BODY TALK

For our 300th issue, we catch up with Zack Snyder to chat about his Spartan epic – a film that split opinion but paved the way for a new kind of sword-and-sandals blockbuster while changing the rules for comic-book movies...

WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD

Frank Miller's limited comic-book series – a fictional retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae where 300 Spartans face down the Persian empire by funnelling them into a tight rocky pass – before he worked on his debut feature-length film, the 2004 remake of *Dawn Of The Dead*. After being rejected twice by Warner, then joining and departing a separate project, Snyder finally got the green light from the studio for *300*.

"There was this creative break that happened. It was right before I got married. I felt good about it," he says. "And then [*the studio*] said, 'We're not exactly sure what this is. Can you do this little test?' So we shot one single shot [*of the Spartans hacking through the Persians in slow motion*]. It's the way we were going to visualise the movie. And everyone was like, 'Holy shit, this is nothing like what we thought.' They were expecting just a traditional sword-and-sandals movie, and they got something else."

Warner Bros was after a PG-13-rated adaptation of Miller's work, but Snyder accepted a smaller budget to secure an R-rating. This meant that he could stick faithfully to the source material. As had been done with *Sin City* – Robert Rodriguez' adaptation of another Miller work – *300* was to be an almost shot-for-shot retelling of the comics. Snyder drew his own storyboards based on the source material.

"The comic book is not that thick," he says. "It wasn't like I had a giant, densely illustrated comic book to get me from shot to shot. There were some very loose moments. To me, the challenge was being able to thread the needle between the shots that Frank had drawn compared to the shots that I had drawn. You had to get from one drawing to another. There's a lot of in-between work that has to be done. It was hard – a labour of love. It was a really fun affair."

Inspiration also came from Snyder's love for *Heavy Metal*, the adult illustrated fantasy magazine, the director wanting to capture the same aesthetic, "but with real people." As he puts it: "The sex and the violence and the bizarro, weirdo… Like, everyone could fuck or fight at any time. That was what I was into."

With that in mind, and using Miller's work as a basis, adherence to historical accuracy was thrown out the window. Indeed, historian Alex
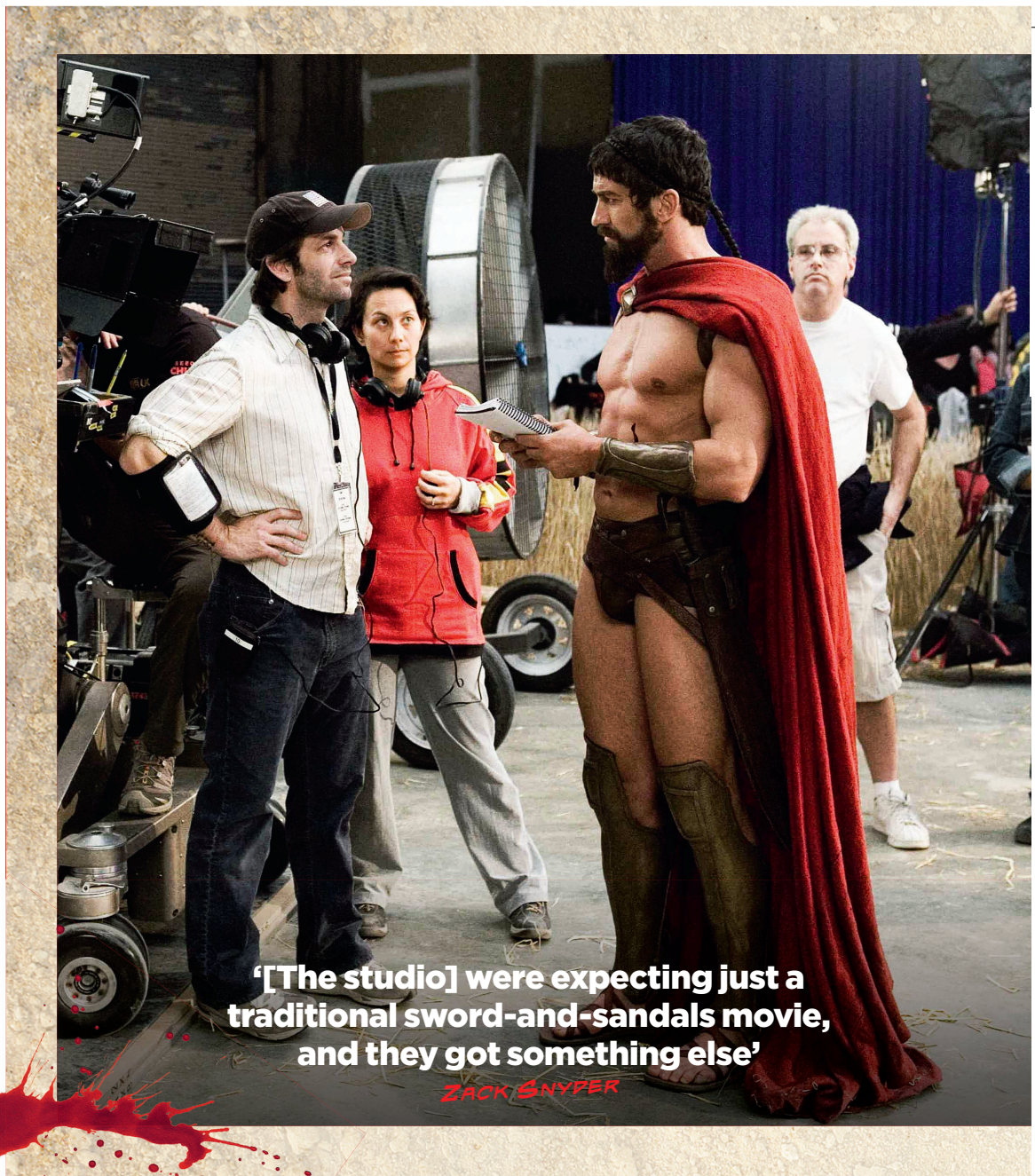
'[The studio] were expecting just a traditional sword-and-sandals movie, and they got something else'
Zack Snyder

von Tunzelmann went on to call *300* an "epic fail" and pointedly took issue with the film's battle rhinos.

"*300* is based on Herodotus," Snyder retorts, referring to the ancient Greek who wrote *The Histories*, the founding work of western literature that details the Battle of Thermopylae. "However you feel about Herodotus, he wasn't about to ruin a really great story with the truth, necessarily. He was a poet-warrior sort of historian in the classic sense."

The film is therefore framed as a campfire tale being told by David Wenham's Dillos to the surviving Spartan army as they ready themselves to battle the Persians once more. "On one hand, was there a battle at Thermopylae with few standing against many? Very possible. I would assume that that did happen," Snyder says. "On the other hand, did it happen in the same way you see it in the movie? Probably not."

300 is a film chomping at the bit to start the fight. Within the first few minutes, we witness a baby being thrown to its death, a son being torn away from his family, and a young Leonidas fending for his life against a wolf. Soon comes the iconic "This is Sparta!" line, shouted full pelt by Butler's king as a declaration of Sparta's unwillingness to bend to the Persian king Xerxes. From the moment the eponymous 300 reach the aptly named "hot gates" – the narrow pass between the sea and the rocks – it's all-out war.

BODY-BUILDING
To truly recreate Miller's pages, the cast had to be ripped; not simply having six-packs, but becoming monstrously huge men with muscles bulging from muscles like mountains on top of hills. Snyder hired Mark Twight, a former mountain climber, to train up Butler, Wenham, and co-star Michael Fassbender. You would be forgiven for thinking the testosterone levels on set were intimidating.

"Everyone was pretty worn out, so there weren't a lot of testosterone outbreaks," Snyder says. "Everyone was pretty much on a ragged edge because

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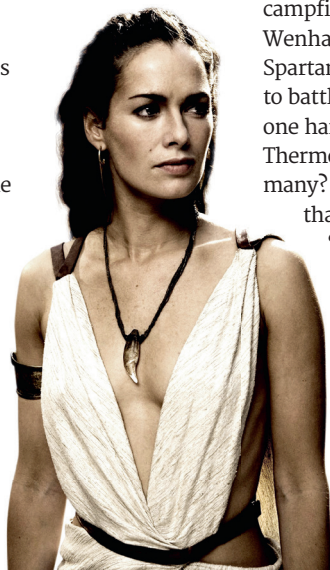
people of colour. *300* probably wouldn't get made in the same way today.

"Would I make the same film today? No, I wouldn't. I'm different. The world's different," Snyder reflects. "They got the movie they deserved. Like anything, we make the movie we can, at the time we did. Once you move past that, the world changes. Everyone changes. I changed."

Snyder argues that many people look at the movie the wrong way. "I always have this argument: the Spartans are not necessarily the good guys. Let's get real for a second about who the Spartans are. They look at their newborn children and, if they're not up to snuff, they chuck them off a cliff. These are the people you're supposed to go with on this journey?

"I wanted to really get that. I thought that was part of the fun, to say, 'OK, these are people that basically send their children off into the woods when they're seven years old, and if they live, they're able to enter society. Those are your heroes?' You can't really frame that from our modern point of view. We're not Spartans. All they do is train. That's all they want to do.

"And so, the aesthetic of the Spartans is just outside of our own aesthetic. And I think that's the difference. That's why, to me, it was never us against them. It's like a painting or drawing of a heroic battle. I never meant it to be some race war."

Despite any controversy, there's no denying *300*'s impact. Were it not for the Spartan blood-bath with its eight-packed heroes, CGI hordes of villains, and abundant sex scenes – "I'm equal opportunity," Snyder says, "I want everyone to be naked" – then there would probably be no *Game Of Thrones*. "Making a sort of sword-and-sandals movie that is poppy and hitting the heart of pop culture in a powerful way – in that way, *300* has influenced *Thrones*," he says. "It's the way it popularises a time period that one might think is stodgy or not really fun."

300 also remains in the public consciousness, and quotes like "What is your profession?" still echo on the sports field. "Its success has resonated," Snyder says. "It spawned a parody movie [Meet The Spartans]. Any movie that can generate an entire other movie, that means it's got some pretty good economic staying power." And with a re-release on the way, expect a new wave of viewers to be chanting "This is Sparta!" like madmen soon enough.

300 IS AVAILABLE ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL DOWNLOAD.

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of our schedule. If they were lashing out, it was more because they were exhausted than that they were on steroids. But I wouldn't have condemned that," he laughs. The look Twight was going for, Snyder says, was for, "'What would your body look like if you were just out hunting animals?'"

"It's funny," he says. "I think about how I, as a filmmaker, have shaped the male body, [*the*] heroic male body identity over the course of [*my career*] all the way to *Batman V Superman*. It's about getting the right physique for these superheroes, and for all my people. I've always had shiny gyms on set. And I train like a maniac, so everyone's got to train. I go, 'You've got to be at least as strong as I am. I can squat, like, 300lbs. If you can't squat 300lbs, then come on! Are you serious?'"

Snyder adds that he's borderline "obsessed" with the classic physique. And yet, despite rumours, they never resorted to enhancing anyone's muscles with CGI during post-production. "There might have been a little paint, but we could not afford to CGI it," he

laughs. "If you look at the technology we had then, I promise you we would have spent that money on sets."

MASS EFFECTS

Even without any virtual abs, the CGI took time to create. Snyder had filmed almost every scene in front of blue-screen and post-production took over a year, with 10 visual-effects companies working on the project. Due to those technological constraints, there is no extended "Snyder Cut" unlike with *Watchmen* and *Batman V Superman*. "The process didn't allow for there to exist a second version," he says.

That hard work paid off. *300* became a box-office smash, grossing upwards of $450m and becoming the 10th-highest grossing movie of 2007. But with success came controversy. There were allegations of *300* being homophobic and anti-Iranian, leading to the film being banned in Iran. Snyder insisted his work is apolitical, and yet, watching today, you can see why the controversies started. The Spartans, for instance, are all white, while the Persians are all

PAGE TO SCREEN
The film stuck faithfully to Miller's R-rated source material (top); Snyder and a buff-looking Gerard Butler during filming (above left).