



PLANET OF THE

APE-MAN

It's 100 years since his creation, but Tarzan's been off our screens for more than a decade. From one of Hollywood's favourite heroes to a loincloth-wearing embarrassment? Empire explores cinema's forgotten franchise — and its imminent return

Words by
OWEN WILLIAMS

EMPIRE
PICTURES

Starring

**JOHNNY
WEISSMULLER
BUSTER CRABBE
GLEN MORRIS
HERMAN BRIX
MIKE HENRY
CHRISTOPHER LAMBERT
CASPER VAN DIEN**

and Introducing...

KELLAN LUTZ

Well, I don't see what's so funny," huffs Kellan Lutz with mock affront, as **Empire** points at him and laughs. The source of our

mirth is the grey one-piece performance-capture jumpsuit the Twilight alumnus is sporting on the Munich set of Constantin Films' new animated Tarzan. Still, joking aside, it's a significant moment. Lutz' Tarzan has gone into production during the centenary celebrations for Edgar Rice Burroughs' most famous creation, and despite its digitally rendered end-point, it marks the first time an actor has physically played the lord of the jungle on a set for 15 years. "I feel honoured," Lutz beams. "I grew up on a farm in the Midwest, and I loved playing pirates and firemen, but I always loved playing Tarzan too. It's a dream come true to play him in a film... Even if he won't have my face!"

Every generation gets a new cinematic Sherlock Holmes, Batman, James Bond. For decades, Tarzan was part of that pantheon. Since his inception he's been the subject of at least 89 movies — yet only a handful of those arrived during the last 30 years. Once a phenomenon, Tarzan now seems an anachronism: a monosyllabic ape-man from a quaintly racist fantasy Africa, screaming his yodelly scream as he swings through the lianas in glorious black-and-white. Or perhaps your Tarzan is from the 30 or so novels, or the various comics, or the colour movies of the '60s, or the Disney animation from 1999, with its kid-friendly messages of tolerance and Phil Collins songs.

"I do presentations in schools and at festivals," says Andy Briggs, author of a new series of kids' Tarzan novels for Faber. "In a room of a hundred children, 99 per cent know who Tarzan is, even though only half have seen the Disney film. They know Tarzan lives in the jungle and was raised by apes, and they all know the Johnny Weissmuller roar. If you ask them how they know, they all shrug. They just do!" Through some kind of cultural osmosis, Tarzan is still with us. But where has he been? And can he successfully come back?

Tarzan Of The Apes was first published in 1912, serialised in the pulp *All-Story* magazine. Like Burroughs' John Carter, his immediate attraction for contemporary audiences was an almost impossibly exotic location. The jungles of Africa may technically have been closer to home than the deserts of Mars, but were still vastly beyond most readers' travel capability, and remained unexplored

enough to believably contain endless lost cities and undiscovered races. Burroughs' own ignorance led to his populating his dense jungle with various species that prefer open plains, and giant apes that don't exist at all. Arriving only 13 years after Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*, *Tarzan Of The Apes* is clearly a very different book, but arguably deals with that same horror and fascination regarding what it might mean to "go native".

Burroughs had hit on a career as a pulp writer at the age of 37, following a stint in the military and a series of hapless business ventures. "He was a very poor businessman!" laughs James Sullos, the president of rights-holders Edgar Rice Burroughs Incorporated. "He tried dozens of different enterprises, and at the time he wrote John Carter and Tarzan he was a pencil-sharpener salesman. He had a team going door-to-door — pencil-sharpeners were a hot commodity in those days! — and he had time on his hands because he was just sitting in his office waiting for his staff to bring the orders back."

Burroughs passed his downtime reading pulp fiction, and concluded that "if people were paid for writing rot such as I read in some of those magazines, I could write stories just as rotten! Although I had never written a story, I knew absolutely that I could write stories just as entertaining..."

"Ironically, after that, he became a very astute businessman," says Sullos.

Burroughs was one of the first authors to actively protect his name and work, creating the corporation of which Sullos is now president in 1923. Unimpressed with the early, silent-movie attempts to film Tarzan, Burroughs sought to find studios that would allow him creative control. But he found it a tough sell, and eventually stepped back. "By the time the MGM films came along," says author and Tarzan expert Scott Tracy Griffin, "Burroughs was growing a little detached from it all. He just sold them the Tarzan name and said, 'Make up your own stories.' As long as they kept to the core of Tarzan's character, Burroughs allowed the films to diverge."

The "Me Tarzan, you Jane" archetype was born here (although the line is not in any of the films). Burroughs' Tarzan is John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, orphaned and left alone in the African jungle as a baby. He teaches himself to read English as a child — and is taught French by his discoverer, naval officer D'Arnot — in the first novel, by the end of which he is also driving a car around Baltimore. As early as the second novel, *The Return Of Tarzan* (1913), he's working as an agent for the French in pre-World War I Algeria.



• Above: Neil Hamilton, Maureen O'Sullivan, Johnny Weissmuller, Paul Cavanagh and Jackie Conway under the crew's surveillance on 1934's *Tarzan And His Mate*. Right: Director Cedric Gibbons shares a joke with his star. Below right: Gibbons catches a lift with his extras on set.

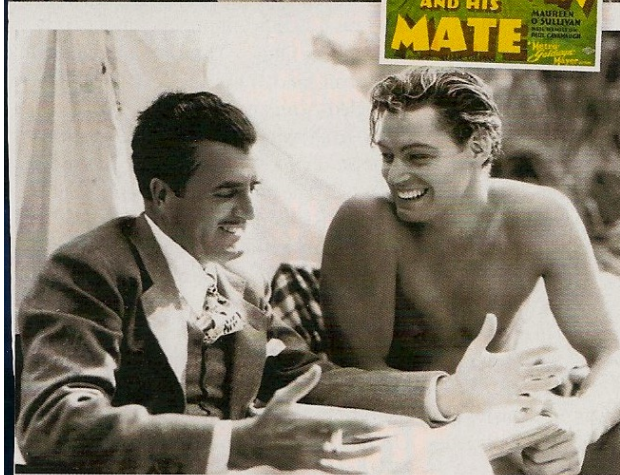
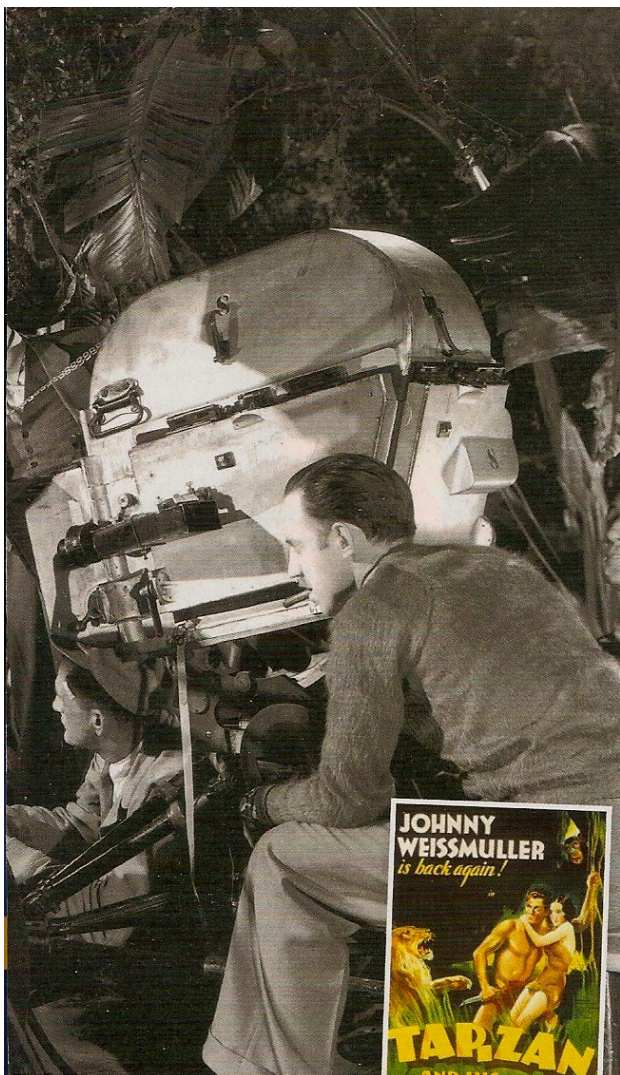
In the MGM movies, though, Tarzan is champion swimmer Johnny Weissmuller, never named anything other than Tarzan and never given an origin. He is, instead, the mysterious "great white ape" encountered by James Parker (C. Aubrey Smith) and feisty daughter Jane (Maureen O'Sullivan) on their trek to the mythical Elephants' Graveyard, in *Tarzan The Ape Man* (1932).

"Weissmuller was extraordinary looking," says *Chariots Of Fire* director Hugh Hudson, a child of the '30s who would make a rather different Tarzan in 1984's *Greystoke*. "Everyone knew him from the Olympic Games, and you can see why he was given the job: he had an incredible physique." That physical stamp would endure: for the next 50 years Tarzan would almost always be played by athletes rather than actors. No less easy on the eye was O'Sullivan, whose string bikini and nude swimming (although the swimmer was a body double) in first sequel *Tarzan And His Mate* (1934) led to a swift, outraged change in the American production codes.

Weissmuller fought dangerous animals, ferocious savages and rapacious white men



"TARZAN'S THE WORLD'S FIRST ECO-WARRIOR, BUT HE'S NOT A FLAG-WAVING LIBERAL. HE'S A PURE FORCE OF NATURE." ANDY BRIGGS



in a dozen films. His iconic yell was created by a sound engineer, although Weissmuller later learned to do a good approximation of it, and it's still Tarzan's strongest signifying characteristic in the popular imagination.

"That's my Tarzan," says Andy Briggs. "My favourite film ever is *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* — that's my apex of perfection — but I think *Tarzan Triumphs* (1943) is a close second. 'Now Tarzan make war!' That, to me, is Tarzan. Tarzan versus the Nazis: what more could you possibly want?" The films also had an oddly domestic set-up, Tarzan and Jane living happily together in a jungle tree house with frequent comic relief from Cheetah the chimpanzee. Tarzan and Jane gained a son, Boy, in 1939, although due to their shocking failure to get married, production codes dictated he should be adopted rather than conceived.

The 1930s and '40s were Tarzan's real heyday, with an explosion of competing film projects. Burroughs had optioned the Tarzan rights to MGM believing that a previous contract with a now-bankrupt company was no longer valid. That turned out not to be the case, however, when that old contract found its way into the hands of producer Sol Lesser, who had it legally declared a still-going concern, and put his own *Tarzan The Fearless* serial into production while MGM was still shooting *Tarzan The Ape Man*. Another swimmer, Buster Crabbe, was Lesser's Tarzan first time out, and he was replaced by Olympic decathlete Glenn Morris in follow-up *Tarzan's Revenge*. The enthusiastic Lesser took over the "official" Weissmuller series in 1943, taking it to RKO after MGM relinquished its rights.

Burroughs also became involved in a further competing film serial, the stunningly inept *New Adventures Of Tarzan*, in 1935, starring Olympic shot-putter Herman Brix. "Burroughs underwrote it financially, and it was really an honest attempt to show his more articulate Tarzan," explains Griffin, "but like a lot of business start-ups they were underfunded. There were tropical storms and injuries >

• **Above:** Herman Brix (left) takes on the ape-lord role in competing — and ill-fated — Tarzan series *New Adventures Of Tarzan*, 1935. Edgar Rice Burroughs part-funded this attempt at filming the character.



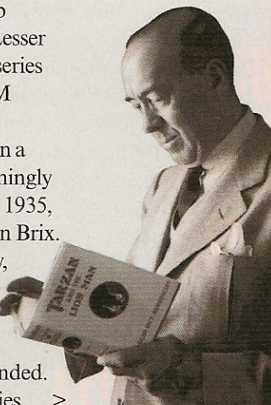
BEAST DEFENCE

THE REALITY OF ANIMAL LIFE ON THE CLASSIC TARZAN FILMS

There's a story (hopefully apocryphal) that Elmo Lincoln (the Tarzan of the silent era) once killed a lion for real on screen, which was then displayed at the film's premiere. True or not, horrors on that scale were avoided even by the Weissmuller era.

During the 1930s and '40s, 'Jungleland' in Thousand Oaks, California, provided Tarzan films with their animals. "It was a very reputable place," says Jim Clubb, of modern movie beast-tamers *Amazing Animals*. "Animals actually fighting wouldn't have happened often, as they were far too valuable."

Stock footage and splitscreen techniques created much of the animal magic, but there were still times on set when more genuine thrills were necessary. "When you see Tarzan wrestling a lion, it's a trainer in a Johnny Weissmuller wig," says expert Scott Tracy Griffin, "but of course, they could have died at any moment! A lot of them lost fingers and limbs..."





WELCOME (BACK) TO THE JUNGLE

WHAT WEISSMULLER DID NEXT

Johnny Weissmuller played only two roles during his 26-year film career (well, three, but we'll come to that). When, after 12 Tarzan films, it was suggested he might have become too portly for the loincloth, he traded it for the safari suit of Jungle Jim, making 16 films and a TV series between 1948 and 1956.

Jim Bradley was a hunter rather than jungle warrior who started life as a newspaper comic-strip hero. Based in Asia originally, the Weissmuller films transplanted him to Africa — played by the Los Angeles County Arboretum.

The first film's villain was played by George Reeves — TV's Superman — while Jim later took on witch doctors, giant spiders, giant people, gangsters and even Nazis disguised as apes. Thirteen films into the series, with Weissmuller still contracted for three more, Columbia lost the rights to the Jungle Jim name. The fix? Weissmuller played "himself". Nobody noticed the difference.

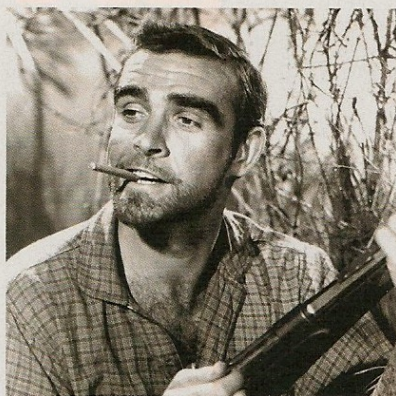
and disease... They didn't know what they were getting into, and it fell short of the mark." Burroughs would work out his exasperation with Hollywood in his novel *Tarzan And The Lion Man* (1935), a weirdly meta affair in which a film crew gets mixed up with a mad scientist in Africa, and Tarzan auditions for a role as himself and is told he isn't suitable. Burroughs stayed away from the films thereafter, but continued to write Tarzan novels (24 in total) until his death in 1950.

Weissmuller finally hung up his loincloth after *Tarzan And The Mermaids* in 1948 (which has no actual mermaids but does include a fight with a giant octopus). By this time the films looked tired, but they plodded on under Sol Lesser at RKO, with Lex Barker until 1953, then Gordon Scott until 1960.

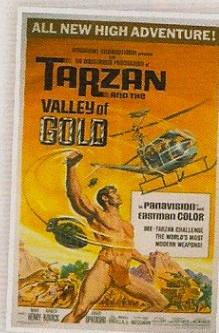
Scott's tenure, while not hitting the heights of the Weissmuller era, saw the biggest shake-up in the franchise for some time. The final film of Sol Lesser's series was *Tarzan's Fight For Life* (1958), Scott's third film as the ape-man and only the second of the series to be shot and released in colour. When Lesser retired, the Tarzan film rights were picked up by producer Sy Weintraub, and while he kept Scott, he immediately began making changes. His Tarzan films would eschew studio sets and be filmed on location (although there would still be some clunky use of stock footage). His Tarzan would generally be a loner, with little sign of Jane. And crucially, the new Tarzan would be educated: somewhere between *Fight For Life* and *Tarzan's Greatest Adventure* (1959), Tarzan becomes fluent in English and stops referring to himself in the third person.

"Weintraub made a more adult, gritty Tarzan," says Griffin. "His initial films were very much jungle Westerns, where you have Tarzan as the lone hero up against a gang of villains and he has to pick them off one-by-one and restore order. You'll find a lot of fans today who hold the last two Gordon Scott films (*Greatest Adventure* and 1960's *Tarzan The Magnificent*) as their favourites, because they took the character seriously." The Western analogy is apt, given the films started to use Western actors like Woody Strode and Al Mulock. Post-Tarzan, Scott would himself make a couple of Spaghetthis.

Greatest Adventure is also



• Above: Sean Connery as villainous henchman O'Bannion in 1959's *Tarzan's Great Adventure*. The unknown Scot was being groomed to take over as Tarzan, until 007 came calling. Below: Gordon Scott's take on Tarzan in 1957's *Tarzan And The Lost Safari*.

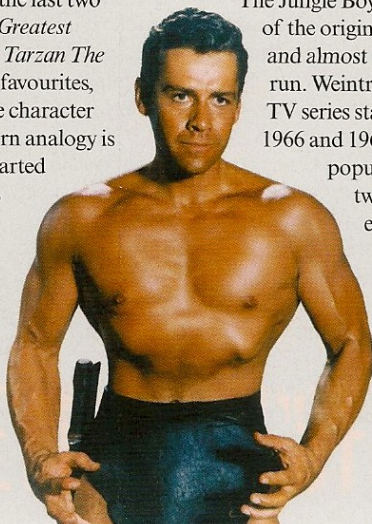


notable for then-unknown Sean Connery as henchman O'Bannion. Connery was actually being groomed to replace Scott in future movies. "It was almost a done deal," reveals Sullos, "but in between the films he tried out for this little spy thriller..." Tarzan lost Connery to Bond, but the films would develop an interesting relationship with the world-conquering franchise as the '60s progressed.

"In *Tarzan And The Valley Of Gold* (1966) we have a very James Bond Tarzan," chuckles Griffin. "He arrives in a helicopter with Brylcreemed hair and a tropical suit. You have the megalomaniac villain and his weird henchman, with a base in the Andes surrounded by fog and invisible to satellite." *Valley Of Gold* may not go so far as to engage with the Cold War, even in a goofy Bond sense, but Tarzan did for a while become a globetrotting scourge of supervillains. "The grosses were good, and it was inexpensive to shoot overseas," offers Griffin. "It all played into the international appeal."

The Mike Henry-starring *Tarzan And The Jungle Boy* (1968) marks the end of the original Tarzan series' colossal and almost uninterrupted 36-year run. Weintraub produced an NBC TV series starring Ron Ely between 1966 and 1968, but while it was

popular, it was over after two seasons due to its expense. Weintraub and Tarzan parted company at this point, and there followed more than a decade of development hell as the property passed to Warner Bros.



Robert Towne began work on the screenplay that would become 1984's *Greystoke: The Legend Of Tarzan, Lord Of The Apes* in the early '70s. Intending to faithfully adapt but also correct Burroughs' 1912 novel, he replaced geographically suspect lions with indigenous leopards, and gorillas with mandrill baboons. He meant to make the film himself, but the failure of his directorial debut, *Personal Best*, put paid to that, and his screenplay remained incomplete until Hugh Hudson took over.

"Towne's screenplay finished at the trading post (*where Tarzan is taken by D'Arnot en route back to England*)," Hudson tells *Empire*, "but it was indicated where it might go with a scene breakdown. I had to write the civilisation part, shorten the jungle part and structure a film of two hours. Towne's a wonderful writer, but he gave his dog his credit. That's the only time a dog has been nominated for an Oscar!"

Greystoke's development had been further complicated in 1981 by the Bo Derek-starring *Tarzan The Ape Man*. MGM retained remake rights to the Elephants' Graveyard storyline, so it could make a Tarzan film any time it liked, as long as it was always that one. Given a three-picture, anything-she-wanted deal following the success of Dudley Moore sex-comedy 10, Derek chose this, much to the displeasure of the Burroughs estate. Maureen O'Sullivan's Jane was a significant presence in the early Weissmuller films — she even gets her own jungle call, kind of like an opera singer being strangled — and was not, as we've noted, averse to showing some thigh. So a Jane-focused film needn't necessarily have been a disaster. The first half-hour, replete with scenes of Richard Harris (as her dad, James) being shouty in the jungle, is good fun. It's only when Tarzan shows up that things start to slide. Miles O'Keefe, a stunt-double promoted to lead after Lee Canalito was let go, is a physically impressive ape-man, but his fascination with Bo's boobs can't help but prompt comparisons with *Carry On Up The Jungle*, released 11 years earlier. "We don't put that one on our list of the great Tarzan movies..." chuckles Sullos.

Hudson, then, had the task of rescuing Tarzan. It might not have been the obvious follow-up to *Chariots Of Fire*, but, says the director, "My films seem to quite often be about people who are from an establishment and who don't want to have anything to do with it. I wanted to construct a film about this aristocrat of the jungle having to come to terms with what civilisation is all about, and discovering it's also a jungle in its own manner. I liked that premise."

Christopher Lambert, whose French accent is unarguably correct for playing the literary Tarzan, was perversely cast for being recalcitrant at the auditions. "We had a big casting session with about 30 people

in a Paris dance studio," says Hudson, "and Christopher wouldn't do it! He just sat in a corner and brooded. And that got my attention. Then we tried some close shots and I saw this funny look he had, looking into the distance, and he was very appealing. Then we found out he was myopic!"

The film confused the Tarzan faithful by becoming an Edwardian drama of love, loss and table manners, but its success did lead to a sequel being mooted. Hudson wasn't interested, but producer Stanley S. Canter eventually got one into production more than a decade later. To the casual observer, *Tarzan And The Lost City* (1998, with Casper Van Dien) bears no relation to Hudson's film, but its set-up, outlined in the opening crawl, is absolutely Greystoke, and Visual Effects Supervisor Julian Parry recalls being hired by Canter to work on "Greystoke 2".

The film was directed by Carl Schenkel, but remains little-seen. "We shot it in South Africa," Parry tells *EMPIRE*, "but it just never felt big enough. In our minds we had thick vegetation, but most of our locations seemed very barren: real savannah. The pyramid at the end was supposed to be a whole, grand city; there should have been more animals... I remember asking an



• Here: Christopher Lambert as a more faithful take on Burroughs' literary character in Hugh Hudson's *Greystoke* (1984). Right: Disney's somewhat less faithful — but very popular — 2D version, voiced by Tony Goldwyn in 1999.

“ROBERT TOWNE GAVE HIS DOG HIS GREYSTOKE CREDIT. THAT’S THE ONLY TIME A DOG HAS BEEN NOMINATED FOR AN OSCAR!” HUGH HUDSON

executive how the opening had gone, and he said, "Yeah, best not put that one on your CV." Hudson, meanwhile, didn't know it existed until *EMPIRE* told him.

Our final sight of a live-action Tarzan, then, was Van Dien swinging out of his tree house with his Jane (Jane March) on his back... Back in Munich, director Reinhard Klooss and Constantin's Martin Moszkowicz remain confident that the Ape Man can be made relevant again.

"The trick is to put a twist on it that makes it relatable to modern and young audiences," says Moszkowicz. "This is not the traditional Burroughs Tarzan."

"Tarzan's the world's first eco-warrior," says Andy Briggs, whose books have also taken a modernising tack. "He's the icon of preservation — just underneath the panda, I suppose! — but the thing is, he's not a flag-waving liberal. He's a pure force of nature. I made Jane more kick-ass and my first villains were illegal loggers. I love the fact that Tarzan's this huge conservationist, but he'd also kill an endangered lion as soon as look at it, if it attacked him. I wanted to make Tarzan darker than before: bipolar and

• Below: Miles O'Keefe gets his yodel on as Bo Derek shows off her assets in 1981's *Tarzan The Ape Man*.



aggressive, so he can laugh one minute and tear raw flesh out with his teeth the next."

Sullos, meanwhile, puts Tarzan's decline down to a change in what we regard as heroic. "In the 1930s and '40s, the hero was always a good guy," he says. "Now movie stars don't have to shave because they're bad and mean! Good guys like Tarzan and Roy Rogers are not held in the same esteem."

If clean-cut heroes have fallen by the wayside, so too, thankfully, have the political incorrectness and inherent racism of the novels and early films. Period films with modern sensibilities run the risk of seeming anachronistic, though, so Hudson too believes that updating Tarzan is the only way to bring him back. "You couldn't spend the equivalent of what we spent on Greystoke on an Edwardian drama now," he muses. "But I don't think he's outmoded. The first letter I got after doing Greystoke was from Greenpeace, thanking us for the advertisement! You'd have to set up a modern Tarzan to defend his territory against a contemporary threat. You would use a political situation in Africa, for example, like the oil exploitation in Nigeria, or the Chinese infiltration into the Congo..."

However, Warner Bros., which still owns the live-action rights, seems to be favouring keeping Tarzan in his original setting. With the Burroughs estate denying it any further extensions, the studio has commissioned screenplays from both Adam Cozad (Jack Ryan) and Craig Brewer (*Hustle & Flow*).

"Warners have been combining those scripts into one film," reveals Sullos, "and I think they're comfortable with it now." Directors have been attached at various points during development (Harry Potter's David Yates was one rumour) but have then moved on, leaving the position vacant as we write. "One of the scripts was set in the '30s, and the other one was going to go back to between 1905 and 1912," says Sullos. "The last I heard, they had decided on the 1930s..."

"It's not possible for their film to reach the screen before ours," says Moszkowicz happily. "We're already in production, in time for the centenary year. But still, you see, there's a fascination among filmmakers and producers with this subject-matter." owen@empiremagazine.com

TARZAN IS OUT IN SUMMER 2013. TARZAN: THE JUNGLE WARRIOR BY ANDY BRIGGS IS OUT NOW. TARZAN: THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION BY SCOTT TRACY GRIFFIN IS OUT ON OCTOBER 26.