



GREEN ZONE

CONFIDENTIAL

FROM SUPREMACY TO ULTIMATUM TO IRAQ... PAUL GREENGRASS AND
MATT DAMON LAY IT ON THE LINE TO HAUL IRAQ THRILLERS OUT
OF THE DEAD ZONE. BUT CAN BOURNE'S FRANCHISE LINCHPINS
AND A \$100M BUDGET FINALLY BREAK THE MIDDLE EAST DUCK?
TOTAL FILM ENTERS THE GREEN ZONE IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

When it comes to insurmountable undertakings, trying to climb Mount Everest in stilettos would rate highly. So would persuading Angelina Jolie to give up Third World adoptions. Making an Iraq War movie that people actually want to see would be another, the latter not only seemingly insoluble but potentially thankless as well (for all its acclaim, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* couldn't even crack \$13m in the US). But that's what Paul Greengrass and Matt Damon have broached with *Green Zone*, the *Bourne* franchise kings leveraging their lofty status to tackle a seismic event of our time – the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, when catastrophic neocon bungling and the inability to locate those fabled weapons of mass destruction turned the Middle East nation into a quagmire of ethno-religious discord and al-Qaeda shit-stirring. Not your average popcorn-munching crowd-pleaser, in other words...

When *Green Zone* was announced, you feared for Greengrass becoming the latest filmmaker to get swallowed up by Iraqi sands. But first and foremost, Greengrass is keen – nay, careful – to stress that *Green Zone* is a thriller (he'd rather Iraq were mentioned last). He's also quick to refute that it's *Bourne Goes To The Middle East*, but equally quick to fess up that it rides *Bourne's* coattails. "Were we aware of the *Bourne*-ness as we made it? Yeah, of course. You can't not be aware of it," rumbles the 54-year-old. "It's me and Matt – it'd be mad for us to think that somehow it's going to be entirely different."

At its heart, *Green Zone* is a political exposé of the US administration's cynical agenda (fiddling while Rome burns, basically), housed in a military actioner casing – with Greengrass stitching the two together so the seams don't show. Assigned to a futile hunt for WMDs in newly occupied Iraq, Damon's Chief Warrant Officer Roy Miller is the film's everyman hero, butting heads with an evasive journalist (Amy Ryan) and hard-charging neocon (Greg Kinnear) and shifting into righteous indignation as he unpicks the truth. "The guy that my character is based on was our technical advisor and he went in believing he was going to find them, racing the other teams because they wanted to be the first one on CNN," says Damon. "And he knew after the first site they hit that it was all bullshit. The entire thing was deception."

"There came a point with *Bourne* where you couldn't make up things that were as utterly jaw-dropping as real events,"



Boom time: (main) Matt Damon opens fire; (top right) director Paul Greengrass on set.

**'WERE WE AWARE OF
THE BOURNE-NESS?
IT'S ME AND MATT –
WE'D BE MAD TO
THINK IT WILL BE
ENTIRELY DIFFERENT'**

PAUL GREENGRASS

Greengrass muses. "It always felt to me that if you could go to the real world you could create a thrilling backdrop just as compelling and conspiratorial as a *Bourne* movie. But would it seem far-fetched or would it seem telling? That's the issue."

GREEN FINGERS

No one can argue *Green Zone* doesn't deliver on the kick-ass front: the on-the-ground action is superbly shot, intense, nail-biting, littered with hyperkinetic foot chases and macho scuffles; a ballistic set-piece towards the end in which an American helicopter is downed by a missile is nothing short of staggering. Greengrass sought the holy grail of immediacy and immersion that his two *Bourne* films – 2004's *Supremacy* and

2007's *Ultimatum* – delivered in spades and dollars (\$731m worldwide). Universal took the bait, allowing Greengrass to bring his freeform, evolutionary filmmaking ethos to *Green Zone* – an audacious plunge on the studio's part knowing the dismal track record for Iraq-themed films. Damon calls it "a \$100m Iraq movie, which I'm sure the studio is thrilled about because Iraq movies are kicking ass out there! Even the good ones aren't doing that well and now it's, 'Get out of our way, we've got the \$100m one coming in!'" Greengrass guffaws, claiming the film "was a lot cheaper than a *Bourne* film. You can't put Matt Damon in a big action movie and not have scale but it cost a lot less than the *Bourne* films." Was Greengrass kept on a tighter leash working outside the franchise? "I wouldn't say it was any different to be honest," he insists.

One man with previous experience of Greengrass' organic methodology is Brian Helgeland. Ten days from shooting *The Bourne Supremacy*, Greengrass asked the Oscar-winning screenwriter to fly to Berlin to do a top-to-bottom rewrite. "We gave a whole new script to the producers, who were horrified," laughs Helgeland, who was frog-marched onto the next plane back to LA. "They went back to the original script but the Cold War element was dropped, which is what Paul wanted. It was my first lesson in how he worked, in that you could completely look at something in a new way and as long as progress came out of it, it didn't matter how much work it took." >>



Dynamic duo: (above) Greengrass and Damon make a plan of action.

Helgeland was eager to suit up for Greengrass' Iraq thriller. The pair kicked around ideas while the director was finishing *The Bourne Ultimatum* in New York City, birthing the concept of tracking a MET squad (Mobile Exploitation Team) hunting for WMDs over several clandestine outdoor meetings. "It was like [*Watergate* reporters] Woodward and Bernstein," laughs the scripter. When Greengrass got hold of the manuscript for Rajiv Chandrasekaran's phenomenal exposé *Imperial Life In The Emerald City*, about the heavily fortified bubble the Americans set up around Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace, he ordered an about-face to zero in on the neocons behind early Iraq policy. "They say things aren't written in stone, but with Paul, they're not even written in paper," laughs Helgeland. "I'm all about getting it on the page and he's very much, 'That's a great road map but let's see what happens if we take this exit. And what about going over there, where there is no road?'"

Jason Isaacs calls Greengrass a sculptor who "doesn't work any different now to when he had less than £1m to make *Bloody Sunday*". The actor, who starred in Greengrass' 1997 telly movie *The Fix*, was sitting at home in February 2008 when the filmmaker phoned him up. "He said, 'What are you doing tomorrow? Do you want to come to Morocco and jump out of

helicopters?' I went, 'What is it?' And he said, 'You'll see when you get here. There's a kind of part but it may change — you know how I work...'"

Next day, Isaacs was jumping out of a helicopter, turning up on location just to say hello and show Greengrass the handlebar moustache he wanted for his Special Forces prick when the filmmaker said, "Let's shoot something now." The scene involved Isaacs' Major Briggs bulldozing onto Damon's patch and seizing the Ba'athist bigwigs he's captured. "If Matt gives you trouble, do whatever you want," Greengrass told Isaacs. "Get him out of the way. We took off and I'm like, 'What did he just say?' Over the roaring din of the helicopter seven Marines explained to me how I would behave and before I knew it I was running towards a movie star who I'd barely said hello to and beating him up rather badly. That was my first day. Most of the rest of the year was like that."

Rarely found behind the monitor, Greengrass prefers to mix it up on the

ground, roving amongst his crew and actors, stirring, searching, probing. "You go to work and you have no idea what you're going to be doing — and neither does he in a way," reveals Brendan Gleeson, who plays a senior CIA officer allied with Damon. "It's nothing to do with self-indulgence, it's about a remorseless search for the critical point of a scene. And when we start shooting it's hammer and tongs — you go home absolutely wasted."

It makes Greengrass sound like cinema's very own jazz musician, the Charlie Parker of action-adventure if you like, although he refutes the analogy. "It's not actually as jazz as you think," he says. "You can't make films without having a very clear idea of what you want to do. But I like to be as free as I can be. You may have a scene but things occur on the day and you do the things that come out of that. You've got to move forward in a way that works for everybody but gives you and the actors maximum freedom."

For those working beside him, can it ever feel like spinning your wheels, grasping for something that might not be there? Does frustration never come into play? "Maybe for the studio," notes Helgeland, "but in that kind of environment, everyone comes to play. Everything is considered and everything is up for grabs."

© 2009 UNIVERSAL STUDIOS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



Weighty topic: Matt Damon (above) gained weight for *The Informant!* and slimmed down again between the main shoot and re-shoots; (right) Greengrass is a 'hands on' style of director.



'IF YOU'VE GOT
A MUCH-LOVED MOVIE
STAR, A STRONG
STORY AND KICK-ASS
ACTION, YOU'VE GOT
A CHANCE'

PAUL GREENGRASS

"He wants the most exciting and dynamic way of representing something truthful," chimes Isaacs. "I've been on film sets where people say to me, 'We're going to make this like a *Bourne* film'. And what they mean is, 'We're going to shake the camera a bit, we're going to mess about with focus.' But what they completely fail to understand is that this is not Paul doing something schematic – he makes real and exciting and suspenseful things happen on the floor and the camera crew are trying to capture that in a way that makes you feel you're right in the middle of the action. What he doesn't do is set things up conventionally and say, 'Wobble the camera a bit.'"

THIS IS THE END

Universal were always aware that Greengrass' freeform approach would dictate reshoots. Ploughing through months and miles of footage in the edit suite, the director finds the gaps and holes that need filling. But it's doubtful the studio anticipated the depth that would be required for *Green Zone*. With Damon committed to Steven Soderbergh's *The Informant!* and Helgeland's services stripped away by the writer's strike, the film entered production with its legs chained together. It tripped up when Greengrass came down with a serious leg

infection during the Morocco stint of *Green Zone*'s seven-month shoot, requiring hospitalisation and 15 pages of script to be dropped. "In fairness to the number of reshoots we did," says Helgeland, "there was a lot of stuff that Paul didn't get in the main shoot because of Matt's schedule and then him being really ill in Morocco."

When Greengrass screened his first cut, however, even doubters saw its resounding potential and the greenlight was granted for extensive extra shooting. This time, Damon's crammed schedule came in handy – having piled on pounds for Soderbergh, he needed to drop them for Greengrass – giving the director the breathing space to plan a surgical-strike campaign, mostly tightening up the third act and shooting a new ending. "We'd never quite worked out who was going to kill who, how certain characters were going to die," explains Helgeland. "So we changed a few things."

Greengrass possesses a thrilling ambition in storytelling that's frequently lacking in today's big-budget arena. The risk with ripping a thriller straight from headlines is that the audience is several steps ahead of Damon – we know there aren't any WMDs, we've gone through the seven stages of moral outrage that define Miller's arc. But the filmmaker's smarter than that; as Gen-X-and-beyond's impressions of Vietnam have been shaped by cinema, so

he's laying down a serious marker for relevance and resonance with Iraq. Not that he'd say it out loud... Genuinely interested, he asks us to predict *Green Zone*'s prospects among 16-35-year-old males. Our take? It's the Iraq War movie for people who refuse to see Iraq War movies. "That's my thinking," he muses. "I'll tell you what – honestly, when you asked 'was I nervous?' I don't think I am nervous but I'm genuinely really interested to see how it's gonna do. In the end, if you've got a much-loved movie star doing things that his audience loves to see him do, with a strong story and kick-ass action, you've got a chance."

"There were doubts about whether he could pull it off," says Isaacs. "I had doubts, he had doubts – like all great artists, he works by having enormous confidence married to enormous anxiety. I hope it's successful because it will be a terrible shame if he didn't get to carry on making films the way that he does."

One film Greengrass won't be making, of course, is *Bourne 4*, Universal venturing forth on their spy franchise without his services. Damon's initial reaction, an outburst of support that he wouldn't continue without the director, will be put to the test by an eager studio; the actor even claimed at *Invictus*' US premiere, "I think Paul would change his mind if a great script came along." For his part, Greengrass insists there's no schism with Universal – it was simply a decision he came to after he'd finished *Green Zone* and it was crunch time for pulling the trigger on the next *Bourne* chapter. "When I really examined where I was at in my head and heart, I felt I'd done everything that I personally wanted to do with the *Bourne* franchise," he says. "It was as simple as that. It was absolutely nothing to do with scripts. They had a script that George [Nolfi] had written and they were having another one written [by Josh Zetumer]. But you can deal with all that. It's just that when I personally got to, 'Do I want to make a third *Bourne*?', I didn't have the fire in the belly."

Greengrass is currently hammering away trying to find the next project that will stoke up that all-important belly furnace. He and Helgeland have been discussing a Wall Street movie but, whatever it ends up being, Greengrass anticipates he'll be staying in the big-budget arena. "I would have thought so," he laughs, "because I do like 'em big and loud..."

***Green Zone* opens on 12 March and is reviewed on page 48. For the latest features and video, check out tinyurl.com/tfgzone**