

you carry all the
species, my
of us, "

CONAN

THE UNMADE

Conan The Barbarian

By
~~Roy Thomas and Ed Summer~~

*Oliver Stone and
John Milius*

~~Conan King of Thieves~~

By
~~Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway~~

Stanley Mann

The Destroyer

~~Conan III~~

By ~~Karl Wagner~~

KULL

~~Conan The Conqueror~~

By
Charles Edward Pogue

aka Don Mancini

~~King Conan Crown of Iron~~

By
~~John Milius~~

Robert Rodriguez

~~Untitled Conan Reboot~~

By
~~Boaz Yakin~~

Conan

By
~~Dirk Blackman~~ Thomas Dean Donnelly and Joshua Oppenheimer

Based on the Conan stories by Robert E. Howard

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The history of the Conan franchise is littered with axed scripts and unrealised visions. As a new Conan movie finally heads into production more than 26 years after the last, Empire reveals the nightmares numerous writers and producers — including even the Wachowski brothers — had trying to revive Robert E. Howard's Cimmerian warrior on screen

Words: Owen Williams

BETWEEN THE YEARS WHEN THE OCEANS DRANK ATLANTIS... AND THE RISE OF THE SONS OF ARYAS, THERE WAS AN age undreamed of, when... the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia... Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian..."

This is all the origin we get from Robert E. Howard about Conan The Barbarian, who arrived on the page already king of Aquilonia in the Texan author's 1932 story, *The Phoenix On The Sword*¹. Over the next four years, Howard would pen a further 21 Conan stories, plus sketches for six more, which skipped backwards and forwards in Conan's life as a thief, mercenary, pirate, guard captain and monarch in Howard's mythical Hyborian age: a warped version of Earth's unrecorded history.

The Conan represented by Howard in '30s pulp magazine *Weird Tales* is not the Conan we've yet seen on screen. The print Conan shared the gigantic mirth and gigantic melancholies of his creator, who liked sports and a drink and the Marx Brothers, but killed himself in 1936 when he was only 30. The "black-haired, sullen-eyed" Conan's philosophy is spelled out in a 1934 story where he states, "Give me red meat and stinging wine... the mad embrace of white arms... the mad exultation of battle... and I am content."

"He's a bitch to write," says screenwriter Dirk Blackman, who has worked on a rewrite of the upcoming Conan reboot. "He has no arc."

Conan first reached the screen in the hands of John Milius, whose *Conan The Barbarian* (1982), along with Richard Fleischer's sequel, *Conan The Destroyer* (1984), forever associated the character with Arnold Schwarzenegger, to the extent that, for a good 25 years, studios felt a Conan project was pointless without him. But Conan's quests towards the status of screen icon

were long and tortuous. Most of the screenwriters who wrestled with the Cimmerian had every intention of capturing the grim tone of Howard's stories, and at least nodding towards his hobbyhorse theme of barbarism versus civilisation ("Barbarism is the natural state of mankind," Howard wrote in *Beyond The Black River*. "Civilisation is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph"). But most Conan projects never saw the inside of a multiplex, or underwent crippling transformations. With the new Conan finally in production in Bulgaria, Marcus Nispel behind the camera, and *Stargate: Atlantis'* Jason Momoa in the title role, we look back at some of those untold stories. Let us tell you of the days of failure and compromise.

ROY THOMAS, THE CHIEF WRITER OF MARVEL'S HUGELY SUCCESSFUL CONAN COMICS DURING THE 1970s², AND

for some of the '80s and '90s, would be most intimately involved with *Conan The Destroyer*, but was instrumental in the beginnings of Conan's cinematic odyssey. When producer Ed Pressman became interested in Conan as a vehicle for Schwarzenegger, then best known as the star of *Pumping Iron*, Thomas' knowledge of Howard's stories made him first choice as a collaborator for co-writer Ed Summer. "Roy's adaptations were always good, and sometimes great," enthuses Howard scholar Rusty Burke. "He was the best."

Thomas and Summer started work in 1976. "Summer had more film experience than me, but of course I knew Conan," Thomas tells *Empire*, "so we pooled our resources, and worked out a treatment. It probably wouldn't have been quite as dark as some of Howard's stories, but we were trying to capture his spirit and get even closer than we could in the comics. Of



course, we barely even got started."

Their collaboration didn't get as far as a full screenplay, but a detailed story was developed, "taking bits and pieces from various Conan stories". Those bits and pieces included a significant portion from Howard's 1934 tale, *Rogues In The House*, in which Conan is hired by a dodgy priest to kill an evil wizard, who turns out to have been usurped by a red-robed mad ape called Thak. Thomas had adapted the story once before, for issue 11 of the Marvel run, and particularly recalls wanting to reuse Howard's scene in which Conan drops a treacherous prostitute into a cesspit, having murdered her latest trick.

This wasn't to be. With Arnie on board and a pre-publicity campaign underway, Paramount agreed to finance the film, but only if the package came with a name writer. Thomas and Summer were in favour of Oliver Stone, who had just won an Oscar for *Midnight Express*. Stone's screenplay was by turns gloriously epic and barking mad. He retains joint writing credit with John Milius on the finished film, but very few of his ideas remain.

"Milius said my script was a 'feverish dream under acid'," said Stone of his four-hour opus, which included an intermission and was planned as the first of 12 films, set in the future, with vast armies of mutants and cloned beast-men. "But that's exactly what it should have been! It's what arises from the work of Howard — he was >>>

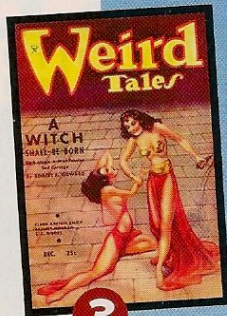


a very strange man. The producers sold it short.”

At its heart, Stone's script does come from Howard, principally extrapolating from *A Witch Shall Be Born* (1934)³, in which a queen's evil twin usurps her kingdom, and Conan leads an army of desert thieves in rebellion against her. Stone includes Conan's crucifixion on the Tree Of Woe (and the unforgettable moment when he kills a vulture with his teeth) from this story, and the sequence survives in the Milius film. There are bits of 1933's *Black Colossus*⁴, too (evil wizard plots world domination), plus the character Valeria — essayed in Milius' film by Sandahl Bergman — from 1936's *Red Nails*. But Stone's vision was too vast to be feasible. As Stone explained, “It was a \$40 million movie (a vast budget for 1982, comparable to *David Lynch's Dune*) dealing with the takeover of the planet. The mutant armies were rising and Conan was the lonely pagan hero. I was very influenced at the time by Catholic imagery: Bosch, William Blake's poetry... I would have filmed in a luxuriant forest in Germany, and I would have shown creatures eating human flesh. This is what the film should have been. But I could never have carried out that vision.”

And so the task fell to John Milius, writer of *Apocalypse Now* and director of 1978 seminal surfer epic *Big Wednesday*. “*Big Wednesday* was a total financial failure,” explained Milius, “and I felt that the only possible honourable thing to do was to join the French Foreign Legion. But I made Conan instead.”

Conan The Barbarian is actually more Howardian than it's given credit for — albeit in a garbled way. Thulsa Doom is a character from Howard's *Kull Of Atlantis* stories, but as portrayed by James Earl Jones and depicted as leader of a snake cult, he's actually Conan villain Thoth-Amon (from *The Phoenix On The Sword*) in all but name. Bergman's Valeria is the pirate queen from *Red Nails*, but her use as a love interest and her return from the grave to rescue Conan in battle mean she's fused with *Bêlit* from *Queen Of The Black Coast* (1934). The peculiar scene where Conan meets a witch, who after some nookie and a scuffle mutates into a flaming comet, has its roots in Howard's non-Conan story, *Worms Of The Earth* (1932)⁵; the tower climb nods to *The Tower Of The Elephant* (1933) and Milius even includes a sequence from Howard-Pasticher-In-Chief L. Sprague De Camp, when he has Conan pursued by wolves into a hidden crypt, to discover an Atlantean skeleton holding a precious sword.



3

Lore maker: His royal Arnieness turns the iconic Conan into raw muscle for 1982's *Barbarian*. Injury on camera mine!



“I would have filmed it in a German forest and shown creatures eating human flesh. That's what Conan should have been.” Oliver Stone

But Conan's origins as a gladiator slave, the *Wheel Of Pain* and the *Riddle Of Steel*, and the plot binding it all together (“Stupid and contrived,” says Burke) are pure Milius, and like Stone with his Blake and Bosch influences, he had his own agenda.

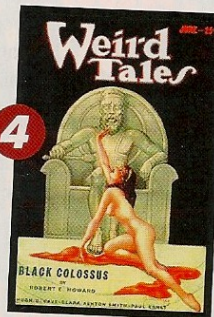
“John Ford is the greatest inspiration to me,” he said, “but on Conan I looked to Kurosawa.” Milius also wanted to make Conan “a Northern European mythic hero” and researched Nordic and Viking history, Greek snake cults and the Mongols. Conan's infamous speech (his first in the film, 25 minutes in) — about crushing your enemies, seeing them driven before you and hearing the lamentation of their women — paraphrases Genghis Khan.

“I expected more from the writer and director of one of my favourite films, *The Wind And the Lion*,” Rusty Burke tells *Empire*, “but Milius has made it clear in the years since the movie that he doesn't know much about Howard or the original stories, and doesn't want to know.”

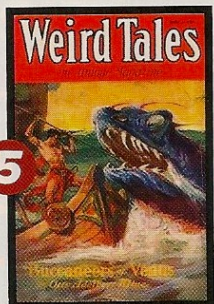
Milius had envisaged a trilogy. The first film was to represent strength, hence the

opening title sequence of the sword which, like Conan, must be hammered and forged. The next instalment was to show “how the sword is used”, and the third was to deal with issues of responsibility. Many years later, Milius would get an abortive shot at that third story, but following *Barbarian's* release, he was not part of Conan's immediate future.

CONAN THE BARBARIAN MADE \$40 MILLION IN THE US, EVEN WITH AN R RATING from the MPAA. Producer Dino De Laurentiis had been a lesser partner on the film, but after acquiring a larger share of the Conan rights and control of the sequel, reasoned there was even more money in tilting at a broader audience. In the years between his first involvement and the planning of what was to become *Conan The Destroyer*, Roy



4



5

Thomas had, along with Gerry Conway, written several screenplays, including Ralph Bakshi's animated fantasy epic, *Fire And Ice*. Considered now to be a more viable player, Thomas got his second shot at a Conan film in 1983, but found it a frustrating experience.

"To some extent it was sabotaged," he tells us. "They decided to make it a PG picture, and every time we had a meeting with them the budget was cut by another million or so." Thomas and Conway dealt with a string of rewrites, following bizarre feedback from De Laurentiis. "All we were getting were negatives," Thomas recalls. "We had rats in one of the early scenes, but then all of a sudden we weren't allowed to use rats. We couldn't have anybody be a priest, which might have had to do with Dino's Italian-Catholic background. I don't really have the slightest idea [why we were getting such instructions], but there were a lot of things like that and they were mostly kind of crazy."

The originally slated director was Roger Donaldson, who eventually left to make *The Bounty* with Mel Gibson and Anthony Hopkins. After a brief and mysterious replacement by William Dear, at the time fresh off the Mike Nesmith vehicle *Elephant Parts* and later the producer/director of *Harry And The Hendersons*, the film ended up with veteran Richard Fleischer at the helm, due to Di Laurentiis' fondness for his 1958 Kirk Douglas movie *The Vikings*. "I made six films for Dino," recalled Fleischer. "I think I'm the only director to survive more than one!"

Fleischer's arrival coincided with Thomas and Conway's departure, but there was one meeting that still rankles Thomas: "I gave Fleischer an issue of *Conan I* had written, where Conan is offered a chance by the villain to resurrect Bêlit, and he took the idea and added it into the picture! They

wouldn't let us do what we wanted to do, so they got somebody else, and he added back things that we'd suggested! He never even returned my comic..."

Stanley Mann has the screenplay credit, while Thomas and Conway are relegated to "Story by". "Mann replaced our dialogue," says Thomas, "but if you turn down the sound and just watch the pictures, almost everything in the movie is from one of our drafts." There are a few differences — a steal from *Rogues In The House*, with the robed ape-man in the wizard's palace, is not one of Thomas', for example. ("I really hated that. It's a lousy scene, turning Thoth-Amon into a third-rate sorcerer.") But the main difference is one of scale and tone, with, for example, Thomas' visions of a climactic Ray Harryhausen-type cliff-top battle with a winged demon replaced with André The Giant lumbering around indoors in a rubber suit, "because Dino wouldn't pay for any stop motion".

"I certainly wasn't wild about it," concludes Thomas drily. "But Gerry and I used our first draft of *Destroyer* to get work for the next year or so. Everybody said, 'Why didn't they make this movie instead of the one they did?'"

Dino De Laurentiis made tentative steps towards a *Conan III*, commissioning a script from psychiatrist-turned-pulp-writer Karl Wagner, author of the 1979 pastiche *Conan novel The Road Of Kings*⁶. The film was never realised, and the Cimmerian lay dormant for a decade.

E NTER, IN THE EARLY '90s, CHARLES EDWARD POGUE, CO-WRITER OF DAVID CRONENBERG'S *REMAKE OF THE FLY*. HAVING JUST handed over his script for *Dragonheart* (which would become a Rob Cohen movie starring Sean Connery as the voice of the dragon) to Raffaella De Laurentiis



PULP FICTION

A brief guide to Robert E. Howard's non-Cimmerian heroes

KULL OF ATLANTIS

Pre-dating Conan by 8,000 years in Howard's chronology, the more philosophical Kull is variously a pirate captain, gladiator, soldier and king. Kevin Sorbo played him in 1997.

SOLOMON KANE

Sixteenth-century puritan sword-and-pistol duellist, who wanders the world smiting the wicked. Just filmed by director Michael J. Bassett, starring James Purefoy.

BRAN MAK MORN

The last king of the Picts — or at least Howard's version of the ailing pre-Roman tribes of Eastern and Northern Scotand. A film has been lingering in development hell for some years, with Hancock helmer Peter Berg briefly attached to direct.

RED SONJA

There is a character from Howard's historical fiction called Red Sonya of Rogatino. But Red Sonja, as played by Brigitte Nielsen in 1985, is a Roy Thomas creation for Marvel. A stalled film project has been prepped by producer Robert Rodriguez and director Doug Aarniokoski, with Rose McGowan set to star.

SAILOR STEVE COSTIGAN

A champion boxer and merchant seaman, Costigan is a humorous Howard creation. He wrote more stories about the lunk-headed pugilist than any other of his characters.

EL BORAK

Aka Francis Xavier Gordon, a gunfighter renowned for his antics in Afghanistan. He starred in a dozen stories but only five were published in Howard's lifetime.

BRECKINRIDGE ELKINS

Howard also wrote Westerns, around 30 of which starred this dim-bulb cowboy from Bear Creek. The Elkins stories are comedies, but Howard wrote an equal number of straight Westerns, of which *Vultures Of Wahpeton* is currently in development at Paradox Entertainment.

MICHAEL KIROWAN

A recurring character in Howard's horror stories, Kirowan is a member of The Wanderer's Club, and a student of forbidden knowledge. These stories are connected to the Cthulhu mythos of Howard's frequent correspondent, H. P. Lovecraft. **OWEN WILLIAMS**



"The franchise went that a-way..." John Milius and Arnie on the set of *Barbarian*.

(Dino's daughter and producing protégé), Pogue pointed to the poster of Conan The Barbarian behind her desk and said, "Begging your pardon, you folks have never gotten Conan right." Two weeks and one phone call to the head of Universal Pictures later, all the contracts for Conan The Conqueror were signed.

There was one caveat: Schwarzenegger had to be on board. Pogue saw the box office and publicity advantage to this but, he tells *Empire*, "At the same time I did feel the character was the franchise, and another actor could just as easily slip into the role, as with James Bond."

Putting those reservations to the back of his mind, Pogue got to work. A fan who'd been reading and collecting Howard's stories since childhood, Pogue wanted to embrace the dark, visceral prose which he thought "somewhat lacking" from Barbarian and entirely so from Destroyer. The writer wanted to come up with "a mature, swashbuckling, epic adventure movie for adults".

Pogue's inspiration was Howard's only Conan novel, *The Hour Of The Dragon*⁷. The last Conan story to be published in Howard's lifetime (in 1935), although not the last to be written, the plot takes place when Conan is in his mid-40s, during his reign as king of Aquilonia: the very period hinted at by Milius at the end of *Conan The Barbarian*.

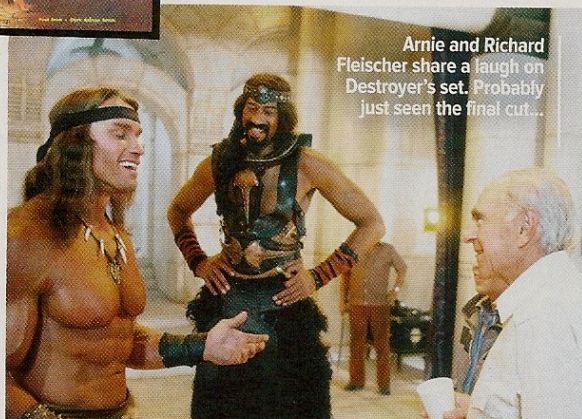
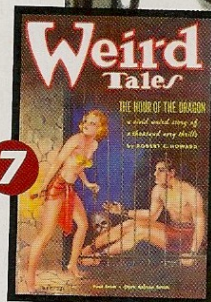
"What I loved," recalls Pogue, "was the idea of a man who had become king by his own wit and prowess, but once enthroned got lost in protocol and politics, and forgot those characteristics. Once *dethroned*, he had to go back and remember the person he'd lost. Victory always costs something. I felt that Arnold had grown enough as an actor to play that complexity."

The finished script met with all-round approval, but Arnie's umming and ahing remained a sticking point, and after waiting a year for an answer, Universal opted for a change of direction: they would switch lead characters as well as actors, looking instead to another macho, mythical Howard creation, Conan precursor *Kull Of Atlantis*.

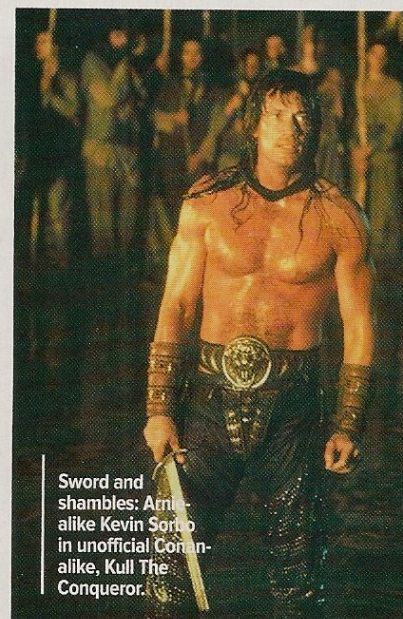
Pogue insists his draft of what would become the hapless *Kull The Conqueror*, directed by John Nicoletta and starring TV's Hercules Kevin Sorbo, "maintained all the virtues of the Conan script". But the rot set in when Pogue and Raffaella De Laurentiis clashed over the finished *Dragonheart*. "I felt she let a mediocre



He won't be back... Arnie was due to star in 2001 sequel *King Conan* — until John Milius' script got the chop.

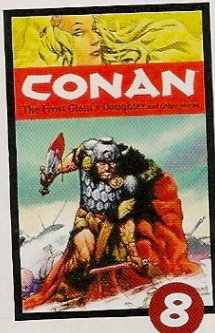


Arnie and Richard Fleischer share a laugh on *Destroyer's* set. Probably just seen the final cut...



Sword and shambles: Arnie-alike Kevin Sorbo in unofficial Conan-alike, *Kull The Conqueror*.

BOBAL (3) AQUARIUS (8) PHOTOFEIST (1)



director diminish my vision," says Pogue, who was removed from Kull and saw his "meticulously rendered script" rewritten by Child's Play's Don Mancini to become "a juggernaut of illogic: hacked around to make it appeal to Kevin

Sorbo's 12-year-old fanbase".

Robert E. Howard may have recycled a Kull plot for his debut Conan story, but it's debatable whether the heroes are as interchangeable as De Laurentiis hoped. Kull is more given to thinking than fighting, at least in comparison to Conan, who'll maim anyone who remotely annoys him. In Sorbo's hands, though, he resembles neither: an easygoing adventurer (not unlike Hercules) rather than the brooding Atlantean the material originally presented. The film itself, meanwhile, is cheap and sloppy. A shark-attack scene in Pogue's script that became a full-blown sea-monster battle in Mancini's reached the screen as merely a giant Muppet Kraken head dumped on a ship's deck and largely ignored. It's not a bad metaphor for the entire movie, which Pogue describes as "a glossy-hided beast that became an emaciated carcass".

THE FINAL ATTEMPT AT A THIRD CONAN FILM HIT THE BALL BACK TO MILIUS THANKS TO ANDY AND LARRY WACHOWSKI

who, post-Matrix, had been given the keys to the Warner Bros. kingdom. Under the

"John Ford is the greatest inspiration to me, but on Conan, I looked to Kurosawa." John Milius, director

their auspices, Milius began writing King Conan: Crown Of Iron in 2001. Arnie wasn't averse to returning, cheerfully telling the press that Milius was busy cutting down a 180-page script. "He smokes a stogie," said Arnie, "then writes a page, and then smokes another stogie."

King Conan's script was once again more about Milius than Howard, although it did begin with some business adapted from The Frost Giant's Daughter⁸ (Conan's earliest adventure, written in 1932 but not published in Howard's lifetime), and features a role for Bran Mak Morn, Howard's Pictish hero from

an entirely different set of stories.

The plot, in a nutshell too small for the job, spans 25 years and sees Conan, alone in the north, encountering the "daughter of the snows" who promises him a son if he brings her "the jewels of an empire". Conan heads west where he becomes a pirate, then a general in the Aquilonian army, and returns to the north with his new-pillaged wealth, to be presented with his son, Kon. Although Kon is not, it transpires, Conan's son after all, but the offspring of (get this) the 'Ice Worm'.

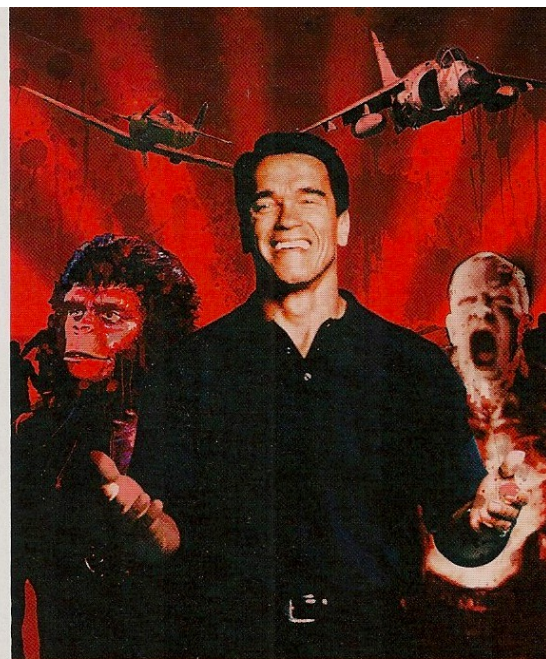
Conan and Kon head south, only to be separated when Conan takes up the crown of Zingara, and Kon is dispatched to the Aquilonian Academy Of War. Kon rises in rank as he grows older, estranged from a lonely Conan, who is still pining for Valeria and dealing with treachery at court, until finally the pair are reunited, with Kon learning the bizarre truth about his parentage, and Conan learning the secret of the Crown Of Iron. And at the very end Milius promises even more, in "Beneath My Sandalled Feet, the final instalment of R. E. Howard's Conan"!

Once again, events conspired against the project. Milius was scouting locations in Turkey, talking up new weaponry (namely the 'Aquilonian Spatha', which he described as a "Frazetta axe", after iconic Conan artist Frank Frazetta), and hinting that Vin Diesel or Dwayne Johnson might be in contention for the role of Kon.

But Fredrik Malmberg, president and CO of Conan rights-holders Paradox and a producer on the film, explains that "during the period they were making The Matrix Reloaded and Revolutions (shot in 2002), it became clear that the

Wachowskis had their hands full. It was turning into this behemoth." Feeling creatively burnt out in the aftermath of production, and stung by fan backlash against the two sequels, the Wachowskis began to make it known that "they were not really that eager to go into Conan, after all. They wanted to do a video-game or a smaller picture."

When Troublemaker supremo Robert Rodriguez heard rumours that the brothers were vacillating, he offered to step in and take over the project, at which point the Wachowskis changed their minds once and for all and officially bowed out. And >>



LOST ACTION HERO

King Conan is just one of many never-realised Arnie projects. To wit...

TRUE LIES 2

There was talk of the further adventures of the Tasker family, but after 9/11 James Cameron abandoned his plans. "Somehow having fun with nuke-toting terrorists just didn't sit as well as it had," he's said.

WITH WINGS AS EAGLES

Austrian-born Arnie had the perfect accent to play the hero of this war movie based on a script by Braveheart's Randall Wallace. The pitch today would be Inglourious Basterds meets Valkyrie as disillusioned Nazi Colonel Klaus von Ostermann leads a Dirty Dozen-style army of POWs to Allied lines.

CRUSADES

After Total Recall, Arnie and Verhoeven planned this 'Conan meets Spartacus' epic, in which Arnie would play Hagen, a thief-turned-slave who winds up joining the Christian army to free Jerusalem from the Muslims in 1095. Walon Green (The Wild Bunch) wrote a cracking script, but political prudence and financial conservatism left the project on the shelf.

TOTAL RECALL 2

Following Paul Verhoeven's 1990 hit, based on Philip K.

Dick's story We Can Remember It For You Wholesale, Ronald Shusett and Gary Goldman wrote a sequel based on another Dick story, The Minority Report. "Arnold was going to star, and Verhoeven was going to direct," Goldman says. "Then right after we wrote it, Carolco (the company behind Total Recall) went bankrupt."

I AM LEGEND

A decade before Will Smith finally got it made, director Ridley Scott was well into pre-production of an earlier adaptation of the Richard Matheson novel, with Arnie signed to the part played by Vincent Price in The Last Man On Earth, and by Charlton Heston in The Omega Man.

RETURN OF THE APES

Arnie almost played another role made famous by Heston, when Terry Hayes wrote the first Planet Of The Apes reboot. A sudden plague of stillborn children prompts two geneticists to travel back to a time when paleolithic humans are locked in a battle for evolutionary survival with highly evolved apes. In the end, Fox backed Tim Burton's re-imagining instead.

DAVID HUGHES

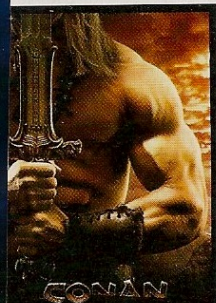


Once was warrior: Nearly 30 years on, Arnie will pass the Conan throne to Jason Momoa (below) for 2011's barbarian reboot.

“Howard was such an extraordinarily visual writer. It’s hard to understand how the movie guys screwed up Conan so badly.” Rusty Burke

without Andy and Larry’s patronage, Milius left shortly afterwards.

A further three years passed with Rodriguez officially tied to the film (and his own rewrite), but the clock was ticking on Warner Bros.’ option, and Rodriguez, who always has his fingers in multiple movie pies, was impossible to pin down. “Warners and Paradox would ask, ‘Can we start now?’” says Malmberg, “and Rodriguez was always like, ‘Yes, but I just have to do this first...’ Finally, when we really pushed him for a start date, he admitted that he couldn’t do it.”



WHICH BRINGS US TO 2010 AND MARCUS NISPEL, JASON MOMOA AND THE SIMPLY titled Conan. If the casting call is anything to go by (and co-screenwriter Joshua Oppenheimer tells *Empire* it is), the story involves an evil wizard out for a queen’s blood in order to raise a demon army; pirates; mercenaries; and slinky maidens. And behind it all is the threatening presence of Thoth-Amon. It could be great fun, but while the plot is intended as ‘Howardian’, little of it is based on Howard. So what is it about the writer’s stories that makes them so resistant to straight adaptation?

Pogue blames a disconnect between the studio mindset and the fantasy genre: “They don’t understand that fantasy readers are highly literate. The studios go for the obvious and miss the darker undercurrents.” Burke agrees. “You just get all the superficial stuff — the wizards, monsters and babes. Howard’s theme is that civilisation is a veneer and when you stop trying to build it, you degenerate and become debauched. Hollywood doesn’t want to sell those ideas

— degeneracy and debauchery is what they’re in the business of selling!”

Joshua Oppenheimer suggests that the difficulty is in Howard’s chosen medium: “The stories are snapshots of Conan’s life, episodic and crafted to stand alone. To stretch out a short story would involve additions and bleeding elements from one story to another, which hardly seems more respectful to Howard’s work than a new story holding true to his central principles.” Thomas agrees: “If you’re going to do a movie, it needs to be a bigger story.”

But Dirk Blackman, already at work on a possible sequel to Nispel’s Conan, tells *Empire*: “I don’t want to disagree with Roy Thomas — he’s a god! I guess a good writer can create a fantastic non-Robert E. Howard story, but why would you? There’s already so much great material.”

We’ll have to wait until next year to see whether the 21st century Conan will break the curse that’s beset the franchise since Conan The Destroyer; certainly producer Joe Gatta promised *Empire* last year that he was looking more towards Howard than Milius, even though the aim is to “bring a new vision and style to the franchise”.

“Howard was an extraordinarily visual writer: the stories are virtually screenplays already,” concludes Rusty Burke. “It’s hard to understand how the movie guys can screw it all up so badly.” With all those mistakes to learn from, there should really be no excuse for getting it wrong this time. owen@empiremagazine.com

Conan is out in 2011.