

SIN CITY... WITH SWORDS

Blood, guts and pixels... How Frank Miller, cutting edge technology and “the new Peter Jackson” forged 300 – the year’s most brutal, ambitious actioner.

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

Girls on film/Girls on film...” Zack Snyder is singing. The man behind 2004’s brash, implausibly impressive remake of *Dawn Of The Dead* is eyeing a wall of bodies and crooning Duran Duran. Fifteen feet above him, Gerard Butler is crouched behind the pile of prosthetic corpses, getting ready to unleash hell on a hoard of Immortals – terrifying warriors whose grotesque silver masks glint under the bright lights of this barren soundstage. The walls are green. Butler is wearing a codpiece. An average day on the set of 300.

“I don’t want it to be like C3PO,” says Snyder, in animated discussion with his DP. He’s worried about how the Immortals’ masks are reflecting the light. “You could see the entire crew in his chin!”

Such are the prosaic problems of directing; even if you’re an advertising hotshot with a sleeper hit debut and an industry tag like “the new Peter Jackson”; and even if you’re stretching technology *Sin City*-style to create a wholly convincing virtual environment. When 300 is finished, Butler – bearded, sculpted and trying hard not to look cold – won’t be stuck on a Montréal set, but cutting a dash in a digitally created Ancient Greece. Right now, it’s January ’06, and we won’t see that for another year. For the moment, he’s playing pretend and Snyder is keeping his spirits up by reciting lines from *Zoolander* between takes. Leonidas, King of Sparta – have you ever wondered if there was more to life, other than being really, really ridiculously good-looking?

Snyder beckons *Total Film* over to the monitor, to watch the playback as the samurai-styled Immortals’ masks switch from ‘scary’ to ‘scared’. Leonidas and the title’s 300 scarlet-cloaked Spartan warriors are about to bring the pain and while the enemy may be the elite fighting outfit of Persian god-king Xerxes, they’ve never come across soldiers as flint-hard as these. No one has. They’re from the mind of Frank Miller. “Yeah, no one has ever accused me of being realistic,” nods the creator of *Sin City* and *The Dark Night Returns* (whose bobbing head and creased features make

him look like a live-action version of the eagle in *The Muppets*). So 300’s Spartans are Miller’s estimation of the original warrior nation, amplified by what would, well, look cool. It’s a story that has echoed through the mind of the iconic graphic novelist for decades, since he saw 1962’s (actually somewhat drab) action epic *The 300 Spartans* as a young boy. “The story haunted me. It redefined everything a hero ever was.”

The based-on-fact tale is of the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC, in which a dedicated band of bloody-minded Spartans faced off against impossible odds and inspired the rest of Greece to unite against a common enemy and establish the world’s first democracy. Not that Snyder is all that troubled by rendering history on screen. To use the director’s word of choice, 300 is all about “awesome”: awesome fighting, awesome weapons and awesome men on a suicide mission...

“The studio was like, ‘Gosh, it seems like Leonidas wants to go to war, like when the Persian messenger comes and is trying to negotiate with him, he just kills the guy. What is that about?’” says Snyder. “I’m like, ‘That’s cool!’ I’m tired of movies where the hero’s always doing the right thing.”

So, expect blood, mayhem, a hero who isn’t afraid to mercilessly slaughter his enemies... >>





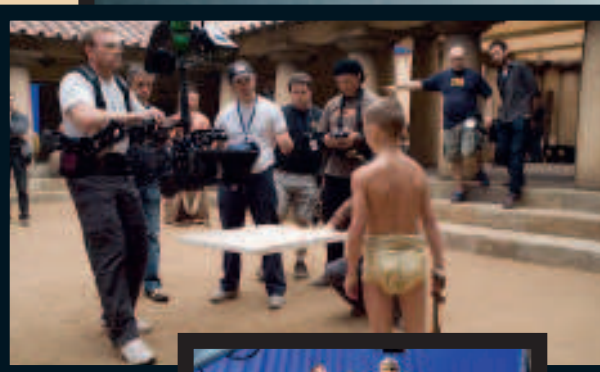
Digital dreamscape: The backgrounds to 300's epic battles were painstakingly created using CGI. The action was shot entirely in a warehouse in Montréal.

It's the Ancient Greek *Dirty Dozen*. But — from the extensive footage *Total Film* has seen — it looks a hell of a lot better than that sounds. Everything's been computer-buffed to a fine sepia sheen, Snyder putting aesthetics above all else, from billowing wheat-fields and hyper-scudding clouds to beyond-polished weaponry and feel-the-spray blood splashes. All shot as if under a sun that's never higher than 22 degrees off the horizon ("like we're shooting in the frickin' Artic Circle") — which somehow makes the daft costumes of the heroes look kinda cool. Not that they looked great on set... "The first time I put on the leather codpiece," says Butler, taking a break from cutting swathes out of the Persian Army, "I didn't have my cape yet, so I was walking past all these gorilla-like carpenters and set-builders who are covered in tattoos and looking at you like, 'What the fuck?' And you're also going, 'What the fuck am I doing?' We have at times felt like Chippendales, but when you see it in context and you get the capes on, it looks incredible."

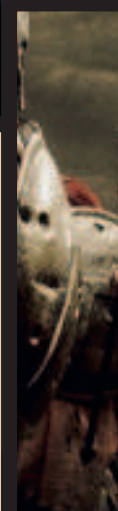
So did Snyder ever, as directors are sometimes wont to do, dress up like his cast to help them conquer their embarrassment? "Yeah, I did," he says, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Uh... no. But I did let Lena [Headey, as Leonidas' queen] slap me. There's a scene in the movie where she slaps Dominic West [who plays Theron, a character not in the comic]. I took her aside and said, 'How hard are you going to slap him?' She goes, 'I don't know.' I go, 'Slap me.' WHACK! I'm like, 'Awwweeeessssome!' You'll see in the movie — she really clocks him."

Violence is what jazzes Snyder. "Any time two guys are taking a swing at each other, I'm pretty much entertained," he laughs. "I've always been a fan of Frank Miller's art, but also his moral viewpoint — he has such a hard view. He strips the morality from situations and says, 'Here's how you deal with it in a raw way.' He has shady characters who become heroes. Marv in *Sin City* is my favourite, but he's really the same as Leonidas; Marv, Leonidas and Frank's *Batman* to me are the same guy."

A Miller adaptation sounds like a no-brainer since *Sin City*'s success, but *300* was initially a tough sell. Snyder was linked to the project even before his breakthrough with *Dawn Of The Dead* and had powerhouse producer Mark Canton, an ex-studio chief who also shepherded Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* to the big screen, in his corner. But with



Train wreck: Before filming, *300*'s cast were subjected to a punishing regime of physical training.



three competing Spartan projects in Hollywood, including an adap of Steven Pressfield's acclaimed novel *Gates Of Fire* (once attached to Michael Mann and George Clooney), the only studio remotely tempted by a stylised sword and sandals epic was Warner Bros — and with *Alexander* and *Troy* already on their slate, the interest was lukewarm.

So while Snyder went off to direct *Dawn*, Canton hired his former assistant to write a screenplay. When that didn't ignite interest, Snyder re-upped, scripting with his writing partner Kurt Johnstad. "For a while, I was saying, 'Let's not write a script at all, let's just use the comic book as our script' but no-one thought that was a good idea. But then *Sin City* came out and I'm like, 'See! It is possible.'"

From day one, Snyder wanted to remain faithful to Miller's graphic novel — down to the composition of frames. "I wanted it to look *exactly* like the graphic novel," he says. "I'd hold up pictures and say, 'If we could make it look like *that* — that would be something special.'" Snyder and Johnstad

"The first time I put on the leather codpiece, I was like, 'What the fuck...?'"

streamlined Miller's structure and beefed up the role of Sparta's Queen Gorgo (Headey, although Snyder also met Sienna Miller for the part). But "if it's a scene from the graphic novel, it's true to the book."

And of course, once *Sin City* scored, Warner Bros execs sat up and flicked on the greenlight for a 60-day shoot and a budget close to \$60 million. "Yeah, *Sin City* certainly pioneered the way for us





‘I look like a Greek god, but I feel like I’m 80 years old. My knees are gone’

to go down the road we went down,” says Snyder. “But to say it’s exactly *Sin City* is not right. It’s its own thing and it was uncharted waters for the studio. I understand why they were nervous but the one thing they did get was that it was time to play around with this genre, which had always been treated with a lot of reverence.”

Reverence is certainly not much in evidence on the 300 set. Unless it’s from the make-up girls clustered around Butler and his fellow warriors — including *The Lord Of The Rings*’ David Wenham as the film’s narrator, Dilios — adding foundation and definition to the actors’ six-packs (Canton claims that the shoot was plagued by women who would

show up at the studios hoping to catch a glimpse of exposed actorly flesh). But the muscles are not all make-up and the key cast were put through a gruelling, four-month training course to prepare for production. “When I take my clothes off I look like a Greek god,” says Butler, through his thatchy facial hair, “but inside I feel like an 80-year-old man. My knees are gone. My shoulders feel like they don’t exist any more...”

The Scottish actor looks more than convincing as Sparta’s steely monarch, Leonidas, even if he’s yet to break through as — to quote the excitable producers of 300 — “the next Russell Crowe”. He’s had starring roles before, but in pictures that either did mediocre business (*Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle Of Life*, *Reign Of Fire...*), bombed (*Dracula 2000*, *The Phantom Of The Opera*) or disappeared (*Timeline*). With 300, the 38-year-old former lawyer has got another shot — and it’s undoubtedly his best one yet.

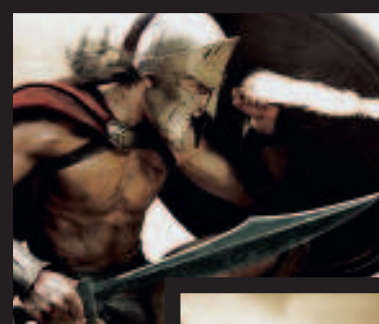
“I liked his freshness,” says Snyder. “I felt like everyone else brought baggage and he just came in and was Leonidas. We shot the movie in order and you can see him turn into Leonidas.” As part of the

strange mating dance that producers have to engage in with studios before they can get their movies greenlit, Butler had to meet the chief of Warner Bros, Alan Horn, to pitch for the role — without letting on that, in fact, he’d already been cast. “Mark Canton said to me, ‘This is what Mel said when he came to see me for *Lethal Weapon*.’ I thought what I could bring to the movie, went in there and unashamedly... that’s not true: *ashamedly* sold myself to Alan Horn. I walked out of there cringing but the next day I got the call.”

In the Spartans’ opening battle against Xerxes’ slave army, Leonidas leads an astonishing charge through a pack of Persians, hacking off limbs, gouging out organs, chucking bodies through the air. It’s a gorgeously stylised piece of combat choreography that Butler had been practising for days and was totally pumped up for. Except that technical difficulties with the new camera system meant it took four hours of set up before Snyder was finally ready to shoot. With time slipping away, he ordered his adrenalised star to stand down and let his stuntman do the scene.

“I wanted to scream and say, ‘Fuck you! Do you know how hard I’ve worked on this? Do you >>

The light stuff: High-contrast, wintery lighting (“like the frickin’ Arctic Circle!” says director Zack Snyder) gives an other-worldly feel.





A SPARTAN EXISTENCE...

Just how hard were the real-life Spartans? Very.

The state decided whether children – male and female – should live or die when they were born. Any sign of sickness or weakness and the unfortunate infant would be left on the slopes of Mount Taygetos to die.

The Spartans conquered their next-door neighbours, the Messenians, and turned them into agricultural slaves who tilled the land for Sparta. “They were like this crazy, fascist cult that went around stomping the shit out of everybody,” says Zack Snyder.

From the age of seven, male children were indoctrinated into the military. Apart from gymnastics and weaponry, their training included regular beatings and survival tests to build up discipline and endurance to severe pain. “The brutality in our movie is child’s play next to what the real Spartans were like,” says Snyder.

At 20, they became soldiers and lived in barracks until the age of 30, when they were allowed to move into their own homes with their wife and children. They retired from the army at 60.

Under Sparta’s totalitarian system, there were strict laws governing beards and the length of men’s hair.

Fun time in Sparta! A popular contest was diamastigosis, in which contestants competed to see who could endure the worst flogging.

The Spartan army’s motto was win or die. The parting cry of a mother or wife was, “Return with your shield, or on it.” A soldier returning without his shield was usually banished or executed.

Eligible men were fined by the elders who ruled Sparta if they didn’t take a boy lover. The relationships were usually chaste, however; buggery was outlawed in Sparta.

The tightly packed Spartan phalanx battle formations – with rows of men behind thick, heavy shields – were considered undefeatable on the battlefield, and helped Sparta win several wars.

Dwindling numbers – through infanticide and strict controls on who qualified for citizenship – eventually brought about Sparta’s downfall.

‘It could easily have gone from a brutal battle movie to a homoerotic comedy’

know how ready I am for this?” says Butler. “But I didn’t. But I think Zack could feel it, and later he says, ‘Why don’t you just warm up to see how it looks?’ When he saw me doing a little bit, he said, ‘Let’s just go for it.’ And the first take was unbelievable. Literally the whole crowd – hundreds of people – started screaming and whooping; you could feel every particle of testosterone in there.”

300 is infused by its operatic sensibility – and, let’s face it, a strong dose of homoeroticism. Ripped men wearing next to nothing, only one speaking female character whose primary contribution seems to be a rough-sex scene that Butler describes as Leonidas and Gorgo “fucking the shit out of each other”, and an effeminate Persian ruler decked out like a showgirl/drag queen hybrid (even Snyder describes Xerxes’s look as “Baz Luhrmann-y”). Did the camp aspect ever worry director or star? “It’s

funny because it was one of those things that, if you put too much thought behind it, you might try to edit yourself and change the aesthetic,” demurs Snyder. “I just went with it. Then it’s up to the viewer to decide whether that’s what they see or not. If that’s the case, great. If not, *awesome*.”

“There were so many scenes where if you changed the tone three per cent one way or the other, it became hilarious,” chuckles Butler. “It could very easily have gone from an epic, brutal battle movie to a homoerotic camp comedy. A whole scene could turn by changing the tone of one word. To be honest, it was the source of a lot of entertainment for us. But it’s cool, I think that’s all part of it...”

A year later – without a codpiece in sight – Butler is confident the camp quotient hasn’t unbalanced the movie, buoyed by the news that the test-screening results are apparently the best for any film in Warner Bros’ 104-year history. “We had the final test screening just before Christmas and it was so incredible, the atmosphere, the audience, they were applauding, screaming, hooting, laughing – because it’s outrageously funny at points – and we came outside and we were all jumping up and down like little kids!”

Snyder, who has been locked in an intensive post-production process for the best part of 12 months (while Butler has wrapped two more movies, crime thriller *Butterfly On A Wheel* and comedy *PS, I Love You*) is a little more circumspect. “It’s amazing to think it’s about to be let loose on the world...” he says. “The truth is you’re always surfing the edge of technology and what you think is cool.

It’s an interesting exercise to do a doodle and say, ‘I know there aren’t any elements that you can go shoot but I don’t care, I want it to look like this!’ It puts everyone up against it but I feel like they all really started to care about the movie. They felt like they were working on something cool and they all gave this monumental effort that has made this movie exactly what I wanted it to be.” And that is? Oh yes. “*Awesome!*” **TF**

300 opens on 30 March and will be reviewed in the next issue of Total Film.

Talk to her: Lena Headey as the only speaking female character, Queen Gorgo.

