

# JAMES CAMERON: Directing

# ALIENS



Hicks (Michael Biehn) makes a gruesome discovery in *ALIENS*, the new movie from director/writer James Cameron.

*The man behind  
"The Terminator" takes up the  
chiller challenge of the  
"ALIEN" sequel!*



ALIENS PHOTOS: BOB PENK/COPYRIGHT 1986 20TH CENTURY FOX



**P**eople have high hopes for James Cameron. 20th Century Fox, the studio which has given him \$17 million to write and direct a sequel to *ALIEN*, hopes he's going to deliver a blockbuster as successful as the original. The actors and creative technicians he has been working with while making *ALIENS* at England's Pinewood Studios hope that he'll make a memorable film. And finally, moviegoers who saw Cameron's last film *The Terminator*—and also director Ridley Scott's *ALIEN*—hope his follow-up will be at least as entertaining.

For Cameron (*Fango* #41), the challenge of *ALIENS* began with his liking of the first movie. "I've always been an avid fan of science fiction, both in literature and films," he confesses. "The thing that struck me about the first film was its heightened sense of realism—virtually a first for a science-fiction film that dealt with a completely separate environment."

"There have been some that have dealt with our world five years from now, or whatever, that obviously had a very realistic milieu, but *ALIEN* was the first film that really created an environment with real characters who spoke like real people, instead of running around in silver lame jumpsuits and speaking dialogue that we all know wouldn't be that way. That attracted me to it."

The character of Ripley, as played by Sigourney (*Ghostbusters*) Weaver, also attracted Cameron to the original hit, and the prospects of continuing the gutsy heroine's story in his own sequel equally appealed to him. "I tend to like strong female characters. It just interests me dramatically," Cameron explains. "A strong male character isn't interesting because it has been done and it's so cliché. A weak male character is interesting: somebody else hasn't done it a hundred times. A strong female character is still interesting to me because it hasn't been done that much, finding the balance of femininity and strength."

"There were many things that could be done with Ripley that hadn't been explored in *ALIEN*, simply because of the way in which it was structured dramatically. She didn't

emerge as the main character until the film's last third—which is part of its basic structure, it's not a flaw. We were intentionally misdirected toward Dallas [Tom Skerritt] as the main character, because the captain is always the guy who lives—a bit like *Psycho*, which is very effective. When Dallas got killed, all bets were off. It was very shocking."

"*ALIENS* focuses on Ripley from the first scene. It's her story. No bones are made about that. And, as such, it's an opportunity to do something that's dimensionally more intricate, from both a character and a dramatic standpoint."

Cameron did meet Ridley (*Legend*) Scott, the first film's director, at Pinewood Studios—albeit briefly. "It wasn't a meeting," Cameron notes. "I was coming out of dailies, and he was going in, and we spoke for about 10 minutes. We didn't really talk

homage to the original without being a mindless fan, something which is a piece of entertainment and a story in its own right."

"The things that interest me aren't necessarily the things that interested Ridley, since I tend to gravitate more towards a little heavier plotting, and a little more concentration on characters, dialogue, more action and less on the visual aspects."

"The other problem area was what to keep and what to forget about. Just doing a reprise of all the elements from *ALIEN* would be pointless, but certain elements were necessary for the story's continuation. And I had to come up with an entertaining way of having it evolve beyond what we had seen before, so that people would have an expectation of going beyond a horizon that they already knew."



Fleeing an onslaught of face-huggers, Sigourney Weaver and Carrie Henn duck for cover.

about *ALIENS* at all; he didn't seem particularly curious about it, other than the fact that it was being done. We just spoke in general terms about shooting in England—it was very polite, there was no depth to it. Basically, it was like, 'Hello, pleased to meet you.'"

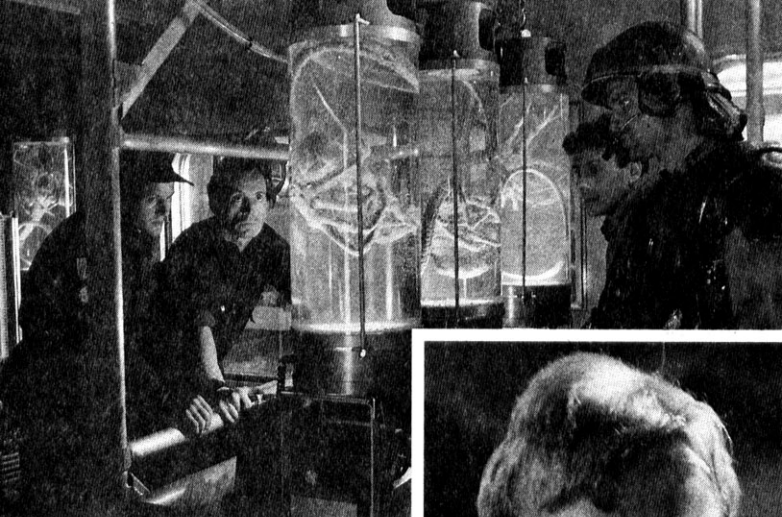
With sequel rights held by 20th Century Fox and *ALIEN*'s producers Gordon Carroll, David Giler and Walter Hill (credited as executive producers on *ALIENS*), Cameron adds that Scott was never involved with this follow-up.

Cameron admits that he found many problems in writing the sequel to *ALIEN*. "The most obvious problem is, how do you beat a classic? You have to really dig deep into the bag of tricks and come up with some good ideas. And you must do a proper

"And the last problem, which is always a problem with sequels: You can't make the assumption that your audience has seen the first film—especially seven years later. They may have heard of it, or they may have even seen it then and not remembered it, other than vague imagery as opposed to specific details. So, the new story must function as an independent entity. That's always the dilemma with doing a sequel, knowing exactly how far to stretch the umbilicus with the first film."

Cameron's solution to this plotting problem was to pick up the story precisely from the final shot of *ALIEN*. Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) is discovered drifting through space in her hypersleep capsule—but 57 years have passed. Brought back to Gateway Station, orbiting high above the Earth, she discovers the alien planet (now known as Acheron) has been colonized by a group of un-

The battle between the Marines and *ALIENS* heats up on the planet Acheron. Though this is starting to sound like a cliché, we can't show you the monsters until the movie opens.



Cameron's Marines (left to right: William Hope, Lance Henriksen, Paul Reiser, Michael Blehn) inspect an exhibition of face-huggers.

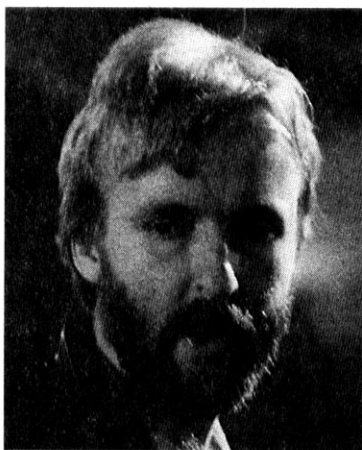
suspecting space engineers and their families during her sleep. Her warnings about the biomechanoid menace are initially disbelieved—until contact is lost with the colony. Then, a group of 11 U.S. Colonial Marines are sent to investigate. Reluctantly, Ripley agrees to accompany them back to Acheron. There, her nightmare begins once more...

Prior to *ALIENS*, Cameron's last movie to hit the screens was *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. He shared the screenplay credit with star Sylvester Stallone. "I wrote an original screenplay, two rewrites and a polish, and then after that, I started directing *Terminator*," recalls Cameron. "During the period that we were prepping and shooting *Terminator*, *Rambo* was rewritten by Stallone. At one point, they wanted me to direct it, but *Terminator* was already going forward, so I declined."

"Stallone altered the script fairly substantially, especially in the first half—probably for the better, given his character and the approach he wanted to take. But I'm very satisfied with the script that I wrote—it's quite different from the film, that's all I can say. I tend to be very unemotional about writing when it's assignment writing."

"When I saw *Rambo*, it was just like watching someone else's movie. I found it enjoyable. I saw it at a pre-release screening, and Gale [Anne Hurd, Cameron's producer] and I looked at each other and said, 'This movie is going to make a lot of money.'"

The major step on Cameron's road to making *ALIENS*, however, was not *Rambo* but his previous film's success. As writer-director (with Hurd as producer and co-writer), *The Terminator* was their vision. "We basically had absolute creative con-



James Cameron

trol on it," maintains Cameron. "We shopped very carefully, to find exactly the right environment in which we could make it that way, and *The Terminator* reflects what we wanted to do—with the exception of certain budget restrictions: We realized we would have to trim back a couple things. But, other than that, *The Terminator* really represents what Gale and I set out to make."

Cameron observes that one element aiding the movie's popularity was the cathartic value of watching its central evil character (Arnold Schwarzenegger) going about his devastating mission. "The Terminator itself was an embodiment of every dark impulse you ever had, and someone who could operate completely without conscience. We're all bound in our daily lives by programming that keeps us from doing things: from being rude to others. This probably goes back a million years."

"But Terminator didn't suffer from those particular problems," Cameron explains. "Everybody has a little Terminator inside them somewhere that would just love to get out and run around and do all those things. Anybody who doesn't think so is probably fooling themselves."

*The Terminator* was not Cameron's first film as director. That

"honor" goes to the low-budget sequel to Joe Dante's *Piranha*. "With *Piranha II*, I tried to survive and get my name on it—then I tried to survive and get my name off it," Cameron jokes.

"*Piranha II* was an interesting challenge, because it was made in Jamaica with an Italian crew, with non-union actors, and for very little money. But it was a wonderful challenge. I have to say: it took every bit of cunning and everything that was required."

Cameron means it literally when he talks about "cunning." For instance, he broke into cutting rooms to re-edit *Piranha II* as reported last issue by star Lance Henriksen. "When I was in Jamaica, the Italian producer, decided that it would be a really good idea if he wrote and directed some second unit scenes on the island's other side with some topless women. He wanted to cut these scenes into the film that I was directing on the other side of the island which didn't have any topless women."

"So, I later went to Rome and ingratiated myself back into the production. Well, I wavered on the edge of fighting or running for a while, and I stayed to fight because I had worked really hard on it. Also, I got some pretty good performances out of the actors, and I knew that, dramatically, the story was working."

"I went there, and the producer wouldn't show me certain reels," adds Cameron. "So, I just broke into the cutting room and ran them for myself. I went through all the footage, and I saw, yes, there really was a movie there—but unfortunately, they weren't cutting it that way. I then got into a big fight with the producer, and I came back here and I made a deal with the distributor to recut it for them. And so, the American release of *Piranha II* was slightly different than the European."

This first directorial experience was not entirely negative for Cameron. "I got the opportunity to do five weeks of underwater photography in the Cayman Islands, so it can't be all bad, if you happen to like scuba diving," he contends.

Two films later, with higher hopes for *ALIENS*, James Cameron observes, "Some people have very auspicious first films, some people have very inauspicious first films..."