


There can be only one...

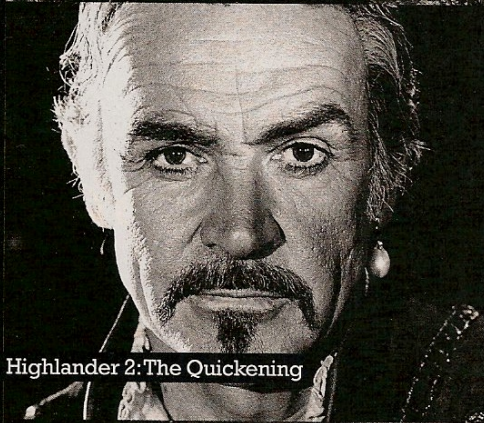
... Followed by a nightmarish sequel. And three more sequels. Plus two TV series, a Saturday morning cartoon, an anime and a ton of merchandise. Not to mention an incoming remake. **Empire** explores how a fun tale of decapitation-happy immortals became an improbable phenomenon that's endured for more than two decades

WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS


Don't lose your head.




Highlander



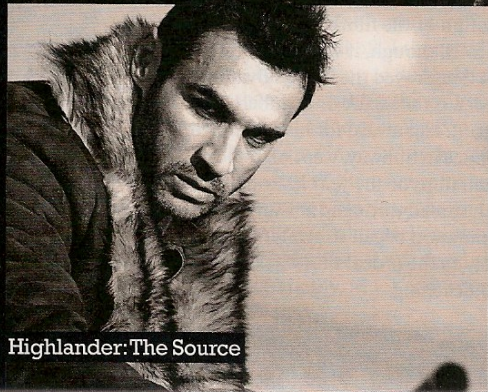
Highlander 2: The Quickening



Highlander 3: The Sorcerer



Highlander: Endgame



Highlander: The Source

Highlander fans are a hardy bunch. They have to be. "After each awful sequel I promise myself I'll stop caring," blogs one, before asking: "Has any franchise ever hated its fans more?" And this is from someone who admits he still likes the movie, some 23 years after it bowed.

Despite being a scrappy fantasy-actioner that cast a Frenchman as a Scot, a Scot as a Spanish-Egyptian and seemed to leave no scope for a follow-up, Highlander has endured. Like its protagonist (well, until Highlander: Endgame), it will not die. Its huge ambitions have often been laid low by practicalities, but it has weathered all. Relating the battles of sword-fighting immortals throughout history, it has lumbered through its incarnations with little internal logic, and the results have more often than not been vilified. Yet its fanbase still exists, attending conventions, writing (usually filthy) online fiction and returning to the well in the face of variable quality.

So what is its secret?

The saga began modestly enough. Greg Widen wrote his original script as his senior thesis while studying film at UCLA, and it eventually found its way to Bill Panzer and Peter S. Davis; producers who had not long since marshaled Sam Peckinpah's final film, *The Osterman Weekend*. "The script itself was rough," recalls Davis, "but we were captivated by the idea." After a second draft from Widen, Peter Bellwood and Larry Ferguson — veteran scriptwriters who had worked with Davis-Panzer before — were brought in to rewrite the screenplay. Most of the key elements were already present in Widen's script: the idea of the 'game' of immortals fighting each other until only one remains; the characters of hero Connor MacLeod and his mentor, Ramirez; the beginnings in the medieval Scottish Highlands and the police investigations in present-day New York; decapitation as the only way to kill an immortal; flashbacks to MacLeod's previous 'lives'.

But Widen's vision is darker than the one that eventually made it to the screen, inspired to a large extent by Ridley Scott's *The Duellists* (itself based on a Joseph Conrad short story and heavily influenced by Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*) and interested primarily in the bleak concept of an apparently meaningless recurring battle, fought over centuries between MacLeod and an unnamed Knight. Ramirez at one point describes immortals as "nothing more than walking corpses living only to slaughter each other in an insane quest".

Bellwood and Ferguson's version lightens the tone considerably, and nails down the concepts that would continue throughout the series: the 'Quickening' transfers of immortal power and the idea that immortals can't have children (Widen's MacLeod has fathered "38 children to nine wives, and buried them all"). The unnamed Knight becomes flamboyant, cackling psycho The Kurgan (Elm Street mania wasn't quite >>

KOBAL (4), MOVIESTORE (1), REK (1)

Back Story: Highlander

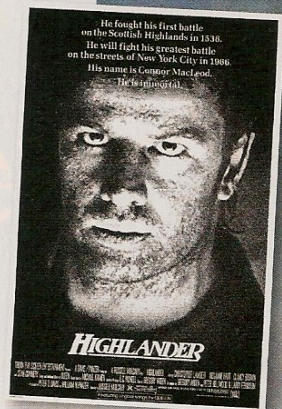
at its height by 1986, but it can't be coincidence that The Kurgan signs his hotel register with the assumed name 'Kruger'); and Rachel and Heather, respectively MacLeod's adopted war orphan and medieval Scottish bride, are added for emotional value. "We were very pleased with the finished script," recalls Davis. "We presented it to EMI and to Fox for a combination funding, and off we went!"

Enter Russell Mulcahy, an Australian director hired by Davis-Panzer due to their fondness for his 1984 killer-pig horror cheapie, *Razorback*, but better known at the time in the UK for the urban legend that he nearly drowned Simon Le Bon while filming Duran Duran's *Wild Boys* video. Speaking to *Empire*, Mulcahy cheerfully describes the odd casting of Christopher Lambert as down to lack of research: "We still didn't have our Highlander, and I was flicking through a magazine and saw a picture of Christopher as Tarzan in *Greystoke* and I went, 'That's the guy!' And so we cast him, and then when he was already signed up we met him and realised he couldn't speak fucking English."

"His agent assured us he'd be fine, but he could barely say, 'Hello, my name is Christopher,'" recalls Davis. A language coach was constantly on set, and six weeks of post-production were spent looping every line of Lambert's dialogue. According to Mulcahy, though, the Scots cast-members turned a deaf ear to their clan leader's Gallic tones: "They didn't care. It was a really tight bunch of people just enjoying the movie. It was freezing cold, and they're in kilts in the mud, drinking whisky first thing in the morning. They were mad and wonderful."

Connery's casting as the Scots-accented Egyptian Juan Sánchez Villa-Lobos Ramírez, "chief metallurgist to King Charles V of Spain", was an equally weird success, and a thrill for Mulcahy, who found himself directing an icon from his childhood. "He was huge and gracious, and very expensive! We only had him for seven days, and if we'd gone over schedule with him he would've got paid an extra million dollars. On the last hour of the last day he said to me, 'You're not going to finish, are you?' And I said, 'Hang on,' and I got him to stand against a green, leafy background, and I was like, 'Turn left, turn right, smile, swish your sword, do this, do that, turn around,' and it came to the last minute, and I said, 'Cut! Wrap!' He said, 'You bastard.'"

Mulcahy's quick-cutting directorial style and mad transitions (like the fish tank that becomes a Scottish loch) raised a few eyebrows, and he recalls that old-school cinematographer Gerry Fisher "nearly had a stroke" as some of the techniques he wanted to try out: "I told him to turn all the lights off and just shoot the flashing neon. He went, 'Oh my fuck!'" But his rushes were accepted, and the finished product was approved by everyone except Queen,



Inset: The enigmatic American onesheet for the first film didn't give much away. This picture: French native Christopher Lambert as brooding Scots hero Connor MacLeod. Bottom right: Sean Connery on set with his increasingly stressed-out director, Russell Mulcahy.



who provided eight songs for the soundtrack and insisted on endless remixes until they were satisfied.

It seemed a moderate hit was on the cards but, initially at least, that was not to be the case. Contemporary reviewers were generally positive about the film's intriguing concept but less impressed by its uneven tone — lurching between deadly serious and very camp — and its occasionally ropery effects, like the all-too-visible wires suspending Lambert at his climactic Quickening. Plus, "Fox basically threw it away," says Davis. "They thought all the back-and-forth between different times was confusing, so we were forced to take out some of the flashbacks (*the American theatrical cut loses the World War II scene that explains who Rachel is*), and they didn't support it with any type of serious promotion." The American poster featured just a grainy black-and-white headshot of Lambert and no indication of the film's content.

Ironically, though, it was the casting of Lambert that proved the film's salvation. Highlander, on the back of Lambert's Best Actor César award for his acclaimed performance in *Subway*, went on to be one of the top ten films of the year in France. Word-of-mouth spread throughout Europe, and the film's reputation began to grow... Leading inexorably to the ordeal that was *Highlander 2: The Quickening*.



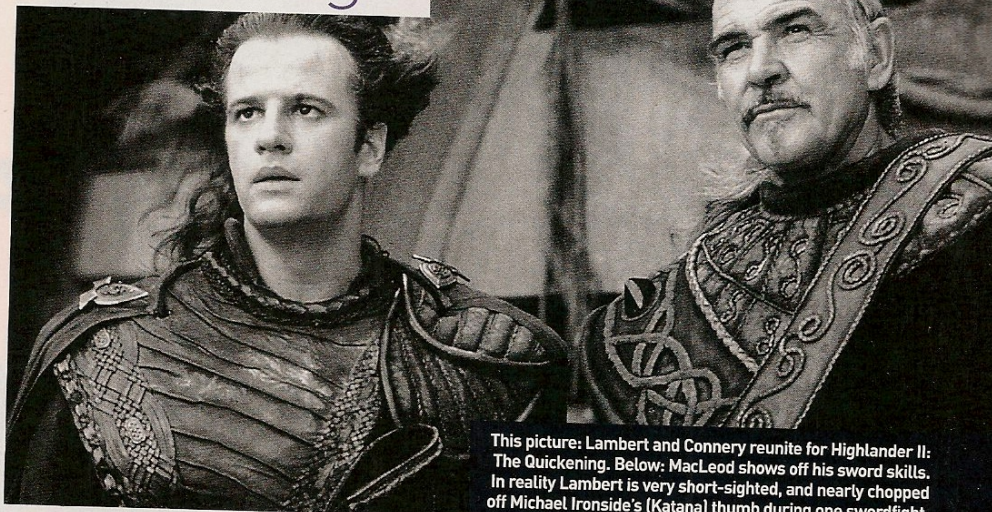
It's time for a new kind of magic.

Conceptually flawed, poorly planned and cursed with bad luck, the 1991 sequel was doomed from the beginning. "It was quite a struggle," admits Davis. "Every morning I woke up and realised that the best part of the day was behind me." Mulcahy is rather less equivocal. "It was a dumb idea, shot in the wrong place," he growls.

That place was Argentina, in the middle of a catastrophic financial crisis. During the late '80s and early '90s, the Argentine government's fiscal policy of gigantic borrowing coupled with the creation of more money led to inflation so rampant that it all but destroyed the currency. Not good news for a production team lured there on the promise of reduced production costs by Argentine producer Alejandro Sessa.

Sessa, a friend of Davis', had been involved in low-budget filmmaking in Argentina since the early '80s — producing and directing cheerfully salacious fantasy quickies like *Amazons*, *Barbarian Queen* and *The Warrior And The Sorceress* — and was confident that the country's filmmaking infrastructure could cope with a multi-million-dollar, North American sci-fi blockbuster. "Sessa was a wonderful man," recalls Davis, "but it quickly became clear that while [his company] could take on films like *Two To Tango*, this was very much more demanding from a technical point of view, an action point of view, in terms of the production design, the type of gear that was required, the personnel that were required... They couldn't handle it."

Extra personnel were flown in from the UK and Los Angeles and housed in hotels, which added a fortune to the budget and caused problems with the Argentine unions, not to mention tension between the Argentine and British crews, for whom the Falklands War was



This picture: Lambert and Connery reunite for *Highlander II: The Quickening*. Below: MacLeod shows off his sword skills. In reality Lambert is very short-sighted, and nearly chopped off Michael Ironside's (Katana) thumb during one swordfight.

still a relatively recent memory. 'Friendly' lunchtime food fights were eventually banned when bottles started being thrown instead of bread rolls. The bond company was hovering, according to Davis, "sure that Bill Panzer and I had managed to siphon off \$5 million and put it in Uruguay, even though they controlled the chequebook", and fretting over the spiralling costs of the gargantuan sets. The street on which the opening set-piece takes place was entirely built for the film and included a working railway system. It also had to be ready in time for the arrival of Sean Connery, back despite the death



"After Lambert had signed up we realised he couldn't speak English." Russell Mulcahy, director

of his character in medieval Scotland, on an incredibly tight six-day schedule for which he was paid \$3 million. A scratched negative of a crane-shot of Connery necessitated an expensive weekend re-shoot. "It was character building," says Davis now. "I even eventually forgave Alejandro."

"It was fucked up and strange and ridiculous," says Mulcahy, who in the intervening five years had returned to videos and been fired from *Rambo III* (see page 128). "Christ almighty, what a disaster." And this is before any mention of the actual script. "It was nearly impossible to pull off, I thought," says the director. "It was trying to undo the myth."

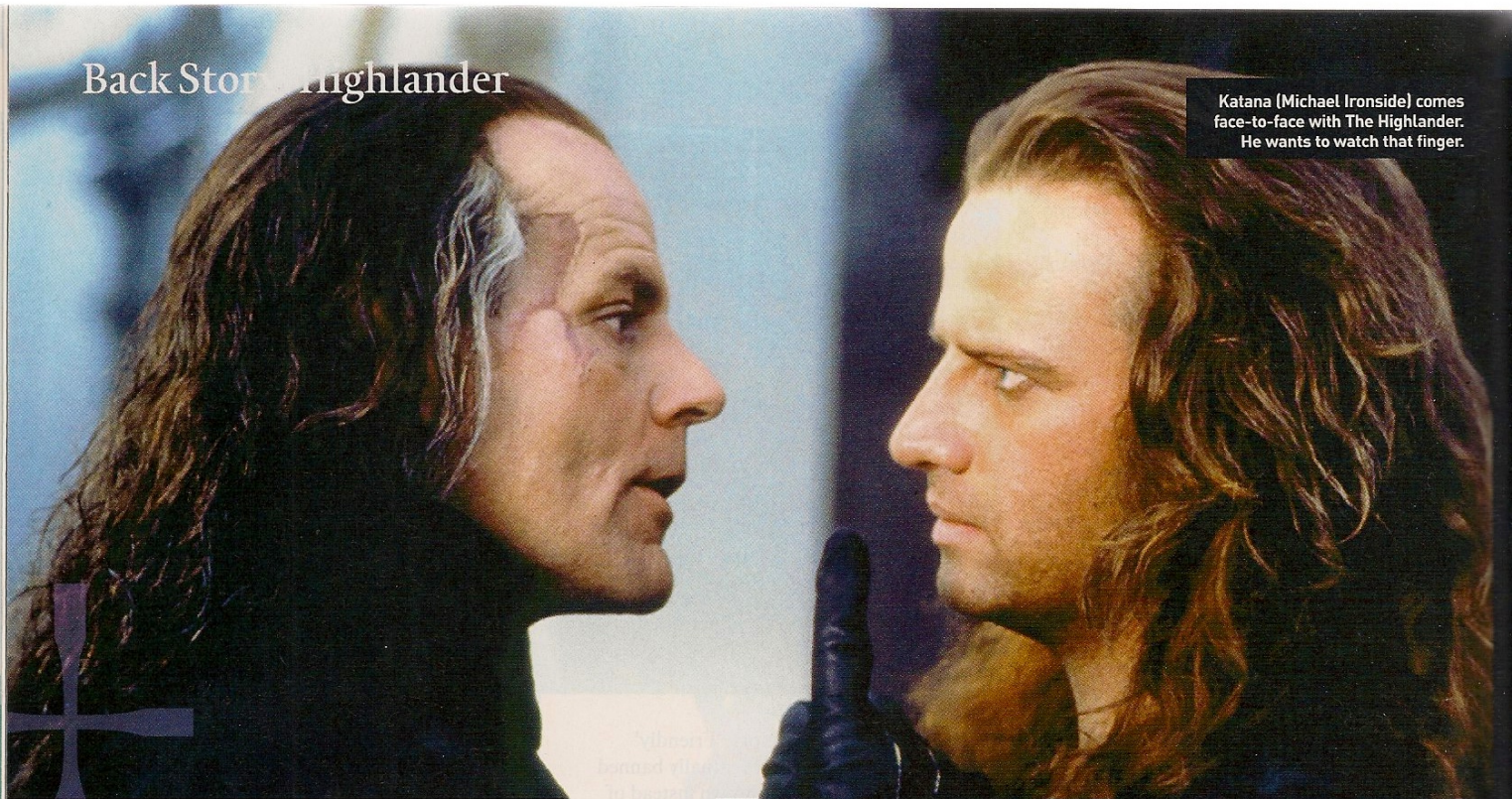
Perhaps the most sensible thing about the original was its refusal to speculate on where the immortals have come from. With the seemingly intractable problem of there being no immortals left, however (Connor MacLeod having won the 'Prize' of mortality, fertility and omniscience at the climax of *Highlander*), it was decided: they're from space! Apparently, MacLeod was not born

in Glencoe after all, but had been exiled to Earth from the planet Zeist with his memory wiped after a failed coup against the tyrannical General Katana (Michael Ironside). By 2024 MacLeod is aged and frail, but his Prize is undone and his youth restored with the arrival, for reasons best known to themselves, of Katana and his henchmen. There follows some business about terrorists dismantling a synthetic ozone layer run by the corrupt Shield Corporation — whose board of directors latterly includes Katana. And yes, Ramirez, despite his decapitation in 1541, returns when MacLeod suddenly remembers that all he has to do is call his name. Or something.

Nobody is willing to take credit for this. "I don't want to speak badly of the deceased, but I think it was Bill's idea," chuckles Davis (Panzer was tragically killed in a sporting accident in 2007). "I thought the planet Zeist stuff was completely stupid — it was such a cop-out," exclaims Mulcahy. "For some reason I agreed to do it, and then I tried to get out of it and they tried to sue me. It was on the front page of >>



Back Story Highlander



Katana (Michael Ironside) comes face-to-face with The Highlander. He wants to watch that finger.

Variety!" (Mulcahy's memory seems to be faulty here: the *Variety* story reports Davis-Panzer attempting to sue Mulcahy for \$9 million when he allegedly reneged on a verbal agreement to direct *Highlander 3*). "I don't really blame the writers," he continues. "It's just that the whole script was never completely filmed because of the financial problems. A lot of the ideas and stories were never shot, so the film is a bit of a patchwork. The bond company shut us down and brought in a butcher editor, and the film that was released just wasn't finished. The first one I'm very proud of, but the second one I'm not, although it's got some good moments."

Those moments include the street sequence, enormous even by today's standards, and perhaps the last real hurrah of pre-CGI effects, as Lambert mounts a hover-skateboard to battle flying Zeist hitmen, triggering a massive pyrotechnic double-Quickening that destroys the entire set. There's also a great scene where Lambert and Connery are shot to pieces at a military checkpoint, reviving later in hospital with Connery complaining about the holes in his waistcoat. And there's certainly strong

"Making Highlander 2 was fucked up, strange and ridiculous. Christ, what a disaster." Mulcahy

evidence that the publicity blitz on its release, regardless of negative reviews, poor fan reaction and multiple cuts across different territories, further benefited the first movie, with video rentals rising sharply as audiences who had missed it thus far sought to catch up.

Highlander 2, though, remains a train wreck — despite subsequent tweaking. Many films have re-shoots, but few can boast them four years after their release. The so-called Renegade Version, released on DVD in the US in 1997 and still only available on Region 1, contained a newly filmed mountainside truck chase deemed crucial to the story but not previously completed, alongside various other rearranged and expanded scenes. The new cut also acknowledged the howls of derision from the original's fanbase by removing

all mention of Zeist, re-editing and dubbing to posit that the immortals are from a distant past on Earth, technologically advanced enough to have developed time travel. It's hard to see quite how this is an improvement (if anything, Zeist makes *more* sense), but this version is now regarded as definitive, if not canon.

Subsequent *Highlanders* wisely ignore it, but Peter S. Davis insists that "as a separate piece of work, I think it's quite wonderful. It's a very good-looking film, and of all the sequels I like it the best." American fans got a further DVD re-release of the Zeistless version in 2004, this time as simply *Highlander 2* (no subtitle), with new special effects. Mulcahy claims never to have had any involvement with any version other than the original.

"My Rambo story"

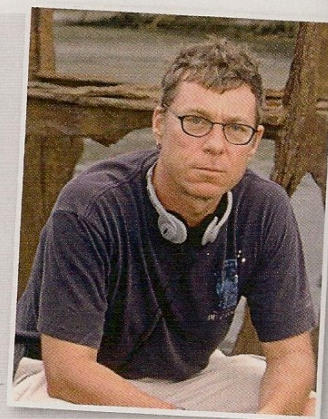
Highlander opened doors for director Russell Mulcahy. Doors which soon slammed shut again...

"I was in London and got a phone call from my agent, saying that Stallone had seen *Highlander* and wanted me to do *Rambo III*. I was already talking to (producer) Dino De Laurentiis at that time about doing *Total Recall*, but when Stallone called I got a bit starstruck and I was like (plaintive voice) 'Yeah, okay.'

"I started shooting it in Israel, which was standing in for Afghanistan, and I sort of fucked up the first couple of days shooting. I just didn't do a good job. Stallone wasn't even there at this point. We were on this giant set over the Dead Sea, shooting stuff for the middle of the film, and we had all these Russian soldiers and tanks and extras and I'm trying to get wide

shots. And when Sly turned up he took me into his trailer and showed me *Rambo II* and said, 'It's all in the close-ups.' And I'm going, 'I can shoot that in fucking Burbank!' It's three in the morning and we're in Israel on top of this cliff with a million-dollar set!

"So we had a little creative difference, and after two weeks I was fired. I mean, graciously fired: as graciously as you can get. I flew home to London in my pyjamas, sitting behind the Israeli President. I think everyone thought I was his weird nephew. So that's my *Rambo* story!"



This time it's for eternity.

Highlander 2 would have derailed a weaker franchise. But not this one. Oh no. In the absence of Mulcahy, Davis-Panzer hired another music video director, Andy Morahan, for 1994's *Highlander 3*, with Miramax providing the cash. It was released in the UK as *The Sorcerer*, in Sweden as *The Magician*, in the rest of Europe as *The Final Conflict*, and in the US and Canada as, er, *The Final Dimension*. The last title is the correct one according to Morahan, "even though it wasn't the final anything". Ditching Zeist (or whatever), the film posits that Connor MacLeod never really won the Prize at the end of the first *Highlander*, because another forgotten immortal had been stuck in a cave for 400 years.

Morahan had worked extensively with Guns N' Roses, not least on the infamously overblown November Rain clip, and for a while it seemed that he had secured the coup of Axl Rose and co. providing the soundtrack. "They loved that Queen had done the music on the first one and I had Axl ready to go," says Morahan. But Rose suddenly revealed an unexplained aversion to Mario Van Peebles (on hand as cartoony main villain Kane) and refused to provide any songs if the actor remained in the film. "So that screwed that one," says Morahan. "Miramax wouldn't get rid of Mario. At the time I thought it was more important to have Guns N' Roses!"

Of all the sequels, *The Final Dimension* works best as a stand-alone movie, but that's mainly because it aspires to be little more than a retread of the original, to the extent of Kane (yet another growly, K-named nemesis) repeating the set-piece where The Kurgan drives a car with a screaming passenger into headlong traffic. Morahan views it as a qualified success. "At that stage Lambert genuinely wanted to do another one, there's a lot of music in it, Mario, Chris and Deborah (*Unger*) were good, and I got some big, cool montage sequences in, so there were bits that I thought worked well. But all I wanted to do, really, after the debacle of the second one was remake the first."

Shooting was at least finished this time, but a bond company still got involved during post-production after observing some "irregularities" on the production side. "Davis-Panzer were kind of at arm's length on this one," recalls Morahan, "but the French producer, Claude Léger, was, shall we say, 'difficult', and I ended up finishing the film with no support from anybody. I was just left to crash and burn, basically."

"It was a French/Canadian co-production, and under the terms of the deal we had no authority on the show," explains Davis ruefully. "We all had a hard time with Léger, but Andy did a great job under the circumstances."

"In some respects it's still a dark cloud for me," concludes Morahan, "but when I look back now there are things that I quite enjoy, so it can't have been all bad. It's a funny franchise because it's so messy — although it actually made for some pretty decent TV."



Above: Cold comfort for Christopher, shivering on location in Quebec, Canada, during a break from filming *Highlander 3: The Sorcerer*. Inset: The Highlander battles with Mario Van Peebles' villainous immortal, Kane.

The television series, at once more expansive and more intimate than the films, is absolutely the key to *Highlander's* longevity. Beginning in 1992, it was filmed in Canada and France (with funding from Canada and all over Europe), lasting for 119 episodes over six seasons. "The series was our saving grace," admits Davis. "Though the films might not have been appreciated by the fans, and rightfully so, the series was extraordinary."

After a single appearance from Lambert, the series shifts its focus to Adrian Paul's Duncan MacLeod, Connor's clansman, and the problem of the world once again being full of immortals is tackled by the new revelation that *potential* immortals exist; their immortality only triggered by a sudden, violent death. A rocky first season struggled with a formulaic decapitation-of-the-week format until the arrival of writer David Abramowitz and producer Ken Gord, who saw its potential immediately. "It was a thinking-person's action show," says Gord, "and it was the complexity of its mythology that fans loved."

From this point on the films became almost peripheral to the franchise: the fans that attend the

conventions are all about the series. "The problem with all the sequels," says John Mosby, PR guru for fansite *Highlander WorldWide*, "is that they were always hugely action-focused, despite the budgets not being able to cope. The series demonstrated that that wasn't what the fans actually wanted." The original action ideas were designed to appeal to a young male demographic, but the show's romantic, emotional side gradually attracted an audience the producers hadn't realised they could draw: women. Ken Gord was also surprised to learn that in North America the show was playing to adults, rather than adolescents, whereas in France "no adult would be caught dead watching!"

Perversely, Mosby believes that the series' erratic scheduling and lack of much in the way of promotion also contributed to its success. *Highlander* floated around in syndication on various American networks, and non-satellite-subscribing UK audiences in random ITV regions may have caught it in the middle of the night during the mid-to-late '90s. "People found it, by accident," says Mosby, "and that gave them a sort of personal investment in it." >>

Back Story: Highlander

The last chance. The ultimate evil. The final battle.

The series ended in '98 but, true to form, the franchise strode on, and continued to test its fans' faith. 2000's *Highlander: Endgame*, the fourth feature, provided the attraction to fans of a crossover while representing a theatrical torch-passing. Christopher Lambert returned for the final time, alongside Adrian Paul. "Christopher was great," recalls Paul. "We were both a little bit older by that point — or should I say more mature? Nah..."

Once again, the shoot was beset by problems: disagreements over a script had audiences splitting their allegiance between two main characters; Bruce Payne (villainous immortal Jacob Kell) fell ill, causing production to be moved from Romania to London; Adrian Paul injured his shoulder; while further delays led to the film being finished in Luxembourg. "It was prolonged pain," says Paul, "and it never seemed to end."

Post-production was no easier. Having worked as effects editor on the original film, Chris Blunden found himself back as principal editor on *Endgame*, only to be replaced. Director Doug Aarniokoski (possibly helming the Rose McGowan-starring *Red Sonja*) produced a rough cut which, according to Blunden, "Bill Panzer simply wanted re-done. Doug understandably didn't feel he wanted to do that, so they put five new editors on it and made it virtually incomprehensible." Fan pressure led to the eventual release of both the producer and director's cuts on DVD, much to Aarniokoski and Blunden's annoyance, since their version remained unfinished. Despite this, *Endgame* still turned a respectable profit for Miramax.

Blunden was lured back for fifth instalment *The Source* in 2007, directed by Brett Leonard (*The Lawnmower Man*, *Virtuosity*, *Man-Thing*). "I was asked by the completion company to try and pull it together, but it was like all the others: three quarters of a film. Brett Leonard was full of big ideas that he was going to reinvent the series, without any money or much of a cast or a decent location or good visual effects, but it turned into the usual fight because he didn't have final cut. It was taken away from him and, once again, re-edited into something else."

"It had visual style," says Adrian Paul, "and the characters were well defined. But the story (*a lacklustre dystopian sci-fi about the source of the immortals' power*) seemed unfinished. There was no real resolution or understanding as to what *The Source* actually was, so the movie fizzled away."

Mosby concurs, but is keen to defend the producers: "Davis-Panzer got a lot of criticism over the years, but without them there'd have been no *Highlander*. They would compromise a lot just to get things in front of the cameras, but they got the films made — no mean achievement."

"We're the guardians of this franchise. It's our baby," says Davis. "Don't make us sound like rug salesmen!"



This picture: Aficionados agree that the *Highlander* TV show — starring Adrian Paul as Duncan MacLeod (right) — reinvigorated the ailing franchise. Below left: 2000's *Highlander: Endgame* united the film and TV versions.

Highlander And Higher

Yet more adventures of the clan MacLeod

THE MERCHANDISE The catalogue at one point was 96 pages long, with two million subscribers. A vast range is still available, including swords manufactured in Spain.

THE ANIME Written by series scribe David Abramowitz and directed by Yoshiaki Kawajiri (*The Animatrix*), *The Search For Vengeance* (2007) follows the immortal Colin MacLeod from Roman Britain to post-apocalyptic New York. "Impressive," said *Empire's* four-star review.

THE CARTOON In another post-apocalyptic setting, *Highlander: The Animated Series* (1994) pitted Connor's descendent, Quentin, against evil immortal Kortan.

THE SPIN-OFF Elizabeth Gracen's recurring TV role as the manipulative, 1,200 year-old Amanda took centre stage in spin-off *The Raven*. It lasted only one season, but like the original has been shown in 70 countries.

THE GAME Surprisingly under-represented on the gaming front (remember the awful beat-'em-up for the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad in 1986?), an impressive-looking third-person action game for the PS3 and Xbox 360, written by Abramowitz, is on the cards for 2010.

THE AUDIOS Big Finish Productions has just launched a series of semi-dramatised talking books, set between *Endgame* and *The Source*. Adrian Paul narrates.

THE COMICS A 12-issue series featuring Connor and Duncan, and a four-issue prequel to the first film were published by Dynamite Comics from 2006 to 2007.

THE CONS The ninth official convention took place in April in LA, and featured Adrian Paul and Elizabeth Gracen. Organiser John Mosby says attendees are mainly female, and "nobody comes in costume, thank God!" **DAN JOLIN**

The *Source* premiered on the Sci-Fi Channel to respectable ratings, but a mooted new trilogy never materialised. The conventions continued to sell out modest-sized venues, the series continued to find an audience on DVD and online, and a collaboration between the Japanese Imagi Animation and Madhouse studios yielded the critically acclaimed *The Search For Vengeance* in 2007 (see right). But the prospect of a new *Highlander* in the core series seemed slim.

Except that, if all goes according to plan, the franchise will come full circle in 2010 with a mega-budget remake of the original. It's a reminder that at the centre of this odd, flawed series is a high concept strong enough to keep drawing people back: the idea of a secret battle between immortals that spans centuries. Summit Entertainment has licensed the rights from Davis-Panzer, a "rather grandiose" script has been produced by Iron Man scribes Matt Holloway and Art Marcum, and according to Davis, "We're about to lock in a director, and the budget is around \$100 million."

"Why?!" blurts an incredulous Russell Mulcahy when *Empire* breaks the news, only to rally admirably: "Actually that's not a bad idea. I wish them the best of luck with it. They can make it a bit more hip — take out all the Queen!" owen@empiremagazine.com