

# HELLFIRE AND DAMNATION

Words: NICK DE SEMLYEN

**A HERO WITH HALF A FACE. A VILLAIN WITH MAGIC CANNONBALLS. THE DIRECTOR OF HORTON HEARS A WHO!. EMPIRE REVEALS THE WEIRD, WILD STORY BEHIND JONAH HEX, THIS SUMMER'S MOST TROUBLED MOVIE**



Jonah Hex (Josh Brolin): A new brand of hero?



**J**OSH BROLIN HAS AN IMPORTANT DECISION TO MAKE. IT'S SUMMER 2008, AND AFTER TWO DECADES OF PLAYING SECOND-BIT ROLES IN THE LIKES OF HOLLOW MAN AND INTO THE BLUE, THE CHARMING CALIFORNIAN HAS FINALLY BEEN

boosted to the A list. People are still raving about his lead performance in *No Country For Old Men*, while heavyweight biopics *W.* and *Milk* are prepping for release. Brolin's thoughts turn to the stack of scripts he's been sent and his crucial next move.

One catches his eye. Titled *Jonah Hex*, it's based on a DC comic-book series, set in the late 19th century, and centres around a mysterious Western gunslinger with horrendous facial scars. He reads it. He hates it. He considers his other options, which include a Tony Scott thriller, New Line's *Escape From New York* remake, and a collaboration with British ads wunderkind Johnny Green. Strangely, though, his thoughts keep turning back to *Jonah Hex*. He gives the script another go. And decides, again, that it's one of the worst things he's ever been sent.

Why in tarnation, then, in April 2009, is *Empire* standing on the set of *Jonah Hex*, talking to a poncho'd Josh Brolin?

"At first I didn't respond to it, but something about the premise resonated within me," he recalls. "I thought, 'It's a schlock piece right now, but it doesn't have to be. What if I get a bunch of amazing actors together? What if we get an interesting director that nobody expects? What if we put this together in a different way? It doesn't have to be so lame and obvious.' That was my idea."

One he may yet come to regret.

**T**HE MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA HAS AWARDED THE FINAL CUT OF *JONAH HEX* A PG-13 RATING, "FOR INTENSE SEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE AND ACTION, DISTURBING IMAGES AND SEXUAL CONTENT." IN AN ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE, THAT WOULD HAVE

been an R, "For full-frontal nudity, decapitations, exploding eyeballs and frequent canine urination." This is because the original draft — the one that so appalled Brolin — was written by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, the insaniacs behind extreme action franchise *Crank*. And, having read it, *Empire* can confirm it's every bit as twisted (the opening scene features a crow eating a man's brain) as you'd expect from the duo who have previously electrocuted Jason Statham's testicles and got Gerard Butler to piss into a car's petrol tank.

Taking control of the project (though without a producer credit), Brolin was determined to inject some gravitas. Out went the dog-pissing and other outré elements, and with them Neveldine and Taylor, who'd also been set to direct. His next move was to draft in some heavyweight thespians. He rang up old friend John Malkovich, convincing him to play the villain, cane-twirling Confederate general Quentin Turnbull — whose dastardly scheme involves launching an attack on the US Capitol. Then he asked Michael Fassbender, who had so impressed him in *Hunger* and with whom he shared an agent, to step in as Turnbull's twisted henchman, Burke.

One thing eluded Brolin, though: that "interesting director that >>

**"I'M ALL TWISTED UP... FOR 12 TO 16 HOURS I CAN ONLY HAVE WATER AND PROTEIN SHAKES... I DON'T KNOW IF I'D DO IT AGAIN."**

**JOSH BROLIN**



JONAH HEX



**BRIEFING**  
**JONAH HEX**

**Released:** September 3  
**Director:** Jimmy Hayward  
**Starring:** Josh Brolin, John Malkovich, Megan Fox, Michael Fassbender, Will Arnett, Michael Shannon  
**Based on:** The DC Comics character who first appeared in the early '70s All-Star Western series.  
**Story:** Horrifiably scarred bounty hunter Jonah Hex (Brolin) is out to get vengeance on General Quentin Turnbull (Malkovich), and also stop him from destroying Washington, D.C. with a secret WMD.

Lilah (Megan Fox) and Hex hang out.

nobody expects". He set up meetings with several big names, including Danny Boyle, but no dice. Then came an email.

"I got this thing in my inbox," he says, "and it really moved me. This guy was almost adolescently passionate, but seemed to have the technical proficiency to pull this thing off. I thought, 'I know the studio's gonna think it's crazy, but who cares?'"

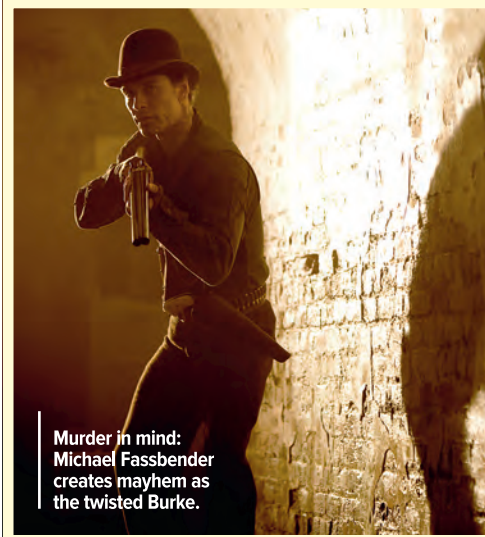
That "crazy" choice? A man seemingly as far as can be from Nevelidine and Taylor. A man named Jimmy Hayward. A man who made Horton Hears A Who!.

"If you knew me," Hayward pre-emptively protests, when we catch up with him that same night, "you'd think I did Jonah Hex, not Horton Hears A Who!." He may have a point — even on first glance there's little to associate this figure with an animated film about an excitable elephant. Tonight he's wearing an all-black ensemble, his T-shirt half-covering several tattoos. "I've been a Jonah Hex fan since I was a kid," he continues, "so in my email I just listed everything I loved about him. The next day, the phone rang and this gruff voice

up, with the addition of Megan Fox as Jonah's prostitute girlfriend, Lilah. "I watched her being interviewed on TV one day, and I saw so much pain," says Brolin. "There's something broken in her, y'know, and I wanted to be the guy who tries to utilise that in a film." With a bit of persuasion, and with the proviso that Lilah would be toughened up, Fox signed on.

**P**RE-PRODUCTION HAD BEEN ROUGH, BUT THINGS WERE ABOUT TO GET MUCH ROUGHER. WHEN WE MEET BROLIN, IT'S ON A HORRIBLY HUMID THURSDAY NIGHT IN A SWAMP SOUTH OF NEW ORLEANS.

He's dripping with sweat and exhausted, repeatedly attempting a tomahawk-throwing stunt gag. His sapped concentration might be due to the distractions of the bayou — the dive-bombing mosquitoes, the alligators splashing nearby — or perhaps the three-hour make-up job he has to endure each morning to recreate the comic-book hero's mangled face >>



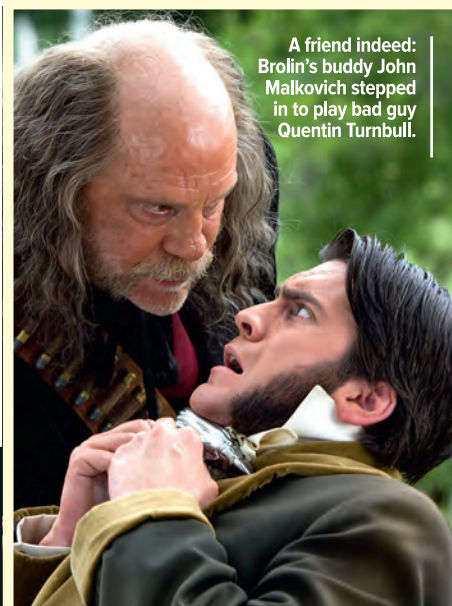
Murder in mind: Michael Fassbender creates mayhem as the twisted Burke.

said, 'Horton Hears A Who!, huh?' But Josh and I ended up talking for an hour-and-a-half. We realised we were both into motorcycles, skateboarding, surfing. And once we'd met up, that was it. We were making a movie."

Well, almost. First there was a rewrite job for Hayward, relocating the climax from a fortress to an ironclad battleship, while stripping away the script's saltier dialogue: "One of the first things Brolin said to me was, 'Jimmy, I'm not into all the fuckin' cuss language.'"

**"ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS BROLIN SAID TO ME WAS, 'JIMMY, I'M NOT INTO ALL THE FUCKIN' CUSS LANGUAGE...'"**

**JIMMY HAYWARD, DIRECTOR**



A friend indeed: Brolin's buddy John Malkovich stepped in to play bad guy Quentin Turnbull.

**Double (And Triple And Quadruple...) Visions**

Four directors worked on Jonah Hex at one stage or another. So are multiple helmers a good sign or bad? We do the sums...

**Sum 1**  
**OLIVER HIRSCHBIEGEL**  
+ **JAMES McTEIGUE**  
= **THE INVASION (2007)**

**Sum 2**  
**GEORGE CUKOR**  
+ **VICTOR FLEMING**  
+ **SAM WOOD**  
= **GONE WITH THE WIND (1939)**

**Sum 3**  
**WALTER HILL (as THOMAS LEE)**  
+ **FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA**  
+ **JACK SHOLDER**  
= **SUPERNOVA (2000)**

**Sum 4**  
**NORMAN TAUROG**  
+ **RICHARD THORPE**  
+ **GEORGE CUKOR**  
+ **VICTOR FLEMING**  
+ **KING VIDOR**  
= **THE WIZARD OF OZ (1939)**

**Sum 5**  
**VAL GUEST**  
+ **KEN HUGHES**  
+ **JOHN HUSTON**  
+ **JOSEPH McGRATH**  
+ **ROBERT PARRISH**  
+ **RICHARD TALMADGE**  
= **CASINO ROYALE (1966)**



JONAH HEX

**“I SAW MEGAN BEING INTERVIEWED AND I SAW SO MUCH PAIN. THERE’S SOMETHING BROKEN IN HER, AND I WANTED TO UTILISE THAT.”**

**JOSH BROLIN**

(damage inflicted by Turnbull in a previous adventure).

“I’m all twisted up,” he admits. “I have to eat as much as I can when I wake up, because for the next 12 to 16 hours I can only have water and protein shakes. Then the 100-degree heat, 98 per cent humidity, three layers of wool on... I don’t know if I’d do it again.”

Even the end of the day doesn’t bring much relief, as cast and crew accommodation is slap-bang in the middle of the 24-hour madness that is New Orleans. “People are completely insane here. You’ll be trying to sleep and someone will start cranking a music box outside your window. It’s an amazing town, but it never ends. Put it this way: Mickey Rourke was in town shooting *The Expendables* and he texted me saying, ‘I’ve gotta get out of here!’ He was here for four days — we’re here for 11 weeks!”

And when Mickey Rourke flees for the hills, you know you’re in trouble.

At this point, Brolin may have been wishing he’d gone for the Tony Scott thriller. And, frankly, that could still be the case. As *Jonah Hex* headed into post, the mosquitoes were replaced by an equally relentless irritant: online bloggers. Possibly no other film released this summer has had such stinky press. The decision to schedule additional

days of filming resulted in online yells of, “Reshoots!”, while the news that *Constantine* director Francis Lawrence was coming on board as “consultant” led to claims that Hayward had been locked out of his own edit suite. Claims those involved have strenuously denied.

The final bad break came in May, with the shock departure of Megan Fox from the *Transformers* franchise, only weeks before *Hex*’s release. Depending on who you believe, Fox was dismissed because of an insulting comparison she drew between Michael Bay and Hitler in an interview, because her solo vehicle *Jennifer’s Body* had flopped, or because she’d lost too much weight for Bay’s liking. Whatever the case, it was spun into yet more bad *Hex* buzz.

Finally, on Friday, June 18, the punk-rock Western was released in US cinemas. Reviews were almost universally poor to the point of scathing, many focusing on the extraordinarily brief running time of 83 minutes (“You cringe at the thought of how awful whatever ended up on the cutting-room floor must be,” said David Germain of the *Associated Press*) and the quality of the special effects. The opening-weekend box office was equally disappointing, the film managing only \$5 million. (Original directors Neveldine and Taylor, while supportive of the project during production, tweeted, “JH: box office karma” on the Monday, though it has since been removed.) *Hex*, it seems, may have been hexed from the start.

As for Brolin, he’s remained stoic through all the ups and downs — while his bid for an action franchise has failed, *Wall Street 2* is in the bag and a plum part in *Men In Black 3* awaits. Will *Hex*’s failure affect his decisions next time he sits down to pick a script? Not likely. This is, remember, the star who’s covered his matinee-idol looks with *Latex* on both occasions he’s headlined a Hollywood film. There seems to be something in his DNA that forces him to choose the hardest path.

“I love that we’re the underdog,” he told *Empire* on set. “The whole thing was a major risk — and that’s why I like it.”  
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**Rough diamond:** Fox joined the project on the condition love-interest Lilah toughened up.



Fassbender enjoys a joke on set. Malkovich doesn’t get it.

**Jonah Hex is out on September 3 and will be reviewed in the next issue.**