

174

BRAVEHEART

1995 ◆

USP: Historical epics were struggling, but Mel Gibson defied the trend and hit big with his second directorial effort, so mythically potent the Scots erected a Wallace statue that looked like him.

MVP: Cinematographer John Toll, for really getting in there with the battle scenes.

OMG: "Hold... Hold... Hold..."
Et voilà: horse kebabs!

FREEDOM FIGHTERS

TWO DECADES ON, MEL GIBSON AND CREW
RELATE THE HISTORY OF THEIR MYTH-MAKING
BATTLE EPIC BRAVEHEART

WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS

By the mid-1990s, Mel Gibson's career had gone stratospheric thanks to justly famous turns as an Australian road warrior, an on-the-edge US cop, and even Shakespeare's Danish prince. But it was the unlikely form of a Scottish folk hero that took him to the Academy Awards, winning Best Picture and Director among its five Oscars. "William Wallace wasn't that well chronicled," Gibson tells *Empire*, interviewed exclusively alongside other *Braveheart* cast and crew. "That gave us a lot of leeway..."

PREHISTORY

Randall Wallace (writer): I first came across William Wallace as a statue at Edinburgh Castle. I asked the guard who it was. He said, "He's our greatest hero!" I elbowed my wife and said, "Greatest hero, honey! Wallace!" I had made a decision to write what I wanted to see, not what I thought Hollywood wanted to buy. *Braveheart* came out of that principle, and it was the breakthrough of my career.

Alan Ladd Jr. (producer): I liked the script very much. I gave it to Mel Gibson, but he said he couldn't do it, and I forgot about it. Then one day I got a call from Mel asking what I'd done with it. I said, "Nothing!"

Mel Gibson (director, producer, William Wallace): It was given to me initially as a project to just act in, but it just kept asserting itself in my thoughts. Life was jumping; my career was really hopping. There was a lot of noise, so it was those quiet moments when I could focus that *Braveheart* was like a radio coming into reception. I'd just be lying in bed constructing shot lists for it before I went to sleep. It was like someone had come up to me with a big fish and slapped me across the face with it and said, "You have to direct this." But it took a couple of years for that penny to drop.

Brendan Gleeson (Hamish): Mel told me afterwards that he'd been interested in doing a script about the Vikings, but there's a certain detachment in that Nordic temperament that I think he found difficult to make the bridge with. I think he saw Scotland as nearly Viking country, but not quite.

Gibson: It was the size and the mythic aspect of the William Wallace story that hooked me. Wallace made the ultimate sacrifice for his beliefs, I guess, and those kinds of characters are fascinating to me. They inspire us to be better than we are.

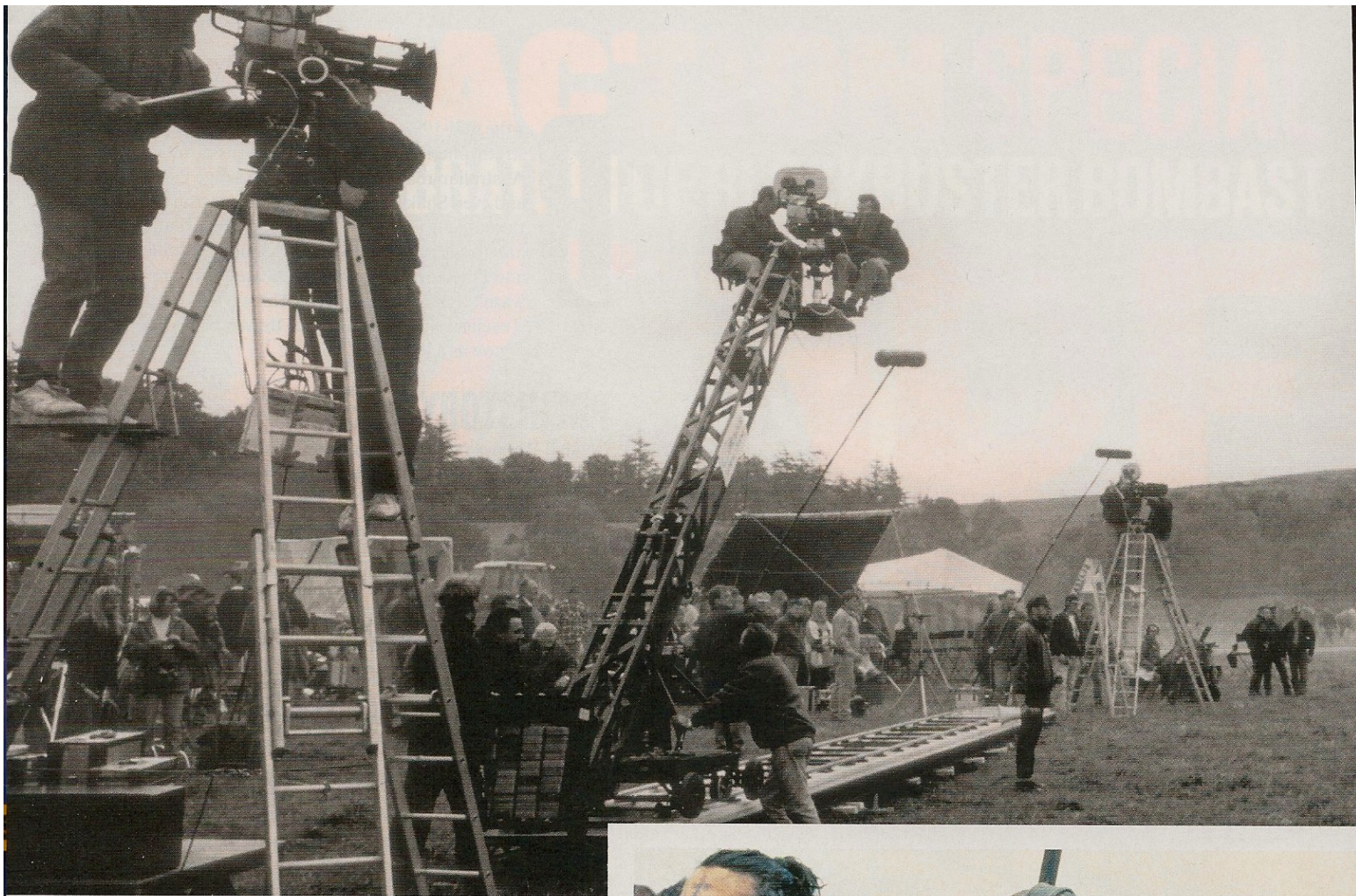
Ladd: I always thought Mel was a person you could believe as a leader. He had that quality. He was always the first choice. Plus having him attached certainly got it made. He was a very big star right then.

Wallace: I had never worked with anyone of his stature. I'm a cussing man and a brawler, but I'm also a praying man, if that's not a contradiction. I prayed that I wouldn't just kiss Mel Gibson's ass. Within a few minutes of meeting him I was pounding on the table saying, "Look, here's the way it is! This movie says if you're faithful to your heart, *even if they cut it out of your chest*, you will prevail. That's the movie I want my sons to see. If you want to make that movie, I'm your man. If you don't, get outta here. Life's too short!" We left, and my phone rang in the car, and my agent said, "What the hell did you say?" I started apologising, and he said, "No, the head of the studio just called and said he wants to double your deal!"

GATHERING THE CLANS

Gibson: Everyone cast themselves, really. I have this peculiar thing where I never make anybody read. I've been subjected to that as an actor myself, and I hate it. I just like to get people in a room and eyeball them. After you've talked for 15 minutes you just know. Jimmy Cosmo (*Campbell*) was immediate, and Brendan, of course. >





Gleeson: We laughed a good bit, and we seemed to share a sense of humour, and a notion of the way history can be exciting. We talked about history being written by the winners, and how a lot of history, especially Irish and Scottish history, is peppered with defeat, and how to make a movie that doesn't become relentlessly downbeat. I think he genuinely wanted to have a gang that was a bit of a laugh. He said, "I was thinking of offering it to you." I said, "Ah well, I'm thinking of accepting it then."

Gibson: As a kid I'd seen Patrick McGooohan on things like *The Prisoner* and *Danger Man*. I'd heard stories that he was kind of reclusive, but he was living in LA, so I made the contact and we had lunch. I asked him if he'd be interested in playing Edward I, and he just laughed at me. I asked him if he liked the character and he said, "He's diabolical." So he wanted to do it.

Tom Sanders (production designer): I met Mel on *Maverick*. One day he goes, "Hey, would you like to do something with a lot of nitty-gritty?" I was in Scotland on Mel's money before the studio even okayed us: they green-lit the film after we started. We were all flying by the seat of our pants. We were young and crazy! Well, young-ish.

John Toll (director of photography): I'd done a commercially unsuccessful film about yacht-racing called *Wind*, and I'd done *Legends Of The Fall*, which had not been released yet. I couldn't figure out why I was getting this call. I think Mel had seen *Wind*, which is a lot of very active handheld camerawork.

Gibson: I was fortunate to find all these talented people. I had a great first AD called David Tomblin, who had about 50 years' experience in film. He'd done *Gandhi* and *Barry Lyndon*. He was phenomenal. I had the benefit of his logistical prowess. We didn't get on that well, but his experience was undeniable.

Toll: I think that David thought Mel would need more help, and started making decisions that Mel didn't necessarily go along with. It wasn't like he was trying to take over. I think he just didn't want to bother Mel. Essentially you invent the process every time you do a new film, because nobody works the same way. It took



• Mel Gibson's William Wallace dons the now iconic blue war paint as he prepares for battle.

a couple of people a couple of weeks to find that space, but things went really well after that, and David was fantastic.

Gibson: I did a little bit of work on the accent with a coach, but basically we were up in Fort William surrounded by this cast, and talking to those people is a lesson in itself. I couldn't even understand Tommy Flanagan (*Morrison*). I'd say to him, "You need fucking subtitles."

Gleeson: I had an hour with a dialogue coach, but Jimmy Cosmo and people like that were around and very helpful and told me I was rubbish.

INTO BATTLE

Toll: The first action sequence we did was in the village after Catherine McCormack is killed. Mel had previously discussed with us all the type of action he envisioned for the film — he'd mentioned *Chimes At Midnight*, *Kagemusha*, *Ran* and a '60s BBC film by Peter Watkins called *The Battle Of Culloden* — but we hadn't rehearsed anything or seen any demonstration. So we started the fight and Mel pulls the thing out and smashes the



uy in the head, the horse falls down, the guy's leg gets chopped off... We'd been hearing the words, now we knew what we were talking about! It was really visceral, but it was fun. It was as much fun as you can have beating people to death.

Gibson: The thing I wanted out of the battle sequences was clarity. I've seen a lot of these battle movies and they just turn into mush. I broke it down to archers and horses and hand-to-hand and who had the high ground and the low ground, everybody was clearly delineated, even though it was often the same bunch of people playing different parts. We had the guys from the Irish army, and one day they were all dressed like Scots and the next day they'd be English. I think there's a scene where somebody actually kills himself.

Toll: There were a lot of handheld cameras in the battle scenes. We were right in there. We just got more and more active. The animation film cameras were much lighter in weight than the high-end digital cameras now. The closer you got, the better it looked. We'd start a scene and cue a horse, and we could get within a foot of where the horse was going to fall and know we'd be fine. There were plenty of near misses, but we got used to it!

Gibson: No-one got hurt. We helped the guys all understand how the camera saw things, so they didn't need to make contact with one another. They all got it. I think there was a broken ankle and a hangnail and a busted nose, and that was it, for all those days.

Gleeson: We worked with a lot of great stunt people. You'd

• Filming the epic Battle Of Falkirk.

practise and practise these moves that had a certain grace to them, and then you'd see them in the battle and it'd be half a second flat. Mel's violence was very specific. There was a theatricality to it, but there was no hiding the nature of it either. When we were faced with the horses actually coming at us, there was no question of trying to "act". The only thing you could do in the face of what felt like that completely uncontrollable madness was to just bellow and hold your ground.

Gibson: The animal rights people accused us of doing things with horses we shouldn't be doing. It was kind of flattering. I had to show them some behind-the-scenes footage. We constructed these dummy horses on air jacks that you could do awful things to. So that was cool!

Gleeson: There was a particular charge where a mad, rogue horse decided he'd do a runner right across the front line, which could have caused mayhem. I think it belonged to some guy from Wexford who'd just been drafted in because they were using hundreds of horses. Tony Smart, who was the wrangler, told him he was sacked and not to appear on set again. Later that evening this guy came back with the horse and said to Tony that the horse wanted to apologise (*laughs*). There were some funny characters on that movie.

Gibson: There was another horse that nearly killed me, so I fired him, too. He had a good trick where he did this whole rear-up thing, but he'd also fall backwards, which is a problem if you've fallen off first and you're behind him. He did that to me. It's actually on film; I must find the footage! My stunt double ran in and pulled me out of the way just as the horse fell.

Toll: You believe *Braveheart* because it's real! There are, like, three digital effects shots in the entire movie, and they're just to multiply the armies in wide shots. There's one part of the sequence in Falkirk where the English soldiers shoot flaming arrows, and Mel's wounded and he gets on a horse and has to gallop away. And it's Mel and there's fire, and it's like, *that's really happening.* >

THERE WAS A HORSE
THAT NEARLY KILLED ME —
SO I FIRED HIM. MEL GIBSON

REWRITING HISTORY

HOW BRAVEHEART'S MAKERS HANDLED THE FACTS

→ "THERE'S SCANT HISTORICAL RECORD," EXPLAINS Mel Gibson of the significant narrative liberties taken in *Braveheart*. "Blind Harry (15th-century author of epic poem *The Wallace*) was fanciful and kicked it up to the mythic level, but if you're looking for a complete compendium of the real life of William Wallace, you're not going to find one."

For screenwriter Randall Wallace, the story was more important than the meagre historical record, to the extent that the research came second. "My approach infuriates the professors and the purists," he chuckles. "I didn't know if they used longbows or crossbows, but what I knew was that they had courage. Blind Harry had an encounter between William Wallace and the wife of Edward I, but I thought the story was richer if she was the wife of Edward II, even though I knew she was far too young. To me, if you quibble over those details, you're not seeing the movie."

Production designer Tom Sanders recalls wrestling with the script's details: "William Wallace's village had, like, two-storey houses and Tudor windows. What we would have seen was dynamic, but not accurate at all." He decided to pitch the film's look too early rather than too late. "Braveheart was, I guess, 13th century, but I wanted it to look 11th century. I used the Bayeux Tapestry a lot for reference."

"Should we put a disclaimer at the start of everything saying, 'Warning! This is only a movie!'" asks Randall Wallace. "The audience understands that."

• One of the movie's many savage battle scenes. Don't worry — the horse is fine.

Gibson: I felt like I'd revived a thing that had been left behind. How many films did we see after where two big groups come together and clash? But we had no digital effects. It was BCG.

AFTERMATH

Gibson: I was pleased with it, but then you're so close. You're like the proud parent. I've thought about an extended version, and gone back and looked at the first cut, but I don't think I want to put it out there. It's like when I was watching the *Apocalypse Now Redux* version. They took the right scenes out of that one.

Sanders: It was my first job overseas, and I like to have that little fear factor involved on a project, like, "Can I actually do this?" We all had that fear factor on *Braveheart*, but none of us were going to be beaten! It was one of the best experiences I've ever had on a film.

Gleeson: I went over to LA to see a screening, and I was staggered by it. I heard that Patrick McGooohan had slipped in and had left again as the credits were going, and I told Ian Bannen (*The Leper*) I was disappointed that I'd missed him. He said, "Well, even if you hadn't, I don't think you'd have been any further down the road." McGooohan was totally as enigmatic as he was reputed to be.

Toll: Imagine it: the picture, the director, my future wife (*make-up artist Lois Burwell*) and me, all go home with an Oscar on the same night. Fantastic. Half the nervousness of the evening is that you might have to get up there and say something in front of a billion people.

Gibson: I haven't seen it for a while. Maybe I should watch it. My sense of it is that it's aged well. It still works and doesn't look outmoded. In fact, it's kind of different. We did things that were kind of amazing.

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THE BRAVEHEART BLU-RAY GIFT SET IS OUT ON JUNE 23.