



BACK
IN THE
SWING
OF
THINGS

Harry Potter director
DAVID YATES
takes on the challenge of
bringing Tarzan back
from the wilderness

WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS





Five years ago, David Yates might justifiably have taken a very long holiday. The director had just said goodbye to Harry Potter with the series' final instalment, *The Deathly Hallows – Part 2*. After four films, half a decade and north of \$4 billion at the box office he'd certainly earned a break, but his thoughts instead turned immediately to his next project. Unsurprisingly, stacks of screenplays had come his way – “Lots of sci-fi, lots of things blowing up,” he says. The director who'd just brought one of cinema's most successful series to a spectacular conclusion had his pick. But one in particular called out to him. A surprising one.

“*The Legend Of Tarzan* felt the most enjoyable of everything I'd been reading,” Yates tells *Empire*. A film based on a character who hasn't been seen on a cinema screen since Disney's animated version in 1999? “I just liked the idea of a really old-fashioned and joyful, romantic action-adventure picture,” he says. “Yes, Tarzan had gone out of fashion, and wasn't necessarily ever done that well in

its earlier incarnations, but they were delightful in their way. I felt that, just as *Batman* had been through reinventions, Tarzan was ready for that too.”

IT WOULD HARDLY BE HIS

first. During the 20th century the lost, ape-raised English lord was ubiquitous. His creator, Edgar Rice Burroughs, wrote more than 40 novels and short stories about him between 1912 and 1947. Other authors (among them Fritz Leiber, Philip José Farmer and Andy Briggs) later wrote even more. There were comics, cartoons, stage plays and radio serials. And there were movies: 90 between the silent era and today. The most popular series, which began with Johnny Weissmuller in the title role in 1932 and ended with Mike Henry in 1968, ran to 28 films. After that, the pace began to slow, but there were still live-action TV shows, school-holiday re-runs of the old films, and occasional cinematic adventures: the ill-fated erotic take with Bo Derek in 1981 (*Tarzan The Ape Man*); Hugh Hudson's handsome but

austere *Greystoke: The Legend Of Tarzan, Lord Of The Apes* in 1984; and Disney's '99 version. The character's popularity endured. “I was a Tarzan fan; that's why I came to this,” says Samuel L. Jackson, who plays US envoy George Washington Williams in Yates' movie. “Gordon Scott was *my* Tarzan on the big screen, but I watched Johnny Weissmuller on TV. We played Tarzan when I was a kid, and jumped from tree to tree and did shit.”

We haven't yet, however, seen a live-action Tarzan in cinemas this millennium. Not counting the swiftly cancelled Warner Bros. TV series of the early 2000s starring a pre-*Vikings* Travis Fimmel, the last actor to swing on a vine with Jane was Casper Van Dien in 1998's *Tarzan And The Lost City...* which had its budget slashed during production, limped to a paltry \$2 million at the box office, and has never even been available on DVD in the UK.

So it's hardly surprising to learn it took producer Jerry Weintraub a decade to get *The Legend Of Tarzan* into production. Directors Guillermo del Toro and Stephen Sommers came into and out of the picture

Samuel L. Jackson's George Washington Williams and Alexander Skarsgård's John Clayton rumble in the jungle.



Above: Djimon Hounsou as Chief Mbonga, who appeared in Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan tales. Left: Margot Robbie offers a more modern take on Jane.

Congolese vistas. Though at source, those elements are problematic, stemming as they do from Burroughs' ignorant fantasies: the 'Scramble For Africa' was far from over at the time Burroughs first began writing. By 21st-century standards, Burroughs' work is naively racist, so key to Tarzan's reinvention was rooting him in an historically accurate past: "redefining him by an understanding of the world", as Yates puts it.

Avoiding the much-told origin story (although Yates says there are more early-Tarzan flashbacks than were planned, due to test audiences "longing for them"), screenwriters Adam Cozad and Craig Brewer introduce a Tarzan already living in England as John Clayton, Lord Greystoke. Plucking a thread from Burroughs' books which saw Tarzan undertaking diplomatic missions for European governments, *Legend* plunges him back into the Congo on a British-American operation to investigate the activities of the Belgian King Leopold II.

A real historical villain, during the late 1800s Leopold ruthlessly exploited the Congo for its rubber crop, resulting in mass enslavement and genocide. Modern estimates put the number of Congolese deaths attributable to his regime in the millions. With this as a context, you can hardly accuse the film of romanticising colonialism. "It is a big, exciting action film," explains Alexander Skarsgård, who Yates cast as his lord of the jungle. "But this is the reality that Tarzan comes back to in the Congo: an appalling situation that wasn't there when he was growing up." >



in 2006 and 2008 respectively, before he finally locked things down with Yates, and an entirely new script, in 2012. Even after that, there was a temporary shut-down in 2013, when it became apparent the budget was too small. "It's been a real struggle to match the vision with the money," says Yates, though he'd achieved that by the time the film finally went into pre-production in February 2014. *John Carter* — another Burroughs property — didn't help his cause, with Disney's high-profile adaptation bombing in 2012. While, even in a dormant state, Tarzan retains wider cultural name-recognition than Carter, reviving him remains a risk in a world where the modern superhero blockbuster is all-conquering.

"I actually do think of this as a superhero movie," says David Barron

(Yates' producer on this and his *Harry Potter* films). "Tarzan's senses are very finely tuned and he has this great physical prowess as a result of his upbringing. It's not a superhero movie like we're used to, though: we are treating it as a proper, grown-up Tarzan story based in reality." Yates insists this is "a modern, eco-Tarzan. His world is amazing, and it deserves to be represented properly, in a way that's really possible now, with that proper wallop of action and entertainment and scale."

DON'T CONFUSE "MODERN"

with "present day", however. Part of Tarzan's charm, for Yates, lies in the richness of his historical setting: the wild animals, the tribesmen and the verdant

Tough times for Tarzan in Take 2.



Outside Africa, Leopold was presenting himself to the world as a philanthropist, and when bankruptcy threatened, he appealed internationally for financial support. So Tarzan joins George Washington Williams (Jackson) on a fact-finding mission that quickly goes wrong. Leopold himself doesn't appear on screen, but his dastardly interests are represented by the movie's principal villain, Léon Rom (Christoph Waltz). Both Williams and Rom are historical characters: Rom is thought to be an inspiration for the brutal Colonel Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*; Washington a lawyer and Civil War veteran whose open letter to Leopold in 1890 hastened the end of his so-called Congo Free State.

"I didn't know George Washington Williams' story until I started talking to people about this job," says Jackson, "but after that I read a lot. He was the first African-American from the United States to go into the Congo and oppose the slave trade. He was an interesting guy." He's also a counter to the 'white saviour' trope, by which white characters solve problems



Animated but still deadly: David Yates eschewed performance capture for his apes.



Director David Yates (centre) briefs Christoph Waltz, who plays the corrupt Captain Rom.

for people of colour: one more example of *The Legend Of Tarzan's* determination to be culturally and racially cognizant.

"We were very sensitive to the more dated aspects of the classic stories," says Yates. "One of the appeals and challenges of the script was that it was rooted in this terrible, powerful, disturbing aspect of African history while still keeping all the iconic aspects of the Tarzan you know. If even one person in that multiplex audience goes away and reads a little bit about George Washington Williams, we've achieved something."

THOUGH AFRICAN HISTORY

was important to the production, Yates didn't shoot in Africa itself. Playing the part of the Congo is his old *Harry Potter* stomping ground, Leavesden Studios (new Jane Margot Robbie, when *Empire* meets her on set, is excited to learn that we're standing on Hagrid's hill). Only some plate shots, to "wrap Gabon around the sets", Yates says, were filmed on location.

There's something fitting about this. The films of the '40s, '50s and '60s were similarly shot on studio backlots, with the more exotic animals slotted in via stock footage. But they were B pictures through and through, lacking anything close to the budget Yates has to facilitate some extraordinarily detailed production design. "The old films were always a bit under-realised," says Yates. "This time we've got the resources, even though we're only in Watford."

Empire can hear the M25 from the savannah village where we watch Skarsgård, Robbie and Jackson arrive to a spirited tribal welcome. We can also hear it from the mountain valley set, with its 50-foot waterfall and craggy cliffs. But it's at least quiet within C Stage, which houses the production's magnificently realised Congolese jungle.

There's a smell of wet peat and bark as we poke around here. Mud squelches underfoot and water gathers at the roof, creating a misty micro-climate. Massive canopies of hand-moulded leaves brush against us as we meander alongside a river with a fully adjustable water level.

You can walk a long way through this jungle before encountering any technology — as long as you don't look up to see the light boxes on the ceiling.

While the flora may be physically present, the fauna — including thousands of wildebeest which stampede through the colonial town of Boma at the film's climax — are entirely digital. Which is less of a surprise than the fact that Yates and his team have avoided the performance-capture approach, even for the apes.

"I didn't want to tie myself into human performances," explains visual effects supervisor Tim Burke. "We don't need our animals to do things that are unnatural for them, as they did in *Life Of Pi* or *Dawn Of The Planet Of The Apes*. Our creatures are in their natural habitat." Again, rather appropriately, the film is using something close to those old stock-animal-footage-insertion techniques, albeit in a vastly more sophisticated manner. "We've been capturing a lot of reference at wildlife parks in Gabon and in this country," Burke says. "We've been photo-scanning real animals. It's all been about creating a library of performance."

ONCE YATES IS DONE WITH

his other 2016 movie — *Harry Potter* franchise extension *Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them* — he's ready, he says, to return to his new/old hero... Assuming his epic, big-budget and tonally modernised approach lands with the 21st-century audience. "We're excited," he says. "We've been thinking a lot about a second Tarzan and how it picks up from this one. It all depends on how it does in July, but we've got a pretty good outline and we're ready to go with that straightaway."

Superman was created in 1938; Batman in 1939; Captain America in 1941. One hundred-and-four years after his own first appearance, it feels right that Tarzan, *The Lord Of The Jungle*, is about to return alongside them. He's been gone for far too long. ■

THE LEGEND OF TARZAN IS OUT ON JULY 8 AND WILL BE REVIEWED IN A FUTURE ISSUE.

FORGOTTEN HEROES

ONCE THEY WERE HUGE — NOW WE'D BE AMAZED TO SEE THEM MAKE A TARZAN-STYLE COMEBACK

JUNGLE JIM

Johnny Weissmuller's signature role after Tarzan was a safari-suited hunter based on a newspaper comic strip. He starred in 16 films between 1948 and 1956, and in the last three, thanks to rights issues, the character was also called Johnny Weissmuller.



THE SHADOW

Though more of a radio hero, this masked vigilante did enjoy a healthy secondary career on film. Six shorts, a serial and four features were made between 1931 and 1958. Russell Mulcahy made a new movie in 1994, starring Alec Baldwin, but it flopped.



BLONDIE

Comic-strip heroine Blondie Boopadoop ditzed through 28 comedy feature film adventures between 1938 and 1950. Penny Singleton — also the voice of Jane Jetson — played her in every one.



ROY ROGERS

Singing cowboy Rogers made more than 100 movies during the '30s, '40s and '50s, usually playing a character called Roy Rogers. He was a merchandising phenomenon, his name becoming a brand second only to Walt Disney.



ROCKET MAN

Nothing to do with Elton John but the basis for the later *Rocketeer* comics and 1991 Disney movie, the masked and jet-packed Rocket Man was the hero of four 12-part Republic Pictures film serials between 1949 and 1953.



CHARLIE CHAN

The globetrotting Honolulu detective investigated 50-odd screen cases between 1926 and 1949. Usually played by a white actor (the Swedish Warner Oland from 1931 to 1938), he's now seen as an outdated Asian stereotype.

