a lot of the other Muppets. "The performer's hand inside the puppet gives you subtle movements that convey emotion... My goal is to try to replicate Jim's style, but with my own influence."

THE HEART

Above all, Kermit is about the way he makes people feel. When he thinks of Kermit, Vogel remembers the first time he ever saw him, on an episode of *Sesame Street*. "He's trying to teach a little girl the alphabet and she keeps getting to a part of it and saying, 'Cookie Monster!' Kermit keeps trying to get her to do it right, but the same thing over and over. Kermit shows that snarky side and gets fed up and leaves. But then the girl says, 'I love you.' He comes back and says, 'I love you too.' That's the heart of Kermit."

OLLY RICHARDS

MUPPETS NOW IS ON
DISNEY+ FROM 31 JULY



No. / 16

Four ways the Scottish Highlands could kill you

New British comedy-horror
BOYZ IN THE WOOD sees
some teenagers battle the
elements — and a bit more...

FOUR BOYS, ONE Duke of Edinburgh Award, the entire Scottish Highlands: what could go wrong? In director Ninian Doff's energetic debut *Boyz In The Wood*, it turns out, *everything*. Reluctant hikers Ian, Dean, Duncan and Beatroot (played by newcomers Samuel Bottomley, Rian Gordon, Lewis Gribben and Viraj Juneja) encounter

gale-force winds, their own ineptitude and a murderous aristocrat, played by Eddie Izzard. Here's a guide to the obstacles they face.

EXTREME WEATHER!

"What they say about Scotland is that you go through every season every hour," Doff says. "Gale-force winds, then some sun, then colossal rain." The titular boyz encounter all of that, and even a spot of light British drizzle proves problematic when you're wearing gleaming white trainers. But there's also an invisible threat. "When it all clears, you've got the midges, which are like piranhas but in the sky," explains Doff. "They're clouds of microscopic mosquitos that will break the toughest person in the world. The good thing about the rain is the midges can't fly. So it's rain or midges — which do you want?"

NO PHONE SIGNAL!

Orientation can endanger even the best of travellers without 3G — so what happens when you place four smartphone-addicts in an area where there's no signal? "Mobile phones are the bane of horror films," Doff explains. "Any modern film that doesn't address mobiles, you spend the whole time wondering, 'Why don't they just use their phone?'" Helpfully for plot reasons, rural Scotland has notoriously patchy coverage — to the deep distress of our Gen-Z leads. "The good thing about the Highlands is that you have huge stretches of zero signal. But it would be unrealistic to not have phones at all." Which is not to say they are neglected in the film: phones are used to make music videos with the self-proclaimed "future of hip-hop", DJ Beatroot.



POSH PEOPLE WITH GUNS!

Our heroes are hunted by an *actual* duke (Izzard), in a nightmarish class-war take on *The Most Dangerous Game*. The "wonderful, deranged characters", as Doff calls them, are actually a set-up for bloody vengeance with a political edge. "In the wake of Brexit and Trump I was feeling heartbroken for the next generation," Doff explains. "I wanted to write a revenge film for them."

YOUR OWN INCOMPETENCE!

It's a ragtag crew for sure: three self-confessed skivers and a plucky homeschooled kid looking forward to making friends. Doff says, "They're not just inept, but they have no desire to not be inept." But this journey ultimately brings these boys together despite their differences. "It's about figuring out who you are as a teenager, who you're pretending to be and who you're pigeonholed to be." The Highlands can be deadly — but they can also be a lifesaver. **ELLA KEMP**

BOYZ IN THE WOOD IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 7 AUGUST

Main: The new Boyzone, L-R: Ian (Samuel Bottomley), DJ Beatroot (Viraj Juneja), Duncan (Lewis Gribben) and Dean (Rian Gordon). Below: Eddie Izzard and Georgie Glen play eccentric highlanders.

No. 17

St Joel's fire

[IN MEMORIAM]

Empire's Alex Godfrey reflects on the life and career of JOEL SCHUMACHER, the irrepressible director who died in June

IT'S DIFFICULT TO think of a filmmaker who loved life as much as Joel Schumacher did. It was evident in his work, in his off-screen exploits, and in person. The last time I spoke to him, for *Empire's* retrospective on *The Lost Boys*, was December 2019. He was an absolute delight from the off. "Well, howdy!" he said, 80 years old, from his home in New York's Greenwich Village. "I've got the fireplace roaring and I'm just about to put on *Lost Boys*, in case I have to make a reference." For the next 90 minutes or so, he was a blast. He always was.

Schumacher got his education on the streets, smoking and drinking from the age of ten, finding his voice among Greenwich Village's bohemian community. After a successful career as a costume designer, he began writing and

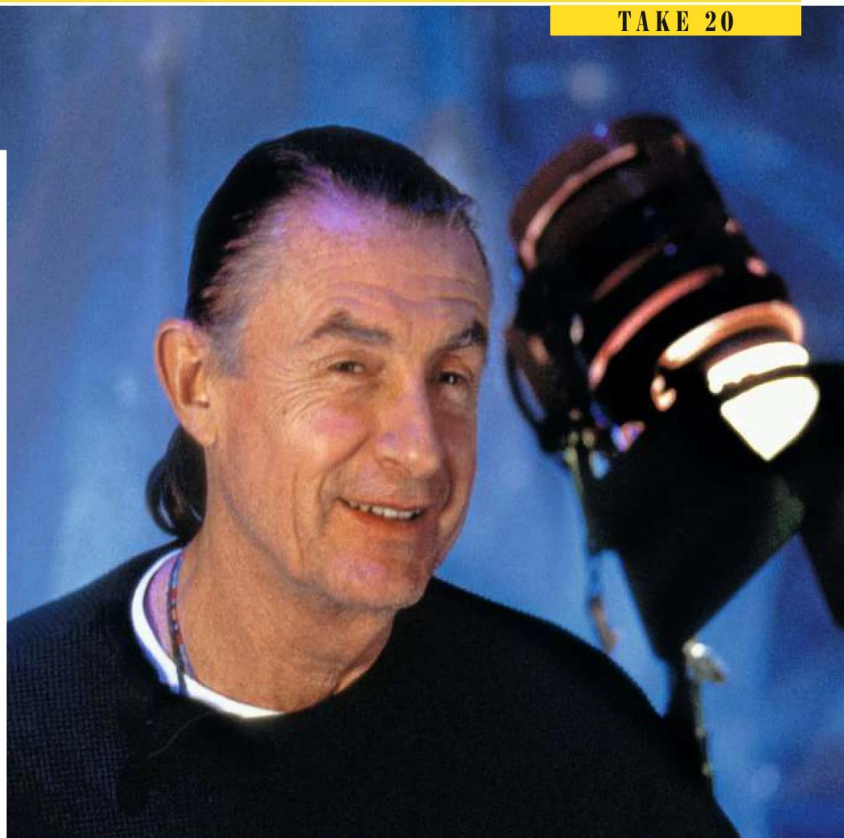
then directing, breaking through with 1985's Brat-Pack drama *St. Elmo's Fire* and 1987's *The Lost Boys*, both dripping with adolescent angst, raging with hormones and populated with the prettiest people around. "There was an article in a magazine," he told me last Christmas, "called, 'Why do people look like they do in Joel Schumacher movies and don't look like that again?'" I said, "I really see people like that."

Schumacher discovered and nurtured actors, casting Kiefer Sutherland (*The Lost Boys*), Julia Roberts (*Flatliners*) and Colin Farrell (*Tigerland*) when barely anybody knew who they were. He loved people, and his films, whether they were glossy courtroom affairs (*The Client*, *A Time To Kill*), more contained dramas (*Falling Down*, *Tigerland*,

Phone Booth) or even his *Batman* bonanzas, positively vibrated. Sometimes too much, sure — but he was an unrestrained director, in thrall to everything.

He was a riot, but he was gentle, and genuinely gracious. "I tried to serve you as best I could," he said to me as our conversation — quite possibly his final interview — began winding up. "Because I am 80, remember that. So I'm delving into the honeycomb of my brain." When we were done, he spent time asking me about myself, giving me incredible encouragement. "Don't let anyone piss on your dreams," he said as we drew to a close.

He certainly followed his own advice. Schumacher really did live life to the full. Watch his films again. The vitality speaks for itself.



THREE TO WATCH

A selection of Schumacher's most defining, underrated films



TIGERLAND

For all his reputation as a flashy blockbuster filmmaker, here was proof Schumacher could do gritty and grounded — with star-making turns from Colin Farrell and Michael Shannon.



THE CLIENT

Schumacher's versatility is evident in this, the first of his two John Grisham adaptations, stripping a courtroom tussle down to its leanest, most effective parts.



COUSINS

This raucous romcom remake of French film *Cousin Cousine* showcased Schumacher's sense of humour — with a scene-stealing turn from *Airplane!*'s Lloyd Bridges.

Top to bottom: One of a kind: Joel Schumacher, 1939-2020. *Falling Down* with Michael Douglas (1993); Everybody freeze! Directing Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Batman & Robin*, 1997.

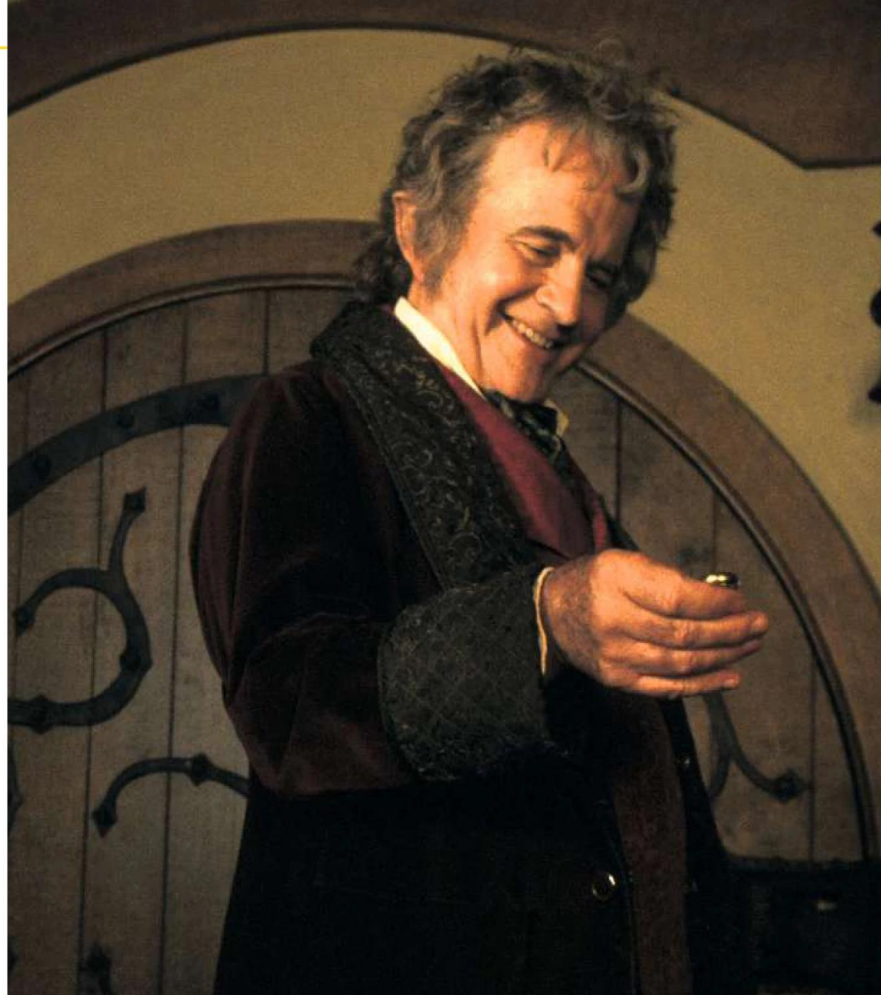
No./18 Goodbye, dear Bilbo

[IN MEMORIAM] The late **Ian Holm** brought magic to Middle-earth with his pitch-perfect Bilbo. We pay tribute to a performance of special magnificence

FOR A GENERATION of film lovers — maybe more than one — the late Ian Holm will be best remembered as Bilbo Baggins in Peter Jackson's *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy. It's not his biggest role, nor his most complex. It's not as funny as his turn in *The Fifth Element* or as stoic as his role in *Chariots Of Fire*. But he gave Bilbo so much heart and character in just a few minutes of screen time that his presence looms large through the whole trilogy.

Bilbo is the first Hobbit

we meet, in Galadriel's prologue of the Ring. But the grey-haired "eleventy-one"-year-old Bilbo who pops up a few minutes later is the image that sticks: an over-enthusiastic host and warm-hearted mentor to his young nephew Frodo (Holm of course played Frodo years before, on radio), talking 90 miles a minute when his old wizard friend visits. But you immediately sense the pain behind the bustle, and a surprisingly stubborn streak under the bonhomie. In the course of a single conversation



Main: "I'm going on an adventure" — Holm's first film appearance as Bilbo in 2001. Left: In *The Return of The King*, 2003.



No./20 The weather according to David Lynch

The filmmaker has been doing weather reports on YouTube — but the elements have always pelted down on his work



THE ELEPHANT MAN (1980)

The tale of the deformed Joseph Merrick (played by John Hurt) is set in foggy Victorian London, where mist and smog hang heavy in the air. It's a smoky, enigmatic backdrop to a tragic human tale.

FORECAST: "People are frightened by weather they don't understand."



DUNE (1984)

The mysterious desert planet of Arrakis tends to throw up regular sandstorms and suffocating heat; the director probably hopes, however, that the sandy winds blow this early misfire off his CV.

FORECAST: "He who controls the weather, controls the universe!"

with Gandalf, Holm layers in years of complicated history for Bilbo. You understand that he's not quite as cheery as he appears, that he's tougher than his cosy home suggests, and that he is planning something major. Holm makes it look easy, but the fact that it feels like a reunion and not an info-dump is testament to his skill.

As he demonstrated as Ash in *Alien*, Holm could turn from benign to terrifying faster than almost anyone: his attack on Gandalf when the wizard suggests he leave the Ring behind is almost as scary as his later, CG-assisted snarl at Frodo. Both moments are uncharacteristic, and profoundly upsetting because they are so alien to him. In a way, Bilbo's character is a microcosm of the whole of Middle-earth. The epic quest to destroy the Ring is, on one level at least, a quest to save Bilbo's soul and free him from its influence. A character who we only spend a few minutes with, in the first and third films, is in many ways the lynchpin of the whole affair, and proof of the story's moral that one small person — or small role — can make a crucial difference. But only if you have someone of Holm's immense skill to bring him to life. **HELEN O'HARA**



No./19

Attack The Block

is back!

And other upcoming projects director **Joe Cornish** has been cooking up to follow *The Kid Who Would Be King*

ATTACK THE BLOCK 2

A sequel to to Cornish's acclaimed 2011 sci-fi debut, about South London kids fending off terrifying aliens

"John [Boyega] and I have had on-and-off discussions about doing something else with those

characters, really since we made the first one. So, yeah, without wanting to get anybody too excited, there are definitely conversations happening. We both think that there's more to be said and done, and it would be kind of cool to revisit the *surviving* characters ten years later."

SNOW CRASH

Long-mooted adaptation of Neal Stephenson's sci-fi novel about a pizza delivery driver/hacker, originally pitched as a film

"That has mutated into a series for HBO Max, which is currently being written by Michael Bacall. I'm hoping [to direct some episodes]. I'd like to do it all. Obviously, there's a big difference in adapting a novel for a feature and for a series — especially with *Snow Crash*, which is an incredibly dense, action-packed, clever, sophisticated book. It's a bit of a cliché but it's true: a TV show done at the right level gives you scope to be more faithful to a book than a movie would. You can really get into the nooks and crannies of the story."

COMPLETE FICTION

Production company set up with Edgar Wright and producers Nira Park and Rachael Prior

"We'd been talking about it for a couple of years. The main delay was thinking of the name, which has taken at least 18 months. It's so difficult. All the good ones are taken. There were quite a lot of rejected names that sounded like cosmetic companies. But it's an umbrella under which anything can happen. Maybe a baked goods chain? Personal massage service? Or Edgar could actually start selling Cornettos. We've been working hard on *Lockwood & Co*, which is a series of brilliant novels by Jonathan Stroud about a ghost-hunting agency in London. I've been writing a bunch of episodes of that, and with luck, will be directing that as soon as directing things is permitted again. That's on Netflix. I'm also working on a fun high-concept horror script. Lots of stuff!" **JOHN NUGENT**



WILD AT HEART (1990)

Lynch's steamy road-movie romance takes in the shimmering highways of the Deep South and the desert West — but nothing in the burning sky is quite as roasting as Nicolas Cage and Laura Dern's off-the-scale onscreen chemistry.

FORECAST: "You got me hotter than Georgia asphalt!"



TWIN PEAKS (1990, 1992, 2017)

Lynch swaps his beloved sunny California for the grey, overcast mountains of Washington State. With crisp coolness and snow-tipped forests, you're not going to want to go outside (or into the extradimensional space of the Red Room) without a jacket.

FORECAST: "Black as midnight on a moonless night."



MULHOLLAND DRIVE (2001)

From *Sunset Boulevard* to *Mulholland Drive*, the sun always shines in Los Angeles. But Lynch's surreal Hollywood nightmare takes place mostly at night, in the mysterious back alleys of Beverly Hills, the air eerily still.

FORECAST: "I hope that I never see that weather, ever, outside of a dream..."



DAVID LYNCH THEATER WEATHER REPORT (2020)

His new YouTube series is played perplexingly straight, as Lynch delivers daily meteorological missives, with occasional diversions into his trademark weirdness (he once dreamed about being killed as a German soldier on D-Day).

FORECAST: "A hope for more golden sunshine." **JOHN NUGENT**



PINT OF MILK

ANYA TAYLOR-JOY

What character did you play in your first-ever school play?

I was about nine or ten and I played Perkin in *Perkin And The Pastry Cook*. It was kind of like a version of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. I was playing a boy and my costume included my mum's thigh-high leather boots. I felt like a rock star. I had a very badly drawn fake moustache that I refused to wash off because I loved it. Actually, I remember there was a moment where somebody didn't come on stage and I freaked out and started delivering a monologue to pass the time. Afterwards, the director — our art teacher — said, "You might be good at this. You should think about doing it properly."

When in your life were you most starstruck?

I think it was while having a conversation with Dan Romer, who composed the soundtrack to *Beasts Of the Southern Wild*. When I was making *The Witch*, that soundtrack was all I listened to. I met him and had a lovely conversation and suddenly had a moment where I thought, "I am talking to the man who soundtracked my life."

How much is a pint of milk?

Oh shit. I don't buy milk. A quid? 90p? Does that question freak people out? Who knows that?

Which film have you seen more than any other?

When I was a kid, my dad and I would watch *Top Gun* on LaserDisc. My dad had an absolute obsession with *Top Gun*. Every weekend. Every birthday. Always *Top Gun*. I am really looking forward to being able to see the sequel with my dad. Also, when I was a bit older I was obsessed with the 2003 *Peter Pan*, with Jeremy Sumpter in it. I would wake up two-and-a-half hours before school to watch it, because I was deeply in crush.

Have you ever sent fan mail?

Yes. This is very embarrassing. Do people usually get this embarrassed in this interview? I sent a letter, when I was 11 or 12, to the people who



ILLUSTRATION ARNO

made *Harry Potter*, saying, "I really want to be an actor and I'm obsessed with Harry Potter. Can I be in your movie?" I never heard back. I also wrote to John Green, the author, when I was 13 and he did write back and his letter was so lovely.

What's the worst thing you've ever put in your mouth?

Raisins. I have a hatred of raisins that is bordering on a phobia. They terrify me. When I was a kid, I thought, for some reason, that biting into a raisin is what it would be like to bite into an old person's arm, and I've never gotten over that. And now I've ruined raisins for you too.

Have you ever stolen anything from a hotel?

This isn't a hotel story but I like it. I travelled on Eurostar and I was obsessed with the little glasses they give you for your wine. They're really tiny and cute. I was talking to the steward and at the end of the journey he gave me a set. So I didn't steal but I very heavily hinted that I'd like them.

What one thing do you do better than anyone else you know?

Read very quickly and make friends with cats very easily. Cats like my vibe. It's a gift.

What's the last TV show you binged?

Pose on Netflix. I cried hysterically through most of it. I loved every second of it.

What is the worst smell in the world?

Toilets at a music festival. I was talking to a friend the other day about the worst queue you've ever stood in, and I said, "The bathrooms at Reading [Festival]." Awful.

What is your earliest memory?

I told my parents this the other day and they didn't believe it was my first memory, but it honestly is. I remember being in the back of my parents' car, going to the countryside, and hearing The Bee Gees' 'Stayin' Alive' and thinking it was amazing. I'd have been three or four. It took ages for me to find out what it was. Years. In my early adolescence, I'd be typing "ah ah ah aah" into the computer to try to find out what it was. **OLLY RICHARDS**

COMING SOON

THE NEW MUTANTS

(2020)

Taylor-Joy stars as young mutant Illyana Rasputin in this much-delayed X-Men spin-off, due in August.

LAST NIGHT IN SOHO

(2021)

Director Edgar Wright's mysterious London-set horror sees Taylor-Joy co-star with Matt Smith and Diana Rigg.

THE NORTHMAN

(TBC)

Taylor-Joy is reteaming with Robert Eggers (who directed her breakthrough film *The Witch*) in this "Viking revenge film".

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[EDITED BY IAN FREER]



[FILM]

DA 5 BLOODS

★★★★★

OUT NOW / NETFLIX
CERT 15 / 155 MINS

DIRECTOR Spike Lee

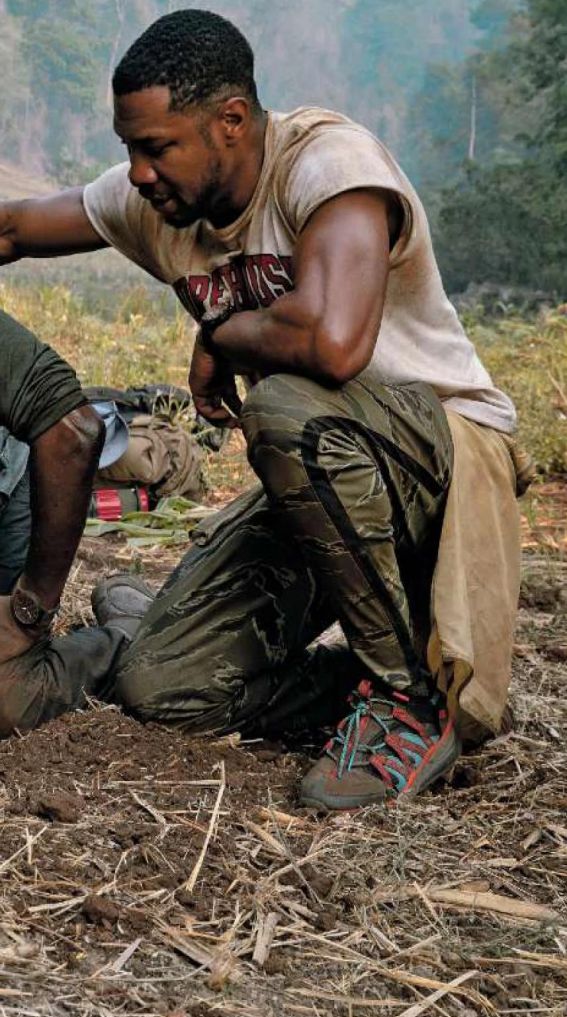
CAST Delroy Lindo, Norm Lewis, Isaiah Whitlock Jr, Clarke Peters, Chadwick Boseman

PLOT Four African-American veterans, Paul (Lindo), Eddie (Lewis), Melvin (Whitlock Jr) and Otis (Peters), return to Vietnam in search of the remains of their fallen squad leader, Stormin' Norman (Boseman). But they are also motivated by the promise of the buried gold he helped them to hide.

IT FEELS BOTH reductive and redundant to refer to a Spike Lee joint as “timely”, but his latest will feel this way to many. *Da 5 Bloods* recaps a long history of state-sponsored murder and abuse of Black people, and suppression of protests just like those against the recent police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and so many more. But this film is also a conversation about American imperialism, weaving a connective thread between the crimes of law enforcement on home soil and the disproportionate conscription of Black people, as well as horrifying atrocities committed by US soldiers abroad. This already threatens to make the film sound like a debilitating affair, but it’s far from it – if anything, it’s often quite funny, with plenty of colourful banter to go around.

The eponymous Bloods are military veterans of different social strata and political alignment who have returned to Vietnam to pay final respects to the leader of their unit, Stormin’

Melvin (Isiah Whitlock Jr), Eddie (Norm Lewis), Otis (Clarke Peters), Paul (Delroy Lindo) and David (Jonathan Majors) grieve for Stormin' Norman.

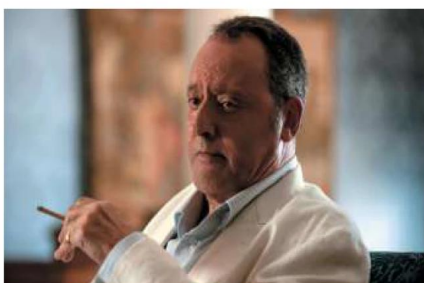


Norman (Chadwick Boseman in flashback, with regal charisma), and get rich by finding MIA gold while doing so. As tensions rise between the old war buddies, Lee creates more thorny, complex morality than in his other recent films; these characters were conscripted and exploited, but were still part of an invading force. Characters and viewers alike are confronted by acts perpetrated by American infantry, as horrific images of war crimes linger on screen, daring you to look away.

Paul (Delroy Lindo instilling the character with paranoid delirium) in particular spouts hateful slurs and holds onto a misguided, xenophobic patriotism. He buys into rhetoric that helps justify the horrors of his past, bringing out the tension between him and his son David (Jonathan Majors, the standout of *The Last Black Man In San Francisco*), as the latter struggles with his ties to this traumatised but prejudiced man. There's a fascinating direct dialogue with



Broker Victor Desroche (Jean Reno, centre) and the gang discuss the contraband loot.



Top to bottom: Land-mine expert Hedy (Mélanie Thierry) and David hang out; Otis and Melvin with local guide Vinh Tran (Johnny Nguyen); The slippery Desroche.

Apocalypse Now, with visual nods and similar story beats throughout — announced from the moment Coppola's film's title card looms over a DJ set in a Vietnamese bar. Only here, Colonel Kurtz is a guy wearing a MAGA hat.

A blend of road trip, treasure hunt and war movie, it's a tough balancing act, and that first hour can feel as though it's missing the dynamism and colour of Lee's exploration of urban spaces, as he leaves behind his comfort zone for wide-open rice paddies, rivers and dense jungle. But the madness that follows is worth the wait, as the quest for gold spirals bloodily out of control. Newton Thomas Sigel's camerawork shifts back and forth between different aspect ratios and colour grading as Lee navigates different time periods; the lensing

eventually becomes more familiar, with Lee's confrontational, direct-to-camera monologues emerging as time passes and anger builds. It's all backed by a typically rousing score from long-time collaborator Terence Blanchard, accompanied by songs from Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* album — sometimes employing Gaye's naked vocal — that are used sparingly, and very effectively.

The usual caveats of late-era Spike Lee apply. *Da 5 Bloods* is almost overloaded with ideas, leaving room for only very thinly sketched female characters. The paternity of the daughter of a Vietnamese sex worker is touched on, but never from her perspective. French land mine disposal expert Hedy (Mélanie Thierry) appears as a fascinating riff on the plantation owners from the 'Redux' cut of *Apocalypse Now*, but her arc fizzles out. Black women still remain at the sidelines. This has been a fairly consistent element of Lee's work, and continues to disappoint.

At least Hanoi Hannah (a real radio personality played with major cool by Veronica Ngo) is given some room to stand out. Some of the film's most striking moments are hers, as she broadcasts to Black American soldiers, calmly smoking as she questions fighting for a country that kills and oppresses them. Meant to discourage American GIs, her words sound more like solidarity when directed at Black soldiers. It's also here that Lee's long-standing use of archive footage to reinforce dialogue proves most powerful.

Between his multiple jabs at Trump ("the Klansman in the Oval Office"), Lee shows how the history of film ties into America's imperialism as well as fundamental anti-Blackness. *Da 5 Bloods* doesn't pretend to tell a complete history of cinema's relationship with the war (here mostly and rightly referred to as "the American War") so much as it works to re-evaluate stale narratives, and highlight those that remain untold. This is, of course, still an American film set in Vietnam, but it's one that tells the story from a viewpoint too often minimised. **KAMBOLE CAMPBELL**

VERDICT Though sometimes messy and freewheeling, *Da 5 Bloods* is a fascinating, frequently gripping and powerful interrogation of the connection between American imperialism, anti-Black racism, and the widespread trauma of the country's war-making.



Clockwise from main: Charlize's comedy headpiece was surprisingly realistic; Kiki Layne as US Marine Nile; Harry Melling channels his inner baddie.

[FILM]

THE OLD GUARD



OUT 10 JULY / NETFLIX /
CERT 15 / 125 MINS

DIRECTOR Gina Prince-Blythewood

CAST Charlize Theron, Kiki Layne, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Matthias Schoenaerts

PLOT Andy (Theron) leads a squad of elite mercenaries, taking on dangerous missions all over the world. They also happen to be immortals, who have fought in countless conflicts throughout the centuries. After their latest job goes bad, however, the team suspects someone is onto their secret.

WHO WANTS TO live forever? So asked Freddie Mercury on the soundtrack to 1986's *Highlander*, a film to which *The Old Guard* owes no small debt. That existential quandary lies at the heart of this Netflix original thriller, adapted by Greg Rucka from his and Leandro Fernández's 2017 comic-book series. Charlize Theron's Andromache of Scythia (Andy to her friends) is a millennia-old warrior weighed down with undying ennui. Having spent most of recorded history up to her elbows in gore, she has witnessed the same old squabbles, the

same inhumanity, and wonders if there's any point to it all. But, after taking a year off (the immortal equivalent of a bank holiday) to contemplate, she and her ageless teammates (Matthias Schoenaerts, Marwan Kenzari and Luca Marinelli) reluctantly return to their calling as guns for hire. This time, though, the perennial quartet's refusal to expire is captured on film, exposing their secret and leading to a showdown with the deadliest foe of all: an unscrupulous pharmaceutical company.

With regular swordplay (Andy herself favours a battle-axe), flashbacks in period garb, and a great deal of angsty hand-wringing over the downsides of eternal life ("It's not what time steals, it's what it leaves behind; things you can't forget"), the film doffs a tartan cap at Connor MacLeod with little apology. But where Russell Mulcahy's film (for all its hamminess) had a sweeping, epic scope that spanned history, *The Old Guard* is far more constrained. With a narrative anchored firmly in the present, hints at the depth of the immortals' past are limited to coy allusions about Andy's age, fragmented glimpses of her raising hell in the Middle Ages, and a rather clumsy scrapbook, complete with awkward Photoshopping alongside Martin Luther King. Beyond these superficial nods, there's little real sense of who Andy or her companions really are; their experiences brushed past but never truly explored. Schoenaerts' Booker opens up about how failing to age caused his children to spurn him, and there's talk of another immortal who one day



simply stopped healing and died, which made them all a bit sad. But these nods to emotional scar tissue are never given sufficient room to breathe, the film too keen to skip over any meaty exploration of character to keep the plot moving. Only Kenzari and Marinelli's characters — eternal lovers who met fighting on opposite sides of the Crusades — have real texture to them, and even that is concentrated in a single, albeit touching, declaration of love in the back of a panel van.

Despite the story limitations, Theron is on



fine form as the Scythian Methuselah, borrowing *Furiiosa's* steely glower and channelling her aptitude for complex choreography previously showcased in *Atomic Blonde*. Director Gina Prince-Bythewood (*Love & Basketball*), who came close to adapting Sony's since-abandoned *Black Cat* and *Silver Sable* movie *Silver & Black*, keeps the action fast and frantic. Regular flurries of bullets and blades serve as the film's main strength, and while unlikely to give David Leitch any sleepless nights, *The Old Guard* gets points for leaning into the idea that the immortals *can* die, they just do so over and over again — with all the excruciating sensation that goes with it.

Most of the film's humanity is rooted in KiKi Layne's Nile, a young US Marine serving in the Middle East and the first new immortal in centuries. Wide-eyed and incredulous at her newfound resilience — she shrugs off an insurgent's blade to the throat without so much as a scar — Nile makes a handy access point for the viewer, teasing out backstory and lending proceedings some heart along the way. Chiwetel Ejiofor is wasted in a paper-thin role as a shady ex-CIA wonk, while the film's primary antagonist — a Big Pharma CEO played by Harry 'Dudley Dursley' Melling — is so embarrassingly overplayed as to veer into parody, making a strong entry for worst screen villain of the year. While this is the most egregious case, lack of character depth across the board only highlights the throwaway plot, which never provokes more than passing interest, as the character beats that set it up feel hollow. It's particularly unfortunate that the film's most promising subplot, involving imprisoned immortal Veronica Ngo, is almost entirely abandoned, leaving a potentially far more interesting tale untold.

Despite some solid action beats and a story that skips from Sudan to Afghanistan, Paris and, finally, Guildford, *The Old Guard* is a trite revenge/conspiracy yarn, clumsily told ("That woman has forgotten more ways to kill than entire armies will ever learn"), and squanders a potentially engaging conceit. An awkward coda sets the stage for a second instalment, but on the strength of this offering, surely there can be only one. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT A disappointingly lifeless take on immortal mayhem. Better than *Highlander 3*, but not by much.

"Darling, I'm only going into space. I'll be back by bedtime."



[FILM] PROXIMA

★★★★★

OUT 10 JULY / PICTUREHOUSE
CERT 12A / 107 MINS

DIRECTOR Alice Winocour

CAST Eva Green, Matt Dillon, Zélie Boulant, Lars Eidinger

PLOT Engineer and astronaut Sarah Loreau (Green) is selected for the *Proxima* space programme, in which she will spend a year in space — the last mission before Mars. As she trains for the mission, she must also nurture her increasingly complicated relationship with her eight-year-old daughter, Stella (Boulant).

YOU'VE HEARD OF the Sad Space Dad. In recent times we've also been getting the Glum Space Mum. The likes of *Interstellar*, *First Man* and *Ad Astra* are being met by the likes of *Gravity*, *Lucy In The Sky* — and now *Proxima*, the latest film to grapple with the cosmic challenges of both going to space and being a good parent. This comes from French filmmaker Alice Winocour, and it's an emotional but refreshingly matter-of-fact drama; where other films might deal with the galactic razzle-dazzle of space, *Proxima* gets into the nuts and bolts of actually getting there in the first place.

This is the rare space movie set entirely on Earth, and as such, it feels grounded and real. As Sarah Loreau (Eva Green) juggles her maternal and professional responsibilities, so the film juggles these perspectives, and both seem thoughtfully depicted and largely authentic. We join Sarah as she learns the news that she has been selected to go into space, realising a lifelong dream, and so begins training across multiple months, settings and continents, from deep-water survival to centrifugal machines.

Much of the film was shot at real training

centres at the European Space Agency, which lends it a sense of realism. But Winocour is as interested in the universal challenges of a woman moving through a male-dominated environment as she is the singular challenges of astronaut preparation. In one telling scene, a male doctor asks Sarah sniffy and insensitive questions about menstruation and getting her hair cut. Although occasionally it feels overly didactic; Matt Dillon plays a thinly drawn astronaut colleague whose primary character trait for most of the film is 'sexist!'.

Better is the relationship with Sarah's ex-partner Thomas (Lars Eidinger), with whom she shares a believably cordial co-parenting relationship ("We're so modern, getting it done with laughs and smiles," she observes), and their daughter Stella, who announces herself as "dyslexic, dyscalculic and dysorthographic". Played sweetly by newcomer Zélie Boulant, Stella is thoughtful and sad, with a quiet intensity, as the confusing pressure of a mother disappearing from the planet for a year slowly dawns. It's a big burden for a small person to comprehend.

That relationship is the real core of the story, and the film finds poetic drama, through their mother-daughter letters, in the dry facts of astronaut life. In space, Sarah notes in voiceover, her body will not be able to produce tears. On Earth, of course, it's a different matter. As the unthinkable scale of separation deepens, it's the twin performances from Green and Boulant that really bring the ship home, and give the film its heart. Boulant is a true find, while Green is astonishing, imparting shattering emotional power with subtlety and verve. We never doubt her character's resolve. Green hasn't been stretched so impressively in years; in fact, it's hard to think of a better performance in her career. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT Another Glum Space Mum, but one who feels complex and real. While the film depicts extraordinary circumstances, it always keeps the hearts (and heads) of its mother and daughter in focus.



An excoriating, multifaceted look at America's criminal (in)justice system.

[FILM]

CLEMENCY



OUT 17 JULY / DIGITAL
CERT TBC / 112 MINS

DIRECTOR Chinonye Chukwu

CAST Alfre Woodard, Danielle Brooks, Wendell Pierce, Aldis Hodge, Richard Schiff

PLOT Bernadine Williams (Woodard) is a prison warden preparing for the execution of a prisoner (Hodge) who proclaims his innocence and is hoping for a last-minute reprieve. Her husband (Pierce) asks her to prioritise life outside work, but has her job already taken too heavy a toll?

CLEMENCY'S OPENING SCENE shows prison warden Bernadine Williams (Alfre Woodard) overseeing the 11th execution of her career. The inmate's face contorts in pain and he recites the Lord's Prayer as his mother raises her cross to the glass; the injection fails, and the execution is horribly botched. The prisoner dies on schedule, but he dies anguished in his body and his soul.

The rest of writer-director Chinonye Chukwu's powerful, needle-sharp drama follows the run-up to execution number 12, as the reality of Bernadine's job destabilises her peace of mind, her sleep and her marriage. Woodard's subtle but affecting lead performance draws us into her private hell as she follows the regulations for killing a man by day, and drowns her demons in a local bar by night. Bernadine's husband Jonathan (Wendell Pierce) warns her that she lives in fragments, and the film itself mirrors her emotional disconnect. Information is drip-fed unobtrusively into the narrative: the film's quiet economy is in inverse proportion to its moral heft.

The prisoner sentenced to die is Anthony Woods (Aldis Hodge), a young Black man convicted of murdering a police officer. He proclaims his

innocence, as do his determined, righteous lawyer (Richard Schiff) and the anonymous protestors chanting his name in solidarity outside the prison walls. Anthony, his lawyer and the crowd outside are pinning their hopes on a last-minute reprieve by the governor. In an agonising scene, his ex-girlfriend (Danielle Brooks) says he will be remembered as a martyr, but Anthony just wants to live: more specifically, he doesn't want to be executed for a crime he didn't commit. He beats his head against his cell wall until it bleeds, begs the prison officers who restrain him to finish the job.

Bernadine can't help Anthony without that reprieve. Her hands are tied to a task that bears an unbearable responsibility. She is, in a real sense, married to her work, because her job demands more than her time and professionalism — it takes a little of her soul every day. "I am alone," she tells her husband, "and nobody can fix it."

In *Clemency*, the cruelty of the death penalty extends beyond the residents of death row, to the officials charged with enforcing it. Bernadine's husband wants them to plan for retirement — it's an option Anthony's lawyer and the prison chaplain are both embracing themselves, but for Bernadine, it's too late. Her bleak profession lacks the emotional reward that has sustained her peers, and now she's adrift.

There's a political dimension to both Anthony and Bernadine's positions too, underlined when teacher Jonathan reads Ralph Ellison's novel about racial injustice, *Invisible Man*, to his class. Bernadine encourages a white male colleague to apply for a cushier job than hers, at a prison without executions, while she stays on to enact the state's violent decrees, mostly against young men of colour. The most devastating revelation in this remarkable film is that there is little prospect of reprieve for Bernadine herself. **PAMELA HUTCHINSON**

VERDICT Alfre Woodard gives an unforgettably moving performance in Chinonye Chukwu's slow-burning, perfectly observed drama about the repercussions of state-sanctioned violence, in which the stakes could hardly be higher.



IN HER HANDS



OUT 10 JULY / CURZON HOME CINEMA / CERT
15 / 106 MINS

DIRECTOR Ludovic Bernard

CAST Jules Benchetrit, Kristin Scott Thomas, Lambert Wilson, Karidja Touré

A kind of *La Haine* meets *Young Musician Of The Year*, Ludovic Bernard's film follows street kid Mathieu (Jules Benchetrit; think a Gallic Taron Egerton), who, displaying prodigious talents as a pianist, is freed from jail and given community service if he commits to his genius. Of course, there is a haughty English piano teacher (Kristin Scott Thomas, as the improbably named Countess Elizabeth Buckingham), a cool cello player (a winning Karidja Touré) to fall for and a big piano competition at the end. It has nice elements — Mathieu's relationship with the Countess — but overall, its formulaic premise, predictable plotting and lack of finesse means it struggles to get beyond 'Chopsticks'. **IF**



BUÑUEL IN THE LABYRINTH OF THE TURTLES



OUT 9 JULY / BFI PLAYER / CERT TBC / 77 MINS

DIRECTOR Salvador Simó

CAST Jorge Usón, Fernando Ramos, Luis Enrique de Tomás, Cyril Corral

It's safe to say you have to know quite a bit about Luis Buñuel and the genesis of his 1933 documentary, *Las Hurdes*, to get the most out of Salvador Simó's animated re-evaluation. Taking its visual cues from Fermín Solís' graphic novel and intercutting clips from Buñuel's short that scandalised Spain, Simó sets out to prove that several of the more memorable scenes in his film, such as the dramatic deaths of some goats and a bee-ravaged donkey, were staged. However, he struggles to incorporate flashbacks to Buñuel's strict upbringing or to convince that he experienced a socio-political epiphany in the village that time had almost forgotten. A treat for cineastes, nonetheless. **DP**

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THE TRAITOR

★★★

OUT 24 JULY / CINEMAS / CERT TBC / 155 MINS

DIRECTOR Marco Bellocchio

CAST Pierfrancesco Favino, Luigi Lo Cascio, Fausto Russo Alesi

Marco Bellocchio's sprawling crime flick tells the true story of Tommaso Buscetta (Pierfrancesco Favino), a Cosa Nostra foot soldier who, following exile in Brazil, becomes the first Mafia informant in Sicily during the '80s. It's a lengthy, all-too-familiar crime saga of honour amongst thieves, but Bellocchio gives it flavour (Buscetta's wife is hung from a helicopter to make him talk), long stretches are involving and Favino (*Rush*) is a dominating presence. After an opening that throws more Italian names at you than a Serie A commentary, the second half is dominated by colourful court-room proceedings, but you're left never fully clear why Buscetta spills the beans. The result is enjoyable but adds very little that is new to the gangster genre. **IF**



MAKE UP

★★★★

OUT 31 JULY / CURZON HOME CINEMA / CERT TBC / 86 MINS

DIRECTOR Claire Oakley

CAST Molly Windsor, Joseph Quinn, Stefanie Martini

Following last year's *Bait*, Claire Oakley's debut feature finds further fear and loathing on the Cornish coast, although it mines a completely different seam. Taciturn teenager Ruth (Molly Windsor) arrives at a caravan park to spend time with steady boyfriend Tom (Joseph Quinn), but has her suspicions aroused by a strand of red hair on his jacket. What starts as local investigation turns into a voyage of self-revelation as Ruth meets Jade (Stefanie Martini), vibrant and gay, who opens up new impulses and horizons. If the screenplay, like its protagonist, plays its cards close to its chest, Oakley's control of mood and palette is impressive, crafting a vivid sensory experience out of limited means, all anchored by an absorbing Windsor. **IF**



LYNN + LUCY

★★★★

OUT NOW / BFI PLAYER / CERT TBC / 90 MINS

DIRECTOR Fyzal Boulifa

CAST Roxanne Scrimshaw, Nichola Burley

Working-class community warfare is laid bare in this starkly captured feature debut from Fyzal Boulifa. At its epicentre are Lynn (Roxanne Scrimshaw) and Lucy (Nichola Burley), two best friends in their late twenties still living in their hometown of Harlow. After a horrific incident befalls Lucy's new family, the pair become estranged, driven further apart by a tabloid brand of mob mentality enforced by the town. When the film arrives at its most polarising moments — complimented by Taina Galis' bright, sparsely framed cinematography — *Lynn + Lucy* deftly highlights the fragile fabric of a community boxed in by its self-imposed sense of justice, and boasts two staunchly impressive performances — especially Scrimshaw, a major talent discovered from the streets. **BW**



INHERITANCE

★★

OUT NOW / DIGITAL / CERT 15 / 111 MINS

DIRECTOR Vaughn Stein

CAST Lily Collins, Simon Pegg, Chace Crawford, Connie Neilsen

A strange mash-up of *Succession* and *The Silence Of The Lambs*, Vaughn Stein's *Inheritance* sees crusading DA Lauren Monroe (Lily Collins, out of her depth) slighted in her wealthy father's will, being left a paltry sum and a punishment — the knowledge that a man, Morgan Warner (Simon Pegg), has been locked in a bunker for 30 years holding the key to a deep, dark secret. What follows is a mostly lacklustre, over-written mind game as Warner tries to appeal to Monroe's better nature, but which doesn't generate any compelling cat-and-mousery; above ground isn't much better, trading in aren't-rich-families-awful? soap opera. Despite some odd sparks from an emaciated Pegg, it's a talky, implausible affair lacking in subtlety, suspense or surprise. **IF**



HOW TO BUILD A GIRL

★★★

OUT 24 JULY / PRIME VIDEO / CERT 15 / 104 MINS

DIRECTOR Coky Giedroyc

CAST Beanie Feldstein, Alfie Allen, Paddy Considine

Beanie Feldstein brings her *Booksmart* charms to this coming-of-age tale by author Caitlin Moran. Set in the mid-'90s, the semi-autobiographical screenplay follows budding rock journalist Johanna (Feldstein), whose rise from bullied schoolgirl to caustic critic delights her male colleagues but disappoints her kind-hearted, working-class family (led by a twinkling Paddy Considine). Director Coky Giedroyc deploys a sometimes distractingly skittish pace to keep up with Johanna's teen angst, but Feldstein ensures you stay in step. A naturally likeable presence who can play an overachiever without feeling overbearing, she embodies Moran's adolescence effortlessly, moving between pep and poignancy without a cherry-red hair out of place. **BW**



FAMILY ROMANCE, LLC

★★★

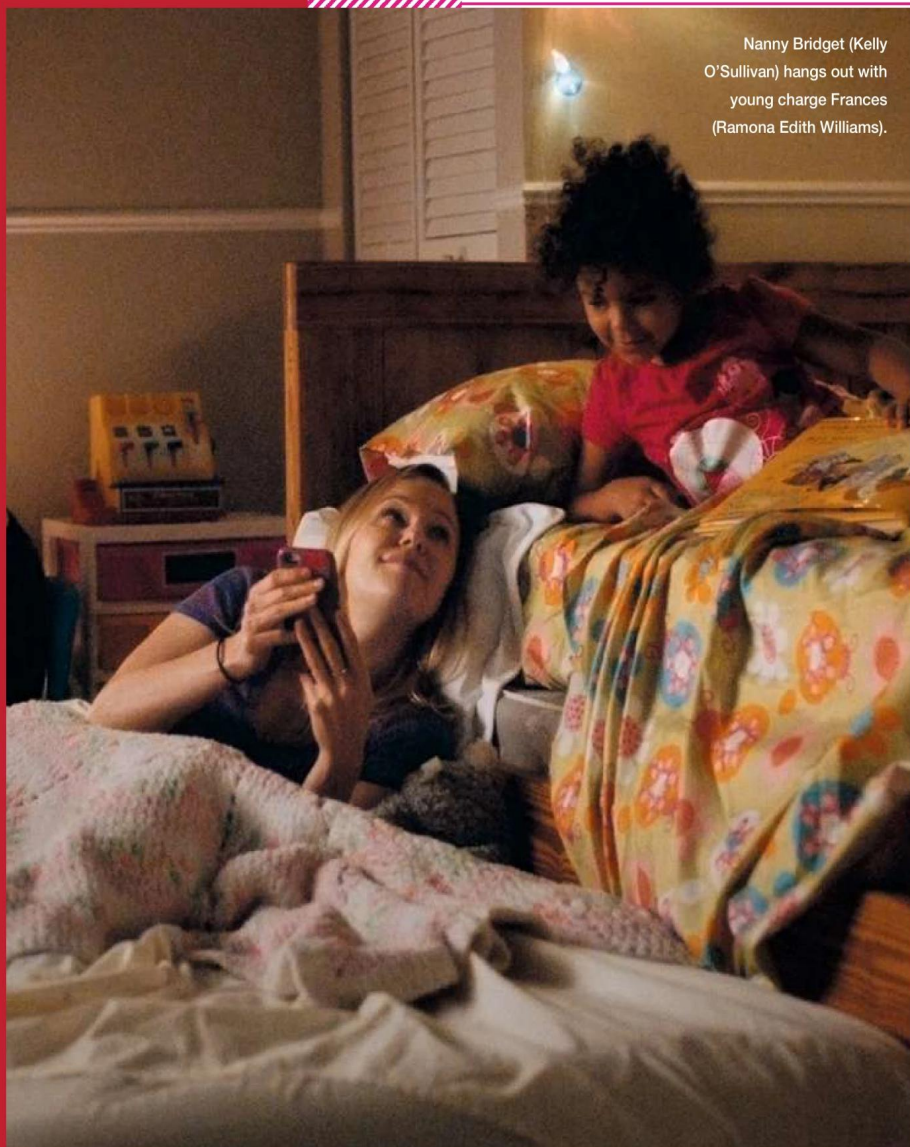
OUT NOW / DIGITAL / CERT 12A / 89 MINS

DIRECTOR Werner Herzog

CAST Yuichi Ishii, Mahiro Tanimoto

One of Werner Herzog's greatest talents is rooting out true, stranger-than-fiction stories and retelling them in such a way that their humanity, in all its complex fascination, shines through. Here, in an intriguing blend of documentary and narrative, he tackles the odd, real-life Tokyo-based company Family Romance, LLC., which hires out actors to play stand-in family members and friends. Its founder, Yuichi Ishii, plays a version of himself, who riskily blurs the line between reality and performance as he takes the role of a (fictional) 12-year-old girl's prodigal father. The film has plenty to say about the nature and arguable value of self-deception, but as thought-provoking as it is, you are left wondering what the *real* Yuichi Ishii feels about what he does for a living, rather than his identical avatar. **DJ**

Nanny Bridget (Kelly O'Sullivan) hangs out with young charge Frances (Ramona Edith Williams).



Top to bottom: Mommy Maya (Chalvin Alvarez); Fireworks fun for the family; Mommy/lawyer Annie (Lily Mojekwu).

[FILM]

SAINT FRANCES



OUT 10 JULY / DIGITAL
CERT TBC / 106 MINS

DIRECTOR Alex Thompson

CAST Kelly O'Sullivan, Ramona Edith Williams, Max Lipchitz, Charin Alvarez

PLOT Thirty-something Bridget (O'Sullivan) doesn't really know what she wants from life, despite considerable pressures from her parents and peers. During one fateful summer, which sees her deal with the fallout from an abortion and become a nanny to a smart six-year-old (Williams), Bridget begins to get a better understanding of what she truly wants.

SAINT FRANCES OPENS, as so many movies do, with a boy and a girl crossing paths at a party, their chemistry sparking into a night of passion. But this is no meet cute. In the bleary, cold light of morning, unexpected menstrual blood smears the sheets, hands and faces of Bridget (Kelly O'Sullivan) and Jace (Max Lipchitz). The easy, jokey way in which the pair deal with this embarrassing situation sets the film's ballsy tone,

and shows that they may be made for each other. Yet O'Sullivan's whip-smart debut screenplay (which is based on her own experiences) isn't concerned with romance, but with Bridget as a 30-something woman struggling to figure out what she wants, and needs.

With her quick comic timing and everywoman quality, O'Sullivan is immediately endearing as Bridget, who, facing pressure from all sides — a mother who clearly expects grandchildren, old school friends with high-flying careers — accepts a position as nanny to smart six-year-old Frances (a scene-stealing Ramona Edith Williams). Soon after, Bridget finds herself with an unwanted pregnancy, and then dealing with the surprising physical and emotional fallout of an abortion that she very much knows is the right choice for her. As the summer progresses, and Bridget's relationship with her young charge develops, she begins to develop insight into herself, and the life that she may want.

Don't expect a sepia-tinged journey to acceptance, however. This is a warts-and-all exploration of what it means to be a modern woman; not so much a breath of fresh air as a smack in the face of tired genre — and gender — traditions. Not only does it tackle the so-called taboos of abortion, periods, postnatal depression and motherhood-as-choice-not-duty head on, giving raucous voice to issues that women have long been taught to keep hidden, it does so without fuss or fanfare. Bridget isn't ashamed of her

lifestyle choices or her mistakes, and she doesn't need anyone to come and save her; she is, like so many of us, simply figuring things out as she goes along. The film acknowledges, and even celebrates, the fact that this process can be messy.

Director Alex Thompson allows this authentic, moving story room to breathe, and O'Sullivan the autonomy to fully inhabit her character's flaws, contradictions and knotty humanness. Crucially, too, while the film may be centred around Bridget, everyone in the film is fully developed, right down to Frances herself. She may be small but she is mighty, a tangled confusion of childlike emotions and wisdom beyond her years without a hint of precociousness. Frances' parents, mixed-race lesbian couple Maya (Chalvin Alvarez) and Annie (Lily Mojekwu), are struggling, too — a new baby and high-flying job both flies in the ointment of their carefully-made plans. The three of them have much to learn from Bridget, as she has from them. Life is tough, no matter how you choose to live it. And a monumental moment in a local park, in which Maya artfully manages an aggressive woman who objects to her breastfeeding in public, is a lesson for us all. **NIKKI BAUGHAN**

VERDICT Fresh, funny and frank, *Saint Frances* is a welcome shake-up of tired genre clichés; a messy, uplifting story about a woman who may not have everything figured out, but is fully in charge of her own fate.



[FILM]

EUROVISION SONG CONTEST: THE STORY OF FIRE SAGA



OUT NOW / NETFLIX
CERT TBC / 122 MINS

DIRECTOR David Dobkin

CAST Will Ferrell, Rachel McAdams, Dan Stevens, Pierce Brosnan

PLOT Inept Icelandic band Fire Saga — made up of possible-but-unconfirmed brother/sister duo Lars Ericksson (Ferrell) and Sigrít Ericksdóttir (McAdams) — are given a chance to fulfil a lifelong dream by entering the Eurovision Song Contest. Can they overcome hirsute love rivals, murderous plots and malfunctioning props in order to win?

REMEMBER WHEN BLUE reformed in 2011, with the specific aim of reversing the UK's wretched run of results in the Eurovision Song Contest? Those four loveable lads — Lee, Simon, Duncan, and the other one — carried the dreams of a nation on their backs and vocal cords. Glory

was within their grasp. Victory was inevitable.

They came 11th.

Eurovision Song Contest: The Story Of Fire Saga is the cinematic equivalent of Blue's ignominious efforts. Not least because it's a long-awaited reunion of, erm, three of the people behind *Wedding Crashers*, but also because this muddled misfire is closer to *nil* points than the coveted *douze*.

Part of the issue lies in its fealty to the competition it should be taking the piss out of. Eurovision, at its best, is a celebration of Europe's diversity and talent, and has thrown up some absolute bangers over the years. But it's also a cavalcade of kitsch, a tsunami of naff, that you would imagine would be just ripe for the comedic picking. Yet this movie has been made in association with the European Broadcasting Union, aka the organisation behind Eurovision — and it's hard to shake the feeling that the film has been defanged, unable or unwilling to fully make fun of Eurovision's inherent ridiculousness. There isn't a line here that has the affectionate satirical bite of a quip from Terry Wogan or Graham Norton. Even Norton, stranded in a commentary box by and as himself, feels strangely muted. And when the comedy, notionally of course, stops for a full-blown musical sequence in which Ferrell is joined by Eurovision luminaries of the past, it's baffling in its oddness.

Which brings us to the film's more significant problem. The opening stretch, showing life in Lars (Will Ferrell) and Sigrít's (Rachel McAdams)

small fishing village, provokes a few chuckles, but big laughs are few and far between. Ferrell and McAdams, playing lifelong friends who fancy each other but who might, for reasons that are never properly explained, be brother and sister, are always watchable (though one moment is a direct rip-off of McAdams' wonderful "Oh no, he died!" reaction in *Game Night*). But the material (whether improvised or from the screenplay co-written by Ferrell) just isn't there. Excellent supporting actors like Jamie and Natasia Demetriou are left floundering, while Dan Stevens is never really given the room to make Russian singing stud Alexander Lemtov a comedy bastard for the ages. It's also slightly muddled in its intent — Ferrell, McAdams and Pierce Brosnan as Lars' dad (great facial hair, shame about the character arc) are all doing outrageous Icelandic accents, and there are fairly first-base jokes about life in that country. Yet Dobkin surrounds his stars with genuine Icelandic actors, and at times it feels like an ad for the Icelandic Tourist Board. The contrast is jarring.

It's all rather airless and lifeless, and is at least half an hour too long. Sadly, by the end, there's nothing left to do but — just like Lee, Simon, Duncan, and the other one — feel blue. **CHRIS HEWITT**

VERDICT The votes are in, and it's official: this largely unfunny paean to Eurovision is a waste of some serious talent. At least some of the songs are decent.



BURDEN

★★★

OUT NOW / DIGITAL / CERT 15 / 118 MINS

DIRECTOR Andrew Heckler

CAST Garrett Hedlund, Forest Whitaker, Andrea Riseborough, Tom Wilkinson, Usher

The true story of a Ku Klux Klan member who is taken in by a Black preacher certainly feels timely enough — though some might feel we've had enough stories about the redemption of white racists. Still, this look at Mike Burden (Garrett Hedlund) goes some way to exploring why hateful ideology might appeal to misbegotten loners, and is told with a sensitive, naturalistic approach. Casting-wise, Andrea Riseborough is typically chameleonic as Mike's lovesick partner; elsewhere, it's somewhat jarring to see a family friend played by R&B sensation Usher. But it's Hedlund who impresses most, delivering an unusually complex and vulnerable performance with just the right amount of thought and care. **JN**



THE BIG UGLY

★★

OUT 24 JULY / DIGITAL / CERT 15 / 106 MINS

DIRECTOR Scott Wiper

CAST Vinnie Jones, Malcolm McDowell, Ron Perlman

In West Virginia to strike a money-laundering deal, geezer gangster Neelyn (Vinnie Jones) goes on a solo mission of revenge when his wife (Lenora Crichlow) is killed by the son (Brandon Sklenar) of oil baron Preston (Ron Perlman). With a story co-written by a Tarantino (Paul, not Quentin), Scott Wiper's film looks to find mileage from uprooting Lahndan lads to Hicksville but gets bogged down in stock characters, unsatisfying relationship jealousies and overwritten voiceover and speechifying. Perlman and Malcolm McDowell as his UK counterpart add class and Jones breezes through it in taciturn hardman mode, but it all ends up in an under-powered shoot-out in the Appalachian Mountains. Still, makes a change from Essex. **IF**

The cakes were, apparently, irresistible.



[FILM]

IRRESISTIBLE

★★★

OUT NOW / DIGITAL

CERT 15 / 102 MINS

DIRECTOR Jon Stewart

CAST Steve Carell, Chris Cooper, Mackenzie Davis, Tophér Grace, Natasha Lyonne, Rose Byrne

PLOT Licking his wounds after defeat in 2016, Democratic strategist Gary Zimmer (Carell) heads to rural Wisconsin to help a grizzled former Marine colonel (Cooper) win a mayoral election in the key battleground. The only obstacle? A ruthless Republican rival (Byrne) sent to the same small town.

MIDWAY THROUGH *IRRESISTIBLE*, Steve Carell's hawkish political kingmaker describes his newest candidate with disbelieving glee. "He's like Bill Clinton with impulse control," he says, grinning into a phone. "Like a church-going Bernie Sanders with better bone density." Two lines that, in their eyebrow-wagging vim, pretty much encapsulate both the strengths and deficiencies of Jon Stewart's second film as a writer-director. Which is to say, it's reflective of a fun, fish-out-of-water political satire that also has the occasional misfortune of feeling about as relevant to the current, pandemic-ruptured climate as, well, Bill Clinton and Bernie Sanders.

To be clear: the drastically altered circumstances of 2020 (evinced by the fact this project is now straight-to-streaming) are not the fault of Stewart or his team. But, even with deft central performances, *Irresistible's* world of cartoonishly folksy Midwesterners and pampered DC power-brokers comes across as a little inert and inconsequential; a pleasant-but-slight electoral fable, from a far cosier alternate reality.

Still, it's a seductive basic premise, introduced with briskness and flair. Distracted after his role in

Hillary Clinton's 2016 election defeat, Democratic Party strategist Gary Zimmer (Steve Carell) is shown a viral video of retired Marine colonel Jack Hastings (Chris Cooper giving maximum ruffled cowboy) nobly standing up for undocumented workers. A lightbulb practically pings above his head. And soon he is in the Wisconsin town of Deerlaken mounting a mayoral campaign, getting close to the colonel's daughter (Mackenzie Davis), and setting up a symbolic battle with an old Republican adversary, Faith Brewster (Rose Byrne).

From here, if you imagine an ebullient melding of *Veep* and *Doc Hollywood*, you will not be far off the feel of the film's first half. Laughs flow, and Stewart's script pours scorn on data-obsessed political grandees, more interested in using rural voters as pawns than actually engaging with them.

A big part of this appealingly breezy, sitcom groove comes from Carell (channeling an uptight, more cynical Michael Scott). And Byrne, too, ignites the film with her affectless put-downs and salutatory face-licks. But, as the action progresses, the backwater atmosphere these two DC sharks have been released into can feel a touch overcooked (would even the smallest of small towns really still have dial-up internet?).

Moreover, by the third act, there are ever-broader moments of satire (including an iffy scene featuring a paraplegic prospective campaign donor with a hydraulic exoskeleton) that feel like *SNL* sketches, somewhat uncomfortably jammed into the story. There is partial justification for some of these tonal gear-changes — a subversive climactic rug-pull delivered with a finger-snapping, 'The Aristocrats!'-style flourish — but any genuine surprise is at the expense of emotional stakes. And the net feeling is of a film that is a tactically astute marginal victory when, given the names involved, it should have been a landslide. **JIMI FAMUREWA**

VERDICT Scabrous, watchable and deceptively provocative, Jon Stewart's political parable may be slightly out of step with the political reality of 2020 — but Carell and Byrne do enough to earn your VOD vote.



ABOVE SUSPICION

★★★

OUT 13 JULY / DIGITAL / CERT 15 / 104 MINS

DIRECTOR Phillip Noyce

CAST Emilia Clarke, Jack Huston, Sophia Lowe

In a Southern mining town in 1989, mother-of-two Susan Smith was found murdered after serving as an informant in an FBI investigation. *Above Suspicion*, from director Phillip Noyce, tells the true-life tale of Smith's death and the harrowing events leading up to it — how she was recruited by ambitious agent Mark Putnam (Jack Houston), how their relationship turned romantic, and how she soon became entangled in an exploitative game of drug busts and deception. Emilia Clarke, deploying a Kentucky drawl that's less Daenerys Targaryen and more Dolly Parton, is a hurricane of smudged mascara and Percocet bottles as Smith in flashback, but don't expect a twisty nail-biter. Instead, this is a sobering story of a woman deemed disposable — and the authorities who let her down. **AH**



SPACESHIP EARTH

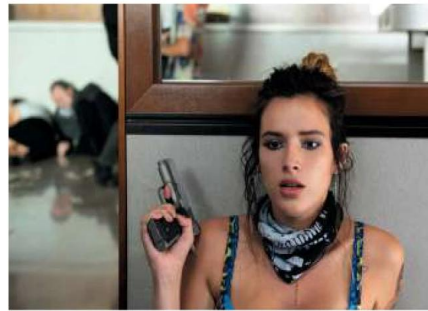
★★★

OUT 10 JULY / DIGITAL / CERT 12 / 113 MINS

DIRECTOR Matt Wolf

PARTICIPANTS John Allen, Tony Burgess

Arizona, 1991. Under the blaze of the sun, and the gaze of the assembled media, a group of eight people entered Biosphere 2, a man-made replica of the Earth's ecosystem, into which they would be sealed for the next two years. The brainchild of sustainability devotee John Allen, and bankrolled by billionaire Ed Bass, the project — intended to test the theory of interstellar biosphere living — was beset by problems both scientific and personal. Through incredible archive footage and retrospective modern interviews, director Matt Wolf plots a traditional course through this remarkable endeavour, although it's a shame he didn't dig deeper on some aspects, like the backstories of the self-styled bionauts or the rift between Allen and Bass that derailed its original aims. **NB**



INFAMOUS

★★

OUT NOW / DIGITAL / CERT TBC / 100 MINS

DIRECTOR Joshua Caldwell

CAST Bella Thorne, Jake Manley

There's a kernel of a good movie to be found in *Infamous*, a lovers-on-the-run drama in which Arielle (Bella Thorne) and Dean (Jake Manley) upload footage of their robberies to Instagram. But any social commentary on our relationship with social media that writer-director Joshua Caldwell is aiming for is obvious and clichéd, while it's near impossible to generate any empathy for the central duo. Arielle, in particular, is delusional in her pursuit of fame and detestable from the start, our desire for her comeuppance mounting with every stupid decision she makes. A committed performance by Thorne, along with some eye-pleasing, sun-kissed visuals, can't mask the fact that the themes at play here have been examined far better elsewhere. On that note, watch the underrated *Ingrid Goes West* instead. **AW**



BLACK WATER: ABYSS

★★

OUT 10 JULY / CINEMAS / CERT 15 / 98 MINS

DIRECTOR Andrew Traucki

CAST Luke Mitchell, Jessica McNamee, Amali Golden, Benjamin Hoetjes

A quasi-sequel to 2007's enjoyable *Black Water*, *Abyss* sends two couples (Luke Mitchell and Jessica McNamee, Amali Golden and Benjamin Hoetjes) — plus wacky guide Cash (Anthony J. Sharpe) — potholing in Northern Australia, only for them to be trapped by floods, then picked off one by one by a hungry crocodile. Original director Andrew Traucki (*The Reef*) creates a potentially menacing playground in the network of caves, but is let down by paper-thin characters, uninteresting relationship dynamics (there's a third act that turns into soap opera), standard horror-film tropes (a foot gets inadvertently trapped) and a tired menace-by-numbers score. Lacking any cool croc kills, it is neither the exercise in white-knuckle tension nor the gloriously silly fun it could have been. **IF**



ALICE

★★★★

OUT 24 JULY / DIGITAL / CERT TBC / 103 MINS

DIRECTOR Josephine Mackerras

CAST Emilie Piponnier, Martin Swabey

Alice (Emilie Piponnier) is a seemingly happy wife and mother who one day finds the family's finances drained and husband François (Martin Swabey) AWOL. Turning detective, Alice discovers François has frittered their money away on prostitutes, so, needing money to stave off eviction, she uses her new-found contacts to enter the world of high-end escorts. Debutant director Josephine Mackerras' Paris-set film is terrific on both the minutiae of paid-for nookie and the double standards (especially around childcare) of the women who provide sex work and the men who use them. It's a well-worn idea, but Mackerras handles the moral complexities deftly and is beautifully served by Piponnier, who dominates practically every frame, taking a believable journey from despair to empowerment to hope. **IF**



ARKANSAS

★★

OUT 13 JULY / DIGITAL / CERT 15 / 117 MINS

DIRECTOR Clark Duke

CAST Liam Hemsworth, Clark Duke, Vince Vaughn

Low-level drug couriers Kyle (Liam Hemsworth) and Swin (Clark Duke) make a mistake that puts them in the sights of their boss, a local drug kingpin known only as Frog, in the directorial debut of actor Clark Duke (Clark in the US version of *The Office*). Duke's adaptation of John Brandon's cult crime novel retains the book's offbeat characters, rambling plotting and soft-boiled philosophising, but it's blandly directed, sabotages itself in the editing, and is slathered in an overwrought score and bad Flaming Lips covers of American classics. John Malkovich, Vince Vaughn and Michael K. Williams elevate the proceedings, but ultimately *Arkansas* feels like a relic from the '90s wave of Tarantino copycats. It squanders some good talent, and it's a tragic waste of a fine book. **DH**



Newcomer Ferdia Shaw as Artemis Fowl, super-smart in every sense.



From top: Colin Farrell as Artemis Sr.; Judi Dench and Josh Gad as Root and Mulch Diggums; Lara McDonnell's Holly Short.

[FILM]

ARTEMIS FOWL



OUT NOW / DISNEY+
CERT UNRATED / 95 MINS

DIRECTOR Kenneth Branagh

CAST Ferdia Shaw, Josh Gad, Colin Farrell, Nonso Anozie, Lara McDonnell, Judi Dench, Nikesh Patel, Josh McGuire

PLOT Artemis Fowl (Shaw) is a 12-year-old genius who must negotiate between humans and fairies when his father (Farrell) is kidnapped. A giant dwarf (Gad) and disgraced fairy police officer (McDonnell) may prove key to his plans.

THE FIRST OF Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* books concerns a largely unrepentant criminal mastermind in its 12-year-old hero, but his illegal edges have been considerably softened for his film debut. It makes one of children's literature's foremost rotters less fun than he should be, in the first of a number of storytelling missteps in Kenneth Branagh's big-budget adaptation.

Set in Ireland (the film plays fast and loose with the country's geography), this Fowl family only steal to safeguard certain items and

preserve the balance between the fairy and human worlds: the Rosetta Stone, Book Of Kells and something called an "Aculos". That's a magical object named as the ransom demand when the globe-trotting Artemis Fowl Sr (Colin Farrell, underused) is kidnapped by a shadowy figure identified only as Opal Koboi (the book series' big bad). Young super-genius Artemis (Ferdia Shaw) and his trusty right-hand man Domovoi Butler (Nonso Anozie) have to find the Aculos, which for some reason they do by kidnapping fairy Holly Short (Lara McDonnell) and inviting a home invasion.

Colfer's world is Bond — or at least *Stormbreaker* — meets *Peter Pan* in its intelligence-versus-magic plot, but this is less fun than that should be. In an effort to appear less Tinker Bell, these fairies brandish high-tech weaponry and magic that can be "jammed" remotely; even their wings are mechanical. It's the humans here who have magnificent libraries full of old books and odd relics, but that neat reversal might work better if Artemis himself weren't so tech-minded. Worse, the fairy kingdom seems deeply dystopian and barely connected to any of the myths and legends that might have lent this depth and texture (keep them peeled for a strained leprechaun pun). The camera swirls for ages to let us take in their city of Haven, but unfortunately none of it dazzles, especially in contrast to the worlds that Branagh created in *Thor* or even *Cinderella*.

But the real problem here is that the script, based on the first two books, shows signs of having been cut to ribbons and woven back together. Newcomer Shaw's Artemis seems virtually immobile for much of the running time, communicating less cunning and more a sense that he's not sure what to do. Tamara Smart, as his friend and Domovoi's niece Juliet, has nothing to play with; her biggest scene involves delivering Artemis a sandwich. In contrast, Holly is given a whole heap of distracting backstory about her disgraced father that adds a good ten minutes to the interminable exposition that is the film's first half, laid out by Josh Gad's Mulch Diggums, a giant dwarf whose interrogation by an unseen British Intelligence officer (for some reason) in an off-shore detention centre frames the tale.

There are some highlights. Judi Dench, as fairy commander Root, essays a largely solid Irish accent. Gad gets a good joke about gluten, and Nonso Anozie is a cool henchman. But *Artemis Fowl* deserved a little more edge and a lot more coherence than this effort, and Irish kids deserve a better class of anti-hero.

HELEN O'HARA

VERDICT An overqualified adult cast and some fun moments can't entirely compensate for a defanged protagonist and too-static plot. This fantasy desperately needed a little more magic.



Clockwise from here: Evelyn (Winona Ryder) and Bess (Zoe Kazan); John Turturro as Rabbi Bengelsdorf; Alvin (Anthony Boyle) tells Sandy (Caleb Malis) of his plans to fight the Nazis.

[TV]

THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA



OUT 14 JULY
SKY ATLANTIC/NOW TV
EPISODES VIEWED 6 OF 6

SHOWRUNNERS David Simon, Ed Burns
CAST Winona Ryder, Anthony Boyle, Zoe Kazan, Morgan Spector, John Turturro

PLOT In an alt-history '40s America, celebrity aviator Charles Lindbergh, a xenophobic populist, becomes President by leading the country away from World War II but towards fascism. The ripples of his bigoted world-view play out on the Levins, a Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey.

US TV IS full of alt-timelines these days. Following on from *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Hunters*, *The Plot Against America*, adapted from Philip Roth's 2004 novel by *The Wire* masterminds David Simon and Ed Burns, imagines a future where Charles Lindbergh, American flying ace and Nazi sympathiser, becomes the POTUS. The result isn't high on dramatic incident and shocking

twists, but its six-episode run is completely absorbing, building a tangible sense of mounting anxieties and helplessness among characters in an increasingly rancid country.

The plot of *The Plot Against America* is spun through three criss-crossing narratives. The dominant storyline sees the effect of Lindbergh's ascendancy on the Levins, a Jewish New Jersey family. Dad Herman (Morgan Spector) is a politically driven insurance man concerned with the popularity (and populism) of the anti-Semitic Lindbergh ("An airplane pilot with opinions"), while Bess (a superb Zoe Kazan) is a stay-at-home mum who just wants to do the best for her two children — Sandy (Caleb Malis), a teen with a talent for drawing and admiration for Lindbergh, and Phillip (Azhy Robertson), a ten-year old with a passion for stamps and a reluctant friendship with kid-next-door Seldon (Jacob Laval). In deft, incremental strokes, Simon and Burns build up the effect of insidious politicking on everyday lives; what starts as dirty looks from neighbours soon develops into out-and-out racial slurs and being chucked out of a hotel in Washington. When the rioting starts in episode five, the accumulation and escalation of micro aggressions make it very clear how we got there.

The second narrative strand follows Bess' spinster sister Evelyn (Winona Ryder) and her growing relationship with Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf (John Turturro), a leader in the Jewish community and a supporter of Lindbergh.



When the President-elect invites Bengelsdorf to become his religious advisor and asks him to lead 'Just Folks', an assimilation programme that sends inner-city teens from minority families to spend time on rural farms to learn real American values, it's a slippery road for the Rabbi and Evelyn, who get caught up in Lindbergh's hyperbole, leading all the way to a gala celebrating Nazism. The relationship lobbs a grenade into the Levin family — Bengelsdorf is accused of "koshering Lindbergh", making it palatable for Americans to vote for him without feeling anti-Semitic — and the fallout is irrevocable.



The third thread featuring Herman's wayward nephew Alvin is perhaps the least engrossing. Played with energy and attitude by Anthony Boyle, Alvin's journey takes him from petty crime in New Jersey to fighting the fight for the Canadian army in a Blitz-torn Blighty ("I want to kill Nazis"). Alvin's no-nonsense man-of-action response to the current climate stands in sharp contrast to Herman's intellectual response. Other fillips of plot come out of young Phillip's friendship, firstly with local delinquent Earl (Graydon Yosowitz) and most impactfully with Seldon. The latter's storyline — the weird kid next door with a sick father — initially feels inconsequential but delivers huge emotional wallop in the final episode.

Directed by Minkie Spiro (*Better Call Saul*, *Fosse/Verdon*) and Thomas Schlamme (*The West Wing*, *The Americans*), the show has superb production values but never at the expense of substance: powerful imagery — be it cleaning swastikas from gravestones or a pile of shoes that is a ghostly reminder of the Holocaust — abounds. The show is also clear-eyed about the repetitive nature of political rhetoric (Lindbergh's 41-word takedown of Roosevelt is always the same), while it employs a great use of '40s media, with cinema newsreel acting as a 24-hour news cycle in the characters' lives.

The novel was written 16 years ago, and while *Simon and Burns* make it live as compelling drama in its own right, the parallels with Trump's America are impossible to ignore; celebrity President, 'America first' dogma, dodgy international relationships, a discontented populace. But even since it has aired in the US in January, it has become even more relevant, the distrust of police and the breaking up of peaceful political rallies hitting even harder. There will be cosier ways to spend your summer TV nights — how many times can you watch *Gavin & Stacey?* — but few that are as compelling. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT Beautifully played across the board — all hail Zoe Kazan — *The Plot Against America* is terrific on how political passions and allegiances can tear families apart. It doesn't make for comfortable viewing, but provides absorbing historical drama and a terrifying prism on the US today.



Evil lurks within: demoness Magda (Natalie Dormer) casts a wicked eye over 1930s Los Angeles.

[TV]

PENNY DREADFUL: CITY OF ANGELS

★★★★

OUT NOW
SKY ATLANTIC/NOW TV
EPISODES VIEWED 4 OF 10

SHOWRUNNER John Logan
CAST Natalie Dormer, Daniel Zovatto, Kerry Bishé

PLOT In 1938, Los Angeles is an angry place, watched over by a furious supernatural entity, Magda (Dormer). Tiago Vega (Zovatto) is about to start his first day as the first Chicano detective in the LAPD. He'll encounter murder, riots, Nazis and more in a city — a world — on the brink of eruption.

THE FIRST ITERATION of *Penny Dreadful* mixed classic horror characters — Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll, Dracula — in Victorian London in a saga about the monstrosity of man and assorted psychosexual doings. It was handsomely produced, very creepy and a little bit camp. A marvellous combination. *City Of Angels*, a tangentially connected spin-off, takes a much more straight-faced approach, with little of the scary stuff. It's every bit as handsome, but the loss of the spookiness and silliness has leeching it of much of the original's fun.

It opens with a doozy of a prologue. Magda (Natalie Dormer), a supernatural being who delights in destruction, delivers a monologue about a coming war that will pit all races against one another. Keen for that war to get a wriggle on, she marches through a cornfield full of Mexican workers, setting it ablaze and burning everyone in it. Her solemn 'sister', Santa Muerte (Lorenza Izzo), the Angel of Holy Death, gathers up the souls to usher them to the afterlife. One of the dead is the father of a boy called Tiago Vega.

Many years later, in 1938 Los Angeles, Tiago Vega (Daniel Zovatto) is a grown man, about to become the first Chicano LAPD detective. The promised race war is coming. Vega's first assignment is to find the killer who left four bodies, mutilated and painted with Day Of The Dead make-up, baking in the LA River basin.

The investigation of that grizzly murder is just a small part of *City Of Angels*' story. John Logan, who created both this and the original series, has a lot of ideas he wants to cover. Broadly tied to real events, *City Of Angels* takes in systemic police racism, the evolution of the immigrant experience, government corruption, the eve of World War II (Rory Kinnear, as a German paediatrician/Nazi, is the sole carry-over from the original series' cast), and the hypocrisy of for-profit religion. That's not to mention romances, family in-fighting and Nathan Lane cast marvellously against type as a world-worn detective-cum-Nazi hunter. It's an awful lot to keep track of, the focus moving around so widely that progress in any one strand is as slow as the 405 in rush hour.

There's an effort to give the knot of plots some cohesion by having Dormer play multiple roles as Magda shifts into different shapes to spread maximum mischief: a meddling assistant to a compromised councilman; a German mother manipulating Kinnear's Nazi; a zoot-suited revolutionary. Though she seems to be having an infectiously fun time with the dressing-up box, her repeated appearance doesn't bring everything together; it just makes the bits she's in more fun.

City Of Angels has loads of ideas and hard echoes of the world right now, but there's too much going on for one show. In trying to talk about so much, its message comes out a little garbled. **OLLY RICHARDS**

VERDICT The original was definitely a horror-drama, but there's so little scary stuff here that it's unclear why it needed to be part of the *Penny Dreadful* 'universe'. Packed with ideas, it would have been more arresting if the show had focused on fewer of them.



Another day, another jaw-dropping Trump press conference...

[TV]

THE POLITICIAN: SEASON 2

★★★★★

OUT NOW / NETFLIX
EPISODES VIEWED 7 OF 7

SHOWRUNNERS Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan, Brad Falchuk

CAST Ben Platt, Judith Light, Bette Midler, Gwyneth Paltrow

PLOT It's the run-up to the New York State Senate elections, and Payton Hobart (Platt) is set on unseating incumbent Dede Standish (Light). In order to win, however, Payton must rely on his team of former school pals, and not all is going to plan.

IT'S AN AMBITIOUS task trying to make a show about American politics today. With media manipulation rife and policies upended with a single tweet, its chaotic nature is fascinating in a car-crash sort of way, but also near-impossible to match with fiction. Season 1 of *The Politician* sidestepped this problem by focusing mainly on campaign strategy, using wax-like protagonist Payton Hobart (Ben Platt) and his race for student-body president as a condensed case study, with bonus musical numbers.

Season 2 sees Payton move to New York for the next phase of his projected journey towards the Presidency. Packing the series to the gills with hot takes on everything from climate action to cultural appropriation, the writers have used Payton and his Gen Z campaign strategists to open up a broader conversation around the power that young people can wield today.

To some, this social commentary/call to arms will seem preachy, but it injects the show with a much-needed dose of vim, pushing the dialogue beyond the soap-opera dramatics of Season 1

into something more provocative. As Payton, Platt continues to channel the same meticulous, somewhat sociopathic persona, that even behind closed doors stays slightly glassy. Acting as more of a carefully crafted political machine than a human being makes him no less intriguing to watch, however, and when the small shreds of humanity push through — usually in the form of a show tune — Platt deftly commands the room.

Around him, the cast bounce off each other like pinballs, and display the same romantic approach to politics that you might find in an Aaron Sorkin script. Payton's strategists maintain their pacy rapport that covers everything from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to the films of Nancy Meyers, while Gwyneth Paltrow as Payton's mother — now herself a politician — continues to delight by having fun with what can only be a parody of her real-life 'wellness'/lifestyle persona, switching last season's kaftans and bohemian colour for pastel suits and a campaign that includes tree-hugging.

Perhaps the highlights of the ensemble, however, are Judith Light as Dede and her Chief Of Staff Hadassah, played by a zesty, pantsuit-clad Bette Midler. In spite of the relationship undergoing a myriad complications — the show can be melodramatic — their showmanship is dazzling against the straight-talking opposition.

With Murphy promising a season for each stage of Payton's career, it's unclear whether audiences already conditioned to the show's formula of theatrical scandal and intricately devised power plays will remain entertained for much longer. For this particular chapter, at this particular time, however, Murphy and co seem to be allowing a little more of the outside world in, transforming the show into a more galvanised, reflective piece of storytelling. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT Likeability has never been the currency of *The Politician's* overachieving ensemble, but this season shows more promise as it taps into the spirit of young voters today, while Bette Midler and Judith Light provide serious energy.

SCREEN CHECKLIST

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



OUT NOW

ARTEMIS FOWL	★★	P41
BURDEN	★★★★	P39
BACK ROADS	★★	P49
DA 5 BLOODS	★★★★	P30
EUROVISION SONG CONTEST: THE STORY OF FIRE SAGA (ABOVE)	★★	P38
FAMILY ROMANCE, LLC	★★★★	P36
INFAMOUS	★★	P40
INHERITANCE	★★	P36
IRRESISTIBLE	★★★★	P39
LYNN + LUCY	★★★★	P36
PENNY DREADFUL: CITY OF ANGELS	★★★★	P43
THE POLITICIAN: SEASON 2	★★★★	P44

9 JULY

BUÑUEL IN THE LABYRINTH OF THE TURTLES	★★★	P34
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10 JULY

BLACK WATER: ABYSS	★★	P40
IN HER HANDS	★★	P34
THE OLD GUARD	★★	P32
PROXIMA	★★★★	P33
SAINT FRANCES	★★★★	P37
SPACESHIP EARTH	★★★	P40

13 JULY

ABOVE SUSPICION	★★★	P40
ARKANSAS	★★	P40

14 JULY

THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA	★★★★	P42
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17 JULY

CLEMENCY	★★★★	P34
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24 JULY

ALICE	★★★★	P40
THE BIG UGLY	★★	P39
HOW TO BUILD A GIRL	★★★	P36
THE TRAITOR	★★★	P36

31 JULY

MAKE UP	★★★★	P36
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Your samurai adventure awaits

Step into feudal Japan and prepare to fight the Mongol Empire in *Ghost of Tsushima*

A STORM IS coming to 13th-century Japan. The armies of the Mongol Empire are invading, samurai warriors are falling, and the fate of the nation is at stake. And at the centre of it all, ready to fight for a different future, is one person: you. Prepare to enter *Ghost of Tsushima*, a brand-new, open-world action-adventure game heavily inspired by classic Japanese cinema that gives you the power and the destiny of a noble samurai.

The legendary samurai movies by the likes of Akira Kurosawa and Eiichi Kudo have proved some of the most influential cinema of all time (they've inspired everything from *Star Wars* to Sergio Leone's Westerns), and their cultural impact can also be felt throughout *Ghost of Tsushima*, which draws from films including *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo* and Takashi Miike's *13 Assassins*.

Players take on the role of warrior Jin Sakai, the last survivor of his clan, who were decimated in an attack by the forces of ruthless general Khotun Khan. Forced to fight for his future and that of the rest of his home, Tsushima, Jin is already a fearsome samurai as the game begins,

skilled with a katana and ready to use it — but in order to protect his people and reclaim his home, he'll have to look beyond the samurai traditions he was trained in and become something more: the Ghost.

During Jin's journey, you'll venture across swathes of gorgeously rendered rural Japan, travelling through ancient forests and billowing fields teeming with life, encountering tranquil shrines and villages filled with richly drawn characters. Away from the game's thrilling combat, get ready to experience all of the natural beauty that feudal Japan has to offer, with expansive rural landscapes and ancient landmarks to explore. And when you do come face-to-face with the Mongol soldiers hunting you down, you'll have to use every trick at your disposal to beat them — unpredictable stealth attacks, tactical ambushes, dispatching enemies from far away with your bow, or battling face-to-face with your samurai sword. With the landscape on your side, and a range of weapons to choose from, how you fight is up to you.

And for players seeking the full Kurosawa experience, you can also play *Ghost of Tsushima* in 'Samurai Cinema' mode, which shifts the action from colour to black-and-white, and also adds a little grainy film texture too, putting you at the heart of your own playable samurai movie.

Get ready to live your samurai fantasy — entering a stunning, cinematic game world, living the epic story of a rising warrior, and getting acquainted with the power and grace of a katana — when *Ghost of Tsushima* launches on 17 July, only on PlayStation.



Clockwise from main: Warrior Jin Sakai, aka the Ghost; Venture beyond the battlefield to experience feudal Japan; Learn new tactics; Challenge opponents head-on.

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THAT MATTERS THIS MONTH**



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THIS MONTH: DA 5 BLOODS P48 THE KING OF STATEN ISLAND P50 THE VAST OF NIGHT P52

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THIS MONTH'S SPOILER TEAM



JUDD APATOW

Co-writer-director, *The King Of Staten Island*



SPIKE LEE

Co-writer-director, *Da 5 Bloods*



ANDREW PATTERSON
Director, *The Vast Of Night*



KAMBOLE CAMPBELL
Contributor



CHRIS HEWITT
Associate Editor



CHRISTINA NEWLAND
Contributor

ADDITIONAL SPOILING:
JAMES DYER,
IAN FREER &
JOHN NUGENT



Da 5 Bloods

1 THE OPENING MONTAGE

Christina Newland: Offering some context of the turbulent social and racial history of the '60s, *Da 5 Bloods* opens with a montage of clips and images featuring Malcolm X, anti-war riots, Martin Luther King Jr, the Kent State shootings, Ho Chi Minh and Lyndon B. Johnson. The result is instructive, concise and charged with righteous energy; for anyone of a younger generation it helps to give a preliminary look at the clashes happening at the heart of American society. Particularly trenchant is the clip of Muhammad Ali, famously declaring his defiant refusal to be drafted into the army and fight in Vietnam when white Americans would not fight for his rights at home.

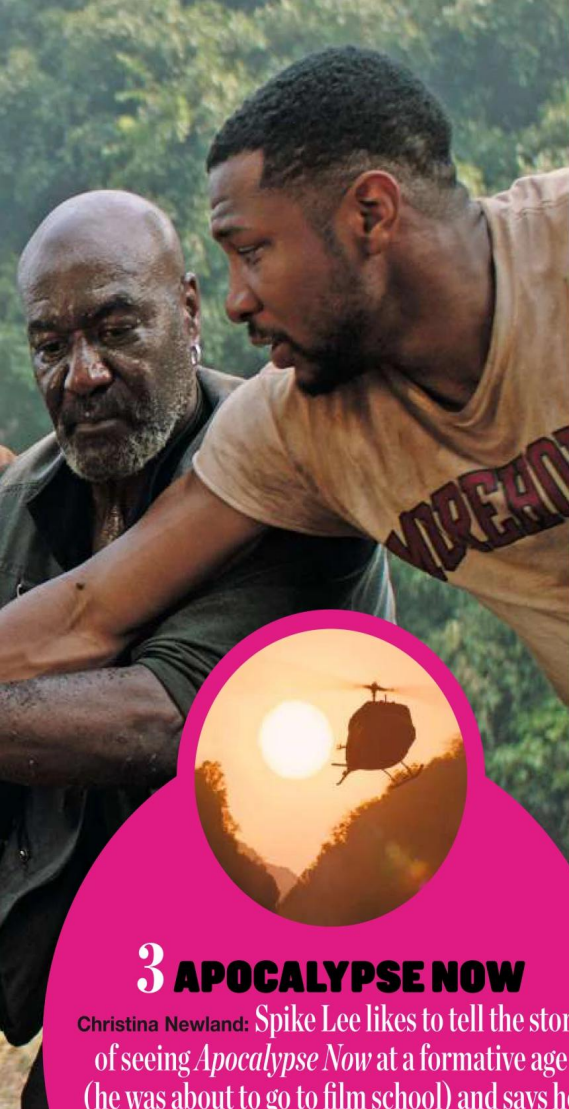


2 PAUL, THE MAGA MAN

Kambole Campbell: As the opening montage ends, the veterans of the Bloods reunite in Ho Chi Minh City, and the differing political alignments of the group become clear. The most pronounced divide is with Paul (Delroy Lindo), who to the group's disappointment has embraced the reactionary

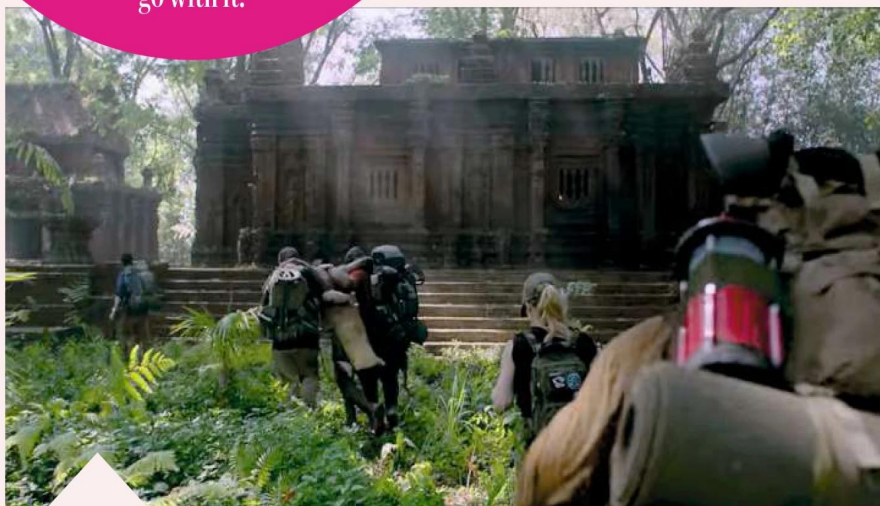
xenophobia of the Republican Party and Trump (referred to here as 'President Fake Bone Spurs'). Paul's political persuasion is a subject of increasing tension throughout the film, his MAGA hat serving as an ironic symbol that America's much talked-about past greatness never existed.

Top: The 'Nam veterans reunite. **Above:** An opening montage of real clips offers historical context. **Left:** Delroy Lindo as the Trump-supporting Paul.



3 APOCALYPSE NOW

Christina Newland: Spike Lee likes to tell the story of seeing *Apocalypse Now* at a formative age (he was about to go to film school) and says he wanted to pay homage to Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 war epic by using 'Ride Of The Valkyries' from the famous helicopter sequence, with a wink and a nod to go with it.



5 WHAT'S GOING ON

Christina Newland: Legendary artist Marvin Gaye's 1971 album *What's Going On* is a seminal protest record, told from the point of view of a returning Black 'Nam veteran. It features prominently here, with the title song in a beautiful, haunting a cappella rendition.

Spike Lee: That to me is one of the greatest



4 HANOI HANNAH

Christina Newland: Lee borrows from history in his depiction of the radio broadcasts of Hanoi Hannah, a real North Vietnamese radio personality who would become the voice of propaganda broadcasting to American GIs in the jungles of Vietnam. In pristine English, she would question the reasons for American involvement in the war, play clips of anti-war protesters and ask why Black soldiers were fighting for a government who would not treat them equally at home.

Spike Lee: Hanoi Hannah had a radio show that played popular American music at the time and in-between records she would speak. The American soldiers would put up with the propaganda they were hearing so they could hear the music. Stuff that Hanoi Hannah's saying to the Black troops is sometimes propaganda but sometimes there are truths. Her recordings for Black soldiers are on YouTube. We put a couple words in there, but those are basically her words to the Black troops.

6 THE TREASURE HUNT

Kambole Campbell: The introduction of Hedy (Mélanie Thierry) and her landmine disposal crew turns out to be an incredibly devious move on Lee's part. Even with Terence Blanchard's score nobly blaring away in the background, the knowledge that the area is dangerous turns every beep of Melvin's (Isiah Whitlock Jr) metal detector into a moment of heart-stopping tension. Lee seems to repeatedly prove the audience paranoia wrong, as they find more and more gold, and the body of Norman. But, of course, the moment we (and the Bloods) let their guard down, that's when disaster strikes. Poor Eddie (Norm Lewis), backing away holding a bar of gold, declaring that it has corrupted them, finally steps on a landmine, and the stakes of the trip are immediately changed by a cruel and gruesome death.



7 THE ENDING

Kambole Campbell: Along with David (Jonathan Majors), Otis (Clarke Peters) is now the only surviving Blood, Paul having been killed by Vietnamese mercenaries and Melvin having thrown himself on a grenade in the final shootout. The moment the dust settles, Lee wastes no time cutting to the aftermath, with final testaments being read and the gold being given away to those in need. The white-saviour imagery of landmine-detecting outfit LAMB feels like a tongue-in-cheek jab from Lee as to how white charity presents itself (especially with stolen gold). Still, Lee notes that the only noble use of such wealth is on causes of Black liberation and reparations towards war victims, like Norman and Eddie said, with Eddie's share itself going to New York's Black Lives Matter organisers.



Getty Images, Shutterstock

albums ever. Marvin's brother, Franklin, did three tours of Vietnam. He was a radio operator. He was writing Marvin letters from Vietnam. So Marvin was getting first-hand accounts going on Vietnam and yet he was seeing the Black soldiers coming back to Motown, coming back to Detroit all messed up.

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Pete Davidson, who lost his own father in 9/11, as Scott in the semi-autobiographical tale.

The King Of Staten Island

1 THE TRAGIC BACKSTORY

John Nugent: Death and grief are undoubtedly odd themes for a comedy. The sustained, lifelong trauma of losing a parent in early childhood does not immediately suggest we're about to witness the next *Airplane!*. But grief can be funny too. Aged seven, Pete Davidson lost his firefighter father while on duty in the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, and while the 9/11 element is removed for the film, his character suffers a similarly traumatic episode. Davidson and director Judd Apatow are clearly keen to shift into a more dramatic gear here, even while keeping one hand on the comedy wheel, as the opening scene's off-colour ribbing is keen to emphasise ("Knock knock!" "Who's there?" "Not your dad!"). As Scott, the character, comes to terms with the loss of his father, we also get the sense that Davidson, the actor-writer, is coming to terms with his real-life loss as the film unfolds. It's a process Apatow has described as "cathartic"; it's cinema as therapy. Albeit therapy with dick jokes.

Above right: An irate Ray (Bill Burr) comes calling, only to find himself disarmed by Marisa Tomei's Margie.



2 ENTER RAY

Chris Hewitt: In an unconventional movie, the ten-minute passage where Bill Burr's moustachioed fireman, Ray, swoops into the life of Scott's mom (a wonderful Marisa Tomei) and sweeps her off her feet gives us something I never thought I'd see: Bill Burr, romantic lead. And it works. I would absolutely watch a spin-off focused on Ray and Margie, and their awkward dinner flirtations.

Judd Apatow: When Ray comes to Scott's house to yell at him and his mom [because Scott has tattooed Ray's young son], what I enjoyed most about that sequence was that in the middle of screaming at Marisa Tomei, just based on how she handles it, you can see that Ray has fallen in love with her. He's so flummoxed by what a good person she is. By the end of his diatribe, he's jelly.

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3 THE ROBBERY

Chris Hewitt: The closest thing we're ever going to get to an action sequence in a Judd Apatow movie — the sequence where Scott's stoner mates try to rip off a local pharmacist, only for the tables to be turned in dramatic fashion — might feel out of place initially, but is illustrative of the path that Scott could so easily find himself on. And it's got a great gag, when one of his pals

turns out to have the theme from the US version of *The Office* as his ringtone.

Judd Apatow: That's a tribute to Steve Carell, who started it all for me. With the robbery, we shot an enormous amount of jokes, but we removed a lot because it seemed to demand that you believed it.

4 THE FIGHT

Chris Hewitt: The moment when Ray — sick of Scott's manipulative bullshit (namely, the bit where Scott visits Ray's ex-wife to load up on negative information about him, which he promptly dishes out to Scott's mum) — takes matters into his own hands by getting into a fight with Scott is notable for a couple of reasons. There's comedy here, of course, but this is also the beginning of the end of the toxicity for both men, and the start of their path to reconciliation.



From top: En route to the robbery; Scott and Ray go toe-to-toe; Tat's entertainment — Scott inks Ray's back with a portrait of his family; Derek Gaines struts his stuff; Manhattan beckons.



5 RAY'S TATTOO

Chris Hewitt: One of the interesting riffs that runs through the movie is that Scott desperately wants to be a tattoo artist, but is desperately awful at it. Yet that passion fuels the movie's emotional peak, when he uses Ray as his own personal practice canvas. There are some awful, awful tattoos on Ray's back, but the centrepiece is a portrait of Scott's family, with Ray at its heart, and Scott's dad looking down from above. Apatow has already used tattooing a kid as the basis for an unconventional

meet-cute earlier — now here he uses it to jog some tears. I'm still not getting one, though. Far too painful.

Judd Apatow: Last week I showed the movie to my best friend from high school, Kevin. He said to me, "I thought you were gonna put Iceflash [the superhero Scott creates] on his back." I said, "That is the best idea. How did I not think of that?" It just shows you how dumb I am that I could go three years working on this and never realise that Iceflash should be one of the tattoos. I want to yell at Pete and my producer, Barry Mendel.



6 KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

John Nugent: There are cameos aplenty from Davidson's friends and family — including his former roommate Derek Gaines (as the dancing waiter), his best friend Ricky Velez (as Oscar), and his grandfather Stephen (as, naturally, Scott's grandfather).



7 THE FINAL SHOT

Chris Hewitt: The final shot of the movie sees Scott, having ventured out of Staten Island for the first time to support on-off girlfriend Kelsey (Bel Powley), looking up at buildings in New York, free to face an uncertain but positive future. And when you realise which building is in the frame, it carries an additional emotional significance.

Judd Apatow: We were location scouting, and I turned and looked up and realised, that's where the Twin Towers were [where Davidson's dad died on 9/11]. That's the Freedom Tower poking out behind that other building. It just says that he's headed in the right direction. I don't like that kind of symbolism at the end of a movie — I'm still mad about the rat in *The Departed*. But I was moved by it, and didn't feel like it was corny.

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Sierra McCormick stars as telephone operator Fay.



The Vast Of Night

1 FAY AND EVERETT

James Dyer: The heart and soul of *The Vast Of Night* is a pair of heroes wearing horn-rimmed glasses: DJ Everett Sloan (Jake Horowitz) and plucky switchboard operator Fay Crocker (Sierra

McCormick). As the story slowly unspools, it's the pair's fizzing chemistry that retains our interest and energises the plot, dashing from one lead to the next with almost effervescent enthusiasm.



Above: Fay receives increasingly worrying calls. **Left:** Everett (Jake Horowitz) suffers some serious spectacle envy.

2 THE SOUNDS ON THE SWITCHBOARD

Ian Freer: When finally Fay arrives at work at WOTW radio station (an homage to *War Of The Worlds*), she operates the switchboard, connecting and disconnecting calls until she hears an unusual sound coming through and tries to discern what it is. Director Andrew Patterson plays the drama out in one long take.

Andrew Patterson: It's 11 minutes long in reality and we cut it down to nine minutes and 40 seconds. I felt pretty confident it worked on the page. That scene is 20 pages long and worked in the script. We didn't do any coverage. Sierra was very much running the show in that scene.

3 THE TRACKING SHOT

Ian Freer: From there, *The Vast Of Night* takes flight. At the midpoint, Patterson wows with a tracking shot around the (fictional) town of Cayuga that races down an empty street, takes a turn through a parking lot, sprints through a basketball game, and zips up the crowded bleachers before plunging out of a window.

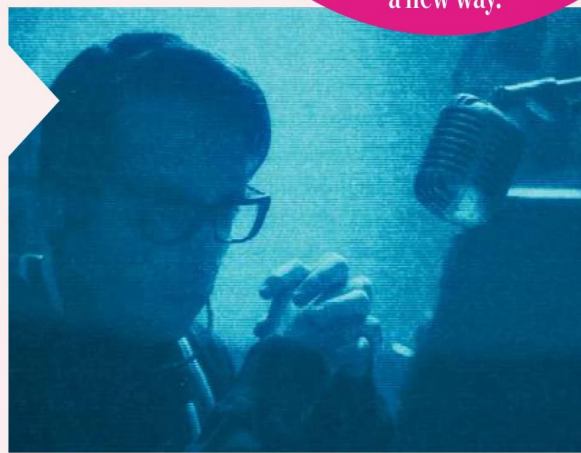
Andrew Patterson: The inspiration for that came from a 2009 Argentinian film, *The Secret In Their Eyes*. The storytelling reason was to connect the town and to say, "Hey, our two characters are

really alone out here and this will infect the rest of the story." The other reason was to say, "You can't put us in a box — anything can happen." We moved the camera on a gimbal and then handed it off to go-kart drivers here and there. I don't think it is something anyone has done at the level of budget we are at. There was very little belief in the crew that we could do this.

5 THE AUDIO WAVES

James Dyer: Former soldier Billy (Bruce Davis) calls the radio station and recounts an assignment where he and a number of other recruits (all Black, in a nod to the marginalisation of people of colour) were taken to a mystery location. They were forced to dig out a huge hole to house a wreck, and after completing the task were ordered to leave, at which point the very same radio anomaly was heard.

Andrew Patterson: My brother is a kind of ufologist. He pointed me to the idea that the guys who were the whistleblowers in the world of military cover-ups are usually older. They don't have the most credible backgrounds, and they are giving up information when they are close to death. The details just came from what I thought was interesting storytelling.



Left: Joel listens to Billy's account of a covert operation.



6 MABEL BLANCHE

Ian Freer: After Billy's unsettling broadcast, Fay gets a call from Mabel Blanche (Gail Cronauer), a senior citizen who has an account of the enigmatic transmission that significantly predates Billy's experience. Mabel regales Fay and Everett with unsettling tales of weird chanting by her ten-month-old son Hollis, and offers her belief that aliens are subtly informing human behaviour in negative ways, suggesting "good

people go bad and smart people go mad".

Andrew Patterson: This was almost entirely fabricated, except her theories about mind control — that there is a malevolent force that keeps humans at a certain level of development, evolution and technology. That is a belief amongst conspiratorial UFO enthusiasts and believers. I'm very proud of Gail's performance in this scene.

Above: Tales of the unexpected — Gail Cronauer as Mabel. Right: The truth is out there...or is it?

7 THE ENDING

James Dyer: Having survived a car crash, Fay, Everett and baby Maddie stagger into a field and finally get a clear look at the objects in the sky that have been circling the town. When we cut back to the field, all three are gone, their footprints ending abruptly — implying that, like Mabel's son, they have been abducted. It's left deliberately open-ended (as all good conspiracy theories should be). But, separated from the town and entirely isolated, the trio fit the aliens' target demographic as laid out by Mabel.

Andrew Patterson: Where they are? What happened to them? That's going to raise questions for the audience and for the other characters in the movie. I don't know if I have the answers. The best thing that can happen to a movie is that you end up building something that becomes the viewer's movie, and they can take it and run with it forever. That would be the greatest legacy for our movie — that it ends up being debated until the end of time.



4 THE VAST OF NIGHT TV SHOW

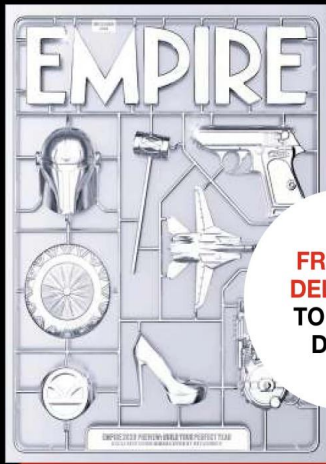
Andrew Patterson: The 'Paradox Theater' framing device teaches you how to watch the movie. We wanted to let people know that we were aware the storyline was not going to be the most original of concepts, but we were going to do it in a new way.

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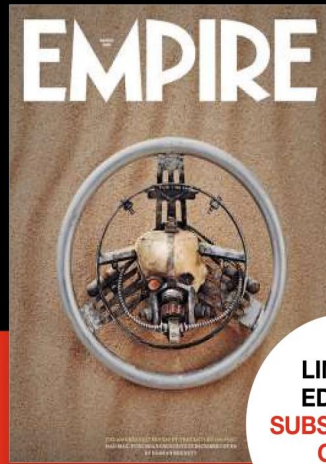
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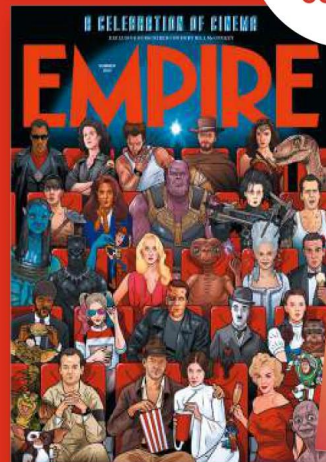
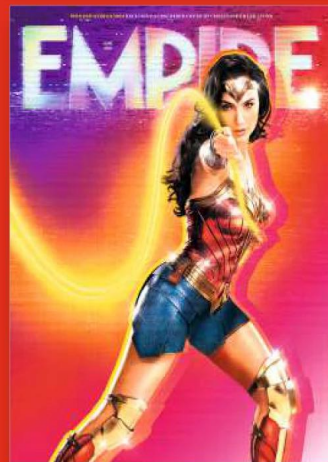
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HALLOWEEN KILLS ✦ FREE GUY ✦ WEST SIDE STORY ✦ AND MORE!**





James Bond (Daniel Craig) and fellow 00-agent Nomi (Lashana Lynch).



NO TIME TO DIE

After 14 years, Daniel Craig is saying goodbye to Bond. It is, says director Cary Joji Fukunaga, going to be emotional

☆ OUT 12 NOV ☆

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

IF YOU EVER happen to bump into Cary Joji Fukunaga, tap him up for the following week's lottery numbers. Because he saw this whole damn lockdown fiasco coming, long before it actually arrived. "There were a lot of conversations happening as early as January," he tells *Empire*. "My first movie, *Sin Nombre*, came out during [the 2009] swine flu [pandemic], and it came out in cinemas in Mexico right when the President of Mexico said, 'Do not go to cinemas.' So I had trauma from that experience, and as



I was following the news of this, almost every day I was asking [the producers], 'What's the plan, guys? Because this isn't stopping.'"

London's Royal Albert Hall had been booked for the world premiere. Tuxedos had been ordered. Olives had been set aside for the numerous after-party vodka martinis. And then, in March, with just a few weeks to go, it all got put on ice. Covid-19 trumped 007. And Fukunaga's *No Time To Die* was the first major movie to bite the bullet and push back its release date, moving to November from its April berth. "I don't think anyone could have foreseen how the world came to a complete standstill," he says, "but I did think audiences would not be going to cinemas."

Interestingly, despite the fact that he had suddenly been gifted a few extra months in which to tinker, Fukunaga chose to leave well alone. "You could just fiddle and tweak and it doesn't necessarily get better," he says. "For all intents and purposes, we had finished the film. I had mentally finished the film. Mentally and emotionally." And from what he tells us, in *No Time To Die* emotions overwhelm 007 too.

Where the character, and the franchise, has often fallen down is in the emphasis on physical explosions over emotional ones. Fukunaga aims to change that with his movie, which sees Bond come out of a five-year





Clockwise
from left: The mysterious Safin (Rami Malek); Director Cary Joji Fukunaga talks to Daniel Craig and Léa Seydoux, who reprises her role as Dr Madeleine Swann, on location in Matera, Italy; A masked Safin arrives; Fukunaga on set with Lashana Lynch.



retirement when he becomes embroiled in a fiendish plot hatched by the mysterious Safin (Rami Malek); a plot that will push 007 to the limits. "Because it's Daniel's last movie, I wanted a sort of emotional heart to it," says Fukunaga. "He started off in *Casino Royale* a pretty tough character, but he falls in love. But for the rest of the films, that heart is pretty closed down. I wanted to see if I could open it back up again for the final film."

Bond tends to dispense with his lovers at the earliest convenience, no matter how interesting they are. Even though virtually every movie ends with him locking lips, and sometimes more, with characters as interesting as Barbara Bach's Anya Amasova, or Carey Lowell's Pam Bouvier, or Halle Berry's Jinx, by the time the credits roll on his next adventure, they're gone. Notches on his bedpost. Faint memories to be jogged by a pop-up reminder on Facebook. Fukunaga decided to change that by bringing back Léa Seydoux's Dr Madeleine Swann. Last seen in Bond's Aston Martin at the end of *Spectre*, *No Time To Die's* five-year jump splits the two apart, but through her mysterious connection to Safin, brings Bond back into her orbit. And it's there that the shit really hits the fan.

"It's something I was fascinated with," he explains. "I thought that Madeleine Swann was an enigma and in *Spectre* you don't really get a chance to understand her, or what her attachment

is to Bond. So I wanted to dive deeper into that. I felt like therein lies the secret to whatever was going to open the box in Bond's heart. And how is she different from Vesper Lynd?"

In this, and the addition of Lashana Lynch as Nomi, an MI6 agent who the smart money says has taken Bond's 007 code number after his retirement, Fukunaga has freshened up the formula. No mean feat when you're dealing with a franchise entering its sixth decade. But one idea he pitched to producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson was, perhaps, a bridge too far. "I was thinking about *Total Recall*," he says. Which is always a perfectly valid thing to do. "And if you think about *Spectre*, when he's sitting in that chair, and that needle goes into his head, suddenly everything just works out really well for him." Fukunaga's theory? That the end of *Spectre*, and the first half of *No Time To Die*, actually took place inside Bond's head. "I thought it would be a really interesting meta way of telling the first half of the story," he laughs. "But it was a pitch. Both hands were being used passionately. I might have been standing, walking and pacing as I said it. But it didn't finish with everyone standing up and applauding."

When a man who can see the future talks, it's usually a good idea to listen. But even without a journey into Bond's psyche, *No Time To Die* promises to take Bond on a refreshingly emotional trip. 🍷



EVERYBODY'S TALKING ABOUT JAMIE

Three reasons we're excited for the drag-queen movie musical

☆ OUT 22 JAN 2021 ☆

RICHARD E. GRANT IS GETTING ALL DRAGGED UP

Any self-respecting drag movie needs a fierce headlining queen — and *Jamie's* is none other than Richard E. Grant, swapping Withnail for with-heels as drag star Loco Chanelle who, by day, goes by the more down-to-earth Hugo Battersby. It should be a towering performance that allows the actor to unleash his camp side in all its glory — all still grounded in a textured, human story.

AN UNAPOLOGETICALLY NORTHERN FEEL

The story of the real-life Jamie Campbell — who attended his school prom in a dress in 2011 — took place in County Durham. Both on stage and screen, *Jamie's* fictionalised story of Jamie New (here played by newcomer Max Harwood) transplants the tale to Sheffield, with a script and songs saturated in Northern wit. The location isn't just window-dressing — it's personal to director Jonathan Butterell, who originated the stage show in his beloved home city. Butterell returns to helm the big-screen version, choosing to shoot in — yep — Sheffield. Even the production company is from Sheffield — Brit-flick institution Warp Films, behind the likes of *This Is England* and *Four Lions*.

THE POP-SMASH SONGS

Jamie should win over audiences typically allergic to musicals with its suite of witty pop hits, penned by Dan Gillespie Sells, songwriter and frontman for The Feeling. The stage show's songs explode with melodic hooks and fizz with brash, mischievous humour right from opening number 'And You Don't Even Know It' through to the disco strut of 'Work Of Art', while the title track has a hook you won't unfix yourself from for weeks. There are weepies in there too, though — save your tissues for 'He's My Boy'. **BEN TRAVIS**



HALLOWEEN KILLS

Michael Myers is back! Again! The upcoming chiller's director and co-writer brief us on his new reign of terror

☆ OUT 16 OCT ☆

WORDS AL HORNER

WRITING A SLASHER-movie sequel is a lot like being a character in a slasher movie — you're pretty much doomed from the off. "It really is one of the hardest things to do!" laughs Danny McBride. "Even in the '80s, when the genre was totally kicking ass, it was always diminishing returns after the first movie, because the temptation's always to follow the same formula." The co-writer of 2018's box-office-slaying *Halloween* reboot/update has a point. Follow-ups to John Carpenter's 1978 horror classic have been more trick than treat over the years, which is why McBride and director David Gordon Green decided to go another way with *Halloween Kills*, their second big-screen resurrection of the murderous Michael Myers (a third is set to follow next year). "It's a different story that grapples with different themes... but has the same gore," teases McBride. Lock your doors: cinema's most famous boogeyman is coming back for another round — this time, with some old faces and new twists...

2018's *Halloween* brought Michael Myers' story full circle and gave closure to Laurie, Jamie Lee Curtis' character from the first film. How does *Halloween Kills* move the story on?

Danny McBride: It takes place the same night, picking up where the last movie ended. Events in the film bring together a lot of characters who were in the 1978 film who we didn't see last time. They gather to try, once and for all, to take down Michael, to stop this madman.



Left and main: The monstrous Michael Myers (James Jude Courtney) in art from 2018's *Halloween*. **Below:** Writer Danny McBride and (right) director David Gordon Green.



David Gordon Green: The first one was more about Laurie's life of isolation after Michael and her attempts at revenge. It was personal. This is more about the unravelling of a community into chaos. It's about how fear spreads virally.

How did you approach Michael this time? Some sequels have tried to delve into his psyche — but your 2018 film stripped him back to this mysterious, unknowable force...

Green: Yeah. We were and still are just following Carpenter's lead. We've stuck to not really knowing much about him. We don't try to humanise or justify who he is. Our *Halloween* films track his transcendence from the boy in the opening scene in the original



Halloween to the legend he represents today – the paranoia and fear that inhabits our culture and community. He’s come to represent much more than a man with a knife in a house.

Why do you think he’s so enduring as a character, 40 years on?

McBride: I think it’s the simplicity of him. The original movie was lightning in a bottle: you had Carpenter’s direction, an incredible score and Jamie Lee Curtis being awesome. Then on top of it all, you had this monster...

Green: A lot of horror stories are ghost stories, haunted-house movies, and you have all these rules that explain the world. Here, it’s all laid out in a very straightforward way. The monster is not some horrific creature. He’s a man with this blank-expression white mask that people project their own neuroses and fears onto.

Did you have more confidence this time, after the success of the last film?

Green: I think so. When you see the box office and hear about all the people who liked the movie and were excited to see more, of course you feel good. We learned a lot from the last film.

McBride: What did we learn again?

Green: Well, we learned that Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie is capable of anything! We didn’t know what to expect working with her. The fact she could do her own stunts, kick everybody’s ass and be a joy to work with – that definitely meant re-evaluating what we wanted to do with the next chapter of the story. We were excited to write without limitations about what Laurie can do.

John Carpenter is composing the score again – has he been involved in other ways?

Green: Oh yes. His music’s incredible. But he also really helps us navigate. Although he didn’t direct [1981’s] *Halloween II*, he was very involved in the writing of it, and he’d asked himself the same questions we’ve been asking ourselves: how do you continue this but make it satisfying and different? We’d also do Skype sessions where I’d watch him watch scenes, then he’d give feedback. He would jump, laugh and sometimes give a thumbs-up. Which for me, who grew up on *Escape From New York* and *Big Trouble In Little China*, was pretty incredible. [laughs]

How did you land on the title?

Green: We wanted something that was simple, not to get too eloquent or poetic.

McBride: It was actually the only fight we’ve ever got into while making this. David was really keen on *Halloween Kills* while I wanted to call it *Halloween 2: Electric Boogaloo*.

The title of the next movie, due in 2021, is *Halloween Ends*. Will that really be the end?

Green: The name *Halloween Ends* is meant to bring some finality. From our creative standpoint, we wanted people to know that this is a contained trilogy and that after three, we’ll be moving on. We’re trying to make it a satisfying close to the story we set out to tell. ●



WEST SIDE STORY

Steven Spielberg's first musical is set to be a dazzling take on an old classic

☆ OUT 18 DEC ☆

WORDS IAN FREER

WEST SIDE STORY is the culmination of a career ambition: Steven Spielberg is finally directing a musical. There have been abandoned attempts (musical-about-a-musical *Reel To Reel*), false starts (*Hook* started life as a songfest) and tiny tasters (the jitterbug contest of 1941, the 'Anything Goes' showstopper that opens *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom*), but this is the first time he has gotten to showcase that old razzle-dazzle for an entire feature.

The film is actually less a remake of Robert Wise's 1961 ten-time Academy Award-winner

than an adaptation of the original 1957 Broadway show, the cast album of which Spielberg listened to over and over again as a kid. In the midst of a gang war between the American Jets and Puerto Rican Sharks for supremacy of a New York neighbourhood, ex-Jet Tony (*Baby Driver*'s Ansel Elgort) and sister-of-the-Sharks-leader Maria (newcomer Rachel Zegler) meet at a dancehall and fall instantly in love. Intact will be the stunning songs — 'Maria', 'Tonight', 'America', 'Cool' — that form the greatest collection of bangers in Broadway history, here arranged by

composer David Newman, conducted by legendary baton-waver Gustavo Dudamel and choreographed by New York City Ballet's Justin Peck. It's *Romeo & Juliet* with the same emotional wallop but way more finger-clicking.

But this is 2020 Steven Spielberg, so don't expect just a glitzy, beautifully shot and dazzlingly choreographed opiate. Instead the director is revitalising the material, bringing out notions of racial tensions and the stark realities of the immigrant experience — the struggle to exist in a xenophobic and racially





Anita (Ariana DeBose) and Bernardo (David Alvarez) dance up a storm.



REBECCA

Three reasons we're excited about Ben Wheatley's gothic drama

★ OUT LATE 2020 ★

A DIRECTOR PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

Ben Wheatley has stepped outside his comfort zone before, but never to this extent. His adaptation of the classic Daphne du Maurier novel, about a young woman (Lily James) whose marriage to the tall, dark Maxim de Winter (Armie Hammer) is threatened by the figurative ghost of his titular first wife, will have a scope and scale a world away from *Down Terrace* or *A Field In England*. Wheatley will also be haunted by a ghost of his own — that of Alfred Hitchcock, whose 1940 version won the Best Picture Oscar. Eighty years on, though, expect this to be a very modern, and very Wheatley, take on the material.

AN ENSEMBLE TO DIE FOR

James and Hammer should make a powerful couple at the film's centre, but look out for appearances from Wheatley regulars Sam Riley and Keeley Hawes, plus Kristin Scott Thomas bringing to life one of literature's most chilling villains: de Winter's possessive, manipulative housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, who doesn't take too kindly to the second Mrs de Winter. If Scott Thomas can add a touch of soul and a dash of humanity to this notoriously unforgiving figure, an Oscar nom could be in the offing. Last night, we dreamt we went to the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles again.

A MONUMENTAL MYSTERY

Du Maurier purists, slightly worried that the bloke who made *Kill List* might take a hammer to their beloved novel, can breathe a sigh of relief. This *Rebecca* should have plenty of Wheatley touches, but one thing that will remain true to the book is its depiction of Rebecca, de Winter's first wife.

Or lack thereof — famously, Rebecca is dead before the novel begins. Like Hitchcock, Rebecca will cast a long shadow. But while there may be tweaks made to the source novel by Jane Goldman and writing team Joe Shrapnel and Anna Waterhouse, don't expect to be putting a face to the name any time soon. **CHRIS HEWITT**

prejudiced landscape — that the 1961 film ignored.

Shooting on location in New York — Spike Lee was a regular on-set visitor — Spielberg has also instilled some much-needed authenticity. Whereas Wise's movie adaptation mostly used white actors wearing 'brownface' to play the Sharks, Spielberg has exclusively hired Hispanic actors to portray the Puerto Ricans and listened to his cast — including Rita Moreno, a Best Supporting Actress Oscar-winner for playing Anita in the original film — to ensure fealty to the Latinx community. Moreno is playing a new

character, Valentina, a re-interpretation of the original show/film's Doc, who ran the pharmacy that provided neutral territory for the Jets and Sharks. Valentina provides a similar peace-keeping role, with Moreno adding a little more bite. The rest of the cast is mostly filled with musical theatre's rising stars: Ariana DeBose fills Moreno's dancing shoes as Anita, while David Alvarez plays the Sharks' leader, Bernardo. For the Jets, Mike Faist plays the gang's top dog, Riff. The result promises to deliver what Steven Spielberg always does best: style and spectacle with substance. ●





Game on:
Jodie Comer as
Molotov Girl and
Ryan Reynolds
as Guy.



FREE GUY

It may be set in a fictional world inside a fictional video-game, but Ryan Reynolds' latest adventure has some things to say about reality

☆ OUT 11 DEC ☆

WORDS CHRIS MANDLE

DIRECTOR SHAWN LEVY was understandably disappointed when the release date for *Free Guy*, his *Truman-Show-meets-Grand-Theft-Auto* popcorn flick, moved from July all the way to December. But, he admits, “In the spirit of making lemonade out of lemons, I’m using that time to hone the movie in ways that I wouldn’t normally have had time to.” Luckily, his new film couldn’t be more audacious – visually or thematically.

Ryan Reynolds plays the titular Guy – a cheery, obedient NPC (non-playable character) working as a bank teller in Free City, a violent shoot-’n’-loot video game loosely based on GTA. “Players do missions for money, points, and rewards,” Levy explains. “Bank robberies, muggings, carjackings, it’s pure anarchy.” But one day, blinkered, naive Guy is granted the ability to see the world for what it really is, and though it spurs an existential crisis when he realises his entire existence is a fabrication, he is urged to try and be a good person within a world full of evil. “He starts to question it: why does a world have to be based on doing things that are illegal and wrong?” says Levy. So Guy, in a move that would horrify Wade Wilson, vows to do good, and finds >

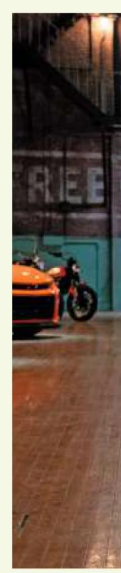


himself levelling up and gaining EXP (“experience points”) despite defying the laws of the game.

This development in Guy’s cognition might be down to the game’s architect, Milly (Jodie Comer), a programmer who plays the game as the “proactive, badass, sometimes violent” Molotov Girl. “In the real world, she’s something of a background character herself — like Guy — but she goes in and out the game inhabiting a skin of her own choosing,” says Levy. Milly’s beloved game is now owned by Antwan (Taika Waititi), “a slightly absurd, massively narcissistic genius”, per Levy. In the game, ‘Blue Shirt Guy’ becomes a cultural phenomenon in his own right, which overshadows and threatens Antwan’s proposed launch of a sequel. “He’s looking to cancel and delete Free City, all in the name of commerce. He’s all about the numbers, and the bottom line. Guy becomes a threat to the entire ethos of the game, because his EXP is exclusively accumulated by doing good. Guy is an AI miracle, a sentient NPC, but Antwan isn’t in it for the miracle.”

Levy, who directed *Reel Steal* and *Night At The Museum*, says that the irony of calling out the crass commercialism in a big-budget movie is not lost on him. “The movie is a commentary on the death of originality. To get to make an original, new movie in the first place can, in some ways, speak to how rare new movies are anymore.”

Not only has he the opportunity to make an original story, but the industry’s response to Covid-19 — and subsequent delays — has given him the rare chance to finesse this film far more than he thought possible. “Delaying a film release is the least of my worries in the midst of far bigger problems. Obviously the world has shifted into a situation none of us foresaw,” he says. “But I was



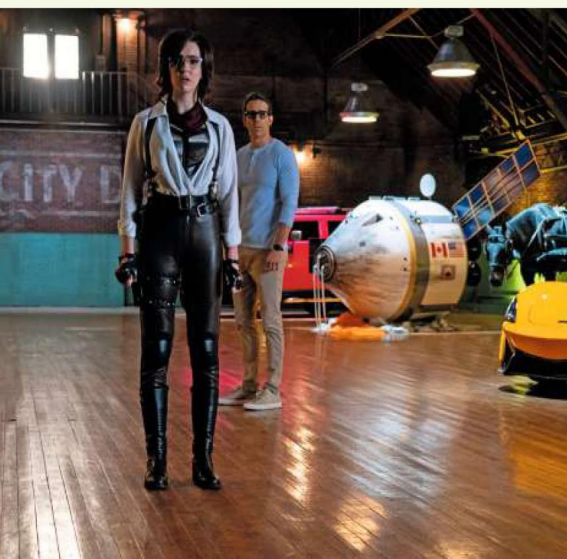
Top to bottom: Director Shawn Levy and Reynolds choose their weapons; Guy with Milly/Molotov Girl; Levy, Comer and Taika Waititi, who plays Antwan, on set.





Left: Reynolds, as Guy, channels his inner Steve McQueen.

Below: Game on — Guy and Molotov Girl take on the bad guys in Free City.



remarking to Ryan this week that I've had more time on the post-production of *Free Guy* than any movie I've ever made. The delay has allowed for more reconsideration and exploration of the edit, of visual effects, of sound design, and of the score than I've ever had on any movie."

When we do return to cinemas, Levy says, our relationship with film might have changed forever — rooms may be socially distanced, or half-full at best, as we rethink our relationship with large spaces. "We were already on this trajectory, where people were considering the expense and expedition of watching stories in cinemas versus on phones and at home," he says. "But I'm not worried. The theme of the movie is not merely accepting the world as you find it, but realizing that you are empowered to affect your world. It's about the empowerment of the individual, in the midst of a world he or she is dissatisfied with, and the personal agency to make a change."

In other words, *Free Guy* has never been more relevant — a story about people coming together both in real and digital universes, and the joy in a shared community. "We needed that in the summer of 2020, and we'll need it in the holiday season of 2020, too, when we're due to come out," Levy says. He pauses. "God willing, anyway." 🍷

Getty Images



BLACK WIDOW

Director Cate Shortland tells us to forget what we think we know — the long-awaited Natasha Romanoff prequel is full of surprises

☆ OUT 28 OCT ☆

How are you doing? You should have been done and dusted by now.

We were one week off finishing the edit [when] we had to stop, and then it probably took another two weeks to get the technology together so we could keep editing. The music's all done. Almost there!

Have you talked to Scarlett during this time?

We text each other really silly jokes. Her partner, Colin [Jost, *Saturday Night Live* writer], bought a metal detector, and was walking around the living room [with it], and all I could hear was her saying, "Oh. My. God. It has come to this."

Well, you have to keep busy. So you're starting Phase Four of Marvel with the prequel, going backwards to go forward. Is that contradiction something that you talked about in making this?

Yeah, it was. Kevin [Feige, Marvel boss] is always interested in the unexpected. He realised that the audience would expect an origin story so, of course, we went in the opposite direction. And we didn't know how great Florence Pugh would be. We knew she would be great, but we didn't know *how* great. Scarlett is so gracious, like, "Oh, I'm handing her the baton." So it's going to propel another female storyline.

So you see this as more a handover than just a farewell to Scarlett?

Yeah. In *Endgame*, the fans were upset that Natasha did not have a funeral. Whereas Scarlett, when I spoke to her about it, said Natasha wouldn't have wanted

a funeral. She's too private, and anyway, people don't really know who she is. So what we did in this film was allow the ending to be the grief the individuals felt, rather than a big public outpouring. I think that's a fitting ending for her.

That's a really interesting approach as well, given that there's such a sense of solitude about her. Putting her with a quasi-family is really counter-intuitive.

Totally, and again that's Kevin, insanely smart. These people have known her since she was a child, so straightaway the mask has to come off because otherwise they call her out. It's a side of her that you're unused to seeing and I think it's a particularly feminine way of looking at a story. Often, men look at things in a big mythic mural, right? The great heroine who's going to slay the enemy. What we looked at was, who is she when she's alone? Who is she with the people who know her best? That's the detail we were after.

Was that an acting challenge for Scarlett? This character has been so defined by her privacy that when you open her up, it could feel like a completely different person.

She's always going to be guarded, but I think what Florence Pugh did as an actor was reveal herself so completely that [Natasha] has no choice but to do the same. So you have this really beautiful... almost a romance between the two girls. It's the story of sisters. I'm proud of what they both did, because it's really subtle but emotionally it's got so much heart. HELEN O'HARA





the Big
Screen
PREVIEW

RESPECT

Jennifer Hudson on what it was like to be hand-picked to play Aretha Franklin — by Franklin herself

☆ OUT 22 JAN 2021 ☆

WORDS JUDE ROGERS

THERE ARE LIVES ripe for brilliant biopics, and then there's Aretha Franklin's. It's an extraordinary story of a girl from a complicated Detroit family, one that takes in grief, teenage pregnancy and early gospel stardom, before her remarkable voice leads to international fame. Her signature song is 'Respect', a cover of an Otis Redding original which she turned into an anthem for civil rights activists and burgeoning feminists in 1967; it's no surprise that the forthcoming biopic shares its powerful title with the song, which also speaks volumes about the woman who sang it.

Years before her death in 2018, Franklin hand-picked Jennifer Hudson to play her, then started coaching her how to do so. "We were just sitting round a table when she first asked, and

I couldn't believe it," says Hudson on the phone from locked-down Illinois. "She was all, 'Are you shy or something?' And I was like, 'Yes! You're Aretha! The Queen of Soul! I've been singing your music since I was a kid!'"

This first meeting was in early 2007, the day after Hudson had won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her dazzling performance in the Beyoncé-led drama *Dreamgirls* (yes: *Respect* has been in the works for that long). Barely three years earlier, Hudson had auditioned for *American Idol* singing Franklin's Grammy-winning 1969 hit, 'Share Your Love With Me'; she eventually came seventh, but became a huge star nevertheless. "To come full circle like that, when Aretha's music had always been there for me... it's still unbelievable to me," she says.

Hudson officially boarded director Liesl Tommy's film in 2016, after Franklin went to see her in *The Color Purple* on Broadway, and

production began. From there Hudson threw herself into research, which was immediately inspiring. "Aretha's story was very interesting and surprising to me," she says. "I learned a lot about how her music connected to the messages she wanted to get out there, and how intent she was to earn respect."

Respect was "a passion project" for everyone involved, Hudson adds, and the cast is impressive, including Forest Whitaker, Marlon Wayans, Queen Latifah and Mary J. Blige. It takes us from 1942, when Franklin was born, to 1972, the year Sydney Pollack made *Amazing Grace*, his acclaimed documentary about the recording of her gospel album of the same name (it was finally released to rave notices last year, after audio-syncing problems plagued its production at the time).

Hudson got lost in reading Franklin biographies, and listening closely to her



Clockwise from left: Jennifer Hudson as teenaged Aretha Franklin, wowing the faithful; Hudson with director Liesl Tommy on set; Mary J. Blige plays blues legend Dinah Washington; Aretha with her minister father, Clarence (Forest Whitaker); The Queen of Soul.



recordings, “thinking what it was like to be an African-American, a woman, and a mother while she was growing up”. Franklin was in charge of her biopic, and was determined to make it her own way, but was also battling ill-health in her last decade. Hudson had weekly phone meetings with her until she passed away. “She’d be very hands-on,” she remembers. “We’d had conversations about characters, and she’d fill me in on all the other details. She’d even send me little things from her life.” Franklin also gave Hudson valuable life advice. “A lot of it was pretty personal, but wow, she knew from experience! It was like talking to an elder. I felt she was schooling me. What an honour that was.”

Franklin was a hard taskmaster, however. She even made Hudson go to music school to improve her piano skills (Franklin learned by ear when she was a child). Many of the scenes in the film were recorded live, Hudson adds, like scenes in church where Franklin is honing her craft singing gospel. “It made me think of where I started out, where she started out, and how music can make you feel so present in the moment. To be in the position of trying to show how Aretha did that was amazing.”

Hudson’s favourite scene, she says, is when she performs the title song, a glimpse of which we have already been given in the trailer. “It made me think of her as a real person who had come into her own, finally,” she says. It’s a dazzling moment, Hudson in gold sequins under bright lights, her voice heading up to the heavens. What we want? Baby, she’s got it. 🎤

Clockwise from main: Kate Winslet plays eminent 19th-century fossil hunter Mary Anning; Winslet with Saoirse Ronan as Anning's love interest, Charlotte Murchison; *Ammonite* writer and director Francis Lee on set.



AMMONITE

Francis Lee's second film treads familiar ground while having something uniquely new — and now — to say

☆ OUT 2021 ☆

WORDS TERRI WHITE

DIRECTOR FRANCIS LEE has an uncanny knack for, if not exactly predicting world events, then making films that end up being surprisingly prescient. His debut, 2017's *God's Own Country*, which explored xenophobia in rural Yorkshire, was released into a country dominated by Brexit. And now his second film, *Ammonite*, concerned with isolation, is set to be released into a world shaped by Covid-19. "I hope people will find it

resonant," he says about the film, which he wrapped just weeks before lockdown dropped. "And I hope that they find it hopeful."

Hope — as evidenced by *God's Own Country* — is a preoccupation for the filmmaker, and it's not all the two films have in common, even if on the surface you'd assume there to be limited shared DNA, with *Ammonite* being the story of the 19th century's foremost fossil hunter, Mary Anning (Kate Winslet). "I'm a very personal filmmaker," says Lee. "Two of the things I obsess about are class and sexuality."

He discovered Mary's story when Googling

fossils he wanted to buy as a gift. What he found out — her father had died when she was ten; she'd had minimal education — set his imagination whirring. "The image of her struck me very strongly," he says. "Totally working-class woman, born on the bones of her arse, yet somehow she managed to rise to be the leading palaeontologist of the century."

In the 19th century, most fossil hunters were middle- or upper-class, and men. They fossilised for the love of science, not survival, whereas for Mary it was both, but specifically about providing food, clothing and shelter. Lee





— who writes his own films — started to recognise all of the elements that he loved in a story: “Class, gender, passion, determination, stoicism.”

As with *God’s Own Country*, it’s the intersection of class and sexuality that the film is most passionately interested in. Lee’s research into both Mary and the period threw up two interesting things. Firstly, that it was believed at the time that women had no sexual-pleasure organs. And secondly, that there was “no evidence whatsoever that she had a relationship with a man. But there was evidence that she had great friendships with women.” Lee points out that when there’s no evidence of sexuality, “heterosexuality is presumed. I wanted to tinker with that for my imagining.” As such, *Ammonite* isn’t a biopic, something Lee absolutely didn’t want to make, but a version of Mary’s story that could have existed. One that would include a relationship with a young woman, Charlotte Murchison, played here by Saoirse Ronan.

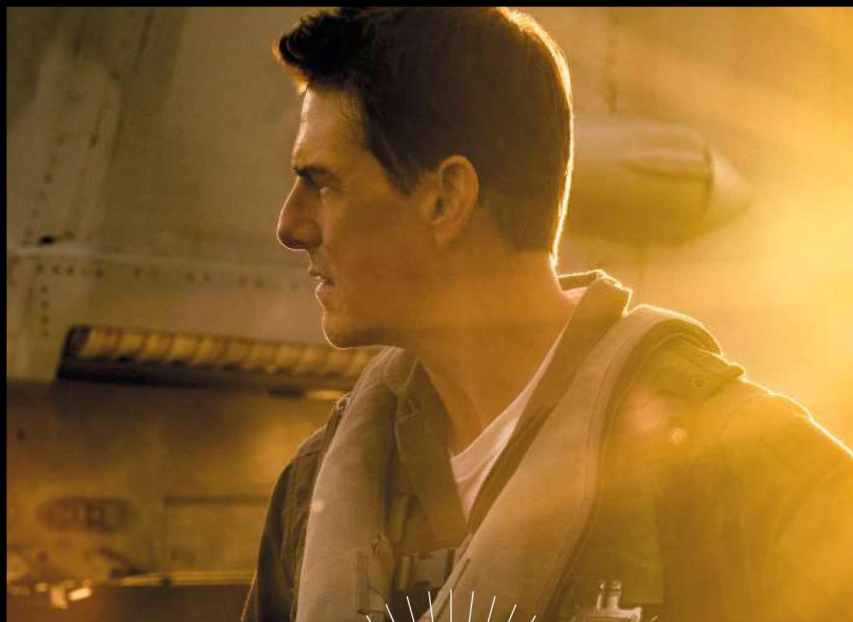
“I’m very fascinated by deep, intimate, human relationships,” says Lee, whose work is known for being stories of same-sex love, though not necessarily *about* it. “One of the things I really look for in stories is to be able to explore a romantic relationship between two people of the same gender where the main issues aren’t around the difficulties of sexuality,” he says.

Instead, it’s an investigation of loneliness, and in Mary, of a woman set apart from the world. It would require quite the performance from quite the actor, and Winslet was the only one that Lee approached. “I wanted to work with someone who had all the tools,” he says. “And also somebody who would be open enough to come to me and work in the way I like to work.”

The two spent five or six months building the character. They talked a lot “about her interior life”, her stillness. Winslet went on the beaches of the Jurassic Coast — where the film was shot and where Mary lived and worked. She learned to fossil, she climbed the rocks — no body or hand doubles were used in the very physical shoot, which took place in “rank” weather last March.

It promises to be a transformative performance for Winslet. And a moment when Mary Anning is given a story that befits “this woman in a patriarchal society, totally looked over by all the men”.

“I loved the idea that she was a survivor,” says Lee. Another story of hope and survival: it can’t come soon enough. 🍷



TOP GUN: MAVERICK

Director Joseph Kosinski on feeling the need... the need to push the envelope

☆ OUT 23 DEC ☆

Under normal circumstances, *Top Gun: Maverick* would be just about ready for release. Now it’s a Christmas movie.

I think everyone working on the movie was looking forward to a summer release, because it really felt like a summer movie. The first *Top Gun* was May of ‘86. But at the same time, we feel this is a movie that needs to be seen on the big screen. So hopefully, by Christmas, everything will be back to normal.

The first movie is a competition movie and it’s a sports movie. Is that the same here?

Yeah, it is. *Top Gun* is a competition movie. It’s about friendship and sacrifice and family, and all of those themes play into *Top Gun: Maverick*. But we were able to take it to the next level. It’s a competition movie but, at the same time, a massive, massive action movie. The amount of flying in this film, even today as we’re putting the movie together, I’m going, “Did we do too much?” It’s a lot. We mounted cameras inside the cockpit with the actors and on the outside of the planes. We were able to do a tremendous amount of stuff, and live up to the very high bar that Tony Scott set with the first *Top Gun*. It was fun for me to do a little bit of a Tony Scott thing on this movie.

But it also looks like a very modern *Top Gun* movie.

It should feel like a *Top Gun* movie. It should look like a *Top Gun* movie. But at the same time it’s 34 years later. And our goal was to use all this modern technology — these cameras that we put in the planes had just been developed.

The movie’s named after Maverick. What can we expect from him now he’s in his fifties?

In so many ways he’s still the guy that we remember from the first *Top Gun*. He keeps that



old Ninja under a tarp in the hangar and still wears those Ray-Ban aviators. He’s the best at what he does, and he’s given his whole life to aviation. But that has come at a personal cost, and Maverick has to confront some things from his past and reconcile with them. It’s a rite-of-passage story, much like the first film was. But this is a man now at a different stage of his life.

What can we expect in terms of the aerial sequences?

You’re really going to get a sense of what it’s like to be inside a jet and feel what I think the first movie was not able to do, which is the intense physicality of flying a fighter jet moving at these speeds. And because we shot it for real, there are things you just can’t do on a gimbal with any amount of special effects. It’s an authentic, visceral, intense experience.

Should people expect to pass out? Should they bring a sick bag?

I don’t think it’s gonna make people sick, but I think it’ll give them an adrenaline rush. If you love aviation, you’re gonna love this movie.

CHRIS HEWITT



WONDER WOMAN 1984

Get ready for the Amazon Olympics, a super-powered sports contest that will show us a whole new Diana

☆ OUT 2 OCT ☆

WORDS HELEN O'HARA

FROM ALL WE'VE SEEN SO FAR, *Wonder Woman 1984* looks set to be bigger, brighter and, well, more golden than its pioneering predecessor. The sequel, though, will take us back a lot further than the '80s — all the way back to Diana Prince's childhood, in fact, to a contest that shows us precisely what she's capable of.

Themyscira's answer to the Olympic Games promises to be a showstopping moment in the film — rightly, given that the event is a staple of Wonder Woman lore and often a part of her origin story. In the comics, it was by winning the Games that Diana showed she had what it took to escort crashed pilot Steve Trevor from her all-female island of mythic, immortal warriors and back to our world of men.

The Games — imagine the actual Olympics, but on steroids — are how the Amazons measure each other. Jenkins originally wanted to include them in 2017's *Wonder Woman* but couldn't make it work. "You really only have room either for the beach battle or the Amazon Olympics," she explains, and she went for the higher emotional stakes of the former. But for this



Left: Twelve-year-old Diana (Lilly Aspell) competes in the Amazon Games.
Below: Use that lasso.



it to be," she says.

The delay meant that Jenkins could fine-tune every last-minute element like the colour grade and sound mix, so the film we eventually see will be precisely as she hoped. The Games were one of the first action sequences she started work on, and among the last to be finished: "You end up dreaming up new stunts for them to do and new obstacles, so it was extremely complex."

In fact, coming up with new challenges for the warriors was so seductively fun that it became a running joke for Jenkins, telling her department heads, "Don't let the Amazons hijack your work." Soon, however, she hopes to ignore her own advice and make both an Amazon-centric animated show and, hopefully, a spin-off Amazon film that would be "part of the in-world story of *Wonder Woman*".

Clearly, Amazon lore is a strong draw for Jenkins. With the Games finally realised on screen, and a sequel that's just how she wanted it, she is happy. Yet the ideas keep coming. She had the idea for this film while making the last one, and sure enough, developed a concept for a third *Wonder Woman* movie while working on this. "You're enjoying the movie you're making and also reflecting on what could be different or better in the [real] world. And therefore what story you want to tell. That's the greatest thing to me about superhero stories. You're able to have a dialogue about what a hero would be right now. So yes, I have ideas for what I'd like to say, and Gal does too."

If the first half of 2020 is anything to go by, the question of what a hero looks like shouldn't go out of fashion any time soon — though it's a question you can comfortably answer by pointing in the direction of Diana Prince. Whether she's brandishing a lasso or throwing a javelin a jaw-dropping distance, her determination is something for all of us to aim for. 🍌

sequel, set some 66 years later, she realised she needed to go back to Themyscira one more time — even though her heroine is now living in exile. Jenkins needed to place the lonely '84 Diana in the context of her people, and teases that she will show "something new" about her past as well.

"What I love about the Amazon Olympics is everything that we got to really celebrate in the first movie," says Jenkins of the Games, which will see the return of young Princess Diana (Lilly Aspell). "Here are these people who are incredibly powerful and capable, but different in how they approach things. If you've been training for hundreds of years because of an impending invasion, you're going to be constantly working on all of these skill sets. So, to me, every year, they would have these Olympics to see who's doing the best on horses or swimming the fastest, and seeing new tricks people have figured out."

Jenkins is talking to *Empire* from LA, where she's been quarantined with her own family and Gal Gadot's clan after the two friends formed their own social bubble ("It's a relief because our families have been able to go through this together"). She's sanguine about her delayed release date; *WW84* is ready to go. "Luckyly, and it may be the only time it ever happens in my life, I got the film exactly where I wanted



COMING 2 AMERICA

Three reasons why we're excited for our return to Zamunda

☆ OUT 18 DEC ☆

MURPHY'S SWEETEST CHARACTER

Eddie Murphy has played a zillion turbo-mouthed, profanity-dispensing characters, most recently in last year's *Dolemite Is My Name*, in which he proclaimed the immortal line, "Dolemite is my name, and fuckin' up motherfuckers is my game."

But the gentle-natured, romantic yet still effervescent Prince Akeem, his hero from 1988's *Coming To America*, is a one-off. The original movie saw Akeem turn down his designated bride-to-be and head to New York to find true love. And this sequel, directed by Craig Brewer, promises to deepen the character, as he returns to Queens to find the son he never knew he had.

Altogether now: "GOOD MORNING, MY NEIGHBOURS!"

A BELOVED KINGDOM

Way before Wakanda became cinema's buzziest fictional African country, Zamunda captured filmgoers' imaginations. Ruled over by James Earl Jones, it featured elephants running free, an intricate royal-court dance number (choreographed by Paula Abdul), and a flag so cool you can buy it online. *Coming 2 America* will head back to Zamunda and expand the mythology; while much remains under wraps, we know that Akeem is set to become king, and Babar the elephant will be back, all grown up.

A CRACKERJACK CAST

As *Dolemite Is My Name* proved again, Murphy is at his best when bouncing off an ensemble of very funny people. Which makes this sequel a truly exhilarating prospect. Arsenio Hall is back as Akeem's redoubtable sidekick, Semmi, but check out the list of new faces in the Zamundaverse: Tracy Morgan, Leslie Jones, Morgan Freeman (hey, he was funny in *The Lego Movie!*) and Wesley Snipes, who just about stole the show in *Dolemite*. And let's not forget the bonus Murphy characters: if early word is to be believed, come Christmas we'll be treated to a second bar of Sexual Chocolate.

Start salivating now. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**



LAST NIGHT IN SOHO

Director Edgar Wright gives us a tantalising glimpse into his psychological horror

☆ OUT 23 APR 2021 ☆

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

EDGAR WRIGHT HAS dabbled in horror before, of course. Just look at the way *Shaun Of The Dead* slowly spirals into full-blown zom, rather than full-blown com, for its last ten minutes. Or the giallo-inspired jump-scarific murders in *Hot Fuzz*. Or Nick Frost in a nappy in his trailer for *Don't*.

Yet — Frost in a nappy aside — Wright has never made a movie that will haunt your dreams. That could be about to change with *Last Night In Soho*, his first foray proper into horror. But if you surmised from the title that it might be a stalk 'n' slash movie set in the bustling heart of London's West End (cast your minds back pre-pandemic — it definitely bustled), you would be very, very wrong. Wright has made something

more ambitious, more enigmatic, more elusive. A film that could bury itself in your subconscious and refuse to move. "It's an unsettling sort of movie," he says. "You want to make a film that lingers in the memory. I think about the films I saw once as a child... particular images burned into my memory. Like, the ghost on the other side of the lake in [Jack Clayton's 1961 horror] *The Innocents*. It's only on screen for two seconds, but you remember it forever."

The exact nature of the images Wright has designed to sear into our synapses won't become clear until April. And, indeed, the story. But we do know that the film revolves around Thomasin McKenzie's Eloise, a young woman with designs on fashioning a career in fashion designing, who somehow finds a way to bridge the gap between modern-day London and the Soho of the 1960s. There, she becomes inextricably entwined in the

life of Anya Taylor-Joy's budding singer Sandy, and soon finds that the '60s aren't as swinging as promised in the brochure. "If you dream of being in the big city, but haven't grown up in one, and you come here, it's uniquely disorientating," explains Wright. "It feels impossible to crack and penetrate."

How Eloise and Sandy will interact, and how Matt Smith's almost certainly shady Jack fits in, will be revealed at a later date. But, after years of pushing the comedy and action envelope with the likes of *Shaun Of The Dead*, *Hot Fuzz* and *Baby Driver*, it'll be fun to see Wright apply his unique visual approach (fortified here by new DP Chung-hoon Chung) to a brand-new genre, and exercise an entirely new set of directorial muscles. "It will feel very different to my other films," he says. "But I've always liked films which have a slow burn into something else, and a lot of



Left: Sandy
(Anya Taylor-Joy)
and Jack (Matt
Smith) up West.

my movies have that feeling. *Last Night* starts in a more psychological realm and then starts to get increasingly intense as it goes along. And I always like to gravitate towards making a film in genres I miss, and there's a certain type of psychological horror film that you got more in the '60s and '70s, that have something of an operatic nature. I'm using that kind of visual grammar."

When Wright first announced the movie, he cited Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* and Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* in dispatches. But that's not to say that *Last Night In Soho* will be a riff on those chilly masterpieces. He's got something much weirder in mind. "I always liked the idea of doing something in a dream state," he says. "Something that, in the Venn diagram of Luis Buñuel and *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, was sort of in the middle." Now that's an enticing prospect. Please, do have nightmares. 🍷



SOUL

For Pixar's metaphysical meditation on who we are, directors Pete Docter and Kemp Powers dug deeper than ever

☆ OUT 27 NOV ☆

Exploring souls is great territory for a film — how did you approach it as an animation?

Pete Docter (below left): I'm always looking for stuff that we could animate that is not based in reality, because we get enough of that when we walk around every day. We wanted to explore what it looks like where our souls were trained — personalities and interests and things that we seem to just be born with. What would that look like? And the characters are made out of fog, this voluminous fog that we'd never done before. You can kind of see through them.

Kemp, how did you get involved?

Kemp Powers (below right): Well, when I came on board, the film had already been in development for a couple of years. They had decided to drill down on both the story being about a main character who was obsessed with jazz, and the struggle of the artist, the unfulfilled artist. The decision was made to set this in the world of jazz and have a main character who is a jazz enthusiast — and then they decided to set it in New York City, and started reaching out to writers to kind of help get the story tighter. That's when I came in. I'm actually from New York City. Jazz didn't come from New York, but it's kind of like the ground zero of modern jazz.

Can you describe what the research process was like?

Powers: This story has forced me as a writer and as a co-director to really dig deep in a way that no other project has. Everyone involved in

the process, down to every animator and story artist — we all put so much of ourselves and our personal experiences into trying to tell this story.

Docter: It's a real gift to all these movies: basically having the opportunity to research, ruminate and meditate on whatever the subject is you're doing — so if that's cars or monsters or whatever, you're going to be doing that for four or five years! So in this case it's been digging down into the deep mysteries of life, which is pretty cool. And we spoke with a lot of jazz musicians, we got to go to New York, go to clubs and meet some amazing people like Herbie Hancock and Quincy Jones and all these amazing musicians, and hear about their life stories. All of this got folded into the film.

Pixar's made a number of films that touch on life's big questions before, but this feels like the biggest challenge yet for a core audience of children. Does it feel risky in those terms?

Powers: I definitely think that this is one of the more mature films that Pixar has ever done, just coming from the fact that the protagonist is a middle-aged man. But again, I think that Pete's proven with *Up*, in which he had a protagonist who's geriatric, that that won't stop children from being able to enjoy his journey.

Docter: The core audience is children, families — we know kids are going to be watching — but as we start these movies and on a daily basis... we're kind of writing for ourselves.

ELLEN E. JONES





MONSTER HUNTER

Paul W.S. Anderson and Milla Jovovich on their flame-throwing, beast-killing action extravaganza

☆ OUT EARLY 2021 ☆

WORDS DAN JOLIN

BASED ON THE CAPCOM video game of the same name, *Monster Hunter* is husband-and-wife team Paul W.S. Anderson and Milla Jovovich's sixth film together as director and star. In the story, which took the couple to some seriously far-flung locations, Jovovich plays Natalie Artemis, a US Army Ranger thrown into a parallel reality where gigantic monsters roam and rampage. The beasts, as she discovers, are stalked by that world's rough, tough human inhabitants — including "The Hunter", played by *Ong-Bak*'s Tony Jaa. For Anderson, the film is a long-gestating passion project, as he and Jovovich explain. First, though: some exercise...

Hi, Paul. Hi, Milla. How's it going?

Milla Jovovich: Sorry we're a little late. We've just finished our virtual gym class.

Paul W.S. Anderson: Well, I needed a moment because, you know, Milla's an action hero and I'm trying to keep up with her. It's not easy.

Of course. So, you've worked together as action hero and director on four *Resident*





Left: US Army Ranger Captain Natalie Artemis (Milla Jovovich) unleashes hell in *Monster Hunter*.
Below: Director Paul W.S. Anderson with Jovovich and crew on set.



Evil movies, and here's another video-game adaptation. How is this one different?

Jovovich: Well, there are no zombies in this movie, for one.

Anderson: *Resident Evil* was very much a survival horror. This is an action-adventure film. It's PG-13. There were creatures in the *Resident Evil* films, but all our monsters are 50-, 60-foot tall. They're really amazing. We're building them in even more detail than the dinosaurs of *Jurassic World*. And they look even better, because we shot on real locations in South Africa and Namibia, which gives the animators something to really match into: real wind, real dust, real sun-flare. The monsters are the only CG thing in there. Everything else — these incredible landscapes, the actors — is there for real. I think we had one day where we put up a green screen and that was it. It's as real as a movie with giant monsters can be.

You shot in some pretty remote locations, especially in Namibia. How was that?

Anderson: It was a real adventure. We spent most of the movie living in tent villages, shooting in these insanely beautiful places. I've been making movies for 25 years and I've never



done anything like this. Though I don't know what Milla's feeling about it was... Too many bloody rocks? [Laughs]

Jovovich: Um... [laughs] Well... I mean, by the end I definitely didn't need to see another beautiful landscape for a long, long time. But [to Anderson] you get the easy part. You get to sit behind the monitor. I've got to go out there and get thrown onto rocks and get kicked around.

Anderson: We celebrated Milla's birthday by getting up at four o'clock in the morning, getting in this tiny little rickety aeroplane, flying several hundred miles over desolate desert, landing at a fresh location and shooting guerilla-style. The scene was Milla and Tony Jaa up on this cliffside, with him flinging her down to the ground. So she spent the day being thrown roughly onto the ground, getting cuts and bruises, covered in blood.

Jovovich: [laughs] Paul's so darn happy all the time. He's always smiling. I don't mind getting flung and scratched and all of that, but what really got me was... I wake up from my nap at lunch and I can hardly open my eyes because my eyeballs are sunburnt. And suddenly Paul walks into the make-up trailer, like [comically cheery voice], "Are you enjoying your birthday, darling, as much as I am?" I was like [shrill snarl], "I'M GONNA KILL YOU!"

How was it working with Tony Jaa? He must be used to tough shoots...

Jovovich: [to Anderson] Oh my God, you broke him.

Anderson: Tony's the nicest guy, and an amazing martial artist. He did everything for real — no wires or anything like that.

Jovovich: He's so strong. In the movie he has



these really big, heavy weapons and he's doing tricks with them! I've never seen someone with that much energy. But by the end of the shoot, poor Tony. It's, like, 3am, during a break, and I look over and Tony's sitting slumped in his chair with his eyes half-open and all bloodshot, stuffing pizza into his mouth, half-asleep. I'm like, "Paul, you've broken Tony Jaa."

That's a career achievement right there for you, Paul. But why put Tony and Milla through this in the first place? Why did you want to adapt this particular game — and do it together?

Anderson: We're both big fans of the game; Milla played it as well. I knew about *Monster Hunter* from 15 years ago when it was just a cult in Japan, and optioned it ten years ago. So it's been a huge labour of love to get it in front of

cameras. I fell in love with the landscapes and the creatures, but when you play the game, you basically play an unnamed hunter. A lot of the characters in the movie are non-player characters from the game; Ron Perlman plays The Admiral, for example. But I wrote the role of Artemis for Milla as the avatar for the player, so she could be a grounded, relatable real-world character who is fresh to the world of *Monster Hunter*.

Jovovich: Yeah, she's not based on a character from the game. Paul wrote her as the captain of a team of Army Rangers that go in to rescue their colleagues. Which was wonderful for me because I got to hang out with a lot of soldiers. I went to an army base here in California [in the Mojave Desert] called Fort Irwin, and was able to ask a lot of questions, see the way these teams do their patrols, talk to them about what it is really like out there.



Clockwise from left: The Hunter (played by Tony Jaa) gets ready to pounce; Artemis forges some serious monster-slaying weaponry; The Hunter braves the elements for a spot of target practice with his Great Hunter's Bow.



I'm assuming that Artemis quickly adapts to this world, and has to adopt the armour and weapons used by its hunters?

Anderson: Exactly. She's almost immediately stripped of all her stuff from the modern world. Actually, although Milla's character's not specifically in the game, she chose the same armour and weapons she uses in the game, so there were aspects of her game character that got folded into the movie representation.

Jovovich: Yeah, I always played the twin blades, because they're the fastest. I experimented with different weapons during the game and was able to kill more monsters with those blades. I thought they'd look really beautiful in an action sequence.

Now the movie's completed, how are you feeling about it?

Anderson: For me, it was a really special

experience making this movie. It's my favourite of all the movies that I've made. Going out to those real landscapes just added something. Certainly visually, it makes the movie stunning. Everyone was joking on set, "It's like *Lawrence Of Arabia*... But with monsters!" It gets away, I think, from the antiseptic feel of a lot of modern-day blockbusters, where everything is done in the studio.

But was it worth that bad birthday, Milla?

MJ: All joking aside, my birthday couldn't have been better, than to be in the middle of nowhere filming a movie with my husband. We have so much fun together. We go through all these crazy adventures. We've been doing it for over 15 years now and it's just made my life so exciting. 🍷



THE WITCHES

Three reasons we're excited for Robert Zemeckis' dark fantasy

☆ OUT 2020 ☆

ANNE HATHAWAY GOES BIG, NOT HOME

There are people out there who love to hate Anne Hathaway, and people who believe — correctly — that she is talented, hard-working and far cooler than she gets credit for. As the flamboyant, scenery-chewing Grand High Witch of Roald Dahl's story, she may have found a way to finally unite both groups (told you she was good). She's thoroughly evil and unbelievably hissable, which will make the haters happy, but — we suspect — should also be an absolute delight to watch laying waste to obsequious hotel staff and lording it over her fellow witches.

THE EFFECTS SHOULD ROCK

Much as we love Nicholas Roeg's 1990 version, there were certain things that were difficult to do with the special effects of the day. Now, there are essentially no barriers left, especially for a director as well-versed in VFX as Robert 'Performance-Capture' Zemeckis (pretty sure that's legally his middle name). Much of this story takes place from the point of view of two small boys turned into even smaller mice, but that sort of scale-shift should be no challenge for the man who made *Welcome To Marwen* — although we're betting these heroes will be significantly cuter.

THERE'S A NEW SETTING

Dahl's book was set in a small English seaside town. Zemeckis' film, however, takes place in the Deep South of the 1960s, adding an extra dimension to the power struggle between Hathaway's big bad and Octavia Spencer's grandmother, over the latter's young grandson (newcomer Jahzir Kadeem Bruno). If the English book touched on questions of class, this one stays true to that and adds the element of race. That should give it even more resonance and power in our times, casting the Grand High Witch as the ultimate Karen against a determined, defiant Spencer. **HELEN O'HARA**

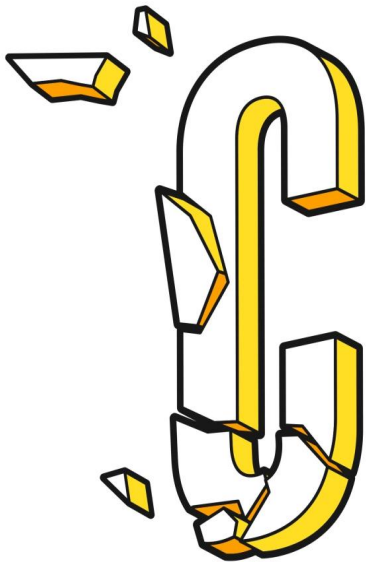
THE MAYHEM FACTORY

THROUGHOUT THE '80S AND '90S, ONE FILM
STUDIO STEAMROLLED THROUGH THE INDUSTRY,
PRODUCING OUTRAGEOUS BLOCKBUSTERS. THIS
IS THE STORY OF **CAROLCO**, THE COMPANY
THAT WAS AS WILD AS ITS MOVIES





WORDS ADAM SMITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING NICK DE SEMLYEN
ILLUSTRATION THE RED DRESS



CANNES HAD NEVER seen anything quite like it.

It was 12 May 1990, early on in the town's 43rd Film Festival, and on the famous pool terrace of the Hôtel du Cap, the swankiest, most eye-wateringly expensive of the area's party venues, a movie bash of blockbuster proportions was in full flow. Earlier in the day a planeload of stars and industry bigwigs had flown in from Hollywood on a specially chartered 747. The passengers had been met on the airport Tarmac by a cavalcade of black Mercedes Benzes, equipped with mounted flashing lights, which negotiated tightly winding streets from the normally quiet Riviera town up to the Cap d'Antibes. That evening, speedboats roared in and out of the bay, ferrying yet more guests to the astonishing blow-out, at which the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Clint Eastwood, James Cameron and Oliver Stone schmoozed, the Gipsy Kings sang, and the titles of forthcoming movies were spelled out in the sky by fireworks. It was enough to raise the eyebrows of even the most jaded Cannes party-watchers.

The shindig, rumoured to have cost as much as \$1 million, was ostensibly to announce such Carolco projects as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *Jacob's Ladder*. But in reality it was designed as a way for the company to bask in its own considerable success. In a few short years, Carolco had transformed itself from a shoestring operation, repackaging the international rights to low-grade Hollywood dreck, into a major production company, one which operated from a swanky seven-storey office off Sunset Boulevard and whose executives jetted around the world on the company BAC 1-11 jet.

Among the dancing crowds, Carolco's co-founder Mario Kassar surveyed the scene with satisfaction. Appropriately enough, it had been at Cannes that he and his former partner, Andrew Vajna, had established Carolco 15 years earlier. Their success — *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Total Recall* (1990), and now even bigger and buzzier projects — was evident in the hordes of revellers, glugging champagne amid the famous cabanas. Out on the water among the lights of the bay was a 203-foot yacht, the Maria Alexander, which, it was whispered, was the biggest of any of the moguls' boats in attendance.

It was pretty good going for a kid who once



Above: Arnold Schwarzenegger hangs around for a few million dollars in *Terminator 2*. Left: Sylvester Stallone cuts up rough as Rambo in 1982's *First Blood*.

slept on the town's beach, and his partner, a former Hungarian wigmaker. "In the books, it's the best party ever done," Kassar says now. "Everybody was picking on us and trying to destroy Carolco. So we threw a party with all of our directors and actors and lit up the sky. And then Sly and Arnold came in at the end. There was a big discussion about who would come in first and who second, so I said, 'Okay, let's go in now!' and came in with both of them. That resolved that problem."

Over the preceding decade and with those twin lodestars — Stallone and Schwarzenegger — Carolco had become one of the most exciting film companies of the age. Its output, loved by pop-cinema fans across the globe, boasted many of the era's defining movies — glorious excess

exploded off the screens. It was the scrappy outsider that had taken on the major studios at their own game and won.

Within three years, Carolco would face its own judgement day, and the glitziest, craziest, richest of the independent film companies would go down in flames as billowy and spectacular as anything their star property, John Rambo, had ever conjured. But along the way, it was one hell of a ride.



For a generation of filmgoers, the Carolco logo — its darting laser beam etching the gleaming titanium curves of a convoluted



Above: Michael Douglas and Sharon Stone smoulder in *Basic Instinct*. Right: Arnie with producers Mario Kassar and Andrew Vajna at the T3 premiere in 2003.



letter 'C' — promised the most lavish, thrilling, over-the-top blockbusters cinema could provide. "If you go on YouTube and search for the logo, it will remind you of a feeling," says an ebullient Kassar, speaking to *Empire* from his Californian home. "When the audience saw it, they expected a good movie. They were never disappointed." Carolco's films were certainly bigger (*Terminator 2*), sexier (*Basic Instinct*) and explodier (*Rambo III*) than any of the major studio pictures of the age.

But the company was defined as much by its flamboyant, money-burning business style as its box-office braggadocio. It was emblematic of the go-go '80s, when chequebooks were prised open as wide as the nostrils in the bathrooms at Spago. Joe Eszterhas would become the highest-paid 'spec' screenwriter in history when he secured a \$3 million deal for his screenplay, 'Basic Instinct', from Carolco. Michael Douglas would pocket \$15 million for the same film. Arnold Schwarzenegger would snaffle himself a \$13 million Gulfstream jet on top of his \$14 million salary for *Terminator 2*. Sylvester Stallone would sign a *ten-picture* deal, unprecedented since the days of the old studios, and demand not only a paycheck of \$16 million for *Rambo III* but a percentage of the back end. To Hollywood's celebrity community, Carolco was a magical ATM from which no withdrawal seemed ever to be refused. "We knew their value," argues Kassar. "We created this friendship and loyalty, but we had to break the first wall. Otherwise do you think I would have got access to any of those actors? Are you kidding?"

Kassar and Vajna had originally met at Cannes in 1974, and had formed Carolco — the

name, of a defunct Panama company, was bought off the shelf — the year after. Kassar, himself the son of a Lebanese film distributor, was gregarious and flamboyant, with a liking for ostentatious gold jewellery and a unique understanding of the fiendishly complex deals that could be struck in international distribution. (One of his first acquisitions: a film about a talking vagina titled *Chatterbox*.) His partner, a Hungarian émigré, had a quieter, more analytical approach. Easily as ambitious as Kassar, Vajna was more focused on the bottom line, known during the company's heyday for wandering the offices asking loudly, "Who are all these people?" as the workforce, and wages bill, swelled.

"They were very different characters," says Peter MacDonald, who would work with the pair as second-unit director on *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and then, after the departure of original director Russell Mulcahy, find himself directing *Rambo III*. "Andy was this dour Hungarian and Mario was kind of like a Lebanese playboy. You wondered how on earth they got on. But, in an odd way, they complemented one another. It was like one of those strange marriages that just works."

The pair soon tired of playing on the fringes of the industry and saw their chance to break into the big league with David Morrell's novel *First Blood*. The story, a downbeat thriller about

a Vietnam vet returning to America only to find himself hunted by a bigoted cop, had languished at Warner Bros. for years, the studio unable to find a way to transfer the depressing, politically charged tale to the big screen. Vajna and Kassar paid Warners \$380,000 for the rights and offered Sylvester Stallone, still riding the wave of *Rocky* and its sequels, \$3.5 million to star, almost double his usual price. "We had to overpay; what you call the membership dues," Kassar recalls. "He changed his mind at one stage, he didn't want to do it. So we thought a little, then went to see his business manager, Herb Nanas, and said, 'Herb, we don't want him to act, but because he knows the character so well, can he at least polish the script for us?' He said, 'Well, for 50k he can.' And obviously when [Stallone] starts writing the character, he falls back in love with the character."

Despite a virtually non-existent marketing campaign, and the doubts of its star, the film was a surprise hit. Stallone's charisma and the patriotic tone of the film — Rambo's death in the novel was replaced with a more uplifting conclusion and, even more importantly, cleared the way for sequels — hit a nerve with moviegoers, and it grossed \$125 million.

With *First Blood*, Carolco had developed its secret sauce: mega-profile projects starring >



the biggest names, with foreign distributors actually putting up the money, and thus the budget, before the film was actually shot. Deploying this formula, Carolco could compete in terms of scale, spectacle and star power with the biggest of the studios.

And boy, did they.

As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, the company was on what seemed like an unstoppable roll. *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) had made \$300 million worldwide; *Total Recall*, Paul Verhoeven's ultra-violent sci-fi extravaganza, made over \$250 million in 1990. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* would justify its ballooning budget with a \$520 million payday. Between 1986 and the start of the 1990s, the company's revenue swelled to a reported \$296 million.

For Peter MacDonald, the Carolco experience was eye-opening. "I didn't realise at the time, until I worked with other companies later," he remembers of the *Rambo III* shoot, "but working with Carolco you didn't have to worry too much about money. If you needed the budget for a sequence, you got it. They absolutely wanted that money up on the screen. Actually, I never really experienced that again."

What, it turned out, Kassar and Vajna also wanted up on screen was insane levels of violence. "I was a bit disconcerted when Mario turned to me and said, 'This is the best carnage I've ever seen!'" remembers MacDonald. "I wasn't sure that was what I wanted. I'd always wanted to make musicals." In typical Carolco style, *Rambo III* would end up entering the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the most violent film ever made, with 221 individual acts of mayhem, 70 major explosions and at least 108 characters killed on screen. "They're counting the bullets? Good for them," shrugs Kassar.

But it was Stallone's unprecedented deal



Above: Sly brings out his big guns (times two) in *Rambo III*. Left: Geena Davis and Matthew Modine in Carolco's ill-fated *Cutthroat Island*.

to star in *Rambo III* that finally led to Carolco's split. Vajna became irritated with the increasingly spiralling budget, and reportedly attempted to fire the studio's star money-maker. "If either of them was going to do that it would be Andy," says MacDonald. "That would be very much like him." The move finally drove an unbridgeable wedge between the two founders and Kassar bought out Vajna's shares at a cost of \$100 million.

Freed of his former partner's more cautious presence, Kassar began splashing the cash even more wildly. He bought a pricey property in Beverly Hills and parked his Rolls-Royce, complete with RAMBO licence plates, in its driveway.



"Guarantees!" yelled Paul Verhoeven. "There's no such thing as guarantees! Guarantees don't happen and if anyone promises you guarantees, they're lying! We don't even know that if you walk out of the building here you won't get hit by a truck! I cannot have control over God! I don't even believe in God! Why am I talking about God?"

This is ludicrous!"

It was 1994, and the scene was a production meeting for Verhoeven's violent medieval epic *Crusade*, set to star Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the reason for the director's not untypical hysteria was Carolco's insistence that he give them assurances that the already eye-watering budget, nearing \$100 million, wouldn't be exceeded.

"I just kept kicking him under the table and trying to tell him to shut up while we're ahead," Schwarzenegger told *Empire* later. "But he just wouldn't. That was the end of that movie. It was a shame."

By the mid-1990s, Carolco was on the ropes. Due to the company's original business model, raising budgets for their blockbusters via presales, even massively profitable films like *Terminator 2* turned out to be less financially rewarding than they looked on paper. Its only possible lifelines were the two potential blockbusters it had in development: Verhoeven's *Crusade* and Renny Harlin's *Cutthroat Island*, a pirate picture starring Michael Douglas — whom they had paid \$13 million — and Geena Davis.

The former was now dead. "It's a sore point



Right: Mr Schwarzenegger gets *Total Recall*.

for me, because I really believed in *Crusade*," says Kassar. "I wanted to do it very badly. Arnold was ready to do it. Paul was ready to do it. But Paul is convinced that I stopped *Crusade* to do *Cutthroat Island*, which in reality — and he's not gonna believe me — is not true. I was a big fan of his and always gave him carte blanche to do his movies. But I needed to have a completion model for that movie, and he wouldn't pin the number down. He thought I was tricking him and I wasn't tricking him, actually. I really wasn't."

And so there remained only the pirate movie. But *Cutthroat Island* seemed doomed from the start. "They had to make this movie," Geena Davis told the *New York Times* shortly after the film released. "The company was dead. Everyone knew that, one way or another, this was their last film." Michael Douglas was unhappy with the screenplay, a problem that only got worse when Renny Harlin repeatedly boosted Davis' onscreen role at the expense of Douglas', a situation uncomfortably complicated by the fact that Harlin was romantically involved with Davis at the time. Shortly before principal

photography was due to commence in Malta, where over 1,000 feet of buildings had already had fake facades built and gargantuan sets were under construction, Douglas quit the film. None of the A-listers approached — Keanu Reeves, Liam Neeson, Michael Keaton, Ralph Fiennes — would take the role. Eventually, Matthew Modine stepped in, but a key plank of Carolco's winning formula, a major international star, was already missing before the film even began production.

"I assumed the whole project would be cancelled," said Davis in 1996. "To my horror, I learned not only would they not cancel, but I had a legal obligation to go ahead. I tried desperately to get out of that movie."

Kassar chuckles when that quote is put to him. "You know, it's very funny how they all want to get out of it, but they end up doing it," he says. "Matthew Modine is a good actor and I did exactly the same numbers of sales, even without Michael Douglas. But [MGM] released it at Christmas, they spent \$2, put it into two theatres. You will always read it every time you read a Carolco article: at the end, a boilerplate '... and *Cutthroat Island*, and

then, and then, and then...' It follows me everywhere. But I laugh when I read it, because it doesn't matter to me."



Finally costing the beleaguered company \$98 million, *Cutthroat Island* limped out of cinemas in early 1995, having made just \$10 million. Swinging cuts at the once-lavish offices had already been enacted, staff let go. An infamous memo announced that free milk would henceforth no longer be provided at the firm's drinks stations. The company that had once bought Arnold Schwarzenegger a jet was now asking its remaining employees to take their coffee black.

It was to no avail. The company was forced to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, the rights to its library of films sold to Canal+. Though Kassar and Vajna would team up again to produce the likes of *Terminator 3: Rise Of The Machines* and *Basic Instinct 2*, Carolco was no more.

But the company had changed the industry, proving that an independent could take on the studios at their own game, and leaving behind some of the era's defining, best-remembered movies. Without them, we wouldn't have the T-1000. There'd be no Rambo. Arnie would never have gone to Mars.

"It was a different time," Kassar reflects of his golden age. "I did some different things than the out-of-the-box things people did in those days. Everything was very specially done, from the way we did screenings to the way our office was set up. But you're in showbusiness. You have to be a showman. You've got to create an aura around everything."

Whatever it costs. ●

GOAT CORPSE POLO

CAROLCO'S WILDEST MOVIE MOMENTS



ANIMAL CRACKERS

RAMBO III (1988)

The third instalment in Carolco's decade-defining franchise upped almost everything to typically gonzo levels for a mayhem-packed 102 minutes. But its defining sequence remains a bizarre sports match in which our friendly PTSD-suffering Vietnam vet plays polo against the Mujahideen with a goat corpse for a ball.



BYE BYE BABY

TOTAL RECALL (1990)

Having travelled to Mars (or possibly not), reality-challenged Doug Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger) delivers a bloody decree nisi to his wife Lori (Sharon Stone) — accompanied with one of Arnie's all-time great zingers: "Consider that a divorce!" Arguments about who gets to keep the dog are thus neatly averted.



RIDING SHOTGUN

TERMINATOR 2 (1991)

Carolco's *bigger! better! shootier!* ethos peaked with the motorbike-truck chase in *T2*. John Connor (Edward Furlong) evades the T-1000 (Robert Patrick) as The Terminator (Schwarzenegger) follows, the three careening through LA's flood-control channels.

A masterpiece of OTT staging and perfect editing.



DOUBLE CROSSING

BASIC INSTINCT (1992)

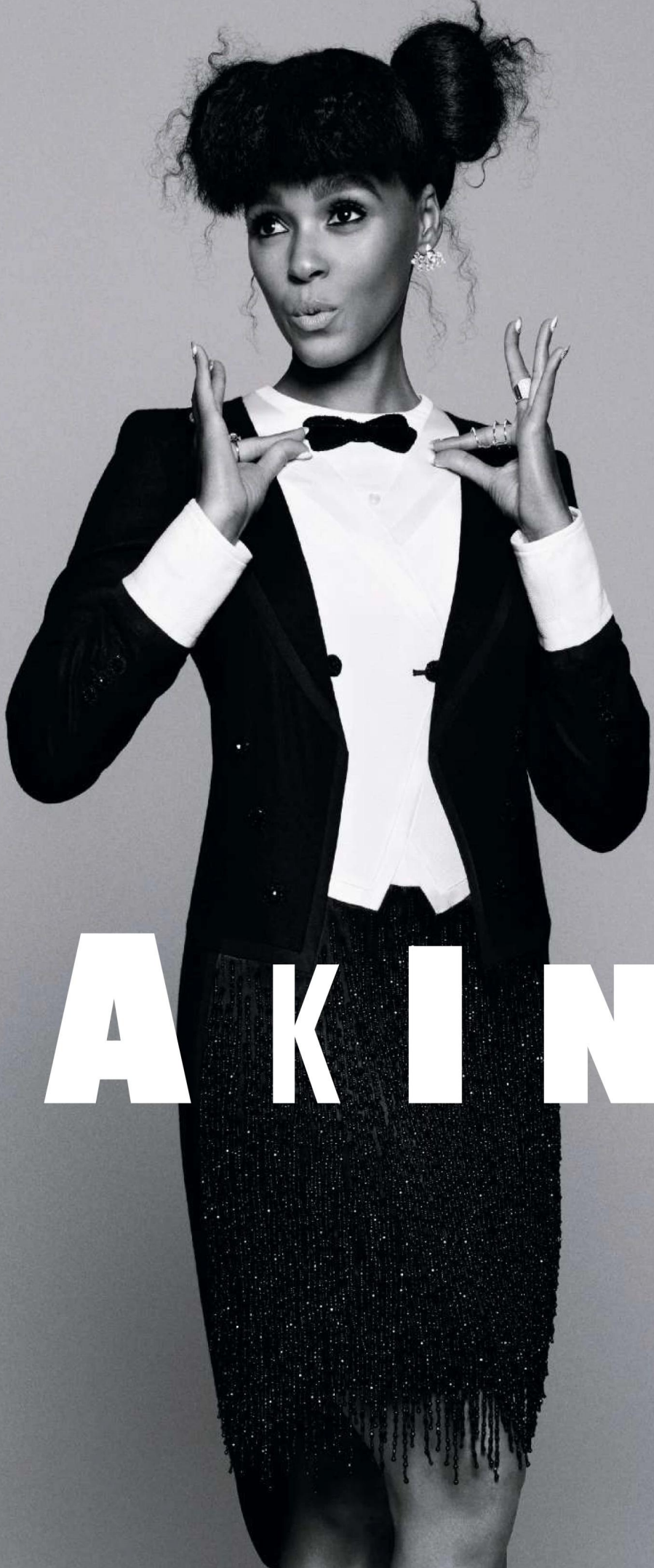
Basic Instinct will chiefly be remembered for the moment when Sharon Stone uncrosses her legs to reveal that she's pants-less. Provocative use of female sexuality as a weapon against the patriarchy, or controversy-generating moment designed to get the punters talking? It's Paul Verhoeven, so it's probably both.



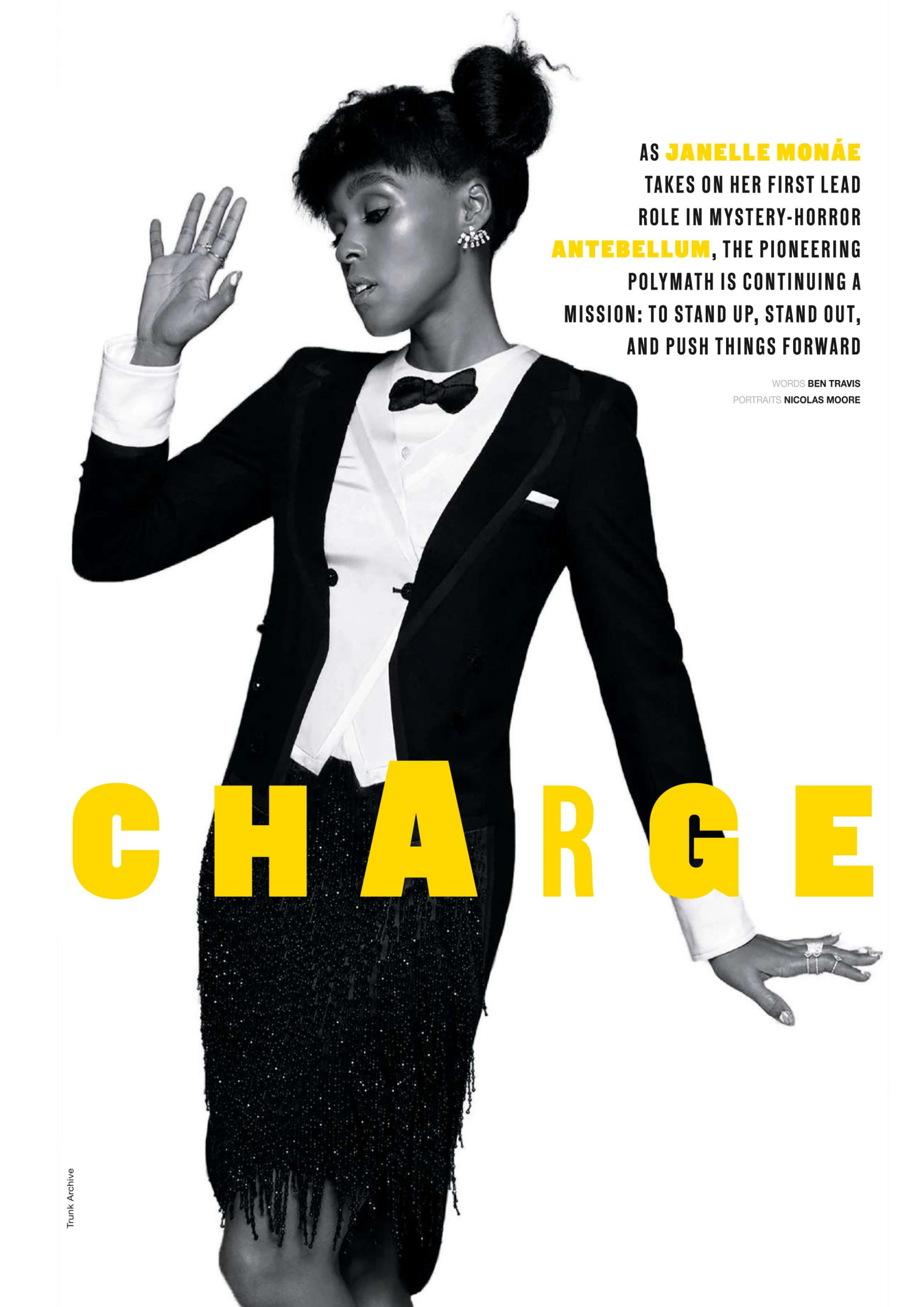
POOL DAZE

SHOWGIRLS (1995)

Verhoeven's batshit-crazy stripper extravaganza would go down as one of the biggest critical debacles in Hollywood history. But no scene sums up its uniquely unrestrained sensibility quite as well as the one in which Elizabeth Berkley and Kyle MacLachlan thrash like horny otters in a neon-lit Vegas pool.



TAKING



AS **JANELLE MONÁE**
TAKES ON HER FIRST LEAD
ROLE IN MYSTERY-HORROR
ANTEBELLUM, THE PIONEERING
POLYMATH IS CONTINUING A
MISSION: TO STAND UP, STAND OUT,
AND PUSH THINGS FORWARD

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**
PORTRAITS **NICOLAS MOORE**

CHARGE

IN EVERYTHING SHE DOES, JANELLE MONÁE IS B O L D

JUST WATCH HER her show-stopping 2020 Oscars performance, which saw her rolling around in the aisles of the Dolby Theatre. There, she beguiled Tom Hanks with a rendition of Mister Rogers' theme, 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?'. She rewrote her 2010 song 'Come Alive' to reference #OscarsSoWhite and the ceremony's biggest snubs (*Hustlers*, *Queen & Slim*, *Dolemite Is My Name*, female directors at large). She thrust a microphone at Leonardo DiCaprio, which he just about managed to "la-la-la" into.

That fearlessness runs through all of Monáe's work. After a near-decade of releasing genre-melding, sci-fi-inspired R&B records — indebted to everything from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* — she kicked off her screen career in 2016 with the double whammy of *Moonlight* and *Hidden Figures*. From there, she has continued to be an active part of telling stories of the Black experience and Black history, in biopic *Harriet*, about 19-century abolitionist and former slave Harriet Tubman, and now as the lead in *Antebellum* — a socially conscious frightfest firmly in the post-*Get Out* Black horror boom. Monáe plays Veronica Henley, a successful modern woman who becomes trapped in a new reality steeped in the horrors of plantation-era America.

With that film hot on the heels of her incredible performance in Amazon's *Homecoming*, Monáe is having a hell of a year. As a rising screen star, a burgeoning producer with her own Wondaland Pictures banner, and an artist who moves fluidly between mediums, she is redefining what it means to be a queer, Black woman in the creative industries. She's forging a brave new world — and waiting for the rest of us to catch up.

What about *Antebellum* made you want to take on your first lead film role?

I read the script in one sitting. I was in the bathtub, and I couldn't put it down, I couldn't stop. By the second act, I didn't know how it was going to end. Gerard [Bush, co-writer and co-director] had a very vivid dream about some ancestor talking to him, representing Veronica's character in his dream, and I also have art that's been inspired by dreams I've had — I've written songs based off melodies in them — so I understood where he was coming from. Once

we started talking through what it would mean to put out a movie like *Antebellum*, I had reservations but also new responsibilities, thinking about where we are in today's society. Our past informs our present, and our present will inform our future. It's all interconnected. I felt like this story would start important conversations that we need to have as Earthlings, as human beings. I could give a voice to so many of the Veronica Henleys around the world.

What can you tell us about Veronica? In the modern day she's a successful author, but in another reality she's somehow been enslaved.

Veronica is very intelligent. She's family-oriented. She loves her community. She's a beacon of hope, a voice to so many Black women. She's encouraging Black women to walk in their authenticity, and not to assimilate but liberate themselves. Her words and what she represents is a threat to the patriarchy and those who want to silence her.

It feels like so many of those things also describe you.

Well, there are certain choices that I would not make that Veronica would. Veronica has a lot more patience than I do, honestly [laughs]. I take on characters that make me want to be better as a person. As an artist, I can be a lot more emotional in my responses, and Veronica is more measured. When I'm creating, I'm not thinking about being measured. I'm just trying to be as unfiltered and honest and raw and real as possible. Plus, Veronica goes through a lot more trauma in this film than I have experienced. Without giving away too much, I knew that it was going to take me into a different headspace. I did a lot of meditation, a lot of exercising. I had a lot more sleepless nights, thinking about what it was going to be like, filming some of the horrific things at five in the morning.

Are you a horror fan? You wore the Midsommar dress at the Oscars.

Oh, I'm a horror fan. I grew up with my cousins and family watching *Nightmare On Elm Street*, *Friday The 13th*, Michael Myers, Chucky and *Candyman*. I'm the person that would get excited when I saw Robert Englund in one of the

Right: Janelle Monáe takes the lead in horror mystery *Antebellum*.
Below: The actor joins Season 2 of Amazon's hit psychological thriller *Homecoming*.
Bottom: *Antebellum*'s Veronica Henley will not be silenced.





Nightmare On Elm Streets as himself, because I knew what he looked like. I've always wanted to get more into the horror space. I think Jordan Peele has reinvigorated a lot of our beliefs that we can do this — it has given us a voice and opened up so many doors for Black voices in horror. We really have to pay him a lot of respect.

For five minutes at the Oscars you had total control. How did you decide what to do with that performance?

It was great to be in that space and be authentically me. I think you saw the authentic Janelle Monáe, you know? It was very in line with stuff I've said in the past, and where I am presently. I'm excited about the future of cinema. One of the things my company, Wondaland Pictures, is trying to do is partner with more women, people of colour, and Black people in LGBTQIA+ spaces that want to tell stories, and whose work hasn't been amplified to our liking. We're working on a slate now that I'm so proud of, I can't wait to share it.

So much of your music is infused in science-fiction, and now you're moving into horror with *Antebellum*. What do you see as the power of genre?

I think it gives the consumer, the moviegoer, the television show-watcher, an opportunity to see life differently. With science-fiction and horror, even drama, depending on the innovative ways it's told, you have the power to touch someone's heart when maybe they weren't expecting it, because they saw it in a different language or through a different set of tools.

We last saw you in *Harriet* — did it feel like a prophetic project? You sang about "leading like a young Harriet Tubman" in your song 'Q.U.E.E.N.'.

Harriet Tubman is a superhero. She's a person who I've always wanted to see on screen. Kasi [Lemmons, director] and Cynthia [Erivo] reached out to me to offer me the role of someone who would assist this Black woman

who was leading other enslaved people to freedom. Marie was born free, so I wasn't playing an enslaved person, but I still felt like, as Marie, I wasn't fully free unless Harriet and the many people that we helped save were free. I still felt like it was my fight in that film. I think it shows what happens when we support other Black women who are in a position of power and who have a plan and a vision. When we support them, we help that plan get executed.

Whether it's Marie in *Harriet*, or Teresa in *Moonlight*, you seem drawn to roles that offer encouragement and empowerment to others.

I don't see those sorts of women honoured — women I deem as being heroic. Whenever I get a unique opportunity to do it, I always wanna do it. That's my way of saying thank you.

A lot of people didn't previously know the story behind *Hidden Figures*. What impact are you seeing from getting these

stories out there?

The beautiful thing is that it's inspiring a whole new generation of kids to investigate these stories. That's how you keep someone alive, in storytelling. Once you stop talking about the Harriet Tubmans and the hidden figures of the world, that's honestly when they die. We can keep their dream alive, we can continue to educate. We recently lost Katherine Johnson [NASA mathematician, portrayed by Taraji P. Henson in *Hidden Figures*] — or, she *lived*. I hate to say “died”. She lives on, you know? What she's done will never be forgotten, and we'll continue to amplify her voice and her story. The amount of kids and young girls who say, “I want to be in STEM [science, technology, engineering and maths] now because I saw *Hidden Figures*. Or, “I'm not going to give up because Mary Jackson [also NASA] didn't give up. I'm gonna keep going, because Harriet Tubman kept going.” And it pertains to *Antebellum*, too — I hope that young girls say, “I'm not going to be silenced, because Veronica Henley wouldn't be silenced. I'm going to burn down the patriarchy, I'm going to build something new. I'm going to work with other women because, in this film, that's how they got this done.”

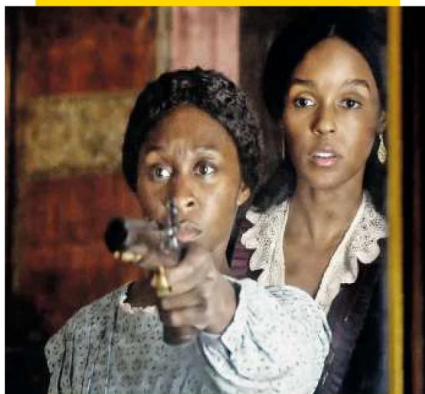
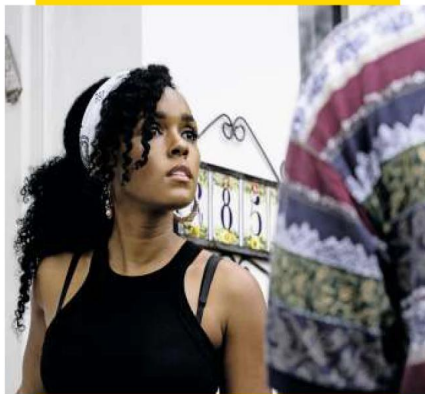
Tell me about your experience on *Moonlight* — it's such an extraordinary film. Did you have a sense of the cultural milestone it would become?

Oh, no. I mean, I knew what it represented to me, how deeply it touched my heart. But you never know what a film is going to do. You always start with trusting your gut — how does it make you feel?

How did *Moonlight* make you feel?

It made me feel many emotions. I felt deeply saddened, because I had met so many kids like Chiron in my life. I was also going through a period of my life where I was understanding my sexuality more and thinking, “Who are my family?” If I didn't have them, what my life would be like, not having allies? Your family is your first tribe. Imagine being poor, young, Black, and not having that foundation. To be Teresa to a Chiron is life or death. That movie dealt with so many things that are familiar in my life — growing up with a parent who had to overcome an addiction, growing up lower class, having to have mentors help you and believe in you. It wasn't easy for me. I felt like a lot of other people would connect to the story. Once I'm moved, that's how I decide if I'm going to do something — if it makes me scared, or if it makes me feel, “I know so many Chirons and Teresas, but where are they on screen?” This representation is important.

So much of your music is steeped in Afrofuturism. What was it like seeing both the aesthetic and the ideas of Afrofuturism enter the mainstream in such a huge way



Top to bottom: *Hidden Figures*' Mary Jackson with Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson) and Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer); As surrogate mum Teresa in *Moonlight*; With Cynthia Erivo in *Harriet*; In action-figure form in *Welcome To Marwen*.

with *Black Panther*?

It was paramount. *Black Panther* was game-changing. As someone who's used science-fiction in my music, in my art, since the beginning of my career, I was so happy to see it become this box-office hit. And a hit, in my opinion, is it feeling authentically Black, authentically Ryan [Coogler, director]. It didn't

feel corporate. I felt my ancestors in that film. I was so proud to see it, so proud of the message that it sent — that yes, we can grow a large amount of money being our authentic selves. There is success in authenticity, in being unapologetically Black, in Black people in the science-fiction and fantasy world.

You cited the Dora Milaje and Wakandan Vibranium as influences on songs from your latest album *Dirty Computer*. What's it like to be in conversation with the culture?

It's beautiful. I hope that I can partner with more like-minded producers and writers and directors to continue to not make it an anomaly. I want there to be a flowing water, a river of films that prove we're here to stay, we're built to last. That there's just not going to be one *Black Panther*, but we'll have other films that can hopefully make just as big of a splash and be rooted in authenticity, rooted in Blackness, rooted in Afrofuturism.

Have you spoken to Ryan Coogler about *Black Panther 2*? Are you making that call?

I have definitely mentioned it. When they were doing *Black Panther* they were all in Atlanta, and I was there working on *Dirty Computer*. A lot of the cast members are my friends — Lupita Nyong'o, Michael B. Jordan, Chadwick Boseman, Daniel Kaluuya. They would come over to Wondaland and listen to the album before it came out, and they would talk to me about the film. It was a great energy that was happening. After seeing the film and talking to Ryan, I definitely have thrown it out there. One of my dreams has always been to play [X-Men's] Storm. I don't know if she comes in in *Black Panther*, but it would be a dream to have her in it. I don't know where they are with that. A lot of women have played Storm and they've done an exceptional job, and I would love to be in that line of artists and get to do Storm justice.

Next up you're in Gloria Steinem biopic *The Glorias*. What appealed to you about it?

Gloria Steinem is such a hero. In a time that women were told more than ever not to collaborate, when this country was segregated, she figured out a way to work with so many women and people from different backgrounds, classes, and ethnicities. She represents what it's like for us to get shit done. I was super-proud to play Dorothy Pitman Hughes, who helped her start [famous feminist publication] *Ms.* magazine. Dorothy helps her get over her speech fears — it's because of her that Gloria can speak and be more relaxed and communicate more effectively. These women really helped Gloria, and she helped them. This will be a story of what worked and what didn't work in the past, and what we can take with us now to get more shit done. 🍌

ANTEBELLUM IS COMING SOON TO CINEMAS








**THE
DEVIL
IS IN THE
DETAIL**

ONE OF CINEMA'S MOST TERRIFYING BLOCKBUSTERS,
RICHARD DONNER'S **THE OMEN** GROUNDED ITSELF IN REALISM.
AS HE AND WRITER DAVID SELTZER TELL US,
CREATING SCARES WAS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

WORDS MARK SALISBURY



IN EARLY 1970s HOLLYWOOD, HORROR WASN'T CONSIDERED A DIRTY WORD.

ROMAN POLANSKI'S *ROSEMARY'S Baby* and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* were big-budget studio movies that had scared up both massive box office and the odd Oscar. Released in 1976, *The Omen* would be another blockbuster, helping popularise 666, aka "the number of the beast", with Satanists and heavy-metal types, as well as making The Book Of Revelation required reading. And yet its director, Richard Donner, says he never saw *The Omen* as a horror film, despite a storyline revolving around the birth and early years of the Antichrist.

To Donner, *The Omen* was, and remains, "a mystery-suspense thriller"; all the tragedy that befalls Gregory Peck's Robert Thorn, his family, and those in his orbit can be chalked up to "coincidence" rather than diabolical intervention. "Even the three sixes could have been a birthmark," insists the now 90-year-old director, who had writer David Seltzer exorcise anything overtly supernatural or demonic from his screenplay before they began filming, opting for a more pragmatic approach. "Dick was very instrumental in shaping the script, keeping the tone down to reality," says Seltzer. "Cloven-hooved creatures could not be real. The credit goes to him for the movie being as brilliant as it was." The key was keeping it real.

CINEMATIC LEGEND HAS it that the idea for *The Omen* was hatched over lunch by its producer, Harvey Bernhard, and Robert L. Munger, an advertising executive who would later be credited as the film's religious advisor. Munger asked Bernhard if he'd ever read The Book Of Revelation, then pitched him the idea of the Antichrist walking among us. Knowing a cool concept when he heard one, Bernhard rushed back to his office and bashed out a ten-page treatment which Seltzer turned into a script. At least, that's the tale Bernhard, who died in 2014, liked to tell. Not so, according to

Seltzer. "You mind if I debunk that and tell you the true story?" says the 80-year-old writer on the phone from Los Angeles. "That's Harvey Bernhard's story, trying to suck up as much credit as he can. There was no treatment. And his friend sent me a page of research."

At the time, Seltzer was "becoming known as that guy who wrote weepy Hollywood romances and children's pictures", he says, having worked, uncredited, on *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory*. "Doing horror pictures was the furthest thing from my mind. So when Harvey called me after he saw *The Exorcist* and said, 'I want you to do one like that,' I said, 'I don't do that kind of thing.' He reminded me he had done me a favour at one point in my career, so I thought, 'Let me give it a try.'" As a former documentarian, Seltzer dived headlong into research, approaching his Satanic subject with forensic rigour. "I was from a family of very fundamental Orthodox Jews," he reveals. "There is no Devil in that religion, there is no place that the Devil dwells, so it was all very foreign to me."

In fact, Seltzer had never even opened the Christian Bible. "It was like reading Shakespeare. I loved the language, I loved the characters, I loved how preposterous it was, because it's told in such a strait-laced manner. I got a lot of different versions and saw people had added to those original tales, rewriting the Bible over the years, so it gave me a very free hand with it." So much so that the film's most quoted passage

— "When the Jews return to Zion/And a comet rips the sky/And the Holy Roman Empire rises/Then You and I must die/From the eternal sea he rises/Creating armies on either shore/Turning man against his brother/'Til man exists no more" — he made up.

"I had seen *Jaws* and I thought, 'Everybody knows fish don't eat boats, but it sure did play in a movie theatre,'" he says. "I decided to write a story about the Devil as though it was real, and could happen to people we relate to." But perhaps Seltzer's greatest cultural impact was in introducing something that *is* in the Bible — the number 666 — to the masses. "Which you now see written on walls, tattoos, and T-shirts," he says, proudly. "I take quiet credit for bringing it to the attention of people."

SELTZER KNOCKED OUT a first draft in five weeks. Entitled 'The Antichrist', it centred on the US Ambassador to London, Robert Thorn, who deceives his wife by substituting another baby for their own stillborn son, unaware he's the spawn of Satan. The script was turned down by everyone, before Warner Bros., who'd enjoyed massive success with *The Exorcist*, picked it up. "Chuck Bale, a stuntman, was supposed to direct. Charles Bronson was going to play the lead, so it was being envisioned as something preposterous," says Seltzer, who accompanied

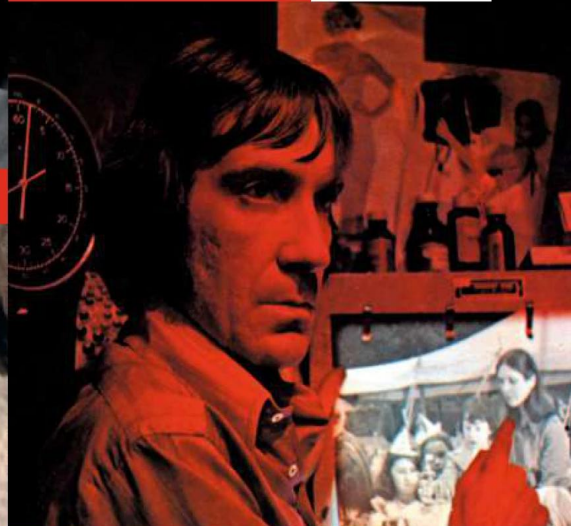




Left to right: Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck), his wife Kathy (Lee Remick) and Damien (Harvey Stephens) after the nanny's death; Remick gets plastered; The Antichrist takes his tricycle for a deadly spin.



Here: Director Richard Donner with Stephens. **Right:** Photographer Keith Jennings (David Warner), whose prints foretell several deaths.



Bale on a location scout to Europe. "We came back to find we were dumped. And Warners were well underway with their sequel to *The Exorcist*."

With "The Antichrist" due to be put into turnaround on the upcoming Monday, the script found its way to Donner, then best-known for directing TV shows such as *The Twilight Zone* and *The Fugitive*. "It was a Friday night and I was going to dinner at Ian McShane's house," Donner recalls. "Eddie Rosen, a manager, called me and said, 'Dick, I've just finished reading a script. It's been passed by every single studio in town, but it's something you should read.' And he sent it over." As Donner got ready, he "smoked a doobie" and started reading. "The script was on the sink in my bathroom. As I was shaving, I opened the first page, looked at it, shaved a bit more, read the next page. All of a sudden I stopped shaving, and read the whole thing." By now, Donner was late, but another dinner guest that fateful evening was Alan Ladd Jr, his former agent and then head of production at 20th Century Fox. Donner took Ladd aside and asked him to read the script. Late Sunday, Ladd telephoned Donner to say

Fox was in. "I couldn't believe it," remembers Donner. "I was jumping with joy. The next morning, I called Harvey Bernhard to tell him that I'd sold the picture."

James Coburn, Roy Scheider, Charlton Heston, Dick Van Dyke and William Holden (who would star in the sequel) all passed on the role of Robert Thorn, before Bernhard suggested Hollywood legend Gregory Peck, who'd won a Best Actor Oscar for playing all-round nice guy Atticus Finch in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Peck had recently retired from acting, following the suicide of his 31-year-old son, Jonathan, although his agent was keen for him to go back to work. Casting such a beloved icon in the lead added a degree of respectability to the project, with Donner figuring if Atticus Finch was convinced his son was the Antichrist, so, too, would audiences. "It was the gravity of his face that made this believable," says Seltzer. "Honestly, if it hadn't had somebody with that kind of stentorian authority, it would not have worked."

Donner searched high and low for his Damien, auditioning hundreds of kids before casting cherubic four-year-old Harvey Stephens,

whose blond locks had to be dyed black. "The Antichrist is prophesied to be beautiful, so I described him as 'clear-eyed, fair-faced with an angelic smile, but it is understood that there is a lot going on behind his eyes,'" says Seltzer. "And they absolutely captured it with Harvey." During auditions, Donner asked each child to beat him up, so Stephens laid into him, punching him in the gonads and scoring the part.

As Thorn's wife Kathy, Donner cast Lee Remick, an American living in England; David Warner played ill-fated photographer Keith Jennings, whose blemished prints foretell several deaths; former *Doctor Who* Patrick Troughton co-starred as Father Brennan, the Catholic priest in league with Satan; Leo McKern played the archaeologist who provides Thorn with the Seven Daggers of Megiddo, with which he tries to kill Damien. For the diabolical Mrs Baylock, who steps in as Damien's nanny after his former carer kills herself during his fifth birthday party, Donner cast British theatre veteran Billie Whitelaw — much to Seltzer's initial dismay. "I envisioned her as a robust Irish woman, and I was angry about it at the time because she was so clearly evil. I thought she violated Dick's entire premise that you don't want somebody on the set who looks like living death. Of course, Dick was right. Billie was brilliant." With the cast assembled, cameras — and heads — were ready to roll.



THE MOVIE'S 11-WEEK SHOOT BEGAN IN OCTOBER 1975, SOON BEING RETITLED 'THE BIRTHMARK'.

The project took over a maternity unit and put up signs that read: "Please be quiet, 'Birthmark' being filmed." "All of the women were desperate to get out when they saw the word birthmark, because it was a bad omen. Hello," laughs Seltzer. "It was an assistant director who said, 'Just call it *The Omen*,' and it stuck."

Throughout filming, cast and crew were plagued by so many strange and mysterious events that the press claimed the production was cursed. Lightning struck planes carrying Seltzer, Peck, Bernhard and executive producer Mace Neufeld. A London restaurant frequented by Peck was bombed by the IRA — on the one night he didn't dine there — as was Neufeld's hotel. The production cancelled a booking on

a private plane which then crashed the day they had been due to film, killing everyone on board. A warden at Windsor Safari Park, where they shot the scene of baboons attacking a car with Kathy and Damien inside, was mauled by, according to varying reports, a lion or a tiger, and later died from his injuries.

Bernhard took the idea of the curse seriously. Unlike Donner. "I had arguments with him about it," recalls the director. "When these things started happening, a friend of his, [who] was very active in the Catholic Church, had it in his mind that a demonic being was trying to stop this film being made. To me, it was coincidence. Nothing more, nothing less. People would say to me, 'We're cursed,' and, 'This thing is dangerous.' I would do everything I could to laugh them through it, because, quite honestly, I needed these people to make my movie, and a lot of them were afraid to come to work." As far as Seltzer was concerned, the curse was "all BS. If the Devil can't stop a movie from being made, we have nothing to fear."

While *The Exorcist* pushed boundaries of taste and physiology with its demon-possessed child, pea-soup vomit and spinning head, *The Omen* went for a series of spectacular and disturbing deaths that were the handiwork of Oscar-winning special-effects supervisor John Richardson. In addition to the nanny's suicide, Troughton's priest is speared by a lightning rod that breaks loose from a church roof during an electrical storm; Remick plummets, head-first, from a balcony at home and, later, out of a hospital window onto an ambulance; while Warner's photographer is decapitated by a sheet

of glass that originally fell from a crane like a guillotine. All, hewing to the filmmakers' original philosophy, incidents that could be explained away as just unrelated accidents.

Alas Richardson, whose credits include six Bonds and eight *Harry Potters*, couldn't get the glass for the latter stunt to fall properly — "Every time the wind would interfere and it would start to leaf," says Donner — so he suggested having the glass slide off the back of a truck instead. Donner covered the sequence with multiple cameras, cutting together every second of footage to prolong the horrific effect, figuring if audiences shut their eyes for a moment or two, when they looked back, Warner's head would still be rolling. The actor couldn't bear to look at his severed noggin, which Donner kept in his car. "I passed David on the motorway going home one day," remembers the director. "I waved at him and he waved back. Then I picked his head up. And I think he passed out in the back seat."



THE OMEN OPENED, fittingly, on 6 June 1976, and grossed almost \$80 million from a budget of \$2.2 million, helping put a cash-strapped Fox back in the black. (Ladd Jr ploughed the profits into another movie he had shooting in London, then known as 'The Star Wars'.) Donner, aged 46, suddenly found himself on Hollywood's A list. "*The Omen* changed my life. And opened up my career," he says. Composer Jerry Goldsmith won his only Oscar for *The Omen*'s hugely influential Black Mass-derived score. "I was on stage when they recorded it. When this choral



Clockwise from far left: Father Brennan (Patrick Troughton) gets skewered; Donner and Peck on set; Kathy Thorn clings on in vain; The baboon attack begins; Keith Jennings loses his head; Robert Thorn attempts the impossible.

ambiguity. "I saw 20 minutes and realised they had missed the point," recalls Seltzer. "The point was an *innocent* villain. The second one started out with this kid being told he was the Devil's son. After that it was just a slasher movie. How many ways can you piss him off and he kills you?" *Omen III: The Final Conflict*, with Damien (Sam Neill) now US Ambassador to London and braced for Christ's second coming, was released in 1981, followed by the made-for-TV *Omen IV: The Awakening*.

While both *Omen II* and *III* have their moments, neither sequel nor spin-off come close to capturing the power of the original which, 44 years later, is widely acknowledged as a classic of the horror genre, thanks, in no small part, to Donner's realistic approach, which is one of the few things not replicated by 2006's slick reboot. "I couldn't believe it," sighs Donner of John Moore's virtual carbon copy. "It was a frame-for-frame remake. Shouldn't there be a new approach?" The answer, evidently, was no. "Same words, same situations, but unbearably false," adds Seltzer who, nevertheless, had to fight for screenplay credit "even though it was my script. It really goes to show what a director can do."

Indeed, Donner worked that same magic again with 1978's *Superman*, which made us believe a man could fly. With *The Omen*, he made us believe the Devil was real. 🍷

group started to go, 'Antichristo... Antichristo...', well, I had to go change my pants," says Donner. "It was brilliant, unbelievable. And that was Jerry Goldsmith. He was a special man. I miss him dearly."

Somewhat surprisingly, *The Omen* was lauded by the Catholic Church. "They embraced it," says Seltzer. "I got awards from Catholic organisations for popularising scripture." There were some, however, who deemed it blasphemous, directing their ire at Donner, who's an atheist. "I had a lot of threats. How dare I allow the Antichrist to live? It was a little unnerving," he notes. "I wasn't anxious to have somebody tell me my blood would be running in the street."

A sequel was quickly put into development. Seltzer wasn't asked back, he says, because the producers got no royalties from the *Omen* novelisation he wrote and "were angry". Initially, Donner planned to return. "I started to help write it, then got an offer for *Superman* and I told Harvey I would appreciate it if he let me out."

Damien: Omen II, directed by Don Taylor, featured a teenage Damien now in military school, and eschewed Donner's sense of



GIVING US THE WILLIES

The *Omen*'s David Seltzer also wrote *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory*: a film that we argue is also a horror. To wit...

THE OOMPA-LOOMPAS

With their spooky songs, clown-like make-up and Trump-orange faces, the Oompa-Loompas feel far more sinister and repellent than mischievous. To quote the *Futurama* 'Chocolate Factory' parody episode: "Who are those horrible orange creatures over there? Tell them I hate them."

THE FIZZY LIFTING DRINK FAN



In a sequence added to the film by Seltzer, a magical moment switches to life-endangering panic. Having imbibed some Fizzy Lifting Drink, Charlie and Grandpa start joyfully levitating... Only for them to realise they're flying

towards a huge, rapidly rotating fan that'll chop them up into Turkish Delight if they can't figure a way back down.

THE BOAT RIDE

A relatively tranquil chocolate-river boat ride plunges into the realm of bad-trip terror as Wonka subjects his guests to a full-on psychedelic assault. As the boat accelerates, the tunnel walls flash with disturbing imagery, including (shudder) a giant millipede coiling around an unconscious woman's face. Genuinely nightmarish.



WONKA HIMSELF

"Not a speck of light is showing, so the danger must be growing," Willy Wonka intones during the above sequence. "Are the fires of hell a-glowing? Is the grisly Reaper mowing? YES!" If we didn't know better, we'd think Gene Wilder's wild-eyed factory owner was a serial killer, offing children one-by-one with his elaborate confection-based contraptions, like a purple-coated Jigsaw. But thankfully we do know better. Um. Don't we? DAN JOLIN





BATTLE

TESTED

HE'S GONE TOE-TO-TOE WITH TERMINATORS, ALIENS, ZOMBIES AND ED HARRIS, CREATING SOME OF CINEMA'S COOLEST AND MOST SOULFUL HEROES ALONG THE WAY. **MICHAEL BIEHN** CATCHES UP WITH *EMPIRE* TO REFLECT ON A CAREER SPENT FACING DOWN DANGER



WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN



EARLIER THIS SUMMER, Michael Biehn addressed the world. "Listen! And understand!" he barked, lowering a striped mask covering his nose and mouth. "That virus is out there. It

can't be bargained with. It can't be reasoned with. It doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or shame. And it absolutely will not stop... until we stay at home." Then he turned away from the camera, ready for a brisk exit. "Kyle Reese — I'm out!"

The 28-second video got uploaded to the Skynet-like digital consciousness that is Twitter, and locked-down movie fans everywhere exploded with excitement. "JOIN THE RESISTANCE!" posted one. "He still has his fastball," said another. Someone even synced up the

speech with Biehn's original version from *The Terminator*.

Biehn himself, not a social-media user, was surprised by the resulting clamour. "I'm not so good when it comes to the movie-star stuff," he tells *Empire* now. "I've never had a publicist. I was just messing around, having fun with my kid or whatever, and something came to me about *The Terminator* and the virus. My wife Jennifer said, 'You should shoot that and put it online.' I was a little bit reticent, but a lot of my friends and family weren't really

getting the seriousness of social-distancing, so I texted it to all my friends."

The transmission may or may not have saved lives. But one thing's for sure: anyone whose feed it popped into would have paid attention. There's a reason the actor has become the face of the human resistance, a corporal in the United States Colonial Marine Corps, the person you hire when you need somebody to yell at Ed Harris in a prison shower room.

Because when Michael Biehn speaks, you damn well listen.



■ ■ ■

GIVEN THE FORMIDABLE roster of tough-guy roles he's racked up over the past four decades, it stands out somewhat that Biehn's first two movie credits were for feather-light comedies that feature not a single shotgun between them. *Grease* and *Coach* were both released in 1978, and in each of them Biehn played a basketball-playing high-schooler. "I'm basically a glorified extra," he says of the more famous film. "The only time you see me is when Travolta's trying to impress Olivia Newton-John, and he hits me in the stomach to take the ball away. And one other scene in a classroom where Kenickie brings out a frog and everybody goes crazy. This tracking shot goes by me, looking like I'm 14 years old."

Originally from Alabama, then a graduate of the University of Arizona, where he studied drama, Biehn was determined to break into movies. He bagged a bigger part in Canadian comedy *Hog Wild*, stalked Lauren Bacall in *The Fan*, and got to go to the UK for *The Lords Of Discipline*, the first of his five collaborations with Bill Paxton. "I really love England," he says. "I used to love the rhyming slang. The weather's shit. But my favourite joke about the weather is: 'What's the

difference between the summer and the winter in England? In the summer, the rain is warmer.'"

Then, in 1984, came the job that changed everything. Although it didn't look like it at the time. In fact, *The Terminator* sounded like the kind of cheapjack sci-fi that would haunt him on late-night cable for the rest of his life. The director, James Cameron, had been fired from a movie called *Piranha II: The Spawning*. And the attached star, an Austrian named Arnold Schwarzenegger, didn't inspire much more confidence. "I read the script and thought, 'This could be really, really bad,'" remembers Biehn. "De Niro and Pacino and Coppola and Spielberg — those were the guys I wanted to work with. I thought, 'Well, this isn't stacking up very well.'"

Once the shoot got underway, Biehn barely interacted with Schwarzenegger ("I could be wrong, but I think that shot where he smashes the window and grabs Linda is the only shot in the movie where Arnold and I are in the same frame"), but was quickly won over by Cameron's virtuosity, heading down to Stan Winston's studio on his time off to marvel at the cybernetic special effects. On set, his performance as resistance fighter Kyle Reese, sent back from the year 2029 to

protect waitress Sarah Connor, was perfectly calibrated — Reese initially as cold and efficient as a T-800, but slowly thawing out as he and Sarah fall in love.

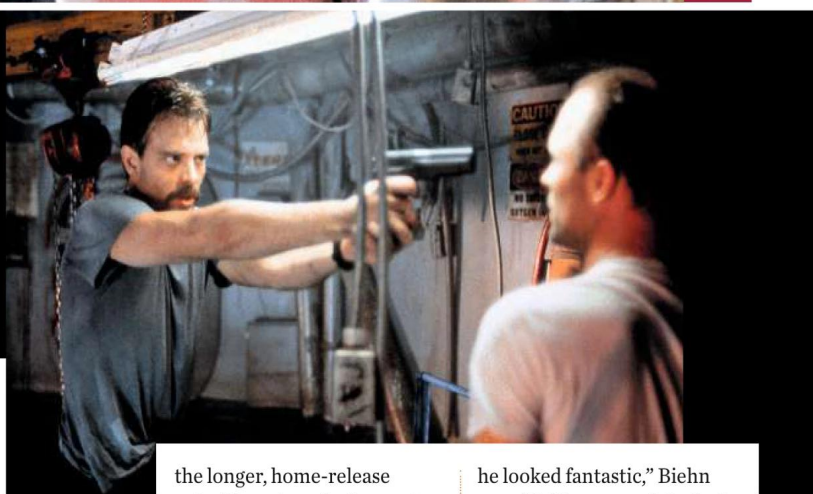
He and Cameron warmed to each other too, so much so that he felt able to do what few have dared: tell the director off. "Jim doesn't coddle actors," Biehn laughs. "And one time I just said, 'Alright, Jim, everybody on the crew knows you can do their job better than them, but you can't fucking play Kyle Reese, so give me a line reading and let's fucking move on.' And that was that."

His next film would be another Cameron classic, *Aliens*, but as every USS Sulaco specialist worth their salt knows, Biehn wasn't in the original cast. Instead he was parachuted in after the shoot

had already begun at Pinewood Studios, replacing James Remar in the role of Corporal Hicks. He got the call on a Friday night; by Monday he was on the set, putting on body armour that had already been painted on by Remar (Biehn was unhappy with a red daubing positioned over his heart that he thought resembled a bullseye, but some footage had already been shot of the Marines running, so it had to stay).

"People always say, 'God, it must have been tough coming in there at the end and everything,'" he says. "Well, Hicks didn't really have that much dialogue, so I had three months to learn about 20 lines." Like Reese, Hicks was a soulful sci-fi hero, a leader of men, but Biehn gave him lighter shadings, making him

Top: Michael Biehn, Sigourney Weaver, Bill Paxton, Paul Reiser and Jenette Goldstein share a tense moment in *Aliens* (1986). **Above:** Biehn's Mike (second from left) eyeballs Danny Zuko (John Travolta) in 1978's *Grease*.



more upbeat, less tortured. “In *The Terminator*, Reese never smiled. Except for one time when we’re in the hotel room and he knows he’s gonna get laid. No, I’m kidding. We’re in the hotel room and she throws something to him and he smiles. But in *Aliens*, Hicks smiles all the time. Jim and Gale [Anne Hurd, producer] liked that I wasn’t playing it as some tough, hardass guy. He’s always smiling, and subservient to [Ripley] too. That was a great role. And I think it’s Cameron’s best film.”

His third collaboration with the director was on 1989’s *The Abyss*, playing a Navy SEAL named Coffey who goes deep, deep beneath the ocean with an oil-platform crew, getting increasingly jittery and psychopathic as the literal pressure gets to him. The shoot

in South Carolina was legendarily rough, and the finished film received patchy reviews. But Biehn is a stand-out, moustached and bug-eyed as the villain, although he maintains the character is a good soldier, cut off from his chain of command. “I loved playing him,” he says. “He was a Navy SEAL, for starters, before anybody even knew what a Navy SEAL was. It’s kind of ironic that his name was Coffey, because I would just drink a lot of coffee on that one. I’d get hopped up as much as I could.”

There would be one more Biehn/Cameron team-up, for *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. But Biehn’s brief return as Reese (as a vision Sarah has in the psychiatric hospital) was snipped out of the film in the cutting room, only appearing in

This page, clockwise from top left: Director James Cameron and Biehn chat on the set of *The Terminator* (1984); With Linda Hamilton’s Sarah Connor in the same; Things unravel for Coffey and Bud (Ed Harris) in *The Abyss* (1989); Biehn versus the exoskeleton in *The Terminator*.

the longer, home-release cuts. The actor admits now to being stung by the experience. “When *T2* was such a big success and everything, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little jealous,” he says. “I was even a little hurt at a screening one time, where they had two screens — all the stars of *T2* in the first, everybody else in the other one — and they put me in the other one.”

The two men remain friends — a while back, Biehn asked Cameron when he’s going to get around to doing a Blu-ray of *The Abyss*. He’s also kept in touch with Schwarzenegger, the former time-travelling enemies now pals who rib each other. “I saw him about six months ago and

he looked fantastic,” Biehn says. “Joking around, I asked him who his plastic surgeon was. He laughed.”

Biehn is funny, frank and chatty — *Empire*’s phone call with the star clocks in at two hours. But on screen, he’s all too often been cast in roles that have straitjacketed his charisma. Here on the phone, though, there is no filter.



AS THE 1980s turned into the ’90s, Hollywood didn’t quite know what to do with Biehn. And his second portrayal as a Navy SEAL, in, well, *Navy SEALs*, was an experience that still causes him pain: the 1990 thriller quickly went



off the rails.

"It was the most horrendous shoot I've ever been on in my life," says Biehn, mincing zero words. "Fucking horrible. Fucking horrible. They offered me a lot of money and Charlie Sheen was on it. We had [Bill] Paxton, we had Dennis Haysbert, we had Joanne Whalley-Kilmer. We had aircraft carriers; the Navy was behind it. I mean, we had everything going for us on that movie except for a director that wasn't smart enough to get out of the way, but just kept injecting nonsense and nonsense and nonsense."

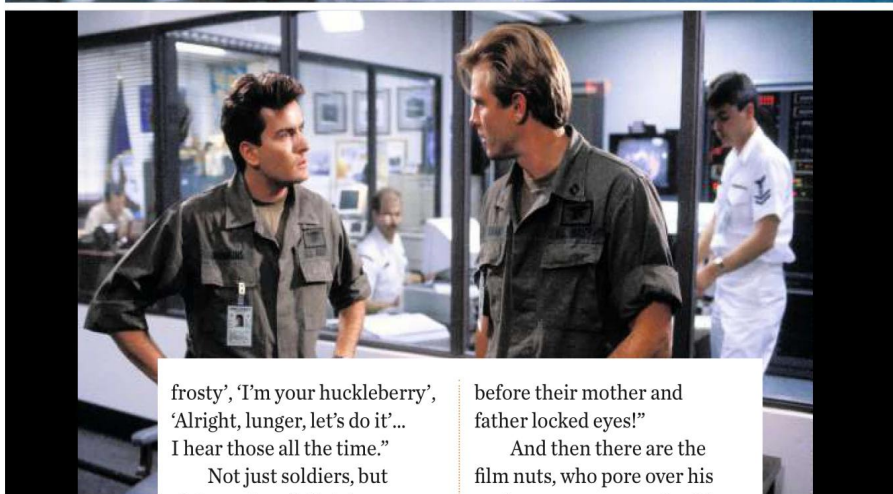
As Lieutenant James Curran, a SEAL who romances a glamorous journalist, Biehn was, at least, allowed to rework his character's material, avoiding such silliness as the scene in which Sheen jumps, for no particular reason, off a bridge from a moving car. "There's a scene where I bring Joanne into what we call the kill house," he recalls, "and everybody's shooting all around her. I wrote that scene. And I wrote all of my stuff. Because the other stuff is just so stupid. It's half of a good movie — I thought it could have been like *Top Gun*."

He felt particularly pained because by that time he had become close friends with several real SEALs, and felt a duty to represent them accurately on screen. "I wanted to show them in the light that they were, not some idiot jumping off a bridge." So he was pleased to get a chance to right the wrong with 1996's *The Rock*, playing his third and final SEAL, a pro who is gunned down by the renegade

soldiers of a mad general (Ed Harris) in the bowels of Alcatraz. Whenever he bumps into Michael Bay, Biehn likes to remind him that he starred in the best scene of Bay's best film.

When the actor praises something he's in, you know he's being honest: Biehn doesn't do PR fluff. For instance, he's not particularly proud of the other film he made with Nicolas Cage, directed by Cage's brother: "It was called something like 'Timeless' [actually *Deadfall*] and after I saw the rough cut of it, I always referred to it as 'Pointless'." But he does have love for *Tombstone*, the 1993 Western in which he plays not a cop, a soldier or any kind of leader, but a pistol-twirling, dark-hearted outlaw named Johnny Ringo. In a cast stacked with heavyweights — Kurt Russell, Val Kilmer, Sam Elliott, Charlton Heston — Biehn makes a major impact.

"It took 20 years before people started coming to me with their stories about them bonding with their grandfather or parents, watching *Tombstone* together," he says. "People see it 30 times. When it came out, I couldn't find anybody who even mentioned me in the reviews. That and *Aliens*, those are the ones that get passed down. Guys that were over in Iraq or Afghanistan say those were their go-to movies for throwing dialogue back and forth. 'Stay



frosty', 'I'm your huckleberry', 'Alright, lunker, let's do it'... I hear those all the time."

Not just soldiers, but alpha males of all stripes identify with Biehn's roster of badasses. "My wheelhouse of people who really love me are military, police officers, district attorneys, those guys," he says. "This cop once opened up his shirt. Into the Kevlar vest he'd sewn an image of Hicks."



BEYOND ALL OF the testosterone, Biehn's fanbase is sizeable and diverse. He has even had small kids run up to him. "I get 12-year-old girls that come up starry-eyed and say, 'Oh my God, you played Hicks. I love you.' We made the movie 20 years

before their mother and father locked eyes!"

And then there are the film nuts, who pore over his performances, savouring his combination of intensity and vulnerability. Damien Chazelle offered Biehn a role in his new film *Babylon*, a part which the actor turned down for being too slim, figuring he could end up being cut like he was from *Terminator 2*. Robert Rodriguez put him in *Planet Terror*, as a BBQ-loving sheriff. And Neill Blomkamp first offered him a role in *Chappie* (which was then retracted and given to Sigourney Weaver), before writing him into a new *Alien* screenplay that would reunite Hicks and Ripley, despite the fact *Alien³* killed off the Marine off-screen.

That project, unfortunately, got blasted

This page, clockwise from top left: *Fire, Brimstone and High-Octane Action* — but not much else — in *Navy SEALs* (1990); Michael Bay's *The Rock* (1996) — a much happier experience all round; Delivering self-crafted dialogue in *Navy SEALs*, in a scene with Charlie Sheen.



BILL AND BIEHN

THE FIVE COLLABORATIONS
OF MICHAEL BIEHN AND BILL PAXTON

THE LORDS OF DISCIPLINE (1983)

Biehn and Paxton's first big-screen teaming finds the pair scumming it as abusive, racist-asshole officers in a '60s military academy. Their hatefully extreme hazing includes forcing cadets to spend all night standing on a ledge, and pouring petrol over them and threatening immolation. Not a fun watch.

THE TERMINATOR (1984)

Sadly they never share the screen in James Cameron's lean, mean sci-fi classic, which belongs more to Biehn as doomed future-soldier Kyle Reese, tasked with protecting Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) from the Arnie-shaped killer cyborg. Paxton doesn't last so long against the burly robot, but his "Fuck you, asshole" blue-spike-haired punk makes an impression.

ALIENS (1986)

The ultimate Biehn/Paxton team-up, as Colonial Marines Hicks and Hudson, whose "bug hunt" goes spectacularly shit-shaped on terraformed rock LV-426. Biehn is the ice-cool one, Hudson is the hot head. Both are treated by James Cameron to several great moments, from Hicks' "looks like love at first sight to me" to Hudson's, "Game over, man. Game over!"

NAVY SEALS (1990)

Another outing in military fatigues, another movie in which neither Biehn (as the team leader) nor Paxton (as the sniper) make it to the end credits — unlike the film's waxy hero, played by Charlie Sheen. It's an unsavoury sploodge of American jingoism best left at the bottom of the cinematic bargain bin, so definitely one for Mike 'n' Bill completists only.

TOMBSTONE (1993)

For George P. Cosmatos' beefy take on the infamous Earp-Clanton feud, Biehn and Paxton take opposing sides. In the Earp corner, Paxton plays youngest bro Morgan, destined to tragically bleed out on a table. In the Clanton corner, there's Biehn's "high-strung" shootist Johnny Ringo, who gets a bullet in the brain courtesy of Val Kilmer's Doc Holliday. Which handily gives us both actors' greatest death scenes in one movie.

DAN JOLIN



Top: As magnetic gunslinger Johnny Ringo in 1993's *Tombstone*.

Above: A change of pace as Sheriff Hague in Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror*, half of *Grindhouse* (2007).

out of the Hollywood airlock. Biehn remains sanguine. "I was pretty excited about it at the time," he says. "It just felt right. But there have been a lot of disappointments in my career. And there have been a lot of lucky things, like what happened to me on *Aliens*. So easy come, easy go. It's the way it is." Like Hicks, who has the ability to close his eyes on a plummeting dropship and have a pre-combat nap, the actor seems happy enough to go with the flow, dedicating his time of late to writing (he's collaborated on a piece denouncing Stanley Kubrick's treatment of actors, and another on *Tombstone*, which can be read online). "There's a lot of guys around who just keep at it and keep at it. And I don't know, I kind of like

not working," he shrugs. "I go by a set now and kind of shudder, like, 'Thank God I don't have to do that anymore.'" Even so, he's kept himself busy, directing two films (2010's *The Blood Bond* and 2011's *The Victim*), reuniting with Val Kilmer in *Streets Of Blood*, and even playing the President in the incredibly titled *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2*. A surprise phone call, like that Friday-night one summoning him to Pinewood long ago, can come at any moment. And although Biehn himself won't confirm or comment on it, multiple reports indicate he'll soon be back on our screens in *The Mandalorian* Season 2. If so, you can be sure that when he speaks, Baby Yoda is going to listen up. ●

WAVE SPOILER WARNING CRASH

INDISPENSABLE HOME ENTERTAINMENT [EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT]



Trouble maker

Cult director John Waters revisits his 1974 underground film **FEMALE TROUBLE**

WHEN YOU LOOK at the perversions director John Waters has committed to celluloid over the last 56 years, you can see how he earned his monikers: King of Filth and Sultan of Sleaze, among others. There was the chicken penetration scene (exactly as it sounds), the lobster sex attack (exactly as it sounds), the eating of dog shit (yep, exactly as it sounds). The last was the final act of *Pink Flamingos*, John Waters' transgressive 1972 hit, when Divine — the centre of his acting 'troupe', 'the Dreamlanders' — in drag, crouched down next to a dog and chewed the warm offering. When his next film, *Female Trouble*, arrived just two years

later, the question was: how could John Waters shock us even more? But something had changed. Waters had got serious(ish). He had double the budget, an actual crew and a film that had something to say about notoriety and celebrity, and maybe even the criminal justice system, with this story of a young suburban woman Dawn Davenport (played by Divine) who has a kid and becomes entangled in a deranged world of crime (this barely does the crazed plot justice). More than four decades on, as the film is released by the very respectable Criterion Collection, the Baltimore filmmaker remembers the making of a filthy classic.



Left: High-school friends Chiclette Friar (Susan Walsh), Dawn Davenport (Divine) and Concetta (Cookie Mueller). **Below:** John Waters sits behind his ebullient cast on set.



Criterion has restored *Female Trouble* — can you talk about the process?

Well, *Female Trouble* was originally shot on 16mm and then blown up to 35mm, in the old days before digital. So on every shot you had to pick whether you lost the top third, the bottom third, or both thirds and kept it in the middle. And it was done fairly quickly and cheaply. But now they've corrected it all. Some people say, "Why don't you leave *Multiple Maniacs* or *Female Trouble* with all those scratches?" Why would I do that? It seems like a really dumb idea. No, they made it look beautiful. *Female Trouble* is my favourite of the

Divine vehicles, even though when it came out it was not a hit. It opened [in] the one theatre in New York on the Upper East Side — a hideaway — and in a blizzard. I remember we got a great review in *Variety*, but most of the other ones were just confused. They didn't know quite how to take it. After *Pink Flamingos*, I realised, "If I ever try to top this, my career will be over."

Were people expecting you to up the ante?

The only thing left I could do would be a snuff movie! The whole movie cost \$27,000. People say, "How could you do it that cheaply?" That

was a lot for us. *Pink Flamingos* was \$12,000. So to me, I felt like it was big-budget at the time. The film's reputation grew — after ten years, even — and people started to like it more. And I think actually it's a better movie than *Pink Flamingos*. Divine gives a great performance and everybody does — all the people that were in my early movies are in it. So it's quite a snapshot of a certain era.

And what do you remember about the shoot itself? Which was either ten days or 20 days, depending on what you read.

That I have no recollection of — how many >

days it was — because we shot one day here and then one day or ten days later, when I had the money or we could do it. It was never continuous. My headquarters were around two shops that Pat Moran [production manager on *Female Trouble*] and her husband had on Read St in Baltimore. Which was also the corner where Divine ate the dog shit! It was kind of like the studio lot.

You were producer, director, screenwriter, cinematographer and co-editor. Was that how you liked to work — being across everything?

When I took the camera away from me, they [the films] looked better. I can't do all that. I'm a writer. I can direct people — I know how to do that, but I certainly am not a cinematographer. Even though I shot *Female Trouble*, I had a good crew for the first time. I had a crew, *period!*

As well as a crew, was this also the first film utilising more conventional techniques?

Yes. *Pink Flamingos* was shot on a camera that had single system sound. The sound was recorded right on the film. You'd have these long, long shots and for every time you had a cut, the sound had to overlap. *Female Trouble* was shot with what they used to call A- and B-rolls, which basically means you could edit, cut back and forth and do coverage. I could never do coverage when I was making *Pink Flamingos* and *Multiple Maniacs*. Not that I knew what it was, but I couldn't have done it anyways!

Pretty much all of the Dreamlanders were in the film. So many of them are no longer with us. Does that make it an emotional experience, looking at the film now?

There are a lot of ghosts in *Female Trouble*. I even know the extras that are dead that are in it.

Gater [played by Michael Potter] is still alive. He wasn't an actor, was he?

No, Gater was walking down the street. We just saw him and said, "Come in here. Can you act?" I think we made him take his clothes off — to make sure what he looked like because we knew he had to be naked in it. And he just said yes. And I think he didn't know what he was getting into. I liked him in it. Johnny Depp [who later starred in *Cry Baby*] told me, "I worked with you because of Gater." I think halfway through it, he realised that he was in it deeper than he wanted to be.

There's the infamous scene in the movie where Divine, playing a man, has sex with Divine, playing Dawn Davenport...

The "go fuck yourself" scene, when Divine was Earl Peterson, was the very first thing we shot because he had his hair grown out, a beard unshaven, eyebrows and everything. Then we shot the double doing it at the same time. And then Divine shaved everything off and was Dawn Davenport.

And when Divine's Earl, he also throws up on Dawn's daughter, Taffy.

Yeah. I guess, because I was doing a little bit like



Top to bottom:
Here comes the bride: Dawn marries hairdresser neighbour Gater Nelson; Dawn in the dock; Shock value.

Pink Flamingos — since Divine really did eat dog shit — that we were trying to have him vomit for real. And he couldn't. He was puke-shy and we gave him that medicine that [causes] gagging. And finally, we used creamed corn.

And how long did you wait for Divine to be able to throw up?

We only had an hour or so. Then we had a nurse

for when Divine shot up liquid eyeliner — it wasn't liquid eyeliner; it was the kind of stuff they shoot in you medically to trace your blood or something. So we had a real nurse on the set that that did shoot up Divine.

The other famous scene is the cha-cha heels...

Yeah — though drag queens even get it wrong. A cha-cha heel is a short, squat heel. It's not spike heels. Drag queens always say, "These are cha-cha heels!" No, they're not cha-cha heels!

A lot of your dialogue and characters have ended up on T-shirts and as memes.

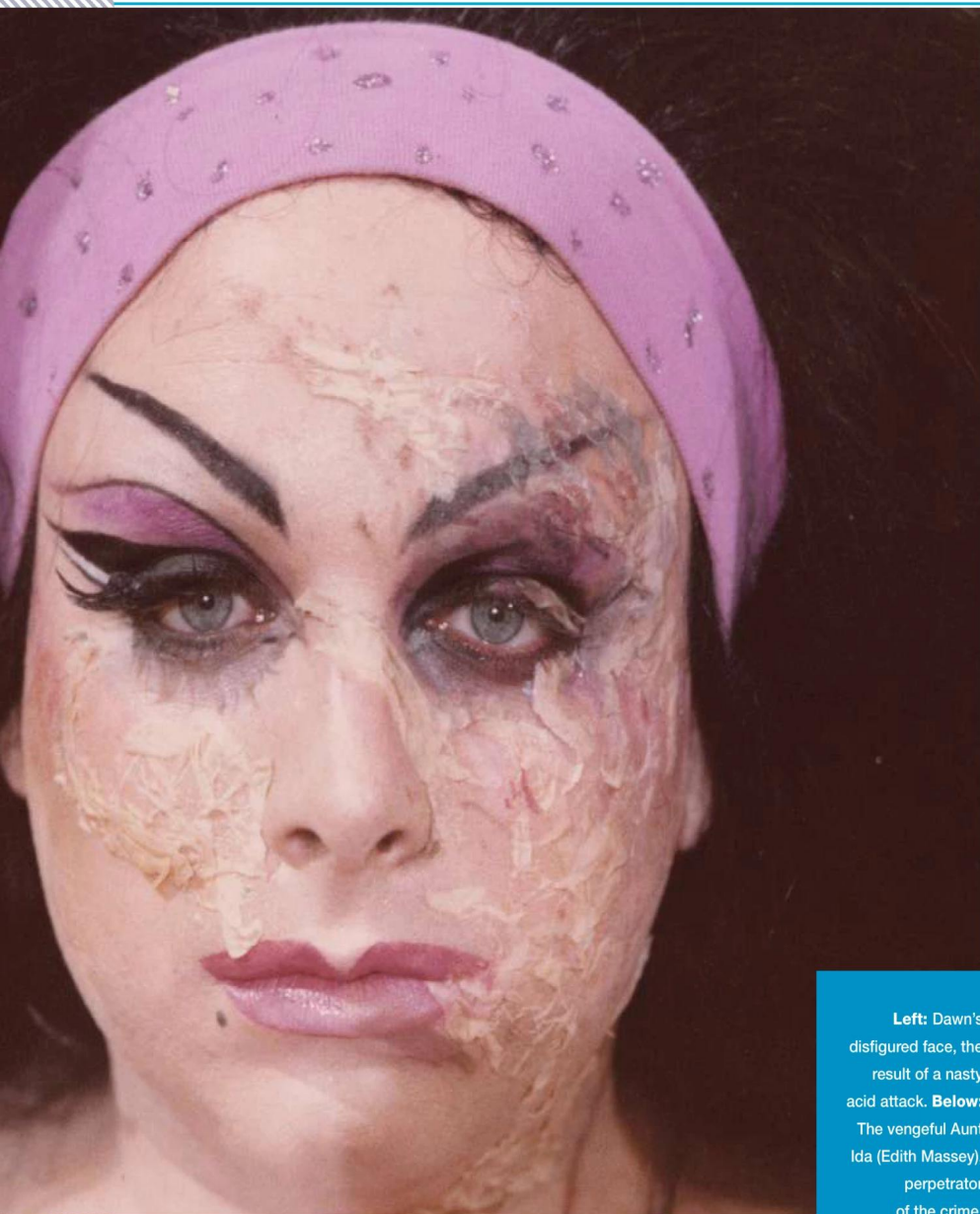
I know, it's amazing. It is truly a great compliment, though, because you know, standing the test of time is the hardest thing to do. Each generation usually says, "I've seen that, I've seen that." But these films seem to still be working with young people. When I do my shows, about half the audience, I'm pretty sure they weren't even alive when I made my last movie, much less my first. I think that just means the crazy sense of humour can pass down to every generation.

But the 'outsider' culture isn't the same anymore.

Now everybody wants to be an outsider. The point of being an outsider was no-one wanted to be one, that's why they so-called 'made trouble'! I said, "I want to be an insider." Now it's much more rebellious to be on the inside and change things, which has weirdly happened to me.

Female Trouble has played at your big retrospectives — at the Lincoln Center in New York and the BFI in London. Could you have ever imagined, back in 1974, that you would have had that kind of respectability?

Well in a way, I'll be honest, yes, I could. My films always did the best in the fanciest neighbourhoods with the most intellectual audience. When we tried drive-ins or grindhouses, they bombed — because the audience knew that we were making fun of the genre. They thought they were sexy; they didn't



Left: Dawn's disfigured face, the result of a nasty acid attack. **Below:** The vengeful Aunt Ida (Edith Massey), perpetrator of the crime.

think they were funny. My movies, even when there was nudity, I don't think anyone was masturbating in my movies, *to* my movies. They might have played in theatres where people did that, no matter what was playing.

What do you think is *Female Trouble's* legacy?

I think it will always be the most popular *Divine* movie I ever made. I think it just has funny lines in it, that are pretty politically incorrect today, but political correctness will go in and out of fashion over the years. It's kind of beautiful, in a warped way. It's hard to get laughs from child abuse — basically *Divine* is a terrible mother — but everybody laughs at the stuff she says. Like, "Do you want another whipping with that car aerial?" Now there is a dated line. There is no such thing as car aerials anymore. I knew about that because my sister used to be a social worker and she said people beat their children with the car aerials because it didn't leave marks. So I always remember unsavoury information that people tell me, then try to turn it into humour somewhere. And of course, no, it would never be funny that a child's beaten with a car aerial. But when *Divine's* saying it to her defiant daughter, and then she says it's hard being a good mother, there's a certain humour. We used to call it sick humour when I was a kid. Now it's black humour. Now it's American humour.



You've talked a lot about good bad taste. Is that what you'd call *Female Trouble*?

I guess then I would have called it that. I think bad taste was always a thing we embraced, and made it good taste by the very fact we embraced it.

Do you think good bad taste still exists?

No. I think Trump has ruined bad taste — nothing's so good it's bad anymore because of him. And maybe your leader too! The hairdo fascists — and we'll throw in North Korea. Why is it the most insane leaders have ludicrous hairdos?

We're probably in no position to talk about Trump, really.

Yes you are, nobody is as bad as him. North Korea might be.

I saw you recently in *Law & Order: SVU*.

Oh, yeah. I like to be in big hit TV series that no-one's going to expect to see me in.

You did play a pornographer.

Yes, big stretch!

Do you like those procedurals?

I like to do things to reach all audiences. When I'm on the subway in New York, people recognise me because I was in the *Chucky* movie. Children recognise me because I was in the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* movie. You have to cover all your bases.

You've long been interested in crime and the justice system. You used to spend a lot of time going to trials.

I don't anymore — I write about it now — but yes, I did. And I taught in prisons for a long time. I still curiously try to get people out of jail, some of them.

And you shot the final scenes of *Female Trouble* in Baltimore City prison, right?

Yeah. And we walked through the prison yard, carrying the electric chair with *Divine* in drag. That the warden allowed us to do that, it's pretty amazing.

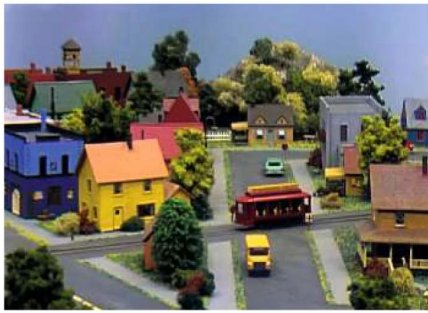
Didn't he love *Pink Flamingos* and *Multiple Maniacs*?

The warden was a fan, yes. Later, he was in *Polyester*. He plays one of the cops that raids the house. I did show my movies in that jail 25 years later.

How did *Female Trouble* go down?

They said: "You're allowed to show us this?!" **TERRI WHITE**

FEMALE TROUBLE IS OUT ON 13 JULY ON CRITERION COLLECTION BLU-RAY



! SPOILER WARNING

THE VIEWING GUIDE

A deep dive into the must-see moments from the month's big release

A Beautiful Day In The Neighbourhood

DIRECTOR MARIELLE HELLER talks us through her heartwarming drama about children's television legend Mister Rogers (Tom Hanks) and the journalist (Matthew Rhys) determined to figure him out.

MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBOORHOOD

The film opens with a precise recreation of the set of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, down to the same foley effects and old TV cameras, and

even filmed in the same studios. "It was to get the feeling right," says Heller. "It was a very technical thing, to create something that felt right, so the one thing your brain would have to adjust to is this being Tom Hanks and not Mister Rogers. That was enough, so everything else had to be perfect." Some of Mister Rogers' original team worked on the film and provided expert advice on nailing the look.

ENTER LLOYD VOGEL

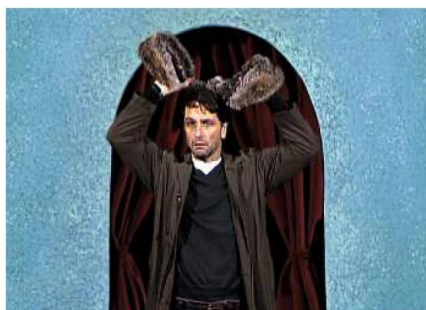
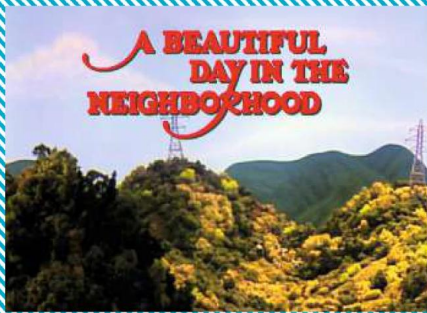
The problem for Heller was that Mister Rogers is, as she puts it, "too evolved" to be the protagonist of a film; he's too good and too calm in the face of conflict. Rather, you need someone who is more conflicted, who "represents that male anger, that's deep and unexamined". Lloyd also becomes a stand-in for the more cynical members of the audience; we're won over by Mister Rogers as Lloyd's scepticism is eroded. "He has to go through this enormous transformation, and he has to be incredibly smart." Like, Heller thought, Matthew Rhys.

THE WEDDING FIGHT

Lloyd was inspired by *Esquire* writer Tom Junod, and has a very troubled relationship with his father because Heller felt that was relatable for many people. "I think the reason Mister Rogers resonates for adults and kids is so many people are still processing their childhood trauma and pain. And Mister Rogers had this ability: he was known [to] get into an interview situation, and he would end up turning the interview around so they were suddenly talking about some long-buried childhood trauma." So the angry Lloyd we meet starts to learn healthier coping mechanisms.

"DON'T RUIN MY CHILDHOOD"

This was the number one thing that people said to Heller when they heard she was planning a Mister Rogers film, an instinct of protectiveness towards him and everything he represents. Some viewers at the UK LFF screening were so worried that the film was going to be a Jimmy Savile-esque exposé that they walked out. Heller gave the line to Lloyd's wife Andrea



(Susan Kelechi Watson). “Part of what you get to see with Lloyd is that he does have this wonderful wife who is not some saint, but she’s able to keep him grounded.”

SINGING ON THE SUBWAY

The crowd serenading Mister Rogers on the New York subway might seem fantastical, but it really happened, in front of Junod. “If it hadn’t, I would think it was too cheesy!” says Heller. “People who otherwise look jaded would approach him on the street with tears in their eyes.” The director added a little tension in this scene, as initially a group of teenagers call out to him — by this point, you’re protective of Mister Rogers, and hoping no-one makes fun of him.

THE TOLL

Mister Rogers’ widow June asked Heller, early on, to take care not to portray him as a saint. “If you think of him as a saint, the whole mission becomes unattainable,” Heller explains. Perhaps his most human moment is when Lloyd tells Mister Rogers that it must have been hard

to grow up as his son, and there’s a flash of fury and pain in Hanks’ eyes before Rogers’ mild reply. “Everyone who loved him says he struggled every day,” Heller says. “He did make sacrifices that were really hard. He was away a lot and I think a big pain in his life was finding out that for his sons, it was hard to share your father like that.”

LLOYD’S DREAM SEQUENCE

After spending many of his waking hours watching Mister Rogers’ show, thinking about him and talking about him, Lloyd begins to dream of himself in Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood Of Make-Believe. “I think Mister Rogers ends up very much infiltrating [Lloyd’s] subconscious — so much so that the more he resists, the worse it gets.” This follows a full emotional breakdown when his father takes sick.

THE MINUTE’S SILENCE

Mister Rogers believed in the power of quiet; he famously used silence instead of a speech when accepting an Emmy, reducing the glitzy audience to tears. But a full minute, on

the big screen? Heller’s stars weren’t sure it would work. “But that was the thing I was the clearest with the whole time. We wanted to have this moment where we invited the audience to be active participants in this, to let their own guard down too and to be present. I knew exactly how I wanted it to feel and look, but I love that it affected people so much.”

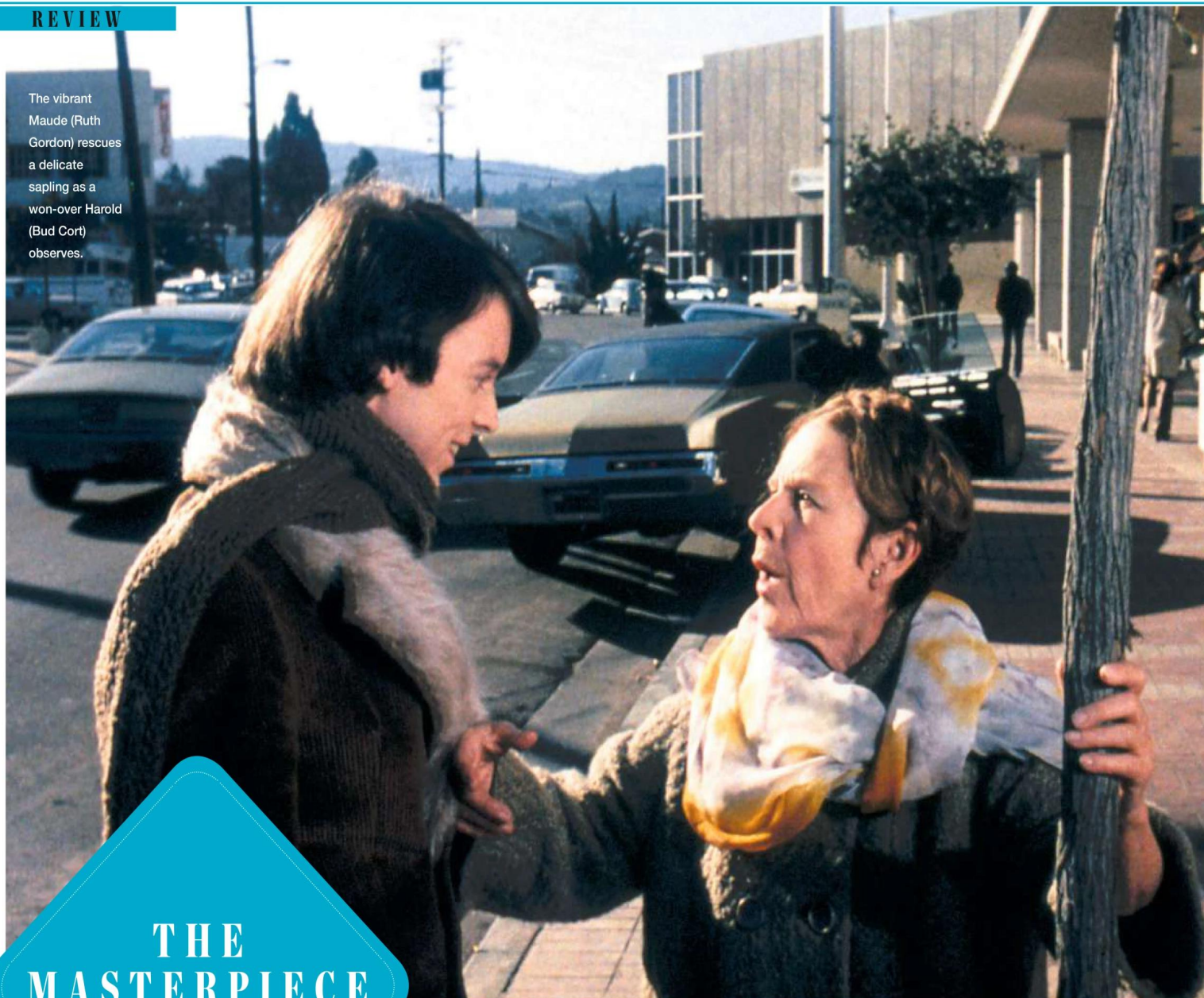
THE DEATHBED VISIT

This was not inspired by Tom Junod’s life, but Mister Rogers was known to ask the dying to pray for him. “The first time I heard that I found it so confusing. He’s saying, ‘Can you give me this gift of praying for me?’ Can you imagine what that would do for somebody, to meet somebody who lives such a good life, to say, ‘Please give me this gift.’ It’s just such a beautiful sentiment. I’m not somebody who’s particularly religious, but I was so struck by that.”

HELEN O’HARA

A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD

The vibrant Maude (Ruth Gordon) rescues a delicate sapling as a won-over Harold (Bud Cort) observes.



THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest films of all time, one film at a time

Harold And Maude

A DISAPPOINTING, PREDICTABLE sort of outrage greeted *Harold And Maude* when it first reached cinemas in the winter of 1971. The peculiar yet enduring love story between a 20ish-year-old man and his 79-year-old girlfriend tanked financially, while critics not only brayed at the subject matter but dismissed its unbridled, vivacious approach to life entirely. “*Harold And*

Maude has all the fun and gaiety of a burning orphanage,” read the *Variety* review upon release.

And yet, like the sickly tree that Maude wrenches from a city sidewalk and rehomes in forest soil, this giddy rumination on life through death found a new life of its own. After a second theatrical release in 1972 (from when it went on to play for 105 consecutive weeks at Minneapolis’ Westgate Theater), *Harold And Maude* crawled into college dorms and cult cinemas, and subsequently the hearts of the romantic and the marginalised, with its galvanising messages of love and liberation. In 1983, it finally turned a profit on its paltry \$1.2 million budget, and today its macabre wit and inventive cinematography can be seen echoed in the films of Wes Anderson, Cameron Crowe and Alexander Payne.

Harold And Maude may have endured a patchy relationship with the film industry, yet its journey to production couldn’t be more Hollywood if it tried. Originally a 20-minute script written by Colin Higgins as his master thesis, the UCLA student got lucky while working as a pool boy for *Spartacus* producer Edward Lewis. He chanced passing the script onto Lewis’ wife Mildred and it paid off, and soon enough this optimistic story about the morbid scion of a wealthy family and a Holocaust survivor

landed in the lap of Paramount Pictures bigwig Stanley Jaffe.

Since the story’s conception in the late 1960s, the mainstream appeal of the bohemian movement, with its political marches and free love, had dulled, but in its wake, big studios had loosened up and become open to working with more non-commercial filmmakers and creatives. Enter Hal Ashby, the pot-smoking, bearded editor of landmark films of the 1960s like *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *The Cincinnati Kid*, and whose debut film as director, *The Landlord*, was a satire on gentrification that, like *Harold And Maude*, saw a similarly privileged young male protagonist (a floppy-haired Beau Bridges) rebuff his life of inherited normalcy.

Yet friction between Ashby, Higgins and a profit-hungry studio was inevitable, and multiple spats ensued. Ashby, a director not accustomed to compromise, nearly left the project a month before shooting began after a string of creative differences. Higgins suffered a professional blow when, after assuming that he was entering the project as director, he was told his test footage wasn’t strong enough.

Ashby accepted the job on the condition that he could keep Higgins on set to learn the ropes, and gave the rising writer a producer credit for



Left: Maude teaches the death-obsessed Harold how to live a little. Below: The controversial kissing scene so despised by Robert Evans.

his work. Similar camaraderie would be found in post-production, when Paramount — now unhappy with the seemingly indecent nature of Harold and Maude's relationship — took control of the edit away from Ashby. It was only when lead actor Bud Cort threatened to abandon his publicity duties that Ashby would retrieve his power over the final cut, bar a kissing scene that Paramount head Robert Evans hated (Ashby sneaked it into a trailer nonetheless). Ali MacGraw — Evans' wife at the time — wanted the scene involving Harold and Maude in bed together to be axed completely.

By the standards of the early 1970s, *Harold And Maude* was admittedly a shocking film, with the couple's slow, unfurling romance culminating in a single shot of them sprawled out peacefully after spending the night together. Shortly after, when Harold confesses his love for Maude to his opulent yet unhinged mother (Vivian Pickles), a barrage of outrage from his military-general uncle, shrink and priest ensues. It was as if Ashby had seen the public's wrath in a crystal ball and decided to have a little fun at their expense.

Then the dust settled, the film enjoyed its renaissance, and the true nature of Harold and Maude's relationship shone through: a celebration of love, unhurried and unapologetic in its nature, with the ability to quite literally overpower death. When we meet Harold he's

staging theatrical fake suicides in his stately family home, feeling he'd be of more worth dead than alive. When we leave, he's singing a Cat Stevens song, looking forward to a life of his own making.

In *Maude*, Harold finds his saviour, an untethered spirit who, in the days leading up to her 80th birthday, remains loyal to living a full, fascinating life. "You sure have a way with people," Harold observes. "Well, they're my species!" comes the jovial reply. In today's shorthand it would be easy to label Maude the blueprint for the Manic Pixie Dream Girl — a female character brimming with joie de vivre and whimsy who vastly enhances the life of our male lead.

But Maude belongs to nobody, not even Harold, choosing to play out to the beat of her own drum instead of a life of matrimony. Even in her final moments, she shows Harold that there's no shame in forging your own path, that you can upend society not by hanging by the neck from an ornate ceiling (no matter how wickedly funny it is to behold), but by being your most authentic self.

Harold And Maude doesn't quite take a torch to the American flag like *Easy Rider*, *The Graduate* or other anti-conformist offerings from the era. Instead it exudes a quiet rebellion that transcends class and age, and a trailblazing aesthetic, with its French New Wave-style editing and sumptuous photography from *Scarface* cinematographer John Alonzo, who transforms the Bay Area into a private, ethereal dreamscape for the pair. In his custom-written anthem, 'If You Want To Sing Out, Sing Out', Cat Stevens sings energetically about self-empowerment: "If you want to be free, be free..."

It was this pioneering, stubborn approach to making *Harold And Maude* that made the love between these two outcasts all the more resilient. This was a film that carved out a rhythm all of its own. It just took the world a little while to keep pace with the beat. **BETH WEBB**

HAROLD AND MAUDE IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD



HAL ASHBY: FAQ



WHO WAS HAL ASHBY?

In short, an editor-turned-director. In long, one of the most important and relatively unheralded American directors of the 1970s.

WHAT FILMS DID HE DIRECT?

As well as *Harold And Maude*, he made *The Last Detail* (1973), *Shampoo* (1975), *Bound For Glory* (1976), *Coming Home* (1978), and Peter Sellers' last film, the wonderful *Being There* (1979) [Ashby and Sellers pictured below]. His beautifully pitched comedy-dramas emphasised people over plot.

WHY SO UNHERALDED?

He never wanted for critical acclaim, is considered to be hugely influential on the likes of Richard Linklater, Judd Apatow and Adam McKay, and even received an Oscar nomination for directing *Coming Home* (he'd earlier won one for editing Norman Jewison's *In The Heat Of The Night*). Four of his movies were nominated for the Palme d'Or. But, *Shampoo* aside, his movies busted few blocks. And perhaps, when assessing the 1970s, he gets lost amid talk of Spielberg, Scorsese, Coppola, De Palma et al. There was also, sadly, his decline in the 1980s.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Bad luck and trouble. Rumours of rampant cocaine use made it harder for him to get films off the ground. When he did, he either suffered tragic misfortune (Sellers died before the two could reteam for 'Grossing Out') or studio interference, bordering on obstruction. He was set to direct *Tootsie*, but was blocked by studio execs at Lorimar, with which he had a production deal. He was also fired the day after principal photography on *8 Million Ways To Die* wrapped. Although he cleaned up his act, he made only a few TV pilots before dying of pancreatic cancer in 1988, aged just 59. But in the decades since, his work has been rediscovered and reevaluated by a new generation.





THE RANKING

Four *Empire* writers.
Eight movies.
Ordered definitively.

The Rocky Saga

Chris: Let's start with the age-old question. What's the first Rocky film you remember?

Terri: Mine is *Rocky II*. My mum used to be a barmaid in this pub and we'd sit in the lodgings upstairs while she worked. It was New Year's Eve and we rifled through their tape collection and found *Rocky II* to put on. I must have been nine or ten. And it knocked my socks off. The fight scenes are incredible. The whole class element of *Rocky* really touches me, but I remember being blown away by the emotion and the heart of it. I think, cumulatively, I've seen them all over 100 times.

Chris: How many times have you seen *Rocky V*?

Terri: Only about six times.

Chris: A mere six. That was the first one I saw in the cinema.

I grew up watching the Rocky movies, and *Rocky IV* was huge for me when it came out on VHS.

Nick: *IV* was the first one I saw. It's a good one to have as an entry point when you're quite young because it's so pumped up and silly and ludicrous. And then you go back and discover the ones that have a bit more soul.

Chris: *Rocky IV* has soul. It has the Godfather Of Soul.

Dan: *Rocky IV* was the first album I ever bought. Not just the first film soundtrack — the first actual album. I don't remember the first *Rocky* I saw. They sat in the background of my childhood. *Rocky*s one and two were mixed together. It was later in life that I discovered that he doesn't win at the end of the first *Rocky*. What a twist!

Chris: The cumulative effect of

these eight movies is a life lived on screen.

Terri: It's one long story. One brilliant, continuous, heartfelt journey of love and loss and grief.

Nick: It's almost like they're rounds in a boxing match.

Dan: And it's the same small set of characters, isn't it? For the most part it focuses on Rocky, Paulie, Adrian, Mickey...

Chris: Apollo.

Dan: Something I noticed is that Paulie...

Chris: Is appalling.

Dan: He's a terrible person.

Chris: Paulie is a racist shitbag.

Nick: I love in *Creed* when they find his porno in his old room. It's still there, on the table.

Dan: And they bury him next to Adrian. Give her a break.

Even in death she's still got him hanging around. But I noticed

OUR CRITICS



TERRI WHITE

Knows 'Gonna Fly Now' off by heart. All together now: "Gonna fly now..."



NICK DE SEMLYEN

Disappointed that Paulie's robot from *Rocky IV* isn't widely available.



CHRIS HEWITT

Favourite Apollo Creed nickname: 'The Count Of Monte Fisto'.



DAN JOLIN

Like Rocky, he's a southpaw. There, the comparisons end.



Illustration: Jacey

him, which is why it's a shame that in both *III* and *V* he lets the character down and almost rejects him, to a degree. We lose Rocky a bit in those two films.

Chris: *V* is, I think, a very well-intentioned attempt to get back to his roots. Each of the Rocky movies parallels where Stallone was in his career. And by *Rocky V* he'd had a few flops, and I think recognised that this guy is less interesting when he's rich. So he tried to take it back to the feeling of the first couple of movies. It doesn't work nearly as well as in *Rocky Balboa*.

Terri: I hate *Rocky V* with a passion. But the way he digs into different parts of Rocky each time, I feel there is a consistent character study throughout the entire eight films.

Nick: There's a sweetness to *Rocky Balboa*. The first film has quite a '70s ending where he doesn't have this triumphant victory, he just goes the distance. That film came directly out of Stallone's pain, out of all his desperation.

Terri: Remember how isolated he was in that film? He lives in that one room, he has quite a bleak existence before he meets Adrian, he doesn't expect much from life. It's so much about masculinity. And it's unashamedly romantic, in some ways.

Nick: The first film ends with them saying they love each other. That's the real victory. And then she gets sidelined.

Chris: Adrian, Mickey, Apollo, Paulie — all these characters speak volumes about Stallone's ability as a writer. It's very easy for people to write Stallone off, but he's a tremendous writer when he wants to be.

Terri: In *Rocky III*, which has many flaws, not least of all in Clubber Lang, who is so crudely and crassly drawn, the relationship with Apollo is absolutely gorgeous. One of his strengths is writing these beautiful relationships. You know, Tony's grief when Apollo dies in *Rocky IV* and he says to Rocky that he "was like my son". Any other writer would have spent pages trying to explore it and he nailed it in three lines.

Chris: The death of Apollo Creed had a profound effect on me as a kid. And rewatching these films destroyed me almost periodically — the scene in *Rocky Balboa* when he breaks down to Paulie about Adrian.

Terri: If you think about when these films were made, it says so many interesting things about pride, masculinity, about ego. And all these are beautifully done through Rocky but I think more interestingly through Apollo Creed.

Chris: The *Creed* films reinvigorated this franchise.

Nick: I love that they flipped it, so Adonis Creed is kind of the anti-Rocky. Instead of this poor guy from the streets, he's from Hollywood. They're about this guy coming to terms with his name and his background and his father.

Terri: It's got a warmth and authenticity that feels fundamentally Rocky, but is so original and modern. The way they reimagined him training in Philly, with quad bikes and hip-hop, and the way Ryan Coogler used 'Gonna Fly Now' is so completely inspired and beautiful.

Chris: *Creed* feels as authentically about the African-American experience as *Rocky* did about the Italian-American experience. I think Stallone should have won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar for that. There's a real sense of the weight of history in everything he does. It doesn't have a talking robot, but despite that this is the best of the franchise.

Nick: *Rocky IV* has the best action. Rocky versus Drago is so immense. And Dolph Lundgren is incredible.

Chris: He's a mountain come to life. That film is utterly fucking ridiculous. It's a huge 1980s poodle-haired rock video that is occasionally interrupted by bouts of talking and punching.

Dan: At one point it's a montage of montages.

Terri: But the narrative heavy-lifting done by those montages is remarkable.

Nick: Eisenstein would have loved it.

Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

that Paulie and Mickey never speak to each other when they're in the same room.

Chris: Are you saying Mickey's a ghost?

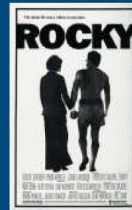
Nick: What if Rocky is the only one alive and everyone else is a ghost?

Dan: The way they framed him when he appears at the start of *Creed II*, I thought Rocky was a ghost.

Chris: One of the things I love is the attention to detail. No small moment goes unremarked. *Rocky Balboa* has Spider Rico turning up, and the lady who works in Adrian's in that movie is there in *Creed II*. The movies feel like Rocky is being constantly haunted by lines and reminders of his past.

Dan: I love that creative continuity created by Stallone. He lives Rocky, and Rocky lives

THE FINAL LIST



ROCKY (1976)

Nick: "Definitive proof that punching meat is a route to success, Rocky's iconic first outing is charming, tender and filled with delightful characters. Plus Paulie."



CREED (2015)

Dan: "Director Ryan Coogler brought a modern style and sensibility to a movie which keeps the feelgood, character-driven vibe of the original."



ROCKY IV (1985)

Nick: "More pumped-up than a Drago bicep, this East-versus-West showdown is a deliriously '80s treat. And however many times you've seen it before, Apollo's death will break you."



ROCKY II (1979)

Terri: "The Rocky film with the greatest opening-credits scene — ambulances speeding the fighters through Philly — and the greatest coming-out-of-a-coma moment."



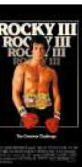
ROCKY BALBOA (2006)

Chris: "This is a desperately sad film, as Rocky struggles to move on after Adrian's death. Nonetheless, it's also an ultimately uplifting return to the character's roots."



CREED II (2018)

Chris: "If, as he has claimed, this is to be Stallone's final Rocky movie, the reunion with Dolph Lundgren's Drago — 33 years on — is an excellent way to go out."



ROCKY III (1982)

Dan: "If it weren't for the joy of seeing Rocky and Creed team up, I'd have ranked this lower than *V*. It totally forgets what made the character of Rocky so engaging, and feels hollow."



ROCKY V (1990)

Terri: "A film, that if I had my way, wouldn't even get to appear here. Unrelentingly drab and downbeat, it confirmed this franchise needed a reboot."

AGREE? DISAGREE? WRITE IN AND TELL US AT: LETTERS@EMPIREMAGAZINE.COM / @EMPIREMAGAZINE

THE CULT OF KIM NEWMAN

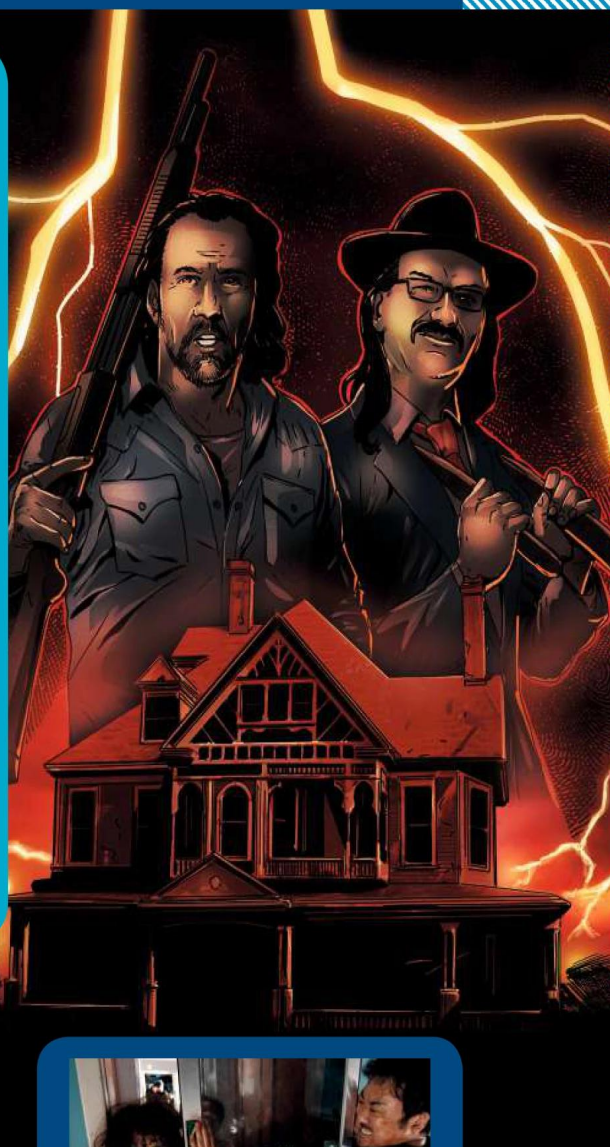
The critic and novelist on this month's weirdest straight-to-video picks

THE THEME OF this month's column — perhaps inevitably — is shut-in horror, with folk cooped up indoors and turning gruesomely on each other.

Stephen S. Campanelli's overheated Southern gothic **Grand Isle** casts the insanely busy and busily insane Nicolas Cage as a drunken, self-hating failed Marine married to demented, sexpot Southern belle Fancy (KaDee Strickland). Hapless handyman Buddy (Luke Benward) gets caught in their mansion during a hurricane, with the mercurial couple set on seducing or killing him — Cage's Walter offers the poor sap cash to murder his wife. Everyone delivers theatrical monologues about how crazy they are and one thing the hosts agree on is that their visitor shouldn't take the triple-locks off the cellar door. Not top-tier Cage, but a full-blooded-enough-to-be-entertaining ride.

In Frank Sabatella's **The Shed**, misfit teens Stan (Jay Jay Warren) and Dommer (Cody Kostro) discover a newly infected vampire (Frank Whaley) hiding from the sunlight in an outbuilding... and get into a complicated relationship with the ravaging monster. Various folk who've given the poor kids a hard time get lured to the shed to be fed to the creature. An uncomfortable, scruffy depiction of fraying small-town America where predators abuse kids even before a Nosferatu-look über-vampire sets up shop, this has excellent work from a mix of veteran character actors (Timothy Bottoms, Siobhan Fallon Hogan) and unfamiliar youngsters.

Marc Meyers' **We Summon The Darkness** explores another American division, as a war between Satanic Heavy Metal and Militant



CULT HERO OF THE MONTH

MA DONG-SEOK
(AKA DON LEE)

Burly Korean-American Ma Dong-seok made an impression as the secondary hero of *Train To Busan*, establishing a Liam Neeson-type screen character he has reprised (with variations) in a series of quality action films. He usually plays middle-aged softies who revert to ass-kicking type when pushed into a corner. In both *The Gangster*, *The Cop*, *The Devil* and *Unstoppable*, Ma is a shady type whose minor traffic accidents lead to battle with truly evil folks. As the relatively ruthless 'Gangster', he survives a brush with a road-rage serial killer, then teams up with a straight 'Cop' to take down the maniac... while *Unstoppable* pits Ma's reformed hardman against a human trafficker who abducts his wife, which affords the shambling hero many opportunities to beat up cringing minions. Ma's global profile is due to rise — he's joining the MCU as Gilgamesh in *The Eternals*.

Christianity is played out at a villa where a concert afterparty goes horribly wrong. Strangely calculating groupie girls (Alexandra Daddario, Maddie Hasson, Amy Forsyth) and standard-issue rocker guys (Logan Miller, Keanu Johnson, Austin Swift) go from playing fun games (uh-oh line: "Never have I ever... drugged someone's drink") to a ritual body-count that doesn't pile up as initially expected. Johnny Knoxville appears late in the day as an anti-rock evangelist, but Daddario — always keen on roles that lift her out of the 'pretty girl who needs rescuing' category — is MVP here, with a showstopper scream-queen

turn. It flounders in the home stretch, but the build-up is terrific.

Orson Oblowitz's **Hell Is Where the Home Is** is in a recent sub-genre of 'Airbnb thrillers', where a group of people having their own problems lease an isolated, picturesque getaway house only to find unwanted intruders ramping up a bad situation. Here, trouble arrives late at night in the form of Fairuza Balk — welcome in any film, even if her character here isn't — who claims she needs to use the phone but is soon giving unwanted relationship advice and lingering as if expecting something bad to happen. Her presence leads to shifts in the balance of power, a gory accident, semi-justified stabbings, gun-wavings and revelations, plus unhelpful visits from sinister cops and masked machete murderers.

Abe Goldfarb's mostly black-and-white, micro-budget **The Horror At Gallery Kay** starts as an edgy indie drama with a lesbian couple (Maine Anders, Rosebud) visiting a relationship counsellor (Brian Silliman). Overlapping, *Rashomon*-like stories lead to a darker place, a tiny art space with shrouded pictures and statues. Clive Barker-y gore and wonder intrude as a story emerges about a hidden city pre-existing New York and eager to reclaim its place in reality. Funny and strange, it opens up cosmic vastness even as its drama is confined to two rooms and a corridor.

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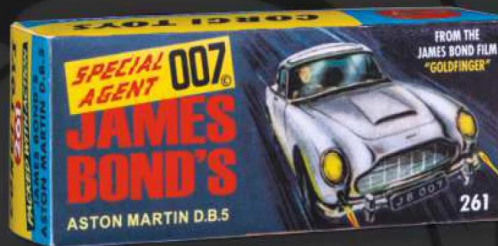
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A Dickens of a task

ARMANDO IANNUCCI, writer-director of *The Personal History Of David Copperfield*, on bringing the iconic characters to life

EVEN IF YOU haven't read Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (and if you haven't, you should), chances are you've heard of some of its greatest characters. Uriah Heep. Mr Micawber. And, of course, the title character. But those are just names. When it came to turning them into flesh-and-blood creations for his adaptation of Dickens' most personal novel, Armando Iannucci and his co-writer, Simon Blackwell, found themselves having to put meat on bones, motivations in mouths, and occasionally making great, big whacking changes to the source material. "If we had to make changes," he says, "we tried to make them in the spirit of the book." Here, Iannucci talks us through some of the standout characters.

1 DAVID COPPERFIELD

Long believed to have been a thinly veiled stand-in for Dickens himself, Dev Patel's David Copperfield is many things as he makes his way through an often acutely sad and destitute life, before finally settling down, falling in love and becoming a writer. He is ambitious, he is intelligent, he is kind, he is funny. But it was important to Iannucci that he also be flawed. "Dickens makes his heroes not quite the purest of pure," says Iannucci. "David is guilty of snobbery when he has a bit of money and goes to public finishing school. It's a much more modern story because it's honest. The very opening line is, 'Whether I turn out to be hero of my own story,' and he very nearly isn't." In a commendably colour-blind cast, the choice of Patel to play David was a cinch for Iannucci.

"I could only think of Dev," he says. "I had nobody else in my head. He's funny, he's played gawky teenagers and been comedic... In *Lion* he's charismatic and strong. There's a warmth; you don't wish ill on a Dev Patel character. You want him to succeed. Honestly, I have no idea what we would have done if he'd said no, really." Maybe place a call to a certain master magician. Or that bloke from *Three's Company*...

2 MR MICAWBER

Anyone expecting Malcolm Tucker-esque fireworks from the reunion of Iannucci with his *The Thick Of It/In The Loop* star Peter Capaldi was going to be disappointed by Mr Micawber, a roguish and eternally fiscally challenged figure who comes into David's life from time to time. "In other portrayals of Mr Micawber, he's seen as this roly-poly, rotund, jovial figure, but in the book he's desperate and despairing." Not to mention physically very different. Iannucci and Blackwell also decided to deploy Mr Micawber in unexpected ways, most notably when he shows up at David's school, posing briefly as a well-to-do teacher. In the book, that's a completely different character. "You never see that teacher again," says Iannucci. "So we thought, 'What if we gave that to Mr. Micawber?'"

3 BETSEY TROTWOOD

For the role of David's eccentric and ultimately kindly great-aunt, Iannucci had only one person in mind to play the part: Tilda Swinton. And he certainly didn't mind that she wasn't exactly known for her comedic work. "I've seen Tilda be very funny in movies," he laughs. "But Betsey has to go through this transition. In the opening scene, she's quite a fearsome, imposing figure."



When we meet her a little later, she's softened, and is looking after her cousin, Mr Dick [played by Hugh Laurie]. With Tilda and Hugh, we discussed their relationship. She wants him to be independent, but she's always keeping an eye on him, so if he looks like he's about to do something embarrassing, she can leap in in a second and click her finger to snap him out of it."

4 MR DICK "I think Mr Dick is the first honest treatment of mental illness in an English novel," says Iannucci of the character played by Hugh Laurie; a well-meaning and warm-hearted man who is all too prone to losing himself in reveries, and who has a particular fascination with the head of the long-dead Charles I. And as such, both director and actor were keen to be respectful. "In previous television and film adaptations, Mr Dick is seen as a figure of fun; slightly crazy, mad, eccentric. And he should be

Below: The key players in *The Personal History Of David Copperfield* — "If we had to make changes, we tried to make them in the spirit of the book," says writer-director Armando Iannucci.

funny, but you also want to feel sorry for him. When they're down on their luck, and he says to Betsey, 'I've got something for you,' and he takes out shells and bits of string, it's such a sad, yet lovely, loving moment."

5 URIAH HEEP The true villain of the piece, Ben Wishaw imbues the mendacious, unctuous, book-cooking Uriah Heep, and his horrendous bowl-cut hairdo, with more humanity than perhaps found in previous iterations. "Ben and Simon and I talked about how it would be nice to have him not as a stereotypical evil man, but indicate why he's behaving like that," explains Iannucci. "We arrived at the notion that he's roughly the same age as David. Both David and he started with similar misfortune and have gone separate ways on how to get around it. David has decided to work hard and try to be honest.

There's more anger in Uriah, saying, 'The rich people are responsible. I'm going to suck them dry of all their money.'"

6 DORA SPENLOW In one of the boldest changes, Dora Spenlow — David's first wife, played by Morfydd Clark — doesn't die. Instead, in a truly meta move, she realises that she no longer fits into David's story and asks him to write her out. By the next scene, she's gone. "I always felt the death of Dora in the book was a bit of a cheat, and a little melodramatic," says Iannucci. "If we are going to lose her, let's lose her of her own volition. She's going to voice what David has thought, but doesn't want to voice. That makes for a more interesting moment." Note how Clark also plays David's mother. "There's an element of David talking about how Dora reminds him of his mother," laughs Iannucci. "Most people don't notice it!" **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD



10 OF THE BEST

Team *Empire* on
the month's essential
movies and TV

PICK OF
THE MONTH



THE GAME

OUT 27 JULY / CERT 15 / 123 MINS

BR

Sandwiched between *Seven* and *Fight Club*, *The Game* tends to be overlooked in the David Fincher canon, but it is far smarter than its 'lesser Fincher' status suggests. A spiked cocktail of *Scrooged*, *The Sting* and any of Hitchcock's twistier capers, it throws Michael Douglas' Gordon Gecko-ish investment-banking git into an elaborate (and highly risky) live

role-playing experience, which may or may not be an even more elaborate (and highly life-threatening) long con. As the red herrings pile up, so does your appreciation of the film's underlying meta appeal. A fair reading of *The Game* is that it's a movie about making movies — specifically the kind of movie you'd anticipate from the guy who just had a huge hit with *Seven*. If you were ever in doubt that Fincher likes fucking with your expectations, then this 'lesser, overlooked' Fincher is the one to watch. **DAN JOLIN**



SHORT TREKS

OUT 13 JULY / CERT PG / 118 MINS

DVD BR

A series of shorts released on CBS All Access in the States to plug the gap between seasons of *Star Trek: Discovery*, the *Short Treks* have proved rather elusive for UK viewers. The first set of four did eventually drop on Netflix, but the more recent instalments make their UK debut on this release — only the most recent episode, 'Children Of Mars', is absent, likely being reserved for the *Star Trek: Picard* box set, to which it serves as a prequel. Ranging from the complementary (a Saru origin story), to the experimental (a love story between a man and an AI, thousands of years in the future), and the downright bizarre (a Looney Tunes-style cartoon about a tardigrade, directed by Michael Giacchino), these ten 20-minute shorts make a fun, occasionally delightful accompaniment to the main series. They're by no means essential, but do lend welcome depth to lesser-served characters like Rebecca Romijn's Number One and Rainn Wilson's Harry Mudd. **JAMES DYER**



MR. VAMPIRE

OUT 20 JULY / CERT 15 / 96 MINS

BR

This massively entertaining 1985 Chinese hit mixes Hammer-style horror, Krazy Kung Fu and *Carry On* high-jinx as priest-exorcist-undertaker Lam Ching-Ying and his clumsy apprentices battle a Mandarin-robed, long-nailed, bloodsucking corpse who hops like a wind-up toy on springs (a Chinese vampire trait). It deploys an impressive range of Daoist techniques for coping with supernatural menace: a mystically charged cat's cradle which seems electrified to the undead; a scattering of sticky rice that acts like garlic does on Dracula (a duplicitous merchant mixes in ordinary rice and compromises the spell); prayer parchments or blood-smears stuck to the foreheads of vampires to immobilise them; a crucifix-sword made out of coins; and amazing martial-arts moves used by the one-eyebrowed priest to batter vampires through breakable furniture. A huge hit in the Far East, this spun off a number of sequels, remakes, imitations and rip-offs. **KIM NEWMAN**



THE ASSISTANT

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 87 MINS

DVD

A single day in the life of a lowly subordinate going about her mundane tasks may not sound like something that would make for compelling viewing, but in the confident hands of writer-director Kitty Green, *The Assistant* turns out to be exactly that, and then some. The titular aide is Jane (Julia Garner), who quickly begins to realise just how much disturbing behaviour is transpiring at the film production company she works in. The Harvey Weinstein parallels are clear, then, but rather than aim for a more overt target Green's screenplay takes a show-don't-tell approach to its topical issues and is all the better for it, spotlighting the everyday indecencies and toxic culture real-life women in similar positions are subjected to. It helps that in the absence of much dialogue Garner's meticulous body language does much of the talking, and she makes sure that each micro-aggression is felt as Jane's suffocation mounts. **AMON WARMANN**

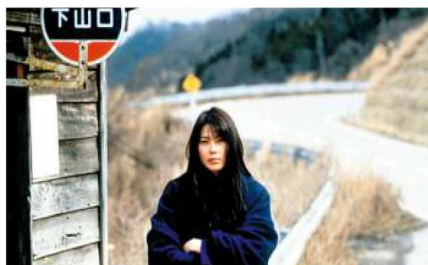


TRUE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG

OUT NOW / CERT 18 / 125 MINS

DVD BR

The legend of Australian outlaw Ned Kelly is a well-trodden one in cinema (he was, in fact, the subject of the very first feature-length film, in 1906), so finding a fresh take is a challenge. Director Justin Kurzel takes up the gauntlet with his opening shot, tracking an outlaw riding across the Australian wilderness — dressed head-to-toe in a woman's dress; a John Ford-esque Western, this ain't. Like the Peter Carey novel it adapts, that title is ironic, exploring the nature of storytelling and myth-making: it has a wild, rebellious streak to it, a scrappy punk approach that is structurally haphazard but rivetingly unpredictable, mirroring its (anti-?)hero. As the wayward bushranger, George MacKay re-confirms his status as one of our most exciting acting exports, putting in a visceral, physical performance — plus, somehow, looking as good in a dress as he does sporting a metal bucket. **JOHN NUGENT**



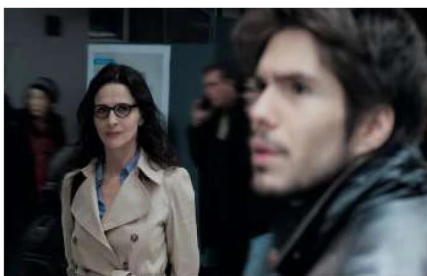
MABOROSI

OUT 20 JULY / CERT 12 / 109 MINS

DVD BR

The story of Hirokazu Kore-eda's feature-film debut is a deceptively simple one. Following the sudden death of her husband, a young woman named Yumiko (Makiko Esumi) moves away to a small fishing village with her child, but her feelings of melancholy continue. Unfolding in almost dreamlike abstraction, it's the contemplation of those feelings that makes up the bulk of *Maborosi*, as Yumiko's numbing grief is reflected in the cold and sparse light of the seaside. Characterised by its deliberate pace and a hypnotic use of light and muted colour, it feels both familiar and removed from Kore-eda's filmography, more enveloped in literal darkness than his later family dramas. In any case, *Maborosi* is a moving study of grief, as even seemingly mundane household objects taking on great emotional significance, filmed as though they're literally haunted. A perhaps daunting, but empathetic and nourishing watch.

KAMBOLE CAMPBELL



WHO YOU THINK I AM

OUT NOW / CERT TBC / 101 MINS

DVD

Sliding into the DMs has never yielded such delicious, dangerous results as in this Juliette Binoche-fronted catfish thriller. After living a solitary life as an emotionally starved divorcee, Claire (Binoche) tentatively strikes up a Facebook flirtation with a younger man under the alias of 24-year-old Clara. When the exchange evolves into a fully-fledged remote affair, a delighted Claire feels momentarily revived, until her new beau suggests meeting in person and catastrophe ensues. *Who You Think I Am* is a nocturnal story that maintains surprising tenderness, with filmmaker Safy Nebbou utilising the low glow of the laptop screen and even the chirpy messenger alert to craft a bubble of forged desire for Claire to submerge herself in. When that bubble bursts, the film unveils a secret identity of its own that upholds the same bittersweet human drama but with a few juicy twists to boot. **BETH WEBB**

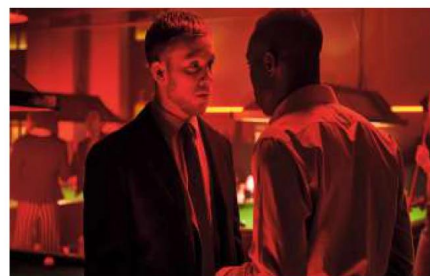


CREEPSHOW 2

OUT 13 JULY / CERT 15 / 90 MINS

BR

Making a sequel to George A. Romero's Stephen King and Dario Argento-fuelled anthology lightshow of terror would be an unenviable task at the best of times, never mind when you have less than half the budget and, in Michael Gornick, a first-time director. However the result, while not as stylised or unique as its predecessor, is surprisingly entertaining at times, with some excellent effects work ('The Raft'), fun casting, and smart comic-book endings. It's just a shame about the decision to reduce the number of stories, for budgetary reasons, from five to three (though one of the planned tales, 'Cat From Hell', does turn up in the *Tales From The Darkside* movie), meaning that that it all feels a bit stretched by the end — especially with the last story ('The Hitchhiker'), which seems to go on forever. Nevertheless, it's a fun little King capsule, and you get to see a very young Holt McCallany as a Native-American pretty-boy, which is always welcome. **JOHN RAIN**



GANGS OF LONDON

OUT 27 JULY / CERT 18 / 450 MINS

DVD BR

Having conclusively shown us he has the chops — so many, many chops — in *The Raid* and *The Raid 2*, Wales' Gareth Evans comes closer to home with this, a nine-part London gangland saga which may well be the fightiest television series ever made. Yet it is so much more than that. Telling a sprawling story which takes in money, power and politics, it never scrimps on the action: every episode boasts bone-crunching, eyeball-gauging, face-shattering violence. But it is also handsomely mounted and thrillingly told, with incredible camera shenanigans and buckets of suspense — the quiet character work is just as engaging as the set-pieces. It is binge city. Best of all, though it is wildly unpredictable. Episode five, in particular — a brutal, shocking siege — is one of the most exciting hours of dramatic TV we've had in a long time. What a show.

ALEX GODFREY



DARK WATERS

OUT NOW / CERT TBC / 126 MINS

DVD

Mark Ruffalo is dogged real-life lawyer Rob Bilott, who finds that a seemingly small favour for a family friend puts his career, sanity and family bonds at risk. Why? He ends up taking on chemical behemoth DuPont, who were accused of dumping hazardous chemicals into the waters near a farming community and, we soon learn, beyond, as a by-product of famed surfacing product Teflon. *Dark Waters* is not the one to watch if you're after explosive revelations and pulse-pounding drama (or, indeed, cheery escapism): it prefers to let the story simmer, director Todd Haynes painting this one with dreary skies and bleak pastures. But rather than letting it descend into drab polemic, Ruffalo and his co-stars (including Anne Hathaway, Tim Robbins, Victor Garber and, later, Bill Pullman) give a tough issue a human face and a healthy signal boost.

JAMES WHITE

THE
STORY
OF THE
SHOT

How iconic
images came
to life



Ice Cold In Alex

WHAT'S THE GREATEST drinking scene in movie history? Rick's gin joint session as Sam plays 'As Time Goes By' in *Casablanca*? Withnail sampling the "finest wines available to humanity" in *Withnail And I*? Or how about Annie (Kristen Wiig), high on sedatives and alcohol, invading first class in *Bridesmaids*? All good contenders, but you'd have to go a long way to beat the final scene of J. Lee Thompson's taut World War II drama *Ice Cold In Alex*, a constant fixture not only in any self-respecting Best Big-Screen Booze-Up List, but also one of the greatest British war films ever made.

After a treacherous journey escorting an ambulance across the hot desert from the Libyan port city of Tobruk to Alexandria, Captain Anson (John Mills), joined by Mechanist Sergeant-Major Tom Pugh (Harry Andrews), Captain van der Poel (Anthony Quayle), a South African officer who has been unmasked as a German, and nurse Sister Diana Murdoch

(Sylvia Syms), enters a bar and orders four lagers— the eponymous 'ice cold in Alex'. Staring at it intently, running his finger up and down the pint glass, Anson downs the beer in one and utters, "Worth waiting for." It's not only cinema's ultimate expression of thirst-quenching, but also a progressive portrait of solidarity, a moment where differences of nation, class and gender are all put aside.

The iconic pint-sinking was present and correct in Christopher Landon's bestselling 1957 novel. On the page, the beer referred to was Rheingold, an American beer because the characters would never be seen drinking a German brand during the war. In the movie, the brand was switched to Danish beer Carlsberg, probably the best product placement in the world. After eight weeks' location work in Tripoli, the crew shot the final scene at Elstree Studios first thing in the morning. As per film industry conventions, the props team experimented with

Mechanist Sergeant Tom Pugh (Harry Andrews), Captain van der Poel (Anthony Quayle), Sister Diana Murdoch (Sylvia Syms) and Captain Anson (John Mills) share the joy of a cold beer.

different soft drinks to replicate lager — ginger ale, sherbet, Andrews liver salts — but couldn't find anything that looked realistic, so it was decided Mills would quaff genuine beer. Thompson was a hard task-master — he had run-ins with Mills, Quayle and Andrews over his penchant for putting the cast in danger — and the take numbers quickly racked up. "By take 14 I was totally plastered and was taken back to my dressing room to sleep it off," recalled Mills. "It's the best morning's work I ever had in a studio."

In the '80s, advertising agency Gold Greenlees Trott purloined the scene for a Holsten Pils lager commercial, splicing Griff Rhys Jones into the film footage for comedic effect. Rival booze producers Carlsberg, the beer used in the film, hit back by simply using the clip with Mills admiringly looking at the Carlsberg branded glass, with a play on their usual tagline — "Still probably the best lager in the world." Whatever version, you can almost taste Anson's relief. **IAN FREER**

ICE COLD IN ALEX IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD

INSTANT TRIVIA



1

Sylvia Syms was paid "£30 a week" for playing Diana Murdoch. "But I made a lot more when they turned it into an advert for Carlsberg," she quipped.

2

John Mills was disappointed with the final cut of his love scene with Syms. "Up to then I had made love on the screen to virtually nothing but submarines and tanks, and this was my big chance — and then most of it was cut out."

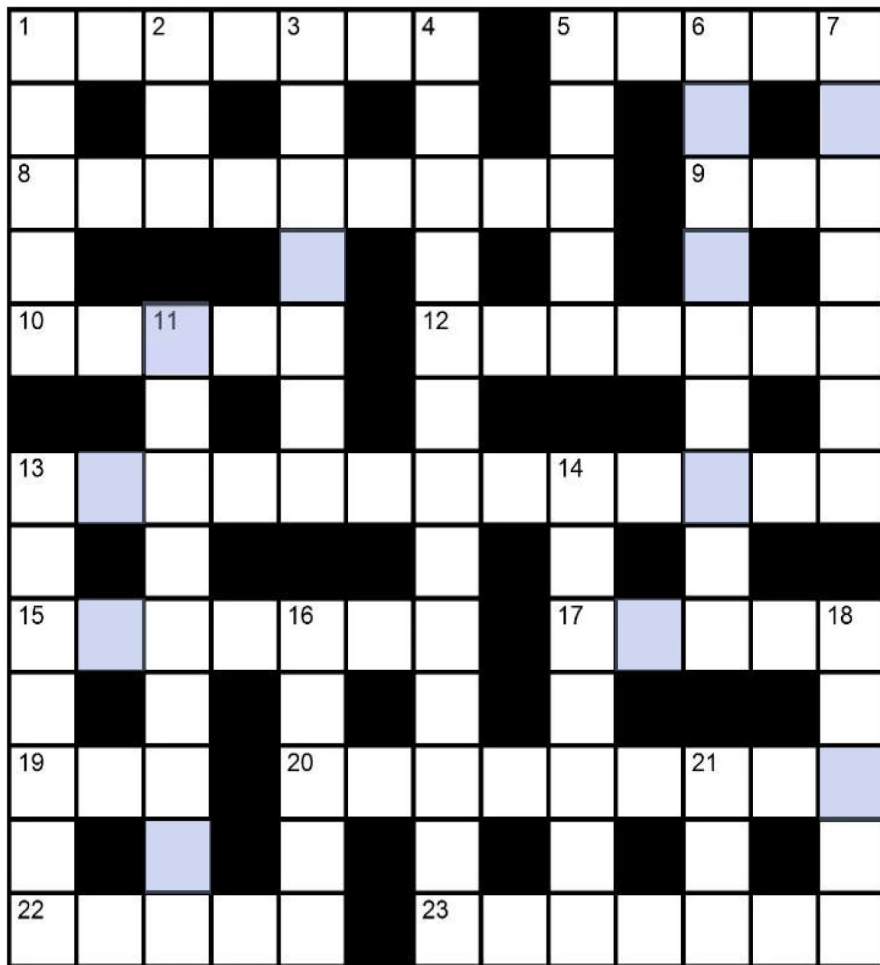
3

The book is based on Christopher Landon's own experiences in World War II, serving in North Africa.

4

TV kids' show *Fireman Sam* paid tribute with the episode 'Ice Cold In Pontypandy'. Sadly, it doesn't end with Sam getting legless on lager.

CROSSWORD AND COMPETITION



ACROSS

- 1 This Juliette Binoche starrer was originally titled *L'attesa* (3,4)
- 5 The — *Mutiny* (Humphrey Bogart) (5)
- 8 Did this Samuel L. Jackson release prove a solid investment? (3,6)
- 9 Coloured like a Bruce Willis action comedy (3)
- 10 Could be Emma, could be Sharon (5)
- 12 McCarthy who played Megan Price in *Bridesmaids* (7)
- 13 Where Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon could be found in 1998 (13)
- 15 The Best Picture Oscar-winner in 1940 (7)
- 17 Ken, director of *Sorry We Missed You* (5)
- 19 They came *Straight Outta Compton* (1,1,1)
- 20 Oscar-winner for his role in *Harry & Tonto* (3,6)
- 22 MacDowell who debuted in *Greystoke* (5)
- 23 Paddy Chayefsky's screenplay for this 1976 release is considered one of the greatest (7)

DOWN

- 1 Anthony Hopkins played the lead role in this Shakespeare adaptation (5)
- 2 *All About* — (Bette Davis, Anne Baxter) (3)
- 3 In which Tom Hulse portrayed Mozart (7)
- 4 *The Muppets* — (1984) (4,9)
- 5 Todd Haynes' 2015 romantic drama (5)
- 6 He was Macavity in *Cats* (5,4)
- 7 Avengers movies — the sequel to *Infinity War* (7)
- 11 The tagline read: "A riches to rags story. If only he could remember it" (9)
- 13 Fishy series, first launched by Joe Dante and Roger Corman in 1978 (7)
- 14 Did Ewan McGregor speak pigeon English in this animated release? (7)
- 16 Could be Chevy, could be Barrie (5)
- 18 Salma seen in *Like A Boss* (5)
- 21 Thomas A. Anderson of *The Matrix* (3)

COMPETITION ENDS 3 AUGUST

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, actress, director or character. Text 'EMPIRE' to 83070, followed by your answer, name and address (with a space between each element of your message!). Texts cost 50p plus standard operator costs. Lines close at midnight, 3 AUGUST. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

JULY ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Iceman, 5 Duets, 9 Hondo, 10 E.G.Daily, 11 God, 12 Lionsgate, 14 Django, 15 Finest, 17 Arbitrage, 18 Her, 19 Hackers, 21 Moore, 22 Renee, 23 Ernest. **DOWN:** 2 Canadian Bacon, 3 Moonlight, 4 Neeson, 5 DVD, 6 Elisabeth Moss, 7 Soylent Green, 8 The Godfather, 13 Spider-Man, 16 Lassie, 20 Eve.

ANAGRAM STEPHEN MERCHANT

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Texts cost 50p + standard network rate. Ask the bill payer's permission before entering. Entries must be received before 4 August or will not be valid (but the cost of the text may still be charged). One winner will be selected at random. Competition promoted by Bauer Consumer Media Limited *via* Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, by phone (on the number the text was sent), between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will call the winner a maximum of three times and leave one message. If the winner does not answer the phone or respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner and the original winner will not win a prize. Entrants must be over 18, resident in the UK and not be employed by Empire. The prize is non-negotiable with no cash alternative. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: <http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/>. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full Ts&Cs see <http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html>.

WIN!

A 49" SMART TV
PLUS *SURVIVE THE
NIGHT* ON DVD



Survive The Night, starring Empire favourite Bruce Willis, sees a retired sheriff, Frank (Willis), kept hostage with his family by two violent robbers (Tyler Jon Olson, Shea Buckner) who are desperately in need of a surgeon. Happily, or rather unhappily, Frank's son Rich (Chad Michael Murray) is a doctor, and so their predicament unfolds... It's out on DVD this month and we have a copy to give away — plus a 49" Smart TV to watch it on! If you fancy getting your hands on some hot new hardware, not to mention Mr Willis' latest action extravaganza, crack the crossword, figure out the anagram and text your answer to the number below.

SURVIVE THE NIGHT IS OUT ON 27 JULY ON DVD



CLASSIC SCENE
 Standout sequences from the great movies

Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan

Chosen by **STEPHEN McFEELY** (co-writer *Avengers: Endgame*)

STEPHEN McFEELY: "For 12-year-old Steve, but really for 50-year-old Steve, when Spock and Kirk say goodbye at the end of *The Wrath Of Khan*, I just get chills thinking about it. The whole movie's leading to that, and it's a lovely, lovely moment. It's a movie that, whether I tell Chris [Markus, McFeely's writing partner] or not, I keep going back to all the time in our work. It's a lovely combination of genre and heart. We keep remaking *Empire Strikes Back*, *The Wrath Of Khan* and *Aliens* over and over again."

INT. ENGINE ROOM — ETERNAL, ENDLESS SPACE

Kirk (William Shatner) has raced down to engineering, to find that Spock (Leonard Nimoy) has sacrificed himself to save the Enterprise by restoring power to the warp engines, his body absorbing huge amounts of deadly radiation in the process. Aghast, he tries to race towards the chamber. Bones (DeForest Kelley) and Scotty (James

Doohan) grab him, and stop him.

BONES: No! You'll flood the whole compartment!

KIRK: He'll die!

SCOTTY: Die? He's dead already.

That sobers Kirk. He looks at Scotty, then Bones.

BONES: It's too late.

They let go of Kirk, who steps up to the glass doors of the warp-drive chamber. He mouths the word "Spock". Realising he can't be heard, he presses a button on the intercom.

KIRK: Spock!

Now we see Spock, on his haunches, on the other side of the chamber, facing away from

Kirk. He rises, haltingly, to his feet and, with his gloved hands, straightens his uniform before flop-turning around to face Kirk. Spock, face scarred from the radiation, comes towards Kirk but, eyesight damaged, walks into the glass. Figuring out where Kirk is, he stands opposite him.

SPOCK: Ship... out of danger?

KIRK: Yes.

SPOCK: [nodding] Don't grieve, Admiral. It is logical. The needs of the many outweigh...

KIRK: The needs of the few.

SPOCK: Or the one.

Spock, clearly hurting, begins to falter.

SPOCK: I never took the Kobayashi Maru test. Until now.

What do you think of my solution?

KIRK: Spock...

Spock sinks to his knees.

SPOCK: I have been, and always shall be, your friend.

Spock, who has removed his glove, places his hand against the glass in the traditional V-shaped Vulcan salute.

SPOCK: Live long and prosper.

Kirk, barely holding it together, places his hand against the glass in response. Spock sinks a little further... and that's it. He's gone.

KIRK: No.

Kirk slumps against the glass, distraught.



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