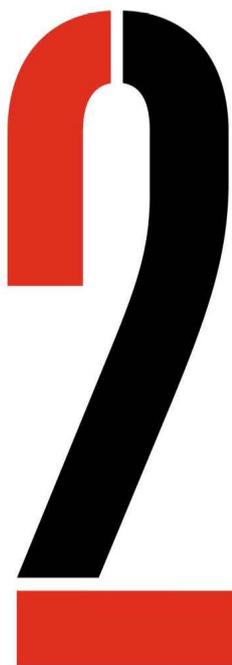


ELLEN RIPLEY

IN FOUR FILMS OVER TWO DECADES, WARRANT OFFICER ELLEN RIPLEY SUBVERTED **EVERYTHING**. **SIGOURNEY WEAVER** TALKS TO *EMPIRE* ABOUT INHABITING A DEEP-SPACE PIONEER



AFTER A SHORT burst of static, Warrant Officer Ripley's voice comes on the line as clear and reassuring as the chiming of a bell. "I'm so glad she continues to resonate for people," says Sigourney Weaver, digesting the news that her alter ego lies second in *Empire's* tally of movie heroes. "I admire her too. She gets things done."

The extraordinary saga of this courageous, resourceful, very human hero, and her close encounters with an iconic if unreasonable species of extra-terrestrial, revolutionised the idea of the hero. Beyond gender stereotypes, across four nightmare confrontations, she kept her head, held her nerve, came up with a plan, a natural leader.

"And, may I say, very different to me," Weaver maintains modestly. "But I've always felt she was such a partner. She is always in my stomach."

Here, Weaver discusses Ripley's ever-surprising evolution.

THE RELUCTANT HERO (ALIEN)

Little could Weaver imagine storming the gates of popular culture in 1978. Late for her audition with Ridley Scott, she stormed in flustered. "And I was wearing very high hooker boots," she laughs — they might have been an act of defiance. She gave Scott the full blast of her opinions: the script was so bleak, and she couldn't understand what the alien looked like. "I can show you pictures," he offered, whipping out a sheaf of Giger horrors.

"They were heart-stopping," recalls Weaver. "They were so beautiful, elegant and frightening. He showed me pictures of the eggs." She remembers this particularly. "All the eggs in the ship had these little baby faces and they looked kind of happy." She could sense the project's perversions.

Scott was equally transfixed by her. Here was Ripley, uneasy and confrontational. Written as male, not a single line was altered when they flipped genders. Scott expected to hoodwink an

audience waiting for her to die, but we sensed that steel core from the start.

"The whole thing for me with Ripley is that you don't have time to think," contends Weaver. "She is this very by-the-book young lieutenant or whatever, and she has to throw the manual away and be like an animal." Much like her foe, Ripley is acting on instinct.

THE ACTION HERO (ALIENS)

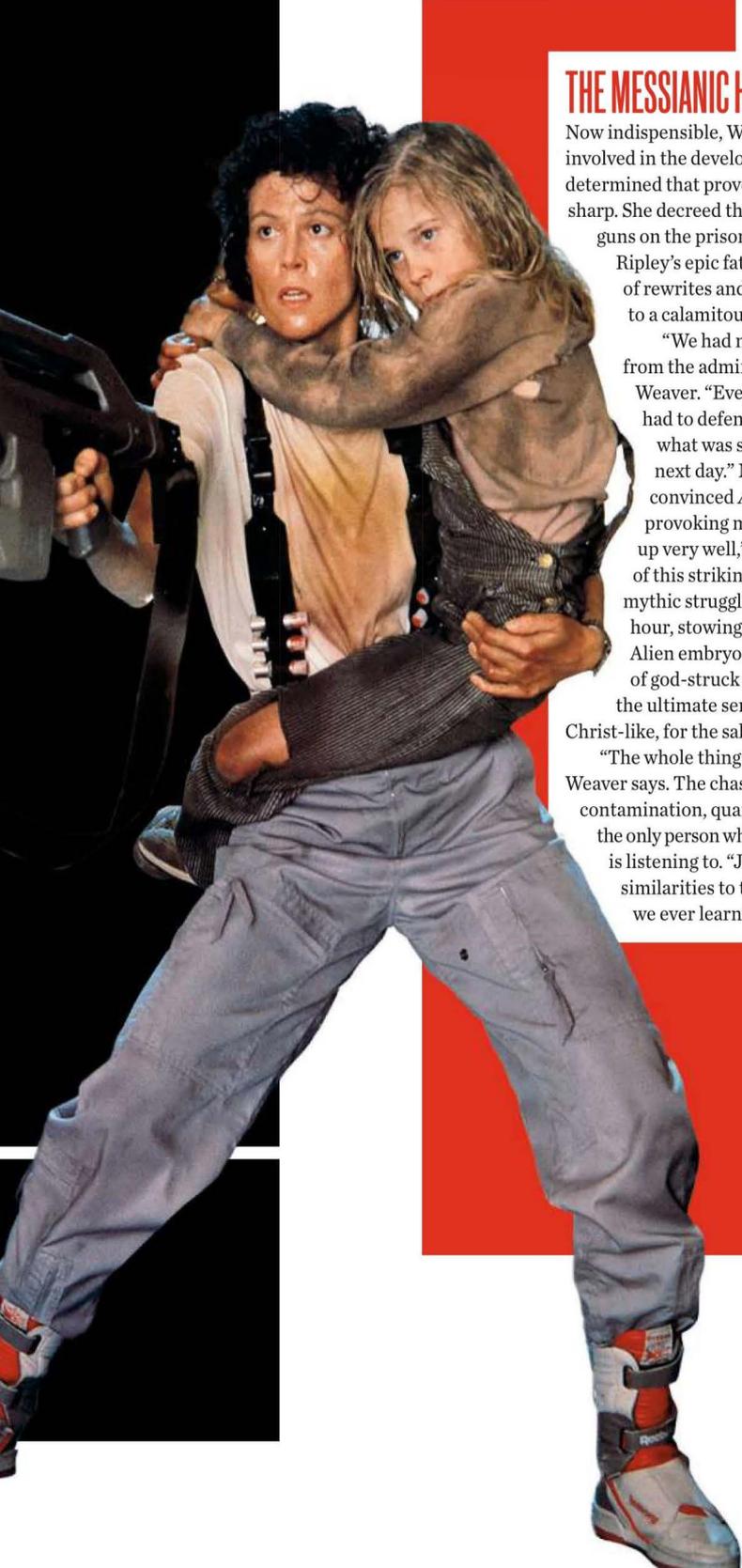
"Jim Cameron gave me such a wonderful storyline," she says. "This sort of damaged woman, broken-hearted, who doesn't want to leave her cell, putting her at the front again." She responded to the idea of Ripley rediscovering her maternal instincts through Newt. Though if anything, the sequel was even more physical. This was Ripley redefined; the sheriff dragged out of retirement. "I really hadn't read the script properly," she laughs. "I hadn't registered there were all these guns in it."

Lost in the nest of sets at Pinewood, playing Ripley and being Ripley was still much the same thing. "Flying by the seat of your pants from one scene to another," she says. "It is such a powerful situation. Everything is at stake, not only your existence and your friends, but also your planet." But the high stakes, the nuking the site from orbit, is just background. It says everything about the humanity of Ripley that the perfect sequel boils down to saving a little girl.

Alamy, Alistar, Photofest

Left: The journey begins for Ripley in 1979's *Alien*.

Below: A glimpse of a maternal streak in *Aliens* (1986). **Right:** At rock bottom in *Alien³* (1992). **Below right:** Ripley's final bow? 1997's *Alien: Resurrection*.



THE MESSIANIC HERO (ALIEN³)

Now indispensable, Weaver was actively involved in the development of the series, determined that provocative edge stay sharp. She decreed there would be no guns on the prison planet. She decided Ripley's epic fate. But a maelstrom of rewrites and studio meddling led to a calamitous production.

"We had non-stop interference from the administration at Fox," says Weaver. "Every night David [Fincher] had to defend his right to shoot what was supposed to be shot the next day." Nevertheless, she is convinced *Alien³* is a thought-provoking movie. "I think it holds up very well," she declares defiantly, of this striking recalibration of the mythic struggle. This is Ripley's darkest hour, stowing her grief inside with an Alien embryo. Yet she rouses a gaggle of god-struck reprobates to take on the ultimate serial killer, before dying, Christ-like, for the sake of mankind.

"The whole thing is existential," Weaver says. The chastening relevance of contamination, quarantine, and the fact that the only person who knows anything, nobody is listening to. "Jesus, there are so many similarities to the pandemic." Why don't we ever learn? Always listen to Ripley.

ALIEN: RESURRECTION THE ANTI-HERO

Scientifically speaking, Weaver doesn't play Ripley in the fourth and weakest of her *Alien* films. She plays clone 'Ripley 8' — Ripley plus xenomorph DNA: amoral, supercharged, brimming with acid one-liners. Weaver appreciated inverting the past. Could Ripley be cool? "Faced with the Company's manipulations, it was natural to be cynical."

She worked out a mutual body language with Tom Woodruff Jr, the stunt man playing the lead Alien. "I watched *Frankenstein*," she says, "for the idea of the monster creating himself." It's a mesmerising performance, but the film is weirdly off-kilter. She sighs, "I'm not sure where we got to."

She was game for Neill Blomkamp restarting the series after *Aliens*, but Fox lost faith. Recently, producer Walter Hill sent over a 50-page treatment for a fifth Ripley. "I don't know," reflects Weaver. "Maybe Ripley has done her bit. She deserves a rest." Time to enjoy the memories.

Deep-cleaning her New York apartment recently, she found a set of photos from the first film. "Me with the special-effects guys," she laughs. "I'd be hanging up in the air and they would pipe me tea laced with rum to keep me going, without my asking for it! I was part of the crew, and that was something I loved. I wasn't dressed in some little dolly dress, trying to keep clean. I was in jumpsuits looking like a grease monkey, in the trenches with the crew."

Just being Ripley, getting things done.

IAN NATHAN

