

RED-HOT!
2007
PREVIEW

DEFENSE

THE YEAR OF LIVING
DANGEROUSLY

Babel, The Assassination
Of Jesse James, Ocean's Thirteen:
Brad Pitt is going to own 2007.
He might even own an Oscar, too...

WORDS MATT MUELLER

D. ENTRER

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or the Chinese, 2007 is the year of the Pig. For moviegoers and keen observers of Hollywood minutiae, it's shaping up to be the year of the Pitt — Brad Pitt. (Incidentally, Chinese New Year fans, Brad Pitt was born in the year of the Rabbit — 1963 — which makes him talented, ambitious, admired and possessing an uncanny knack for making the right choices. It also means he laps up gossip and never backs out of a contract, although Pitt's likely to snort at the former and Darren Aronofsky may contest the latter after the actor's abrupt 2002 departure locked *The Fountain* into limbo for a few years.)

Point is, Pitt's 2007 is shaping up very nicely, between the films he's appearing in (a small but vital role in January's incredibly relevant *Babel*; a final teaming with the Rat Pack for *Ocean's Thirteen*; the titular Old West outlaw in *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford*), the projects he's producing through his Plan B outfit (Scorsese's biggest success in years, *The Departed*, may compete for Oscars) and globe-trotting activism with Angelina and the sprogs (the couple have joined forces to set up the Jolie/Pitt Foundation, and donated \$10 million to charity by flogging photos of baby daughter Shiloh).

With most of his superstar peers otherwise occupied (Cruise in career salvage mode; Cage a workaholic with dubious taste; Crowe's "nice" makeover failing to convince), Pitt's got the playing field to himself. He's making the most of it, too, although *Total Film's* polite suggestion that he's been spreading himself a bit thin of late is just as politely rebuffed.

"Maybe it was turning 40," Pitt proposes, on a spotless LA afternoon in early October. Now 42 (43 on 18 December if you want to send a card), he could pass for 35 going on 30. "Getting older just makes me more efficient and I can get the things done that I want to get done. Before, I probably meandered. In my younger days, I was more of a drifter.

"There were certain things I wanted to attack, and it seems to be working," he continues. "I'm very proud of the films I've got coming out." And so he should be. More on *Babel* later — but the other two movies on Pitt's 2007 slate will quench different parts of our movie palates. Reteaming with Clooney, Soderbergh and the gang for *Ocean's Thirteen* will mainline a blockbuster sugar-rush, with Danny's crew pitted for their final outing against Al Pacino's casino boss. "This one's going to be the one we should have made last time," ventures Casey Affleck, Pitt's co-star in both *Ocean's Thirteen* and *Assassination*. "It's going to be a lot better than *Ocean's Twelve*. It's back in Vegas, for one thing, and it's going back to the *Ocean's Eleven* vibe, which is more fun in Vegas: it's the right place for these stories and characters."

On the flip side, Pitt calls *Assassination*, in which he headlines as notorious American bandit Jesse James,

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a serious meditation on one icon's private life and public exploits. "It deals with the mythology of celebrity and the hunt for that kind of notoriety, what's behind that kind of life," he muses, literally stroking his chin. "Ultimately it deals with the consequences of it. And, of course, those themes relate to me due to my place in the tabloid mags!"

Assassination is the fifth film with the name Plan B seared on its credits. Launched in 2002 with ex Jennifer Aniston, who's no longer involved, Pitt's increasingly dynamic production company has just wrapped on the story of slain US journalist Daniel Pearl, *A Mighty Heart*, starring Jolie. It's also pipelining plenty of other projects, including apocalyptic zombie movie *World War Z* and Marc Forster's

Dallas Buyer's Club. Brad's even toying with the idea of starring in the latter, tempted by the part of a HIV-positive man seeking underground drug treatment. But back to the bigger picture...

"Producing opens up a whole other aspect," he murmurs. "Now I get to work on films and with people that personally mean something to me." That's a change from last year when, around the release of *Mr & Mrs Smith*, Pitt declared he only had a few years left in the business because, "I'm interested in other things, like family." Now he's found a ready-made family: Jolie's two adopted children, Maddox and Zahara, plus their new daughter, born far, far away from prying lenses this past May in Namibia. "Three kids a year," laughs Pitt. "Next year we'll have six. Then nine. We're looking for a soccer team. I want to compete in the World Cup." The new family man feels resurgent and, after years of resenting paparazzi intrusion, wants to exploit his fame to turn the spotlight onto issues he cares about, like trade practices and AIDS orphans.

"I said a few years ago, and got in trouble for it, but I just wish everyone would screw everyone and we'd only have one colour," he muses. "That's an obnoxious way to say it, but I think there's great value in it. On the adoption front, we're talking about the difference between a kid having a future and death. That was certainly the case with our daughter, Zahara. To me, that supersedes every other argument."

Do age making him smarter? No, because Pitt's had brains as well as buns since he first burst on the scene as Geena Davis' cowboy seducer in *Thelma & Louise*. But he is finally getting respect — after a 16-year slog. Back then, he was regarded as sweet meat for the industry machine and could easily have been minced up with other '90s Hollywood himbos. Because the charge that's always been laid at Pitt's feet is that he's a movie star of blessed DNA and moderate acting talent. But the fact that this born-and-bred Midwesterner has levitated above LA's handsome chaff speaks volumes for his grungy appeal to multiplex knicker-wavers.

And Pitt was wise to the pitfalls of beefcake stardom from the off, yawning, "One: it's boring. Two: it's stupid. And three: it's death." Thus, a pair of shrewd post-*T&L* choices set the template for his career. In *A River Runs Through It*, he turned in a

modulated performance as a (wait for it) hell-raising fly fisherman. He then sullied that pretty-boy image with a grubby psycho turn in *Kalifornia*, a sordid outing in which Brad, while no De Niro, tackled his trashy serial killer with gusto.

And with that, Pitt was off, astutely mixing down'n'dirty projects with crowdpleasers. He took a stoner cameo in *True Romance* then followed it up with his first heartthrob role in *Legends Of The Fall*. Then he chopped off those silky blond tresses to go edgy in *Seven* and *Twelve Monkeys*.

But his sun-god image still laid traps for him, epitomised by 1998's *Meet Joe Black*, a dire misstep in which critics took a scorched-earth attitude to Pitt for playing a gorgeous incarnation of Death. For three gooey hours. "Vacant, mechanical and

was risking his career. "It seemed like it would be foolish not to do it." It was a career pinnacle he followed up with *Snatch*, in which, despite — or perhaps because of — his indecipherable Oirish brogue, he swipes the movie.

'I just wish everyone would screw everyone and we'd only have one colour' BRAD PITT

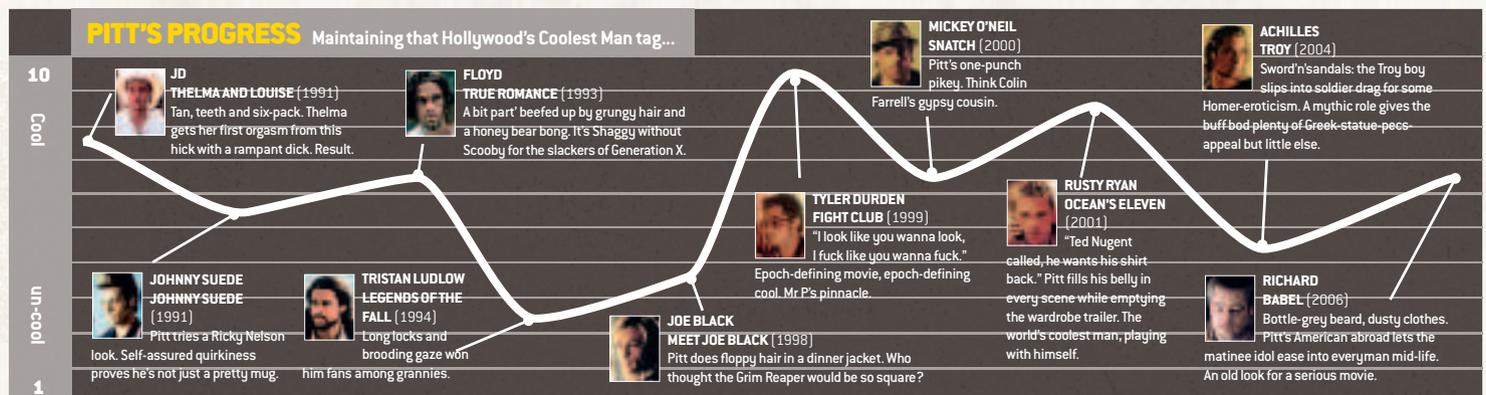
pretentious: what the Dalai Lama would be like reincarnated as an underwear model," was one of the more benign assessments.

Pitt's reaction? The best role of his career — *Fight Club*'s pugilist antihero Tyler Durden. "It didn't seem gutsy to me at all," he said when asked if he

Hitting 40, Pitt made two films that impacted him in differing ways. *Ocean's Twelve* was, on the face of it, even more of a lark than the first film, but the Amsterdam leg of the shoot brought Pitt face to face with an uncomfortable, post-Iraq reality. "I used to get around the city on a bike," he says,



Pitt stops (left to right): with Matt Damon as part of the *Ocean's* franchise; angst-ridden with Cate Blanchett in *Babel*; raising hell as Jesse James.



“and I had left the guys and gone out for a midnight ride. There were some guys coming out of a bar and I had to swerve out of the way to avoid hitting them. I said, ‘Excuse me,’ and they started screaming, ‘You fucking American! We’ll fucking kill you!’ I’d never come face-to-face with that before.”

He also succumbed to his looks again by getting buff to play sleek Greek warrior Achilles in *Troy*. The project marked out Pitt as the reluctant superstar in action... and giving in again to the Hollywood machine seemed to sap his soul. He even briefly talked about quitting acting. Not seriously, he now insists to *Total Film*: “I think it was more about finding other things.”

It’s no surprise that Pitt jumped when Alejandro González Iñárritu rang with *Babel* on his mind. He asked Brad to play a rich American who’s put through the trauma wringer when his wife (Cate Blanchett) is shot in Morocco. Sure, there was the prestige of working with an acclaimed filmmaker; but, crucially, it was the chance to play, for the first time in his career, *old* – a 49-year-old man with grey hair and haggard eyes. He pulls it off, too, bristling with authenticity next to an actress who radiates genius.

“It was a big relief to finally work with Brad,” coos Blanchett. “The great thing about Brad is that he’s so buoyant. When you’re entering into something that’s deeply tragic and weighty like *Babel*, the best way to go into it is with a moment of hilarity. That would happen often with Brad.”

“We had to drive an hour to get to this village and it was in the middle of this lunar landscape,” Pitt says, referring to the Moroccan shoot. “They didn’t have electricity; we brought it in for the film and we left it there afterwards. But it’s a very intimate scene between me and Cate, and that goes back to Alejandro and Guillermo [Arriaga]’s writing.”

More importantly from Pitt’s point of view, *Babel* feeds into his new role as global humanitarian campaigner. “The work has to seep into acting in some way,” he says. “Maybe not *Ocean’s Thirteen*, but this film, certainly. Where *Babel* succeeds, I think, is this undercurrent that we’re all the same, and that it’s our lack of will to understand each other that separates us. The base issue is equality: a family living in a hut in Africa who have to go five miles to get their water are looking for the same kind of dignity and opportunity for their kids as I am.”

So does that mean Pitt’s off the dreamboat grid for good now? The years of trying to shatter his pin-up reputation are paying off, and Pitt is suddenly being showered with the respect he’s always craved. Clubbing together with Clooney and Soderbergh for the ultra-hip *Ocean’s Eleven* boosted his cool quotient, and Plan B is taking over where that duo’s now-defunct Section Eight left off, pushing smart, politically aware projects (and the odd edgy thriller like *The Departed*).

There’s also no question he’s improving before our eyes as an actor. Pitt’s psychotic in *Twelve Monkeys* is his only Oscar nom to date, but don’t be staggered if he strolls up to the Oscar podium next March for *Babel*; 2007 is set to be his year, after all.

All that, and he’s still one of the best looking men on the planet. “Next to that kid,” Dustin Hoffman once said, “we all look like onions.”

***Babel* opens on 5 January; *Ocean’s Thirteen* and *The Assassination Of Jesse James* will be released later in 2007. They will be reviewed in future issues of *Total Film*.**



Moroccan muckers: Brad Pitt and director Alejandro González Iñárritu.

GLOBAL WARNING

Amores Perros director Alejandro González Iñárritu gives us a tale of shattered lives in **Babel**. But never mind that: how did he get Brad Pitt to go wrinkly?

For anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Bible stories, you’ll know about the tower of Babel, a colossal building project designed to reach Heaven which God – a tad tetchy at humanity’s impertinence – foiled by making everyone speak in different languages. Point made: the baffled Babel builders scattered in confusion across the globe.

Leave it to a fiercely independent master of visceral, emotional, non-linear storytelling like Alejandro González Iñárritu, then, to conjure up a feature with the narrative heft and bold intentions of *Babel*. A companion piece to Iñárritu’s first two films, 2000’s *Amores Perros* and 2003’s *21 Grams*, all three co-written with Guillermo Arriaga, the 43-year-old Mexican’s third feature parades its

couple’s children across the US-Mexico border to her son’s wedding. There are two Moroccan shepherd boys whose rash game of oneupmanship leads to grim tragedy. And finally there is a sexually exploring deaf-mute Japanese girl (Rinko Kikuchi) who’s angry at her father and the world.

“Alejandro is incredible,” says Blanchett. “It’s very rare to work with someone who has the breadth of vision he has. If another director had asked me to lie immobilised, bleeding on the floor for four weeks, I might have said, ‘Pass!’ But it was the way Alejandro illuminated the story to me...”

In Iñárritu’s \$25-million movie, every character suffers from disconnection – and Brad Pitt has grey hair and wrinkly bags under his eyes, a physical match-up with the barren Moroccan landscape he finds himself trapped in with his possibly dying wife. It’s Pitt’s first middle-aged role, and Iñárritu

‘I don’t think I’m miserable. I think my films, at the end, are hopeful’ ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU

weighty themes in every frame, not just in its biblical title. There are the cataclysmic misunderstandings and cultural barriers that entangle two American tourists (Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett) trying to save their brittle marriage on a Moroccan holiday when she’s struck by a bullet. There is the tourists’ Mexican nanny (Adriana Barraza), who decides – illegally – to take the

says he leapt at it. “For him, it was a very risky project. He challenged himself to do something that is not obvious for him, which is a 49-year-old guy going through lots of pain. If I got it right, it’s not Brad Pitt, it’s just a desperate human being.”

Iñárritu signed up his two stars in February 2005, and the seven-month-long shoot kicked off in North Africa three months later, before heading

Bullettime: Richard (Brad Pitt) struggles to save the life of his wife, Susan (Cate Blanchett) in *Babel*.



to Mexico and Japan. Each location came with its own peculiarities. Never mind the brutal heat and biting sandstorms of outback Morocco; there was the ordeal of directing non-professional actors, which all the Moroccan cast are. Yes, even the guy playing the local veterinarian who comes to stitch up Blanchett's seeping wound.

"He was this town's vet," says Iñárritu. "His hands didn't smell so good, let me tell you! And the guy speaks Berber. He wasn't doing the lines, he was smiling, Cate's make-up was melting and the heat was unbearable. Cate was doing a great performance, but this guy kept making mistakes. By take 73 I was just begging him not to look at the camera."

"It was an incredibly intense shoot," agrees Blanchett, "and Alejandro is relentless as a director. There were a few low moments, like when I was covered in blow flies. I realised they were putting meat juice on my wound in order to attract them. Not the most glamorous of roles..."

After Morocco, shooting conditions were just as dusty and sweltering in the Mexican desert. By contrast, in teeming Tokyo, a city without a film commission, Iñárritu and his crew were forced to adopt guerilla-style shooting tactics in order to avoid Tokyo's jail cells. "We were escaping from the police," he chuckles, "at every corner."

'They were putting meat juice on my wound to attract the blow flies' CATE BLANCHETT

Born and raised in Mexico City, chucked out of school when he was 16, Iñárritu ended up in his twenties as a top-rated DJ on Mexico's number one radio station. Hosting a daily, three-hour show that he now credits with teaching him how to spin stories for an audience, he then quit the DJ booth,

working stints as a film composer and TV producer before honing his directing skills in advertising.

Then Iñárritu wrangled a meeting with Arriaga, already an acclaimed novelist, and the two set to work on an anthology of 11 short films about different stratas of life in Mexico City. This they eventually boiled down – after three years and 36 drafts – into three non-linear storylines. Shot for \$2 million, the result was slum-set masterpiece *Amores Perros*.

The day after *Amores Perros* won the Critics' Week Grand Prize at Cannes, both our lives changed," says Gael García Bernal, who also has a small role in *Babel* as Barraza's impetuous nephew. "It's a defining point for us. He's a great, interesting director. And the relationship with him now is as heartfelt as it was before, but now it's lined with other things: craft, maturity and confidence. *Babel* was a tough shoot but I learned a lot from him."

Lazily labelled "the Mexican Tarantino" after *Perros*, Iñárritu headed north to LA and concocted the despairing melodrama *21 Grams* with Arriaga, convincing Naomi Watts, Sean Penn and Benicio

Del Toro to star. Both Watts and Del Toro were Oscar-nominated for the film. Being a "director in exile" in the US was also Iñárritu's original inspiration for *Babel*.

When *Total Film* met Iñárritu in Cannes, the first stop on *Babel*'s tour of major film festivals (where he

nabbed the Best Director award), he described himself as "an obsessive-compulsive pessimistic creator of the world." But when he hears that one pundit has branded *Perros*, *Grams* and *Babel* the "trilogy of death," he vehemently objects.

"That's a horrible name! Who came up with that?" he barks. "Please call them the 'trilogy of life!' Because they're about life, you know? They are the themes that really connect with me. My films basically deal with real, primitive things that affect all of us." Has anyone ever called him a miserabilist? "No! Another horrible word! 'The trilogy of death by the miserabilist...' I don't think that I'm miserable. I think my films, at the end, are hopeful – especially *Babel*. There's a sweet sadness in it."

Iñárritu will never be prolific; he's made three features in six years, and attributes his work rate to the fact that he suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder. "Arriaga and I are both ADD," he says. "We had this argument: 'I'm more ADD than you!' 'No, you're more ADD than me!'"

And that's not the only arguing they've been doing, with the collaborators calling it a day on their partnership. So, is there a rift? "We've just finished nine years of collaboration, so it's time to explore other things," Iñárritu hedges. "It's a natural thing."

But Arriaga, resentful that Iñárritu's getting all the plaudits for *Babel*, has put a definite full-stop on their partnership. "*Babel* is our last collaboration. We have three films and I think that's enough... I don't think *Babel*'s an auteur film – it's auteurs."

So while Arriaga goes off to work with the likes of Tommy Lee Jones (*The Three Burials Of Melquiades Estrada*) and Marc Forster (the upcoming *Dallas Buyer's Club*), Iñárritu isn't sure what he's doing next. But he'll be searching for another writing partner. "I can be a pain in the ass but I love collaboration; I work better that way. I'm planning a lot of things but it will take me a while to decide what. And before deciding, I need to do nothing. That's my challenge now..." **TF**

