

Rich VISION

F Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece of the Jazz Age is vividly reimagined in the long-awaited film from Baz Luhrmann *BY MATT MUELLER*

Hollywood has always been fond of big gambles, but in a multiplex age dominated by superhero-fronted blockbusters, a \$125m adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* still qualifies as a colossal risk. Which is why Baz Luhrmann's take on F Scott Fitzgerald's beloved seminal novel of roaring-'20s excess and tragic love will be no ordinary adaptation, but one steeped in the director's distinctly flamboyant style. For one, Luhrmann has filmed his version in 3D; for another, he's invited the likes of Prince and Lady Gaga to write songs for the soundtrack. At least it will have a suitably glitzy launch pad: *The Great Gatsby* has been selected to open this year's Cannes Film Festival.

Carey Mulligan had never read the novel, first published in 1925 and widely hailed as a classic, before she landed an audition for the role of flighty socialite Daisy Buchanan. "I wasn't on the original list of people to be seen, and it was only about three days before the audition that I actually found out I was auditioning," says the British actress. "I read the book, read the pages of the script they sent over and then jumped on a plane, flew to New York and was in a room auditioning with Leonardo DiCaprio." She pauses and laughs. "I think I was lucky it all happened so quickly. If I'd had any longer to think about it, it would have been overwhelming."

The role of Daisy, Fitzgerald's most memorable female character, was coveted by a number of high-profile actresses. British actress Rebecca Hall workshopped Luhrmann's script with the film's male leads, Leonardo DiCaprio and Tobey Maguire – who play, respectively, the enigmatic millionaire Gatsby and his neighbour, Nick Carraway – while Amanda Seyfried, Natalie Portman, Scarlett Johansson and Keira Knightley were all under consideration for the part of Daisy. Reading Fitzgerald's prose, it's easy to understand why Gatsby obsesses over this vain, beautiful woman, but also why she comes to epitomise the emptiness of the American Dream. It's no easy task for an actress, even one as talented as Mulligan.

"Daisy is quickly villainised for the way that she behaves in the novel, but I always had to empathise with the fact that she was a product of her time, a woman in the 1920s encouraged to marry for wealth," Mulligan says. "She was a debutante; she was brought into society and married one of the richest men in the country. Well, of course she would do that. She'd had this brief love affair with Gatsby, who had lied about who he was and then disappeared, and she was left with what? With



ABOVE Leonardo DiCaprio as Jay Gatsby and Carey Mulligan as Daisy Buchanan

people wanting her. And she chose Tom. It's not the most romantic path, but it's the one she would have been encouraged to choose."

Landmark literature typically suffers in translation to the big screen, and previous filmmakers have floundered in their efforts to capture the brilliance of Fitzgerald's Long Island fable. The 1974 version starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow is the most famous, but is often considered shallow and listless in comparison with the book. There was also a 1926 silent movie, a forgotten 1949 adaptation starring Alan Ladd, and even a 2002 film, called *G*, that turned Gatsby into a modern-day hip-hop mogul.

While Luhrmann has kept the Jazz Age setting, his version may be the most radical yet. His extravagant take on *The Great Gatsby* will undoubtedly be a visual feast, while his fairly radical notion to shoot in 3D will test the storytelling limits of the technology that now dominates the Hollywood blockbuster realm but has yet to encroach on adult dramas.

While Mulligan faced brutal competition to win her role, Maguire and DiCaprio essentially came as a package. Having known each other since they were struggling young actors, Maguire says it was DiCaprio's suggestion that he play striving narrator Nick. He relished the opportunity to portray the strange, contrived friendship between the two men with his good friend. "It's great, because he's my buddy, but he's also an actor I really appreciate," Maguire says. "I loved watching his process ▶



FROM LEFT Tobey Maguire as Nick Carraway, Leonardo DiCaprio as Jay Gatsby, Carey Mulligan as Daisy Buchanan and Joel Edgerton as Tom Buchanan; BELOW LEFT & RIGHT On set in Sydney

“[The sets] were spectacular, but they were full of incredible details, too, which would unfold in the storytelling”

She’s got such a clear idea of how things should look, not just on the character but also within the flow of the film.” Brooks Brothers created suits for DiCaprio and the other male leads, while Miuccia Prada collaborated with Martin on a flapper-style gown that Daisy wears to one of Gatsby’s lavish parties. “We called that the ‘chandelier dress,’” Mulligan laughs. “After a couple of takes, I’d have to have it taken off because it would weigh down on my shoulders. But it was really wonderful.”

The question remains whether audiences will embrace the film; will anyone worry if Luhrmann has failed to capture the essence of the time and place that Fitzgerald conveyed so magnificently? The director has stated his interest in giving the story modern resonances, saying he wants to make its critique of the irresponsible lifestyles of the wealthy more overt. He has recruited musical impresario Jay-Z to create what will surely be an anachronistic soundtrack that, if nothing else, will blast this version of the story into the present.

“Baz has done some very surprising things with this,” Maguire says. “I have yet to see the final version, but I think it will all make perfect sense in terms of interpreting the material. It’s going to be incredible.” ■

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The Great Gatsby opens on 17th May in the UK



and getting to jump into scenes with him. There was a comfort there, where we felt like we would talk honestly to each other.”

A question sometimes posed about Fitzgerald’s narrative is why Nick becomes as fascinated as he does with the secretive Gatsby. But Maguire believes his character “ends up feeling real affection for him. Gatsby invites him into his world, and that’s incredibly seductive for Nick.

But, ultimately, he comes to realise that as close as you feel to Gatsby,

and as engaging and inclusive as he is, you will still never be able to know him.”

Although primarily a doomed romance, *The Great Gatsby* is also about the decadence of a privileged lifestyle. Despite being a quintessential story of 1920s New York, Luhrmann shot the film back in his native Australia, in conjunction with his wife, Oscar-winning production and costume designer Catherine Martin. Both Maguire and Mulligan admit they felt dazzled walking onto Martin’s sets, particularly those built for the Buchanan and Gatsby mansions. “Yes, they were spectacular,” Maguire says, “but they were full of incredible details, too, which would unfold in the storytelling.”

The period costumes are another crucial part of the film’s aesthetic, especially Daisy’s gowns. “Everything that I wore, I loved,” Mulligan says. “Catherine’s wonderful.



Film stills, from top: Alamy; Rex Features (2)