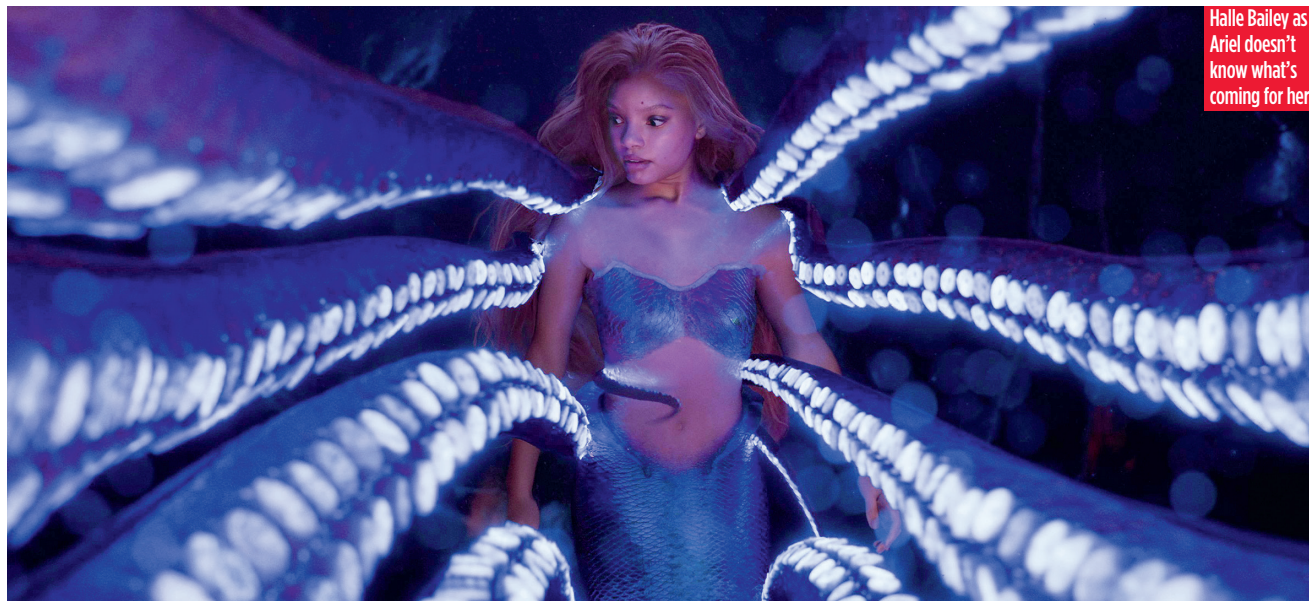


Red Alert



Ursula (Melissa McCarthy): everybody shout "Boo!"



Halle Bailey as Ariel doesn't know what's coming for her.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Divine Inspiration

The director of **The Little Mermaid** explains how they brought Ursula to life

➔ HALF-WOMAN, HALF OCTOPUS, all chaos energy: Ursula is an icon. Despite having just 13 minutes of screen time in *The Little Mermaid*, the sea witch sauntered into our lives and never left, bewitching every child who watched Disney's animated classic.

Originally voiced by Pat Carroll, Ursula casts a terrifying shadow over the forthcoming live-action remake – who could bring the beloved character to life and do the role justice? Director Rob Marshall (*Chicago*, *Into The Woods*) knew it would be tricky.

"It was really daunting to think about who was going to play this part," Marshall tells Red Alert. "I love that she was originally inspired by Divine [Harris Glenn Milstead], the wonderful

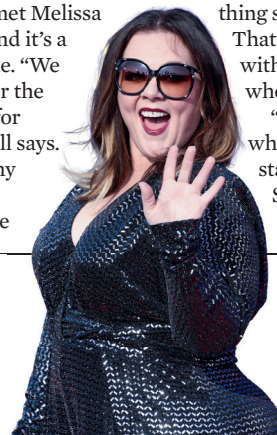
drag actor, who was so original and so funny. I thought, 'Well, who's going to be able to bring the humour and the depth?' Because this is now a live-action piece, it can't just be a funny character, it has to have a great deal of depth. Who can do that and sing – really sing – and bring originality? I wanted a woman of size, too, as I thought that was important."

Then Marshall accidentally met Melissa McCarthy (*Bridesmaids*, *Spy*), and it's a story as Hollywood as they come. "We were sitting at the same table for the Golden Globes, when I was up for *Mary Poppins Returns*," Marshall says. "Emily Blunt, John Krasinski, my partner [and *Little Mermaid*'s co-producer] John DeLuca were

all at the table, and Melissa [nominated for her role in *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*] was there and she was just so wonderful and funny and great. And I thought, 'Well, she's fabulous.'"

Marshall instigated a proper meeting to discuss Ursula. "You could have knocked me over with a feather when she said to me: 'I started as a drag performer.' That was the first thing she said to me: 'I was in drag shows. That's how I started, I had this character with a big cape.' She's described the whole thing.

"And she goes, 'So I understand where the beginnings of this character started.' And then we just talked. She's a wonderful actress, people forget that. They say, 'Oh, she's



“Melissa had eight dancers around her playing her tentacles”

funny.’ This character is an injured character, and she was able to find all that depth and emotion, in addition to all the other colours.

“We really used Divine as our inspiration, because that’s where it started,” he adds. “But the thing about Divine is that she’s bigger than life, and this character is bigger than life, but at the same time, Melissa was able to bring humanity to it.

“When you’re doing a live-action piece, the most important thing is to find the humanity and the truth in these performances. I want to believe you, even if that’s a merperson, mermaid or merman. I want to believe these people so I’m invested in the story.”

Even after finding the perfect actress, making Ursula a reality was easier said than done. Everything had to be meticulously planned, with Marshall creating animatics of various sequences, choreographing the dances

and doing some previsualisation. Then they started rehearsals so that McCarthy could get a feel for the character, the space she would be moving in, and the multiple dancers acting as her tentacles.

“Melissa had eight dancers around her playing her tentacles as if we were doing

something like *War Horse*,” Marshall says. “All these wonderful dancers were puppeteering as she moved. She had this incredible costume on where she had a harness, and from that came those tentacles.”

The bulk of the movement was planned with McCarthy and the dancers on the floor – then came the time for her to be put into a rig and lifted from the ground. That’s when a whole new set of equipment was introduced so that the team could achieve the underwater effect.



Divine in 1978: Ursula’s original inspiration.

“We used wires and a tuning fork [two prongs that lock either side of the body], where you go up and you can spin and dive and move,” Marshall says. “And then we also used a teeter-totter [see-saw], which can do a little tipping, but it’s not as flexible as a tuning fork. A lot of equipment was very cutting-edge and

new because we kept trying to find ways to make our characters work the way we wanted them to. So in addition to her tentacles, she also had a series of stunt people moving her on these rigs. It was like a ballet.”

A chance meeting at the Golden Globes, hours of rehearsal, eight dancers playing tentacles, a tuning fork and a see-saw – that’s a lot of work to bring an icon to life. **JS**

The Little Mermaid is in cinemas from 26 May.

▶ SCI-FACT! Melissa McCarthy recently cameoed in *Thor: Love & Thunder*, playing an actor playing Cate Blanchett’s Hela from *Ragnarok*.