

# THE EAGLE

**I**N BUCOLIC HUNGARIAN COUNTRYSIDE, ABOUT an hour outside of Budapest, *Total Film* wanders serenely through the rooms of a Roman lakeside villa, before exiting into hot sunshine to stroll past market stalls bearing all manner of victuals for the healthy Roman diet – hanging pheasants, rabbits, garlic, grapes.

Drawing the eye – and the feet – is a grandly imposing provincial coliseum. It's been constructed to meticulous perfection for sombre centurion movie *The Eagle*, down to the hanging urns that burn incense to mask the smell of blood. Today in the solid-wood arena, Marcus (Channing Tatum) – a hobbled, humbled Roman centurion – will watch diminutive Celtic slave Esca (Jamie Bell) battle for his life against a better-armed, better-armoured gladiatorial foe. Esca will put up a brave fight but eventually his fate will lie in the wavering thumbs of a baying crowd – and Marcus will convince them to stick those digits skyward...

When it comes to swords'n'sandals epics, genuflecting at the altar of the genre's modern-day overlord is a valuable ploy, and rightly so. In terms of box office dinari, *Gladiator* (\$458m) has been outstripped by *Troy* and *Clash Of The Titans* (\$497m and \$493m respectively) and out-stylised by *300*, but nothing can touch Ridley Scott's revivalist epic for Oscar glory and laudatory prestige.

Wisely, then, *The Eagle*'s director Kevin Macdonald, producer Duncan Kenworthy and star Channing Tatum all freely 'fess up to their *Gladiator* aspirations. "It's always been something I've wanted to do," vouches the film's unlikely star. "*Gladiator* is one of my favourite movies." The reeds flanking that lakeside villa billow with the same Elysian dreaminess as Maximus' wheat field. And although *The Eagle* doesn't unleash hell in its opening frames, it only waits a few minutes before young-gun Marcus – a fresh arrival in southwest Britannia – is saving comrades, fort and the day in a furious centurions-versus-hairy tribesmen smackdown (while suffering a grievous leg wound that ends his military career).

*Total Film* has missed the shooting of this mêlée's main event – a head-on collision between Tatum and a chariot – but battle scenes are huge undertakings and Macdonald's second-unit is now picking over the spoils. Leaving the coliseum behind, next up is a spectacularly rendered Roman fort in the middle of a mud-spattered field. Before it, the ground is strewn with dummy casualties, with today's filmed carnage including legionnaire leg-chopping (British chariots have spiked wheels; Hungarian extras pay the price) and the Druid chieftain's stunt double flying out of his chariot after being impaled by a Roman spear...



## 'IT'S A WESTERN SET IN

Based on Rosemary Sutcliff's 1954 historical novel *The Eagle Of The Ninth*, this is a long-term passion project for Kenworthy. He'd adored Sutcliff's boy's-own adventure as a youth and secured the film rights in the late '90s, finding an eager recruit in Macdonald. Jointly hammering out a script, they were ready to march in early 2007 – only for Macdonald to hurl a spanner into the works by swanning off to film *State Of Play*.

Kenworthy opted to wait for the Glasgow-born filmmaker, largely because he saw *Eagle* being "almost like a Roman documentary" and thus perfectly suited to the *Touching The Void* director's talents (even though it meant they were piped into production by Neil Marshall's similar *Centurion*). "*Troy* and *Alexander* were the kind of films I *didn't* want it to resemble – big, grandiose, lots of CGI," observes Kenworthy. "At its heart, the story is just two guys in the wilds of Scotland."

Created in the spirit of *Gladiator*, but on a sliver of its budget (\$25m), *The Eagle*'s shoot kicked off in Hungary, a stand-in for Roman Britain below Hadrian's Wall. It then migrated to the Scottish Highlands for the film's epic second half, when Marcus crosses into the untamed wilds of

Caledonia with Esca on an obsessive quest to retrieve the 9th Legion's titular banner and restore his father's honour (he was leading the legendary unit when it vanished). During *Total Film*'s Hungarian sojourn, Tatum and Bell shoot their first face-to-face encounter at the villa of Marcus' uncle Aquila (played by lanky, white-haired Donald Sutherland, looking even less Roman than Richard Harris), with Esca pulling a dagger and tossing it defiantly at his new master's feet.

Wearing a dark tunic and leaning on a crutch, his thigh wrapped in dressing to below the knee, Marcus returns the petulant scowl – but recognises Esca's insolence for what it is: an aggressive act of submission. "I hate everything you stand for... But I must serve you," snarls Bell, who disconcertingly is wearing Kickers. "Can you see any sneaker footprints in the dust?" asks Tatum half-jokingly. The actor sings softly to himself between takes, becomes irked that his crutch keeps breaking ("It's so fucking distracting") and needs to repeat his close-up a few times before Macdonald is content.

At first glance, the star of *Step Up, Fighting* and *G.I. Joe* is far too contemporary to convince as



**MORTAL BLOWS**

Channing Tatum on his steel and pork swords...



**Were you surprised when you were cast as Marcus?**

I was actually going in for the Esca role, but then Kevin decided he wanted to break that stereotype of a Roman having an English accent.

**You do a lot of fighting in the film... any injuries?**

Your hands are always torn up... I don't know how these guys kept their fingers. We had this one fight on the parapet that took about a minute, but you're exhausted. These guys would fight for days. They were much harder than I could ever try to be.

**When that boiling water was poured onto your johnson, how extreme was the pain?**

There are no words... It was unbelievably brutal.

**Any lasting damage?**

No, there's no scars or anything. I remember the medic saying, "I know it's no consolation now, but it's a good thing it hurts because it means there's no nerve damage."

**Did the man who wielded the kettle give you a present to say sorry?**

He did, he got me a bottle of whiskey. It was a total accident. **MM**

**Double header: (left) Jamie Bell finds himself at the mercy of a gladiator; (right) Tahar Rahim's Seal prince confronts Channing Tatum; (far right) Tatum on the warpath.**



**2ND CENTURY SCOTLAND' KEVIN MACDONALD**

a 2nd-Century centurion, and one who speaks in a broad American drawl at that. Macdonald wasn't all that sure himself, having another actor on his radar. "But Channing came to see me and changed my mind," he says. "I'm hoping the baggage he brings is the baggage of someone who's played many soldiers and straight-arrow all-American boys. Because that's who this character is, even though he's Roman - he's a guy with a limited vision of the world who has a decency about him and a drive to do the right thing." His accent fit the bill, too: Kenworthy and Macdonald settled on casting Americans as Romans and Brits as well, Britons, drawing intentional parallels between Roman and American supremacy. "It's about empire," notes Kenworthy, "an invading, civilising force who think they're bringing good things to the country they're occupying but who handle the natives indifferently."

Infused with a dark, gritty authenticity, the film was exhaustively researched to recreate its mud-blood-and-guts, 2nd-Century atmosphere - although historical accuracy appears malleable in the depiction of the barbarian tribes, who look more Native American than native Celt. In

particular, the film's savage Seal people (caked in green mud and led by *A Prophet's* Tahar Rahim) could be taking on English Redcoats as easily as a Roman interloper.... "I always said, 'It's a western set in 2nd-Century Scotland,'" says Macdonald, "and maybe the influence of *The Searchers* in particular rubbed off on me."

But for all Macdonald's panic that Rahim might be a disaster (the supposed-to-be-fearsome warrior at first spouted his Seal dialogue in a thick French accent until the accent coach suggested the Gallic-Algerian actor try it with an Arabic accent instead - et voila...), *Eagle's* most terrifying mishap involved Channing Tatum's cock.

"I remember it vividly," says Macdonald with a rueful smile. "I was chatting to somebody, and I heard Channing screaming... He was always pretending he'd fallen off his horse or got a spear in his eye and I remember thinking, 'Fucking Channing, he's joking around again,' and just carrying on my conversation."

If only. In fact, the First AD had accidentally doused Little Channing in boiling water while Big Channing shot a scene in an icy Scottish river. The First AD had been tasked with pouring warm

water down the actor's wet suit between takes to ward off hypothermia, but, sadly, forgot to check one kettle for temperature...

When the reality dawned, Tatum was whisked to hospital. Thankfully the trauma is behind him now, but Macdonald located a silver lining in the cock-up. "In some way it did me a favour because what I was trying to do in that Scottish section was break him down. But Channing's such a... *bulk* and so strong and capable that it's very hard to make him feel like he's reached the end. He could hardly walk but it was good because it meant that when he was fighting in the final battle he was in pain and he couldn't do it very well."

Fortunately Marcus has Esca by his side in that final battle, and breastplates, barbarians and blood-caked heroism aside, that's what *The Eagle* ultimately boils down to: more than a scaled-down *Gladiator* for the iGeneration, it's the first swords'n'sandals buddy movie. Macdonald calls it "a rip-roaring tale of friendship". And on that front, *The Eagle* flies alone. **TF**

**The Eagle opens on 25 March and will be reviewed in the next issue of Total Film.**