

ON SET



THE LION, THE SWITCH

It was the Disney franchise that had wiped out, so why did Fox think *The Chronicles Of Narnia* was worth saving? Total Film talks to the creators of *The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader* about swapping studios and steering Narnia back on course...

WORDS MATT MUELLER

Here's the stark facts: *The Chronicles Of Narnia* has always been the poor man's fantasy franchise. Too kiddie-oriented by half, stifled by author CS Lewis' heavy-handed Christian allegory and never generating anywhere near the levels of anticipatory fervour as *A Lord Of The Rings* or *Harry Potter*. But you can't argue with results. *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* hoovered up \$745m worldwide, while serving up plenty for sprogs and their parents to like: James McAvoy's captivating faun Mr. Tumnus, Tilda Swinton's dreadlocked ice witch and sufficient

AND THE BOARDROOM

Narnian enchantment to overlook some half-baked effects and Ray Winstone's fussbudget beaver. Enough, anyhow, to deliver a viable franchise for rights-holders Walden Media and their studio partners Disney.

Then came *Prince Caspian* and it was goodbye magic, hello disenchantment. Eschewing the original's charm and humour, *Caspian* lumbered into view as a ponderous political tale rife with interminable battles and sword-clashing; ho-hum, Spanish-accented villains; and *Wardrobe's* cavalcade of woodland cuties giving way to a

grumpy orange dwarf and wearisome mouse-in-boots Reepicheep. Having inflated *Caspian's* budget to \$225m, Disney and Walden ended up with egg on their face and a deeply disappointing tally of \$420m. While they went through the motions developing the third *Narnia* escapade, *The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*, no one was shocked when Disney threw in the towel in December 2008. At that stage, the game looked up. Was *Narnia* a permanently poisoned chalice?

Rewind to spring 2007, when Andrew Adamson, who always intended to step aside

as director for the third film, met Michael Apted in Prague while filming *Caspian*. Adamson and producer Mark Johnson were instantly sold on Apted's slant – that, far from being a slavish CS Lewis devotee, he simply liked the characters and wanted to put the emphasis back on them. “When you look at his work, not only is he clearly adept at dealing with actors but there's real emotional strength to his characters,” says Johnson. Having directed *The World Is Not Enough*, Apted also had experience in handling the scope and scale of a massive tentpole. The plan was for *Dawn* >>

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‘I DID SO MUCH PRE-PRODUCTION ON THIS FILM, SO GOD KNOWS WE WERE PREPARED!’ MICHAEL APTED

Treader to start in January 2008 while *Caspian* was in post-production – to avoid the stars from ageing too much – with a location-hopping shoot between Malta, Iceland and the Czech Republic.

But as soon as Apted climbed on board, *Dawn Treader* delays began. Originally, says Johnson, “because we didn’t have a script. If you look at the history of bad decisions in the movie business, top of the list is starting a film when you don’t have a script you’re satisfied with.” With Disney and Walden dragging out development for the next 18 months and postponements piling on top of each other like Telmarine soldiers in Narnian booby-traps, Apted grew frustrated. “It was always hard to keep getting up for it,” he sighs. “But I liked the project, I liked the challenge of it, and frankly there wasn’t much else going on during these difficult industrial times.”

Continually moving the goalposts (studio honchos ultimately demanded a \$100m cap on *Dawn Treader’s* budget), Disney’s panic ratcheted up several notches more when the dark, listless *Caspian* capsized at the summer 2008 box office, becoming an instant loser in relation to both its predecessor and its testosterone-fueled competitors. With Walden clamping down – they were determined to reposition *Narnia* as a Christmas family film – Disney finally walked. “Nobody slammed the door, we just all came to the conclusion that it was best not to go forward,” says Johnson.

So where did *Caspian* go off the rails? “We may have gotten a little cocky and said, ‘OK, we have the family audience, let’s see if we can get

the boys,’” admits the producer. “The mistake – if there was one – was doing *Prince Caspian* next. We were faithful to the book, but it doesn’t contain the Narnian magic that that audience wants.”

“I thought we might be sunk,” vouches Apted. “After *Caspian*, there was a sense that perhaps this was not an ongoing franchise...” Far from being dead in the water, however, every studio got in touch after the Disney divorce. 20th Century Fox, through their pre-existing deal with Walden, had first-look and were won over by Apted’s “dog-and-pony-show” presentation. Having originally vied for the rights to Lewis’ seven-book series, Fox 2000 chief Elizabeth Gabler calls it a “perfect kismet situation” that her studio has now saved *Narnia* from oblivion.

Hinting at deeper themes of faith, family and temptation, Fox’s first *Dawn Treader* trailer put the boot into *Caspian* with its clarion call: “Return To Hope. Return To Magic. Return To Narnia.” Drawing on Lewis’ *Treader* tale was a road that

was always going to be followed, insists Johnson, even when Disney were still in the picture, but Fox still rejigged the blueprint, hiring writer Michael Petroni for one final push. “He nailed it,” says Apted. “He didn’t mess with the structure or story but he brought a lot of fresh imagination.” Among Fox and Walden’s requirements were that a heavier emphasis be placed on Lewis’ thematic threads, to reel in the faith-based family audience that Disney jettisoned with *Caspian*. “That was one of the crummy decisions they made, glossing over that market,” says Apted. “It’s tricky stuff but you have to acknowledge what the book is and where it came from. To ignore it is a bit silly.”

Dawn Treader sees the return of the two youngest Pevensies – Lucy (Georgia Henley) and Edmund (Skandar Keynes) – along with their odious cousin Eustace (*Son Of Rambo’s* Will Poulter) three years after their *Caspian* exit. They join Ben Barnes’ prince – now King – on a seafaring quest aboard the titular vessel to locate



Return of the King: (right) Ben Barnes as Caspian; Apted, Barnes and Skandar Keynes on set.



New direction: (left) Michael Apted with Will Poulter, Skandar Keynes and Georgia Henley; Apted and crew on location; Poulter as cousin Eustace.

the seven lost Lords of Narnia and prevent an unspeakable evil from ravaging the realm. Besides upping the quotient of magical beasties (merfolk, sea serpents, dragons) and reviving the children's sense of wonder, Apted's challenge lay in giving Lewis' episodic journey the narrative propulsion it lacked and filling the creative gaps by using "the unwritten book" between *Dawn Treader* and its successor, *The Silver Chair*.

There are going to be people who love the books who are not going to be thrilled with the additions," says Barnes, who compares *Dawn Treader* to quest movies like *The Seven Voyages Of Sinbad* and feels his character makes more sense this time. "I always thought Prince Caspian should have been much younger because being 14 would explain why he was so terrified of his uncle and running away from his problems. I was 25 and didn't quite fit the mould to what fervent lovers of the book had imagined, but I always knew I'd be better casting for *Dawn Treader*."

Compared to *Caspian's* bloated spending spree, the third film's budget is, says Gabler, "much lower, but still significant." Johnson pegs it well above \$100m, but minus *Caspian's* globe-trotting,

claims they've got more bang for their buck. Where to shoot *Dawn Treader*, however, was a long-running logistical nightmare for Apted. As Disney scaled back its ambitions, they settled on Rosarito Studios in Mexico, originally constructed for Cameron's *Titanic*, only to see their plans scuppered by the country's horrific drug wars. "They said, 'We can't be doing a family film where the kids are going to work in armoured cars,'" says Apted. "You've got gunning placements outside the studio and beheadings every weekend... It's terrible there, worse than Baghdad."

"I was very nervous about going to Mexico," confesses Henley. "It's hard enough shooting a film and juggling school work without having to look over your shoulder all the time. And the way Michael described it, the heads lying in the road and stuff... My heart was pounding."

Eventually the production landed at Warner Roadshow studios on Australia's Gold Coast, with the immense *Dawn Treader* constructed on a promontory overlooking the ocean, operated by a gimbal that allowed the ship to appear to be out to sea from any angle. "Shooting is the toughest part of a movie but in this case it was the smoothest part, maybe because we were all so glad to be doing it finally," muses Apted. "The kids had been waiting for a year, terrified that they'd grow too much. I did so much pre-production on this film, so God knows we were prepared!"

A more vivid tale than *Caspian* and even *Wardrobe*, *Dawn Treader* is many fans' favourite book. The latter arriving in the shape of the dragon that Eustace becomes for part of the story – something Poulter was initially unsure how they were going to pull off. "We were like, 'Hmm... he turns into a dragon. Do you think I'll have to wear a costume?'" Lightly tampering with Lewis' tale, Eustace's dragon will end up battling a sea serpent in the film's climax, while for continuity's sake the two older Pevensie kids have been revived for cameos, as has Swinton's evil temptress. "I don't feel too bad about it," says Apted. "We did do an honourable draft of the book but it had no life to it."

Apted's made other switches too, like replacing Eddie Izzard with Simon Pegg as the voice of Reepicheep, whose relationship with Eustace is the heart of the film as far as he's concerned. "That was one of my big fights with everybody, that I thought their's was the central relationship," says Apted. "But it was hard to impress people about that because Reepicheep's so expensive to do. They kept saying, 'Do we really need this scene?' It was a fight but I knew in my heart I was right about it."

It's not just the budget where Fox are steering a tighter ship. After the two-hour-plus indulgence of *Wardrobe* and *Caspian*, Johnson expects *Dawn Treader* to come in at a leaner running time – and in 3D, a decision embraced after the five-month shoot had wrapped. But be not afraid that *Dawn Treader* is going the dreaded conversion route, insists Johnson: "This is *not* one of those rush jobs – we've had a decent amount of time to get it right. But I'd also be lying if I said we were done and I knew exactly how I felt about it yet..."

If *Narnia's* new alliance can prove the naysayers wrong, Fox and Walden will still have four books left to play with. Since it follows in Lewis' chronology and brings Eustace back as the main character, *The Silver Chair* is the next contender, which makes *Dawn Treader* the final bow for all the young Pevensies. While Henley intends to continue acting, Keynes has just started a degree in Arabic and Islamic history at Cambridge and isn't sure he'll ever return to the big screen: "I have four years to decide what to do with my life. Other things may come up..."

Even if *Dawn Treader* does become a success story, Apted doesn't expect he'll be returning to Narnia either. "It's going to take years to do the next film – they haven't even started writing it," says the filmmaker, who for now just lives in hope that he has indeed reclaimed the wonder. "You'll be the judge of whether I did it but that was always the intent..." **TF**

The Chronicles Of Narnia: The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader opens on 9 December.



Re-tread Three other franchises that ducked and dived...

JAMES BOND
After Connerly's six-film run as 007, Bond honchos decided to replace him with George Lazenby for *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. His charisma-free turn so unsettled the franchise that EON were soon clawing back the magic with a return to Connerly in *Diamonds Are Forever*.



SUPERMAN
Supes started off at Warner Bros with director Richard Donner but he was dismissed half-way through the sequel to make way for Richard Lester. Lester made *Superman III* and *Supergirl* before the franchise was flogged to Cannon Films. Result? *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace*. Oh dear.



SCARY MOVIE
The Wayans brothers may have originated the horror spoofs but after two outings they slung their hooks and left the franchise to Dimension Films. Creative team required to cash in? Clearly not – the series has reaped four inexplicable hits and there are three more in development.

