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ISSUE 6

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EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

Tom Hanks was in the midst of one of life's most daunting challenges – getting through Herman Melville's great American novel *Moby Dick* – when he met with Lana and Andy Wachowski at his production company offices in 2010. The sibling filmmakers, most famous for their game-changing science-fiction *Matrix* trilogy, were hoping to convince the star to climb aboard their monumentally ambitious adaptation of David Mitchell's 2004 best-seller *Cloud Atlas*.

Three directors, six narratives, multiple stars and a 500-year timespan: how David Mitchell's 'unfilmable' novel became the soaring epic *Cloud Atlas*

Words by Matt Mueller

As small talk, Hanks was explaining his current literary mission... "And Lana just exploded," he recalls. "She said, 'That's what we want to do! We want to take everything that

Moby Dick was when it came out and we want to match it to *that*.'" She pointed at a poster of 2001: *A Space Odyssey* hanging on Hanks' wall. The actor chuckles, still startled by the boldness of

their intentions: "That's really different from, 'You're a cop with a dog who solves crimes.' I said, 'Oh man, I am so in.'"

It was Natalie Portman who first gave Lana a copy of Mitchell's acclaimed novel on the set of *V For Vendetta* (2005), which the siblings had co-written and produced. "I was blown away, I was so in love with it," says Lana, who was born Larry and recently came out as a transgender woman. "I gave it to Andy, he loved it too, and it became

all we could talk about. It had a love of storytelling and the power of literature and yet it was also post-modern." When they decided they wanted to collaborate on a film project with Tom Tykwer of *Run Lola Run* fame, *Cloud Atlas* became the obvious contender, its epic scale and Russian-doll plotting "a large enough dance-floor," as Lana puts it, to accommodate three ambitious directors.

Convincing others that Mitchell's beloved, puzzle-like tome could be deciphered into a satisfying big-screen adaptation, however, was a challenging mission. In that respect, Andy notes, the trio felt very connected to the travails endured by *Cloud Atlas*' characters, who exist in interconnected tales that span hundreds of years and a multitude of genres, ranging from period adventure to '70s-style conspiracy thriller to dystopian sci-fi. "In the same way that they are tested and have to stand up and be courageous," says the younger Wachowski sibling, "so did everyone have to stand up and be courageous when they were making this film."

The epiphany moment happened in Costa Rica, where the Wachowskis and Tykwer decamped with an all-or-nothing goal: to crack the code of a *Cloud Atlas* screen adaptation, or give up altogether. Already hooked by the karmic connections woven into the novel's six storylines (see right), the trio worked out that one character who represents the worst of humanity in the 19th-century South Seas voyage could evolve into another who becomes a hero

in the final story set in post-apocalyptic Hawaii, and that having the same actor portray both roles was the ideal way to suggest an evolutionary journey. "It was like this miraculous breakthrough," laughs Andy.

And so it came to pass that Hanks, Halle Berry, Hugh Grant, Susan Sarandon, Hugo Weaving, Ben Whishaw, Jim Sturgess, Jim Broadbent and a cavalcade of other international actors decamped to Berlin, Scotland and Majorca for a shoot in which they all portrayed wildly varying characters, often bewigged, prosthetically enhanced and frequently bewildered. "Sometimes we would pass each other in the hallways and not recognise who that person was," laughs Berry. "It was like camp *Cloud Atlas*," adds Sarandon, "in that we all got a chance to do so much. You had no time to hold onto your ego when you saw Tom Hanks doing little parts, big parts, changing all the time.

"I SAW ALL OF MY CHARACTERS AS THE SAME SOUL. I START OFF AS AN ENSLAVED NATIVE AND EVOLVE TO BECOME THIS ADVANCED, OTHERWORLDLY WOMAN"

HALLE BERRY

It all added to the festivities of this brave circus."

The logistics and scale of the production dictated that Tykwer, who also devised the film's emotive score with two cohorts, and the Wachowskis needed to work in separate units, with the German filmmaker shepherding the 1930s, 1970s and modern-days storylines while the siblings oversaw the 19th-century and futuristic strands. Complex →

THE WEAK ARE MEAT, THE STRONG DO EAT

A short guide to *Cloud Atlas*' story sextet...

1849 Pacific

Young, gullible notary Adam Ewing (Sturgess) shares a Pacific voyage with an ill-intentioned doctor (Hanks) – originator of the weak/strong motto. Also features: Weaving, Grant, Sarandon, Berry, Doona Bae.

1936 Edinburgh

Past-his-prime composer Vyvyan Ayrs (Broadbent) takes on ambitious, bisexual apprentice Robert Frobisher (Whishaw). Also features: Hanks, Weaving, Berry, Grant.

1973 San Francisco

Tabloid journalist Luisa Rey (Berry) uncovers nefarious deeds at a local nuclear power plant. Also features: Hanks, Grant, Whishaw, Weaving.

2012 London & Edinburgh

Vanity-press publisher Timothy Cavendish (Broadbent) comes unstuck when his brother (Grant) tricks him into a nursing home-cum-prison. Also features: Weaving, Whishaw, Hanks, Sturgess, Sarandon.

2144 Neo-Seoul

In a totalitarian future, the cloned 'fabricant' Sonmi-451 (Bae) reveals how she evolved from a genetically engineered worker drone to a revolutionary leader. Also features: Sturgess, D'Arcy, Grant, Hanks, Weaving.

2321 Hawaii

In post-apocalyptic Hawaii, tribal goatherder Zachry (Hanks) helps Meronym (Berry) save what's left of advanced civilisation. Also features: Sarandon, Grant, Sturgess, Weaving, Broadbent.

scheduling occasionally required that actors play different characters in the same day. "I'd be Chang [an Asian freedom fighter in 22nd-century Korea] in the morning," recalls Sturgess with a wry smile. "Then I'd go have lunch and, in the afternoon, I'd be transported back to the 1800s as Adam Ewing." There were bigger challenges for Berry, who broke her foot two days into the shoot. "I was working with limitations and pain but I had gracious co-stars and we found ways to get around it," says the actress.

Like most of her Atlas accomplices, Berry was strongly in tune with the film's karmic sentiments, namely that a person's choice to act with either kindness or cruelty will ripple through time and that each actor was meant to be evolving (or, in some cases, remaining stuck) through their sundry characters. "It made sense for me personally," she notes, "because I believe that everything I do in this life has a consequence. I've always believed in reincarnation, and I saw all of my characters as the same soul. I start off as an enslaved native in the 1800s and I evolve to become Meronym, this advanced, otherworldly woman trying to save her people."

Elaborating on the theme, Hanks chips in, "It's above my pay grade to say what's going on beyond this life but I embrace the mystery of it all. And as a layman who studies history, I am firm in my belief that the human condition throughout the history of the world has never evolved until someone did the right thing, which is a version of saying, 'It's



important the karma you put out right now because it's going to affect eternity."

That's weighty philosophy to encounter in a mainstream film, but that was always the Wachowski's noble vision: to make an evocative epic as steeped in big ideas as it was accessible to multiplex moviegoers. Their other key objective was to create a film that carried a multitude of textures and layers, much like 2001: A Space Odyssey, an all-time favourite after their father showed it to them when Lana was ten and Andy eight ("Crazy, right?" the former laughs). They'll be delighted to hear that Hanks has seen Cloud Atlas three times and taken "different, profound things" away with him each time.

"The last time I saw it," the actor recalls with palpable enthusiasm,



"I picked up on Doona [Bae], as Sonmi, saying to James D'Arcy after he tells her, 'We'd like your version of the truth': 'Truth is singular; versions of the truth are mistruths.' Holy cow! And then later, Susan Sarandon as The Abbess quotes from the book: 'From womb to tomb, we are all connected; this life is but a door

that we are passing through.' There's some high-powered stuff in this movie. It makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck..."

Cloud Atlas is released in UK cinemas on 22 February.

Q&A



FROM SKYFALL TO CLOUD ATLAS, BEN WHISHAW IS ON AN ALMIGHTY STREAK

You play the young composer Robert Frobisher in your main storyline. Did you have to study music? Tom [Tykwer] phoned me three months before we were going to shoot and said, "You need to have piano lessons." So he sent me the score and I found a teacher in London. Miao-miao, her name was. I learned a lot about Frobisher that way.

Which was the most liberating character to play? I liked being the woman [Whishaw plays Hugh Grant's wife in the modern-day storyline]. It was only one day's filming. We did this whole experiment with lots of prosthetics and creases and wrinkles and it ended up that you couldn't see me at all, it was very bizarre. Tom said, "We've got to be able to see a bit of Ben in there." That was the balance we were

trying to strike so that you could see that it was Halle Berry or whoever underneath. Because then it's fun.

Did you go out to the shops to try the make-up in public? Oh god no! We were filming in some sort of abandoned mental institution in Germany. There wasn't anywhere for me to go even if I'd wanted to.

Was it tricky feeling like you were the same soul considering you looked so different in your varying guises? I never felt that the characters I played were all the same person. For me it was about the feeling that you get rather than it making absolute logical sense... the vision behind the film is more about how we're all the same, regardless of our skin colour, gender, whatever.

What was your reaction to the film when you watched it? I've seen it twice now and I was on the edge of my seat. I kept gasping out loud; I don't think I've ever done that before in a film. One of the first shots literally took my breath away, this beautiful shot when Jim Sturgess is walking along the beach and the camera lifts up and you see these gorgeous little clouds reflected in pools on the beach. The poetry and the imagery and the way they cut the film together, these things were just thrilling. The film has such chutzpah.

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