Die Hard's director. Lethal Weapon's writer. And The Terminator himself. Last Action Hero should have been bulletproof. Instead, it brought a studio to its knees, sent its cast and crew insane and proved, really quite conclusively, that some movies are not...

TOO BIG TO FAIL

Words: **Nick de Semlyen**

THE SUMMER OF 1993

was a bad time for Rainier Wolfcastle. One of The Simpsons' most beloved minor characters, the Austrian action star is famed for co-owning Planet Springfield (along with "Chuck Norris, Johnny Carson's third wife and the Russian Mafia"), and headlining the McBain franchise, which includes such entries as McBain IV: Fatal Discharge and McBain VI: You Have The Right To Remain Dead. But Wolfcastle's lowest ebb is documented in classic episode The Boy Who Knew Too Much, as Bart Simpson spots him at a party.

"Hey, McBain, I'm a big fan, but your last movie really sucked," complains Bart.

"I know," sighs the musclebound A-lister. "There were script issues from day one."

"I'll say," chips in Chief Wiggum. "Magic ticket my ass, McBain!"

Rainier turns to his wife, shoulders slumped. "Maria, my mighty heart is breaking. I'll be in the Humvee..."

Wolfcastle is, of course, not real (and neither, sadly, is his movie I Shoot Your Face Again), but for the actual, non-yellow person he's based on, there would have been nothing funny about this exchange whatsoever. With his own tale of a magic ticket that, yes, had script issues from day one, Arnold Schwarzenegger had just suffered his first devastating flop and a production process so agonising it's become Hollywood legend. Friends became enemies. Vaults of cash went up in smoke. And Danny DeVito voiced a cartoon cat. The creation of Last Action Hero is the horror story that development executives whisper around campfires to this day.

"The weird thing is that The Simpsons inspired it in the first place," remembers Zak

"LAST ACTION HERO WAS THE WORST TIME I'VE EVER HAD IN THIS BUSINESS."

JOHN McTIERNAN

Penn, co-writer of the first draft. "We thought, 'If this show can destroy genres even as it embraces them, why can't we do it in live action?' But somewhere along the way, the movie got lost. And nobody came out smelling like a rose."

PENN AND ADAM LEFF, two young graduates of Connecticut's Wesleyan University, loved action movies. So in 1991 they decided to write an ambitious script, titled Extremely Violent, which would work both as a deconstruction of the genre and a kick-ass romp in its own right.

"The basic idea was: wouldn't it be cool if a kid got sucked into a silly action movie and used his knowledge of the genre to subvert all the clichés?" explains Penn. "We dubbed it Reverse Purple Rose after we realised it was the opposite of Woody Allen's Purple Rose Of Cairo, where a character comes out of the screen into the real world."

For research, the pair visited their local videostore. "We rented every action movie we could think of and made a checklist. Does the second-most evil bad guy die before or after the most evil bad guy? Does the hero have a Vietnam buddy? It was fun, although watching Steven Seagal movies one after another can be soul-crushing."

Extremely Violent, which can be found online, lives up to its name. In the opening sequence, invincible cop Arno Slater takes on a horde of hitmen in LA's Beverly Center, blowing them away with a laser-sighted hand-cannon while merrily dispensing one-liners such as, "Shopping can be hell." The twist is, all this is revealed to be a trailer for a movie within the movie. Later, after the teenage hero has been yanked into the actual film, he uses his knowledge of the story's beats to help Arno through the mayhem.

The script found a champion in Chris Moore, now a producer of such films as The Adjustment Bureau and the American Pie series, but back in 1991 an up-and-coming agent. "I saw it as a modern-day Wizard Of Oz," Moore recalls. "The kid has a problem with his family. His father has left and he's not getting on with his mom. And instead of getting whisked away to Oz, he does what most kids today would want to do, which is to escape into a movie."

He wasn't the only fan. Penn and Leff watched agog as a bidding war unfolded, with Sony-operated studio Columbia Pictures ultimately prevailing by plonking down $350,000. More miraculous still, it attracted the attention of the star who had inspired Arno Slater in the first place: Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"We never thought we'd actually *get* Arnold," says Penn. "We were just two guys sitting in my apartment, thinking maybe someone would read it and get the reference. When we heard he wanted to do it, Adam and I looked at each other like, 'This is *insane*.'"

It seemed their dream was coming true. But it was about to curdle into a nightmare. Hot off the success of Terminator 2: Judgment Day, Schwarzenegger was in no hurry to make a commitment. As well as Extremely Violent, he was considering a family comedy called Sweet Tooth, in which he would play the tooth fairy. Columbia top brass, desperate to bag the world's biggest star, met with Schwarzenegger at his Santa Monica restaurant, Schatzi, where he

puffed on a Romeo y Julieta Cuban cigar, sipped schnapps and explained that while he loved the concept — "Having a kid come into a movie awakens certain fantasies I had as a kid in Austria, like sitting on a horse with John Wayne" — the script wasn't "executed professionally". He also had concerns about Extremely Violent's extreme violence.

To their dismay, Penn and Leff were swiftly dismissed from the project. Then, at Schwarzenegger's suggestion, Columbia called in Hollywood's hottest scribe. Shane Black's first script, Lethal Weapon, had launched a lucrative franchise; his latest, The Last Boy Scout, had netted him an incredible $1.75 million. He also had history with Schwarzenegger, having played a commando alongside him in Predator.

"The irony is that we'd gone to the MPAA library and read all of Shane's scripts," says Penn. "We were big fans of his — he was the Elmore Leonard of action movies. So it was this surreal moment of, 'We're parodying this guy, and now he's been hired to rewrite us.' It was just a strange, strange occurrence."

To Black, who took a break from Iron Man 3 pre-production to talk to **Empire** for this article, it looked like easy work. "Me and my partner, David Arnott, were to take this very small script, where not a lot happens, and beef it up into a summer movie, with a lot of set-ups and pay-offs and reversals. Zak seemed to think that we ruined his script, but I was actually quite fond of what we came up with. We had a silly gag where Slater reaches up, grabs a scratch on the film and stabs a villain with it. I know Columbia told us at the time that they were very happy with it. But then, abruptly, things changed."

Black attributes the sudden chill to the hiring of John McTiernan, the man behind action classics Die Hard and Predator, as director. "McTiernan had made a lot of hits, so the studio said, 'Let him do what he wants.' And we watched as John rewrote the whole thing. I have a lot of fondness for John. He's an interesting guy with a lot to say. He just wasn't keen on the things we'd written."

Watching from the sidelines, the original writers became more and more anxious. "We always thought it would be someone like Robert Zemeckis or John Landis directing," says Penn. "Someone with a history of pulling genres apart. I like Shane and I like John McTiernan — I wouldn't have watched all their movies so many times if I didn't. But I do think it's easier for someone from the outside to mock the conventions of action movies than it is for the people who created them in the first place."

STRESS LEVELS WERE rising fast on the project now called Last Action Hero, with Penn alleging that Black hung up on him during a phone call and Schwarzenegger still unhappy with the story. Before long, Black and Arnott were themselves fired and the increasingly choppy script sent to legendary writer William Goldman, who was paid an eye-watering $1 million for four weeks' work.

"Back in those days, that kind of thing was an insurance policy for keeping your job at an executive level," says Black. "A script would be questionable and the trembling executive would give it to a famous writer with a million bucks, so he could say, 'Yeah, it's fortified now. We've given it vitamins. Wait, wait, wait... It needs the woman's touch. Give it to Carrie Fisher!' It just made people breathe easier, throwing money at this enormous behemoth. Even if the movie sucked, now they could say, 'It's not our fault.'"

As well as Fisher and Goldman, several other script doctors, including The Hunt For Red October's Larry Ferguson, made nips and tucks. The projectionist of Danny's favourite cinema went from demonic villain to kindly old man; a scene in which dozens of iconic movie villains invade the real world was added, then deleted; even Slater's forename changed from Arno to Jack. Also new was a climactic premiere set-piece, where Slater — having escaped from his movie Jack Slater IV — would meet the real Schwarzenegger, the star sending himself up as a nitwit who won't stop plugging Planet Hollywood.

But the more money Columbia threw at the script, the more problematic it became. Late one night, a desperate McTiernan called Black, asking him to take a look at the action sequences. "I declined," says Black. "We'd been fired and now they wanted us to fix up the explosions and helicopter scenes? I considered it an insult to my professional pride."

Despite all this backstage brouhaha, in August 1992, Last Action Hero finally got its star and its green light. Any fears Columbia may have felt were swept under the rug — after all, with a $15 million fee for Schwarzenegger and a budget set for $60 million, it was fast becoming the most expensive film in Hollywood history. Studio chairman Mark Canton declared to the *LA Times* that, "Next summer is the season that will make me or break me. This is the big one. This is the best thing I've ever done." Plans were rushed into action for Last Action Hero video-games, a line of Mattel toys, a $20 million Burger King campaign and a hard-rock soundtrack. And, in what would prove to be a fatal move, the event picture's release date was announced. Whatever went down, it would open on June 18, 1993.

Austin O'Brien, who was cast as Danny after meeting Arnold Schwarzenegger several times, remembers the frantic pace once the shoot got underway at the end of 1992, and the star's micro-management of the tiniest details. "During the first week on set we kept screen-testing cars — Arnold and I would drive around in different vehicles, trying to find an iconic car for Slater. That was such a strange process. I also remember Slater's boots being a really big deal."

Far left: Quick! Shoot the projectionist! Left: Jack Slater (Arnie) smashes a Ford F-100 into a Victoria's Secret shoot. Because. Here: Slater saves the day — and loses the audience.

Schwarzenegger even opened his contacts book, recruiting friends and ex-colleagues. "I was doing ADR for an indie film when I got a call from Arnold," says Robert Patrick, who'd battled him in Terminator 2. "He went, 'Robert, I want you to do the T-1000 cameo you did in Wayne's World for my movie.' I think we even talked money, for Christ's sake. It was just, 'You have to do it for me! You *have* to do it for me!'"

"THE WHOLE THING would have profited from a little more digestion," reflects John McTiernan. "The movie, from the moment the studio said they wanted to do it until it was in the theatres, was nine-and-a-half months. Which was a month too short. In hindsight, we were arrogant, too."

McTiernan is a survivor. The director has been through a lot in the past two decades, from an acrimonious divorce to an ongoing federal case linked to the Anthony Pellicano wiretapping investigation, not to mention the Rollerball remake. So when he describes the final stretch of Last Action Hero as "the worst time I've ever had in this business", you begin to understand the scale of the horror.

To begin with, things went smoothly enough. Early on in the shoot, two reporters from *Premiere* were summoned to the Hyatt Regency »

Long Beach Hotel, where the La Brea tar pits had been recreated at gargantuan expense, complete with giant model dinosaurs. Arnold Schwarzenegger sat shirtless in front of his trailer, eating swordfish and joking about the 'edible' fake tar: "It tastes like mud with fungus in it!" Such was the on-set bonhomie, *Premiere* were told, that the star had played a prank on McTiernan, hiring a stripper for his birthday.

For O'Brien, who was getting to meet Michael Jackson and have Silly String battles with Arnie, it was non-stop fun. "Every day there was something amazing happening: a car flying over a truck or a huge gunfight," he recalls. "And we had a big enough budget that if we blew something up and it didn't look great, we'd do it again!"

Behind closed doors, however, tempers were fraying. During a set visit, Black and Arnott were told by a studio exec to pop into Schwarzenegger's trailer. McTiernan saw it happen and later vented on them, furious, convinced they were conspiring behind his back. "I tried to explain," says Black, "but after that John was just not the same towards us."

Penn was also back on the scene, having been offered a bit part in the film as a police officer. But even this reconciliatory gesture caused more bad blood. "After a couple of weeks, another actor turned to me and said, 'Zak, I hate to tell you this, but if you look at where the camera is, you're never in frame. McTiernan has basically blocked you out of the movie.' You might be able to see my shadow if you look closely. I did laugh about it later, but it was so silly — why didn't they just tell me to go home?"

More seriously, the movie itself was in trouble, with McTiernan struggling to find the right tone. "The head of the studio couldn't decide whether this was an action movie or a kids' movie," the director says now. "I was getting pushed in a lot of directions. When I was sent the script, the thing I liked was that it was wildly irreverent. But that was all getting watered down. And we were just trying to get the damn thing finished." By the final few weeks, he and others were working 18-hour days.

"I do remember that the deeper in we got, John looked more tired, more haggard," says O'Brien. "He was great with me — when we got something right he'd turn into a little kid and start jumping around — but there was one day when I got a sense of how under the gun he was. We'd built a New York skyline inside the studio and I was hanging from a gargoyle, wearing a harness. It was so tight that I literally couldn't breathe, but I was too nervous to say anything and I passed out for a few seconds. People were cutting my clothes off and it got kind of scary. But I do remember McTiernan coming up afterwards and saying, 'In situations like these, I don't care what's happening, you tell me and we'll fix it. Don't be afraid. You haven't done anything wrong, but we cannot afford to stop shooting.'"

Far left: Film Debuts From Hell #5,967 — introducing Mrs. Pete Sampras, aka Bridgette Wilson. Left: Charles Dance's Bond-villain alike, the exotic-sounding, er, Benedict. Here: Arnie with Austin O'Brien — damp squib, anyone?

"THE HARNESS WAS TOO TIGHT. I COULDN'T BREATHE. I PASSED OUT. IT WAS SCARY."
AUSTIN O'BRIEN

IF THE FILMING

schedule had been punishing, fresh hell awaited in the edit suite. A meta action-comedy like Last Action Hero requires precision cutting in order to make the jokes land and the stunts fly. According to McTiernan, he barely had time to unspool the reels. "It was something like three weeks from the end of shooting to when it was in the theatres," he laments. "Do you know the old joke? The editing department says to Cecil B. DeMille, 'The editors are dropping like flies.' And DeMille says, 'Hire more flies!' We were living that. There are enormous sequences in the film that are literally how it came out of my camera. We cut the heads and tails off, and that's the sequence; it wasn't edited at all."

Black finally patched things up with McTiernan and offered to take a look at the film. But he found it nearly impossible to identify a positive. "It was a mess. There was a movie in »

PUMPING IRONY

All the in-jokes, blow by blow

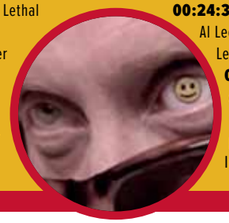
00:01:00 Immediate Die Hard reference in, "One hell of a way to spend Christmas." Plus Frank McRae as a shouty police chief: a role he played in 48 Hrs.

00:08:50 The teacher introducing Olivier's Hamlet to her class (and rolling her eyes at Clash Of The Titans) is Mrs. Laurence Olivier, Joan Plowright.

00:09:50 Arnold plays Hamlet — as did Lethal Weapon star Mel Gibson in 1990.

00:10:45 Danny watching a Road Runner cartoon. Last Action Hero contains many Acme inventions…

00:18:04 "A Franco Columbu film": Franco Columbu is a bodybuilder friend of Schwarzenegger, co-starring in Pumping Iron, with cameos in Stay Hungry, Conan The Barbarian, The Terminator and The Running Man.



00:19:40 It's Charles Dance! A traditional Brit-baddie role (inherited from Die Hard's Alan Rickman, who passed), there are shades of Bond villainy in his idiosyncratic disability — a glass eye.

00:24:00 A black cop bemoans he only has "two days to retirement", while Michael Kamen borrows from his Lethal Weapon score on the soundtrack. Kamen also scored Die Hard.

00:24:30 One of the baddies in the car is Al Leong, who also bad-guyed in both Lethal Weapon and Die Hard.

00:27:50 A car chase through a storm drain, recalling T2 and Grease!

00:31:00 Sharon Stone leaves the police station, in character as Basic Instinct's Catherine Tramell. Shortly after, we see Robert Patrick in full-on T-1000 mode.

00:32:03 The rabbi cop is a nod to Serpico.

00:32:40 "He killed Mozart!": F. Murray Abraham played Salieri in Amadeus.

00:37:14 In the videostore we see a T2 poster that replaces Arnold with Stallone. "He's fantastic; it's the best performance of his career!" says Slater.

00:40:15 Slater can't pronounce Schwarzenegger.

00:40:32 It's Oddjob! Not actually Harold Sakata, but Toru Tanaka, billed as 'Tough Asian Man'.

00:40:56 "I'll be back!"

00:41:30 The first namecheck for The Wizard Of Oz. The first of several, in fact.

00:45:10 "It's her first movie": the same situation for fictional actress Meredith Caprice and the actress playing her, Bridgette Wilson. She's married to tennis legend Pete Sampras, don't you know.

00:46:34 Slater shoots The Ripper off a tall building, but kills his own son in the process. This is actually what happens to the Bonnie Bedelia character in the Roderick Thorp novel that Die Hard is based on.

00:55:10 Danny takes to two wheels and riffs on E. T. in the process.

00:57:20 The Twilight Zone is playing on a telly.

00:59:05 House explodes in the Hollywood Hills: an identical shot is in The Last Boy Scout which, like Last Action Hero, was written by Shane Black. He also wrote Lethal Weapon and appeared in Predator.

01:07:28 Abraham makes the Bond-villain mistake of explaining his plans for far too long.

01:12:57 Arnold/helicopter face-off. See also: T2.

01:15:29 Dinosaurs! A nod to Last Action Hero's 1993 summer rival, Jurassic Park.

01:23:45 A spoken reference to the end of Die Hard, and a lift from its score on the soundtrack.

01:31:06 Danny's Mom tells Slater that he looks uncannily like Arnold Schwarzenegger but is obviously more intelligent.

01:32:17 Spoken reference to Witness.

01:34:00 Charles Dance colouring in an ad for Coppola's Dracula. He doesn't seem interested in Sleepwalkers. Wise.

01:36:18 "Make my day" (Sudden Impact) and "I'm your worst nightmare" (48 Hrs).

01:36:56 Schwarzenegger and wife Maria Shriver on the red carpet for Jack Slater IV premiere. Shriver scolds Arnie for plugging "the restaurant" (Planet Hollywood, a venture between Arnie, Stallone, Demi Moore and Bruce Willis).

01:37:00 Little Richard is a red-carpet guest. His Long Tall Sally backs a classic scene in Predator.

01:37:45 Arnold: "In this movie, we only kill 48 people. In the last one, we killed 119."

01:39:14 James Belushi rocks the red carpet. He starred with Arnold in Red Heat.

01:39:40 Total Recall poster in background.

01:39:56 More red carpet. Damon Wayans is in Shane Black's The Last Boy Scout. Plus baffling Chevy Chase cameo.

01:40:02 Yet more red carpet: this time it's fellow action hero and fired Predator, Jean-Claude Van Damme!

01:40:44 MC Hammer enquires about the soundtrack to Jack Slater V.

01:44:45 Another, "I'll be back".

01:45:00 Rooftop dangling in a rainy New York at night, in an obvious homage to Blade Runner.

01:47:20 Charles Dance threatens to unleash Dracula, King Kong, Freddy Krueger, Hannibal Lecter and, er, Rosemary's Baby.

01:49:06 "No sequel for you!" How very true.

there, struggling to emerge, which would have pleased me. But what they'd made was a jarring, random collection of scenes. The casting of the little boy was one of the absolute misfires of Western culture. Also, they rewrote every line of ours, and I don't like the dialogue they wrote."

Fragments of ideas sit uneasily together on the screen. A fantasy scene where Schwarzenegger's Slater becomes Hamlet and knocks an enemy out with Yorick's skull goes all the way back to Penn and Leff. The Mr. Benedict villain, played by Charles Dance with a range of lurid glass eyes, is a Goldman creation. And the scene where the heroic duo have to dispose of the expired, dynamite-stuffed body of a fat gangster called Leo The Fart is the handiwork of Black and Arnott, who borrowed the idea from Richard S. Prather's murder mystery novel, The Meandering Corpse. "We thought it was a pretty swinging caper, where they gotta go hijack this bodybag. But John didn't shoot the scenes that explained why the dynamite was there," Black notes.

At some point, the simple central idea — that Slater abides in a ridiculous, Lethal Weapon-esque world filled with action-movie clichés — had become disastrously fuzzy. For instance, while the police-station sequence has funny gags about angry police chiefs and mismatched partners, it's cluttered by baffling cameos: a Terminator, Sharon Stone as Basic Instinct's Catherine Tramell, a cartoon cat called Whiskers and, strangest of all, a group of what appear to be space robots.

"There were suddenly all these little in-jokes that worked against the story," says Penn. "It turned into, 'Let's go to a videostore and do a joke about Stallone taking your parts. I don't know about you, but I've never seen a Seagal movie where they go to a videostore." Chris Moore agrees: "It had shot way off to the left of what was originally intended. If there'd been more time, there's a chance someone might have stood up and said, 'What the fuck are you doing with an animated cat?' Something which, from the outside looking in, looks like a decision of somebody using drugs."

Time was the one thing they didn't have. After a disastrous test screening, where one audience member commented that the movie "lay there like a big fried egg", a decision was made to reshoot the ending. Panic set in. But with so much money on the line, Columbia was desperate to maintain a confident face. In fact, it over-compensated, with the most ill-advised publicity blitzkrieg in movie history.

Box-office Death: Ian McKellen reaps the grimness.

"IT WAS A MESS. WHAT THEY'D MADE WAS A JARRING, RANDOM COLLECTION OF SCENES."
SHANE BLACK

Not content with spending a rumoured $750,000 on the trailer, the studio paid a further $500,000 to have the film's name emblazoned on a NASA rocket, trumpeting that, "It's the first time in the history of advertising that a space vehicle has been used." Unfortunately, a glitch meant the launch was delayed until months after the movie's release. The promo curse continued when a 75-foot balloon of Schwarzenegger holding sticks of dynamite was erected in Times Square. Given the recent truck bombing of the North Tower of the World Trade Center on February 26, 1993, it wasn't the most tasteful gesture. The balloon was swiftly and sheepishly deflated.

It all seemed like karmic payback for the incessant *braggadocio*, with Schwarzenegger declaring at Cannes that, "I've turned out another great movie, and the critics have already said it's a great summer hit," and PR wizard Sid Ganis promising, "We're heading for big numbers."

To McTiernan, up to his eyeballs in celluloid, it was just more grief. "I didn't have time to get intimately involved in all the press disasters, but the advertising campaign was terrible. It did seem that if they hadn't overhyped the movie, it would have been a lot easier to sell it. Because it's actually sweet and kind of small in its heart. It isn't Cleopatra. It's the anti-Cleopatra. And if they had come on a little more quietly, it probably would have worked out better for them."

The budget was rocketing and time was running out. Yet an even bigger problem loomed. A problem 65 million years in the making.

STEVEN SPIELBERG'S

last film, Hook, had been a rare dud. It might have been this fact, or just good old-fashioned hubris, that led Canton to underestimate the director's new project, Jurassic Park. When Universal announced that its dinosaurs-on-the-rampage blockbuster would open just a week before Last Action Hero, the Columbia boss refused to push back his own movie, despite the pleas coming from his own camp. "It was insane," laughs Penn. "I rang him up and said, 'I want to see Jurassic Park more than Last Action Hero, and Last Action Hero was my idea!'"

Clockwise from top: Arnie puts the ham in Hamlet; Smug in-jokery with 'The Stallonerlator'; Run for cover, the budget's gonna blow...

"Sheer stupidity" is how McTiernan describes the decision. "I saw Jurassic Park that summer: it's a fabulous movie. But the studio tried to set us against each other, which was an idiotic thing to do. Because we weren't the greatest action movie of all time. We were never supposed to be."

The rivalry became the season's big story. *Time* ran a piece with the headline "The Dinosaur And The Dog"; some papers even reported on the contrast between Jurassic Park's toys, which were selling like they were going extinct, and Last Action Hero's, which were sticking to shelves, perhaps due to Schwarzenegger's insistence that his action figure not be armed.

When Jurassic Park opened to a phenomenal $47 million — "Lizards eat Arnie's lunch!" yelled *Variety* — the already gloomy Columbia lot became, in the words of one employee, "like the Nixon White House in the last days of Watergate". And when Last Action Hero's premiere rolled around, it was a predictably dispiriting affair. Like Jurassic Park's John Hammond, Columbia spared no expense, spending a fortune on recreating Hamlet's Elsinore Castle and dangling a Leo The Fart mannequin from a crane, but it was noticeably sparse on guest stars, despite each arrival being heralded over loudspeaker.

At the lavish afterparty, an elephant lumbered about the room (metaphorically, although you wouldn't have been surprised to see a real one there). "Everyone ate the food and drank the drink and nobody said anything to each other about what they'd sat through," says Black. "It was like, 'Don't talk about the movie, but these are some really good fucking canapés.'" Meanwhile, Penn sat miserably in the corner, at the event that once promised to be the high-point of his career. "It was not a pleasant experience. People kept saying, 'Did you do all those fart jokes?' 'No, no, that wasn't me.' 'Why did you have a kid thrown off a roof in the opening sequence? It made my kid cry.' 'I didn't write that!'"

In the end, the film made $15.3 million during its opening weekend and $137 million worldwide, higher than the tally of that other '90s misfire, Hudson Hawk, but still a huge disappointment.

For Schwarzenegger, it was painful proof of his vincibility — though he'd temporarily bounce back with the business-as-usual True Lies, his action-muscleman heyday was over. "To be rejected so soundly — it sort of broke his heart," says McTiernan. The director himself went into a deep funk, suffering from a uniquely Hollywood strain of PTSD. "That was a crazy time and you get to take a bite at the world as you find it. I'm happy I made it, but we pushed ourselves too far."

At least his friendships survived the experience — just. "After the movie came out, Arnold, John and I went for a beer," remembers Black. "John couldn't get his head around why it had gone so badly, because he knew there were troubles with the film but he was still proud of it. But by the end of the conversation we were getting really excited about the concept of the new Die Hard he was going to do. It was good to see him smile again."

NEARLY TWO DECADES

on, emotions have cooled. Even Penn and Black, who recently crossed paths at the Captain America premiere, no longer want to kill each other in inventive ways. And despite all its flaws, Last Action Hero looks less like a disaster and more like an interesting, very expensive oddity. At least, unlike Hollywood's current torrent of colourless sequels and mindless rehashes, it has ambition to burn. It blazed the trail for more successful genre parodies, like Edgar Wright's Hot Fuzz and Black's own Kiss Kiss Bang Bang. And Moore even harbours an ambition to one day remake it: "I'm sure you'll put that in your article, I'll get fucked out of it and some Sony producer will be shooting it next week."

All involved agree that the movie marked the end of an era of rampant Tinseltown excess. "In a way, it was the last of the smug big movies," says Black. "Maybe Michael Bay's are still this way, but there's a smugness to Last Action Hero — a celebration of spending money in itself."

Moore goes further. "It was a historical moment, where so many people saw this craziness unfold that it created an embarrassment and a ripple effect in the business. Somebody needed to step in and say, 'Look, we've got some of the most talented people on Earth and a shit-load of resources — what is the actual movie we're making?' Instead, everybody avoided the hard conversations, so the movie attacked and ate itself. It's the ultimate cautionary tale."

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Last Action Hero is out now on DVD and Blu-ray. (The Jurassic Park Ultimate Trilogy Blu-ray box-set, however, is out on October 24 and is reviewed on page 138.)

HEAVY META

More movies that cocked a snook at the fourth wall

Sherlock Jr. *(1924)*
A dreaming projectionist (Buster Keaton) imagines himself into a movie and finds himself at the mercy of cinematic conventions. It's all the more astonishing in that it was made when most audiences hadn't even noticed the film shorthand Keaton made jokes about.

Duck Amuck *(1953)*
In this Chuck Jones masterpiece, Daffy thinks he's been cast in a remake of The Three Musketeers, but a sadistic animator redraws the backgrounds in an attempt to unravel his painted world.

The Bellboy *(1960)*
Jerry Lewis plays a sweet, non-talking everyman, but a standout scene also has him as 'Jerry Lewis', a cruel movie comic. The encounter is the seed for the Jack-meets-Arnie bit in Last Action Hero.

8½ *(1963)*
Why the title? Fellini had made eight films and an episode of an anthology film, and this is all about his stand-in (Marcello Mastroianni) trying to come up with another. It struck a chord with blocked filmmakers, who made their own versions — see, for example, Paul Mazursky's Alex In Wonderland.

Closed Circuit *(1978)*
A cinemagoer is mysteriously shot dead during the screening of a spaghetti Western. Forensics reveal that the bullet was made in the 1880s. This little-known Italian TV mystery breaks the fourth wall in the most extreme manner — setting a precedent for the film escapees of Demons, The Purple Rose Of Cairo and Last Action Hero.

The Purple Rose Of Cairo *(1985)*
Mia Farrow wishes a screen hero (Jeff Daniels) into reality to romance her, but the studio send the actor who plays the hero (Daniels) to woo her away so the character can get on with the film.

Wes Craven's New Nightmare *(1994)*
It's revealed that Wes Craven was exorcising a real demon when he made A Nightmare On Elm Street but that Freddy's cheapening in poor sequels (!) has let it loose again. Craven, Heather Langenkamp, John Saxon and Robert Englund play themselves.

KIM NEWMAN