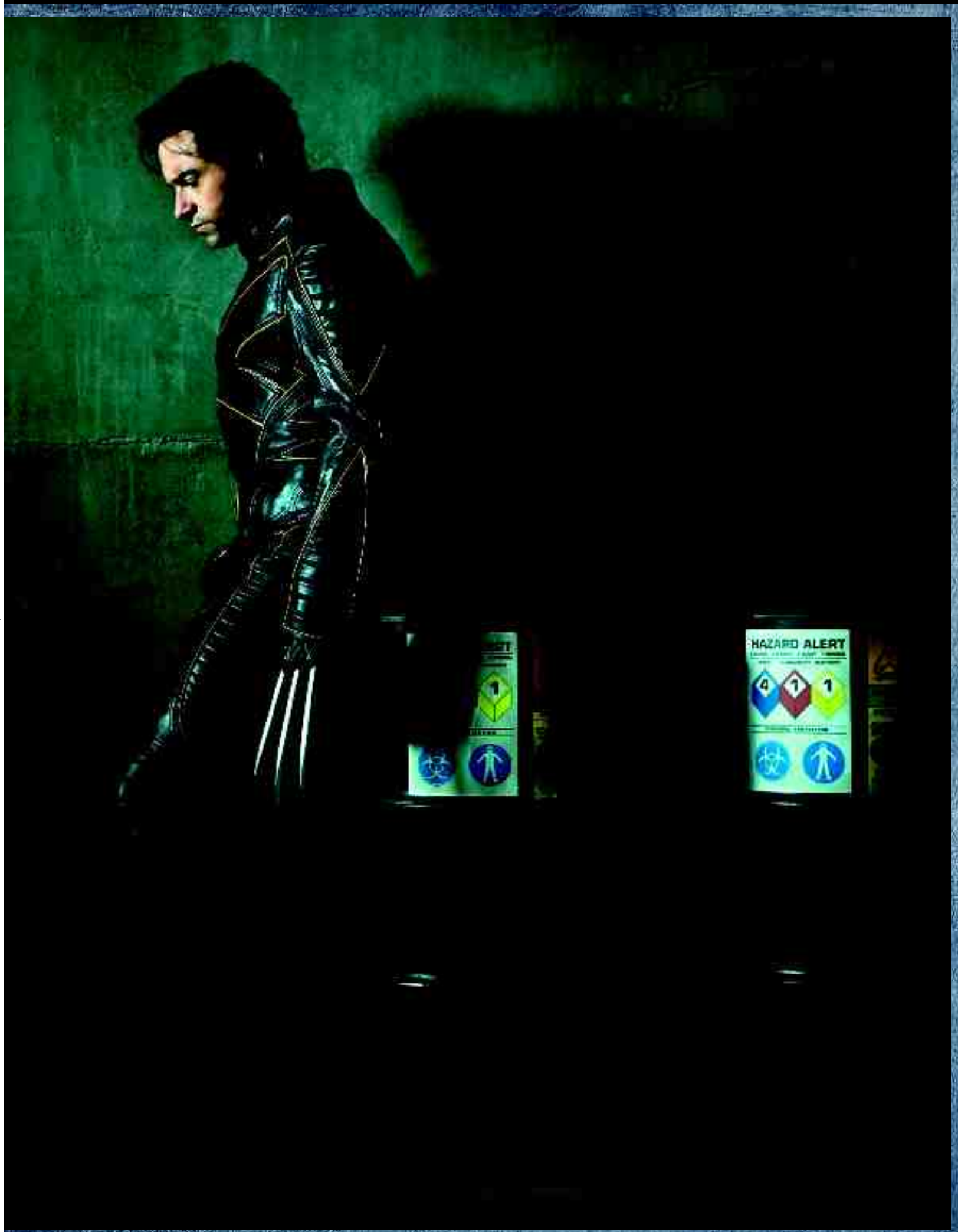


THE LAST CUT IS THE DEEPEST

Gather, darkness... A hero must save the world or the woman he loves. And a franchise must spark its final blaze of glory from the ashes of the past. For the X-Men, **The Last Stand** is now.

Dark days have befallen the world of the X-Men. Integral parts of the team are missing, newcomers are being treated with distrust and the entire crew is under attack from clandestine forces. No doubt about it: the future of our beloved mutants hangs in the balance. No, this isn't the plotline for *X-Men: The Last Stand*. It's the story behind its making. In summer 2005, 20th Century Fox appeared to have blown it. Bryan Singer, the visionary behind *X-Men* and *X2*, had flown to Warner Bros and *Superman Returns*. *Layer Cake* director Matthew Vaughn had signed to >>

WORDS **MATT MUELLER AND ASHLEY BIRD**



‘This is the best script of the three – the most emotional, definitely the biggest’ HUGH JACKMAN



Getting an eyeful: Cyclops (James Marsden) minus specs and glowy eyeballs.

FIGHTING BACK

Thwack! Crunch! Crash! Six months later, the front window of a house in a sleepy Vancouver suburb shatters as a muscular figure is launched through it and lands with a resounding thump on

the lawn. The sculpted hair and rippling physique identify him as Wolverine, reluctant but heroic figurehead of Professor Xavier’s band of peace-seeking superbeings. The creature administering the conclusive cuffing is less familiar, but no less impressive – a heavily armed, brick shithouse of a beast going by the apt name of Juggernaut. Meanwhile, across town, a huge replica of the Golden Gate Bridge is being constructed only to be shortly destroyed again, a winged teenager is being hoisted 80 feet in the air ready to plummet from the city skyline and Famke Janssen, whose Jean Grey died at the end of *X2*, is squeezing into a classy new red get-up. All of which can mean only one thing: the X-Men aren’t going down without a bloody big scrap.

“I was sad to see Bryan go,” says Hugh Jackman, aka Wolverine, between takes. “But I understood how much *Superman* meant to him. I remember

when we were filming the Statue Of Liberty scene in the first film and he’s shouting up at me, ‘Do it like the scene in *Superman* when he rescues Lois from the earthquake!’ And I’m shouting back, ‘Mate, I haven’t seen that film since I was 12!’ He looked at me like I was a total ignoramus.”

Jackman, Ratner and many other members of the *X-Men* cast have remained close to Singer, with Jackman even rumoured to make a cameo appearance, via flashback, as the young version of Clark’s dad in *Superman Returns*. Their loyalty only extends so far, though.

“I never really thought about pulling out of *X-Men*,” explains Jackman. “It all hinges on the script for me and I think this one is the best of the three – the most emotional, definitely the biggest. Plus I can’t think of another character that has the challenges for an actor that Wolverine has. I always liked *Mad Max*, *Dirty Harry* and *Han Solo* as a kid, and Wolverine has elements of all of them. Could Wolverine kick *Superman*’s ass? Definitely!”

Jackman’s decision to stick around set the trend, with almost all of the X-Men from the previous two films signing up for the third – the only notable exceptions being Alan Cumming



Phoenix rising: Professor Xavier (Patrick Stewart) and the recently-dead-but-improving Jean Grey (Famke Janssen).

(Nightcrawler) and Ray Park (Toad). Both may be missed but are, frankly, expendable. Not so Patrick Stewart (Professor Xavier), who needed two long phone conversations with Ratner to convince him the movie was in safe hands (“There was a big question mark about the project,” he admits). Oscar-winner Halle Berry (Storm), on the other hand, came on board with a set of demands. “I wanted to fly!” she tells *Total Film* in her Los Angeles home. “I’ve worn this cape for two movies and I wanted to put it to use. On a bigger level, I also wanted Storm to have a voice and a definite point of view this time so people can better understand who she is.”

Her wishes were granted. Not only is Storm’s dialogue plentiful and potent this time round, but she’s an integral part of several of the action sequences; action sequences that will, if you believe the cast, be the biggest, baddest and bestest of all the *X-Men* films to date. Hyperbole? Perhaps, but if one man should know, it’s Jackman. “I saw a take of this one stunt and I couldn’t believe it was real,” he says. “It’s this thing where Halle flies about 100 feet, spinning like you can’t believe. I figured they must have sped it up or something, but no, they actually did it for real.”

WEIRD SCIENCE

So, are flying, self-healing and telepathic mutants really about to start popping up everywhere? *Total Film* asked science expert Robert Weinberg...



WOLVERINE

Mutant powers

Adamantium-coated skeleton, apparently infinite ability to heal himself

Science says “Wolverine is the typical ‘comic-book

character who makes no sense.’ When you possess a healing factor that, if analysed and duplicated by modern medicine, could save hundreds of thousands (most likely millions) of lives each year, why not do that instead of engaging in constant lethal combat? Healing factor or not, I’ve also no idea how he can move with metal coating his joints.”



PROFESSOR XAVIER AND JEAN GREY/DARK PHOENIX

Mutant powers Telepathy, telekinesis (the ability to move objects with the mind)

Science says “Telepathy is the power that seems to have the most possibility of existing, though there are no real scientific results showing telepaths actually exist (whatever parapsychologists might claim). If they did, why aren’t they all in Las Vegas or Monaco making a fortune at cards?”



BEAST

Mutant powers

Superhuman agility, massive strength, bright blue fur

Science says “Again, we run into problems with the laws of nature.

Make him as strong as suggested and he’d be so muscle-bound he couldn’t move, much less jump around. Having him blue just seems garish, rather than impossible.”



MAGNETO

Mutant power Can control mighty forces of magnetism with nothing but his mind, can manipulate metal and fly through the air using the same power

Science says “How someone’s mind could control magnetism is far beyond me. Not even the most outrageous facts about quantum mechanics can explain what Magneto does. And while I don’t have terrible problems with him using magnetism to lift cars, I have no explanation of how he can fly around and hover using magnetism – at least, not without a giant magnet over his body. Also, the less said about him disrupting the Earth’s magnetic fields, the better...”



STORM

Mutant power Can control the weather

Science says “Is weather control even possible? Not at present. Especially not by any human powers that we know about. We still

have a hard time predicting it, much less controlling it.”



JUGGERNAUT

Mutant power He’s an unstoppable force

Science says “No matter how strong he is, there’s a limit to what his human body can withstand. Just because his bones won’t

break when he punches a wall that doesn’t mean his hand will penetrate the wall. There’s a big difference between unbreakable and unstoppable. He’s more the first than the second.”



ANGEL

Mutant power Wings

Science says “A normal human-sized being with wings just wouldn’t work because of the ratio of weight to muscle needed to lift it. Even with some

extra muscles, Angel would still need hollow bones. Which would make rough-and-tumble fighting a death-defying proposition.”



CYCLOPS

Mutant Power Optic beams from his eyes

Science says “The eyes are a one-way mechanism – light goes in, nothing comes back out. And exactly what do Cyclops’

eye beams do? Hit something with laser rays? Use a force to move things? His powers are hard to understand, much less imagine.”

MYSTIQUE

Mutant power

Shapeshifting

Science says “Colour changing is possible in nature, but not this kind of shape-changing. There’s the question of adding and subtracting mass, if nothing else. Shape-changing her size, figure, and most of all, her sex, is a trick I can’t even begin to explain. She’s just impossible.”

Robert Weinberg is co-author of the books *The Science Of Superheroes* and *The Science Of Supervillains*.



FRANCHISE FUNK

Total Film eyes threequels to find all that's holy (and unholy) in the movie trinity...

Rocky III (1982)

Good Mr T's bling-bling slugger, Stallone's oiled pecs, 'Eye Of The Tiger' anthem.

Bad Mighty warrior Apollo becomes Rocky's right-hand bitch. Oh, the indignity...

Ugly Paulie's robot: a Dalek voiced by Jessica Rabbit.

A Nightmare On Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors (1987)

Good Ripping out a sleeping boy's veins and using them like puppet strings to make him walk! Laurence "Larry" Fishburne playing a hospital orderly!

Bad It's Freddy backstory time – apparently he's "the bastard son of a 100 maniacs."

Ugly A slippery Freddy-worm thingy chomps on a young Patricia Arquette. To think, Krueger was scary once...

Star Wars: Episode VI – Return Of The Jedi (1983)

Good Sandbarge scrapping, Boba Fett, Princess Leia's gold bikini, speederbikes and another Death Star to boom to bits.

Bad The frikkin' Ewoks.

Ugly Pasting Hayden Christensen's whiny chops into the revamped edition as the ghost of Anakin Skywalker.

The Godfather Part III (1990)

Good Al Pacino's dying crime king and Andy Garcia's wannabe heir to the empire are an offer you can't refuse.

Bad Al's hairsprayed-up grey barnet stands up better than a murky plot about the Pope.

Ugly Sofia Coppola's turn as Michael's jailbait sprog, Mary. Sometimes being family just isn't enough.

Terminator 3: Rise Of The Machines (2003)

Good Kristanna Loken's fembot. Less Terminatrix, more dominatrix.

Bad The Governor's so far past it he can barely glimpse it in his rearview mirror.

Ugly Nick Stahl's wimpy John Connor. A future crushed beneath the jackboot of robot-kind would be worth it just to see him take a bullet to the brainpan.

Alien³ (1992)

Good Sigourney Weaver still rocks as Ripley.

Bad Hicks and Newt – they go splat. Makes the end of part two seem bloody pointless, doesn't it?

Ugly Fincher was shafted. And it makes no bleeding sense. At all.

Rambo III (1988)

Good Props to any movie where someone pulls a bullet out of their own stomach and then cauterises the wound themselves with a dab of gunpowder.

Bad Stallone looks like someone's stuck a compressed air jet up his arse – no human should have arms that over-inflated.

Ugly Could one man on horseback *really* take out an entire army in tanks?

Die Hard: With A Vengeance (1995)

Good Samuel L Jackson and Bruce Willis: together at last. What's not to like?

Bad Jeremy Irons' fuzzy Rickman-clone.

Ugly Willis with his shirt off is bad enough, but Irons' ludicrously unnecessary bitch-slapping sex scene is claw-your-own-eyes-out time.

Back To The Future III (1990)

Good Who can hate a dippy Western that ends with a flying, time-travelling train? That's right. A. Flying. Time-travelling. Train.

Bad Michael J Fox can play one character and one character only... and it's not "Top of da mornin' to ya" plastic paddy Seamus McFly. Begorrah!

Ugly Whose bright idea was it to have ZZ Top playing at the hoedown? Lord, make it stop!

Halloween III: Season Of The Witch (1982)

Good Lethal Halloween masks, menacing Oirishmen, evil telly commercials (sing it, people: "Six more days to Halloween...")

Bad But where's Michael Myers?

Ugly We'll say it again. Where's Michael Myers?

Jurassic Park III (2001)

Good Pterodactyls. All you need to know.

Bad Even with Spielberg off making grown-up films, the franchise still has a revolting cute kid at its core. Sick-bag please!

Ugly There's no bloody climax and the velociraptors turn out to be just a big cuddly family that loves its kids! Aw.

Batman Forever (1995)

Good Riddle me this: how does Joel Schumacher get such a creepily nasty turn out of Jim Carrey as The Riddler...

Bad ...when he leeches all the energy out of Val Kilmer's Dark Knight?

Ugly And don't even get us started on Tommy Lee Jones cackling-all-the-way-to-Barclays non-effort as Two-Face.

Jaws 3-D (1983)

Good Director Joe Alves hasn't directed again...

Bad Everything. No, really, everything.

Ugly Jeez, where do you start? Dennis Quaid's performance? Effects that make original rubber shark, Bruce, look like a wildlife doc?

Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade (1989)

Good The daddy of all action heroes, Sean Connery, is Indy's dad. Could it really have been anyone else?

Bad Hate to speak ill of the dead, but the adventures of Young Indy? Rest In Peace, River...

Ugly "We called the dog Indiana." Of course you did.

Day Of The Dead (1985)

Good Bub, a zombie taught to listen to classical music and read Stephen King books.

Bad Big George tries to make a plus of his limited budget but, let's face it, an underground bunker's no shopping mall, is it?

Ugly Marked the end of Romero's trilogy – until *Land Of The Dead* arrived in 2005.



Taking a stand: Hugh Jackman and Halle Berry ponder their characters' final battle.

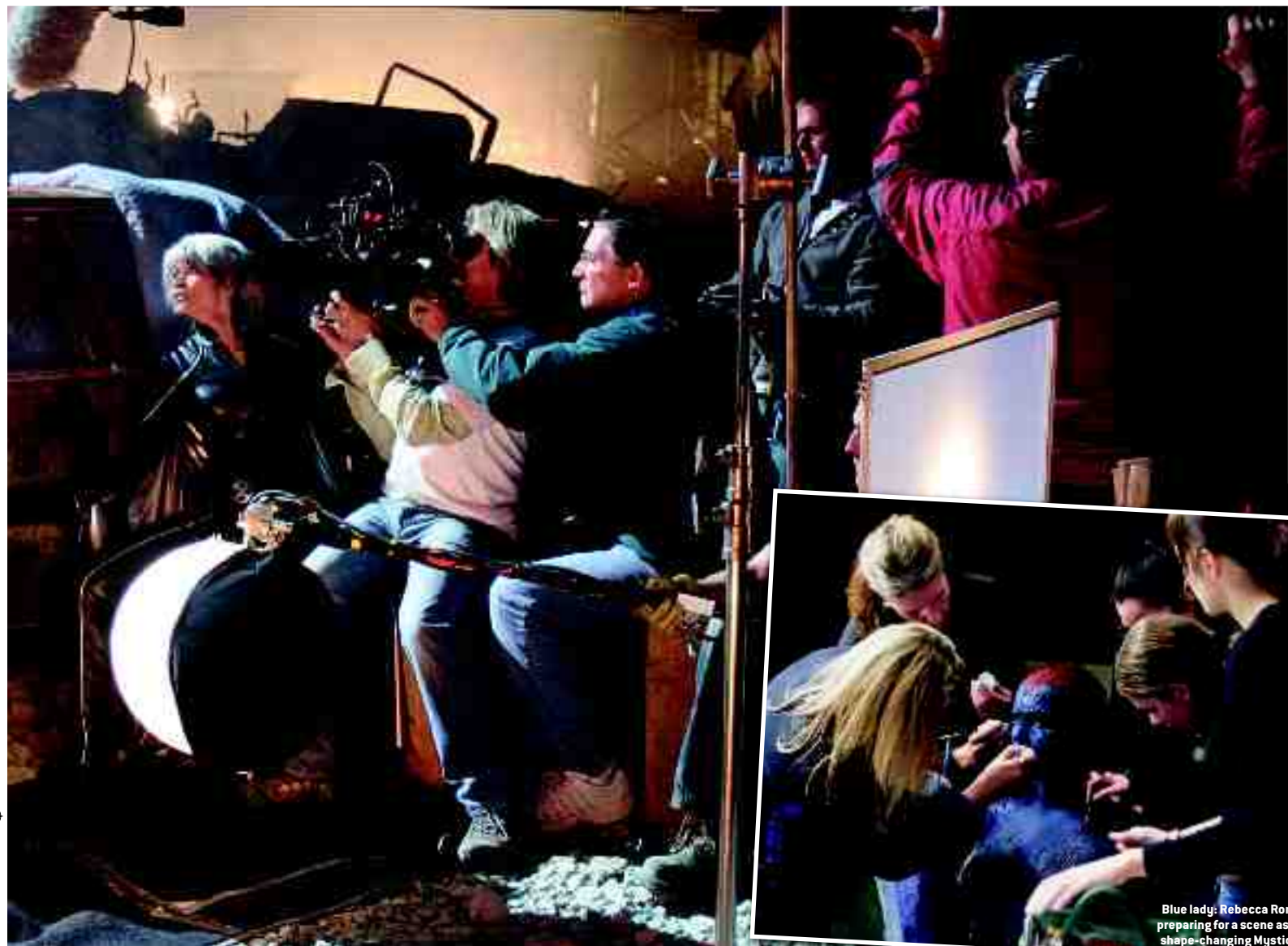


"I love the physical challenge of these movies," says Berry. "That's not to say there aren't depths of emotion, but this genre is about using your body in different ways. That said, it was hard for me because I have a weak stomach and tend to projectile vomit if I'm not careful. The stunt guys had to have a big red bucket to sit by me at all times!"

So are we to believe that Storm is going to, erm, steal Wolverine's thunder? No chance, says our hirsute hero, bristling at the mere thought of being out-muscled. He reminds *Total Film* of Wolverine's window-smashing fight with Juggernaut (played by Vinnie Jones) and highlights a sequence in which his clawed crusader single-handedly takes on a whole army of Magneto's cronies in a forest-set dust-up. Then he pulls out his ace... "There's a scene where I get hurled back by Magneto [*Jan McKellen*]," he says, chest puffing out. "I was thrown on this rig – about 600 feet. At 80 mph. Through tree branches. It was the most unbelievable ride of my life."

REQUIEM FOR A TEAM

Details of *The Last Stand*'s plot have been protected by the filmmakers with a fervour usually employed by governments shielding military secrets. Actors were required to sign contracts that could see them



Blue lady: Rebecca Romijn preparing for a scene as the shape-changing Mystique.

sued if they gave certain twists away, although these twists – the possible deaths of two key characters – are easy enough to fathom if you spend enough time on the internet. And it’s no secret that *The Last Stand* deals with the discovery of a cure for mutancy and the myriad questions such a breakthrough raises for all the characters. Plus, Famke Janssen’s Jean Grey returns from her watery grave as Dark Phoenix – a creature more powerful than even Professor Xavier. This plot strand was suggested at the end of *X2* and promises much, given that Chris Claremont’s *Dark Phoenix Saga* is one of the greatest comic-book stories of all time.

“It’s the most emotional through-line of the movie,” says Ratner. “Imagine if you had a family member who lost control and was a danger to herself and everyone around her; you’d have serious choices to make about somebody you love.” Jackman adds, “Wolverine and Jean’s relationship this time goes further than it’s ever gone before.”

Janssen’s just glad to be back. “I’m so proud of this film,” she beams. “I like my character. I like the fact that we stay true to who these people were and what Bryan had initiated in the first two films. And I like my red costume.” Anything else? “I also like the new characters we’ve acquired...”

Ah, the new characters – always a point of contention among fans. Here goes... Juggernaut is everything you’d expect a Vinnie Jones character to be – big, malevolent, a man of few words. “He’s not actually on anybody’s side,” says the artist formerly known for squeezing Gazza’s nadgers. “But when there’s a battle going on, he wants to be in it. He has some great one-liners, too. There’s one bit where I get busted out of a train and say something like, ‘Thanks, I’ve been dying for a wee!’” Okaaay...

Next up is the subject of many of the film’s pre-publicity photographs – winged teenager Angel, a primary player in the very first *X-Men* comic-books. Played by rising star Ben Foster, Angel (real name Warren Worthington III) is central to the ‘mutant cure’ plot, his father looking to create a serum in response to Warren’s desire to cut off his wings and be normal. Foster, whose face you may recognise from *Six Feet Under*, found filming to be an extraordinary experience.

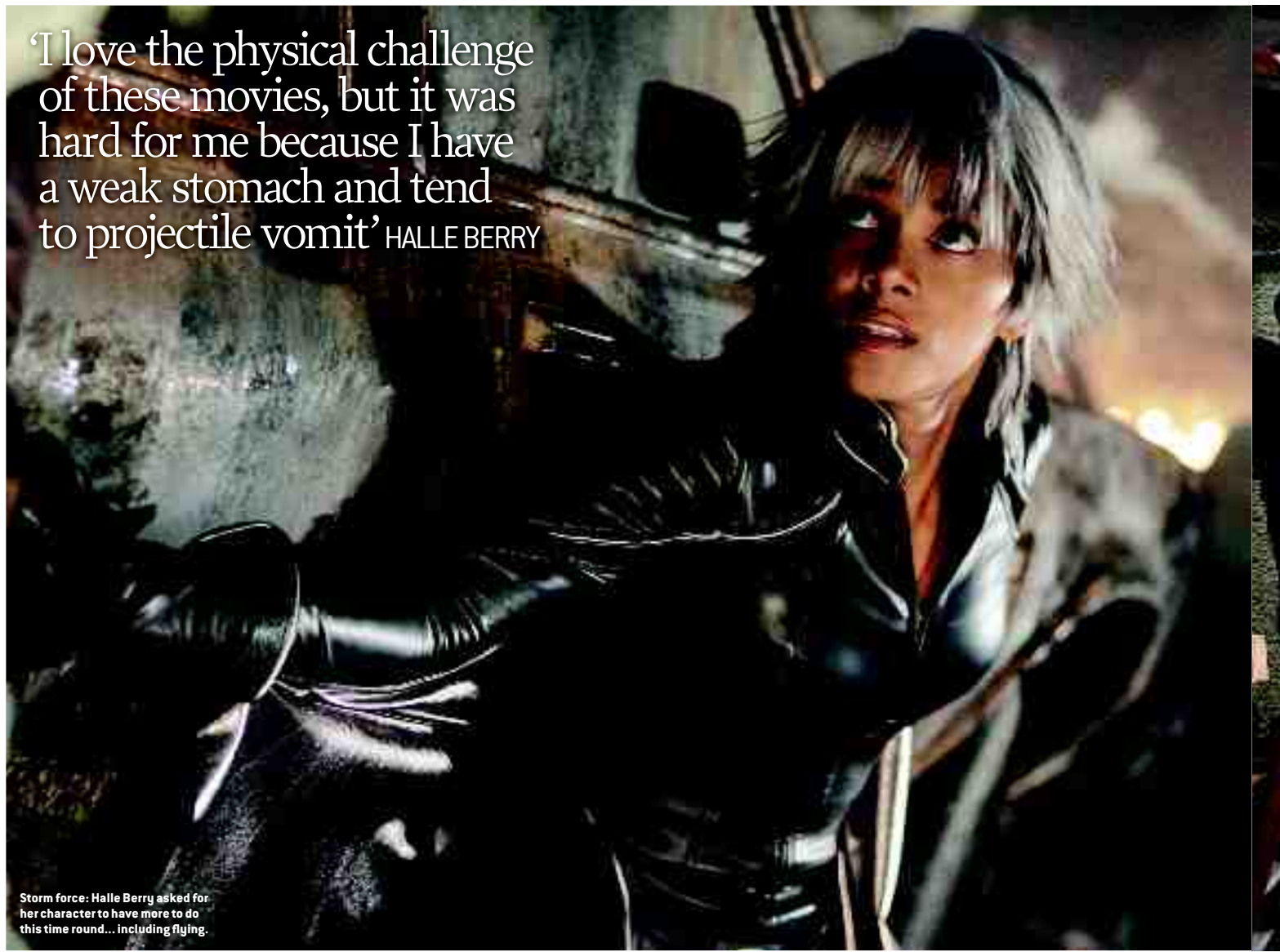
“They strapped me into a jockstrap, dragged me up 80 feet and then dropped me! The whole experience was like Willy Wonka on acid, man! It was all so big, so over the top... This film is massive!” And seemingly a little overwhelming. “There’s Sir Ian McKellen walking around in his gloves and helmet, Hugh in a tank top with

daggers sticking out of his hands and I’m shirtless with wings and feathers. It’s a weird job, man!”

Also coming to the fore this time round are steel man-mountain Colossus (Daniel Cudmore), the power-sucking Leech (*Birth’s* Cameron Bright) and Storm-rival Callisto (Dania Ramirez), plus a more prominent role for the agile Kitty Pryde, aka Shadowcat (with *X2’s* blink-and-you’ll-miss-her performer Katie Stuart replaced by Ellen Page, star of controversial upcoming paedophilia thriller *Hard Candy*). The most exciting new role, though, is that of Beast. Despite featuring in the first *X-Men* books, Beast has so far been limited to a background shot in *X2*, when his alter-ego, Dr Hank McCoy, is interviewed on TV. McCoy is the first mutant to be fully involved in politics, but his gigantic, hairy blue body suggests he is more than capable of violence. It’s this mix of bulky frame and learned mind, married to a voice that conveys intelligence and class, that makes Kelsey Grammer – yes, that’s *Frasier’s* Dr Frasier Crane – inspired casting...

“When I first got fitted up I thought, ‘Oh Lord, what have I gotten myself into!’” laughs Grammer. He’s currently huddled in the cramped make-up truck, ready to again be buried under a mound of prosthetics. “It takes two-and-a-half or three hours to apply,” he explains. “The cast were

'I love the physical challenge of these movies, but it was hard for me because I have a weak stomach and tend to projectile vomit' HALLE BERRY



Storm force: Halle Berry asked for her character to have more to do this time round... including flying.

XTRATIME

Is *The Last Stand* really the final film? We doubt it. Here's where the X-franchise might go next...

More Movies With Team X

Even while telling us that *X3* finishes off a trilogy, Fox exec Tom Rothman admits, "That doesn't mean never – I would never say never again." And *X3* director Brett Ratner has dropped heavy hints that he sees a future for the franchise: "I just know that Fox are going to want to put Kitty Pryde in *X4*, *X5* and *X6*..."



Sentinels

We'll maybe see our heroes facing off against simulated Sentinels (huge mutant-killing robots) in the Danger Room, the famous holographic training centre that's yet to appear in the movies. The fans certainly want the metal menaces to take a clanking bow.

Joss Whedon's Astonishing X-Men

Love 'em or hate 'em, plot ideas from Whedon's comic run have been incorporated into *X3*. Would Fox go the whole way and have him write a script, however? Maybe not, when you remember he was responsible for the crappy "toad hit by lightning" line from the original [though, in his defence, he does claim Halle Berry mis-delivered it].



Wolverine Spin-off

Hugh Jackman's deal includes an exploration of his dark, brutal past. *25th Hour* scribe David Benioff has explained plans to "rough Jackman's Wolverine up a bit, showing more of his berserker side."

Magneto Spin-off

The life of Erik Lensherr (aka metal-bender Magneto) is already in development. This prequel of sorts is "going to take place from 1939 Auschwitz up to 1955", according to first-draft writer Sheldon Turner. Sir Ian McKellen says, "I know they've talked about a Magneto spin-off but it wouldn't be about me, it would be about a young Magneto. So I'd just get to top-and-tail with that one."

speechless when they first saw it, but I look like I did when I was 25, actually. I had that much hair then..." We can only presume it wasn't blue.

Grammer's an undoubted hit with his co-stars. Jackman and Foster describe him as "hysterical"; Stewart says the costume is "the most brilliant piece of prosthetic make-up I've ever seen" and Berry loved to go "deep" with him. "I had some really thoughtful and insightful conversations with Kelsey," she says. "I had to giggle, though, when I saw him all blue and furry off-camera, putting his reading glasses on to read a book."

SINGIN' IN THE PAIN

Later in the day, *Total Film* is up close and personal as Hugh Jackman's stunt double – who bears an uncanny resemblance to the Aussie actor and is, coincidentally, his brother-in-law – gets another mulling from Jones. The 'real' Wolverine is mooching about and singing to himself, a full-throated, somewhat camp, rendition of a show-tune. Even knowing that Jackman won a Tony award for his portrayal of Australian singer Peter Allen in Broadway musical *The Boy From Oz*, it's still disconcerting to see him gaily crooning in full superhero garb. But hey, we shouldn't be surprised: the *X-Men* set is rife with surreal behaviour, from



Hangin' around: Kelsey Grammer's Beast has superhuman agility as well as huge problems shaving.

Brainiac maniac: Magneto (Ian McKellen) destroys the Golden Gate Bridge with his metal-bending powers.

people trying to work out how to use the loo while wearing 18ft wings to full-scale *Strictly Come Dancing*-style moments in full costume.

"I danced with Vinnie as Juggernaut," smiles Janssen, relieved to be asked about anything other than her plotline. "I have a picture of it somewhere. He's a good mover! So was Sir Ian McKellen, actually."

It all seems a far cry from the 'troubled production' the web geeks were so keen to debate. And – balls to the web rumours – Ratner has to take much of the credit for it. His passion is infectious. "Brett's really outgoing and very gregarious. He's absolutely fearless," enthuses Jackman. "One day I was about to do a big scene and I got this tap on my shoulder. I looked around and there's Brett in full Wolverine costume. But it's *my* costume. I'm about 6'2", he's about 5'3", so the sleeves came halfway down over his claws. He looked utterly hysterical! He said, 'You can sit this one out, dog,' and then proceeded to go and do the whole scene. He'd learnt all my lines! Halle Berry was just pissing herself laughing and Brett was trying to be all serious. He actually sent out a Christmas card of himself dressed like that, too."

Yet for all the good humour on set, the pedigree cast and the 'more emotional' script, no comic-book blockbuster can really fly without its set-

pieces. And it sounds like *The Last Stand* might just raise the bar (to steal Joel Silver's favourite phrase), its finale putting a good deal of the \$150 million budget up there on the screen. Picture it: the Golden Gate Bridge destroyed by Magneto while his Brotherhood and the X-Men wage an all-out mutant war around him. "It's the biggest set-piece I've ever shot in my life," says Ratner, currently dressed in his own clothes. "So many elements had to be put together to make that scene work. I shot the real Golden Gate Bridge, miniatures, effects, CGI, the lot. It's unbelievable. And all the set-pieces in this film also exist somewhere in the comic-books because the two writers, Simon Kinberg (*Mr And Mrs Smith*) and Zak Penn (*Behind Enemy Lines*), are the biggest X-Men geeks ever."

It's not just the showpiece moments that use state-of-the-art effects in *The Last Stand*, either. One flashback scene finds Magneto and Xavier visiting a young Jean Grey. "Patrick and I are very pleased with that scene," says a relaxed Sir Ian McKellen. "It takes place 20 years ago and we both appear 20 years younger on screen. Being a couple of vain old-timers, we're very happy with that! They put our faces through a process which has an effect like airbrushing. It's cutting-edge technology that's never been used in a film before. It's wrinkle-lifting film magic!"

All this titillating talk about set-pieces and effects is to be expected, but this cast and crew is willing to show doubts, too. Ratner sighs as he admits, "Every day is difficult... there are a lot of people working on the set and it's a big production," before refixing his smile and adding, "but I'm so proud of this movie. I think it delivers." Whether it does or not – and we're hopeful – the question is, will *The Last Stand* really be the end of the X-Men? While there is plenty of potential for spin-offs (see sidebar), the key players are adamant this is the end of the main production line. "I don't think they're talking about another at this stage. I think it's done," says Berry. Jackman concurs: "This is it, the end of the trilogy. No cliffhanger here." And he's confident they're going out in a blaze of glory? "Listen," says the refreshingly frank Aussie. "There's something about these films that means they're always a bumpy ride. I'd be more worried if they weren't. These are huge films with massive fan interest; it matters to the fans, so they worry. But rest assured, the level of commitment from the cast, crew, director and studio couldn't be higher. They can grumble all they like... but the proof will be in the pudding." **TF**

X-Men: The Last Stand opens on 26 May and will be reviewed in the next issue of *Total Film*.