





AT WORLD'S END

He's already killed millions. Now, Roland Emmerich's wiping out the world in 2012. To chart the disaster movie to end all disaster movies, Total Film talks to director and cast about climbing the Emmer-Richter Scale. From micro to epic...

MICRO: NOT FELT

After pulverising the White House in *Independence Day*, unleashing a mutant lizard on Manhattan in *Godzilla*, cloaking Earth in icy knickers for *The Day After Tomorrow* and working with Mel Gibson, you'd think that Roland Emmerich would have had his fill of mega-disasters. So did he. Been there, done that.

But while the Teutonic planet-blaster and his recent collaborator Harald Kloser discussed what to do next over endless lunches, dinners and snack bananas during *10,000 BC*'s post-production in London, Kloser kept chipping away at Emmerich's resistance after they'd brainstormed the idea of a global flood

movie. "I needed to say to Roland, 'It's not a disaster movie, it's a movie about a new beginning,'" says the Austrian-born composer-turned-scripter. "The Mayan calendar ends the counting of time on December 21, 2012, but that doesn't mean time won't continue..."

Ah, the Mayans — that ancient, sacrifice-loving culture who, before abandoning their civilisation 1,500 years ago, mapped out an astronomical calendar that still astonishes with its precision. And, as Kloser points out, the date it comes to an abrupt end is December 21, 2012. At that point, according to various kooks, prophets and doomsayers, Earth will descend into either cataclysm or enlightenment.

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**



“One group thinks it will expand our minds,” says Emmerich, who immersed himself in Mayan mythology while he was researching another project. “The other says it will be the end.” That’s why *Total Film* finds itself in Cancun, Mexico, to meet the people bringing the Mayans’ prophecy to catastrophic life. But come on – Emmerich was looking for an excuse to kick seven shades of shit out of our planet again. “Yes,” agrees Kloser, “I think that’s what convinced Roland to do it one more time.”

“It’s only because I so fell in love with the idea of doing a modern retelling of Noah’s Ark that I said yes,” counters Emmerich. “But I said to myself, ‘If I do it again, this time I will get it *all* out of my system.’”

MINOR: OFTEN FELT BUT RARELY CAUSES DAMAGE

From the start, Emmerich wanted John Cusack to play 2012’s everyday Joe, a part-time limo driver and sci-fi novelist with one flop book, one failed marriage and two kids who think rubbing their faces on cheese graters would be more fun than spending time with him. “That was a nice call to get,” says the actor. “When I was younger I just wanted to establish that I could do serious acting movies and I didn’t want to get on a route that was more superficial and commercial. As I get older, I’d love to do a movie like this once in a while.” He didn’t say yes until they let him read the script, though. At that point, he says, “it was a no-brainer... It was wild. You’d read things where you thought, I don’t know how they think they’re going to do this... ‘Rome falls, California drops into the ocean and Spain explodes.’ I thought, ‘You can’t film that.’”

Unless you have \$200m to play with... Then bringing earth-crust displacement theory (if the planet’s core overheats, its surface will disintegrate) to celluloid fruition isn’t merely a screenwriter’s fantasy. So, besides making a “good hook for the audience”, has Emmerich turned himself into a believer in Mayan prophecies? “No. Nor was I a believer in aliens when I did *Independence Day*. I got a lot of letters from alien believers saying I was doing a disservice to the aliens who are already visiting our earth and abducting us. Do I believe? My brain says, ‘No, why should I? It’s ridiculous.’ But then you do some research and find that some other cultures have the same prediction – and it’s just eerie.” On the



Destruction derby: (above) a multi-story gets pulverised; John Cusack’s sci-fi writer looks to the skies.

plus side, if 2012’s predictions do come true, at least he won’t be getting sacks of hate mail about it.

LIGHT: NOTICEABLE SHAKING OF INDOOR ITEMS; RATTLING NOISES

All of Emmerich’s favourite themes are present and accounted for in 2012: the everyday schlub who becomes a hero, families torn apart and reunited, father-son schisms that need healing, powerful nitwits who fail to heed the signs. “As a filmmaker, you always can live off what you’re emotionally involved in,” says Hollywood’s favourite German. “In all my movies, there’s a father-son story because I was very close to my dad. And there’s always one who knows things which other people don’t – that’s a bit like my own outsider situation, first in Germany and now in Hollywood.”

If calling himself an outsider despite being one of the most powerful men in the industry seems rich, consider the evidence. He’s one of Hollywood’s few openly gay directors – having come out a few years ago – and with each project, he funds the script development himself before auctioning it to the highest studio bidder. It’s a fierce streak of independence he’s had since he first arrived in LA from Germany to direct “this huge fucking movie”, an aborted Sylvester Stallone vehicle called *Isobar*.

Instantly locking horns with Joel Silver, Emmerich refused to take the producer’s suggestions on board. “I just said no to everything – not to spite him, but because I thought he was wrong. After nine months I called it quits.”

Instead of hightailing it back to Germany, though, Emmerich agreed to take the reins on *Universal Soldier* as long as its producer let him do what he wanted. That’s been his professional mojo ever since. “I got all these studio offers after I did *Universal Soldier* and I said, ‘No, I want to do *Stargate*.’ Then more offers after *Stargate* and I said, ‘No, I’m doing my own movie.’ And that was *Independence Day*. That pretty much set the tone for who I am – I always did it my way. It’s more important what you say no to than what you say yes to.”

MODERATE: CAN CAUSE MAJOR DAMAGE TO POORLY CONSTRUCTED BUILDINGS

Arriving for his interview a bit worse for wear from last night’s festivities (a jungle-themed bash in the Cancun hotel, complete with scantily-clad Mayan warriors and maidens wandering around in various states of undress), Woody Harrelson ferries his breakfast to the table, slumping over and spooning cereal into his mouth. The actor plays the movie’s crackpot – a wacky-bearded





'If you turn to God, don't do it in a church because it could fall on your head' ROLAND EMMERICH

doomsday DJ broadcasting end-of-days predictions from his trailer. But forget all that – what *Total Film* wants to know is, did you really attempt to leap from one hotel balcony to the next at the end of last night's shindig? "Yeah..." drawls Harrelson. "That was pretty stupid."

Fortunately Harrelson didn't suffer his own apocalyptic demise and is able to join his fellow cast for memory-spilling of the epic shoot. Beside the Harrelson and Cusack strands, 2012's various yarns follow the US President (Danny Glover), his chief advisors (Oliver Platt and Chiwetel Ejiofor), his daughter (Thandie Newton), a Russian billionaire who buys his way onto the world governments' survival 'arks'; a Tibetan family involved in the arks' construction and two old jazz musicians on a cruise ship, who we imagine get to blow their own trumpets.

Emmerich subjects the lot of them to all manner of hideous disasters: floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and erupting volcanos... But when you're standing in front of a 100-foot-high blue wall, surely it's a challenge to summon up the required look of alarm/fear/hysteria. Emmerich's thesp-aide is to show his actors sophisticated pre-viz sequences. "It's actually a fluent process," he claims. "They see it in some form. They just have to trust you that it'll look real."

Newton struggled with the level of emotion to register, enough to convey the feeling of "Hooolllyyy Fuccckkk!" without coming off as the world's worst actor. "At the beginning of the movie, my dad tells me about this terrible thing going on. It's a close-up on my face and I'm thinking, 'How am I supposed to impart this knowledge to the audience? One eyebrow up, maybe?' Wouldn't we all be literally shitting ourselves?"

"If somebody told me that, I'd pass out," laughs Ejiofor. "I always remember the Joey school of acting – Joey from *Friends*. When receiving any kind of news, all you have to do is think of the square root of eight. Somehow you're able to give the right expression."

STRONG: CAN BE DESTRUCTIVE IN POPULATED AREAS

"We were writing the script in a very nice house in Thailand," recalls Kloser, "and one day, Roland said, 'Oh man, I got an idea. You know they're making the sequel to *The Da Vinci Code*, where they're trying to save the Vatican? Well, you

Survivors: (above) Cusack with onscreen daughter Morgan Lily; (right) LA falls spectacularly into a crater.

know what we're gonna do? We're gonna kick the shit out of it!"

And that's exactly what they do. As anyone who's seen the trailer knows, one of the money shots is St Peter's basilica toppling onto a mass of Catholic worshippers. Emmerich likes to stick it to religion. He also crumbles Rio's Christ The Redeemer hilltop statue into dust. "I'm against organised religion in general. Why go into a church and pray? I have no idea. That's why I said, 'If you are going to turn to God in a moment of peril, don't do it in a church because this thing could fall on your head.'"

In a cheeky move, Emmerich even hired the same visual effects company that was working on *Angels & Demons*, "because they had the Vatican already built! That was convenient. We wanted to do our second teaser all about the Vatican but Sony got nervous – they thought Ron Howard would get mad at

them." But there was one religion even Emmerich wasn't brave enough to take on. "We couldn't destroy Mecca. That's the problem with our world. I wanted to but if I destroyed Mecca in a movie, I would have a fatwa on my head."

MAJOR: CAN CAUSE SERIOUS DAMAGE OVER LARGE AREAS

Danny Glover really is too old for this shit. The second black president to reign over a disaster movie (following Morgan Freeman in *Deep Impact*), he regularly took a tumble on the 'shaky floor' – massive, gimbal-operated platforms that the filmmakers used to simulate floor-rumbling episodes.

"Danny is such a trouper but he constantly fell down," laughs Emmerich, a tad sadistically. "I kept running over going, 'Danny are you OK?' It was just incredible – it really felt like an eight or nine-point earthquake. We had to tone





Rain of fire: (left) a volcano erupts; (below) survivors jet out of LA; Amanda Peet with onscreen kids Liam James and Morgan Lily.



THE SHOW CAN GO ON!

London 2012 events useful in a post-Mayan-prophecy world...

TRIPLE JUMP Brit medal hope Phillips Idowu need not fret that his training will go to seed... This is a man who will see a whopping 17.73m crevasse and leap it, piss-breeze, if there's something in the middle for his skip. Likely to tumble to a horrid death if 18m wide, though.

MODERN TRIATHLON You know, the cycling, running and swimming one? When the world is dirt, survivors will need to be proficient at *everything*. Running from a tidal wave, chance upon a bike? Get on it. Find a newly-sprung lake? Paddle, fool. The ultimate discipline for living.

BOXING Thing is, sod the above. In a post-apoc world you've got to fight for your right to eat and boxers from Team GB Unknown #1 to Cuban Amateur #2 will punch their way to have the only paunch around. Straggler vs Olympic Fighter? Only one's getting the chow.

SEX Everyone knows all athletes really go to the Olympics for is the constant village nookie. The lithe, toned and primed bodies of the 11,000 young things will explode their wears into each other to repopulate the globe, creating a master race and, sadly, making Hitler's day. **JD**

'I pulled a hamstring. I was trying to limp my way through water, fire and earthquakes' JOHN CUSACK

it down because people freaked out. We had to use a stunt double for Danny on the wide shots."

You don't imagine that Glover saw the funny side. Cusack wasn't laughing much either. "If you're doing an action movie, physically you have to make sure that they understand that if you do things 20 times you can injure yourself," says the actor, who was furiously put through his paces on the 'shaky-floor'. "You can't do it at eight in the morning until four in the afternoon at full tilt. Unless you're an athlete..." So what happened? "I pulled a hamstring. I was trying to limp my way through water, fire, ash clouds, earthquakes without anyone seeing that I was limping."

The hobbled star tumbles out of cargo planes, runs along a glacier and spent a big chunk of time underwater. "I was worried about them keeping the tank clean so you didn't get an ear infection," says the actor. "I've done a couple of movies where that's happened." But he found Emmerich a brilliant organiser of chaos – and master of his domain. "No interference, no worried people from the studio milling around," Cusack muses. "It's very cool. And literally every time you'd go, 'I don't know,' he comes right over to talk to you about it, takes as much time as you want – never rushed. He's at the top of his game."

GREAT: DEVASTATING

"There's always this joke in California: one day we'll sink into the ocean. I said, 'I think it should happen in this film.'" In 2012, Emmerich sends LA the way of the Titanic with an earthquake measuring 10.5 on the Richter scale (the largest recorded is 9.5) and resulting in – having



seen it ourselves in all its orgiastic glory – the epic's most stunning set piece.

Cusack was there as LA's destruction was pieced together. Manoeuvring his family on an insane limo ride as the San Andreas Fault rips California a new one, he continued to be gobsmacked by the scale of Emmerich's vision. "When he pulls up to his house, they have the entire city block shaking and the sides of all the houses collapsing. It was huge."

In another part of the story, Newton attempts to get to the safety of the Ark as water gushes around her and starts to fill up the saviour vessel. "We're coming down a corridor and this massive tidal wave comes round the corner towards us. It actually was happening, it wasn't CGI. On action, this wave came around the fucking corner and I swear to you it was as high as this room, like floor-to-ceiling water – whooshhh! – and then,

'Cut!' All the water gets drained through God knows where and 15 minutes later, it was a pristine set again. And action! We do it again. Amazing..."

EPIC: NEVER RECORDED

"My personal opinion is that the world won't end," chin-strokes Cusack, "but that maybe a new consciousness will start. Maybe when this epoch is over, the world will become less materialistic, we'll become more conscious. I think that's what the Mayans were talking about. Either that or we should all have a lot of fun over the next two years."

And now you've destroyed the world, what's next, Mr Emmerich? "This can only be my last disaster movie because I don't know what else I can do. I'm not saying I'm not going to destroy things, but in another form. I want to do the sequel to *Independence Day* and there would be a lot of destruction in that..."

You heard it here first. *Independence Day 2*, coming our way. Provided, that is, we're all still here after 2012... **TF**

2012 opens on 13 November and will be reviewed in a future issue of Total Film. For the latest features and video, check out tinyurl.com/tf2012