

CONAN

THE

Words: Owen Williams

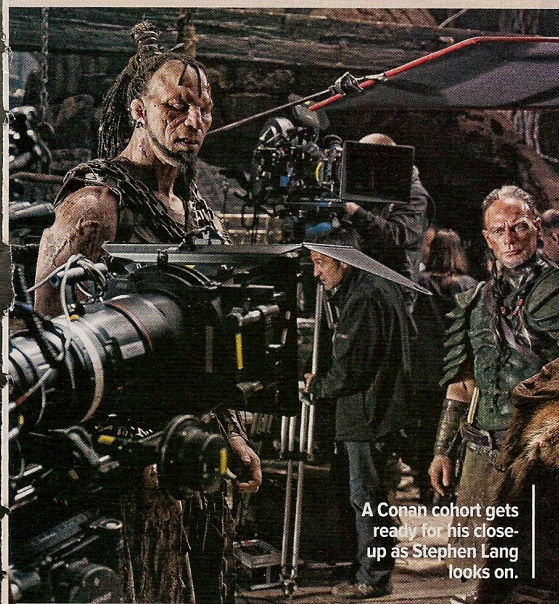
YEAH, WE'RE IN TROUBLE ALRIGHT!" THE FACT THAT MARCUS NISPEL, DIRECTOR OF LIONSGATE STUDIOS' NEW CONAN MOVIE, IS laughing provides the first hint that he speaks here not of production problems or studio dissatisfaction. Everyone is extremely happy with the new Conan The Barbarian. He speaks, instead, of the mighty warrior's forthcoming confrontation with his greatest enemy. Forget Thulsa Doom; forget Thoth-Amon. Conan is going up against the Cult Of Fandom. "We're fucked!" jokes Nispel.

Yes, this is the year Conan The Barbarian finally gets his muscles back (and in 3D, too), with Nispel praying to Crom that Conan 2011 will do for the looming Cimmerian what Casino Royale did for James Bond in 2006. Jason Momoa, known where he's known at all as Ronon Dex from *Stargate: Atlantis*, is now swinging the sword and filling the loincloth

CONAN

REBOOTED

From Texas Chainsaws to Hyborian swords: hack-happy director Marcus Nispel resurrects Conan The Barbarian for the 21st century — in hard-edged 3D



A Conan cohort gets ready for his close-up as Stephen Lang looks on.

of Robert E. Howard's most famous and enduring creation, and he faces formidable odds. Not just the horde of aficionados who have yet to see Howard's work faithfully translated to the screen, but also the general viewing public, for whom Conan is indelibly Arnold Schwarzenegger, and who'll be viewing Nispel's movie as just another unnecessary remake.

King of the thankless task, having previously directed un-looked-for reboots *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday The 13th*, Nispel is cheerfully undaunted by Conan's prospective reception and pleased with the way it's shaping up. "It's a diamond in the rough," he tells *Empire*. "It's a real experience." This is, he insists, not simply a do-over of John Milius' 1982 version, but a fresh attack, ostensibly returning to its '30s pulp source, and carving its way through production in Bulgaria after previous attempts by the likes of the Wachowski brothers and Robert Rodriguez crashed and burned.

When it comes to movies, Conan's sandalled feet have been treading water for almost three decades. Books, comics, role-playing and video-games, Saturday morning cartoons and low-rent, live-action TV series have kept him alive in other media, but incredibly, he hasn't torn up a cinema screen since *Conan The Destroyer* in 1984. And even then, it was in decidedly watered-down and kid-friendly form.

The production team is determined this Conan will have appropriately hard edges, teeth sharp and strong enough to defeat all the hovering vultures awaiting his failure. It will, for example, embrace an R rating — "It allows for the kind of sexuality and violence you would expect in a barbaric world," says screenwriter Sean Hood. Confidence is high, with producer Avi Lerner particularly excited to report, "We've got something special. I know I'm selling the movie, but I'm my own worst critic," he assures us. "It wouldn't have mattered whether a lot of my films got made or not, but having seen >>

CONAN THE BARBARIAN 3D

Released: August 19**Budget:** \$90 million (estimated)**Director:** Marcus Nispel**Starring:** Jason Momoa, Stephen Lang, Rachel Nichols, Rose McGowan, Ron Perlman**Story:** Conan The Cimmerian (Momoa) kidnaps a mysterious girl named Tamara (Nichols) and uses her to draw out warlord Khalar Zym (Lang), the man who slaughtered his family and village.**Based on:** Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, and John Milius' 1982 movie, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

this, with all the production values and the cast and the thousands of extras, I'm really very happy."

"It's kind of bullshit to say it's not an FX movie," says Nispel, "because we've got four months of post-production and 1,500 shots still to add, but you can watch the movie right now and not actually notice that the FX are missing. They're just the icing on the cake. I was very taken with *Apocalypto*; that's how I wanted to do it."

ALARGE PART OF WHAT'S MAKING EVERYONE SO HAPPY IS MOMOA. "IT WAS CLEAR WE WOULDN'T FIND OUR CONAN AT THE TYPICAL agencies," says Nispel. Some consideration was given to Jared Padalecki, who had worked for Nispel in *Friday The 13th*, but the director explains, "Conan has to be a king *and* a savage. Jared certainly had the physique and he could have been the king, but I couldn't see him as the barbarian." After a worldwide search going as far afield as Russia and Iraq ("John Milius said I should cast an Iraqi to terrify Americans!" laughs Nispel), the director was surprised to find his leading man in Hawaii, "surfing minutes away from me on a regular basis."

Momoa was on nobody's radar, but it soon became clear to the production that nobody else was going to come anywhere near as close to their stripped-down, streamlined Cimmerian as the 31-year-old Hawaiian. "He had this huge beard and he looked a bit like a Klingon commander," Nispel recalls. "I told him he'd have to lose the beard because he looked like a pirate, and he said, 'If you give me the movie, I'll take the beard off. If you don't give me the movie, I'll play a pirate and make Conan look like the pussy that he is!' And that's the guy

looking for the role of his life! He absolutely had the attitude. I rolled some film on him and he was amazing; he had the swordplay down and at the end he did the Maori haka, and it was just incredibly powerful! I played the tape to Lionsgate and they said, 'Well, we like him, but can he do it again? He's trying too hard to sound like Conan.' But that's how he sounds in real life: like he's talking through a bucket!"

Much thought and effort has gone into

ever disassociating from him. "Conan needs to be the kind of guy that grabs a girl's ass, and she laughs and he most likely gets laid that night. Whereas if you and I did that, she'd slap us and sue us for the rest of our lives," as Nispel succinctly puts it. "That's what we were looking for, and I knew we'd found it in Jason. He made all the Lionsgate office girls swoon."

With the literary Conan's steel-spring muscles, keen wits and cat-like speed fully

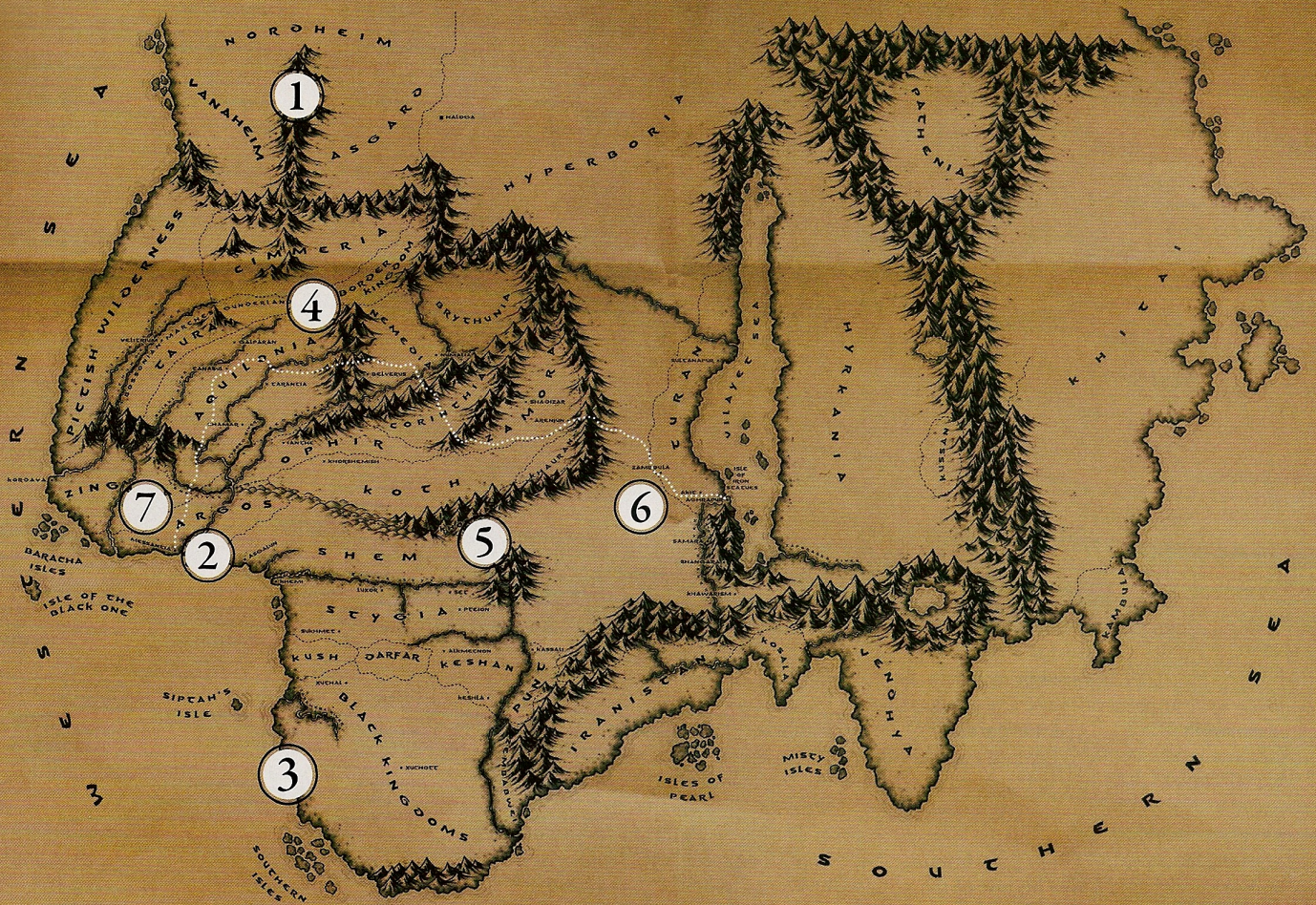
"Conan needs to be the kind of guy that grabs a girl's ass, and he likely gets laid that night." Marcus Nispel

making Conan a "difficult" hero, with Nispel explaining that he was interested in the difference between characters whose violence the audience cheers, and those who make an audience feel slightly more equivocal. John Milius' second piece of advice after pointing Nispel Iraq-wards (Milius is not involved in the film, but is friendly with Nispel) was that the character should embody a sometimes reprehensible morality without the audience

embodied, Momoa the barbarian safely distances the new film from its liberty-taking Schwarzenegger predecessors. The fact remains, though, that for all its back-to-the-books posturing, the new Conan is once again based on an original screenplay, involving evil warlord Khalar Zym (*Avatar*'s Stephen Lang), and the enigmatic Tamara (Rachel Nichols), who is the key to a ritual of resurrection. "When Conan abducts Tamara and uses her as bait, he is

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Conan's raid on the Hybrian World Of Leather store was a resounding success.



A Rough Guide To Hyboria *Things to see and do in Conan's neck of the woods*

1. Lands Of The North The dense forests and gloomy plains of Cimmeria offer little in the way of excitement, but serve as an ideal base from which to venture north to Vanaheim and Asgard. The ice-capped Eglolphian Mountains offer spectacular opportunities for the winter sportsman, though constant impending slaughter by Frost Giants can be a worry.

2. Road Of Kings Experienced road-trippers will enjoy the Road Of Kings, which takes in Corinthia, Nemedra and Zamora. If you only opt for one of those destinations, head for Zamora, renowned for its haunted towers and dark-haired women, but keep a wary eye out for pig-sized spiders and elephant-headed aliens. Also, avoid the City Of Thieves, which is named that for good reason.

3. The Black Coast Sun-worshippers should head for the palm-lined shores along The Black Coast, although there are no tourist enclosures, and the threat of savage pirates who will sell you into slavery is ever-present. Heading inland to Kush, be sure to stop off in The Vale Of Lost Women: perfect for stag nights and those executive team-building exercises.

4. Aquilonia Less hardened travellers should opt for a stay in Aquilonia, the self-styled "proudest kingdom in the world", protected from outside attack by "buffer" provinces like Westermarck. Rafting is available along the Black, Thunder and Shirki rivers, although all three pale in comparison to the River Of Death Ice, much further to the north-east in Hyperborea.

5. Ancient Near East Ophir, Stygia and Koth offer much for the keen historian, although the former is the only one that remains a going concern: wealthy to the extent that its knights wear gilded armour. Koth is generally beset by civil war, but is the oldest of all Hyborian kingdoms, settled immediately after the oceans drank Atlantis. Stygia is mostly desert, although inexplicably it boasts more wizards per square league than anywhere else.

Recommended Eateries
6. House Of Aram Baksh, Zamboula Reasonably priced Ghazan wine sold by the tankard. Room and board available. Other residents may be demons.

7. The Inn Of The Nine Drawn Swords, Messantia Dancing girls

occasionally spies; food may be poisoned.

Transport

On land: Foot; horse; camel. Camels are known to spit; please do not be tempted to retaliate by punching them in the face.

By sea: Passage can be bought on buccaneer vessels travelling to and from the Barachan Isles, at traveller's own risk.

Useful phrases

"Be sensible, wench; I'm not going to harm you" — proven seduction technique. Staring with burning interest can also be effective.
 "Back, if you value your dog lives!" — useful when confronted by the Watch.
 "The hell with you" — to be used when talking to Crom.

Here, Conan turns vicious killer in search of his missing chainmail sleeve. Below: Supine actor considers suing his agent.

pursued by armies, besieged by monsters and led to a site of primeval magic and human sacrifice," it says here. And the film also contains an origin thread in which a young Conan sees his village put to the sword and vows revenge on the sorcerer responsible: plot beats entirely familiar from the Milius film, and not at all from Robert E. Howard.

Nispel is up-front about his love of the original film, although he isn't keen on sword-and-sorcery tropes that see simple strongmen

the medium it was being created for. Our intention was to create something that fit snugly within the existing Conan mythology, which was hardly less of a challenge than making one of the original stories work within a traditional three-act structure."

During the shoot, on-set script doctor Sean Hood made some significant revisions ("simplifying and clarifying the mythology, making major contributions to characterisations", as well as entirely changing

“He’s not just a muscle-man in a loincloth; there is a gravitas, a raw passion and intensity.” Sean Hood

defeating supposedly all-powerful wizards: “Why doesn’t the wizard just turn Conan into a rabbit?” He says he makes movies for his 16 year-old self, who was tremendously excited when Conan The Barbarian finally arrived in his native West Germany. “I was a big Star Wars fan, and Conan came out soon after, and I remember I read an article in *Time* magazine that said, ‘Milius’ Conan is Star Wars by a psychopath.’ I was like, ‘Man, if I ever make a movie, I want someone to say that about me!’”

Yet screenwriter Josh Oppenheimer (working in tandem with his regular professional partner, Thomas Dean Donnelly) is a little more defensive about the decision to craft a new story rather than adapt an existing one from the Howard canon. “We could have stretched out a single short story,” he tells *Empire*, “but we opted to create a new one: one which spoke to

the third act). He shares the idea of Conan as an “existential” hero, motivated by “survival, personal gain and loyalty to his allies”. (Oppenheimer and Donnelly also liken Conan to a Western gunslinger, and brought some of those elements to the script in homage to Howard’s favourite genre.) But Hood took issue with a late narrative shift in which “Conan seemed to embrace and trumpet a higher purpose. I didn’t think that was true to his character. Some characters are compelling precisely because, despite enormous danger and pressure, they heroically refuse to change.”

Both parties ultimately agree that translating Howard from the page to the screen is uniquely difficult. “I’m always struck by the way illustrations of H. P. Lovecraft’s monsters look so childish and cheesy, while his stories are so nightmarish,” says Hood. “Likewise,

Robert E. Howard’s writing isn’t fairly represented by a muscle-man in a loincloth with a buxom babe. There is a gravitas, a raw passion and intensity that can get completely lost.”

So, it seems, does Nispel, although he’s by no means averse to muscles and boobs, and says there was almost no need to come up with concept artwork, since Frank Frazetta’s famous oil paintings (used on the Conan paperback covers for years) had already done the job.

“Marcus sees things like nobody else,” says Avi Lerner. All involved will be hoping, with a new franchise in the offing, a sequel already being written, and stablemate Red Sonja in the works, that the audience sees it Nispel’s way.

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Conan The Barbarian 3D is out on August 19 and will be reviewed in a future issue.

THE BARBARIAN

Words: Owen Williams

Empire goes toe-to-toe with Jason Momoa: the new Conan

“OWW, LOOK, I’VE

got a splinter.” *Empire* nervously inspects the 6’ 4” Jason Momoa’s finger, and concurs. He does have a splinter. What does one say to Conan The Barbarian when he has a splinter? We opt for, “Crom laughs at your pain.” We survive.

Spelk-induced wussiness aside, Jason Momoa is not a man to be messed with, but we’re relieved to find he’s quick to laugh too. His massive frame is currently draped incongruously on a sofa in a plush, civilised Soho hotel room of which Conan would not approve. “What is best in life?” we ask him, to get the line from John Milius’ 1982 *Conan The Barbarian* out of the way. “Ha!” he barks. “Answering that question for the rest of time!

“I’m actually not primed to answer it,” he admits, “because, offensive as it is to some people, I’ve never seen the first movie. I grew up a big fan of the Robert E. Howard stories and the comics, and I love Arnold Schwarzenegger. But I was raised by a single mother; we weren’t watching too many orgies and heads being lopped off.” Arriving to the role last year, in Marcus Nispel and Lionsgate’s ‘reimagining’, he decided not to correct that oversight: “I wanted to build the character from the ground up. I know a lot of people really love it, and I’ll be totally geeked out to finally see it... but I want to see mine first!”

CONAN IS THE

affable Hawaiian’s first starring role but is his third barbarian, following *Stargate: Atlantis’* Ronon Dex and *Game Of Thrones’* Khal Drogo. Momoa’s physicality was clearly instrumental in securing him his first acting job, on *Baywatch Hawaii*, but he didn’t land that part without bringing some bollocks to the table. “I was working in my family’s surf shop in Hawaii when *Baywatch* came up,” he chuckles. “I wanted to audition, but you had to have a résumé. So my buddies took some pictures of me and we said I was a model for Louis Vuitton. To this day I hear that I started out as a model. It’s part of the legend now... Legendary bullshit artist!”

He suggests that perhaps for his next role he’ll put some clothes on and do a rom-com (he’s joking, we think), but does seem thoroughly at

home in sandals and loincloths. “Those things are so much fun as an actor, because there are no limitations,” he enthuses. He brought his Kanaka Maoli heritage into play for the *Game Of Thrones* audition with an impromptu *haka*. Calling upon that “savage barbaric” display had fortunate consequences, since Marcus Nispel’s casting director, Kerry Barden, was in the room. “He went straight to Marcus and said, ‘I’ve got your Conan.’”


Even so, an epic series of screen-tests and interviews with studio bigwigs at Lionsgate followed before Momoa was told to pack his bags for Cimmeria. “I was really nervous,” he recalls. “I had to answer all these questions about what I thought it took to be Conan. I told the story of how this kid smashed a pint glass in my face in 2008, and I had 140 stitches. I think I got a bit aggressive because I was just re-living it in front of them: like about going to court and how the guy had winked at me and it just made me *livid*. And then at the end I kind of came back to myself and I said,” — he snarls — “So do you think I can play Conan now?”

The Conan shoot took place in Bulgaria and Momoa describes the training as intense. “Over the course of shooting Conan I got bigger and bigger. Trying to stay lean and gain muscle at the same time is really hard! I was eating boiled chicken breasts every two hours, which is like cardboard. And I had sword training and six hours lifting weights every day for the four weeks before we started shooting. Conan’s a product of his environment: he isn’t out there doing squats. So I wanted to keep him really nimble, and I think we really got that cat-like quality.”

Conan The Barbarian is an action-heavy spectacle in which Momoa is rarely off-screen. “I did about 80 per cent of the stunts myself,” he beams. “There were great stunt guys who really wanted to step in, but Conan really speaks through his body movement and how he handles that sword, so it had to be me as much as possible.”

THE FILM HAS THE

disadvantage of starting out on the back foot: fighting the entrenched perceptions both of Robert E. Howard fans unhappy at an original



story rather than an adaptation, and of audiences who've never heard of Howard and are wondering why we need a remake of an Arnie film. "I'll be disappointed if people don't like it," says Momoa, unperturbed. "but if people are really stuck on Conan being their own one thing, I think it's time to address it. We wanted to give respect to Robert E. Howard, but you can't just focus on his fans. There are eight decades of stories and comics and movies since him, so Conan is different things to different people. You can't please everybody, but you can re-imagine Conan every couple of generations, like Batman or Bond.

"I love the whole concept of him," he concludes. "He does what he wants, he lives in the moment, he could usurp a throne if he wanted to, but he just wanders, and he's a pirate and thief. Those are great things to play. Our film gives a glimpse of him during the pirate years, hanging out with artists and banging women and beating up slaves and being drunk and having fun, before it's (*snaps fingers*) game on! We even see him smile once. He's honourable, but he's not. He'll do what he wants to. Even among people, he's a loner. He's a barbarian! And there's endless stuff that we can do in the future. We have the world now. What he needs next is a real ongoing nemesis..."

"I did 80 per cent of my stunts."

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We remind him of Oliver Stone's lament that his planned 12-film cycle never came to pass. Is Momoa up for that? "Well, I'm contracted for three..."

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