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Hollywood's new heroes are from Britain, Canada, Australia — where have all the young Yanks gone, asks Matt Mueller

In Avengers Assemble, you can see a clutch of America's finest actors gathered together for some biceps-flexing, world-salvaging heroics. Catch them while you can if you like your Hollywood heroes home-grown: the rest of 2012 is a scorched landscape for American leads.

This summer, Will Smith and Channing Tatum will be flying the flag in Men in Black 3 and GI Joe: Retaliation, but Ridley Scott has assembled a UN collective for Prometheus, from Ireland's Michael Fassbender and Hackney's Idris Elba to Sweden's Noomi Rapace as a Ripley-style heroine. Australia's Chris Hemsworth, reprising Thor in Avengers Assemble (the only non-Yankee in the group) will bring woody valour to Snow White and the Huntsman; Britons Christian Bale and Andrew Garfield will slug it out for the summer box-office crown in The Dark Knight Rises and The Amazing Spider-Man. Even the headliners you assume are American — Taylor Kitsch, Ryan Gosling, Ryan Reynolds — turn out to be from Canada. You have to wonder: where have all the young Yanks gone? Is Hollywood's heartland running dry of talent?

When Sony and Marvel pressed the restart button on Spider-Man, they flung their casting web far and wide, seeking what Marvel's chief executive, Avi Arad, calls "a new flavour" — a younger, grittier, skinnier wall-crawler, basically. Enter Andrew Garfield. A decade ago, when the American Tobey Maguire was cast as Spidey, his chief rivals

were his fellow countrymen Freddie Prinze Jr, Chris Klein and Wes Bentley. Arad itemises the factors that tipped the balance in Garfield's favour: "terrific acting", "athletic ability", "off-the-wall chemistry" with his co-star Emma Stone and a lifelong passion for the geek-hero. He recalls how the actor sent a photo of himself as a boy, dressed as Spider-Man, standing beside his brother as Superman. "He just fits the bill best right now," the Israeli-born mogul says.

"In all fairness, many of the young American actors who auditioned are becoming big stars in other movies. But every so often, you get lucky — a guy walks into the room and you start whispering to each other. If he does a bad job, maybe they'll say, 'Why did they hire an English actor?' If he does a good job, nobody cares. It's a good thing the world is becoming borderless when it comes to talent."

Having hired the Australian Hugh Jackman in the late 1990s to play Wolverine in X-Men, Marvel has always brought a border-blindness to casting (though they apparently drew the line at Captain America, launching a nationwide search before settling on Chris Evans, from Massachusetts).

"The world is flat — it has been for a while," remarks Joel Lubin, co-head of CAA's motion-picture talent department and Garfield's American agent. "This openness towards overseas talent has been around for some time, but you're seeing more movies designed to be franchises." What Lubin means

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From left, Chris Hemsworth (Australia), Taylor Kitsch (Canada), Christian Bale (UK), Andrew Garfield (UK), Ryan Gosling (Canada), Ryan Reynolds (Canada) and Henry Cavill (UK)

nywhere but America

is that it doesn't take a lifelong steeping in Americana to portray these franchise heroes, because they are being forged from universal ore. The struggle for pride and identity, geeks inheriting the earth with godlike superpowers, humanity's endless tussle with dark and light – it's soul-stirring mythology that anyone with the power of rational thought can tap into. "The whole appeal of Spider-Man is that there are Peter Parkers everywhere, in every culture," Arad notes.

As the ratio of franchise blockbusters to studio movies keeps rising, so the number of films Hollywood produces each year goes down. You don't need to be a Cern scientist to work out that this means fewer lead roles for actors to fight over, and a need for a greater willingness to wear spandex in the ones that are left. It's a pincer movement that has squeezed the middle-range projects that were once the proud domain of homespun stars such as Kevin Costner, Chris O'Donnell and, latterly, Tom Hanks into near extinction. And it has changed television from a refuge for waning film stars into a safe haven for actors seeking monthly pay cheques and textured, long-running characters they can really sink their teeth into. That's a reality that British actors have been cottoning on to for years, with the added bonus that, in a post-Clooney world, TV can now be a springboard back to movies.

Are non-American actors inherently better at giving super-heroes and hunks some character complexity? You might think so if you just looked at Bale's Batman and Jackman's Wolverine. Factor in, too, the failure of Ben Affleck's Daredevil, Brandon Routh's Superman and the Stars and stripes-draped Watchmen, and

there's a temptation to use it as evidence that Americans aren't travelling that well outside the homeland. But it's obviously not that simple. Ewan McGregor made a wan Obi-Wan, Australia's Eric Bana sucked the life out of Hulk and, while he has two Avatars banked, nobody is predicting a Russell Crowe or Jackman-like career for another Aussie, Sam Worthington, after two charisma-defying performances as Perseus in the Titans films. Even Daniel Craig's magnetism hit a wall in *Cowboys & Aliens*.

So, if it isn't the case that non-American actors are simply superior, why are they everywhere you look? Marcia Ross, who headed the Walt Disney Company's feature-film casting department for 16 years, has a more prosaic explanation: they are just easier to access now. "The internet has changed casting so profoundly," says Ross, who gave Heath Ledger his break in *10 Things I Hate About You*, and

'Nobody is handed these jobs just because they came from another country. Everybody has to go through the same rigorous process'

Cavill his first Hollywood role, in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. "Years ago, you didn't see these people unless you went to the theatre in London. Now you can see anybody you want, any time. Everybody self-tapes, at home, on the set, in their agent's office. If I want to see an actor, I can email an agent anywhere in the world and, 24 hours later, I'm watching their audition. It has broadened the talent pool enormously."

That works both ways. Arad recalls getting British "luminaries" for bargain-basement prices up to 10 years ago, but today's hot young things from overseas arrive with Hollywood agents, managers and attorneys already in place. "Everybody gets it," Ross says. If American actors feel put out by the invasion – "and I suspect some do", she says – as long as jets fly and emails ping, it won't get any easier for them. So buck up, boys.

"I say to actors all the time, 'Nobody can take a job from you,'" Ross continues. "If somebody doesn't get something, they're just not the right person at the right time. Nobody is handed these jobs just because they came from another country. Everybody has to go through the same rigorous process, and the best person, or the right person, or a combination of the right and the best, gets the part."

So take heart, Statesiders. Next year, you will have partial revenge when Armie Hammer rides as *The Lone Ranger* and Chris Pine regaining warp speed as *Captain Kirk*. Riding right beside them, however, will be Britain's finest: Elba, monster-bashing in *Pacific Rim*; Nicholas Hoult, titan-slaying in *Jack the Giant Killer*; and Cavill, unfurling his red cape as a retro-flavoured Superman. **Q**

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