

## ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

THIRTY YEARS AFTER HIS LAST SCI-FI VOYAGE, RIDLEY SCOTT IS BACK IN THE GENRE WITH A NEW EPIC. ALIEN PREQUEL OR STANDALONE SAGA? WHAT IS PROMETHEUS? TF HEADS TO THE OUTER LIMITS...

WORDS MATTHEW LEYLAND

The third act of *Prometheus*. We're neck-deep into the story. The characters have been through the wringer, suspense is sky-high, something mega is about to happen... "And then I turn into Will Smith!" laughs Charlize Theron. Unless Ridley Scott has a very funny turn between now and the film's release on 1 June, we're pretty certain that won't be happening. Theron's leg-pull comes in response to being grilled for titbits on a movie whose secret weapon is, well, secrecy. A movie about finding answers that's already thrown up a million questions. A movie whose cool poster is dominated by an ominous, intimidatingly big sculpture of some bloke's head.

One thing we definitely do know: *Prometheus* is a prequel to Scott's 1979 sci-fi/horror game-changer *Alien*. Or not. "It stands alone," says the veteran British director, who somehow manages to sound gruff and chipper at the same time. Interviewed in the last throes of post-production, the 74-year-old is thrilled with his new baby. "How's it looking?" he half-smiles. "Oh, my God. Beautiful. I've really enjoyed this stint in sci-fi again." It's good to be back, but has the game changed once more? If - oblivious to the hype, the rumours and the trailers - a punter went into a cinema completely cold on 1 June, would they suss a connection to the earlier film? "Barely, barely," reiterates Scott. And yet, if you *do* watch the trailers, the links are unmistakable: the outfits, the hardware, the way the title emerges, and a peek at the Space Jockey, the dead ET who - for now - remains one of the 1979 film's unexplained mysteries. It's all very *Alien*. But not.

"It was something I'd been thinking about for a while," says Scott, alluding to his longstanding curiosity about where Mr Jockey came from - a thread left dangling despite three sequels and two sidequels (those messy grudge-matches with *Predator*). "So, if you like, this started off with the notion of where *Alien* left off - but it really leaves it all behind. It's into a completely different arena. You go through that keyhole and it all changes..."

The story's set in 2085, three decades before Ripley and the crew of the *Nostromo* go through hell with the world's sneakiest stowaway. Here, the spaceship is *Prometheus*, and the mission is to uncover the truth about humanity's beginnings, prompted by patterns >>



found in ancient pictograms on Earth. Or as Scott puts it, "A group of fairly sensible people go in to do a job, basically, and what they find is not, of course, what they expected. But far *more* than they expected. But it's not good news, no." Where *Alien* was essentially "truckers in space", here the set-up is more white-collar. "They're all a group of eggheads," confirms Scott. "And there's a lot of hubris between these people who think they know everything. But of course they don't."

Scott worked closely with scripter Damon Lindelof (co-creator of *Lost*), teasing and tweaking writer Jon Spaihts' (*The Darkest Hour*) original screenplay – a direct *Alien* prequel – until satisfied they had something that was its own beast. But surely this is an *Alien* movie – it's even got a strong, smart, dark-haired heroine. Yes, but no. Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) isn't an Ellen Ripley clone (been there, done that). "Are there parallels to be drawn?" asks Scott. "No. The dynamics are entirely different."

Rapace is more on the fence. "I'd say, yes, there are similarities, though I think my character is a bit more feminine, maybe," says the Swedish actress. Unlike Ripley, it's clear from the get-go that Shaw is the movie's lead. "My character and Doctor Holloway [Dark Blue's Logan Marshall-Green] are the ones who discover something on Earth that gives us the last possible piece to go out on this journey," she reveals.

"So, I'm carrying more on a personal level than [Ripley] did." Ripley was a warrant officer; Shaw is a scientist – one who strongly believes in God. But as events unfold, she's forced to become "more of a warrior... her fighting spirit wakes up". So not entirely un-Ripley, then.

Another *Alien* staple is the presence of a 'bot on board. Introducing David, Prometheus' android butler and maintenance guy. David's so ahead of the tech-curve that he develops thorny human emotions – vanity, insecurity, envy. He's also very blond. "I didn't like it, man!" groans Michael Fassbender, scanning a blown-up still of his fair-haired likeness. "But it's perfect for David." Dressed in jeans and leather jacket, the charismatic *Shame* star looks more likely to down a pint than serve one. To transform himself into David, Fassbender took a cue from Scott's other sci-fi classic. "I watched *Blade Runner* to see what was happening in terms of the robots," Fassbender reveals. So is there a bit of Rutger Hauer in David? "There's a bit of Sean Young! David's definitely not a warrior robot like Rutger, but he's smart. He's a survivor."

Looking for a physical template, Fassbender struck upon "the economy of movement" he remembered from watching Olympic diver Greg Louganis as a child. Looking for an accent, he went South African. Which wasn't so successful. "I said to him, 'That's interesting,'" recalls a smiling Scott. "And he said, 'Whenever you say, 'That's interesting', it means you don't want it, doesn't it?' And I said, 'That's right.' He's funny, Michael, I love him..."

The fake accent may have got the push, but there's still a real-life South African in *Prometheus*. "Cold, icy, very unapproachable," says Charlize



'ARE THERE PARALLELS TO BE DRAWN WITH RIPLEY? NO. THE DYNAMICS ARE DIFFERENT' RIDLEY SCOTT

Theron, painting an unflattering portrait of her character – shifty corporate suit Meredith Vickers. Who, just to be clear, isn't Will Smith in disguise. For one thing, where the Fresh Prince never met a spotlight he didn't want to hog, Vickers prefers to hug the shadows. "I got the call sheet in the first week and was like, 'There's nothing in the script for me, why are you bringing me in?'" remembers Theron. Turns out Scott wanted her in the corner of the frame, watching, lurking. "And that became my favourite part of the character," she beams. "It really layered my performance, because you're just so suspicious of her, instantly."

There's friction between Shaw and Vickers ("My character's like, 'Who is this bitch?'" ), but Theron won't pigeonhole her role as the kind of

heartless, one-dimensional bean-counter "we've all seen a million times before". Maybe, hints a spoiler-conscious Theron, Vickers is the one "with a bigger agenda than everybody else"; hence the character's flickers of anxiety in the early going, keeping us watching her while she watches others. Revisiting science fiction for the first time since 2005's abortive *Aeon Flux*, Theron found herself unprepared for the physical trials Scott had in store. "I mean, running in sand in 30-pound boots – I really did not foresee how big and action-y Ridley was going to go," she winces. "I was still chain-smoking at the time, and so I got my ass kicked, for sure."

So, there'll be action. But will there be blood? The original *Alien* was a hard R in the States and an X in the UK (the intervening years have brought it down to a 15). A PG-13 is in the offing for *Prometheus*, reflecting its status as a high-priced, teen-friendly summer tentpole. But surely Scott made the case for an R? "No, no, no," he insists. "I didn't push for an R. The most

Secrets and disguise: (above) Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) and Charlie Holloway (Logan Marshall-Green) explore; (below right) the crew open fire; (below middle) David (Michael Fassbender); (below right) the Prometheus landing.



NOOMI RAPACE

WHY PROMETHEUS' HERO GETS A KICK OUT OF RIDLEY.

Like most of us, Ridley Scott first encountered Noomi Rapace in *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*. "I thought, 'Who is this extraordinary punk?'" the *Prometheus* director recalls. "Then I met her, and what walked in was a rather beautiful, very elegant woman. So, I knew I was dealing with a real actress." Two repeat viewings of *Tattoo* later and Scott knew he had his lead.

Months later, at London's Soho Hotel, in walks the 32-year-old Swede – rather beautiful, very elegant, all in black and sporting cheekbones you could slice frozen carrots with. Not a trace of Lisbeth Salander in the wide smile, warm handshake and animated gestures. Instead of kicking the hornets' nest, she's (gently) kicking TP's foot, demonstrating the affectionate joshing she and Scott shared on set.

"He came over to me and was like, 'Dude, does that hurt? Good, let's do another take.' Then he's like, 'Does that hurt?' By the third take, I was like, 'Shut up!'" she laughs.

Shooting *Prometheus* tested Rapace both physically and psychologically; she admits to freaky dreams "about God and the Devil and black angels" the deeper she dug into her character, space-faring scientist Elizabeth Shaw. Intense identification with a role is common for the actress; by the end of the *Millennium* trilogy she barely knew where Lisbeth ended and she began. But she enjoys jumping in feet first.

"I've always been drawn to things that you can't control, that you don't really know," she confides. Rapace is going places: she's got projects lined up with Brian De Palma and Catherine Hardwicke and is moving to London this summer ("my favourite city"). Top priority, though, is creating "a normal life" for young son Lev who, like Scott, knows an actress when he sees one: "We watched *Sherlock Holmes: A Game Of Shadows* together the other day," she relates. "And he was like, 'Mummy, you're actually good, because you don't seem like my mummy!'"

FABRICE DALL'ANESE/ORBIS OUTLINE





In space, no one can hear you direct: (main) Ridley Scott keeps Charlize Theron scary; (below left) the Space Jockey; (below right) Janek (Idris Elba) gets a creeping feeling.

**'DOES WE HAVE A MONEY SHOT TO MATCH THE CHESTBURSTER? "OH, YES. YES. YEP!" RIDLEY SCOTT**

important thing is the film. You do the film right, and then it's degrees of negotiation."

Standards have changed, he muses: "Last year there were some very puzzling films that got away with PG, and I do mean 'got away with'. It's how far you can justify and push." So, there's still potential for some proper pant-filling scares. "Yeah. I mean, that was part of the intention, you know?" says Scott. "Except that I always like my scares to be integrated - and integral - to the story rather than the occasional boo. That's why I think most scary films aren't that scary. A few cheap shocks and that's about it." If the trailers are anything to go by, we're in for a fright. Even Charlize Theron doing naked press-ups looks unsettling. No mean feat, when you think about it. But does Scott have a money shot up his sleeve to match John Hurt's infamous chest complaint? "Oh, yes. Ohhh, yes. Yep, yep, yep." That's a yes, then.

The chestburster scene will forever be one of cinema's greatest shocks. But there's something a teeny bit comical about the way the little blighter scoots off after spoiling

everyone's dinner. Generally, though, *Alien* remains remarkably ageless, especially for a vision of the future. "None of my films date," asserts Scott. "It's the look and how it's handled." Given the keenness of the former ad-man's eye, the prospect of his 3D debut is a lot more alluring than most. Scott soon immersed himself in the process. "At one point, I thought it was going to be a problem," he admits. "But it was easy, I must say. The trick is not to overdo it." Don't expect space monsters chewing the audience's faces off - for Scott it's more about extending depth of field. "And you can do that afterwards, by the way," he marvels. "You can literally twiddle a knob and the depth will increase. It's kind of bizarre."

Scott had fun tinkering with CGI, too; there are roughly 1,300 digital shots in *Prometheus*, "which are just fucking incredible". He didn't let



**ACTING THE PART**

THE SPIANS AS AUTOMATONS: WHO'S THE BEST TRANSFORMER?

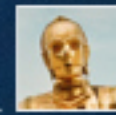
T-800/ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER  
**THE TERMINATOR (1984)**  
No acting. Arnie bludgeons and intimidates. He is a robot.



ROBOCOP/PETER WELLER  
**ROBOCOP (1987)**  
Weller brings incredible pathos to his tin-can Plod; you truly feel the humanity.



C-3PO/ANTHONY DANIELS  
**STAR WARS SAGA (1977-2005)**  
The walk, the talk... hard to believe there's a bloke in there.



T-X/KRISTANNA LOKEN  
**TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MACHINES (2003)**  
Too catwalk to convince as the ultimate death-bot.



ANDREW/ROBIN WILLIAMS  
**BICENTENNIAL MAN (1999)**  
A metal nanny. All the schmaltz will fry your circuits!



VANESSA/LIZ HURLEY  
**AUSTIN POWERS (1999)**  
Revealed as a fembot in the sequel. Who knew you could build one out of wood?



STEEL  
REAL  
ROBOT  
BAD

his actors drown in a sea of green screen, though, recalling decades-old advice given by FX legend Douglas Trumbull: "If you can do it live, do it live." "That's the old master at work in Ridley, you know," admires Fassbender. "He'll use a bit of fishing wire or something if it works better than adding something in afterwards." Like her co-star, Rapace was mind-boggled by the scale and detail to which the sets were built: "It really felt like I'd left Earth." As in *Alien*, it's a grave new world. "It's quite dark," Rapace says, "and everything is broken down." Keep an eye out for some ceiling murals designed by *Alien* artist HR Giger, the man behind the xenomorph.

According to Scott, the beast with two gobs will not, like Will Smith, be appearing in this movie. What exactly it is that Shaw and her crew do find out there is tightly under wraps. "It's a nice feeling, being allowed to keep some of the mystery," says Theron. "It's very rare, you know, in this day and age, where everything's talked about and you walk into a theatre knowing exactly what you're going to get."

There is, of course, a clue in the title. In Greek myth, Prometheus is the titan who steals fire from the Gods and passes it to us mere mortals (Scott: "He shouldn't have done that"). What the 'fire' in the film is, and who nicks it to give to whom, remain to be seen. But sounds as if we're in for a weighty, cautionary tale grappling with science, religion, life, the universe and everything. There's even a 'beginning of time' sequence (shot in Iceland) à la *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Tree Of Life*.

No xenomorph, no blue-collar vibe, epic aspirations... in some ways, it does feel like we've drifted light years from the haunted-house-in-space B-horror simplicity of 1979. And yet, after a 30-year hiatus from science-fiction, Scott is mindful of grounding *Prometheus* in the same credibility that future-proofed *Alien* and *Blade Runner* (a credibility the former franchise let slip back in the early '90s). "I always figured, it's a genre where anything goes," he says. "And if anything goes, that can also mean it's downright bloody stupid. The trick is, you have to draw up your guidelines and stick within the rules of your rulebook - even if you're getting into, let's say, more fantastical arenas." In short? "I try to keep it as real as possible." **TF**

**Prometheus opens on 1 June and will be reviewed in a future issue. For more features, go to [totalfilm.com](http://totalfilm.com)**