EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS WITH THE 2019 FRONT-RUNNERS
OLIVIA COLMAN • ADAM MCKAY • BARRY JENKINS • REGINA KING • ETHAN HAWKE

EXCLUSIVE
DETAILS ON HIS NEXT HORROR
GAME OF THRONES
WHAT WE CAN EXPECT FROM
THE EXPLOSIVE FINAL SEASON

ON SET WITH THE MCU’S TRAILBLAZING NEW HERO

EDGAR WRIGHT
JON HAMM, CHRIS EVANS & MORE
SALUTE THE HOT FUZZ DIRECTOR

GAME OF THRONES
WHAT WE CAN EXPECT FROM
THE EXPLOSIVE FINAL SEASON

JORDAN PEELE
REVEALS EXCLUSIVE
DETAILS ON HIS NEXT HORROR

EXCLUSIVE

CAPTAIN MARVEL

MARCH
2019
MASSIVE OSCARS SPECIAL
COMES AN ADVENTURE FOR KIDS WHO RULE

IN CINEMAS FEBRUARY 15
IT’S KINDA REMARKABLE that we’re still talking about firsts in 2019, but here we are. And this, right here, is a biggie. The one of great significance, potentially of even greater significance than we know right now. If 2018 was the year of Black Panther, 2019 is the year of Captain Marvel. We all know that it’s Marvel’s first female-led superhero film, but when I went on set in LA last year, it became quickly, abundantly clear that this was only part, the start of the story.

Made in the year that the percentage of female filmmakers on the highest-grossing films actually dropped, Marvel and its star, Brie Larson, took action. From hiring a female director, Anna Boden, to signing female writers and department heads, its commitment to representation was clear. Its push for parity, that went beyond simple desire and professed intention.

It’s a step, a big step, but still just a step. The journey continues. Other stories still need to be told. But we’re on our way. And hopefully one day, not far from now, this won’t be radical, a revolution. It will just be. And won’t that be grand.

TERRI WHITE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
@terri_white

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This month’s subscriber-only limited edition cover, by Doaly

ILLUSTRATOR DOALY BRINGS EMPIRE’S EXCLUSIVE CAPTAIN MARVEL SUBSCRIBER COVER TO LIFE.
CARNAGE ON THE DANCE FLOOR

CLIMAX

A FILM BY GASPAR NOÉ

ON DIGITAL HD FEBRUARY 4
ON BLU-RAY & DVD FEBRUARY 11
CAPTAIN MARVEL
The inside story of a superhero who shares a name with her own studio. Coming in 2020: General Paramount, Lieutenant Lionsgate and Major Fox.

EDGAR WRIGHT ORAL HISTORY
As part of our #Empire30 celebrations, we examine the dental records of the director of Baby Driver. We'd get that one at the back checked out if we were you, Edgar.

THE PEOPLE VS. EDGAR WRIGHT
Edgar Wright tackles your questions. “Ask me the tough ones!” he asked. So we gave him some algebra.

EDGAR WRIGHT’S GREATEST SHOTS
As voted for by you. Did your favourite not make the list? Then it came in at number 11. Sorry about that.

OSCARS SPECIAL
We speak to the people we think will be bothering Oscar, but not in a creepy way, come the end of February. Featuring Sophie from Peep Show, Withnail and that bloke who stands on desks in Dead Poets Society.

THE EMPIRE INTERVIEW
Like, if Kenneth Branagh loves William Shakespeare so much, why doesn’t he just marry him?

US
The trailer for Jordan Peele’s Us dropped on Christmas Day and was the second scariest thing we saw that day. The first? The Mrs. Brown’s Boys special.

DUMBO
Tim Burton takes on the Disney classic. Let’s talk about the elephant in the room: the elephant in the room.

HOW MUCH IS A PINT OF MILK?
Rebecca Ferguson. Whatever you do, don’t call her Becky.

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK
It would say, “We’re now a major motion picture! Five stars, says Empire!”

VICE
Adam McKay’s biopic/takedown of Dick Cheney. And he seemed ever so nice.

GLASS
“Who gives a shit about Glass?” Us!

BREXIT: THE UNCIVIL WAR
Good luck trying to advertise this one on the side of a bus.

THE VIEWING GUIDE

CRAZY RICH ASIANS
A crazy long chat with Jon M. Chu.

THE RANKING
John Williams scores... and Liverpool lead in stoppage time!

THE NUN
Corin Hardy is behind you.

Clockwise from top: Captain Marvel; If Beale Street Could Talk; The Kid Who Would Be King; Dumbo; Edgar Wright on the set of Hot Fuzz.
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ALIEN VS. CONSIDERABLY FRIENDLIER ALIEN
Not only is John Carpenter’s The Thing his best film, it’s my … the Editorial Complaints Policy is complaints@bauermedia.co.uk

“James, you’re a basic bitch, psychologically speaking”

THE GREATEST MF’ER
After careful consideration, I have come to the conclusion that no actor in the history of cinema can say the word “motherfucker!” as succinctly as Samuel L. Jackson. He is the King of Motherfuckers!
All hail the King!

ALEX CLINCH, VIA EMAIL
Careful consideration is truly the only way to go about bestowing such a prestigious movie mantle. Thank you for this valuable service.

WORSPLOSIONS
A hit late to the party, but next time you guys want to suggest a Travis Knight equivalent for ‘Bayhem’, feel free to go for ‘A-Knight-ilation’! Happy to help!

SAL TARQ, VIA EMAIL
We’ll keep this in mind when Knight goes explosion-happy — the only thing that got A-Knight-ilated in the lovely breadcrumbs was Charlie Smith’s cassette.

ON THE FAVOURITE’S BAFTA NOMINATIONS: JUST SAW IT LAST NIGHT AND IT’S TOTALLY DESERVING OF EACH AND EVERY NOMINATION. COULDN’T FAULT THE MOVIE AT ALL.
GERALD DORRITY

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Pedro Pascal, Garrett Hedlund, Charlie Hunnam and Ben Affleck team up to rob a Colombian drug lord. Left to right: J.C. Chandor (second right) rallies the troops on location; He’s a firestarter, twisted firestarter; Did no-one think to bring a sat nav?
J.C. CHANDOR IS a director who knows how to turn his hand to genre movies and come up with something unexpected. In his new action-drama *Triple Frontier*, a group of hardened American combat veterans — played by a starry ensemble that includes Pedro Pascal, Ben Affleck, Charlie Hunnam and Garrett Hedlund — join forces to plan an audacious heist of a Colombian cartel kingpin, set in the notorious border zone between Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil.

“We have a professional warrior class doing all the fighting in the US,” says Chandor, who co-wrote the script with Mark Boal (co-writer of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *The Hurt Locker*). Chandor shares with Boal an interest in the role of American military veterans today. “When you see the movie, it’s not like it’s on the surface, but there’s an analysis of what the last 20 years of warfare, as Americans, have sort of done to a certain class of guys. This movie allows the audience to see where these characters are 15 or 20 years on, without it necessarily having to be in the desert.” Coming from a military family himself, Chandor was keen not to distort the depiction. “My dad and my grandfather were combat veterans. I’m not, so I want to make sure I represent it correctly.”

The film required a physically gruelling shoot, on location in South America and Hawaii. But Chandor loved the challenge. “As a visualist, I love movies that put characters in places where I’m too scared, tired, lazy or wimpy to go,” he says. “I love the old-fashioned adventure of it.”

But the adventure hints at something deeper than standard action fare. “In my mind, the film was a play on some of those action movies with a kind of moral or ethical dilemma at their core,” explains Chandor, “as well as an idea of masculinity, and what makes you valuable to yourself, your family and society.” If it’s anything like the similarly existential concerns of Chandor’s *All Is Lost* or *A Most Violent Year*, then we’re in for another insightful, absorbing treat. CHRISTINA NEWLAND

**Blowing up expectations**

With *Triple Frontier*, can director J.C. Chandor do for the action-drama genre what he did for disaster movies and crime thrillers?

**TRIPLE FRONTIER IS ON NETFLIX FROM 15 MARCH**
After the game-changing horror of Get Out, Jordan Peele reveals where he’s taking the genre next in Us

US, JORDAN PEELE’S second movie after Get Out, looks perhaps even more disturbing than his first. It sees a family of four, headed by Lupita Nyong’o and Winston Duke, being harassed by four intruders. Those intruders turn out to be hellish doubles of each member of the family. They are effectively being hunted by themselves. Peele tells us how he created his terrifying new treat.

THE IDEA THAT SPARKED IT ALL

The idea for Us came to Peele when he began “to follow the thread of ‘we are our own worst enemy’.” Who he exactly means by “we” — everyone? Americans? African Americans? — he doesn’t want to specify. “The movie itself is answering that question. I can’t say it’s not specifically about race. I don’t want to go too deep into its meaning because it’s there for everybody to discover on their own.”

HORROR AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY

While Get Out had horror elements, Us is what Peele calls “a horror film without any caveats”. He says he’s gravitated towards the horror genre for his first two movies as it allows him to tackle tough subjects in an entertaining way. “Horror films are important,” he says. “They’re ways that we as a society face our fears. Personally, they serve as a way for me to acknowledge the dark thoughts floating inside of me.”

THE INFLUENCE OF SPIELBERG

You may have seen the youngest member of the Us cast, Evan Alex, wearing a Jaws T-shirt in the trailer. That was a nod to Steven Spielberg, a surprising influence on Us. “Films like Jaws, E.T. and Close Encounters take normal American families and put them in extraordinary situations. That warmth and connection that the viewer has [to the family] is something I wanted for this film,” he says.

GOING BEYOND RACE

Get Out was a very modern commentary on race relations in America. Peele says Us is making a comment on how the movie industry views race by not being overtly about race. “There hasn’t been a horror film about a black family, that I can remember. I think that’s an important thing to note. We have a lot of films in this genre where a family meets a monster, but the fact we’ve never seen a black family in that situation is a problem to me. There’s a presumption in the industry that if black people are the leads in a film it has to be in some way about race. I wanted to show that we can push past that.” OLLY RICHARDS
Silvio Berlusconi party movie Loro gives The Wolf Of Wall Street a run for its money

THROWING A POLITICAL PARTY

Silvio Berlusconi party hair. The blinding tan. And most of all, the infamous ‘Bunga Bunga’ sex parties, in which truckloads of young women attended epic romps at luxury villas.

Nod doubt about it, Silvio Berlusconi, four-time Italian Prime Minister, is one of the most divisive figures in modern politics. So when Paolo Sorrentino decided to make a film about his antics, he had lunch with the man himself, to get an up-close look. “Berlusconi wears a grotesque mask; that’s what he created for himself. So we tried to find the human dimension,” the director tells Empire. “What he said was basically a carbon copy of the usual things he says on TV. But it was useful in the sense that you discover details of his character.”

The first challenge was in transforming star Toni Servillo into the Italian Trump, tussling on thick make-up, whitening his teeth and recreating that bizarre hairdo. “You have to do it this way,” shrugs Servillo. “It’s like playing Churchill without his Scotch or his cigar, or playing Gandhi not barefoot. You can’t avoid having that black dome stuck to his skull and his 32-carat smile.” Then the task was to recreate something even more lurid: the sex. The results are outrageous tableaux that manage to outdo The Wolf Of Wall Street, scored to pounding club music and featuring so much female nudity that Italian Rolling Stone compared Loro to a porn movie. “That’s a very low type of controversy,” says Sorrentino of the latter. He feels that the film’s wanton excess is just enough, a reflection of Berlusconi’s raging id. While the real Berlusconi offered the crew use of his own villas for sets (it was declined), this is no fawning biopic. “I don’t think you are creating a positive advertisement when you are putting on screen a scene where a 20-year-old girl is with a 70-year-old man trying to seduce her, and she tells him, ‘You have breath that reminds me of my grandfather,’” says Sorrentino. Still, there’s one thing he admires about his subject. “His vitality. His perseverance. The person who gets tired last wins. And Berlusconi never gets tired.”

NICK DE SEMLYEN

LORO IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 APRIL
DURING THE SHOOT of Tim Burton’s *Dumbo*, Colin Farrell (who plays the nominal human lead Holt Farrier) caught himself watching his director enraptured by what was playing out in front of him.

“When Tim comes in to give his notes, he is a 60-year-old. [But] watching the monitor, he is just a child. It was lovely to see that level of engagement,” laughs the actor. “I swear to God, if we can get a reaction off a seven-year-old that is anywhere in the neighbourhood of what Tim’s reaction was in front of the monitor, we’ll be doing well.”

Yet, for all the innocence that Burton is bringing to his updating of Disney’s 1941 baby-elephant-with-big-ears-flies classic, Farrell confirms that, “Tim is suspicious of things getting too sweet.” The story sees Dumbo born into the small-scale circus run by Danny DeVito’s ringmaster Max Medici, yet is gobbled by

**THE IDRIS REMIX**

New TV comedy drama *Turn Up Charlie* sees Idris Elba mine his DJ side career

IDRIS ELBA LOVES music. The young Idris would watch his uncle spin records and dream of being a superstar DJ; the grown-up version would foster a respectable sideline as a DJ and producer, sometimes under the moniker ‘Big Driis’. After years of inhabiting dark, challenging characters on screen (Stringer Bell, Detective John Luther, Nelson Mandela), the actor was looking for something a little closer to home.

“It just felt like I owed it to myself to have a job which encompasses what I love in my spare time and what I do as an actor full time,” says Elba, talking to *Empire* in Ibiza, the day after filming wraps on *Turn Up Charlie*, a new comedy drama about Elba’s greatest passion.

Elba plays Charlie, a frustrated DJ who never escaped the shadow of his mid-’90s one-hit-wonderdom. After years in the wilderness, Charlie is given a second chance, ultimately making the pilgrimage to Ibiza — and while filming the series, the real Elba has been DJing at an Ibiza superclub. Art imitates life and back again, then.

“This character is a little closer to me as a person,” agrees Elba. “A lot of my characters are complex and dark. But [Charlie] is a little more light-hearted.” This is about as personal as it gets for the actor. Though Elba is not a credited writer, he spent two days with a writing team preparing the treatment, and much of the music used in the show is Elba’s own work. “It comes from deep inside him — his bone marrow,” says producer and co-creator Gary Reich.

Inevitably, when fiction and reality collide so intimately, there can be anxiety from some quarters. “My management team on the music side are a little nervous, if I’m really honest!” he chuckles. “They were like, ‘If you’re going to do it, do it for real.’” If Elba is exhausted from his simultaneous triple-threat of acting, DJing and music-producing, he’s not showing it. Though they bear similarities, his character isn’t even close to Elba-levels of ambition. “Tomorrow I play [legendary Ibiza superclub] Pacha,” he notes, with a smile. “Charlie’s not there yet.”

**TURN UP CHARLIE IS ON NETFLIX FROM 15 MARCH**
big-bucks entrepreneur V.A. Vandevere (Michael Keaton, returning to the Burton fold for the first time since *Batman Returns*) for his theme park Dreamland.

For DeVito, the storyline gives the film a modern edge. “Our new story has a resonance with what’s going on in the world: how corporations take over things and manipulate and capitalise on everything to tamper with the spirit of it and make it their own.”

DeVito has also seen the director gain more emotional finesse. “I feel like he’s getting deeper into himself but there is still the child-like quality he’s always exhibited,” he says. Burton is also keeping the schmaltz at bay by mounting huge action sequences, including a thrilling set-piece that sees Farrell's Holt, a former circus rider who lost his left arm in World War I, barrelling a horse through a fire.

“I had to ride a horse around the flames and, smartly enough, horses don’t like being around flames in a confined space — that was a little bit hairy,” he admits. “In some of the aerial stuff I may have used the left and trust that my luminous glove will allow the CG artists to remove my arm. Some of it was tricky.”

DeVito's biggest challenge was not wearing costume designer Colleen Atwood's fancy suits to the pub every night. “I wanted to wear them home but Disney, being very protective of images in the movie, wouldn't let me.” Farrell concurs: “One day I saw a producer run across the set screaming, ’Danny’s gone home wearing the intellectual property again.’” Sometimes it is impossible to keep a lid on the magic.

IAN FREER

**TIM'S TRADEMARKS**

**TIM BURTON’S FAMILIAR CALLING CARDS ARE PRESENT AND CORRECT IN DUMBO**

**GOTHIC FANTASY**

While *Dumbo* might cake on the eyeliner less than some of its Burton stablemates, there’s still evidence of the filmmaker’s whimsy in the Art Deco-inspired Dreamland theme park and the bold, colourful costumes.

**REGULAR PLAYERS**

While Johnny Depp, Burton’s most frequent collaborator, is absent here, the Burton Family still draws Michael Keaton (four films, including this), Danny DeVito (four films) and new muse Eva Green (three films).

**QUINTESSENTIAL OUTCAST**

*Dumbo* himself is very Burton-esque: an outsider who doesn’t fit into the natural order of things. The director’s idiosyncratic tastes find a natural affinity with *Dumbo*'s Victorian circus and its cavalcade of friendly freaks.

**DANNY ELFMAN**

*Dumbo* marks the 16th score for Burton from Elfman, continuing a 34-year-long collaboration that began in 1985 with *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*. Only three of his 19 films don’t boast Elfman’s famous quirky, perky strings.
Ashton Sanders moves on from *Moonlight* in *Captive State* — an alien invasion movie with a twist

**IN *MOONLIGHT*, ASHTON**

Sanders struggled with issues of identity and intersectionality. In *Captive State* — his first lead role after that film’s Oscar-winning success — he’s struggling with an alien invasion. But even with extra-terrestrials in the mix, there’s still ground-level grapples with identity.

“I kept on saying to everybody, ‘I want to make a science-fiction film in the way that Ken Loach might make one,’” laughs director Rupert Wyatt, who co-wrote the script with Erica Beeney, his wife. With the insectoid oppressors lurking in the background of a frontline tussle between human resistance fighters and collaborators (played by Ashton Sanders and John Goodman, respectively), and a setting rooted firmly in the working-class neighbourhood of Pilsen in Chicago, *Captive State* was made, Wyatt says, on a “low budget for a film of this ambition”, and deliberately avoids a mainstream Hollywood approach.

Part of what makes it different is how smart these off-world invaders are. “They carried out a number of staged events prior to arrival, including a takedown of the grid’s power systems, allowing us to turn on ourselves,” Wyatt explains. “Then they made first contact when we were at a very weakened state, offering terms of armistice to the major governments. Which was basically unilateral, in the sense that, ‘If you choose to fight back, you will be wiped out.’ So they very quickly complied and were replaced with puppet governments, with the various armies demobilised and police forces remaining as a sort of upgraded, Vichy-like collaborationist force.”

Note Wyatt’s use of the past tense here. Unlike most alien-invasion movies, *Captive State* is set ten years after the aliens landed. And won. Not that the *Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes* director was trying to show other sci-fi filmmakers how it should be done. His starting point was simply a desire to tell the story of a resistance movement, similar to Jean-Pierre Melville’s World War II thriller *Army Of Shadows*.

“It’s one of my favourite films, and it got me thinking, ‘How could I approach this subject matter in a more heightened, genre-based way? And then subvert it in an interesting way?’” he says. “And that’s when I thought maybe I could do this in the near future with an occupation that is not human. It’s one of those little investigated aspects to alien-invasion stories: what comes after?” Ken Loach meets *District 9*? Beam us up.

DAN JOLIN

**CAPTIVE STATE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 MARCH**
SAVE FOR A documentary on The Stone Roses, director Shane Meadows has spent most of the last decade living in the This Is England universe, directing three acclaimed TV follow-ups to the 2006 film for Channel 4. Now the East Midlands filmmaker is back, with a brand-new story — and while the film and television industry has transformed in the last ten years, Meadows is still telling stories precisely the way he wants to.

"The way Shane works is fascinating," says Meadows’ long-term producer Mark Herbert. For The Virtues, a psychological drama that reunites him with This Is England’s Stephen Graham, Meadows started by exploring “Biblical elements”. Graham plays Joseph, a recovering alcoholic who has suppressed his childhood memories before going in search of his own past. “Shane was drawn to a number of real-life events, and then he gets in a room with a load of actors and he explores those events.”

Meadows’ now tried-and-tested process took in a near-18-month shoot, taking over a derelict primary school in Sheffield as a base, rehearsal space and edit suite. Meadows and his cast would rehearse and prep scenes there, go to shoot and edit — but then perhaps come back and rethink. Graham had other film commitments, but during the weeks he was away Meadows would cut scenes, reassess and again adjust his plans. “It was really creative,” says Herbert. “But to get this process you do away with other luxuries. It’s not fizzy water and cappuccinos; there’s a kettle and a toaster.”

That gonzo, thinking-on-the-move approach informed every aspect of filming. One particularly proud day saw Meadows decide, during a morning rehearsal, that planned flashback scenes should be shot on “broadcast-quality VHS cameras”, remembers Herbert. He found a local seller on eBay, drove there to buy one with cash and discovered it had no battery. “I went to B&Q and got one of those battery chargers they have for your car, because there’s no power at the location. And when the shots came back it looked absolutely right.”

Such flexible thinking, fine-tuned at each stage and re-shot while still shooting, might seem like wild innovation for many filmmakers — but The Virtues finds Shane Meadows back doing what he does best. HELEN O’HARA

THE VIRTUES IS COMING SOON TO CHANNEL 4
BACK IN 2009, Chiwetel Ejiofor was sent an early copy of *The Boy Who Harnessed The Wind* by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer. An unconventional memoir, it told the story of how the teenage Kamkwamba saved his famine-stricken Malawi village by building a makeshift windmill from scrap parts, despite his parents being too poor to send him to school. “I was just stunned by it,” says Ejiofor. “It was inspirational and touched on so many relevant issues to the wider world, condensed to a tale of this one boy’s ingenuity, skill, drive and passion for life. It triggered a lot of emotions.”

It ultimately became a passion project for the *12 Years A Slave* actor, writing and directing the film, as well as acting in a key role. But Ejiofor initially intended only to adapt the book. He had never directed a film before, and saw no part for himself in it. “I couldn’t at that time play [William’s father] because I was too young,” he laughs. “I didn’t realise it would take eight years to complete!”

A long period of scriptwriting, development and research followed, by which time Ejiofor could play Trywell Kamkwamba — and became invested enough to step behind the camera, too. “I felt like I was so inside the story,” he explains. “I thought of it in visual terms. I wrote drafts of the screenplay with the real Malawi locations in mind. It became clear I was making directorial decisions.”

It’s an ambitious first film as director: filming was entirely on location in Wimbe — William’s actual village — in a remote part of a developing country with basic facilities. Plus, much of the dialogue is spoken in Chichewa, not English. Ejiofor acknowledges it was a challenge. “It was a lot! But I think you’ve just got to dive in feet first.” He credits his collaborators — including Dick Pope, Mike Leigh’s cinematographer, and Tulé Peak, the production designer from *City Of God* — in giving him confidence to get through.

Ultimately, he felt he had to make it. “I had the feeling that if I don’t make this film, it won’t be made, or made quite the way that I want.” Ejiofor’s parents were from Nigeria, some distance from Malawi, but nonetheless, it felt deeply personal. “I hadn’t seen African village life depicted cinematically in a way that I recognised. When I was growing up [in London] and going back and forth to Nigeria, there was something very pure and beautiful about the community, and how family pulls together in a crisis. It’s a real central part of African existence.”

After nigh-on a decade, this labour of love is nearly ready.

JOHN NUGENT

*THE BOY WHO HARNESSED THE WIND IS ON NETFLIX FROM 1 MARCH*
A SONG OF FIRE
Daenerys and Jon Snow, after a protracted campaign and heavy losses, venture forth — she astride Drogon, Jon astride Rhaegal — to bathe the Night King’s army in a sea of dragonfire, before going on to rule the Seven Kingdoms as Targaryen king and queen. The Iron Bank abandons Cersei (paying your debts has consequences), leaving her in the lurch until Jaime (or rather Arya, wearing his face) makes an end of her, thus fulfilling the prophecy that Cersei’s ‘little brother’ would prove her undoing. The Hound carves up what’s left of The Mountain, Theon rescues Yara and retires to the Iron Islands, and Bran, despite knowing absolutely everything, proves no help whatsoever.

A SONG OF ICE
After discovering that Tyrion is, in fact, the child of Joanna Lannister and Aerys Targaryen and has a better claim to the Iron Throne than either of them, Daenerys and Jon perish at the hands of the White Walkers. The Night King, who is actually a future version of Brandon Stark, lays waste to the realms of men, killing mad Queen Cersei and her infant child (which turns out to have been Euron Greyjoy’s all along). Arya is slain and wargs into the body of Nymeria to live out the apocalypse on four legs, while Sansa is left to wander the shattered North with Tyrion and a handful of survivors, like a snowy spin-off of The Walking Dead.

A SONG OF PIES
None of the major characters survive the Night King’s assault, leaving the supporting cast to take centre stage. Brienne and Tormund settle down in the Frostfangs to raise giant, flame-haired babies. Varys turns out to be a merman (seriously, look it up) and swims back to Essos, while Hot Pie makes a triumphant return, opening a Greggs knock-off in Flea Bottom called ‘Hot Pie’s’. It all ends with Samwell Tarly closing his epic tome, ‘A Song Of Ice And Fire’, which he’s been reading as a small boy’s bedtime story for the past eight years.

GAME OF THRONES SEASON 8 IS ON SKY ATLANTIC AND NOW TV IN APRIL
AH, THE GOLDEN Globes. In the film calendar’s annual awards season, it’s always been the slightly embarrassing, frequently drunk uncle — the one who married into the family and occasionally says things that make everyone else feel uncomfortable. The one who, frankly, we should all stop paying attention to.

This year’s ‘vintage’ was another fine example of Golden Globes contrarianism — never more so than in this year’s Best Drama winner, Bohemian Rhapsody. Currently at 62 per cent on Rotten Tomatoes, it is the worst-reviewed Golden Globe Best Drama winner in over 30 years.

Having likely passed a billion at the box office by the time you read this, Bohemian Rhapsody’s awards success feels like an attempt to pander to a broad audience — something the Globes has always tried to do. Fine. But if they were looking for a populist, billion-dollar winner, there’s a Black Panther-shaped hole in their winners’ list. Bo-Rap, on the other hand, is a tone-deaf choice for an awards show only 12 months ago singing its woke credentials with a #TimesUp-themed ceremony. Many in the LGBTQ community felt the Queen biopic had erased the warts-and-all details of Freddie Mercury’s life in place of a sanitised, by-the-numbers portrait, while the spectre of credited director Bryan Singer — accused of numerous sexual abuses (which he has repeatedly denied), and fired from production during filming, yet never once mentioned in the awards ceremony — loomed like the elephant in a star-studded room.

Bohemian Rhapsody’s triumph is the latest in a long tradition of winners defying the critical consensus and bookies’ odds. The small, eccentric pool of voters from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA), the secretive private consortium of journalists who select the winners, means it is actually not much of a useful attempt to be a rough guide for the Oscars, still the most important film awards. A study by FiveThirtyEight suggested the Globes Best Drama winner predicts the Best Picture Oscar winner 48 per cent of the time, compared to 80 per cent for the DGA awards.

At least the Academy and the British Academy attempt to be a rough cross-section of industry representatives. Both are voted by a group of several thousand actors, filmmakers, producers and crew members. And in recent years the Oscars has made genuine concerted efforts to diversify its voting base after the #OscarsSoWhite fiasco. When you win an Oscar, you have been chosen by your peers in the business. When you win a Golden Globe, you have been chosen by tiny bloc of celebrity-hungry oddballs whose journalistic credentials are not exactly stellar. HFPA’s rules only require its members to publish four articles whose journalistic credentials are not exactly stellar. HFPA’s rules only require its members to publish four articles a year. The notoriously secretive membership includes a man who once guest-starred on Star Trek Voyager and a former Russian bodybuilder who only joined because, says the Hollywood Reporter, he was “just plain curious”.

Look, given how predictable awards season can be, it’s fine to have a fun ‘wild card’ show that goes for the unexpected choices. Nobody is asking the drunken uncle to stop drinking. But we all need to stop pretending it actually means anything. The prestige it craves. Maybe, like a magpie, Hollywood has simply been attracted by shiny things.

Perhaps if we started calling them the Rusty Globes, everyone would stop paying attention.
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How Matthew McConaughey learned to be an old-school screen idol again in Serenity

MATTHEW McCONAUGHEY HAS spent the past few years railing against the beautiful genes nature gave him. Whether it’s being fat and bald in Gold, gaunt and gothy in The Dark Tower or greasy and hairy in White Boy Rick, since 2015 McConaughey has looked like anything but one of the biggest movie stars on the planet. In Serenity, the tricksy new film noir from director Steven Knight (Locke, Peaky Blinders), McConaughey is leaving the grotesques behind and enjoying being a screen idol again.

He plays Baker Dill, an enigmatic fisherman who gets caught up in a murder plot when ex-wife Karen (Anne Hathaway) begs him to help her and their son get free of her abusive husband. That’s just the bare bones. We’ll leave you to discover the crazy places this movie goes. Tanned, windswept and often shirtless, Baker is what McConaughey calls “a handsome man” role, a skewed version of the action men he played earlier in his career.

“I thought, ‘Hey, McConaughey, you kinda look how you used to look! You’ve got a tan! You’ve got a nice three-day growth on your face! Your T-shirt fits ya!’” The film needs someone like McConaughey at his shiny best because it’s a story of film noir archetypes, from the “Humphrey Bogart, straightforward guy, with no ‘etcetera’ about him” that is Baker Dill, to Hathaway’s sultry femme fatale and Jason Clarke’s sneering villain. As it goes on it plays with our expectations of those roles and turns them inside out. In many ways it’s as much a character-actor role as anything McConaughey has done in his serious period. If it didn’t require piling on weight or getting skeletal thin, it still turned out to be a physical test for McConaughey.

“I’ve been doing enough physical transformations that it was actually a transformation to get back to my ‘fighting weight,’” he laughs. “It’s been a decade since I’ve been in decent shape!” He grabs at (a tiny amount of) flesh just above his waistband. “I’ve still got a couple of things back here that I thought were just renting, but it seems like they’ve moved in.”

Having demonstrated his skill as a dramatic actor, this taste of the lighter side has given McConaughey a yen to do some straightforward fun stuff again. “I’ve found myself leaning into comedy recently,” he says. He’s got The Beach Bum, in which he plays a stoner vagrant for Harmony Korine, on the horizon, and as you read this he’ll be wrapping a role in Guy Ritchie’s Toff Guys. “My funny bone is getting tickled again.” McConaughey the Oscar-winning dramatic actor is great, but we’re ready for the return of fun Matthew.

OLLY RICHARDS

SERENITY IS IN CINEMAS AND ON SKY CINEMA FROM 1 MARCH
Pretty much all of Aquaman made us go, “Wait... what happened?” The octopus drummer. The mythical sea creature voiced by Julie Andrews. The sharks with frickin’ laser beams. And then there’s the soundtrack.

Halfway through the film, during the scene where Aquaman and Mera make their way to the Sahara desert, an interesting version of Toto’s hit song ‘Africa’ plays, as reimagined by Pitbull, in perhaps the film’s biggest tonal whiplash.

Pitbull, for his part, said in a statement: “The ocean has always been the border from where my parents came from Cuba and the United States, which gives us freedom. That’s why I respect water.” Bless the rains!

Why a former YouTube hero made a film about a YouTube zero

IN 2006, BO Burnham posted his first video to YouTube. He was 16 years old. His subsequent career in comedy — encompassing Netflix specials, hit albums and a bestselling book — can all be traced back to the internet. Now Burnham (still, maddeningly, only 28 years old) has directed his first feature film, about a very different kind of YouTuber: the kind that nobody watches.

“Three hundred hours of video are uploaded [to YouTube] every minute,” explains Burnham. “The vast majority express themselves to nobody. I get so annoyed when I see people talk about the internet like it’s all cat videos and influencers. Most of the internet is unfiltered people expressing themselves... I wanted to give voice to that — the internet I was a part of.”

This was the impulse that became Eighth Grade, a painfully authentic portrait of life as a 13-year-old girl in the 21st century. It tells the story of Kayla (played by Elsie Fisher, who graduated from her real eighth grade two weeks before filming began), a friendless loner who struggles with anxiety — a feeling potentially amplified by the demands of social media. Like Burnham did as a teen, Kayla uploads regular videos to YouTube, though hers are raw, vulnerable attempts at motivational self-help, watched by virtually nobody.

He isn’t looking to judge, though. “My hope wasn’t to lecture — rather than just describe the depth to which it reaches,” he says. “[Social media] isn’t just some sort of decorative thing, and we shouldn’t just be banning it. It’s deeper than that. It’s actually interfacing with a kid’s own sense of self, at a core, fundamental, soul level.”

His own relationship with the internet is a love-hate one. He owes his career to it, of course, and admits to still diving deep into YouTube’s murky depths. It’s an ambiguity he wrestles with in the film. “I want to be on [the internet] less,” he says. “I definitely think it’s bad for me. But also, I love it. I’m watching videos all the time.”

John Nugent

EIGHTH GRADE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 26 APRIL
The deadly art of satire

Jake Gyllenhaal reunites with his Nightcrawler team for another dark LA parable

FOR HIS ROLE in Nightcrawler, Jake Gyllenhaal was inspired by the coyotes that roam Los Angeles. For Velvet Buzzsaw, a new satirical horror which reunites him with Nightcrawler writer-director Dan Gilroy, he’s among the city’s snakes. Here, Gyllenhaal plays Morf Vandewalt, an art critic who encounters a painting by a mysterious, recently deceased artist. The artwork turns the anonymous artist into a posthumous darling of the LA art world. But dark forces are afoot that will leave a few more deceased. It’s not as mind-bending as it sounds, says Gyllenhaal. “The characters in the art world are just extreme,” says Gyllenhaal. “People say, ‘What a strange film, they’re so crazy,’ and I say, ‘Have you experienced the art world?’” Like Nightcrawler, it’s a smart, funny and genuinely unnerving parable, this time focusing on greed and how wealth can kill creativity. “There’s so much money around,” explains Gyllenhaal. “Art has become invaded by a whole other world that is not a creative world, and there isn’t a necessity for it.”

And once again, LA is the canvas for a tale of immorality — the perfect setting. Gyllenhaal says, for a satire. “Los Angeles is a vast open space,” he says. “There’s a drama to its topography. It has extremes in terms of weather and geography. It has something we could find ourselves in, whether literal or just a piece of our mind.”

ANDREW DICKENS

VELVET BUZZSAW IS ON NETFLIX
FROM 1 FEBRUARY
I think I can guess this one: is Plastic Man basically a bloke made of petrochemical-derived polymer?

Almost. A Golden Age superhero, Plastic Man was first introduced way back in 1941 in *Police Comics #1* as Patrick “Eel” O’Brien, a small-time crook who specialised in safe-cracking. During a heist-gone-wrong, a chemical spill (what else?) accidentally grants O’Brien the properties of plastic.

So he’s waterproof? And not widely recyclable?

More like stretchy. Plastic Man can mould himself into practically any shape, any size and is virtually impervious to any force. He was also one of the earliest superheroes with a defined sense of humour, dispatching his foes with a well-timed wisecrack.

Why hasn’t he made it to the big screen already?

He’s more of a cult character than a headline hero. But it’s not for lack of trying, either. He’s popped up in plenty of animated TV shows and even briefly had his own cartoon in the ’70s (*The Plastic Man Comedy/Adventure Show*). The Wachowskis tried unsuccessfully to make a film in the ’90s.

What’s different this time?

The superhero landscape shows there’s now room for more offbeat characters on the big screen. Warner Bros has tapped writer Amanda Idoko to pen a “comedic, action-driven” script. Could this be DC’s answer to *Deadpool*?

1. It’s a prequel to the 1982 Jim Henson movie. Set many years before the original, it’s the story of a Gelfling (the pointy-eared ones) rebellion against the vicious Skeksis (the ones who look like boiled vultures) in the magical world of Thra. Discovering the horrible secret to the Skeksis’ power, three Gelflings stir up a fight to destroy them and save their dying world.

2. Whereas in the movie the Gelflings were a dwindling race, in this series there are so many Gelflings that there will be numerous tribes represented, each living in very different terrains.

3. The cast is astonishing. Voicing the lead trio of Gelflings are Taron Egerton as Rian, Anya Taylor-Joy as Brea and Nathalie Emmanuel as Deet. Other Gelfling voices include Helena Bonham-Carter, Natalie Dormer, Eddie Izzard, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Mark Strong and Alicia Vikander.

4. The voices of the Skeksis and Mystics (healing creatures who are the Skeksis’ exact opposite) are just as starry. They include Mark Hamill, Jason Isaacs, Harvey Fierstein, Keegan-Michael Key, Simon Pegg and Andy Samberg.

5. The show is produced by Lisa Henson, daughter of Jim, who has been trying to green-light a sequel for over a decade.

6. The show is directed by Louis Leterrier (*Now You See Me, The Incredible Hulk*), making his first foray into the world of puppetry.

7. Like the Henson film, *Age of Resistance* will be told entirely with puppets, with only minimal CG to remove puppeteers.

8. Those new models and recreations of old ones, were designed and created by a team that included Brian and Wendy Froud, who designed the characters for the original movie, and their son, Toby, who is now in the family business. Fun fact: Toby played the baby in *Labyrinth*.

9. There will be some characters familiar from the original movie, notably the strange old wise woman Aughra. She’ll be voiced by Donna Kimball (*The Happytime Murders*). In the original, she was played by the late Billie Whitelaw.

10. The series will consist of 10 episodes, released on Netflix later this year.
**Becoming van Gogh**

**Willem Dafoe on playing van Gogh in his final years in *At Eternity’s Gate***

What did you know about van Gogh before taking this role?  
I think I knew as much about van Gogh as the average person. I do love painting. My understanding, I would say, compared to now, was limited. When I was a young man and starting to form ideas about art in general and visual art in particular, he was very much in my mind. And then of course he’s kind of the poster boy for the tortured artist, and when you’re a young man that’s a very attractive thing.

Have you learned a lot from this experience of playing him?  
I think so. I mean, to learn a lot is to tempt the devil and brag! But yes — making this movie changed how I look at things; visually, at first, but that triggers something else philosophically that is significant. It’s beautiful. I can’t say I’m a painter now, but this was a very personal and transformative experience.

You say that, but you’re listed as a painter in the closing credits!  
Well, what you are seeing (on screen) — I’m painting those. I think, as a viewer, you can see the painting come together from the start. You see a rough outline, and then you see these extreme colours. You can see how something that doesn’t look very good starts to turn.

What other preparations did you do for the role? Did you have to learn French?  
I don’t really speak that much French in the film. The little bit that I did was sometimes improvised, and that was pretty hairy! I had a little buffer because van Gogh notoriously spoke French quite badly with a very pronounced Dutch accent. Obviously I was in Paris, surrounded by a French crew. So everyone had lots of advice for me.

Did it help to film in the actual locations where van Gogh lived and worked?  
I mean, truly, you’re flirting with ghosts. The twilight scene where I put the dirt on my face and I start to paint felt like an inspired improvisation. It was quite moving to me. And then I found out that was the field where he painted his last painting in. You’re in the places that he was and that helps a great deal. This is by no means a forensic documentary or biography, but those things help.  

**JOHN NUGENT**

*At Eternity’s Gate* is in cinemas from 29 March.
WHAT ARE YOU directing next? That’s what we’ve been asking Edgar Wright since June 2017, when Baby Driver was released. In the 18-month interim, he’s filmed a music documentary about cult band Sparks, but news of his next fictional feature film has been restricted to rumours and rumbles. Until now.

Speaking exclusively to Empire as part of our 30th birthday celebrations, Wright reveals that his next project is an entirely original film — and his first non-comedy. He describes it as “a psychological thriller set in contemporary London”, a straight horror with a female protagonist bearing all the filmmaker’s hallmarks, minus any comedic elements. “I’ve always been obsessed with movies like Don’t Look Now or Repulsion,” he explains. “The idea of doing something in that kind of realm is really exciting to me.”

Part of Wright’s inspiration for the movie, he says, were the dark corners of the capital’s West End district — his former stomping ground. “I realised I had never made a film about central London — specifically Soho, somewhere I’ve spent a huge amount of time in the last 25 years. With Hot Fuzz and Shaun Of The Dead you make movies about places you’ve lived in. This movie is about the London I’ve existed in. It’s an obsession with what London becomes when the sun goes down, probably inspired by too many walks home from edit suites in Soho in the middle of the night.” The film has a finished script, co-written with Krysty Wilson-Cairns, and Wright plans to shoot in the summer.

Also in the pipeline is Baby Driver 2, which is very much happening — just not yet. “A first draft of Baby Driver 2 exists,” confirms Wright. “The studio wanted me to do a sequel. That’s in the future because Ansel [Elgort] is busy this year. It wouldn’t start shooting until next year. I’m excited about that — it takes the story further.” That includes new characters — “because most of the characters from the first movie are dead”. We’re already wearing our bellbottoms in anticipation. JOHN NUGENT

TURN TO PAGE 62 FOR EMPIRE’S EDGAR WRIGHT CELEBRATION

MOVIE MATHS

THE THREE FILMS THAT INSPIRED MID90S, ACCORDING TO DIRECTOR JONAH HILL

Do you have a nickname? I hate nicknames. And I’ve always been a bit jealous of people who have them. Vanessa Kirby’s [Mission: Impossible: Fallout] is Noo. We became friends later, but in the beginning we were sitting in make-up and she said “Becky” or something, and I said, “My name is Rebecca. Don’t shorten it. I’m happy we caught it on the first day.” That was the first time I met her! After that we hugged and kissed — we’re good friends now — but I remember thinking, “What a bitch I am.”

When have you been most starstruck? I’ve just finished shooting a film called Doctor Sleep with Ewan McGregor. And every bloody time I met him I made a fool out of myself. A fool, I tell you! God, it’s so embarrassing. The first day, he walked in and I got really nervous, because I wasn’t prepared. I started blushing and blabbering. Then it got worse. I criticised him for where he lived and sang out of tune in front of him. At the end of the shoot I was on top of him for a scene, and I said, “Do you remember when I sang?” He said, “Don’t do it again.” I said, “Okay.” Some people just help to make things awkward. Ewan makes things awkward.

What is the worst smell in the world? There is a Swedish delicacy called ‘surströmming’, something we ate back in the day. And it is rotten herring. The smell is so revolting — like acid mixed with the worst fart. I feel like throwing up talking about it. My partner keeps buying them, but I’ve told him to eat it in the backyard.

Who is the most famous person you could text right now? I mean, Tom [Cruise] is quite famous. If email counts, I emailed him two days ago. I said, “I’m on an exercise bike and thought of you.” Because we trained so much for Mission. He’s off flying planes, he said.

How much is a pint of milk? Expensive! I always loved the sound of the clink-clank of milk jugs being delivered to my granny’s door in the Lake District. God, I loved it. We carried them in and they always tasted so creamy and rich.

What is your favourite animal? I love lions. Little lion cubs — Jesus, that’s sweet. I’ve never been close to one and I wouldn’t, because they shouldn’t be close to human beings. And also I boycott zoos and anything with animals in captivity. I went the other day to the big aquarium in Atlanta, and it’s beautiful, but why do you have four whale sharks in a tank? I’m sorry but I don’t appreciate it.

What is the best thing you’ve stolen from a hotel? They set up a room for Saga, our daughter, and gave us this beautiful quiltly, blankety thing. I decided that was a gift. We don’t travel anywhere without it.

When were you last naked outdoors? Probably in our house in Greece. Not in front of everyone. I was in the pool naked, because I like being naked in the pool.

When you were young, whose poster did you have on your wall? Leonardo DiCaprio from Titanic and, when I was a little bit older, Johnny Depp from Blow. I think that was it, because I didn’t have many posters.

Where is the strangest place you’ve ever thrown up? In a bucket, on the set of Mission 6, while doing the end sequence with Sean Harris. I was six months pregnant, on top of Sean with my leg around him, belly literally in his face. There was a bit of farting going on there. He laughed and said, “I have farts, vaginas, tits and belly in my face.” And then I jumped down and vomited in buckets. And off we went again.

What would you call your autobiography? ‘Don’t Call Me Becky’. NICK DESEMELYEN

COMING SOON

MEN IN BLACK: INTERNATIONAL (2019)
Ferguson joins Tessa Thompson and Chris Hemsworth in the alien comedy reboot.

DOCTOR SLEEP (2020)
In the sequel to The Shining, Ferguson plays Rose The Hat, a murderous psychic.

DUNE (2020)
Director Denis Villeneuve has cast Ferguson as Lady Jessica in this ambitious sci-fi remake.
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Clockwise from above: Ill-fated couple Fonny (Stephan James) and Tish (KiKi Layne); Regina King (centre) as justice-seeking Sharon, Tish's mother; Pensive times for Tish's father, Joseph (Colman Domingo).
IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

**VERDICT** A sort of Romeo And Juliet with systemic racism replacing the family feud, this is romantic and infuriating, hopeful and despairing. A sensory, desperately emotional experience for lovers and fighters alike.

**DIRECTOR** Barry Jenkins

**CAST** Kiki Layne, Stephan James, Regina King, Colman Domingo, Michael Beach

**PLOT** Alonzo ‘Fonny’ Hunt (James) has been jailed for a crime he did not commit, and his girlfriend Clementine ‘Tish’ Rivers (Layne) works to get him freed before their baby is born. Her parents and his father rally around to support them and clear his name.

OUT 8 FEBRUARY
CERT 15 / 119 MINS

Two years ago, Barry Jenkins won Best Picture at the Oscars for *Moonlight*, a devastatingly emotional look at identity, deprivation and the search for connection that binds us all. For his follow-up, Jenkins returned to a project he’s been trying to make for years, an adaptation of James Baldwin’s passionate depiction of love and loss in 1970’s Harlem. The result is just as luminous, if a little more mainstream.

Jenkins’ approach is elegantly simple. He shows us two of the most beautiful young humans on the planet, takes us through their love story until we’re as enamoured with them as they are with one another, and then puts them through hell. The result is the most sweepingly romantic polemic you’ll ever see, a love story that will make you want to take up arms against a cruel world.

Fonny (Race’s James) and Tish (near newcomer Layne) have known one another all their lives before they fall in love in young adulthood. Fonny, a little older, plans to be a sculptor, while Tish works at a department store perfume counter. She’s just become pregnant when he is arrested and falsely charged with rape. Left alone to tell her news to both families, Tish and her clan work together to clear Fonny’s name and get him back before their baby is born.

Regular flashbacks to Fonny and Tish’s lives together reveal their blooming romantic feelings, but there is also forward motion here in his legal quest for justice, with family help. Tish’s father Joseph (Domingo) and Fonny’s dad Frank (Beach) raise money for an idealistic lawyer (Finn Wittrock) who’s doing what he can. Meanwhile, Tish’s mum Sharon (King) goes to great lengths to seek out the evidence that could free him.

It’s a beautiful film, but weighty too. It humanises black men in a way that the media, often, does not. We see Fonny as a loving, considerate boyfriend, and Joseph and Frank as devoted fathers who would do anything for their families. None of them are idealised or faultless, but they’re all the more sympathetic for that. It also shows the strength required of black women to survive intersectional racism, as Tish visibly begins to grow steel around her spine, and Sharon goes to war in the most dignified, careful, womanly way possible. Most of all, this shows the effects of not just one racist apple but a whole rotten system of prejudice, injustice and money.

Jenkins wisely stuck with the behind-camera team that worked so well for him before. *Moonlight* cinematographer James Laxton somehow manages to inject a sunlit, amber glow even into Tish and Fonny’s basement apartment, giving the film a golden sheen of memory and summertime that reflects its protagonists’ hopes. And composer Nicholas Britell, whose stripped-back jazz score’s theme haunts the film, lightly punctuates the emotion without overwhelming it. The dialogue, adapted by Jenkins himself, is sometimes a little dense and novelistic, unwilling to strip out too much of Baldwin’s prose, but it’s also frequently lyrical. Equally, some lighter scenes — particularly a short, likeable cameo by Dave Franco — will be divisive, but these moments of levity serve to both momentarily relieve and generally emphasise the darkness.

Set in the 1970s but feeling all too contemporary, this is powerful but not self-righteous; it never descends into that dry, medicinal ‘important film’ slog. The overwhelming feeling is one of love, both the romantic kind that can endure great hardship and the familial kind that supports and protects its own. The great tragedy of the film is that love is not enough to protect us entirely against the world’s cruelty, and that such ordeals could even be inflicted in the first place.

**HELEN O’HARA**
**BOY ERASED**

★★★★

OUT 8 FEBRUARY

CERT 15 / 115 MINS

DIRECTOR Joel Edgerton

CAST Lucas Hedges, Nicole Kidman, Joel Edgerton, Russell Crowe

PLOT When American college student Jared (Hedges) has no choice but to come out as gay to his religious parents (Crowe, Kidman), they send him to Love In Action — a ‘conversion therapy’ institution led by Victor Sykes (Edgerton), where he enters a course designed to change his sexuality.

WITH HIS FILMMAKING debut The Gift, Joel Edgerton displayed a sharp eye for creeping horror rooted in human cruelty and social anxiety. His return as a writer-director heads into more direct drama territory, but it’s an instinct Edgerton very much brings with him. The opening stretch of Boy Erased is framed with a thrumming dread — teenager Jared Eamons (Hedges), under the instruction of his parents, signs himself in at ‘gay conversion therapy’ camp Love In Action, surrendering his possessions and identity to a place that the audience knows is only going to do him harm.

In his adaptation of Garrard Conley’s memoir, Edgerton is clear and direct in depicting not only the insidious and hypocritical nature of so-called ‘ex-gay’ practices, but their banality too. The 12-day course that Jared enrols in, led by figurehead Victor Sykes — Edgerton, looking somewhat an evil Ned Flanders — includes such dubious activities as posture lessons and hitting baseballs, alongside more obviously harmful ‘therapy’ sessions tantamount to emotional abuse. Can Jared, already plagued with doubt and guilt, really change — and if so, should he? Or should he, as one fellow inmate (a magnetic Troye Sivan) tells him, “play the part” and get out before more lasting damage is done?

Boy Erased navigates the intersection between traditional religious beliefs and internalised homophobia incisively, mapping its varying destructive consequences to generally powerful effect. But while the film is empathetic and well-intentioned in exposing a practice still alarmingly prevalent in America today — as summarised in the closing credits — it doesn’t quite connect as a human drama. Lucas Hedges puts in a strong performance — particularly when his rage bubbles over in a roadside meltdown — but Jared feels more cipher than character, a situation to be horrified by rather than an individual to root for. The film also portrays him principally as a victim, which may prove too one-note for some — his trauma is depicted graphically, particularly in one unflinchingly violent sequence, while his positive sexual experiences remain comparatively unexplored.

But whenever the film turns to the relationship between Jared and his mother Nancy (Kidman), it becomes more nuanced and emotive — Kidman is excellent as a parent who genuinely wants to help her son but whose ignorance sees her go about it in the most damaging way. The film’s beating heart is in this evolving relationship, where there’s hope that love can ultimately transcend prejudice.

With arresting visual compositions and a well-deployed cast, Boy Erased confirms that The Gift was no fluke from Edgerton. It’s an important story to be told, but it’s the horror of ‘conversion therapy’ as a whole rather than the subject’s twilight years.

**SECOND ACT**

★★★

OUT 25 JANUARY

CERT 12A / 104 MINS

DIRECTOR Peter Segal

CAST Jennifer Lopez, Milo Ventimiglia, Vanessa Hudgens

JENNIFER LOPEZ RETURNS to the block for Second Act, a rags-to-riches romp which, through a set of delightful twists, ditches the ruthless career-comedy shick for something refreshingly kind-hearted. Lopez plays Maya, a long-suffering megastore assistant manager who, after being social media “Cinderellagged” by her godson, lands a big job on Madison Avenue. Injecting her street-savvy ways into a company reliant on Silicon Valley shorthand, Maya soon finds herself competing against her boss’s daughter Zoe (Hudgens), only for their rivalry to evolve into sweeter stuff. It’s sentimental but fun, the message of solidarity guiding Second Act away from a formulaic battle to the finish line.

**ALL IS TRUE**

★★★★

OUT 8 FEBRUARY / CERT 12A / 101 MINS

DIRECTOR Kenneth Branagh

CAST Kenneth Branagh, Judi Dench, Kathryn Wilder, Ian McKellen

FILMS ABOUT SHAKESPEARE have ranged from the delightfully frivolous (Shakespeare In Love) to the historically outrageous (Anonymous). But Bard aficionado Kenneth Branagh has taken a more personal approach, building a closely observed family drama around history’s greatest playwright. An ageing Shakespeare (Branagh) retires to Stratford to rekindle his relationship with his wife, Anne (Dench), and unmarried daughter Judith (Wilder). A portrait of the artist as a gardener, this almost entirely lacks high stakes, but its beautifully shot and acted moments lend a sense of quiet reckoning and poignancy to its subject’s twilight years.

**FILMS ABOUT SHAKESPEARE**

OUT 25 JANUARY / CERT 12A / 104 MINS

DIRECTOR Peter Segal

CAST Jennifer Lopez, Milo Ventimiglia, Vanessa Hudgens

JENNIFER LOPEZ RETURNS to the block for Second Act, a rags-to-riches romp which, through a set of delightful twists, ditches the ruthless career-comedy shick for something refreshingly kind-hearted. Lopez plays Maya, a long-suffering megastore assistant manager who, after being social media “Cinderellagged” by her godson, lands a big job on Madison Avenue. Injecting her street-savvy ways into a company reliant on Silicon Valley shorthand, Maya soon finds herself competing against her boss’s daughter Zoe (Hudgens), only for their rivalry to evolve into sweeter stuff. It’s sentimental but fun, the message of solidarity guiding Second Act away from a formulaic battle to the finish line.

BEN TRAVIS

VERDICT Joel Edgerton once again proves himself a gifted filmmaker — but for all the craft, compelling performances and good intentions at work here, the drama itself falls somewhat short.

DARE MARCH 2019
They won’t be breaking the speed limit again.

DIRECTOR Karyn Kusama
CAST Nicole Kidman, Sebastian Stan, Tatiana Maslany, Toby Kebbell,

PLOT Seventeen years after being part of an undercover operation that went wrong, police detective Erin Bell (Kidman) hears that Silas (Kebbell), the leader of the gang she infiltrated, is back in town. Bell is intent on settling old scores, whatever the cost.

DESTROYER OUT 25 JANUARY CERT 15 / 121 MINS

WE HAVE, WITHOUT a doubt, never seen Nicole Kidman like this before. But there’s far more to her performance in Destroyer than the remarkable, ravaging make-up job that has already received so much attention, and deserves to draw comparisons with Charlize Theron’s transformation for Monster in 2003. The role of LA detective Erin Bell is the kind you’d expect someone like Harvey Keitel or Woody Harrelson to play: a deeply flawed, corrupt cop who barrels through the story with a sense of self-justification that’s only matched by their sheer moral turpitude. Whether she’s employing seriously dubious interrogation techniques or going in all guns blazing — and never mind the collateral damage — Bell is surely up there with the baddest of lieutenants. You might occasionally stop and think, “Hang on, did I really just see Nicole Kidman kick in a door and fire an assault rifle?” But, this being an ever-versatile, Oscar-winning actor, you’ll soon be lost in the ever-thickening shadows of her performance.

It is by no means an easy watch. Destroyer, as the title suggests, is a grim, downbeat thriller which rarely leavens its dramatic truncheon-blows with lighter interludes. Unlike Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri, which features a similarly astonishing, similarly brutal performance from Frances McDormand, there’s no wit or snap to the dialogue, no black humour to revel in. Bell isn’t blessed with one-liners or acerbic comebacks. She’s a traumatised, red-eyed insomniac, living out of her car and lurching around the streets of LA like a badge-flashing zombie. You wince just watching her walk.

Interestingly, director Karyn Kusama (Girlfight) and director of photography Julie Kirkwood present the city in an almost post-apocalyptic way: oddly desolate and tainted by decay. We know it’s just the Los Angeles we’re familiar with from so many cop flicks, yet we experience it as Bell does, in a hellish afterlife created in the wake of an undercover assignment that went disastrously south 17 years earlier. It is impressively toxic.

Some story beats don’t quite measure up to Kusama’s heady world-(un)building, or Kidman’s impeccable downward-spiralling. A subplot about Bell’s teenage daughter becomes a distraction that ends with a rather obvious pay-off, the flashbacks don’t sell the malevolence of Toby Kebbell’s gang leader, and there is one crucial plot point that just doesn’t quite click in terms of the character motivation behind it. But none of it will derail this psychological subway ride through Bell’s personal hell. It’s hard to imagine anything that could distract you from marveling at the way Kidman has hollowed herself out and delivered such a starkly powerful, darkly disturbing turn. DAN JOLIN

VERDICT A grim, dour dive into one LA cop’s unravelling, which centres on a truly transformative performance from Nicole Kidman.

Daniel Jolin
HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON: THE HIDDEN WORLD

★★★★ OUT 1 FEBRUARY
CERT TBC / 104 MINS

DIRECTOR Dean DeBlois
CAST Jay Baruchel, America Ferrera, F. Murray Abraham, Justin Rupple, Kristen Wiig

PLOT Hiccup (Baruchel), now chief of Berk, has turned the island into a thriving dragon haven. When hunter Grimmel (Abraham) threatens to disrupt the peace, Hiccup sets out to discover the legendary Hidden World and establish a dragon and Viking utopia.

FOR ALL ITS mythical fire-breathing reptiles, the How To Train Your Dragon series is a coming-of-age story at heart. Hiccup (Baruchel), originally a kid on the cusp of adolescence, and Toothless, his adorable Night Fury, have grown up incrementally with each instalment — a boy-and-his-cat-dragon duo who rank among DreamWorks Animation’s most emotionally engaging partnerships.

The Hidden World takes Hiccup into young adulthood, wielding his flame-sword confidently as chief of the Isle of Berk — but he and Toothless face diverging futures. Marriage could be on the cards for Hiccup if he can stop dithering and finally propose to Astrid (Ferrera), while Toothless now has a romantic foil of his own. Stumbling across a Light Fury, the yin to his yang, the dragon is instantly smitten. His doe-eyed lovestruck antics, including the sort of flamboyant flirting usually reserved for a David Attenborough doc, are The Hidden World’s utterly charming highlight.

But the Light Fury also heralds the emergence of hunter Grimmel (Abraham) — a menacing villain with his own set of dragons that spew bright-green, Xenomorph-blood acid. Despite his peroxide-blonde hair, Grimmel is no Targaryen — his attitude to dragons is far from friendly, forcing Hiccup to seek new horizons for Berk and its people.

Despite the dramatic urgency Grimmel brings, the film struggles to streamline its plot threads and character pay-offs. It takes a little long to really get going, while irritating supporting characters like Tuffnut and Ruffnut (Rupple, Wiig) clutter the screen — if the franchise’s initial audience has since grown up, the dialogue here skews frustratingly young. There are highlights — the opening misty dragon raid by Hiccup and pals, the DayGlo arrival in the titular Hidden World — though the original’s exhilarating flying sequences remain unmatched.

Crucially, with so much going on and a reluctance to bench its minor players, The Hidden World barely leaves room for the contemplative character moments an ending chapter deserves. When that big goodbye finally arrives, it doesn’t quite sucker-punch the tear ducts in the way it should. Compared to the elegiac climax of Toy Story 3 — and Dragon is as close as DreamWorks comes to Pixar-level sentiment — this farewell to Hiccup and Toothless’ childhood friendship could burn a little brighter.

VERDICT DreamWorks Animation’s most heartfelt series bows out with a beautifully designed finale, but the long-awaited emotional goodbyes for its beloved central duo don’t quite soar.

BEN TRAVIS

 Those Harley riders were going to weep.
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**CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME?**

★★★★ OUT 1 FEBRUARY CERT 15 / 106 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Marielle Heller
**CAST** Melissa McCarthy, Richard E. Grant, Dolly Wells, Ben Falcone

**PLOT** 1991. New York. Failing biographer Lee Israel (McCarthy) sells a letter by US comedienne Fanny Brice to get some cash. When she is told the missive would be worth more if it was “juicier”, it inspires her to become a forger with astonishing results.

“a better Dorothy Parker than Dorothy Parker” and McCarthy perfectly etches her arc; she embraces Lee’s spikiness, creative uncertainty and self-destructive streak and somehow makes them winning.

As she begins her career of forgery, Lee finds salvation in Grant’s Jack Hock (who announces himself as “Jack Hock, big cock”), a gay, dissolute New Yorker who helps her flog her letters when memorabilia dealers start to get suspicious. Channelling Withnail in a long coat and a love of booze, Grant is the best he’s been in years, by turns charming and tragic as he inveigles his way into Lee’s life. Together, the pair of outcasts form a winning double act, two people born out of time taking sideswipes at polite society while finding solace and co-dependency in each other’s company.

There first meeting is that rare thing in modern movies — a lengthy scene of two people chatting — and it’s a delight. Adapted from Israel’s own memoir, Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty’s witty, literate script is good on the compelling detail of Lee’s scams, buying numerous old typewriters to exactly match the fonts of the famous writers and upturning her life around to fill the accounts. Heller also ratchets up the tension, both in scenes of Lee smuggling letters out of archives and as the net draws in on her bakery. But ultimately this is a film about human frailties. Smuggled in between the friendship and the bakery is a tentative, beautifully rendered attraction between Lee and bookseller Anna (a terrific Wells) told in quick, economical strokes. A touching sketch of someone who doesn’t know how to be in a relationship, it becomes one of the most affecting love stories of the year.

**VERDICT** A moving hymn to outsiders, this thrives on two criminally good performances from Melissa McCarthy and Richard E. Grant. It also confirms Marielle Heller as one of the brightest directorial talents around.

The Brexit debate was about to get very heated.

**BERGMAN: A YEAR IN A LIFE**

★★★ OUT 25 JANUARY CERT 15 / 117 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Jane Magnusson
**CAST** Liv Ullmann, Thorsten Flinck, Barbra Streisand, Elliott Gould

In 1957, SWEDISH director Ingmar Bergman achieved international fame after premiering *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*. He also produced two more films and four landmark stage plays. But, for all its artistic merit, Bergman’s work was also a vital refuge from his health problems and complex personal life. As Jane Magnusson argues in this valuable if scattershot profile, Bergman’s demons, as well as his tyrannical temperament and exploitative attitudes towards women, were crucial to his creativity. Yet, while she makes telling use of archive interviews and clips, Magnusson resists reaching definitive conclusions about Bergman’s incalculably influential career or his deeply flawed psyche.

**INSTANT FAMILY**

★★★★ OUT 14 FEBRUARY CERT 12A / 118 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Sean Anders
**CAST** Mark Wahlberg, Isabela Moner, Gustavo Quiroz, Rose Byrne

PREVIOUSLY TOO BUSY to have kids, fixer uppers Pete (Wahlberg) and Ellie (Byrne) take the plunge into the world of foster caring and adopt three siblings: moody teen Lizzy (Moner), anxious middle kid Juan (Quiroz) and adorable terror Lita (Juliana Gamiz). Amid the bonding Shenanigans, director Sean Anders doesn’t really unify tonal shifts between spiky comedy (dick pic shtick) and weapons-grade schmaltz, but for the most part it’s a winning confection, unafraid to go to unexpected dramatic places and elevated by Byrne’s stealth gift as a comedy foil and Moner’s lively but subtle turn. And it’s a hard heart that resists its persuasive message of the power of unconditional love.
He flew in the face of Buckingham Palace protocol.

DIRECTOR Joe Cornish
CAST Louis Ashbourne Serkis, Dean Chaumoo, Tom Taylor, Rhianna Dorris, Angus Imrie, Patrick Stewart, Rebecca Ferguson

PLOT Alex (Serkis) thinks he’s got his hands full with homework. Then he gets said hands on Excalibur. Cue a quest to stop a witch (Ferguson) from getting medieval on the entire United Kingdom.

OUT 15 FEBRUARY
CERT TBC / 132 MINS

THE KID WHO WOULD BE KING

“STRANGE WOMEN LYIN’ in ponds distributin’ swords,” pronounces a character in Monty Python And The Holy Grail, “is no basis for a system of government.” Evidence also suggests it’s not much of a basis for successful filmmaking. There have been a few great movies inspired by Arthurian lore, including Excalibur and Holy Grail itself, but more often than not it’s led to ponderous misfires such as the recent Guy Ritchie effort and the one where Richard Gere dodged giant, swinging axes. Now, however, along comes Joe Cornish, rebooting the legend and making strange women lyin’ in ponds distributin’ swords more fun than they’ve ever been before.

Eight years after he science-fictioned up a South London estate in Attack The Block, here Cornish chucks a different genre — fantasy — at an inner-city school. The likeable but much-teased Alex (Ashbourne Serkis) discovers an ancient blade on a local construction site, realises it’s Excalibur, and ends up embarking on a quest with his best friend and the bullies who have been making his life hell, the quartet slowly transforming into four pint-sized knights. Read that description, and it’s hard not to imagine a very silly comedy. But Cornish achieves a balance between laughs and earnestness, aided by a terrific performance from Serkis. Kid has the feel of an old-fashioned, classic kids’ adventure film, à la E.T. or Explorers, with the baddies played straight and some emotional business involving Alex’s parents.

Those baddies are where the film’s imagination falters a little: Rebecca Ferguson brings intensity to the dread witch Morgana, but is stuck to a muddy wall for most of her screentime, while her army of hell-skeletons are undeniably cool-looking but get a little samey. Cornish compensates, though, with some striking fantasy licks, such as a training sequence involving mobile trees, and a riff on the Lady Of The Lake trope that’s really rather genius. He even manages to breathe new life into Merlin, that most shopworn of wizards. Here the sagacious sorcerer flits to and fro between two bodies, one old and one young, played by Patrick Stewart and Angus Imrie respectively.

The story is deftly told, with wit, momentum and a third-act battle sequence which cleverly recasts the youngsters’ school as a castle under siege. There are even sly allusions to Britain’s current travails, with Morgana’s assault seemingly inspired by Brexit. Let’s hope Theresa May doesn’t get any ideas.

VERDICT More proof that Cornish is a wizard at re-energising tired tropes. The characters are a delight, the action sequences thum with invention, and when it’s funny, it’s very funny indeed.
VICE
OUT 25 JANUARY
CERT 15 / 132 MINS

DIRECTOR Adam McKay
CAST Christian Bale, Amy Adams, Steve Carell, Sam Rockwell, Eddie Marsan

PLOT Dick Cheney’s [Bale] rise from boozy dropout to the most powerful Vice President in US history, taking in his early days under Nixon and ultimately 9/11, the invasion of Iraq and the torture and surveillance programmes of the War On Terror.

IMAGINE BEAMING BACK to 2004 and telling your younger, thinner self that the guy who made Anchorman would go on to become one of the most interesting political filmmakers America has produced in years. His follow-up to The Big Short, Adam McKay’s Vice, with its sweep and cast of powerful people, is oddly reminiscent of Oliver Stone’s Nixon, except the tone is far more amused than that film’s operatic pomp — but in its own way just as angry.

Sharing with Nixon a focus on Dick Cheney, Vice also serves as a genealogy of the mutations of the American right as it descended from cynical to genuinely ghoulish. Tellingly, at no point does any political character talk about any issue in terms of ethics, morality, or benefitting people’s lives, with Steve Carell’s Donald Rumsfeld openly scoffing at the idea as he inducts Cheney into ‘70s Washington.

Cheney’s USP as a politician was an extreme form of cynical realpolitik and a willingness to go to, as he openly called it, the dark side. In one late-film monologue, he makes that traditional villain’s plea that he alone had the stones to make the decisions limp liberals couldn’t. The film lets him state his position, but also wisely chooses not to exonerate or soften a man with tens of thousands of bodies on him.

But this is no dry piece of political analysis. As in The Big Short, McKay plays formal games and deploys engaging performances to help the medicine go down. One mid-film gambit regarding a potential alt-timeline for Cheney is so bonkers it brings the house down, although repeated cutaways to reeling in fish as Cheney bends George W. Bush to his will do play a bit to the back row.

It’s no surprise to say Christian Bale delivers a good performance, but he really is sensational here. Disappearing under make-up and a gut, he transforms into Cheney before your eyes. It’s often too easy to hail performances like this for the perspiration more than the inspiration, but the feat Bale manages here is far more than just another body modification stunt.

Nailing Cheney’s distinctive growl, he creates a man where it’s seldom clear if he has the dirty work foisted upon him, or if he seeks it out in a kind of moral martyrdom.

Amy Adams, meanwhile, equals Bale as Lynne Cheney, a surprisingly compelling figure if you only know her from that namecheck in Eminem’s ‘Without Me.’ In a performance very reminiscent of her turn in The Master, Adams easily hurls Republican Wife clichés and, as her husband’s career comes home in ways you might not expect, she increasingly becomes the film’s conscience — or lack thereof.

Yet this isn’t really a character study. Just as The Big Short was a lesson in finance disguised as a caper, Vice is a lesson in American civics disguised as a political biopic. Presidential power and its limits are big questions at the moment, and the current incumbent haunts this film like a ghost. With every venal move Cheney and his cohorts make, you feel the American system lurch closer to the disaster of today — McKay gleefully suggesting it deserves its current humiliation. ANDREW LOWRY

VERDICT An acting masterclass that neither pulls its punches nor sacrifices detail to pander to a mass audience, this is smart filmmaking from a director who gets better with every film.
blue-collar crusader’s ideal nemesis. Moore’s film is scattershot and scrappy, but it makes a lot of good, and scary, points. Yet its $6,350,000 domestic haul hardly chimed with the level of anti-Trump sentiment in a highly polarised country. (In contrast, 2004’s anti-Bush Fahrenheit 9/11 grossed a whopping $119 million domestically.) Partly it was a case of a film just not being able to keep up with the hourly outrages on social media. Mostly it was a question of Trump’s detractors already being so sick of his dominance of daily discourse, they couldn’t bring themselves to pay the cost of a cinema ticket to relive the electoral car crash that created his Presidency.

Which is why the best approach to Trump is the indirect one. On the surface, Vice is another George W. Bush-administration basher, like Oliver Stone’s W. But what it’s really doing is revealing how Dubya Veep Dick Cheney was in fact the silent-but-deadly architect of an extension of executive-branch power which makes the current Oval Office occupier so terrifying. The pathway to Trump stretches back much further than we may have thought, Vice suggests.

This idea of digging into the roots of the Trump era also applies to Jason Reitman’s The Front Runner, though that film comes at it from the perspective of Democratic Presidential nominee Senator Gary Hart’s sudden, scandalous fall from grace in May 1987 — a reversal of fortune Hillary Clinton’s supporters can certainly relate to. More to the point, The Front Runner presents a pivot-point in the way the media covered politics, making it less about issues than personalities. “To me, the Hart story was about our obsession with scandal and our decision to treat politicians like celebrities,” writer Matt Bai told The Atlantic in November. “And when you create a process that mirrors entertainment, you’re going to get entertainers in your process.”

Rather than expecting the audience to doubly suffer the horrors of the present, both movies invite us to a past which we all need to learn from. It’s something Drew Goddard attempted, too, albeit in a completely different genre with his stylish noir, Bad Times At The El Royale. Writing his script the very month Trump entered office, Goddard tackled his political demon through the Nixon era — an approach also taken by Steven Spielberg’s The Post, which was the first Trump-tackling movie out of the gate (fast-tracked by its director, in fact). The Post presented a robust case for why the press should stand up to Presidential bullying, in its case from historical Trump stand-in Richard Nixon. Tricky Dick certainly feels like a good parallel, not least because he ultimately quit, offering some vague hope, at least, of a possible exit from the current American nightmare.

It is hard to tell whether any of these non-Western Union-delivered messages will land, or make the difference their creators hope they will. But the fact remains that Trump is, for now, an issue best not met face-on through cinema; after all, a potential upcoming biopic (title: The Apprentice) has already been described as “the biopic no-one asked for”. Few of us, it seems, have the stomach for that.
A PRIVATE WAR

DIRECTOR Matthew Heineman
CAST Rosamund Pike, Jamie Dornan, Tom Hollander, Nikki Amuka-Bird, Stanley Tucci

PLOT During the final 11 years of Sunday Times foreign correspondent Marie Colvin’s (Pike) life, she struggles with PTSD and the loss of an eye, while continuing to report from war zones like Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, where she strives to expose the true human cost of modern conflict to the world.

THE TRANSITION FROM cinematic documentarian to narrative feature-maker is not always the easiest — just ask Joe Berlinger, praised for Paradise Lost: The Child Murders At Robin Hood Hills then ridiculed for Book Of Shadows: Blair Witch 2. So with his debut narrative movie A Private War, director Matthew Heineman (who was Oscar-nominated for 2015’s superb Mexican drug-war-investigating Cartel Land) wisely keeps the subject and style close to his non-fiction roots. Focusing on the final decade-or-so of celebrated war journalist Marie Colvin’s life, his film forebodingly counts down to the event in Syria that would finally silence her fierce and resonant voice. All the way, he sticks uncomfortably close to reality, even weaving in audio of Colvin herself as voiceover.

Yet there is a sense that, with a true-life story this strong, why not just make it as a documentary? At times you wish you were hearing more from the real Colvin, or the reflections of her contemporaries and surviving colleagues, rather than absorbing the heavy-handed swings of Grace Of Monaco writer Arash Amel’s script (adapted from Marie Brenner’s 2012 Vanity Fair article on Colvin). It’s a disappointingly tell-rather-than-show affair, where dialogue scenes clunk and creak as Colvin’s passion and arguably self-destructive drive are repeatedly spelled out for us. “You’ve seen more war than most soldiers,” her photographer Paul Conroy (Dornan) says unnecessarily; “You have a God-given talent to make people stop and care,” her editor Sean Ryan (Hollander) pointlessly points out.

Despite the warzone-to-warzone countdown structure, it is also a film that frustratingly lacks momentum, tugging us back and forth between the screaming gunfire of Colvin’s frontline assignments and her listless, trauma-punctured interludes back in London. It becomes repetitive rather than revelatory, only really hitting its stride when we eventually arrive at the horrors of Homs, in Syria.

Fortunately, Heineman does play a pair of aces. One is cinematographer Robert Richardson, who also shoots for Oliver Stone and Quentin Tarantino, and here captures Colvin’s experiences with a queasy, handheld immediacy. The other is Rosamund Pike as Colvin, who delivers what feels less like a performance than an act of possession. After Gone Girl and last year’s ultra-sharp Western Captives, Pike once again throws herself into territory you imagine few other actors would dare to tread, tearing away at Colvin’s layers and baring her soul in a way that no documentary could. It is career-peak work, the truthful tour-de-force that Colvin deserves — albeit one which you might wish were better serviced by the script. DAN JOLIN

VERDICT A sometimes clunkily executed true-life story which at least has potency in its blend of subject matter and lead actor. Despite often being hard to watch, this is Rosamund Pike’s best work yet.

THE VOICE

Colvin was born in Long Island and educated at Yale before joining The Sunday Times. So she always had a distinctive American twang, and the low, raspy tones of a regular smoker. “It’s not just the accent, it’s the pitch and the energy,” says Pike of recreating her subject’s voice. “It was a process of transformation.”

THE PHYSICALITY

Pike had to “change [my] physicality and the way my body holds tension, carry my face differently, learn to smoke”. Colvin — unsurprisingly given she worked in a war zone — carried herself as if ready for attack at all times. Pike even attended a detonation of landmines to experience being around explosions.

THE REALISM

“A Middle East advisor came round to my house” to tutor Pike on the distinctions between the countries where Colvin worked so there would be no lazy stereotyping. Then director Matthew Heineman recruited real Syrians and Iraqis, many of them war zone survivors, to tell Pike their stories during ‘Colvin’s’ interviews. “Her great quality was her enormous capacity for empathy. It wasn’t for personal glory. She was genuinely interested in transmitting their story.”

THE LETTING GO

After filming, Pike had the difficult job of putting Colvin aside. “If I really talk about it, which I’m trying to do truthfully, I feel it all over again, and it is tough. But thank God she was such a funny person. The film is a focus on serious parts of her life, which I think is what she would have wanted because she’d want her legacy to be about the work she did. But she was also brilliantly, wonderfully funny,” HELEN O’HARA
The harsh reality was — no toilets for 658 miles.

DIRECTOR Peter Farrelly
CAST Viggo Mortensen, Mahershala Ali, Linda Cardellini, Dimitri D. Marinov, Mike Hatton

PLOT The true story of Tony Lip (Mortensen), a working-class Italian-American, who in 1962 was hired by refined African-American pianist Dr Don Shirley (Ali) to drive him on a concert tour of the hostile Deep South.

GREEN BOOK

OUT 1 FEBRUARY
CERT 12A / 130 MINS

THE STORY OF Tony Lip and Don Shirley is not a wildly original one. It's an odd-couple road trip about how we're all not so different, after all. No wheels are being reinvented here: it's Driving Miss Daisy by way of Planes, Trains And Automobiles, if you like. But the execution is so outrageously appealing and good-hearted that surrendering to its charms feels like the only option. Peter Farrelly, most commonly known for leaning on the cheapest, dirtiest jokes he can find with his brother Bobby, here summons a gentler, more character-driven kind of humour, while telling a serious story about the compromises that African-Americans have been long forced to make by an oppressive white status quo.

What makes the film so compelling is the chemistry that crackles from the central pair of actors. As Tony Lip, Mortensen's enjoyably larger-than-life performance sometimes skirts the fringes of caricature, but you can't fault the all-encompassing commitment or his performance. As with Don Shirley, we're soon worn down by his gregariousness, and taken by his transformation; any memory of the softly spoken Dane who once wielded the reforged sword from the shards of Narsil is soon quashed at the sight of his unbelievable (and apparently real) Italianate gut.

Ali's Don Shirley is a contrast, in every sense. A model of quiet elegance and self-possession, there's humour to be found in his obsessive-compulsiveness and almost regal particularisms. But Ali, who has always been an incredibly thoughtful actor, coats his performance with a dignity and melancholy. His is not the average black experience in America, but as we later learn, he deliberately chooses to tour more hostile areas of the country, using his position as a celebrated musician for the sake of progress.

There's been a fair few criticisms of Green Book's somewhat rose-tinted take on the appallingly violent reality of the Jim Crow South. You could certainly argue that its handle on racial politics is simplistic. But the film doesn't shy from depicting racism in its ugliness and sadism when it counts. That it also acknowledges the intersectionality of Don's experiences as a gay black man should not be ignored.

There are legitimate concerns that Green Book settles for lazy tropes about white saviours, but the central humanistic message is important, necessary and correct, and the fact that what could be a stiff, awards-hungry 'message movie' is in fact a crowdpleasing slice of mainstream entertainment means that message can reach audiences in all corners. At a time when racists are feeling more emboldened than they have any right to, that's a very welcome message indeed.

JOHN NUGENT

VERDICT A supremely likeable film. Its message might seem obvious and its template overcooked, but it boasts a warm heart, with two astoundingly good lead performances to guide it home.
ON THE BASIS OF SEX

★★★
OUT 22 FEBRUARY
CERT 12A / 120 MINS

DIRECTOR Mimi Leder
CAST Felicity Jones, Armie Hammer, Justin Theroux, Kathy Bates, Sam Waterston

PLOT It's 1956 and Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Jones) is one of nine women in a class of 500 law students at Harvard, and faces discrimination despite her stellar brain. But she eventually finds her path: challenging sexist laws across the US.

BEFORE US SUPREME Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg became a feminist hero and internet meme (as 'the Notorious RBG'), she was an unlikely revolutionary. She never looked like a rebel, but as an early female student at Harvard Law School, the lawyer-to-be, played here by Felicity Jones, unflinchingly stood up to a world hostile to her mere presence. Eventually, her quiet determination to forge her own path would change her country and lead to the repeal of its most sexist laws, as this efficient, understated biopic shows.

For all the world-shaking that Ginsburg has done, she's an odd choice of heroine for Hollywood, in that her life is not exactly packed with incident. There is no combat for this heroine to march off to, nor do we even reach the point where she will spend over 50 years, Marty Ginsburg (Hammer). He is an enlightened feminist and equal partner by the standards of our own time, never mind his own. Encouraging of rather than threatened by his wife's brilliance, he fights for her ambitions — and she returns the favour, toiling to get him through law school when he's struck down with illness.

But director Mimi Leder, making a long-overdue return to the big screen, finds a way to make Ginsburg's story engaging despite this super-healthy relationship and respectable profession. She keeps the focus close, showing the tiny signs of frustration that Ginsburg allows herself to indulge as academic and commercial doors are slammed in her face. It bubbles under until the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s gives her an opportunity to finally step forward and take a case that will challenge an entire series of discriminatory laws.

That fight back, following years of doing the polite thing, is rousing stuff, a vindication for the beliefs and ideals of both Ginsburgs. Hammer's easy self-confidence and charm fits perfectly with the role of a decent, privileged man who has nothing to prove but tries to do the right thing anyway. And Jones uses her British air of reserve to convey Ginsburg's ladylike nature, though she also allows her own intelligence to shine through, giving her character sharp edges as well as genteel manners. By the end, fully evolved into a legal crusader, she is a heroine to root for, someone who made the extraordinary times that others merely lived through. HELEN O'HARA

VERDICT It's not a hugely innovative biopic, covering just a short period of Bader Ginsburg's extraordinary career, but this is still a vastly inspiring account of the fight for equality.
BURNING

OUT 1 FEBRUARY
CERT 15 / 148 MINS

DIRECTOR Lee Chang-dong
CAST Yoo Ah-in, Jun Jong-seo, Steven Yeun

PLOT Aspiring writer Jongsu (Yoo) reconnects with schoolfriend Haemi (Jun), the couple quickly getting together. Haemi takes a trip to Africa and returns with the affluent Ben (Yeun) by her side. His nose out of joint, Jongsu is further disturbed by the revelation of Ben’s unusual hobby...

For its first half hour or so, Burning proffers an engaging, nuanced romance. Wannabe writer Jongsu (Yoo) bumps into old school friend Haemi (Jun) selling lottery tickets on the street. The pair have a lightning courtship — her tangerine-eating mime during dinner is super charming — and are soon having sex in her cramped apartment, Jongsu promising to feed Haemi’s cat Boil (the name becomes important later) while she is on a trip to Africa. It’s here that the enigmas and twists that become Burning’s stock-in-trade start to rack up. Firstly, during Haemi’s absence, Jongsu never actually sees Boil, although the food is being eaten and kitty litter messed with. Secondly, she returns from the Kalahari with a new beau in tow — Ben (Yeun), a Korean Jay Gatsby, confident and out for fun. Jongsu understandably is knocked for six. This triangular relationship evolves into an engrossing and unpredictable psychological thriller. Syringed into the story are reflections on class conflicts, sexual jealousy, dealing with your past (Jongsu is from a fractured family) and a study in how introspection can build into feelings of injustice and retribution. Chang-dong keeps everything on a slow boil (not the cat), reaching a poetic creepiness in long stretches without dialogue. The craft is hypnotic and exquisite (step forward cinematographer Hong Kyung-pyo), but the overall effect is unnerving.

As a hero, Jonsu is an introverted, not-easy-to-warm-to hero but Yoo suggests oceans of longing before turning into 2019’s most shambolic detective. Casting the charismatic Yeun is a masterstroke; his star status on The Walking Dead means Ben instantly lauds it over Jonsu without the actor doing anything — he takes the stereotypical rich, romantic suitor and invests him with vulnerability beneath the bravado. But it is Jun who is the breakout here, so effervescent the film noticeably dims when she is not on screen. The film’s standout scene sees Jongsu and Ben share a joint as Haemi strips to the waist and dances to Miles Davis’ jazzy score for Elevator To The Gallows, not for the men’s pleasure but lost in her own reverie. It’s a bewitching turn that lights up the film. Just don’t expect any illumination on its mysteries.

VERDICT Slow and difficult to get a hold on, Burning emerges as a brilliantly made one-off; puzzling, intelligent and ultimately mesmerising. And Jong-seo Jeon is a revelation.

JUST AS HOLLYWOOD often trades in narrative certainties and soothing resolutions, Burning is built on ambiguity. Inspired by Haruki Murakami’s story Barn Burning, South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-dong’s first film since 2010’s Poetry takes thriller movie tropes (no spoilers) and dials the pace and thrills right down, replacing them with foreboding and dread. Elliptical and strange, it is more cryptic than the toughest crossword, but stick with it: the rewards are manifold.
Changing Rooms’ revamp was a tad outré.

AT THE VERY end of his last film, 2016’s Split, M. Night Shyamalan pulled away from the supernatural maniac, both of them are confined to a creepy asylum, along with the titular Mr Glass (Samuel L. Jackson), and the film slows to Unbreakable pace.

It’s here that cracks start to appear in Glass. Raven Hill Memorial hospital has some inventive tricks designed to keep its inmates in their cages, not to mention a room for group meetings that’s painted a truly terrifying shade of pink. But it also keeps the three lead characters apart (a shame considering Willis and a twitchy Jackson are each on form), and gives most screen time to a doctor (Paulson) bent on proving they’re normal human beings, after all. Her monologues grow tiresome, Willis doesn’t get enough to do, and the second act’s languid pace gives you more time to unpick the plot holes. Without giving anything away, the security team for this supermax sanatorium should have been fired by the one-hour mark.

Shyamalan remains an ambitious, interesting director, shooting close-ups with Dutch angles and imbuing even the talky scenes with a palpable sense of trepidation. But his writing here often doesn’t hit the target; where Unbreakable was a smart, simmering deconstruction of comic-book tropes, Glass veers towards the heavy-handed, with characters disseminating his ideas through clumsy dialogue. And the eventful last 20 minutes offer both big moments that are confident, surprising and thought-provoking, and a flurry of laughably ridiculous twists. Despite boasting some fine performances and dread-ridden atmosphere, then, the film is sadly less than the sum of its parts. At least a Scrunt doesn’t turn up in the final scene.

VERDICT Essentially a Split sequel with an Unbreakable topping, this is weaker than either film but still has plenty of entertaining sequences, most of them due to McAvoy’s top-rate performance.

ON HER SHOULDERS

OUT 25 JANUARY / CERT 12A / 94 MINS
DIRECTOR Alexandria Bombach
CAST Nadia Murad, Murad Ismael, Ki-moon Ban

ALEXANDRA BOMBACH’S GRIPPING documentary profiles 23-year-old activist Nadia Murad, who survived a hideous ordeal at the hands of ISIS during the genocide of the Yazidis in northern Iraq in 2014. It’s formally conventional filmmaking — fly-on-the-wall actuality mixed with talking heads — but, on her way to address the UN, Murad’s strength of character pulls you through, be it being asked in interviews to revisit her horror or meeting world leaders who are powerless to help her. Bombach never forgets to drop in human moments — such as Murad’s joy in riding a shopping trolley — and the film is at its best with Murad writing her speeches on the fly. A sensitive portrait of a remarkable woman. IF

MEKToub, MY LOVE

OUT 15 FEBRUARY / CERT 15 / 181 MINS
DIRECTOR Abdellatif Kechiche
CAST Shain Boumedine, Ophélie Bau, Salim Kechiouche, Alexa Chardard

IN OUTLINE, ADELLATIF Kechiche’s follow-up to Blue Is The Warmest Colour is like a three-hour Love Island: twentysomethings gossip, flirt, smoke, dance and shag in a sun-kissed locale. What it lacks in story and dramatic incident, it makes up for in a series of set-pieces that thrum with naturalism. The hero is the inscrutable Amin (Boumedine) who has an unspoken thing for Ophélie (Bau) who is having an affair with Tony (Kechiouche) who is getting bored with Charlotte (Chardard) etc. As the relationships develop, Kechiche’s camera consistently ogles his female cast, but he remains a terrific director of actors, the intimacy and authenticity conveying a real lust for life to sweeten the hefty running time. IF
THE PUNISHER: SEASON 2

SHOWRUNNER Steve Lightfoot
CAST Jon Bernthal, Ben Barnes, Amber Rose Revah, Giorgia Whigham, Josh Stewart

PLOT Frank Castle (Bernthal) is crossing the US when he rescues a teenager (Whigham) being hunted by killers. Meanwhile, Billy Russo (Barnes) is in a coma, after a beating from Frank, and Agent Madani (Revah) is worried what he’ll say when he wakes up.

THE BEST REASON TO WATCH THE SHOW, aside from Bernthal’s charisma and tendency to grunt like a gorilla when he’s amped up, is the consistently brutal action. In one gym-based fight Castle shows such flagrant disregard for the niceties of combat that the Marquess of Queensberry would swoon dead away. Unusually, a bar brawl sees him square off against two ferocious female opponents, proving he’s a pleasingly equal-opportunities fighter. Anything is fair game as a weapon, from an iron bar to a box of herbal tea, and most skirmishes end with Castle crawling or limping away.

Like almost every Marvel Netflix show, 13 episodes is too long, with endless slow burn followed by a final episode that struggles to cram everything in. There’s some beautifully hard-boiled dialogue along the way — “I’m not the one that dies, kid. I’m the one that does the killing” — but while Frank Castle is a more bloodthirsty killer than most, this season doesn’t do enough to distinguish him from the rest of the plaid-clad herd. HELEN O’HARA

VERDICT Bernthal’s hugely charismatic and great in the role, but the story around him is muddy, and this season’s bad guys never really seem his match.
BREXIT: THE UNCIVIL WAR

DIRECTOR Toby Haynes
WRITER James Graham
CAST Benedict Cumberbatch, Rory Kinnear, John Hefferman, Liz White

PLOT It’s late 2015 and Prime Minister David Cameron has called a referendum on Britain’s continued membership of the European Union. Seeing their opportunity, a group of Eurosceptics headed by political strategist Dominic Cummings (Cumberbatch) found the Vote Leave campaign and set out to sway the nation.

WHEN THE TEASER for Brexit: The Uncivil War dropped late last year, you’d have been forgiven for thinking it was an elaborate send-up. With comedic pastiches of Boris Johnson and Michael Gove reeling off Brexit slogans amidst the bewildered hand-wringing of agonised Remainers, it resembled nothing so much as a mega-budget SNL skit. But Brexit: The Uncivil War, like its namesake, is very real indeed.

With a vocal Remain activist in the lead role, many will write Brexit off as a Remoaner polemic, but writer James Graham’s work is rarely so black and white. He takes pains to avoid taking sides — directly, at least — instead focusing on one key person: the largely unknown mastermind behind Vote Leave, Dominic Cummings. A former special advisor to Michael Gove, he’s portrayed here as a savant-like data hound, with a Sherlockian insight and mastery of the digital arts, providing a political strategy based on likes and retweets instead of hearts and minds. Graham’s focus is on the data-driven process that led to that 52 per cent victory. A political Moneyball, if you like, only with more Nigel Farage.

As a relative unknown, Cummings is a compelling focal point, his single-mindedness and ability to see the whole board leading to a campaign that was both far more sophisticated and better organised than that of his Remain counterparts. Benedict Cumberbatch plays the character with deliberate ambiguity, never decisive as to whether the strategist is a true political genius, or only thinks he is. “He’s not the Messiah,” bemoans Rory Kinnear as Craig Oliver, Cummings’ Remain counterpart. “He’s a very naughty fucking arsehole!”

Dramatic doppelgängers are portrayed alongside archive footage of real-life characters, including Cameron and George Osborne, but never in a manner that jars. It helps that the film is intercut with an assortment of stylistic storytelling devices (comedy captions, to-camera addresses from a broom cupboard) that recall Adam McKay’s Vice and The Big Short, only with less panache. What’s fascinating here is the route by which we got here, with the manipulation of people’s data and the weaponisation of misinformation deployed by both sides. It’s a chilling indictment of the modern political process and augurs ill for a future in which big data is used to control every aspect of our lives. British democracy, Cummings realises, is just a beta test for digital puppet mastery on a global scale — an endgame far more worrying than the fate of one country’s economic relationships.

VERDICT Part docu-drama, part political thriller, it plays like The Thick Of It with less creative swearing but provides a gripping — and sobering — insight into the vote that split the nation.
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EXCLUSIVE SUBSCRIBER-ONLY COVERS
MARVEL'S VERY FIRST FEMALE SUPERHERO MOVIE HAS A FAR BIGGER REVOLUTION BOTH IN ITS BONES AND ITS SIGHTS, AS EMPIRE LEARNED ON SET OF 2019'S MOST RADICAL FILM: CAPTAIN MARVEL
The lives of directors Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck changed forever during the matinée performance of a Broadway show.

Fleck took his phone off silent during the intermission of Pulitzer-Prize winning play Sweat in 2017, to see five missed calls and countless texts from his agent. “We were like, ‘What the fuck?!’” he laughs as Empire meets the pair on day 50 of the gig that those five missed calls and countless texts were informing him of — helming Captain Marvel. After they digested the news and sat through the second half of the play (“We didn’t leave, it was really good,” says Boden), they decided to check whether their names had featured in the mix of the churning, whirling online rumour mill.

“I remember Googling it,” says Fleck. “And no-one called this one...”

Even though Marvel has a habit of plucking little-known filmmakers and placing them at the centre of huge tentpole movies, when the news was announced in April of that year, it was still met with surprise. The filmmaking duo certainly weren’t household names, with a filmography of quiet, intimate, indie outings including Half Nelson and Mississippi Grind, but all at Marvel — including president Kevin Feige — have spoken passionately about what makes them the right team. “We knew that they’d put character at the heart,” says executive producer Jonathan Schwartz.

“What makes them smart, what makes them cool, what makes them funny.” This translated into a vision that they pitched to the studio in a series of meetings and what Schwartz now describes, in December 2018 with the film in post, as “a great take” on what makes Carol Danvers, AKA Captain Marvel, tick.

This vision was for a flawed Carol Danvers, a human Carol Danvers. “She’s not the perfect superhero,” says Fleck. “She gets punched in the face a lot, she makes mistakes, but we love her for it.”

And who do you need to play this version of Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel? A test pilot whose DNA has been melded with that of the alien species Kree — not just giving her superhero powers but making her, in the words of Kevin Feige, “by far the strongest character we’ve ever had”? You would do worse than start (and end) with an Oscar-winning actress.

“Brie was the first and only choice,” says Jonathan Schwartz, pointing to the demands of the multi-faceted character — and specifically her strength, emotion and humour. For her part, Brie Larson admits: “It took a little bit for me to come into the room.” When she did, she was impressed by what Marvel put on the table — the general shape of Carol Danvers’ character and story, plus a mock-up of the costume. It was the detail that won Larson over. “I was really impressed with what direction they were going to take it in,” she says. “For example, with the costume, it’s functional, she’s a fighter — everything on that costume has a purpose and a meaning”.

But while she was impressed, it still wasn’t an immediate yes. The life-changing consequences of appearing...
in a movie like Captain Marvel sat heavily. “It took me a while to agree to do it,” she admits. “I really needed time to sit with myself and see if this was a choice I should make and a life I should live. It wasn’t about the piece itself — more about all that comes with it after the movie comes out. And whether, as an introvert and someone who really enjoys anonymity and being able to walk around and observe the world, that experience might be different and I might be more observed than being the observer. I didn’t know mentally if that was something I could handle. And also, I felt that my art, things I want to create, my ability to tell stories of the human experience, would suffer because my reality would be too far, too different, from what most people’s reality is”.

But agree she finally did. Once she was on board, Larson threw herself headlong into the role: from reading the comic books to visiting Air Force bases, meeting female pilots, flying jets and undergoing nine months of intense physical training. “I got super-strong,” she says. “It wasn’t enough to just put the costume on and play pretend strength, I wanted to be actually strong. I wanted girls and women to know how much dedication and time I put in. And that I could deadlift 225lbs and do ten pull-ups at a time. That the strength that was in her, was in me, to the bone.”

It’s a physical and mental commitment to her craft that all involved attest to. “Brie has more facets to her than a diamond,” says Ben Mendelsohn, who plays Larson’s most-feared foe as leader of enemy alien race the Skrulls. “You forget, Brie has a comedy background, a really dignified and
powerful acting background. She did an enormous amount of work to prepare and to stay Cap Marvel. That’s an incredibly strong person. Her gifts are formidable, her work ethic peerless.”

Jude Law, leader of Starforce and Danver’s mentor, agrees: “It’s rare you can say you can’t think of anyone else playing the role. She brings a fantastic intellect, energy, youthfulness, sassiness”.

Furthering the challenge was that Brie Larson was preparing to play not just the most powerful superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but a very specific version of the character: one that was overtly, proudly feminist.

CAPTAIN MARVEL, AS a project, has been bubbling away at Marvel for several years. Jonathan Schwartz confirms that there was a ‘Captain Marvel’ script, or more specifically a ‘Ms Marvel’ script, developed as part of the Marvel writer programme. This iteration, though, bears little resemblance to the current film about to hit cinemas. When writers Nicole Perlman and Meg LeFauve were hired in 2013, they were given a blank page.

“Carol is a tricky character with a fairly involved backstory,” says Schwartz. “So, finding the right take on her took a lot of time, a lot of care, to sift through the comics and stories to work out what the big-screen version of her should be.”

The comic-book run they finally settled on — that Schwartz describes as their “north star” — was a very singular one. Arguably the most progressive one of all — Kelly Sue DeConnick’s 2012 ‘Captain Marvel’ series. The one that isn’t an origin story, that both sends Captain Marvel to space and grounds her as a pilot. It was this run that became the focus for Carol’s personality and the world she inhabited. It was this series that “made us fall in love with Carol Danvers first” says Anna Boden. “A female superhero who’s allowed to be funny and bold and sometimes reckless and all the things that make her human and make her loveable.”

Schwartz is clear about the appeal of DeConnick’s version of the character. “It’s unabashedly a feminist run,” he says. “And I think a lot of the themes, the guiding spirit, we wanted to keep in the movie. We didn’t want to run away from that — we wanted to run toward it.” It’s what some may consider to be an incredibly bold choice in a likely
A billion-dollar superhero movie, but Schwartz remains unconvinced of the risk. “In our calculus, it didn’t feel bold or not bold. It just felt right. It’s what excited us about the character in the beginning. You have to honour those things.”

With the character, themes and storytelling beats established, there was one big challenge waiting in the wings for the directors. The reality that any Marvel movie must include a very healthy dollop of spectacle and a truck-load of complex effects. A world that both confess was completely new to them — they had zero experience with VFX or previz, undergoing a “visual effects 101” from the team at Marvel.

“It seems like the craziest place to make that step because they’re making the biggest movies out there and we haven’t made any big movies, but in some way it’s the best, easiest place,” says Boden, who admits they had “so much fun playing with all the toys and exploding things” and working out the path from what was in their imaginations to what could be
But while we can expect plenty of the customary bang and wallop, the character work at the heart of the film, combined with the filmmaking approach of Boden and Fleck, meant that *Captain Marvel* had more practical sets, and used more locations and less greenscreen than your normal superhero film of this scale and certainly than any other Marvel film.

“One of the things that was very important to us, coming from an independent, more tactile world,” says Boden, “was to have some reality on our sets and for our actors to be able to interact with their environments in some way.”

One person who was used to this approach was Ben Mendelsohn, who was given his first lead role in an American film (*Mississippi Grind*) by Boden and Fleck back in 2015. “I have something of a shorthand with them,” he says on set, carefully peeling off the eight green fingernails and two thumbs that he’s wearing along with a ton of prosthetics. “I thought we got a good result in *Mississippi Grind*. They were asking me to do some stuff with this Skrull guy that was going to be fun and interesting. It’s different, but it’s the same. It’s just an actor and a camera.”

It’s a philosophy echoed by Larson, who points to the commitment to a standard of performance and craft as one of the persuasive elements of taking this role. She was conscious of putting as much care into the character as she would for a dramatic gig and speaks to being aligned with Boden and Fleck on resisting all-out VFX frenzy.

“One of the main pieces that we talked about was making sure the film didn’t just rely on visual effects and explosions and chases,” Larson says. “But instead has moments throughout of real emotion and heart. And that’s what we’d fight for. That was exciting to me. The idea of doing real scene-work in a movie that’s large and in space felt like a challenge I wanted to take.”

Jonathan Schwartz points to certain big action movies of the 1990s — *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* among them — as more unexpected inspirations, saying, “They did what we’re trying to do — put character at the centre and let the characters drive the action and the spectacle.”

But it wasn’t just their handling of these storytelling elements that made them such great reference points, but the decade they were set in. *Captain Marvel* is set in the mid-’90s, long after
who says he’s back as “a younger, naive” Nick Fury at the beginning of his career as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, underwent the most extensive de-ageing in film so far at the hands of Lola VFX (responsible for de-ageing Michael Douglas in Ant-Man, Robert Downey Jr. in Captain America: Civil War and Kurt Russell in Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 2).

Schwartz describes it as, “the most ambitious and robust de-ageing we’ve done in any Marvel film to date”, but as a decision that simply had to be made “because Nick Fury was becoming such an important part of this movie. And I can’t imagine ever asking another actor to fill Sam’s shoes. I just can’t wrap my head around it.”

BEHIND ALL OF this innovative, groundbreaking filmmaking is an army. An army that looks slightly different from your average Marvel army — an army of women. It’s clear that the commitment to representation from the studio has gone way beyond simply making the first female superhero movie. That making a movie from a female perspective and with a filmmaker voice in and of itself wasn’t enough. Says Schwartz: “That meant hiring a female filmmaker in Anna Boden, that meant hiring female writers and hiring as many female department heads as we could so that we could fill the room with the voices of the people who we knew we would need to infuse this character with truth.”

Brie Larson attests to “the care that they were going to take” in ensuring representation, particularly in hiring choices, saying, “These are things that as time goes on, we look back and say, ‘Oh, it’s just normal,’ but at the time that was an incredibly radical choice to make.” For Larson personally, it meant using her power and influence wherever and whenever possible, to ensure parity, something she says she “feels proud of”.

Anna Boden admits that the huge significance attached to this film can, at times, feel overwhelming; almost too huge to fully comprehend. “We appreciate how important this movie is,” she says. “But in terms of managing the pressures day to day and carrying the weight of it, we try to focus on putting our everything into making this film as good and true to itself as it can be and doing justice to a character who is a complicated, fascinating human being and also an amazingly strong woman.”

Captain Marvel herself is keen to emphasise that the job isn’t done. That this is one film, at one point in history, one stop in a long conversation. “This film isn’t the end, the answer to the question,” Larson says. “It’s the beginning for many more stories.” Captain, we salute you. And we can’t wait for Vol. 2.
Where is Nick Fury in his career in Captain Marvel?
He’s been out of the army for a while, and he’s now basically riding a desk in the newly created S.H.I.E.L.D., doing threat assessment, trying to figure out where the next war will jump off or where our next threat will come from, never even believing or knowing anything about extra-terrestrials.

And what does he see for himself at the point we find him?
He’s kind of bored! [laughs] He doesn’t go in the field and do a lot of stuff. He’s doing threat assessment and there’s not a lot of ways to do that that are exciting.

Does he have less of an edge to him—less world-weary, seen it all?
He doesn’t have that yet, no. Not at all. He hasn’t yet developed the set of cynicisms that propels Nick Fury in later films.

Is his relationship with S.H.I.E.L.D. less complex?
Yeah, it’s less complex. It’s a boring job where you send people out into the field to see if that government’s doing this or that, and having never thought of aliens, it’s sort of off-putting when he does meet Captain Marvel in terms of the fact that even though she’s an alien, she’s not green. She looks like the rest of the people on Earth. It takes him a moment to accept that fact.

How does that shape how he sees the world?
It’s totally life-changing, and mind-changing, because they are a lot more powerful than anything we’ve seen. And it lends credence to the fact that he’s got to find other people or other beings that are willing to be our allies.

And what can you say about his relationship and partnership with Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel?
They bond pretty well once they figure out the fact that, “Okay, you’re from somewhere else and we think you’re an alien but you’re actually from here and you’ve been sort of brainwashed into thinking you’re an alien. But, there are these other people chasing you that are aliens.” So the fact he helps her rediscover her history bonds them in a very real and genuine way. And creates a really interesting set-up between the two of them. He becomes an integral part of who she is and how she sees the rest of the universe.

What’s it like for you, ten years on with Nick Fury?
It’s been fun! Back when I had the nine-picture deal I was pretty secure in terms of, “Okay, I’m gonna be around for nine pictures, I don’t know how long that’s gonna take,” and I didn’t realise they were gonna make 13 pictures in three years, I thought that would be over. And then you start working on ways of staying alive, because you like doing the job, you don’t want them to kill you, you wanna keep hanging around [laughs]. And I’ve been very fortunate, I’ve been in some big franchise films between this and Star Wars and Jurassic Park world, I died in that one — I was around for a while. There are all kinds of iconic characters that I’ve had an opportunity to portray, I think, that will be around with people for a while, including Mace Windu and Jules and Nick Fury. I’ve been lucky.
FROM HIS ROOTS AS A KNEE-HIGH DORSET DYNAMO, HE’S RISEN TO BECOME THE TOAST OF HOLLYWOOD. SEVENTEEN OF HIS FRIENDS, COLLABORATORS AND FAMILY MEMBERS TELL THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF EDGAR WRIGHT

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT
ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWS NICK DE SEMLYEN
PORTRAIT ANDY PARSONS
WRIGHT'S RIDE
**THE DREAMER**

Lesley Wright (mother): One week he said, “Mum, I want to be a film star.” So I said, “To be realistic, you’re going to have to think about television first.” This is a five-year-old we’re talking about. He said, “No, that’s not famous enough.” Then the Two Ronnies were filming down on the beach. We went and met Ronnie Corbett and saw Ronnie Barker directing. We came back and I said, “Do you still want to be a film star?” Edgar said, “No. I want to be the director.” Because he’d watched Ronnie Barker all day.

Edgar: I grew up in Swanage, and Poole was our nearest town showing first-run movies. Star Wars was my first film at the cinema.

Lesley Wright: It was his brother Oscar’s birthday treat. And Edgar was on my knee.

Chris Wright (father): Edgar was bowled over by that.

Edgar: When the Star Destroyer showed up and seemed to come out of the ceiling, I was completely immersed. But the first time I remember thinking, “Somebody made this movie,” was Raiders Of The Lost Ark. It was the first time I had a palpable feeling of, “How did they do that?” I definitely wanted to be part of it.

Lesley Wright: When we moved to Wells, Somerset, he worked in the local supermarket and saved up to get a Super 8 camera. Chris went and got it for him.

Chris Wright: I got a really good one for him. The Braun Nizo.

Oscar Wright (brother): He used to plan his shorts quite meticulously. I went out filming with him one day just to help out, and I was larking around. I got sent home.

Edgar: That sounds possible.

Lesley Wright: There was a competition for Comic Relief [in 1991, when Edgar was 16]. They wanted people to send in films of social comment. Edgar said, “I’m not interested in social comment!” But when they were coming down to the deadline, he said, “I’ve got an idea!”

Edgar: I did a short about how more cinemas needed a wheelchair ramp. That was the altruistic reason. The more cynical reason is that a girl at school I fancied said, “You should do that competition.” I won the competition, but never went on a date with her, so it was a hollow triumph.

Lesley Wright: Edgar won a handheld video camera and he was off.

**THE BEGINNING**

Edgar: I wrote the script for A Fistful Of Fingers in the college library [while completing his diploma in audio visual design]. I wrote only one draft, which I later discovered was not such a good idea. The person who invested in it was the editor of the local newspaper, The Wells Journal. We shot the movie for 11 grand in the summer of 1994. Twenty-one days. I remember it vividly.

Oli Van Der Vlijver (The Squint, A Fistful Of Fingers): Edgar was deadly serious about the film. We even did two or three night shoots. The post was where it got difficult, I think.

Edgar: I moved to London to edit it. I was sleeping on my brother’s floor. We didn’t have any money. We were editing at Pinewood, but not necessarily legally.

Oscar Wright: When it opened, I remember Edgar being elated that it took more money that weekend than Guarding Tess.

Edgar: I felt very conflicted about the movie at the time. I feel much more fondly of it now. And Matt Lucas and David Walliams saw the movie and recommended me to direct Mash And Pear, their show on the Paramount Comedy Channel.

I met Simon Pegg after one of their gigs.

Simon Pegg (star/co-writer, Spaced): It’s a bone of contention between us, where we met. Walliams saw the movie and recommended me to direct Mash And Pear, their show on the Paramount Comedy Channel. I met Simon Pegg after one of their gigs.

Jessica Hynes (star/co-writer, Spaced): After Asylum, Simon and I started to develop and write Spaced. When we were thinking about a director, we both thought that Edgar would be good.

Edgar: We made that show completely under the radar. There was a point where I nearly got fired because I refused to show the executive producer, Humphrey Barclay, the rushes. I was sure if they saw what I was doing, they’d get freaked out.

Pegg: We wanted it to be cinematic in inverted commas, but we didn’t really know what that was. We could write “cut to” something happening, but he would be able to do that cutaway in the style of the film we were referencing. We always said Edgar was the third writer of the show.

Hynes: I remember we were doing a whole sequence with zombies, based around Resident Evil. And when we got the blood spatters on the zombie, for Simon and Edgar it was like falling in love. “You love zombies? I love zombies!”

**THE ROMZOMCOM**

Nira Park (producer): The hardest part about making Shaun Of The Dead was actually getting it financed. Making it was tough but we just felt so lucky to be making a movie that it...
Edgar: We developed it for Film4 and they went bust. The whole of 2002 was about trying to get that script going. I was getting increasingly broke. I’d been borrowing money off friends, like Simon and Nira.

Eric Fellner (Working Title co-chairman): I read the script for Shaun, and asked to meet with Edgar. My job is to identify who’s really got it when they walk into the room. The minute I met him, I knew he was one of those guys. He genuinely believes in what he’s doing. That is such an incredibly attractive quality for other creative people.

Edgar: Simon and I were in Iceland, watching Ash support Coldplay. I remember we were at the Blue Lagoon when I got the call saying Working Title were going to finance the movie. I owe my career to Natascha Wharton of Working Title, and Eric Fellner. With Shaun Of The Dead was that I didn’t have as much fun as I wanted to. We were making a zombie movie, it should have been heaven on Earth, but I was having a tough time. It was partly pressures I put on myself, and a couple of crew members who were not into the movie.

Pegg: The camera crew was a little obstreperous at times with Edgar. A little work-to-rule. It wasn’t that they wouldn’t go along with his vision. It was more that they didn’t know what they were making.

Edgar: For some people, Shaun was just a job. Just a cheap zombie movie for six weeks. They were working, but for me and Simon and Nick and Nira, this was our chance to make a genre movie in North London, where we live. And after the fact, those people changed their tune about the movie.

THE NETWORK

Pegg: After it came out, Shaun was so beloved by a lot of filmmakers. Part of the marketing in America was the quotes from Quentin [Tarantino] and George Romero and Peter Jackson. I think other directors related to Edgar. He’s brilliant at talking to people like that.

Frost: I don’t think this is telling a tale out of school, but he’s a massive starfucker. He fucking loves everyone, he knows everyone. He’s amazing at it.

Park: I was there when Edgar first had dinner with Quentin Tarantino. I remember looking at Edgar’s beaming face and feeling so proud of him, that he was getting to meet his heroes. Our first Comic-Con was hilarious. We all ran around in circles, we were so excited.

Edgar: I take no greater pleasure than going to dinner with some of my favourite filmmakers and listening to their stories. If you had the chance to have dinner with Walter Hill and ask him all the questions you’ve wanted to ask, why wouldn’t you?

Paddy Considine (star, Hot Fuzz and The World’s End): He’s very inclusive. When I was out in LA with him, I ended up going round Kevin Smith’s house, and Tarantino’s. There’s a whole film community that Edgar is very keen to introduce you to.

Joe Cornish (co-writer, Ant-Man and Tintin): Edgar was living in Quentin Tarantino’s guest house when we were writing Ant-Man and Tintin. Quentin lives in William Friedkin’s old house. It’s a very satisfying place to visit.

Edgar: At the end of the Hot Fuzz press tour I was a little adrift. I’d broken up with my girlfriend and, instead of going back home and facing an empty flat, I decided to stay in Los Angeles for
Martin Freeman. He was laughing so much, and then he set me off. We couldn’t stop. He has the best laugh.

THE LAUGH

Chris Evans (star, Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World): I love his laugh. It’s a cackle, but it’s so honest. It’s so genuine. It’s such a relief to hear that laugh. It’s wildly infectious.

Michael Cera (star, Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World): Who can forget Edgar and his laugh? It sounded like a eulogy for a second. It’s a very special laugh.

Fellner: That laugh means life. He has the nervous version and the joyous version. The nervous version is slightly worrying as a producer. He’s also the best person to watch one of his movies with, because he laughs his way through it. The jokes never seem to get old for him. He’s the perfect audience to watch a movie with.

Jon Hamm (star, Baby Driver): It’s exactly what I love about Edgar. In the fact that it’s authentic. There’s nothing manufactured about it.

Oscar Wright: It’s funny — we have the same laugh, so sometimes people have got it in stereo. I think it’s freaked out a lot of his girlfriends when they first meet me and we both start laughing.

Pegg: Once it explodes, you can’t stop it. It’s great to hear. I’m smiling thinking about it. I’ve watched TV shows where they’ve had live audiences and I’ve heard Edgar on telly in the audience. Which is hilarious. He throws his head back and he claps while he’s laughing.

Cornish: It’s like a sort of movie seal in the cinema, clapping its fins and honking with aquatic joy.

THE LIGHTWEIGHT

Pegg: I really enjoyed the US press tour for Hot Fuzz, which was immortalised by Joe Cornish in a documentary called The Fuzzball Rally. In Atlanta, a group of young fans gave us brownies laced with fun stuff. We were travelling away from Georgia and Edgar and Nick ate the rest of these brownies. By the time we got to Atlanta airport, Edgar was so fucked that we had to find immigration and security. The jokes never seemed to get old for him.

Frost: In the car we looked at him and he was like green art glass. Sweaty green art glass. Then we lost him in the lounge, and found him in a vibrating chair.

Pegg: Next to an empty jar of cookies.
Frost: He didn’t say a word for the whole flight home.
Edgar: The space cakes thing was actually at the end of the Shaun Of The Dead tour in 2004. I felt like I was in Midnight Express going through security. I had the cold sweats. Two hours stretched on for 13.
Cornish: He’s very sweet, Edgar. He has a very low alcohol tolerance threshold. He’ll be the most incredibly entertaining person for about 23-and-a-half minutes, then he’ll fall over.
Frost: He was an alcoholic drunk. Years ago, he had this idea for a movie about a pub crawl. He said, “Why don’t we go down to Wells and write for a week?” We hired this amazing Mercedes and then ended up not writing anything at all. When Edgar goes back to Wells, he’s like a teenager again. He would come in with his shirt ripped. He was hammered. In hindsight, I look back and go, “You could have co-written The World’s End, you fucking idiot!”
Edgar: I am a lightweight. In The World’s End I would be the Martin Freeman character, out for the count halfway through.

THE PILGRIMAGE
Wright: I felt I needed to prove myself outside of Simon and Nick. Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World was a chance to do something very different and fresh, and with a studio. I was excited about doing it. It had elements of magical realism and pop art and the chance to do something visually different.
Cera: I think everyone was excited by each other. Me and Edgar and Michael Bacall all lived in the same building, on the same floor. Me and Michael would stay up so many nights watching movies and hanging out.
Evans: It’s one of the few movies I’ve done where I didn’t want to leave.
Cera: Edgar is, basically, an animator. He storyboarded everything, including expressions and rhythm.
Evans: I don’t think Edgar operates in the way some directors do. “Well, we’ll find it in the editing room.” Edgar has a specific vision from the second he steps on set. The moment when I come out and crack my neck to the Universal theme isn’t something they discovered later. He thought it would be funny and was able to paint such a clear picture for me.
Edgar: When the film opened to $10 million or something, people around you act like there’s been a death in the family. But my response at the time was it’s the first weekend. Films last forever.
Cera: It was a shame people didn’t find it at the time. We all felt it was something very different and fresh, and with a studio. I was excited about doing it. It had elements of magical realism and pop art and the chance to do something visually different.

THE END OF THE F**KING WORLD
Edgar: In 2007 I had promised Eric Fellner two scripts: The World’s End and Baby Driver.
Fellner: He knew I’d buy into Baby Driver because it had cars in it. He just had to say “getaway driver” and I was in.
Edgar: I finished Baby Driver in 2011, and on the day I handed in the script I heard that Eric had aggressive cancer, and a 50/50 chance of living. I felt so awful and guilty that I was handing the script in four years later anyway, and the idea of losing someone who was very dear to us was a terrible thing. I called Simon and said, “We have to write The World’s End right now because Eric has to see it. It can’t say ‘FOR ERIC’ at the start.”
Fellner: That meant an enormous amount. It’s impossible to put into words what it meant.
Edgar: So we dropped everything and wrote The World’s End in Eric’s office in LA, in the space of about six weeks. Also, Simon had gone through something after Hot Fuzz, where his own problems with alcohol could not be ignored. Between coming up with the idea for the film and writing it, he got sober.
Pegg: We talked about Gary at length. We messed around with him in the writing room for a year, and I had a fully formed idea of who Gary was. Edgar helped me arrive at that as well.
Edgar: Writing the movie became our way of talking about the elephant in the room without actually talking about it. It was an extremely therapeutic experience where we could write about Gary King and deal with some of the things we had both been through. And I’m very proud of that movie.

THE RED LIGHT, THE GREEN LIGHT
Cornish: Just after Shaun Of The Dead came out, Edgar met with Artisan, who had the rights to Ant-Man then, before Marvel really existed as a company. He was a big fan of Ant-Man from his youth, and said “I wouldn’t mind having a go.” He called me and said, “Would you be up for writing this with me?” That was the beginning of a very long relationship with Marvel that ended in creative divorce.
Edgar: Me and Joe handed in the first draft of Ant-Man in 2008, before Iron
Man had come out. In the time we developed that movie, between 2008 and 2014, the company really changed. Eight weeks before we started shooting, they told me and Joe they were doing a draft without us, which was a tough thing to take. When I read the draft, it was a very different movie. I went to see them the next day with my agent. Contrary to popular belief, I wasn’t fired. I did leave.

Considine: I have the utmost respect for him because of that. If you don’t want Edgar Wright’s version of Ant-Man, then don’t hire him.

Edgar: I knew leaving the Marvel movie was the right thing to do, but I said to my agent, “As long as I’m making another movie by the time that one comes out, I’ll be okay.” Cut to summer 2015. I’m going to a meeting to get people excited about Baby Driver, and I remember being on Los Feliz Boulevard, stuck behind a bus that had an Ant-Man poster on it. That was probably my lowest ebb of 2015.

Park: Times were tough after Ant-Man, but he very quickly picked himself up and we started pushing Baby Driver forward.

Edgar: How can you give people something familiar yet fresh? That’s the trick. Baby Driver’s genre elements were deliberately very familiar: heists, car chases, handsome guys, gorgeous girls, gunfights, foot chases. Credit to MRC and Sony for greenlighting the movie. And we ended up with a starrier cast than anticipated.

Hamm: We’ve kept in touch for years. After Ant-Man, he said, “I have this other thing.” And it was Baby Driver. It was exciting and original and cool. I urged him to do it. And he did.

Ansel Elgort (star, Baby Driver): For the ‘Harlem Shuffle’ shot, Edgar would come in with a little camera, and film me doing the choreography. He would always make rough demos with his personal camera, which was really cool.

Lily James (star, Baby Driver): He’d be up in your grill filming on that old retro vintage camera. And there was an animated storyboard, so as we were filming he would slot in shots, so you could see it unfold on the day.

Hamm: I remember that my job on Baby Driver was to say to him, “Okay, let’s go get something to eat.” He would just not take a break. If he wasn’t shooting on main unit, he was on second unit. If he wasn’t on second unit, he was shot-planning or something else. I’d go, “Buddy, we’ve got to keep feeding you, man. Let’s stay healthy here.”

Fellner: I’ve never seen someone work so hard. He was working seven-day weeks. He was working the first unit during regular weeks. The second unit on weekends.

Elgort: I don’t know when Edgar sleeps.

Lesley Wright: He drives himself into the ground. He can’t stop. He has literally gone back to work on Boxing Day before.

Edgar: I think you have to make every film like it’s your last. I’ve felt that since I started.

Fellner: I was thrilled with the success of Baby Driver. [It made $227 million worldwide]. He pulled it off, and boy, does he deserve it. For him to have a proper, bona fide, commercial hit is fantastic.

Lesley Wright: That’s a real breakthrough, that film. I love Baby Driver. It’s like somebody flicked a switch.

Chris Wright: I like all of them. The one that I want to get to grips with is Scott Pilgrim. I’ve only seen it twice and I found it difficult, the first time. I want to actually sit and watch it again and again, like you have to.
HE’S CHOREOGRAPHED SWAN CHASES, MOUNTED ROOM-DESTROYING BAND BATTLES AND CONVINCED JAMIE FOXX TO WEAR AN AUSTIN POWERS MASK. NOW HE FACES HIS MOST FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE YET: ANSWERING YOUR QUESTIONS

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN ILLUSTRATION JACEY
How often do you skip through TV channels late at night, find a film of yours on and nestle down to watch it? And has this happened in the company of people who don’t know you directed the film?

STEVEN LOWE
I don’t know in what situation somebody would be round my house late at night that doesn’t know who I am. You’d have to have picked up a young tourist who has no idea who you are. That’s Dennis Nilsen territory. So no, that has never happened. I have sometimes been flipping through the channels and *Hot Fuzz or Shaun* will be on. And I have watched parts, for sure. Just never with a random person I picked up at a bar.

If you could be in any band, which would it be? Personally I can see you fitting into Radiohead.

SIMON TUCKER
Oh, I think I’d be terrible in Radiohead. I think I’d like to be in the ’66 Monkees. Or one of The Kinks.

What’s your favourite whip pan in all of cinema?

MAX RHINER
There’s a good little sequence in *The Red Shoes* where she kind of twirling and twirling and twirling and they have the whip pans going on. I like that. That’s a good version of early whip pans.

What’s the most memorable thing George Romero said to you on the set of *Land Of The Dead*?

SALLY HILL
When we were playing the photobooth zombies, me and Simon Pegg, there was an actress with us who was screaming. And after a take, he came up to the actress and gave her some notes on her performance. Then he turns to us and goes, “I don’t need to tell you guys what to do.” That was one thing that was amazing. The other thing was in his hotel the next day. We were having coffee and he asked us what we were doing next. I said, “Oh, we’ve written this police action comedy.” And he said, “Oh, it’s not a horror film? So you’re getting out?” I vividly remember him saying that. I’m very, very fond of George.

Since it wasn’t Skinner, who sustained the wound on a piece of broken glass in *Hot Fuzz*?

JUSTICE MARIE PARCEL
Oh man, that’s a good one. Well, it’s Lurch, isn’t it? Because he’s limping after that. Unless I’m completely wrong, in which case feel free to harangue me on Twitter about it.

Which character would you want to play in any of the films you’ve made?

DEBBIE RAW
It would probably be Baby in *Baby Driver*. Shooting car-chase sequences and being in the car was such a rush. I think I could probably do the bit where he slips over the bonnet in the middle of the intersection if I had enough goes at it, but I’m not sure I could do it in only four takes, like Ansel did.

Will you make a film that passes the Bechdel test?

LEAH GODDARD
Listen, this is a very hollow triumph, but I feel that *Shaun Of The Dead* passes on the basis that Liz and Barbara talk about the zombie infection rather than just Shaun. And *Scott Pilgrim* slips by on the basis that Knives and Envy talk about something else other than Scott. But yes, there’s always room for improvement and all I can say is, I aim to improve. I would like to fly with flying colours at some point soon.

Given your Blu-rays and DVDs are loaded with extras, what is your all-time favourite special feature?

MICHAEL FRIEL
Oh man, what have I watched a lot? This is really random, but I used to like, on the *Mission: Impossible 2* DVD, Ben Stiller’s short about him as Tom Cruise’s double. I don’t know why that popped into my head, but that’s definitely something I watched more than once.

Why don’t you make more historical movies? History is fun. They have great hats.

GREG JENNER
It’s funny, there’s something I’m developing that has an element set in the past. If it was something I felt very passionate about, I would for sure. But at the moment I just need to distinguish myself from Joe Wright. Joe Wright does the historical work.

Will there be another chance to see *Fistful Of Fingers*, either on the big screen or on DVD?

IAN WRIGHT
Arrow are releasing it on Blu-ray this year. And we did this nice documentary, which I’m really happy with, to give it some context. When I did the commentary it was the first time I’d watched it in 20 years. And it was a very fun way to do a commentary. About 50 per cent of it I was like, “Oh, that’s pretty funny.” And then the other 50 per cent I was saying, “I can’t apologise enough for this joke here.” It’s a very, very silly film.

I was intrigued by Kolchak: The Night Stalker, which Johnny Depp was going to star in. Are you still planning on doing some night-stalking?

NICO BACKHOUSE
That’s a frustrating one, actually. I remember watching the TV movie when I was a kid and being really taken with it. D.V. DeVincentis wrote a great ’70s-set script, after we talked about the idea together. It was really good. Probably quite expensive. Then Johnny Depp through his company said he didn’t want to play Kolchak. I think after *Dark Shadows* he didn’t want to do another ’70s thing. It’s a tricky one because Disney/ABC have the rights to it, but also it’s a bit too dark and adult for Disney. Then it came back to us as, “Would we adapt it for the TV?” And at that point I was kind of busy on other things. So it’s in a strange limbo. TBD on that one.
Given the tease in Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse, are we ever likely to see From Dusk Till Shaun in any medium?

AL PLANT

I don’t know. Simon’s talked about doing it in comic form at some point. Personally I feel that there has to be a really good story to tell. I love the way Shaun Of The Dead ends. One of the reasons there’s not a sequel to it is that I don’t think there’s any further comment we have to make about the genre. Maybe there’s somewhere to go, but ultimately I feel like the end of Shaun Of The Dead is the full stop.

You’re well known for poking fun at various pop-culture staples in your work. Now that you’re rubbing shoulders with some of the people involved in those things, has it ever led to uncomfortable moments?

JOHN TATTZ

It has at times, and very quickly you learn not to be so flippant and cheeky. When we were promoting Shaun Of The Dead we were asked more than once, “How would you describe the film?” And I would say, “If you liked Love Actually but wished that more people died, Shaun Of The Dead is the film for you.” But one time I said, “It’s like Richard Burton shot through the head by George Romero.” Now cut to meeting Richard Burton, who happens to be the nicest man on Earth. I saw him the other day, in fact, and though I’ve apologised to him before, I apologised to him today. You’ve just got to be careful — it’s one thing lampooning things in films, but it’s another thing to actually name that person. More often than not you will run into them and they’ll be so nice it’ll make you thoroughly ashamed of your flippancy. So, Richard Burton, if you’re reading this, I apologise yet again. When can I come round for dinner?

What’s your favourite background detail you’ve included in one of your films?

JAMES SOULSBY

There’s a thing in Baby Driver which is kind of nerdy. Baby comes back to his apartment after it’s been trashed by Batman and Buddy, and if you look on the floor, at the records, literally the entire soundtrack of the movie is lying there. You could probably only really see it on a big screen. At the end of the shoot I requested that I keep all of those vinyls, so I now have them.

Would you ever consider making a musical biopic, and if so who would it be about?

RONY LLEWELLYN GENDERS

Funnily enough, I did go in and have a meeting about the Queen film a couple of times. It wasn’t like I was offered it, and ultimately it was something where I couldn’t do both that and Baby Driver, so it didn’t go very far. I’m obviously a fan of the music. In terms of people who haven’t had one done, I think The Kinks would be an interesting movie, because they’ve got an interesting story. What song would I use for the title? Maybe ‘All Day And All Of The Night’.

Can you tell us a bit about your experience making your Sparks documentary and how it’s been in comparison to your other projects?

HANNAH BROOKS

Well, it’s a very different process. I’ve really enjoyed doing the interviews — I think so far I’ve done about 30, and not just with members of Sparks and colleagues of them, but other artists that Sparks has inspired. Everyone from members of the Sex Pistols to Sonic Youth to Duran Duran to Squeeze to Red Hot Chili Peppers. I interviewed Todd Rundgren and that was amazing, but I was sort of overwhelmed by that. Because there’s so much career of his — if something came up, I wanted to make sure I’d done my due diligence.

What’s the weirdest movie you’ve ever seen?

EWELINA DZIECIOŁ

When I was at art college, I used to watch all sorts of horror films and video nasties that were getting passed around. But Michael Winner’s last movie, Parting Shots, is incredibly strange. Me and David Walliams went to see that at the cinema. Chris Rea, the singer, is in the lead, as a lothario who starts killing all of his enemies, and he’s quite an odd presence. He doesn’t seem entirely comfortable being an actor. I remember after seeing it I said, “If you didn’t know it was Chris Rea, you would think that somebody’s dad had won a competition to star in a movie.” Like a lot of late-period Michael Winner films, it’s set mostly around nice hotels and nice restaurants. Would I recommend it? Let me put it this way: I did not regret watching it in a cinema.

Are there any dramatic beats in your work that you’re proud of?

NOAH WELSH

I think the scene with the mum dying in Shaun Of The Dead was quite a brave thing to do. I remember other comedy people saying at the time, “It gets a bit too dark for me with that.” I think that’s why it’s good. I like that sudden moment of dramatic heft, and the idea that it’s all fun and games until somebody dies.
Shaun Goes To The Shops
SHAUN OF THE DEAD - 0:25:45
Shaun Of The Dead’s most complex shot, which tracks Shaun as he walks to the corner shop, oblivious to the zombie apocalypse happening around him, had its origins in a similar trip Wright took following a Resident Evil 3 marathon. Mirroring a shot earlier in the film while adding the undead, it’s layered with bits of business, such as Shaun slipping on a pool of blood without realising. “We plotted all these little gags so you could watch it more than once and notice all these background details.”

The Reverse 180
BABY DRIVER - 0:04:09
“This was not in the script,” admits Wright of Baby Driver’s greatest bit of auto-erotica, in which Baby avoids an oncoming truck by slamming his red Subaru into a 180-degree slide, then out again. Wright calls it the ‘180-in-180-out’. “Tom Rothman said, to his credit, ‘I need six trailer shots.’” So Wright and Darrin Prescott racked their brains, eventually coming up with this. “And it’s in every single trailer of the movie.” This shot was captured by a drone, perfectly framing the intricacies of Jeremy Fry’s stunt driving.

The Window Jump
SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD - 0:53:40
An almost blink-and-you’ll-miss-it gag in which Michael Cera’s Scott Pilgrim, desperate not to talk to Knives Chau, leaps out of an actual window instead, while his roommate Wallace (Kieran Culkin) covers for him. “That’s a Texas switch,” says Wright. “There’s no digital trickery. You see Michael Cera, then he runs around the corner and hides, and stuntman Chris Mark is the one who jumps through the window.”

Cuppa Tea
SHAUN OF THE DEAD - 0:37:23
Part of a much bigger sequence in which Shaun imagines a series of scenarios whereby he saves all his loved ones, this push-in on Pegg, as he drinks a cuppa and beams at the camera, is particularly glorious. Wright recalls that the whip pan onto the cup at the end took ages for David Dunlap, the DP, to get right; at one point he snapped at Wright after the director laughed at one take. “But that was the particular shot. He thought we were laughing at him, but we were just marvelling at him.”

Grabbing Some Pints
THE WORLD’S END - 0:00:30
The opening shot of The World’s End is, according to Wright, “Gary King’s perfect world”, in which he and his friends, pictured in silhouette, run into a pub and find five perfectly poured golden pints waiting for them. “I’m really proud of that shot,” says Wright, who added it into the film fairly late in the day, and also had to convince Simon Pegg of its merits. “But then he watched it back and went, ‘This is the opening, clever clogs.’”

Band Rehearsal
SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD - 0:02:54
Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World opens with an optical illusion, as Wright’s camera pulls back from Sex Bob-omb as they launch into a number, and then pulls back some more, stretching a small living room into something that looks like Wembley Stadium. “We did it for real. We had a massive carpet that went all the way back, and pulled out the wall, so the camera can track back. And the sofa was on coasters, and as the camera goes past, you push the sofa back into the shot.” Don’t try it at DFS.
YOU VOTED FOR YOUR TEN FAVOURITE MOVIE MOMENTS — EDGAR WRIGHT EXPLAINS THEM

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

2 THE FENCE JUMP
HOT FUZZ - 0:28:46
When Shaun jumps over a fence, badly, in Shaun Of The Dead, Wright and Pegg never intended for it to become the beginning of a running (and jumping) gag that features in all three Cornetto movies. “But we liked the idea of these little running gags,” explains Wright. “And, because Nicholas Angel is a supercop, wouldn’t it be funny if he excelled at doing what Shaun did badly?” Cue this gag where Angel, in pursuit of a suspect, somersaults and flips his way across a series of back garden fences.

5 HARLEM SHUFFLE
BABY DRIVER - 0:06:25
Baby Driver begins with Baby (Ansel Elgort) going to get some coffees, post-heist. Except Wright saw it as a chance to further showcase his intent for the movie, with Baby’s every movement coordinated to Bob & Earl’s ‘Harlem Shuffle’. A sequence so complex that it needed a full day of rehearsal, the take used was take 21. “I’m in the finished shot as well. I’m in a reflection — rather than paint me out, I was holding a monitor and they made that into a smartphone. That’s my Hitchcock cameo,” says Wright.

8 DOUBLE DALTON
HOT FUZZ - 1:10:37
“I think there’s a somewhat similar gag in Airplane!” says Wright of the shot in which Timothy Dalton’s nefarious supermarket manager, Simon Skinner, poses by a picture of himself with the exact same expression. But its origin lies with the manager of a Wells shop where Wright used to work as a shelf stacker. “He had a photo of himself as a manager in his office. And if you look closely, the Simon Skinner photo says ‘Employee Of The Month’. So he’s given himself that title.”

Far and away the winner of our poll, the greatest shot in Edgar Wright’s movies was a complete accident. It was a simple set-up, requiring Rafe Spall and Paddy Considine as the two Andys to goad Nicholas Angel, and then exit the frame. “Except Paddy was just fucking around, basically,” laughs Wright. Which explains why Considine suddenly lurches back into the frame for one last pop, and then leaves again. It was the only take they had of Considine doing that, yet Wright knew it was the one. “We really had to work closely in the edit to keep it in the movie. If you watch closely, Rafe Spall is already cracking up in the background. But as somebody who plans their movies to within an inch of their life, it’s nice to have these little magical moments like that.”

THE ANDYS EXIT
HOT FUZZ - 0:52:10
Far and away the winner of our poll, the greatest shot in Edgar Wright’s movies was a complete accident. It was a simple set-up, requiring Rafe Spall and Paddy Considine as the two Andys to goad Nicholas Angel, and then exit the frame. “Except Paddy was just fucking around, basically,” laughs Wright. Which explains why Considine suddenly lurches back into the frame for one last pop, and then leaves again. It was the only take they had of Considine doing that, yet Wright knew it was the one. “We really had to work closely in the edit to keep it in the movie. If you watch closely, Rafe Spall is already cracking up in the background. But as somebody who plans their movies to within an inch of their life, it’s nice to have these little magical moments like that.”
As the big night looms, we talk to the actors and directors gunning for recognition this year.

Best Director
Best Supporting Actress
Best Actress
Best Supporting Actor
Best Actor
Best Picture

Oscars 2019
Try a little tenderness

BARRY JENKINS FIRST heard he’d been nominated for an Oscar after stepping out of the shower in a hotel room in Amsterdam. “Moonlight was the number-one film in the Netherlands,” he laughs. “A film by a black dude from the projects about a black gay dude in the projects was number one, which was insane.” On Oscar-nomination morning (afternoon in Amsterdam), he wanted to avoid the hoopla and asked his publicist to slip notes under the door with the news, good or bad. When he came to face the music dripping wet, he found eight paper slips on the wooden hotel room floor — Moonlight had been nominated in every category it was eligible for.

The subsequent events of 26 February 2017 became the biggest in Oscar history. Jenkins recalls only being nervous when the Best Director award came up, realising the significance of the first win for a black filmmaker. After he lost to La La Land’s Damien Chazelle, he admits it was a “pressure taken off. I just thought, ‘I’m not that guy.’” So when Faye Dunaway announced La La Land for Best Picture, the director was sanguine. But in the ensuing mayhem — perplexed Warren Beatty, the wrong envelope, La La Land’s gracious producer Jordan Horowitz announcing Moonlight had won — Jenkins was thrown into a zone of madness that he describes as “out of body, of mind”.

“When you get an Oscar, there’s nothing written on it,” he recalls. “Until I saw what was written in the card, I didn’t believe it. I was still in that place: I, Barry Jenkins, was not going to make something that was going to end up at the Oscars. I didn’t think I could make films; that was something people who were better than me did. I should never have allowed myself to feel that way.”

Jenkins once again finds himself at the centre of Oscar talk for his latest, If Beale Street Could Talk. His journey from struggling indie director to awards-season staple in just three short steps is instructive for any up-and-coming filmmaker and inspirational for the rest of us. Here’s how he did it...
Others who deserve a Best Director nomination

- **BRADLEY COOPER**
  *A Star is Born*
  First-time director Cooper not only pulls off that rarest of things — believable concert footage — but delivers a devastating emotional directness via a rough-hewn intimacy.

- **ALFONSO CUARÓN**
  *Roma*
  Cuarón’s filmmaking has it all: technical razzle-dazzle and sublime artistry all in service to a deeply personal story.

- **YORGOS LANTHIMOS**
  *The Favourite*
  Lanthimos re-energises the costume drama with a mastery of tones, a skill with performances and visual bravura.

- **DEBRA GRANIK**
  *Leave No Trace*
  Granik’s quiet film is elevated by attention to detail and a deft touch with actors, especially young Thomasin McKenzie.
The Academy Awards couldn’t have been further from Jenkins’ mind when he made his feature debut, *Medicine For Melancholy*, in 2008. It had been five years since he graduated from a fine arts degree at Florida State University and he still hadn’t pulled together a feature film.

“Not that every artistic career has to involve risk, but I hadn’t risked anything,” he recalls. “All I had done was what I was told to do in film school, which is a very pampered experience. I thought: am I even allowed to call myself a filmmaker? I hadn’t made anything since film school so *Medicine For Melancholy* was about going out to create a film to prove I am a filmmaker.”

The result is a literal date movie. *Medicine For Melancholy* follows two black indie kids, Micah (Wyatt Cenac) and Jo (Tracey Heggins), who hook up then spend the day getting to know each other visiting a museum of African diaspora, stumbling on a housing coalition meeting and attending a concert. Jenkins says the story emerged “1,000 per cent from my own lonely broken heart”, spinning off from a failed relationship with a white woman Jenkins followed to San Francisco — when the relationship ended, Jenkins saw the city in a new light. As much as it is about love, *Medicine For Melancholy* also captures a young man wrestling with issues of race and assimilation in a predominantly white city. The filmmaker underlined the point visually by desaturating the imagery to near black-and-white — San Francisco literally becomes a city with the colour taken out.

“I felt out of place in San Francisco,” he says. “I watched a lot of movies and I hadn’t seen a movie that depicted what that feeling was like — being the only black person at a rock concert, being the only black person at an art gallery. When my generation says, ‘We don’t see colour,’ or, ‘Hipsters don’t see colour’ — living in San Francisco, they definitely do.”

Made with a crew of five while Jenkins was still working at Banana Republic, a schedule of 15 days and a budget of $12,000 (“It was in-fucking-sane”), the resulting film, while not setting the world on fire, found traction within the emerging mumblecore movement and Jenkins jetted around the world’s film festivals, from Argentina to Telluride to London. For some filmmakers, first films are baptisms of fire. For Jenkins, the opposite was true. “That movie was so fucking fun,” he says. “In the place I am in my career right now, you still make decisions in the same way but you have to be aware of the possible repercussions of those decisions. Back then, we didn’t give a shit. There was no consideration for nothing. Despite its budgetary limitations, despite its aesthetic limitations, I think what you feel is go-for-broke pure expression.”

Another five years later — Jenkins says his life rolls in five-year cycles — the director’s “go-for-broke-pure expression” reached a whole new level.
**MOONLIGHT (2016)**

“**What I had to say was worthwhile.**”

Based on Tarell Alvin McCraney’s play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, Jenkins’ next film is an audacious coming-of-age story, a mesmerising look at the hardscrabble life of a young gay black boy growing up in Miami told in three distinct chapters defined by the characters changing monikers: child Little (Alex Hibbert), teen Chiron (Ashton Sanders) and adult drug-dealer Black (Trevante Rhodes). Cleaving closely to his own upbringing with a drug-addicted mother, Jenkins took further artistic risks telling the story with bold narrative jumps, shooting in CinemaScope, aeons away from the stereotypical grittiness of a ‘hood movie, and giving each chapter a distinct feel through creative colour grading — each section looks like it was shot with a different film stock. The 25-day shoot (ten more than *Melancholy*) flew by. For the most part.

“From a production standpoint, it wasn’t tough,” he says. “But it was tough emotionally because I am someone who is trying to avoid these deeply emotional things in their art. I somehow backdoored my way into dealing very directly with a lot of personal things from my life. It was an extremely draining shoot.”

The emotional toll was worth it, with an Oscar win for Jenkins and Best Supporting Actor for Mahershala Ali as soulful drug dealer Juan. While Jenkins is grateful for the nods, he is clear-eyed about the tangible effect it has subsequently had on his work.

“If the early days of Fonny and Tish’s love were the most obvious but it was important for me to discover cinema I had the same kind of understanding of the emotions soaring.” But when it really captured the essence of what it was like to be there,” he says. “Maybe it’s a bigger place in history than winning the Academy Award ultimately had little bearing on the film itself. The film doesn’t change, whether we win or lose.”

As with *Medicine* and *Moonlight*, Jenkins found personal ties to the material, seeing himself in sculptor Fonny. “He wants to be an artist and live a life that is not predetermined by the strictures of masculinity and patriarchy. When I first discovered cinema I had the same kind of feeling.” Fonny’s incarceration, being separated from the art and craft that he loves, particularly touched Jenkins. “To think of losing that is incredibly scary.”

To unite the disparate poles of Baldwin’s authoritative voice, Jenkins drew inspiration from two different sources. The early days of Fonny and Tish’s love story was heavily influenced by Douglas Sirk, the king of 1950s melodramas such as *All That Heaven Allows* and *Imitation Of Life.* “When you are getting to know these people, it really felt like a Sirkian endeavour. I had no problem with some of the emotions soaring.”

**IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK (2018)**

“**That’s what winning an Oscar gives you — seven more days.**”

The Academy Award ultimately had little bearing on *If Beale Street Could Talk*. “I had seven more shooting days than *Moonlight,*” he laughs. “That’s what winning an Oscar gives you — seven more days.” Jenkins adapted celebrated author James Baldwin’s 1974, Harlem-set novel on a trip to Brussels at the same time he was writing *Moonlight*. On the surface they seem very different. If the former is a contemporary, poetic look at male intimacy, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is a lush period heartbreaker charting the relationship between Fonny (Stephan James) and Tish (KiKi Layne), childhood sweethearts who are torn apart after Fonny is wrongly accused of rape. Yet Jenkins sees them as companion pieces dealing with what he describes as the “black family dynamic”.

“I think *Moonlight* is one depiction of a black family, the black family I grew up with,” he says. “*If Beale Street Could Talk* is a different depiction, maybe the family I could have had. But both those families are working towards the same goal: they just want to raise their children as best they can.”

Clockwise from left: Jenkins with Beale Street’s Tish (KiKi Layne); Juan (Mahershala Ali) and Little (Alex Hibbert) in *Moonlight*; Michah (Wyatt Cenac) and Jo (Tracey Heggins) in *Melancholy*; Fonny (Stephan James) and Tish’s romance isn’t dampened in *If Beale Street Could Talk.*

*IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 FEBRUARY*
THERE’S A LINE of thought that to win a Best Supporting acting Oscar you need one standout scene and no bad ones. In Barry Jenkins’ adaptation of James Baldwin’s If Beale Street Could Talk, Regina King’s standout scene is a humdinger. As Sharon Rivers, the mother of Tish (KiKi Layne), she confronts the woman whose accusation of rape has seen her daughter’s fiancé, Fonny, thrown behind bars, pleading with her to reconsider. It’s an astonishing emotional exchange between Sharon and the victim (Emily Rios), King managing to express both anger and empathy. And the result has been a flurry of nominations and awards (including a Golden Globe in early January) for King, hitherto best known for playing the loquacious Shalika in Boyz N The Hood and supportive spouse Marcee in Jerry Maguire. Talking to Empire on a morning off from shooting Watchmen for HBO, she talks about the prospects of being up for an Oscar, and how that big scene was pulled off.

Was the combination of James Baldwin and Barry Jenkins the draw?
That’s what makes you read the script as soon as it is in your inbox. Sometimes you get an email from your agent that says, “This came, there’s interest for you,” and you might get to it after a couple of days. But when, in your inbox, you get Barry Jenkins and James Baldwin, you go, “Oh I’m reading this tonight!” I was directing an episode of This Is Us and I had tons of homework to do, but I found time to read Barry’s script even though it had me up until two o’clock in the morning. Luckily I didn’t have to be on camera so it didn’t matter if I looked tired.

Where did you find Sharon? Did you know women like that? Absolutely. I think a bit of Sharon is in my mother and my grandmother, especially. My grandmother was that woman who, if you talked about the problem, you knew you were going to feel better, more confident you were going to overcome the adversity.

There is a big scene between the two families where Tish reveals a secret. How was that to shoot?
It was a tight, tight area. We were actually shooting in a brownstone in New York. They are small. To have all of those characters and the entire crew, you can’t move any walls to get two cameras in at the same time. Let’s just say it was great that we all liked each other. That scene shows the dynamics of two different families and two different women. The two mothers in that scene are so different but so strong.

Sharon’s big moment is in Puerto Rico, when she catches up with the woman who accused her daughter’s fiancé of rape. What are your memories of that?
We were shooting the Dominican Republic for Puerto Rico because the hurricane demolished Puerto Rico. There was a lot of emotion in the air already. And Emily [Rios] is such a great actress. We had so much respect for each other and the project and we just dove in, wanting to honour the emotion of these women. There are a lot of women who have had these experiences. So I think for Emily and I — we talked about it during make-up — that’s what really drove us and gave me a clear place from which to perform.

It’s so raw.
Yeah. Just details like when I reach out and touch the cross on her chest and Emily screams out. You can’t plan that, but what you can do is be clear about who that woman is. Her clarity in her pain just channels over to me and I can’t help but react. A lot of acting is listening and reacting. Audiences don’t know when they are watching a very emotional scene how much the actor has to give. Usually those nights are the best sleep you get.

The role is attracting a lot of awards attention. Can you remember the first award you ever won?
Probably the third-grade spelling-bee award. It was pretty big words, like “statutory”. I still think I’m a pretty good speller, although these daggone smartphones have handicapped our brains.

You were also nominated for Best Dance Scene at the Teen Choice Awards for Miss Congeniality 2: Armed And Dangerous...
I did not know that. I had lots of fun with Sandy. She is a fun chick.

What is your take on awards season?
I’ve never been in it this tough. I’ve experienced the Emmys over the past few years but that’s a one-off. The movie awards season is continuous. I’m really grateful that I have a project, Watchmen, that has created a space for me to focus on. So when I’m getting these amazing phone calls it’s great, but I can’t get caught up because I have a bigger focus.

Finally, awards ceremonies are often very long. What are your tips for getting through the night?
I eat before I go. And I do have a sip of something to knock the nerves off a little bit. Champagne. Or tequila.

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 FEBRUARY
Others who deserve a Best Supporting Actress nomination

> AMY ADAMS
VICE
After five nominations, is 2019 finally Adams’ year to win? Her turn as Dick Cheney’s wife Lynne is highly nuanced: hard, ambitious but human.

> MARGOT ROBBIE
MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS
As Mary’s suspicious sister Elizabeth, Robbie works wonders from beneath a false nose, thick white make-up and carrot-top wig.

> EMMA STONE
THE FAVOURITE
Stone has a blast as Abigail, seemingly innocent and vulnerable, before revealing darker, devious colours. A fantastically knockabout performance.

> RACHEL WEISZ
THE FAVOURITE
Weisz’s Lady Sarah is fascinating to watch: a fearsome political operator, masking a love she cannot reveal.
OF THE MANY standout moments in Yorgos Lanthimos’ 18th century-set comic-drama The Favourite, its tour de force is the film’s simplest shot. For an agonising length of time, the camera stays fixed solely on Olivia Colman’s Queen Anne as she watches her political advisor/lover Lady Sarah [Rachel Weisz] energetically dancing with a man. Joy turns to sadness and then grief, Colman’s expressions shifting in such a way that it becomes hard to keep watching.

The scene is a microcosm of Anne’s ever-changing temperament — everything on the surface, all of the time — and Colman’s performance (which has already won her the Golden Globe award for Best Actress in a Musical or Comedy) is staggering. She is riotous and devastating, playing a fragile, selfish, spoiled character with various physical ailments. It’s rare that women are shown like this on screen. “I just sort of loved her,” she tells Empire of Anne, cherishing her time on the film, and in awe of the film itself. “This was a special thing,” Colman says. As is she. And a whole lot of fun.

Did you have an emotional response to reading the screenplay?

Yes. And you don’t always get that. It’s the most exciting thing, and you want to close it and not talk about it again. You don’t want to say those words again until you’re filming because it’s too exciting.

Was it just the material or were you already thinking about how you might tackle it?

All of those things. Loved the story. I loved the story of all three of those women. It was funny, it was tragic, it was very Yorgos. I was excited that the queen plays four different things every few minutes. I was excited to try to play that. Often it’s, “That character is the straight one, that is the emotional one...” But this is all in one. It was great to rage and cry and... everything.

Did that live up to your expectations?

Yes. And you don’t always get that. It’s out. I’ve told you now. It’s yours. There you go. I found?” Which made us laugh. I’m not sure I was meant to say that. It’s out. I’ve told you now. It’s yours. There you go.

Would you still be doing that if there were no consequences?

Oh fuck. But I’ve got to behave a bit better.

Did you have an emotional response to that?

Yes. And you don’t always get that. It’s out. I’ve told you now. It’s yours. There you go.

Thank you. Anne has all of her emotions on the surface, but also she’s traumatised. There’s so much going on in her head — how did you handle all of that?

The main thing that informed it for me was that she’d suffered. The loss of one child is unbearable, but 17 Every child she’d given birth to had died. The one that got to 11 died. That level of loss informs an awful lot. She feels, “Nothing’s good, everyone dies, I’m unattractive, I can’t see anything, my legs hurt, I’m awful...” You have to be quite a strong person to be able to stand up in front of people and go, “This is what I think.” She never wanted this job. She doesn’t think much of herself — it’s, “Why would people love me? It’s just because I’m powerful.” So these things were in the back of my mind while playing her.

Was there anything that made you think, “I’m going to be doing things I’ve never done before”?

The scene is a microcosm of Anne’s ever-changing temperament — everything on the surface, all of the time — and Colman’s performance (which has already won her the Golden Globe award for Best Actress in a Musical or Comedy) is staggering. She is riotous and devastating, playing a fragile, selfish, spoiled character with various physical ailments. It’s rare that women are shown like this on screen. “I just sort of loved her,” she tells Empire of Anne, cherishing her time on the film, and in awe of the film itself. “This was a special thing,” Colman says. As is she. And a whole lot of fun.

The first one you ever go to is the best night ever. And then after that, it gets more scary. I get more and more nervous. I feel sick to my stomach before I have to go. Because, “What am I gonna say if I win?” And, “I don’t think I should win, I think they should win.” It’s not just a night out anymore. The first time was at the BAFTAs, Peep Show was up for a BAFTA and we all went as a team, and I felt like I’d come from out in the sticks and everything was amazing. “Look who’s over there!” Now I’m still excited, but I’m not allowed to just get pissed and fall into a taxi home.

Would you still be doing that if there were no consequences?

Oh fuck yeah. But I’ve got to behave a bit better.
Others who deserve a Best Actress nomination

> **LADY GAGA**

*A Star Is Born*

Gaga’s portrayal of a singer’s meteoric rise was an absolute revelation: subtle and sensitive with charisma to spare, she sold every beat of Ally’s turbulent journey.

> **GLENN CLOSE**

*The Wife*

Over four decades into her career, Close is still yet to win an Oscar. Here, as half of a married couple with a secret, she puts in the performance of her life.

> **SAOIRSE RONAN**

*Mary Queen of Scots*

Emanating steely power alongside an appropriate vulnerability, as the young queen Ronan elevates the film, embodying Mary’s sophisticated swagger and unbreakable determination.

> **CAREY MULLIGAN**

*Wildlife*

As a woman who turns her whole world upside down, Mulligan sets the screen on fire. After years of playing well-behaved characters, she goes gloriously unhinged, and it suits her.
Fine vintage

As a boozy hustler in *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, Richard E. Grant is on rip-roaring form

THIRTY-TWO YEARS after he demanded the finest wines available to humanity in *Withnail And I*, Richard E. Grant is back on the sauce. In *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, an adaptation of the tragicomic memoir by Lee Israel, Grant plays Jack Hock, the hedonistic, hard-drinking foil to Melissa McCarthy’s misanthropic literary forger. Funny, sad and full of humanity, it’s Grant’s best role in years, and one that has put him in serious awards consideration, for the first time in his career. The boozy parallels with Withnail, Grant’s debut film role, are obvious, but as he explains, there’s much more to Jack than that.

The first major nomination you got was for the Golden Globes. Did you do anything to celebrate?

Yes — I levitated. [Laughs] I couldn’t believe it! I’ve been around for so long. I’m essentially a journeyman actor. I’ve never been in any kind of awards campaign. So getting all these nominations has been and continues to be a complete astonishment to me. I’m just amazed. You know, I shot 20 days on this tiny, low-budget movie. That it is now in all this awards-season stuff? None of us could have anticipated this.

How do you feel about awards season? It can be quite an intense process.

Incredibly intense. I had no idea that it would be so organised. The schedule that I’ve now got is full-on. I’ve spent more time on the promotion trail of this film than we took to shoot it. Gobsmacking, really.

Are you the sort of person who likes to prepare an award speech?

[Laughs] It feels like jinxing to prepare something to say, because I think the reality is, when I see the competition, which is absolutely loud-and-clear, neon-lit, I have no delusion that I’m going to be the one blathering.

What was your reaction when reading the script for *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* the first time? Did you respond to the characters straightaway?

My immediate thought was that they were like Dustin Hoffman and Jon Voight in *Midnight Cowboy*. You’ve got two characters that are misfits, outsiders in Manhattan, one of the richest acreages on the planet, and yet they are so lonely and destitute, and form this co-dependent, platonic relationship. I also was friends with an actor called Ian Charleson, who played the lead in *Chariots Of Fire* in 1981. He died of AIDS at the age of 40 in 1990. He had a kind of promiscuous, louche life on the one hand, and a little-boy-lost quality with a caustic wit on the other hand. When I read the script, it reminded me of the time I’d spent with him. I wore a bandana for the final scene, when my character is dying of AIDS, as an homage to him, because that’s what he looked like the last time I saw him.

Do you find it appealing, playing characters who are outsiders?

I suppose so. I wonder if that’s partly to do with where I grew up, and then being an immigrant in England at the age of 25 in 1982. [Grant was born and raised in Swaziland, now Eswatini.] I think there’s inevitably a sense that you are always an outsider looking in.

There are some obvious parallels with Withnail, your first film role. Is there a sense for you that things have come full circle?

They’re both failures. But I think the Withnail character was so entitled and utterly selfish. He didn’t give a fuck about anybody else. Whereas [Jack] I think about in animal terms. He’s like a Labrador. He will just go up and lick anybody into submission — for a shower, a bed, food, anything that he can. Withnail believed through delusion and entitlement that he should have stardom. Jack is hustling on the street for everything that he’s got. They’re both drunkards, and obviously I’m the same actor playing them. But when I was doing it, I didn’t think, “Oh my God, this is Withnail if he’d gone gay.”

There is, though, a sort of Withnail parallel in the line, “You’re a horrid cunt, Lee.” Was that on the page?

[Laughs] “Monty, you terrible cunt!” Yes, everything was on the page. The only thing I improvised was the scene in the bar, the first time I meet her. I say, “Jack Hock, big cock.” It just came out of my mouth.

You’ve been in the business for a long time. Are you enjoying this stage of your career?

God, yeah. I thought that my mid-fifties would be diminishing returns, like Old Dobbin being put out to graze. The fact that the last two years have been a great upsurge is so beyond anything that I’ve experienced before. I’m genuinely enjoying the ride for as long as it lasts.
Others who deserve a Best Supporting Actor nomination

> SAM ELLIOTT
A STAR IS BORN
One of the most consistently excellent supporting actors in the industry, Elliott has never been Oscar-nominated. Expect that to change for his heartbreaking role as Jackson Maine's brother.

> TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET
BEAUTIFUL BOY
Chalamet, who was up for Best Actor last year for Call Me By Your Name, should get another shot for his devastating performance as a drug-addicted teen.

> MAHERSHALA ALI
GREEN BOOK
2017’s Best Supporting Actor winner will likely be in the running again for his role as jazz pianist Don Shirley in Peter Farrelly’s ’60s-set race-relations drama.

> HUGH GRANT
PADDINGTON 2
Is it wishful thinking that the Academy might reward Grant for his unapologetically campy turn as hammy actor Phoenix Buchanan? Maybe, but there was no more memorable comic performance this year.
Miracle worker

Could his astonishing turn as a tormented priest in *First Reformed* be rewarded?

Have a little faith

**PAUL SCHRADER'S FIRST**

*Reformed* is boldly, beautifully batshit. Reverend Ernst Toller, loyally trudging on at this tiny, mostly empty First Reformed church, might well be a distant cousin of Schrader's own Travis Bickle, consumed with existential malaise, tipped over the edge after meeting a man nihilistically obsessed with climate change. The film is infused with doom, darkly hilarious in its extremities. And as Toller, Ethan Hawke radiates utter despair. There's a moment where he is being offensively aggressed by somebody, and the look in his eyes could kill you. And when he flips, it is joyful. Hawke himself had a keenly religious upbringing and, as he tells *Empire*, almost mystically fit this role. It really is the performance of his life.

**What made you want to do First Reformed?**

In the script, Paul describes all the books on Toller's bedside table, and they were all books my mother had given me in my life. So I was like, “Oh, I think I'm supposed to do this movie.” What I think Paul articulated was a spiritual cry, or some kind of crisis. What's happening with the environment, I think a lot of people don’t know what to do, or say, or think about it, it's almost too scary to look at. And Paul just stares at it, and he gives it voice, and that's what I felt when I read the script. I remember saying to my wife, “I'd make this movie on an iPhone if we have to.”

**Was it spooky to see that Toller had the same books your mother had given to you?**

There was something spooky about the whole project to me. In a way that whenever anything feels right in my life, there's something spooky about it. You know when you make eye contact with your baby for the first time and you feel like you know this person already? It's that kind of strange feeling of, “Ah, this is what I'm supposed to be doing. I've been preparing for this, and I didn't even know it.”

**Did you have any thoughts on where you were in life and what that could bring to your performance?**

Absolutely. Years ago I read Elia Kazan's book *A Life*. He says if you wanna do something worthwhile you have to put some blood in the mercury, in the celluloid. And give people a reason to pay their money to see it. And I felt Paul was asking for that. You have to have something personal at stake. And I have for a long time felt that when work is going well there's a continuity and a kind of integration between your own inner life and the character's journey. And if you can find that and put that on screen, that people will feel that.

**Did you find yourself doing anything you hadn't expected?**

Late in the movie, when I'm about to go in the church, Paul said to me, “This is the one place in the movie where I'm not sure what happens. I don't know what you do when you see that Amanda's [Seyfried] character is in the church.” And it was a really wonderful thing he did — he set up three cameras and let me do whatever I wanted. I did a bunch of different takes, and the one he used is, I take off my robes and shove them in my mouth and scream. [Laughs] You know, it's kind of fucked up!

**But it's how I felt. I realised that it was what I was playing the whole time, you know when somebody's choking? When you can't breathe? There's so much you wanna say and do, and you feel like you have a sock stuck down your throat, because you can't be the person you really wanna be.**

**Your mother wanted you to be a minister. What does she make of this film?**

She watched it for the second time two days ago and she just couldn't believe how much richer it was the second time. And she said she still thinks I was meant to be an episcopal minister and that I'm coming around to it in just the most backwards fashion. She said, “The Lord works in mysterious ways and he's found a way to use you.” [Laughs]

**You've been Oscar-nominated twice before. Does that change the way you feel about the films or performances?**

Most people are not film nerds — they're only gonna see a couple of movies a year, and awards help curate for the community what art films might be of value for people. And so it makes a huge difference in the life of the movie. *Training Day* and *Boyhood* gained a tremendous awareness through Denzel winning the Oscar and *Boyhood* being nominated for Best Picture. All that stuff elevates the way people think about a movie. And when it happens with an indie movie? It's like beating the system. It's like shooting a bullseye from a thousand yards. When a movie cracks the system like *Boyhood* does, and now *First Reformed*, it feels like a miracle.

*First Reformed* is out now on DVD, Blu-ray and download.

*LAST WORDS*

**Words:** ALEX GODFREY

**Portrait:** AUSTIN HARGRAVE

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*August Images*
Others who deserve a Best Actor nomination

> **BRADLEY COOPER**
**A STAR IS BORN**
He lowered his voice an octave, learned to play instruments and sang live at Glastonbury. Come February, the Hangover star could well be reborn as an Oscar-winner.

> **STEVE CARELL**
**BEAUTIFUL BOY**
Heartbreaking as the father of a perpetually relapsing meth addict, Carell delivers a career-best performance, imbuing his character with warmth, frustration and undeniable resilience.

> **CHRISTIAN Bale**
**VICE**
The Academy may be reluctant to give the award to a second consecutive British actor swaddled in prosthetics. But Bale's inhabiting of Dick Cheney is so uncanny, they may have no choice.

> **ROBERT REDFORD**
**THE OLD MAN & THE GUN**
The 82-year-old has won a Best Director Oscar (for 1980's Ordinary People). Could he win Best Actor at last for his presumed swansong? Never bet against the Sundance Kid.
Power play

Adam McKay’s searing, hilarious political satire should go all the way

WORDS OLLY RICHARDS
ADAM MCKAY IS at the midpoint of what he calls his ‘What The Fuck Is Going On Trilogy’. He didn’t intend to even start a trilogy, but the world kept presenting reasons to ask what the fuck was going on, so he felt compelled to try to in some way answer his own questions.

It all began with 2015’s The Big Short, which asked what the fuck was going on with the global financial markets and the economy. His interrogation won him an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. His new film, Vice, asks what the fuck has been going on with the US government for the past couple of decades. His answer to that could well win him this year’s Oscar for Best Picture.

If there is a type of guy you expect to be making hot-button political movies, McKay is not really it. He is the least intense man you could imagine. A tall, greying 50-year-old with a wide smile and little round glasses that look like the ones that come with Mr Potato Head, he has a friendly, self-mocking manner that immediately puts you at ease. He’s like the nice next-door neighbour in a sitcom; the sort that gets a cheer when they enter. The second we meet him in a hotel room in London’s Soho, he makes an advance apology for spending the interview lying down. He has, he says, done something horrible to his back. As we begin to offer sympathy, he interrupts: “You know what, it’s actually not my back. The truth is I have haemorrhoids. It’s so painful. I’ve been saying it’s my back to be polite.” He said it was okay to put this in the article, “because it’s funny”. This is what Adam McKay does; he makes grim, painful things funny.

And that’s precisely what he’s doing in Vice, a film that is ostensibly a biography of Dick Cheney, George W. Bush’s Vice President, but is more a look at how government in America has transformed over the past couple of decades, sneakily moving power into the hands of an ever-smaller number of people at the top, sliding democracy towards autocracy. But with laughs. It’s McKay’s most serious movie, but still often very funny (“You have to laugh or you’ll cry”). He didn’t begin with the idea of making a film about Cheney. Nobody would begin with that idea. He began with a thought about political villains, or those who get cast as villains in the political narrative. How do you become a public servant who doesn’t seem to much like the public?

“IT ALL STARTED with the central question of, where do these people come from?” says McKay. “Where does a Mitch McConnell come from? Or Newt Gingrich? I’m just naming cartoonishly awful American people, but yours [in the UK] would be Boris Johnson or Margaret Thatcher. How do you get like that? I’m not a believer that people are born awful or good.” That train of thought led him to Dick Cheney, precisely because he knew next to nothing about him, aside from three things: he was nicknamed Darth Vader; he once shot a guy in the face (and never apologised); and he helped send the US to war on a lie, altering American foreign policy, possibly forever.

“He’s this boring, weird guy who changed history,” says McKay. “Without thinking I was going to make a movie, I just started reading about him. I couldn’t believe how he played the system and... then at a certain point grabbed the wheel and took charge.”

Cheney began his political career in the final days of the Nixon administration. A college drop-out, he wangled his way into the White House via an intern programme, pulling his way up and working for several Presidents until landing the Vice Presidency under Bush. He watched quietly, at least according to McKay’s telling, learning arcane rules and loopholes that might one day serve him. His career focus was not on public service but the accumulation of power.
He got his best grab at it from the events of 9/11. After the terrorist attacks, Cheney shaped the country’s response, supporting ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ like waterboarding and pushing for war in Iraq to retrieve weapons of mass destruction (that were later confirmed to not exist). He also had a deep interest in something called Unitary Executive Theory, an interpretation of US law that holds that the President controls the entire executive branch, or more briefly, that the President can do as he pleases. Through Cheney’s life, McKay saw a story of America heading towards a form of government that had a lot in common with the powers it was supposed to oppose, one that told the people what they wanted rather than asking. Cheney’s was a twisted version of the American dream, with Cheney, and his equally ambitious wife Lynne, aiming to reach their most powerful potential but at the expense of everyone else in America.

“It gave me goosebumps to learn that they’re just like us,” says McKay. “Lynne had this very tough upbringing (the film depicts her mother suffering domestic abuse and later drowning in strange circumstances). I could understand the desire for power and safety and security, and how Dick became a vehicle for that. Like all great power stories, it’s about the family.”

TOLD ENTIRELY SERIOUSLY, the life of Dick Cheney would be bone-dry, but McKay doesn’t tell real-life stories entirely seriously. Part of what made The Big Short so clever was McKay’s use of stylistic tricks to make arid exposition entertaining. For example, he had Margot Robbie in a bubble bath explaining sub-prime mortgages direct to camera, and Anthony Bourdain breaking down CDOs while chopping off fish heads. He takes those stylistic tricks further in Vice, creating a gonzo structure that includes Alfred Molina as a waiter serving up slices of the constitution as daily specials, Naomi Watts as a Fox News-ish newsreader reporting the decline of the media and a false ending for the movie, complete with credits. “Those kind of find themselves,” says McKay of his little tricks. “You can’t just list all [the Bush administration’s] attacks on the constitution, so I’ll have Molina as a waiter! I come up with them on a case-by-case basis. Where do they work? Where does it feel too dry? Where can I get away with it?” McKay’s most eccentric choice was in his casting of Cheney. Instead of an older actor, McKay picked Christian Bale and a lot of prosthetics.

“From the second I started writing I wanted Christian to do it,” he says, calling the actor, with whom he worked on The Big Short, “my favourite”. The physical transformation was very much Bale’s wheelhouse; he gained 40lb for the role. The make-up took a little work, to make the handsome, very non-bald Bale resemble Cheney. On screen the transformation is startling — the actor playing, very convincingly, a scheming pensioner. With a Golden Globe already won by Bale, entry in the race for Best Actor is a given. “Christian doesn’t do an impersonation,” says McKay. “He really understands every impulse of someone and puts them together in a kind of impressionistic portrait of how he sees them.”

McKAY’S NEW POLITICAL direction might be a surprise to those who know him as the director of Anchorman, Talladega Nights and Step Brothers — what he calls his ‘Mediocre White Man Trilogy’ — and McKay gets it, but he doesn’t think of his current work as a reinvention. “I can see that from the outside it looks like that,” he says. “People who know me weren’t surprised. I was an English major in college. I was a pretentious young man at 19, reading Dostoyevsky and Louis-Ferdinand Celine. My girlfriend smoked clove cigarettes.” The change came down to two things. One was that the type of “absurdist, self-referential comedy” McKay had been making was going out of style (“I don’t see it really going on now”). The other was that he started to see more potential in real-life stories.

“The reason for making them is not shocking,” he says. “One day I said, “What
the fuck is going on?’ and then I did movies about it. Quite honestly it’s just a reaction. You look at the world and think, ‘Holy cripes, what’s happening?’” When he was making Vice, he hadn’t realised how current his film would turn out to be. He thought he was making a film about how we got to the current situation, not one about the current situation. Then the Trump administration happened. “There were tons of times it linked up,” McKay says gloomily. “We talk about the ‘death tax’ [in the movie] and then there’s a Republican bill getting rid of the death tax. In the Brett Kavanaugh hearings he’s talking about Unitary Executive Theory, which nobody ever talks about! Every day I’d get an email saying, ‘Have you seen this?’ and it would be word-for-word something that was in the movie.” He considered reworking the project, going so far as to write a scene about Brett Kavanaugh, but decided it was too garish a signpost. You’d think the clear echoes of current events would be a good thing for a movie, making it even more relevant than it intended to be, but McKay would much rather his movie were a little less so. “For the movie [it’s a good thing],” he says. “As a human being walking planet Earth? It’s a hummer.” Adam McKay is still at the midpoint of his What The Fuck Is Going On Trilogy. He doesn’t yet know for sure what the third part will be. For the good of cinema, we should hope he gets to make it. For the good of humanity, we should hope he never has a reason to.

VICE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 25 JANUARY

The Competition

Other films that deserve a Best Picture nomination

▶ ROMA
Alfonso Cuarón’s beautifully shot love letter to the good stuff — family, resilient women, movies themselves — could be Netflix’s first Academy Award winner.

▶ THE FAVOURITE
Built on three stunning performances, The Favourite is as raucous and rock ‘n’ roll as 18th century period pictures get. Could Yorgos Lanthimos’ sly, acerbic twist on the historical drama live up to its name?

▶ A STAR IS BORN
The biggest surprise of 2018. A gut-wrenchingly moving portrait of artists in pain topped by two star turns — in at the deep end of emotion — from Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga.

▶ BLACKKKLANSMAN
The blistering return to form of Spike Lee mixes ‘70s funkiness with a hard-hitting nowness. Fighting the power rarely gets this incendiary or fun.
KENNETH BRANAGH MAY BE RETURNING TO THE GLOBE WITH ALL IS TRUE, BUT AFTER ORCHESTRATING DISNEY FANTASY EPICS AND TACKLING POIROT, HE BRINGS A BOLD NEW PERSPECTIVE TO THE BARD.
Kenneth
He’s been a fan since he was a teenager and has directed six of Shakespeare’s plays on film, as well as starring in so many stage productions we lost count. Branagh’s latest project, as both director and actor, is Shakespeare-centric but no adaptation. *All Is True* is a fictionalised biopic, focused on the last years of Shakespeare’s life, after the writing stopped. It’s something Branagh has been percolating for 30 years, since the first time he mentioned it to its eventual writer, Ben Elton. It’s both a domestic drama, dredging up dark family secrets, and a look at how genius can come from very ordinary men. Under transformative prosthetics, Branagh plays with warmth and sensitivity the man who inspired his career.

Today, in a photo studio in north-west London, he is thankfully free of prosthetics. For a man used to commanding theatre stages and film sets he is a very gentle presence. He immediately introduces himself as Ken (no ‘Sir Kenneth’, thank you) and slips into general conversation about Christmas (we meet on 23 December). It’s the first time we’ve met, but it’s like being introduced to a friend-of-a-friend, chatty and easy. His gear doesn’t shift when we start the interview proper. He is just someone who enjoys gabbing about subjects he’s passionate about.

It may seem familiar, but *All Is True* is actually an anomaly in Branagh’s recent directing career. Since 2011’s *Thor* he’s been rejoicing in big-budget tentpole movies, including Disney’s *Cinderella* and the all-star Murder *On The Orient Express*. His next movie might be his maddest yet: *Artemis Fowl*, adapted from the book by Eoin Colfer, is set in a fantasy world and features Judi Dench as a fearsome fairy general. Where the first half of his career was largely serious and earnest, Branagh’s latter years are all play.

It’s quite a feat to find a new angle on Shakespeare. This, looking at his life in retirement, is something we haven’t seen before. What made you think of it for a film? This part of his life hadn’t really been done. I wanted to concentrate on what was out there in public record, which was that this man called William Shakespeare is recorded in all the deeds of the Globe Theatre and then he went back to Stratford when it burned down. Sexual scandals (involving his daughters) did happen. John Lane did stand up in that church and call his daughter [Susanna] a whore and say she had gonorrhea [local lout Lane accused Susanna of being “naughty” with haberdasher Rafe Smith, and suffering from “running of the reins”]. Thomas Quiney [his other daughter, Judith’s, husband] was found guilty of sexual congress out of wedlock six weeks after marrying Judith. His son Hamnet did die from causes unexplained. Lots and lots of facts that basically allowed us to take a Shakespearean approach: let’s fill in the gaps with things that were his preoccupations in the plays.

It’s quite a transformation. If someone arrived after the opening credits they might not realise you’re in it. Why did you choose to undergo all those prosthetics? There is this image of a high-collared, high-foreheaded, long-haired, bearded fella. Whether people have seen it on badges or tea towels, there’s a look of Shakespeare’s that people have some familiarity with and I thought we should present people with that and then try to present the man inside.

You’ve been ridiculously busy in the past few years, releasing a film every year. Have you deliberately been working like mad? I do think that there is something to momentum and energy. Powell and Pressburger made some of my favourite movies, including *Black Narcissus*, which is my favourite. I remember reading that at their height, they were always working on three films: one in prep, one in production and one in editing. Michael Powell describes it creatively and pragmatically as “the preferred option”. I have always found that kind of thing to be the case. As long as you have the capacity to have an organised brain, working on a couple of things in rotation is really helpful.

From an outside perspective, since *Thor* it looks like you’ve been in a more ‘Hollywood’ phase of your career. *All Is True* is the exception, but your other films of this decade have been big-budget productions. Is that conscious? Yes. I shot a movie per year in 2005, ’06 and ’07: *Sleuth*, *As You Like It* and *The Magic Flute*. They were not received well, critically. They certainly didn’t do well at the box office, in what was already a changing world for independent film. They’re all pictures I cared about but it made me very open to the idea of a new kind of adventure. So something like *Thor*, when it came along, intrigued me. I’ve always had a strong interest in commercial moviemaking from watching big, commercial movies when I was young.

After all the success of the Marvel movies, we tend to forget what a surprise that movie was. It could have gone very wrong, if you’d done a straight version of the character from the comics. That was at a very embryonic moment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. We...
were pillar three in the first tier that was going to support this huge thing. It was a very interesting time to be there, because it was a project about which they were concerned, especially tonally. It was such a difficult one to balance… It felt like something where I had something to bring to the table, a familiarity with stories that have vast tonal difference, like Shakespeare plays dealing with magic and insane coincidence and offering up drama as well as a broad comedy. It led to these other opportunities, which were all activating part of who I am as an artiste. I love my thrillers and there was Jack Ryan. The fairy-tale world of Cinderella. Then the mystery world of Orient Express.

You did a lot to set the future Marvel tone, which became happy to poke fun at itself. You found this lovely tone where Asgardians are treated very seriously on Asgard, but as soon as they’re on Earth they’re ridiculous. What I really loved in that movie was that [the actors] would take a serious approach. I remember saying to Anthony Hopkins, “You’ve got to try and break our hearts with this scene,” when he throws Thor out of Asgard. He says, “You’re unworthy!” For a minute he enters into a different kind of movie, this human melodrama. Then 20 minutes later Hemsworth walks into a pet shop and declares, “I want a horse!” That those two things can exist in the same movie gave me a lot of pleasure.

Do you think you’d have done a big fantasy like Artemis Fowl if you hadn’t done Thor?

Maybe not. Certainly the big challenge of something like Artemis Fowl is where two very distinct worlds and different tonal challenges are at play. Thor gave me some experience of that. Innately I find myself going for things I haven’t done before. I say that, but I remember speaking to [composer] Pat Doyle, when we were recording the music for Thor. We were watching a scene of Hemsworth and Hopkins at the end and I thought, “This is about fathers and sons… I’m wondering, do I always make the same film?” Not to agrandise the work or me but there seemed to be a series of preoccupations on fathers and sons. [Artemis Fowl] is another one about it!

You’d hardly be the only director to have that preoccupation. Spielberg has done a lot on the same theme. True. And they do say there are only six stories. The reason All Is True is about return and not retirement is that I had Odysseus in mind when I was pitching this to [writer] Ben Elton. He’s been off on adventures. He’s been tempted by the sirens and met a few one-eyed monsters and he’s got to win his wife back again. He’s got to find a way to return to the point from which he started. Thor does that too. He goes on an Odyssean journey back to Asgard.

You have a small but exceptional cast in this movie, including Ian McKellen and Judi Dench. I think there’s an impression a lot of us have that there’s a set of British actors that just hang out all the time and fall into working together. Can you ring up Judi Dench [who plays Anne Hathaway in All Is True] and just say, “Judi, love, there’s a part for you in this one,” and she’ll come and do it? Not quite. She was my first choice and she wasn’t available. Maybe a month passed and I said to Tamar [Thomas], my producing partner, “Can we just try Judi again and see if anything’s happened?” Sure enough, the other project fell through and she became available. I called her agent and asked if I could just drive down and pitch it tonight. She told me, “Judi says don’t waste your petrol. Don’t waste your time.” Oh no. “It’s a yes.” But I hadn’t told her what it was about. “Doesn’t matter. It’s a yes.”

And was it a similar situation when you cast her as the fairy military leader Commander Root in Artemis Fowl?

I did have to tell her about that one. She said, “What on earth is this?” So I told her, “Originally, in the book, it’s a fella. Can I tell you the world of Commander Root?” She was very intrigued by that. She did this funny thing. National treasure Judi came to set looking elegant and lovely and funny, as she is. Then she said, “I’m not sure about this.” I asked her if she wanted to read a scene. “No, I don’t want to read a scene!” Then it went very quiet. She started walking about for several minutes. As I looked at her I thought, “Gosh, that really reminds me of Rod Steiger in Waterloo, when he played Napoleon. Then there was this [makes guttural growling noises] from somewhere; I thought from outside. It was her! She started going through the first briefing Commander Root has to give to the Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance, or LEPRecon. Her hands went behind her back and the voice dropped and this weighty, gravelly, aggressive, slightly non-human — she’s playing a fairy, after all — emerged. She started saying, “Give to the Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance, or LEPRecon. Her hands went behind her back and the voice dropped and this weighty, gravelly, aggressive, slightly non-human — she’s playing a fairy, after all — emerged. She was, frankly, scary. I just watched her turn into Commander Root, then switch back to Judi and say, “Well, what do you think?” I said, “Well, it seems very good to me, Judi.” “A bit like Ian Paisley, I thought.” “Yes, Ian Paisley should work.” One of the things she’s always loved is
doing something that’s unexpected. She loves being dismissed. It brings out the best in her. So the idea of playing what was originally a male, Irish fairy called Julius, i.e. something she couldn’t possibly do, was the lure.

You call Judi Dench a “national treasure”. You’re heading for that title yourself. How do you feel about that?

I certainly feel a deep sense of gratitude for being able to continue to work. I don’t take that for granted. Having come into the business thinking, “Wouldn’t it be great to have any kind of job in the theatre?” That was all I wanted. I knew I loved it and whatever it could give me would be enough. It didn’t contain thoughts of fame or particular parts. My choices [as a working-class boy from Belfast] were the army, British Rail or Prudential Insurance. I’ve got nothing against the prospects of any of those, but I knew it didn’t suit me.

This is meant with the greatest of respect, but after being a successful actor for several decades you start to get licence to be a bit eccentric. You can play parts a little bit over the top. I’m thinking particularly of Poirot...

Ha. That moustache. I was working with [hair and make-up designer] Carol Hemming and we said, “We’ve really just got to go for this. It’s supposed to be the greatest moustache in England. Let’s do it and deliver this party.” I was amazed to be asked to do it and then decided to just embrace it.

You talk about loving old Hollywood movies as a child. Was that the attraction of directing that?

It was a celebration of all-star casts. That was part of the event. I don’t know if you remember a John Huston movie called The List Of Adrian Messenger. It’s not a very good movie but what is so beguiling is that there’s a roll call at the end where all these people reveal they were in it, even though you didn’t notice them. Suddenly this gypsy horse boy, or something, takes off, Mission: Impossible-style, his mask, and it’s Frank Sinatra. The list of luminaries in it is quite extraordinary. I remember thinking for the odd scene they had everyone in the same room together, the feeling of what that must have been like… [Orient Express] took me right back to that feeling and the excitement of going to the movies as a kid.

How was the reality of wrangling all those stars?

The first day shooting on the train was a delight, seeing how many people were so nervous. Michelle Pfeiffer was nervous and emotional about working with Judi Dench. Depp worships Dench and wants to do his very best. Judi is the ultimate pro, so of course she’s there as soon as you call her. That really set the example. I won’t say who, but on day two of the month they were all there, someone rang at 7.10am to say they would not make the 7.20am rehearsal. I cancelled that rehearsal, because I couldn’t possibly have this group wait for anybody. Said person came directly onto set and breathlessly apologised to everyone. Everyone. There was never another case of lateness on the entire movie. There were some people there whose reputations suggested that might be a possibility. Some of that was down to me, because I don’t hang about like that, but most of it was Judi and Derek Jacobi, people who were everything you expected them to be. You had to be grown-ups around them.

You’re much younger than actors like Judi Dench, Derek Jacobi and Ian McKellen, but having known them so long, do you feel like their peer? Do you get used to being on an equal footing?

You really don’t… When I was 15 or 16, I would read about Judi Dench and Ian McKellen. To me, they were miraculous things. So to do a scene with Ian McKellen!

Who, shockingly, you’d never worked with until All Is True. [McKellen plays Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, with whom Shakespeare is in unrequited love.] I swotted and practised for that scene like I was doing my A-levels and wanted an A. I worked so hard. It wasn’t a competition thing. I just didn’t want to let him down. I didn’t want to keep him waiting or forget my lines.

Coming back to Poirot, your next film is the sequel, Death On The Nile. No pressure, but you’ve got to at least match the cast of the first one.

Ha ha. Yes. It’s a big challenge. All being well, we have Gal Gadot, Jodie Comer and Armie Hammer. That central trio I’m very excited about it. We’re in the process of casting the rest. We want the same sense of event. Something I’m pleased about is that I bump into a lot of actors I admire and they ask, “Can I be in the next one?” So I’ll absolutely be taking them up on that. I’ve been looking at locations in Egypt. It’s quite something. It’s an extraordinary thing to be able to do. I don’t take any of it for granted. I do still pinch myself quite a lot.

ALL IS TRUE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 FEBRUARY

Top to bottom: Branagh consults Chris Pine while directing 2013’s Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit; Back in front of the camera as Commander Bolton in Dunkirk (2017); Branagh’s second Shakespeare adaptation as director and star, Much Ado About Nothing (1993), in which he starred alongside Emma Thompson; Moustache fluffing on the set of 2017’s Murder On The Orient Express.
Writer/director Bart Layton on his brilliant half-doc, half-heist movie

**SETTING THE SCENE**

Bart Layton’s account of a real-life college-heist-gone-wrong starts with cryptic shots of its four anti-heroes preparing for the deed by donning old-age make-up. Meanwhile, Layton layers this with voiceover from the boys’ real parents. “That does two things,” he says. “It makes you think there’s something weighty coming down the line, and we’re going to set up the backstory.”
MEET WARREN LIPKA

When we see the real Warren Lipka, suddenly it’s clear how he persuaded three sensible students to go along with his crazy plan. “The first time I met Warren, I could see he had a few daft tattoos,” says Layton. “He got up to go to the loo… so my DP, Eric Wilson, rolled the camera. When he came back, I said, ‘Hey, show Eric your tattoos.’ And he did. He didn’t know the camera was rolling.”

WARREN MEETS WARREN

Warren (played by Evan Peters) meets the real Warren for a single scene. “Is this how you remember it?” asks Warren, of Warren. To confuse matters further, the scene takes place inside the memory of Spencer (Barry Keoghan), the film’s lead character. “And that’s not how Warren remembers the conversation. Much of it is saying, ‘We’re never going to know how truthful any of this is.’”

SHAMSTERDAM

In an attempt to find a fence, Warren travels to Amsterdam to meet with a shady/terrifying Udo Kier. “Udo was great, but there were a couple of moments when he went full Dracula,” laughs Layton. The film casts doubt on whether Warren’s trip actually happened. “Warren’s sticking to his story to the bitter end,” notes Layton. “I think he did go to Amsterdam. But I’m not sure he met anyone there.”

RESEARCH IS FUN

As part of the gang’s preparations, they rented a bunch of heist flicks. “If they’d bothered to watch them all to the end, they would have realised most of them end badly,” says Layton. In one scene they’re watching Kubrick’s The Killing. He had hoped for Soderbergh’s Ocean’s Eleven. “I wrote to Soderbergh, but never got an answer. Subsequently, he wrote to me saying how much he loved the movie.”

OCEAN’S FOUR

“I’d written this scene like the most insane drum solo,” says Layton of the sequence where the gang imagine their heist as a slick Ocean’s Eleven-style affair. “It had maybe 120 shots.” But scheduling meant he had an afternoon to shoot it, so it became a single shot. “We shot for an hour. On every take someone would drop something or crash into something else.” The take you see here is the 16th.

SPENCER’S BLUES EXPLOSION

After a disastrous dry run for the heist, a depressed Spencer decides to sit out take two… which gave Layton a problem. His main character, the audience’s eyes and ears, wasn’t present for the main action. So Layton passed the POV baton to Warren. “I obsess about point of view. That was a tricky one, that shift. I think we got away with it.”

STOP LARKING ABOUT

Until the heist itself, American Animals has been presented as a playful caper. But when it begins, it marks a seismic tonal shift for the movie as Warren and Eric (Jared Abrahamson), hopelessly out of their depth, try to steal valuable books from their college library. “The shift was very much written into the script,” says Layton. “The moment they cross that line, it’s this brutal fucking crash.”

THE LIBRARIAN

Much of the power of the heist comes from Ann Dowd, largely silent yet riveting as Betty Jean ‘BJ’ Gooch, the librarian who has to endure a gruelling, inept assault at the hands of Warren and Eric. Layton wrote a letter to Dowd to persuade her to take the part. “I said, ‘It’s a small part, but it’s the heart and soul and the moral core of the story.’” Indeed — BJ drives home the human cost of the heist.

THE FINAL WORD

Which is why the contribution of the real BJ — still a librarian at the same college — was saved until the end, when she gently excoriates the quartet. “Let’s give her the last word. She’s able to pour cold water on their justifications. I think BJ liked that.”

AMERICAN ANIMALS IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD
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PILOT TV

ISSUE 2
ON SALE 21 FEB

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RELEASED IN THE impossibly small window in 1996 when swing music, bowling shirts and fedoras briefly threatened to make a comeback, *Swingers* left not one but two lasting marks on the lexicon. The first, the compliment “you’re so money”, didn’t have much in the way of cultural currency, and was killed off completely once it was adopted by an online price comparison website. The second, the exclamation, “Vegas, baby!” died an extremely long and drawn-out death at the hands of over-excited tourists everywhere. Both phrases now seem incredibly obnoxious in the cold light of day, but they cast a long shadow on *Swingers*, a film which, despite outward appearances, really had no intention of playing it cool.

For starters, it’s not really a movie about Vegas at all: the sharp suits, casino couture and Rat Pack camaraderie is all for show. *Swingers* is actually a movie about loneliness — it’s not so much a movie about relationships but the spaces in-between, and how the dating game can chew you up and spit you out like an olive pit. Doug Liman’s name is above the door but it’s Jon Favreau’s movie through and through; loosely based on the writer’s efforts to break through in Los Angeles after a long-term relationship hit the skids, *Swingers* shines a neon light on the gloomy side of showbiz, showing how an industry that serves up repeated rejection can grind down a man’s self-esteem.

Favreau’s leading man Mike is a model of male anxiety: an out-of-work actor who’s self-defeating to a fault (“I got an agent who specialises in magicians”), he’s a minus in a town full of pluses — the unwitting full stop at the end of every free-flowing conversation. The opposite, in other words, of charismatic buddy Trent (Vince Vaughn), a hit with the ladies and a charming raconteur who can light up a room as quickly as Mike can clear it — the kind of guy who can not only get you into the club, but get you in Scorsese-style. Together, Favreau and Vaughn explore both ends of the spectrum of masculinity, the toxicity and fragility and the inescapable, depressing artifice of it all. It helps that both actors literally look like half the men they are now, the ill-fitting suits and the bright lights of the big city highlighting the fact that they’re really just boys finding their way in a men’s world. They’re Vegas babies.

Best friends in real life after meeting...
on the set of 1993’s sports drama Rudy, Favreau and Vaughn’s bond held Swingers together like glue — fitting for a movie that could have easily fallen apart at any minute. Liman’s budget was, unfortunately, not so money — he shot the movie using an old 35mm camera that was so loud and hot, he had to wrap it in his coat during filming. The cast had to provide their own wardrobe for most of the movie, while the shooting locations included Jon Favreau’s own apartment building, and party scenes were filmed in real Hollywood parties to save money (quint and you might make out Favreau’s downstairs neighbour Adam Scott and director Mike White among the beautiful babies in attendance).

That meagre budget wasn’t spent on permits either. Pull back from the scene where Trent and Mike are having a heart-to-heart on the side of the road and you’d see the movie’s assistant director frantically trying to stall the cops; Liman had to point and shoot without looking through his viewfinder and Favreau and Vaughn had to act while also acting like they weren’t, projecting their voices to a mic stashed in the back of their car. The resulting guerrilla shooting style suited Swingers way better than the bowling shirts ever did — few movies capture the elbow-to-elbow hustle and bustle of the LA party scene better.

Regardless, the movie’s most memorable moments take place pre- and post-shindig, like the excruciating answerphone sequence where Mike tries — and fails — to leave a casual message to a girl he just met in a bar. Instead, he ends up leaving six increasingly panicked voicemails, fast-forwarding through the entire imaginary relationship straight to the “it’s not you, it’s me” break-up. The scene is a masterclass of comic timing, with Mike completely unravelling in real-time, but it’s rare to see a movie’s male lead so utterly destroyed by his own machismo, and rarer still to stay with him while he shame spirals. Ultimately, it’s the reassuring voice of an old friend that pulls him out of his post-break-up slump: “You wake up every day and it hurts a little bit less, then one day you wake up and it doesn’t hurt at all.”

Quiet scenes of male bonding like these usually feel like filler in typical ‘guy movies’, the expository padding between tiresome macho antics, but they feel integral here. The fact that coping with rejection is woven so well into the story marks Swingers as decidedly more mature than its marketing lets on. It’s a movie that favours tempering the male ego instead of encouraging its excesses like, ugh, Entourage, or The Hangover, another Vegas movie that takes the wrong messages home from Sin City.

Favreau and Vaughn would go on to work with each other again, most notably in 2001’s little-seen and under-appreciated mob comedy Made, but the easy chemistry they shared in Swingers was not easily replicated in static studio pics like Couples Retreat and Four Christmases. Favreau did write a screenplay for a Swingers 2 (“a helluva script” claimed Vaughn), but it never got off the ground, and nor should it have. No, Swingers is a film best left preserved in that mid-’90s time capsule, along with chunky ties, zoot suits and the music of Big Bad Voodoo Daddy. Sure, what was once considered cool might seem cringeworthy in hindsight, but Swingers still swings today because it’s about more than fashion and music and dancing — it’s about learning how to cope once the party’s over. If all you remember is the catchphrases then you’ve been watching it wrong.

ALI GRAY

SWINGERS IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD
IT’S PERHAPS NO surprise that the man who created *Freaks And Geeks* on the small screen has spent plenty of time conjuring a posse of freaks and geeks on the big. Moronic superspies, kooky busters of ghosts, surprising sociopaths — Feig’s got ‘em all. Here, he talks us through a few of his finest.

**ANNIE WALKER, BRIDESMAIDS**
Kristen Wiig’s flawed, directionless former cupcake store owner

“The challenge with a character like this is they’re screwing up so much and doing things they shouldn’t be doing. So how do you get the audience not to go, ‘Fuck it, you’re frustrating me.’ The key was you had to see who she used to be. The most important scenes are when she’s in her bedroom looking at the pictures on the wall of her old business, and you go, ‘Wow, she had a business.’ Then the other one is when she makes the cupcake in the middle of the night and you go, ‘She’s an artist.’ That helps you go, ‘Please be that person again.’ And the other asset you have is that Kristen Wiig is one of the funniest people on the planet.”

**SUSAN COOPER, SPY**
Melissa McCarthy’s meek CIA office worker who has to go undercover as a badass killing machine

“That’s my favourite character, other than Lindsay Weir from *Freaks And Geeks*, that I’ve created. It came from the fact that Melissa and I had done *Bridesmaids* and *The Heat* together. Some reviewers were like, ‘She only plays the same characters, yelling and screaming all the time.’ I was like, ‘Well, fuck you!’ What comedic actor doesn’t have a thing that they do that’s hilarious that you wanna see them do again and again? But also, knowing how good an actress Melissa was, and how sweet person, I said, ‘I’m going to write a character that is you and then move her towards the persona that people know you as. But people will see that this is a real person that has to pretend to be tough and to be mean.’”

**RICK FORD, SPY**
Jason Statham’s vainglorious blowhard of a secret agent, much given to making wild, over-the-top boasts like, “I appeared convincingly in front of Congress as Barack Obama,” or, “I’ve jumped from a high-rise building using only a raincoat as a parachute”

“My first drafts had him boasting about things. When we got to the set, we started writing crazier things for him. Tricia McAlpin was on set and she was just writing crazy stuff on notepads and Post-it notes and passing it to me. I was sitting three feet away from Jason, feeding him different jokes, *They were getting dumber and dumber and more absurd. He’d read the line, burst out laughing halfway through, and on the second take he would just nail it. It was so funny. Anybody who goes for it that hardcore is a hero of mine.*”

**JILLIAN HOLTZMANN, GHOSTBUSTERS**
Kate McKinnon’s eccentric scientist/electronics expert, who isn’t quite wired the same as everyone else

“Kate’s the first person I hired for the movie. I knew her through *SNL.*”

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**Characters study**

Writer-director Paul Feig on how he co-created some of his most memorable characters

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Holtzmann didn’t have that many lines, so I would rehearse with her and she would throw in jokes and comments. I interviewed her as the character and started asking her about her life as Holtzmann. All this insanity started coming out. Stuff like, she was brought up by thieves and moved away to Iceland and was pulling scams on people. The thing about Kate is that she knows a ton about science and electronics. She was really into the tools and all that jargon and all that stuff. I said, ‘Just be yourself. It’s perfect. You’re playing a character very close to who you actually are.’

KEVIN BECKMAN,
GHOSTBUSTERS
As the Ghostbusters’ secretary, Chris Hemsworth creates one of the best cinematic idiots in years.

“The role on paper was a kind of slacker dude, off Craigslist. The joke was always that he wasn’t interested in anything they were doing. Then we got to set and started playing around and the idiot character started coming out naturally. That’s the way Chris was improvising the character, and playing off the ladies. Chris came up with the whole Mike Hat thing. And the glasses were an accident. We were having reflection problems with his glasses. So I said, ‘Take the glasses out, nobody’s going to be able to tell.’ And then he scratched his eye through the glasses. The girls all cracked up, and it just started snowballing. We had moments going, ‘Is this just too dumb?’”

EMILY NELSON,
A SIMPLE FAVOUR
Blake Lively reveals a darker side as a glamorous photographer who turns out to be a murderous sociopath.

“She’s a sociopath, but only when her buttons are pushed. Before that she’s a survivor. It’s only once Stephanie [Anna Kendrick] sleeps with her husband immediately after she ‘dies’ that the sociopath becomes unlocked. With every character I have on screen, I want to make sure their internal logic is right and that they mean well, even if they mean harm. In Emily’s world, I see her justification [as] because she’s pissed at Stephanie, who she thought was her best friend, and her husband. When I met Blake, within seconds I realised how great she was going to be. My favourite thing is to let somebody play something they don’t normally get to play.” — CHRIS HEMSWORTH

A SIMPLE FAVOUR IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD
THE REASON I haven’t seen *Casablanca* is the same reason I haven’t seen most black-and-white films — because every single person in them, every horse, every dog in the background, every parrot — is dead. Dead dead dead dead. This rarely puts me in a movie-watching mood.

Plus, I knew the end, and I truly hate going in knowing the end of things. I haven’t seen *Planet Of The Apes* or *The Crying Game* either, and blocked the word “Marvel” from all my social media feeds before I saw *Infinity War* (which, were there any justice, would win an Oscar like *Casablanca* did, but that’s another piece).

However, as a romantic novelist it doesn’t seem quite right not to have seen it, and sure enough, I could see immediately why everyone fell in love with it, and to it.

Even though clearly shot on an LA soundstage, for about five pence; and stagey enough you could easily run it as the play it once was, its sincerity and tautness of plot works just as well now as it ever did. It’s immaculate (and one hour, 42 minutes long, i.e. the length movies ought to be by law).

The things that cudgel you over the head are, firstly, Bergman. She’s not just the beautiful woman in the film; she looks like she might be the single most beautiful thing ever to have existed. They spotlight her from above in every conceivable scene, but you get the feeling that even if they didn’t, she’d still shine out from within. There is absolutely no irony nor doubt, either in the script or in the actors’ faces, that this woman you would risk your life for, over and over again. They believe it, and you do too, without question.

Bogie, on the other hand — at some point someone remarks on how he is 37 years old, to which the only riposte is, “Yeah, plus VAT.” He looks ancient, like a scrawny third Kray twin. Which, of course, adds to the drama and beauty when Ilse comes to his apartment, and he gets drunk and weeps over his loss. A tough, broken guy losing it so sincerely over a girl is absolutely irresistible.

The other heartbreaking thing is how much basic morality is assumed and shared, which given Rick’s American Bar is a noted den of thieves and swindlers is amazing.
There is simply at the base, though, a knowledge of what does and doesn’t constitute the decent thing to do and everyone shares it: unlike these days when Rick would take both the travel passes, tear them up in their faces, then strut about boasting about how he’d owned that libtard Hungarian snowflake. Or he’d have gone anyway, explaining how it was best for his “self-care” and how he had to “live his best life”.

One of the many lines everyone remembers is, “You’ll regret it — maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but one day, soon, and for the rest of your life,” which is obviously a corker.

But Lazlo’s, “Since no-one is to blame, I demand no explanation,” is also exquisite, particularly when you consider the poor sod spent the year Rick and Ilsa were whooping it up in Paris being tortured by Nazis in a concentration camp.

I didn’t realise until afterwards that this film was made not just before the end of the war, but long before the outcome was remotely certain — it was released in 1942. The tension and triumph of the ‘Marseillaise’ scene thrills even more in retrospect, as does Lazlo’s self-sacrifice and belief. The actor playing Lazlo, Paul Henreid, hated the part incidentally, considering the character a “stiff”, which just goes to show how much more nuance they were used to getting in those days. (Also, glancing down the Wikipedia page, the amount of actors in this film who were European Jews fleeing the Nazis, cast for their accents, makes very bittersweet reading.)

So, watch it. The only negative: it reminded me that a few years ago someone mooted re-editing old films to take out the smoking and everyone howled down such a ludicrously PC idea. I will say here that a film with so much smoking in it is to modern audiences both distracting and disgusting, particularly if you consider how many takes they had to do in a day — and I say this as an annoying Malboro Lights Party Poncer.

But apart from that: it’s wonderful. Play it, Sam. Play it.

CASABLANCA IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD. AN ISLAND CHRISTMAS, BY JENNY COLGAN, IS OUT NOW IN HARBACk, EBOOK AND AUDIOBOOK.
MY IDEA OF comfort viewing runs to creaky black-and-white movies where comedians visit haunted houses (with sliding panels and secret passageways), encounter sinister eccentrics, and are menaced by a master fiend with a surprising secret identity. Best of the batch is the Bob Hope version of The Cat And The Canary (1939), but I’m happy enough with Abbott and Costello in Hold That Ghost, Sid James and Kenneth Connor in What A Curve-Up!, and so on, right down to Gene Wilder and Gilda Radner in Haunted Honeymoon. If Kevin James and Kevin Hart got trapped in a haunted house with a hooded fiend, I’d queue overnight to be at the first screening.

Even by the standards of the sub-genre, SH! The Octopus (1937) — and what does that title even mean? — is daffy. It’s a parody of an already-comic form, with lead comedians who are more obnoxious than amusing and supposedly straight supporting characters who are deadpan hilarious. A tiny clip from the climax, showcasing an astonishing (but simple) in-camera special effect, occasionally goes viral on the internet, piquing the interest of double-clickers everywhere. Incredibly, seen in the context of the film as a whole, it’s an even more bizarre, honestly surreal moment, featuring demented overacting from character actress Elspeth Dudgeon as a sweet old lady transforms into a cackling, oily-faced mad witch.

Instead of an old dark house, the setting is an old dark lighthouse, rumoured to be the lair of a master criminal known as the Octopus, who might even be a real octopus to judge from the way rubbery, Lovecraftian tentacles keep reaching out to throttle anyone who gets too close. Comedy idiot detectives Kelly (Hugh Herbert — who spun a whole career out of ridiculous catch-phrase “woo woo”) and Dempsey (Allen Jenkins — who achieved pop-culture immortality as the voice of Officer Dibble on Top Cat) escort shrieking mystery woman Vesta Vernoff (Marcia Ramston) to the lighthouse, where her stepfather — inventor of “the radium ray” — has disappeared. Among the other eccentrics gathered during an inevitable mystery mania when he hears a ticking clock.

The plot is farcically screwy — late in the day, it’s suggested one of the characters may be dreaming up the whole thing after an overdose of “pep pills” — and sight gags (involving diving suits, bleeding corpses, and those tentacles) come at a rapid pace. By the time it’s over — it rattles through the full programme in 54 minutes — you’ll wonder if you’ve been taking the same pills and just dreamed it up.
From the makers of Q magazine, The 10 Commandments presents the golden rules for living from 50 stars across music’s generational spectrum.

The 10 Commandments is packed with lots of brand new interviews, plus some of our old favourites. All are deeply illuminating.

AVAILABLE 8 NOVEMBER FROM ALL GOOD BOOK STORES
THE SEARCHERS

THE SCENE ISN’T in the screenplay. Perhaps writer Frank S. Nugent knew what his frequent collaborator, director John Ford, was going to do to elevate the ending, but on the page it simply has our (anti?)heroes trotting up to the Jorgensen ranch, with Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) balancing the long-missing Debbie (Natalie Wood) “on the pommel of his saddle, his arm supporting her, and she is asleep”.

This is only a few moments — in screen time — after we’ve feared Ethan was going to kill his niece, because she has spent years living with the Comanche, the Native American tribe who kidnapped her after murdering her parents. *The Searchers* is an extraordinary story of family and, really, hate. And the final scene is remarkable for how it compensates somewhat for the ferocity we’ve witnessed, but does not excuse it. After Ethan hands Debbie over to the compassionate homesteaders, they walk inside, followed by his fellow searcher Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) and his fiancée, and he is left silhouetted in the doorway. He crosses his left-hand to his right elbow, lingers for a moment and then turns and walks into the desert — the door closing on him. He has saved her, but cannot be redeemed. “Only an artist as great as John Ford would dare to end a film on such a note,” once observed Martin Scorsese. “In its final moment, *The Searchers* suddenly becomes a ghost story. Ethan’s sense of purpose has been fulfilled and... he’s destined to wander forever between the winds.”

The shot has been mimicked to infinity, but perhaps it’s Wayne’s peculiar gesture that haunts you. There are two explanations for why it came about — improvised on the Sunday they filmed, 3 July 1955. “I knew a guy who stood like that all the time,” Wayne recalled. “And the pose always seemed so lonely to me. I thought it would work well in that last shot.” It’s a reason that plays against the notion of Wayne as simply an unthinking, gruff movie star and would have gone down well with the interviewer at the time, critic/director Peter Bogdanovich. There may be an element of truth to it, but the more down-to-earth, emotional motivation — as related by Wayne in another exchange — is that inside the house was Olive Carey (playing Mrs Jorgensen), the widow of Harry Carey Sr, an actor who Wayne had always admired — and who appeared in the first feature of John ‘Pappy’ Ford. “When I crossed my arm I did it the way Harry Carey used to do it, because his widow was on the other side of the door,” said Wayne. “And he was the man, Pappy said, who taught him his trade.”

*The Searchers* is out now on DVD, Blu-ray and download.

**Instant Trivia**

1. Though the story is set in Texas, Ford only ever intended to shoot in his beloved Monument Valley, located on the Arizona-Utah border.

2. In an interview for the French TV series *Cinéastes De Notre Temps* Ford dismissed *The Searchers*, his most acclaimed picture, as “just a Western”.

3. John Wayne’s second son, Patrick, said, “My father would say that everything he had done on film to this time was building to this role.”
CRAZY BIG HIT

Director Jon M. Chu on the incredible groundbreaking success of Crazy Rich Asians
ONE OF THE most significant movies of 2018 was also one of the most fun. Crazy Rich Asians, based on Kevin Kwan’s bestseller, was the first major Hollywood movie with an all-Asian main cast in a quarter of a century. It was as important a cultural milestone as Black Panther or Wonder Woman, further pushing open the doors for a more diverse Hollywood. It was also an absolute hoot.

A global box-office haul of $238 million came from audiences enjoying the best romantic comedy in years. Sequels are inevitably in the offing (the book is the first of a trilogy). As the film arrives in living rooms across the country, director Jon M. Chu (right) marshalls the craziness on set.

So even though opting for Netflix could have given you a larger audience, you wanted the prestige of a studio release to say this movie deserved it?

Absolutely. Movies still have a big place in our culture of saying what’s important and what society needs to pay attention to. Also, taking time to leave your house, drive, find parking, take your friends and family to a dark room and watch a story? That symbol was important. You’re saying this is worth your time and energy. As someone who’s been a fan of cinema since I was a kid, I’ve always felt that was one of the great powers of cinema.

Did you feel a sense of anticipation for it?

Last November, when we were doing test screenings, we had to recruit an audience and nobody would come watch it. For a free movie. I think the ratio of acceptance was 25/1. The Asian people who didn’t know the book thought the title was offensive. The Asian people who knew the book were sceptical of Hollywood. People of other ethnicities thought, because of the title, it wasn’t for them. At that point Warner Bros. could have just ignored us. But they believed in the movie. They said the best way to market this movie was to show it. At that point I thought they were copping out a little. But we had to build an audience. They started screening it and they were some of the most robust reactions to a film ever. We showed a cut of the movie to press and influencers, I think maybe five or six months before. I got to watch this thing build and I was in shock seeing the momentum grow, knowing where we had come from.

Were you confident it would do well, because it was serving an underserved audience?

No. I thought we wouldn’t flop. I thought there was an audience. Our movie wasn’t expensive. It was about $30 million. I thought we could [be profitable], but would it change anything? I think we opened with $26 million. That’s not the biggest number in the world, so in my mind we did okay… That weekend was only the tip of the iceberg. In the second week we only went down by, I think, six per cent and the following weekend we only went down about another six per cent [it was ten per cent, still an extraordinary hold]. To watch the word of mouth spread on this, I’ve never gone through something like that... More than the numbers... seeing all types of people, not only Asian people, going to see it for the second, third time, then congregating

With the benefit of hindsight, it’s easy to say that Crazy Rich Asians is an important movie. When you started, did you think you were making something important?

I went looking for something important to me, but many things that are important to me aren’t important to other people. I wasn’t thinking about others yet. Once I got on it, the idea of how important it was to represent Asians started to seep in. I think it was more when we were trying to decide between Netflix and Warner Bros. [both companies wanted to make the film] the importance of how it would be viewed became a much more pointed question for us. Kevin Kwan and I started talking about why we wanted to do this, why we wanted it to be a movie and what’s the difference between a movie seen on a streaming service as opposed to in theatres. That’s when it became clear that it had to be a movie [released in cinemas].

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Director Jon M. Chu (right) marshalls the craziness on set.

So even though opting for Netflix could have given you a larger audience, you wanted the prestige of a studio release to say this movie deserved it?

Absolutely. Movies still have a big place in our culture of saying what’s important and what society needs to pay attention to. Also, taking time to leave your house, drive, find parking, take your friends and family to a dark room and watch a story? That symbol was important. You’re saying this is worth your time and energy. As someone who’s been a fan of cinema since I was a kid, I’ve always felt that was one of the great powers of cinema.

Did you feel a sense of anticipation for it?

Last November, when we were doing test screenings, we had to recruit an audience and nobody would come watch it. For a free movie. I think the ratio of acceptance was 25/1. The Asian people who didn’t know the book thought the title was offensive. The Asian people who knew the book were sceptical of Hollywood. People of other ethnicities thought, because of the title, it wasn’t for them. At that point Warner Bros. could have just ignored us. But they believed in the movie. They said the best way to market this movie was to show it. At that point I thought they were copping out a little. But we had to build an audience. They started screening it and they were some of the most robust reactions to a film ever. We showed a cut of the movie to press and influencers, I think maybe five or six months before. I got to watch this thing build and I was in shock seeing the momentum grow, knowing where we had come from.

Were you confident it would do well, because it was serving an underserved audience?

No. I thought we wouldn’t flop. I thought there was an audience. Our movie wasn’t expensive. It was about $30 million. I thought we could [be profitable], but would it change anything? I think we opened with $26 million. That’s not the biggest number in the world, so in my mind we did okay… That weekend was only the tip of the iceberg. In the second week we only went down by, I think, six per cent and the following weekend we only went down about another six per cent [it was ten per cent, still an extraordinary hold]. To watch the word of mouth spread on this, I’ve never gone through something like that... More than the numbers... seeing all types of people, not only Asian people, going to see it for the second, third time, then congregating
in the lobby of the movie theatre just hanging out. People getting dressed up to go to the movies. It reminded me of one of the inspirations for the movie, which was old Hollywood movies. Asian people could always have been a part of that if they were given the chance. It felt very old-fashioned in a way... I still can’t comprehend everything that’s happened. When we get award nods I can’t quite get my head around it.

**This is quite an old-fashioned movie, in the best possible way. Romantic comedies have been out of fashion for a while...**

I grew up on romantic comedies. That was my era. Old romantic comedies and old musicals were always playing in my house.

**Any particular romcoms you looked at for inspiration?**

There are bits and pieces of a lot. I’d say *My Best Friend’s Wedding, Singin’ In The Rain, Pretty Woman, While You Were Sleeping*. Also we slipped in tropes we know and twisted them, like the airplane scene. The last thing I ever wanted to do was an airplane scene, but it was fun to flip it and do it in a coach. The wedding was also like, “How many times do we need to see a wedding?” But we did a wedding where you get rid of the bride and the groom and make it about the guests. All the drama between everyone collides in this scene. It’s this beautiful, romantic scene about love, but it’s love seen through different lenses: familial, heartbreak, new love. All of that had interesting twists on the tropes, for me.

**You had some famous names in the cast, but a lot of your leads are little-known, particularly Henry Golding and Constance Wu. Why did you opt for unfamiliar faces?**

The reality is that when you ask for Asian actors through most of the casting directors in Hollywood studios, you get a list of about ten people. I just refused to believe there were only ten legitimate actors in Hollywood. I just don’t believe that. When we went to Warners there was a very specific conversation of, “You’re going to be spending more time and money on casting than maybe anything in the last several years.” The infrastructure isn’t built for these people. The parts aren’t there so they’re not in the system... Henry was the hardest one to find. [After a long search for a Nick, Golding, a TV presenter, was suggested to Chu by his accountant, Lisa Kim-Kuan, who’d seen him present an awards show in Malaysia.]

**And he’s now a huge star.**

It’s nuts. He’s such a nice guy. In the first couple of days I could see the fear in his eyes and he just overcame it. We would find out in that first week whether he would progress or whether he would stall out. He stepped his game up. He showed up and knew this was an opportunity.

**Any movie that is breaking ground will receive backlash. There were criticisms you were only representing a tiny part of the Asian community. What did you feel about that?**

I think it’s ridiculous but I don’t blame them. That is a result of the lack of representation on the big screen. When you don’t get a lot of chances to show who you are, you get a void. By filling the void glass by glass you’re going to be missing a lot. Stories can’t be about everyone because that’s not what stories are. They’re a specific perspective. If you do tell the story of everyone then I don’t know what movie that is. You have to have an angle. So I understand. I don’t have any animosity when people criticise how we represent. That we get to have a fricking conversation about it, finally, is a blessing. I just think it’s an indication that we need to have more stories that...
of writers, directors and actors who are getting jobs. Just my own inbox. Suddenly projects are being seen as commercial that would never previously have been seen as commercial. The amount of talent we’re about to see in the next three, four years, I think is going to be pretty amazing, I’m in shock about how fast change can be.

The film’s success of course means a sequel. China Rich Girlfriend and Rich People Problems have been announced. What stage are you at? I’m excited about them. I don’t know which stories we’ll tell because there are so many stories in the second and third books, but there are also so many stories we didn’t tell from the first book. We’re in exploration mode. We still have some deals to close, too. We’re brainstorming.

The books get more dramatic in the sequels. Would you go in that direction or stick with the light tone of the first? The characters have some more complicated things they go through, so I’d definitely want to get into that. We have such hilarious characters that I’m sure the comedy we had in this one will stay. It’s such a fun world we built and I’d like to keep that, but I also want to dig into the real meat of their conflicts.

Any characters you would want more time with? Astrid and Charlie. That love story is so fascinating to me. That hurt my heart the most when we were adapting it. This was Rachel’s story and Rachel’s story alone, but I would love to expand Astrid’s. Gemma Chan is just an alien from outer space. There’s nobody else who could play Astrid. She’s one of a kind.

The downside to being so successful is that all your cast is in huge demand. Is it true you can’t get everyone together until 2020? I’m trying to convince the studio to do two and three together. Let’s just bang them out so everybody is together at one time. Then everyone can go spread their wings and be bigger and better... This opportunity as everyone gets bigger and bigger is so great because now we get to dictate how our own people are represented and the jokes we can tell and what our representation is. It’s all good. All in the right direction. We’re in transition and we’re on the way.

Have you noticed a change in the conversations in the industry about telling more Asian stories? Absolutely. I don’t think this is the end of the story here; it’s the beginning. The amount of TV shows and movies that were greenlit literally the weekend our movie came out. It suddenly became an idea it was good for business. Hollywood reacts to good for business. The amount of talent we’re about to see in the next three, four years, I think is going to be pretty amazing, I’m in shock about how fast change can be.

Nobody could claim to know how big Crazy Rich Asians would be, but if there’s one person who had a pretty strong inkling, it’s Ken Jeong. As soon he heard that an adaptation of the book was in the works, Jeong began lobbying for a role.

“I read that book four or five years ago,” says Jeong, “and I knew I wanted to be involved if it was ever made into a movie... I contacted Jon and said I wanted to be involved.” Jeong’s role, as Goh Wye Mun, is only a small one, but, as an Asian actor who’d worked in the industry for ten years, he knew what it meant for a film to have this many roles for Asian actors. “I told Jon that even if there was no part for me I would support the film any way I could, because I knew how important it would be to the Asian community.”

None of this is to say, Jeong knew quite how important it would be. “I had no idea it would be so big!” he says. “I’ve already spoken to Asian actor and writer friends who are having their projects greenlit because of it.”

For Gemma Chan, who plays Astrid, it was a slightly different experience, being a Brit who lived outside of the LA community Jeong talks about. “It’s still a challenge in the UK, in terms of representation,” she says. “For me the big difference is about which stories we tell. For a long time I could count on one hand the projects made that centred on an Asian experience. It’s exciting to me that that is now changing. And it’s not just in terms of telling Asian stories. It opens things up to all sorts of stories that have not been told.”

THE CAST SPEAK

Ken Jeong and Gemma Chan on the film’s impact

OLLY RICHARDS

CRAZY RICH ASIANS IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD
Four Empire writers debate the man behind the greatest film scores of all time. Can they compose themselves?

Chris: Let’s start at the beginning. When did you first get into John Williams, and how?
Helen: Star Wars or E.T. Probably E.T. first.
Chris: Were you aware that there was a person responsible for the music you were hearing?
Helen: I was just aware it was amazing.
Ian: I first heard John Williams on an album by Geoff Love & His Orchestra about disaster-movie themes. And the very first track of that was Jaws. Also on there is The Poseidon Adventure, and Earthquake I think.
Chris: Didn’t he do The Towering Inferno as well?
Ian: The Towering Inferno, yep. He was the master of disaster. But Star Wars was the first album I bought with my own money. I bought it in a market in Islington. It’s a weird double-sided album because the first side is side one and side four, and side two and side three on the other.
Amon: The first John Williams score I heard was probably Home Alone.
Chris: You’re showing your age.
Ian: I’m throwing up here.
Amon: That was a fixture in our house, that film. The first John Williams score I paid attention to was Star Wars. That fanfare is a bit special.
Ian: How about you, Chris? How did you discover John Williams?
Chris: I lifted Steven Spielberg and there he was. It’s true, though. The two of them go hand in hand. How many films has he not scored for Spielberg?
Helen: Three.
Ian: Color Purple, Bridge Of Spies, Ready Player One, and he didn’t do The Twilight Zone. That was Jerry Goldsmith.
Chris: I think one of the reasons we’re talking about John Williams today, and not, say, a James Horner or a Jerry Goldsmith or an Alan Silvestri, or even a Marco Beltrami, is because of the impact Williams has had, on us, and on film music in general. But I’m looking microscopically at that five-year period between ’77 and ’82, when he wrote at least six of the greatest movie themes of all time. He wrote Star Wars, Raiders Of The Lost Ark, Superman The Movie, The Empire Strikes Back, with the ‘Imperial March’, E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial... Am I leaving anything out?
Ian: Close Encounters, come on.
Chris: Is there any famous music in that?
Helen: It’s not a plot point. I don’t think it’s important.
Amon: There are so many themes that I just knew, without even having seen the movie. Like Jaws. I just knew at some point that was from Jaws. There are so many people who won’t even know they’re listening to John Williams, but they’ll be fans of his scores.
Helen: I was reading about the way he composes and why it was different to what most other people were doing when he rose up through the ranks. There were a lot of composers doing classical themes for movies and for characters in movies. They were using them as themes, rather than leitmotifs...
Chris: Good word.
Ian: I like when he plays fast and loose with leitmotif. For example, in the famous bit where Luke goes out to look at the twin sunsets, that’s Ben’s theme, the Force theme, and we haven’t met Ben yet and we don’t know about the Force yet. It’s foreshadowing an important thing in a very different way.
Chris: One of my favourite examples of that is there’s a little hint of Vader’s theme in Anakin’s theme in The Phantom Menace, which is a score I will defend here. Do I need to defend it?
Helen: No!
Chris: I need to defend the film, maybe, but not so much the score.
Helen: ‘Duel Of The Fates’ alone gets a pass.
Chris: When I hear the opening bars of the opening march from *Superman The Movie*, it gives me goosebumps.
Ian: That’s one of those grace-of-God things. Jerry Goldsmith was going to do it for ages, and scheduling conflicts took over. Williams was around London. I think he might have been doing *The Fury*. He stepped in. He wrote that score in ultra-quick time and it’s an astonishing score. The Krypton theme. The love theme.
Helen: It’s gorgeous.
Chris: With or without Margot Kidder’s narration?
Ian: “You can fly! You belong in the sky!”
Amon: These movies, the *Star Wars* and the *Supermans*, start with the fanfares. Those themes are up front and centre immediately. Having that Superman theme in the opening section of the movie makes an impact on you.
Ian: *Raiders* has a seeded approach. You don’t get that Indiana Jones theme right away.
Helen: *Superman* is one of the ones I find most emotional. Ian and I went to the John Williams concert recently at the Royal Albert Hall.
Amon: I wish I’d gone to that.
Helen: It was incredible. I don’t think I’ve cried so much at a concert, ever. I just kept bursting into tears.
Ian: There weren’t enough B-sides. There weren’t enough 12” remixes.
Chris: You were yelling, “Deep cut! Play Watto’s theme!”
Helen: It was a hundred per cent themes, but *Superman*, *Schindler’s List*, *E.T.* all just made me lose it.
Chris: *Star Wars* is the series many people will associate Williams with. Which is the better soundtrack? *Star Wars* or *Empire Strikes Back*?
Amon: I can sum up my take in three words: the ‘Imperial March’. If Darth Vader walked by me and that music was playing, I’d be going with that guy. And when he really has fun with it in the last minute of the track, when it’s more staccato, it’s really special.
Ian: I think it’s interesting how you forget that’s not in *Star Wars*. There is an Imperial motif in *Star Wars* and it’s so superceded by Darth Vader’s theme, the ‘Imperial March’.
Chris: It’s music you would play on speakers attached to your shoulders.
Helen: I want the ‘Imperial March’ too, so I’m going for *The Empire Strikes Back*.
Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let’s vote!

**THE TOP TEN**

   Ian: “A deserved number one, so rich and varied beyond the ‘Imperial March’ I would get married to Lando’s palace promenade theme.”

2. **SUPERMAN THE MOVIE**, (1978)
   Chris: “Brassy, confident, noble, triumphant. Yet the rest of the score is just as good. You will believe a composer can fly.”

   Ian: “A shout for Williams’ most hummable and malleable theme. How it is used in various forms in the truck chase is masterful.”

   Helen: “The film music most likely to make your heart, and bike, soar. One of Williams’ most straight-up beautiful scores.”

5. **JAWS**, (1975)
   Amon: “Williams’ most simplistic theme is also his most terrifying. No other composer has wrung more suspense out of two notes.”

   Helen: “Takes us from the profound joy of our first sight of a resurrected dinosaur all the way to the terror of a T-Rex chase.”

   Ian: “This is the game changer. You can talk about film scores pre- and post-*Star Wars*.”

   Amon: “Arguably Williams’ most moving piece of music. If this doesn’t melt your heart, then you haven’t got one.”

   Chris: “One of Williams’ most playful scores for one of Spielberg’s most playful films.”

    Helen: “A highly plot-centric piece of music, it still evokes intrigue and awe...”

**LETTERS@EMPIREMAGAZINE.COM / @EMPIREMAGAZINE**
The Nun director Corin Hardy tells us how to make people jump

A HORROR FAN since he was knee-high to a Leatherface, director Corin Hardy has spent a lifetime figuring out how to scare people. Recently, he’s begun to put those ideas into practice, first with his haunting low-budget debut, The Hallow, and last year’s The Nun, in which Bonnie Aarons’ demon wanders around an ancient convent scaring the bejesus out of anyone unfortunate enough to get in her way. Here’s Hardy’s guide to making audiences watch a film betwixt their fingers.

MIX IT UP
Although you might think that The Nun has more jump scares than a vampire on a trampoline, Hardy says that’s not the case. “I’m not a great jump scare fan,” he admits. “One of my favourite scares in The Nun isn’t a jump scare. It’s when a door opens and you slowly reveal Bonnie turning around. Your blood runs cold. I like trying to create a variety of scare. The aim was to pepper The Nun with enough fear, dread and scares, and have a bit of fun with it as well. It’s nice to hear people go dead silent, and then shriek, and then laugh afterwards.”

KEEP PEOPLE GUESSING
“There is an internal rhythm of a scene,” says Hardy. In fact, the timing of a scare isn’t a million miles away from the timing of a gag in a comedy. But it’s not as simple as simply counting one, two, three. “I’m aware that you get used to that, so you can anticipate it; So the moment when the scare should come, you don’t have any scare at all. And then, when you’ve forgotten about it, that’s when it comes. For me, it’s about acknowledging the mechanisms and rhythms and then essentially abandoning them.” In other words, it’s tantric horror.

USE SOUND
Scaring audiences isn’t simply a matter of LOUD NOISES on the soundtrack. In fact, Hardy says he wanted to emphasise the sounds of silence. “We took a lot of sound and music out of the movie while we were editing,” he says. “It was telling you too much how to feel. With a horror movie, half the effect is coming from the sound, and the lack of sound.”

FRAME IT JUST RIGHT
Hardy’s business card should more accurately say ‘film misdirector’. Because a large part of getting a scare right is to wrongfoot the audience, spooking them with hands bursting through a wall, or a face appearing in the left of the frame when they’re expecting it to come from the right. All of which calls for meticulous blocking and framing. “There’s a scare that when we shot it, I remember thinking, ‘This is going to be good,’” recalls Hardy. “Irene [Taissa Farmiga] is walking through an old dining hall, holding
THE PREDATOR FRANCHISE has Shane Black bookends: he met an early end in the 1987 original as potty-mouthed soldier Hawkins, but 31 years later Black returned to direct The Predator, the latest attempt to make the dreadlocked dread-dealer relevant for a new generation. But what of the movies in-between? As a welcome break from pushing too many gags, I'm about to find out...

8.30AM: PREDATOR (1987) Start the day with a testosterone breakfast: the original Predator is a goddamn sexual tyrannosaur of a movie. One of those rare ramshackle sci-fi's where the low budget and the challenging conditions work in its favour, John McTiernan's rumble in the jungle is raw, rough and easily the manliest film ever made. Arnie's dialogue is hyagh-ly quotable, the Silvestri score is still hummable and the superb Stan Winston effects still stand up. No time for a toilet break, I ain't got time to pee. This Predator franchise just might work!

10.20AM: PREDATOR 2 (1990) This Predator franchise is terrible! The sequel lost everything that made the original great: the steady hand of McTiernan (replaced with Stephen Hopkins, the director of A Nightmare On Elm Street 5), the jungle (it's set in LA in the futuristic year of 1997) and, yes, Arnie, who declined the offer to go double Dutch. It's loud, charmless and excessively violent, almost like it's over-compensating for something. Still, the final scene, featuring a Xenomorph skull in a Predator trophy cabinet, eventually birthed the Alien Vs. Predator crossover: tat begat tat.

12.15PM: AVP: ALIEN VS. PREDATOR (2004) “Whoever wins, we lose” has to go down as one of the biggest tagline self-owns in history, gifting unimpressed critics a tailor-made kiss-off. James Cameron had a script for ‘Aliens 5’ rejected by Fox, so somewhere down the line we ended up with a Paul W.S. Anderson video game instead; an efficient crossover that managed to disappoint two fanbases in one fell swoop. AVP is not without its charms, but why watch Alien or Predator when you can watch Alien or Predator? I wish I were still watching Predator.

2.15PM: ALIEN VS. PREDATOR: REQUIEM (2007) It’s mid-afternoon and I’ve spent most of the day being acid-gobbed on by alien mouths, but I’m hard pushed to think of a worse sci-fi sequel misfire. Get this: AVP: Requiem takes the two most iconic sci-fi monsters of all time and recasts them in a modern-day slasher movie. Also Alien and Predator have a baby. What? I’m not being paid enough for this shit.

4PM: PREDATORS (2010) This belated sequel from Robert Rodriguez does at least stop the rot by removing Alien from the equation, but unsurprisingly, Adrien Brody is a poor substitute for Arnold Schwarzenegger. It’s a fair attempt at going back to basics (jungle setting: check, Gatling gun: check, character covered in mud shouting, “Come on, kill me, I’m here, come on, do it!”: check) but the only way it evolves the franchise is by introducing Predator Dogs, which is obviously stupid.

6PM: THE PREDATOR (2018) Back to Black then, and thank Christ, because I was starting to lose all hope. The plot is bobbins and some of the CGI is dreadful, but the vibe is right — it’s the first Predator movie to feel like a worthy sequel. Boyd Holbrook gives good sass, Sterling K. Brown is a charismatic bad guy and the gags are best in show. Still, I had to wait 30 years and ten hours for a movie half as good as the original. Whoopee. ALI GRAY

THE PREDATOR IS OUT ON 28 JANUARY ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD
Blindspotting’s theatrical release came and went with criminally little fanfare, which is ironic as, once you’ve seen it, you want to proverbially shout about it from the proverbial rooftops. Daveed Diggs stars as Collin, an African-American man a year out of jail, who has three days left on his probation when he witnesses another black man getting shot in the back by a white cop. Understandably desperate to stay out of trouble, not at all helped by his white friend Miles (Rafael Casal), a dangerously loose cannon, he then becomes haunted by what he’s seen. Developed over a decade by Diggs and Casal, who know every inch of this world, this is incredibly fresh and vital, with keen things to say about race, gentrification and culture, Carlos López Estrada’s direction aggressively throwing you into the action. Every second of it feels urgent.

ALEX GODFREY

Enjoying something of a renaissance, Rachel Weisz takes a break from Yorgos Lanthimos’ treacle-black comedy for something more reserved but no less intriguing: Sebastián Lelio’s Orthodox Jewish drama Disobedience. His follow-up to Oscar-winner A Fantastic Woman, Lelio sticks to his strengths with this complex character study, that sees Weisz’s estranged Ronit returning to London after her father dies. The scandal of her departure still hangs in the air, stirred by news that childhood friends Esti (Rachel McAdams) and Dovid (Alessandro Nivola) have wed in her absence. The three performances are electric; McAdams — last seen in surprise hit Game Night — proves she can champion any genre, while Nivola displays the same wounded defiance that made Kyle Chandler so forgivable in Carol. Ultimately, though, this is Weisz’s film, whose tender charms soon have Esti realising what she’s missing. Hendon never felt so sexy. BETH WEBB

The announcement of a kids’ movie from the filmmaker behind the Hostel films and The Green Inferno was the kind of thing to put social services on standby, and it’s true that Eli Roth’s inspired adaptation of John Bellairs’ 1973 novel isn’t for the faint-hearted, nibbling as it does at the bleeding edge of the 12 rating. Things get weird almost as soon as little orphan Lewis (Daddy’s Home’s Owen Vaccaro) moves into the mysterious mansion, where Jack Black’s jovial warlock, Jonathan Barnavelt, and Cate Blanchett’s Florence Zimmerman — ‘Scary Poppins’ — teach Lewis the magic he may need to combat the dark forces lurking in the house. On home formats, the film’s scarier moments are shorn of their nerve-shredding potency, but younger children may still prefer to watch from behind the sofa. On this evidence, Roth is the man for a Beetlejuice reboot. DAVID HUGHES

Desiree Akhavan has spoken about how The Miseducation Of Cameron Post was influenced by John Hughes films, so it’s unsurprising that the quietly powerful film is more concerned with studying its ragtag team of characters than it is chasing thrills or preaching attitudes. While Chloë Grace Moretz’ titual teen is shipped off to a gay conversion therapy centre — an unquestionably awful practice — there are no villains, only complex, recognisable humans. Jennifer Ehle’s frosty leader believes she’s helping the youngsters in her care; no monster-like caricature needed, that’s disturbing enough. Moretz, aided by intimate cinematography, imbues Cameron with an unwavering self-assurance; a refreshingly far cry from the angst-ridden figure we might expect. Along with her, we scoff at the absurdity of the camp as well as understand its tragic effect — via troubled disciple Mark (Owen Campbell) and ‘cured’ counsellor Reverend Rick (John Gallagher Jr) — too. AMY WEST
THE LAST KINGDOM: SEASON 3
OUT 28 JANUARY / CERT 18 / 528 MINS

Making the leap from BBC to Netflix, The Last Kingdom employs a brisker, more streamlining-friendly pace for its third season. Based on the fifth and sixth books in Bernard Cornwell’s Saxon Stories, the show once again picks up with cocksure Viking Uhtred Ragnarsson (Alexander Dreymon) as he cuts a swathe through ninth-century Wessex. This year it’s delightfully amoral princeling Aethelwold (Harry McEntire), who proves the bane of Uhtred’s existence, making a pleasant switch from all the spitting, hirsute Norsemen. Easily dismissed as Game Of Thrones lite, there’s a lot to love about The Last Kingdom’s earthy irreverence and abundance of rampaging Danes, bloody battles and feudal intrigue. Along with Norsemen and Vikings, there’s a wealth of Valhalla-themed action knocking around at the moment, but by Great Odin’s Raven, this is the most flat-out enjoyable. JAMES DYER

ORPHÉE
OUT NOW / CERT PG / 96 MINS

Jean Cocteau’s fifth film is a funny, magical, occasionally unnerving classic. Orphée transposes the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to post-war Paris, with Orpheus (Cocteau’s real-life lover Jean Marais) now a celebrated Left Bank poet who descends into the underworld to reclaim his dead wife (Marie Déa) on the proviso, when he returns to the real world, he never gazes upon her. Cocteau mixes up the myth up by establishing Death (Maria Casares) as the third spoke in a romantic triangle, the raven-haired grim reaper unforgettably swanning around in a chauffeured Rolls Royce with leather-clad motorcycle outsiders. The film finds enchantment in simple cinematic tricks — the entrance to Hades is through a shimmering mirror — but alongside the fêted dream-like logic enjoys the absurdity of bedroom farce when Orpheus has to live with a woman he cannot look at. Sublime. IAN FREER

BORN YESTERDAY
OUT 21 JANUARY / CERT PG / 103 MINS

From the moment she opens her mouth, yowling like a cat being force-fed a duck, Judy Holliday’s Oscar-winning performance in Born Yesterday is simply a masterclass in comic timing. She plays Billie Dawn, the purely ornamental, helium-toned, extremely non-worldly girlfriend of a wealthy criminal (Broderick Crawford). Billie is given a teacher (William Holden) to help her learn some manners and culture, so she might be of further use to her boyfriend, and it sets her on a path to self-discovery and the realisation that she’s worth more than being just someone’s trophy. Despite this message its gender politics are a little iffy by modern standards — Billie’s relationship with her teacher immediately becomes a romantic one — but the comedy remains timeless, both in terms of the written jokes and Holliday’s physical brilliance. OLLY RICHARDS

THE LAST MOVIE
OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 108 MINS

When Easy Rider became a big box office hit, Hollywood eagerly greenlit this ominously titled follow-up from director-star Dennis Hopper. It gained such a reputation for being a runaway disaster that it nearly was a last movie for Hopper, who decamped to Peru (allegedly because of the quality of the local drugs) to make this indulgent, rambling, fascinating, self-referential film. Stunt man Kansas (Hopper) stays on a remote location after a Sam Fuller Western has finished shooting in South America, and is drawn into a ritual recreation of the filmmaking process which seems to combine (and prefigure) the vibes of The Wicker Man and Aguirre, The Wrath Of God while also parodying The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre. Cinematographer László Kovács gives it a lovely acid haze look, Kris Kristofferson sings ‘Me And Bobby McGee’, and there are patches of very funny writing (or improv). KIM NEWMAN

HORROR EXPRESS
OUT 11 FEBRUARY / CERT 15 / 84 MINS

In case you weren’t compelled to give this bizarre, cheap-as-chips Spanish horror a go after Empire columnist Kim Newman extolled its several virtues in the last issue, here I am, banging on about it again. A rare outing for legends Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing in which they aren’t trying to kill each other, Eugenio Martin’s movie puts their dry British academics on a Siberian train and pits them against an ancient alien fossil that thaws out and stalks around, picking off minor cast members with a single glare of its glowing red eyes. There are elements here that predate The Thing, ’80s cult classics The Hidden and The Keep, and even Snowpiercer, and while there’s nothing here that’s quite as good as any of those films, this is still a gloriously daft romp with much to appreciate. Come for Cushing and Lee exchanging acerbic barbs, stay for the Cossack zombies. CHRIS HEWITT

RBG
OUT 18 FEBRUARY / CERT TBC / 98 MINS

This documentary on the life of US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg verges on hero worship at times, but it’s hard to object when the result is so fist-pumpingly inspiring. The Notorious RBG, as the internet knows her, quietly trailblazed a path through the US justice system with the help of her supportive, forward-thinking dreamboat of a husband, Marty. She led the effort to dismantle hundreds of sexist laws in order to make equality a reality before she even joined the bench, and there she has written some of the most influential opinions and dissents of the modern era. It’s wonderful, and still too rare, to watch a woman lauded for her giant intellect (watch Joe Biden, then head of the Senate Judiciary Committee, fall hard for her during her confirmation hearing), her unfailing determination and her commitment to pumping iron, even in her eighties. HELEN O’HARA
Beware the Court of Owls, that watches all the time ruling Gotham City from a shadowed perch, behind granite and lime...

**Batman: The Court of Owls**

A Batman novel

An original novel by Greg Cox

Out now

**Batman: The Killing Joke**

Christa Faust / Gary Phillips

Out now

**Harley Quinn: Mad Love**

Paul Dini / Pat Cadigan

Out now

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Bidding Starts
15 Feb.

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ACROSS
7 This 2018 heist movie was based on a 1983 TV series (6)
8 Singularly, a martial arts Jet Li double helping (3,3)
9 Dev Patel and Nicole Kidman were both Oscar nominated for this (4)
10 Alejandro G, the first Mexican director to receive multiple Oscar directing nominations (8)
11 Cyberpunk franchise first launched by director Paul Verhoeven in 1987 (7)
13 Jessica, memorable in Driving Miss Daisy (5)
15 Not at all grubby, this Nick Nolte starrer (5)
17 Sean — the essential 007? (7)
20 Queen’s biopic Rhapsody (8)
21 Deadly maze with which director Vincenzo Natali sparked a horror thriller series (4)
22 In which Rupert Everett was an Ibiza party guy (6)
23 “A thriller where nothing is black and white” ran the tagline for this 1993 release (6)

DOWN
1 Heaven’s Gate director Michael (6)
2 Brotherly filmmakers (4)
3 Sir Peter, often cast as Hercule Poirot (7)
4 Hawke found in an Elizabethan movie (5)
5 Composer Bernard forever linked with Hitchcock scores (8)
6 Add 93 for Paul Greengrass’ real-time tale of hijack heroes (6)
7 This rapper/actor starred in Against The Ropes (4,4)
8 Abbie who played Anne in Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (7)
9 Bruce Willis went time-travelling in this 2012 release (6)
10 Redford, Pattinson, Urich maybe? (6)
11 The River — ( Cicely Tyson, James Earl Jones, Louis Gossett Jr ) (5)
12 Just Billy Crystal’s kind of slickers (4)
14 Accrington Stanley (1893) (3)
15 Lady Gaga, American singer (5)
16 Glenn Close, et al in this 1992 comedy (8)
17/4 Down The Hate U Give, 20 Anne Reid, 21 Amen, 22 Psycho, 23 Allied.
20 The Hate U Give, 20 Anne Reid, 21 Amen, 22 Psycho, 23 Allied.

COMPETITION ENDS 18 FEBRUARY
HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, actress, director or character. Text ‘EMPIRE’ to 83070, followed by your answer, name and address (with a space between each element of your message!). Texts cost 50p plus standard network rate.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Texts cost 50p + standard network rate. Ask the bill payer’s permission before entering. Entries must be received before 18 February or will not be valid (but the cost of the text may still be charged). The winner will be selected at random. Competition promoted by Bauer Consumer Media Limited t/a Empire (“Empire”). Empire’s choice of winner is final and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. Empire reserves the right to cancel this competition if it cannot be operated as planned. If for any reason Empire is unable or unable to provide the prize, Empire may provide an alternative prize of equal value. If the winner does not answer the phone or respond to the message within 14 days of the competition’s end, Empire will select another winner and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire will call the winner a maximum of three times and leave one message. If the winner still has not called back Empire, Empire will select another winner. Entrants must be over 18, resident in the UK and not be employed by Empire. The prize is non-negotiable with no cash alternative. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire’s privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner’s personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner’s details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html.
THE CITY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT
CHARLIE JANE ANDERS

THE BRAND-NEW NOVEL FROM THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

OUT NOW
EXT. DO LUNG BRIDGE — NIGHT

Willard (Martin Sheen) has disembarked from the boat, in an attempt to find someone with information pertinent to his mission. Accompanied by Lance (Sam Bottoms), he runs up a hill and into the dark. The light strobes in and out. A voice barks instructions over a loudspeaker. Off-key carnival music plays on the soundtrack. As they walk, ducking under strings of lights, explosions flare in the distance. Men scream. It’s a vision of hell.

Willard crouches down on a gangplank, then drops out of shot. Lance relaxes with his gun around his shoulders, taking in the view.

WILLARD: [off camera] Where can I find the CO?

SOLDIER: You came right to it, son of a bitch!

WILLARD: Lance! Get down here!

Lance jumps down into the trench.

WILLARD: You still got a commanding officer here?

A soldier is holding a wounded colleague in his arms. The injured soldier is screaming in pain.

SOLDIER: Beverly Hills.

WILLARD: What?

SOLDIER: Straight up the road, there’s a concrete bunker called Beverly fucking Hills. Where the fuck else do you think he would be?

Willard moves on. Electric guitar and gunfire permeate the air. Soldiers watch them go past.

GUNNER: You think you’re so bad, huh, nigger?

WILLARD: What are you shooting at, soldier?

GUNNER: What the fuck you think I’m shooting at?

He realises he’s talking to an officer.

GUNNER: Ain’t you?

WILLARD: Who’s the commanding officer here?

GUNNER: Aint you?

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