

ON SET

# RISE OF THE MACHINES?





WORDS MATT MUELLER

After *Transformers*, does robo-smackdown movie **Real Steel** prove that the blockbuster has lost its humanity? Hugh Jackman and co argue it's all about the humans...

**I**n Detroit's Cobo Arena, a supersized boxing ring for supersized pugilists has been erected on the capacious stadium's floor. *Total Film* watches as *Real Steel*'s robotic star, an 8ft-tall junkyard dawg called Atom, goes at it hammer and tongs with his two-headed red 'bot adversary Twin Cities.

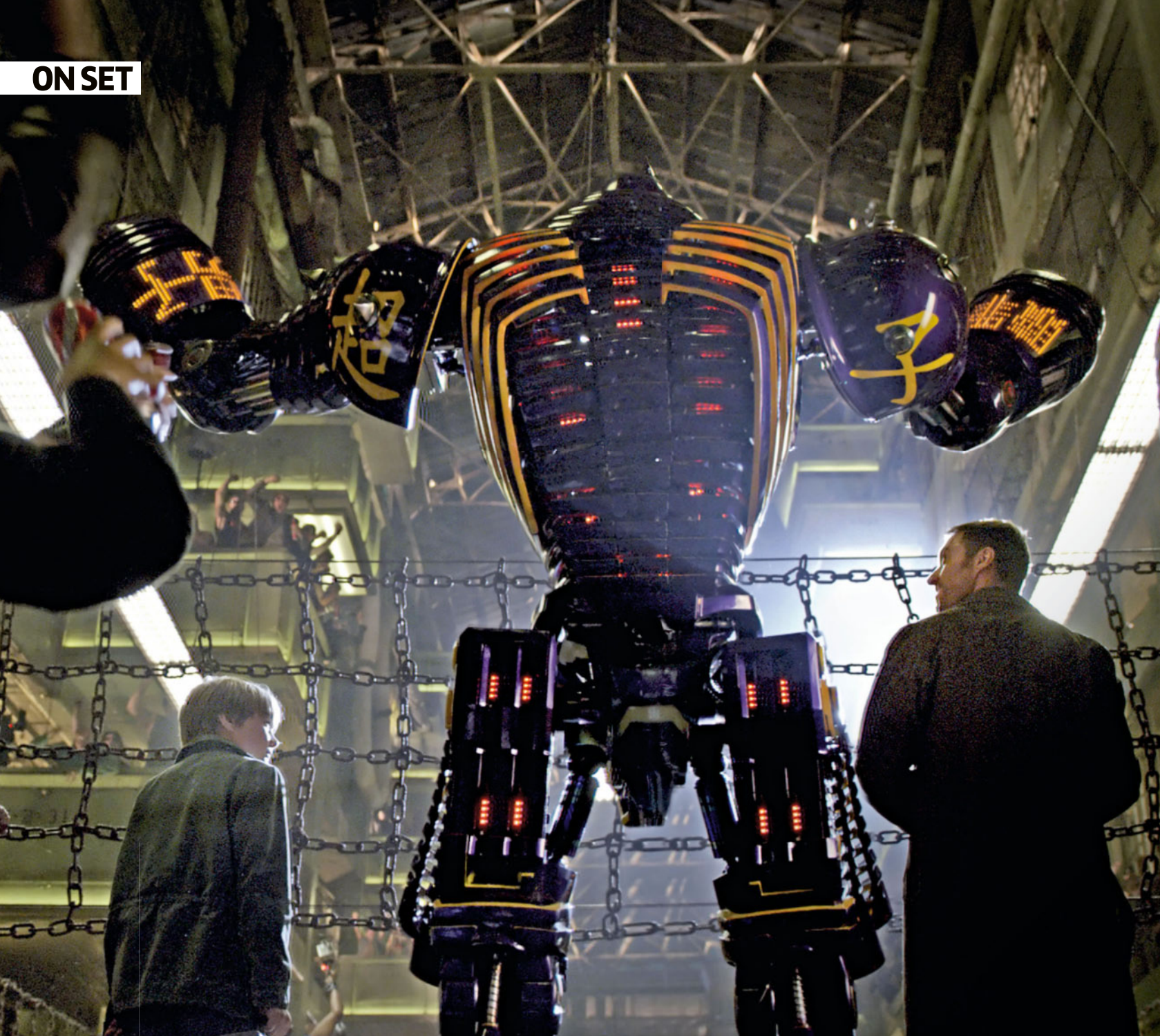
Or make that *imagines* what seems like a bloody good scrap, judging by the reaction of 600 baying extras... Because no one can really see these two iron giants denting each other's mainframes with their giant metallic fists. Not *Total Film*; not Hugh Jackman, who prowls the outer ring operating Atom's movements; not the frenzied rent-a-crowd baying for hydraulic fluid to be spilt. No one, that is, except for DoP Mauro Fiore (*Avatar*) and his camera operators, who can observe every swing, jab and parry thanks to *Avatar*-invented technology called SimulCam B, which offers real-time playback of pre-captured performance as they're filming the sequence.

As with all of *Real Steel*'s scraps, today's robo smackdown was shot six months before the rest of filming. It was done on a soundstage by director Shawn Levy, fight choreographer (and former Welterweight champ) Sugar Ray Leonard and boxers in mo-cap suits who would later be converted into robotic avatars. Stiffened and >>

Robot wars: (main) the fighting arena; (below) director Shawn Levy gets involved on set with Jackman and his on-screen son, *Thor*'s Dakota Goyo.







decelerated, the physical action is designed to mimic heavy-metal girth and lumber, a far cry from *Transformers'* law-of-physics-defying ballet-machines. "I was there checking it all out," recalls Jackman, "and making a couple of annoying comments." As washed-up boxer-turned-trainer Charlie Kenton, Jackman controls Atom by remote-control headset and voice recognition. Everything he says, Atom does: "Left jab! Right hook! Uppercut, slip right, backpedal..."

Impressively, it's Levy who's shouting out these match moves so the extras can react. If the big-budget filmmaking doesn't work out, he can always go into sports announcing. Having skimmed off enough multiplex cream with his seven comedies (including *Night At The Museum* and its sequel) to make Hollywood purr with delight, he was deemed worthy of his first action

blockbuster by DreamWorks honchos Steven Spielberg and Stacey Snider.

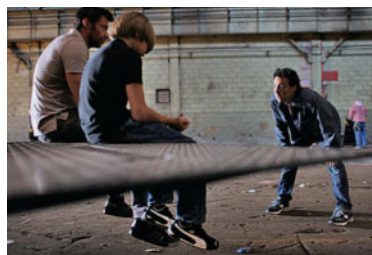
"They called and said, 'We've got this robot boxing movie,'" he recalls. "I was like, 'You do know this is Shawn Levy?'" But Steven said, 'We called you because we don't want another robot movie that's just loud and messy; we want something warm-hearted... I've seen everything you've done; you're ready for this.' I felt ready."

Loosely derived from a short story (*Steel*) by sci-fi scribe Richard Matheson and set nine years hence, *Real Steel* already had a star attached in Jackman. The Aussie's no stranger to playing the onscreen bruiser, although this tale casts him as a bitter ex-fighter who was deprived of his shot at championship glory when human boxers were rendered obsolete by metallic pain-dispensers built to satiate audience bloodlust. Worse, he's

afflicted by regret and shame after abandoning his son at birth. When the tyke re-enters his life and convinces him to train up a pile of scrap-metal – Atom – into a robot title-winner, he gets his shot at making things right.

Levy and Jackman spent six months overhauling the screenplay, turning it from something destined to be dismissed as a *Transformers* knock-off into a human story about the redemption of a trinity of abandoned souls: the father, the son and the holy machine. "We always knew the robots were going to be badass and supercool," says Levy. "My worry was all the things that make the movie more than just another robot movie. To see if we could pull off the first truly emotional





**Nerves of steel: (main) Jackman with a 'bot; (l-r) director Shawn Levy gets down to his leading men's level; Jackman and Levy compare notes; Jackman dons an excellent hat; Levy sets up a shot.**

more organic camera moves, while Jackman and his fellow actors can deliver more credible performances. "Was that mind-numbing or interesting?" asks Levy as we exit the Brain Bar. *Total Film* replies that if *Avatar*'s tech-heads are this giddily excited about getting to use their technology in a live-action setting, we're more than happy to listen.

Listening isn't something required around *Real Steel*'s big 'bots. "They don't speak, they don't feel – they're not sentient beings," says Levy. "The exception being Atom... He's a machine but you start to believe, as this boy does, that maybe he has something resembling a soul." To aid this anthropomorphic illusion, Spielberg convinced Levy to go animatronic rather than simply rely on CGI. Of the film's 19 robots (with names like Zeus, Noisy Boy and Metro), four were constructed, including an 8ft tall, hydraulically functioning Atom. "They cost half a million bucks each, they're unbelievable – you just believe they're alive," marvels Jackman. "We treat it like Cary Grant [sic] with Harvey, like they're real all the time. Having them was invaluable – I see why Spielberg is Spielberg."

Dakota Goyo, the young actor playing Max who looks like the love child of Justin Bieber and Carla Bruni, was more than persuaded by the puppeteer-operated animatronic he found himself emoting to. "I was with Atom a lot. I think he was alive," he says. "I felt like it, yeah." The 10-year-old was also in awe of his onscreen pop's phenomenal buffness and strength. In one scene Goyo punches

Jackman in the stomach, delighted at Atom's latest victory. "My wrists cracked. After, they hurt. It's like a brick wall." Later, Levy tells *Total Film* that the scenes where Goyo 'bonds' with Atom, who's programmed with a shadow function to mirror his opposite's moves, "are the most magical in the movie... Dakota looks like he loves Atom because he wasn't faking it; he was a 10-year-old boy with a real robot moving in mirror with him." Unless it was a guy on stilts, which happened too...

Spielberg's pawprints are all over *Real Steel*, from casting to approving every last robot design. In turn, Levy convinced the project's godfather to steer clear of 3D. "Given that 70 per cent of the movie is a humanist father-son drama, I don't want people to be taken out of a beautifully acted scene because they're going, 'Wow, Evangeline Lilly's lips are right in my face!'" But for those who would accuse him of being a mere puppet while Spielberg pulled all the strings, Levy shrugs and says, "Anyone who's making popcorn movies in 2011 is an offspring of Mr. Spielberg."

Beckoned back to the Cobo floor, Levy shouts testily across the auditorium – "30 seconds, just give me 30 seconds!" – then turns back to *Total Film*, only to grin sheepishly when his passionate verbosity suddenly deserts him. "Anyway," he concludes, "that's what I wanted to tell you. Back to our crazy robot action..." Down in the arena's bowels, Levy finds his voice again. "OK guys!" he barks to his extras like he's addressing a gathering of close chums, "this is the knockout, this is Level 3! This is where you really get to use your voices! And 3, 2, 1... Knock-down!!!" **TF**

***Real Steel* opens on 14 October and will be reviewed in a future issue of *Total Film***

**'NO HUMAN FRAILTY EQUALS NO LIMITS FOR VIOLENCE – WE CHOP BITS OFF THESE ROBOTS. IT ALMOST GIVES YOU A LICENCE FOR BLOODLUST'**

SHAWN LEVY

live-action robot movie." Featuring lots of thrashing, crashing, bashing robot-on-robot prize-fights... "No human frailty equals no limits for violence," says Levy. "We cut these robots' heads off, we cut their arms off. It almost gives you a licence for bloodlust because you know the blood isn't blood, it's hydraulic fluid..."

Squirrelled away from the main unit up on the arena's first tier, like some techie leper colony, are *Real Steel*'s seven-strong "simulcam team". They've all been plucked from *Avatar* and regale *Total Film* with phrases like "quad split", "virtual camera feed" and "load list" while showing off their "Brain Bar", a super-jazzy bank of computers and monitors linked to the action below. Bottom line? With Fiore and his camera operators able to see the robot combatants' position in the frame, they can plot smoother,

## Our friends electric Total Film's favourite robo-buddies.



**JOHNNY 5**  
**Short Circuit (1986)**  
Goes by the catchy name Strategic Artificially Intelligent Nuclear Transport (SAINT) Number 5, but his friends call him Johnny.



**THE IRON GIANT**  
**The Iron Giant (1999)**  
Towering android makes a cuddly companion for a lonely boy. Prone to fits of rage. Nasty underbite, too.



**BUMBLEBEE**  
**Transformers films (2007-2011)**  
Trusty yellow autobot turns into a '76 Chevy Camaro when Shia LaBeouf needs to make out with Megan Fox.



**ROBBY THE ROBOT**  
**Forbidden Planet (1956)**  
Looks like a jukebox – it was the '50s – but does conjure up va-va-voom dresses for Dr. Morbius' sexy daughter.



**R2-D2 & C-3PO**  
**Star Wars saga (1977-2005)**  
One speaks six million languages; one has flight and zapper abilities. Perfect sidekicks for any space jam.