

# THE FRENCHMAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

LUC BESSON HAS BEEN DREAMING OF OTHER WORLDS SINCE HE WAS A BOY. *VALERIAN AND THE CITY OF A THOUSAND PLANETS* IS THE CLOSEST THING YET TO GETTING INSIDE HIS HEAD

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**THIS SUMMER'S RELEASE** schedule is studded with the latest instalments of giant franchises. And then there's *Valerian And The City Of A Thousand Planets*, a deliriously OTT space opera that's as unconventional as its super-sized title. Based on a French comic book series that began in 1967, it follows the adventures of intergalactic PIs Valerian (Dane DeHaan) and Laureline (Cara Delevingne) as they navigate space station Alpha, encountering such far-out beings as shapeshifting cabaret dancer Bubble (Rihanna) and the charmingly named Jolly The Pimp (Ethan Hawke). Massively scaled, primary-coloured and unashamedly eccentric, it's clearly the product of an imagination without fetters. The owner of that imagination: Luc Besson.

The French director started relatively small, with 1983's *The Last Battle*, a black-and-white post-apocalyptic drama. But he was never going to be content with an arthouse budget. Over the years he has told tales of the ocean (*The Big Blue*), hitmen (*Leon*) and history (*The Messenger: The Story Of Joan Of Arc*). Time and again, though, he's returned to mind-bending, VFX-laden tales, whether unleashing a pterosaur on Paris in *The Extraordinary Adventures Of Adèle Blanc-Sec*, supercharging Scarlett Johansson's brain in *Lucy*, or having a cabbie save the universe in his sci-fi masterpiece *The Fifth Element*.

I first met Besson in San Diego last summer. At the end of a crushingly long day of Comic-Con press, the filmmaker was sipping red wine and still buzzing from the screams that clips of the movie had elicited from a 6,000-strong crowd. We picked up our conversation in late March, the morning after he picked up the Empire Inspiration trophy, given only to the most



Cara Delevingne's special operative Laureline. Below: Dane DeHaan and Luc Besson on set.

visionary minds, at the Three Empire Awards. Both times he was clearly exhausted, but perked up as he started talking about his mad new endeavour: a film he'd dreamed about since he was a *garçon*. He famously refuses to record DVD commentaries for his films, but at one point pulled out an iPad Pro, booted up the *Valerian* trailer and started excitedly talking over the visuals. Whether it's a hit or a miss at the box office, he's made exactly the film he wanted to.

**You've said that you discovered the Valerian comics when you were ten. Was that a huge moment for you?**

For sure. It was the first time I saw a girl being the hero. Laureline was the second heroine I remember falling in love with, after the little girl at the end of *The Jungle Book*. And though they were set in space, they were very human stories. Laureline and Valerian joke and have fun and argue. I think I still have two or three issues somewhere, but maybe not, because you grow

up, you have a fight with your girlfriend and she throws your stuff out of the window, things like this. I had a big reaction to reading the comics. But my desire to tell a story doesn't come from there. It comes from a different place.

**Do you know where?**

Probably from loneliness. My parents separated when I was very young and put me in a boarding school. So I was by myself. Loneliness pushes you to create a world that you like. And I was not so attracted by cigarettes and alcohol. So writing was the best escape for me. You can have a parallel life without bothering anyone. I started writing when I was very young.

**Didn't you start dreaming up *The Fifth Element* when you were about 15?**

I was 16. But I started writing stories when I was 13. It began with my journal, doing a few words every day, and then I became addicted to it. It's a really good, healthy escape. But I didn't really



show what I was doing to anyone, because my spelling is so bad. People just went, "Oh my God, you make so many mistakes!" I got a little frustrated and stopped giving it to people.

**Tarantino isn't great at spelling either. Einstein neither. I'm in good company.**

**Weren't you on course to be a marine biologist early on?**

Yes. I always loved the sea. I remember long ago, when I was about nine, a day when I was on a tour boat and spotted a dolphin. I said, "Stop!" But the pilot of the boat, this old guy, said, "No, we're late." So I jumped in with my flippers and mask and stayed in the middle of the ocean, with these dolphins circling me. The boat came back 20 minutes later and the guy screamed like crazy at me. But it was a wonderful moment and it made me want to do something where I could be around dolphins.

**Why did you give up that dream?**

I had a diving accident. And the doctor said, "You will never dive anymore." He broke my heart and my life, because I'd been sure I would be in the sea for the rest of my life. I went back to school that September and suddenly the entire process of family, boarding school and all this looked impossible. I was totally depressed. That doctor really spoke to me the wrong way — saying that to a kid at 17, you just break him. It took me months to recover, and I was only saved by the cinema. I walked onto a set one day to take a look, and fell in love totally.

**What was the set?**

A short film. No-one was being paid and I just went along to give a hand, move equipment around. I didn't expect to fall in love. But I did, hard. No-one asked me where I came from or if I had a diploma. This girl just smiled at me and said, "You've come to help? Great." This open mind was what brought me in. Nobody asks you your religion or the colour of your skin or whatever. You're here to serve God and God is cinema. That's it.

**And you were still writing *The Fifth Element* at this point?**

Yeah. But it was a book, not a script. I wrote 200 pages, then I threw them out because it was not good. I wrote 200 again. Then I throw again. And then I wrote 400, and kept the 400.

**What was the first image that came to you?**

A concrete platform that covered the entire Mediterranean Sea. Almost like a desert. I don't know where that came from. I haven't put it in a movie yet.

**Even without that, it turned out to be a pretty wild film, with flying taxis and blue opera singers and elephant/caterpillar creatures. Was it a fight to get it made?**

I always fight. Since the first film I'm



fighting. Nobody wanted to produce my first film, so I loaned money from everyone I knew to do it. On *Subway*, the producers say, "Why do you film in black and white?" On *Nikita*, people say, "We don't know if you're able to handle an actress." When I want to do *The Big Blue*, they say, "No, no, no, films about the sea never work." On *Leon*, I heard, "Why is it so dark? Why are you setting it in New York? You're French — you should set it in Paris." But every time you do sci-fi, it's the same thing: "Only the Americans do sci-fi. You can't do sci-fi." I'm used to it. And the more resistance there is, the more I believe it's something I should do.

**Sci-fi can go spectacularly wrong, though. And when you took on *The Fifth Element* you'd never done anything even close to that scale before.**

It was very difficult. And I was not helped at all by my producer at the time. He was really taking care of the budget, but creatively he was totally absent. So I was really by myself. I did my best, but the special effects were very laborious. It was just before CGI, so we did it dinosaur-style. As I found out with *Valerian*, now you can put the camera on your shoulder and do whatever you want. But at that time every special-effects shot was a nightmare.

**I imagine it may have also been a challenge to convince Bruce Willis to wear that bright-orange rubber vest...**

Actually, Bruce was never difficult. I'd heard he could be, but I found that if you don't try to fool him, he'll follow you. But he did hate that vest by the end. It scratched him all the time. I made an interesting deal with him at the beginning: I'd give him three days off a week, if he stayed next to me for the entire day. No trailer and all that shit. And he agreed. He sat on a box two metres from the camera all day, playing cards with the make-up girl.

**Did you see Gary Oldman's interview in *Playboy* a few years back, where he said of *The Fifth Element*, "I can't bear it"?**

Well, I don't like to watch it either! I didn't know about that. But listen, Gary is really one of the best actors alive. And he's very tough with himself. The great actors are always a little bit dismissive of what they've done before. But that's healthy.

**How do you feel about your own work? Are you proud of everything?**

The films are my babies. So I love them. I don't care if they're too skinny or too fat or too big. I love them and that's it.

**Is there one you feel has been unfairly maligned by people?**

Oh, *The Big Blue*, definitely. I mean, I opened the Cannes Festival and I got killed. Killed by the entire press. It was like a bath of blood. In Cannes you have this magazine every day where



**Top:** Bruce Willis in sci-fi spectacular *The Fifth Element*. **Middle:** Scarlett Johansson as *Lucy*'s chemically enhanced hero. **Bottom:** Jean Reno teaches Natalie Portman how to be gun-ready in *Leon*.

the critics all give a film one star, two stars, three stars, four stars. And for *The Big Blue* the entire 15 critics put a double zero. This had never happened in the history of Cannes. My first reaction was to say, "Oh, that's funny because it looks like bubbles."

**Was that the worst day of your career?**

No. The worst day was three days before that, when I collapsed in the editing room. I had the doctor come and shoot me [with an injection], because I was so tired after 52 weeks of shooting. At the same time, my daughter was having a six-hour operation in Paris on her heart. So that was my concern when I was in Cannes, even when I was getting all this fire. And the film ended up doing fine. It finished at about 11 million admissions in France, which was the biggest score of the decade at the time. And it's a cult movie now.

**You've been nursing *Valerian* for a long time. You actually wrote a script back in the 1990s. How do you feel about the film now it's finally finished?**

I'm exhausted, but I'm so happy. It's so different to what else it is out there. I'm tired of seeing superheroes in tights. For me it's ridiculous, like Robin Hood or something. It's been a long journey with *Valerian* and there have been points where I've spent more time on Alpha than in the real world. But then you go home and your wife is asking you to put the garbage outside and your kids are bothering you to buy them new shoes. That brings you back to the real world in a few seconds.

**You used Instagram to document the making of the movie. The image from the final day of the shoot showed everyone covered in glitter and confetti, from a celebration**

**you'd sneakily set up.**

I'm tricky! Before I said cut, 500 kilos of confetti dropped, with music and champagne. We were all crying. After six months, it was emotional. But it's not always fun like that. You know, I have a bunch of friends who are big chefs. And I think of the set as a kitchen — there's screaming, boiling, testing, failing. The cinema is like the restaurant on the other side of the door, where people are waiting to enjoy what you've made. But in the kitchen, there is screaming.

**Are you a screamer?**

I think I have a very particular way of putting tension on the set. I arrive first, before the grips or the electricians. It makes everyone nervous because they see me and go, "Fuck, he's here already." And I never sit. I'm there with the actors all the time. So I make pressure just by showing that I'm not treating myself apart. I come with my bike. No personal assistant, no shit like that. I'm there to work and everybody's following that. So I don't have to scream, in fact.

**So it's more psychological?**

Oh, it's totally psychological. When I was starting off I'd see a director in his chair, watching the monitor, with his nails very, very clean and a little scarf around his neck. I mean, are you kidding?

**You seem very confident, but the *Valerian* comics are pretty niche. Are you concerned the movie might be rejected at the box office?**

I don't worry about that stuff anymore. Honestly, you never know, so what's the point in getting nervous about it? Look at *Lucy*. Universal, on their plan, expected to do \$120 million worldwide, and it did [nearly] \$500 million. *Avatar*, that's got the world record, and it's not coming from anywhere except [James Cameron's] brain. At the end of the day, all you can do is make the best film you can. I see it like running a race. You can beat your own record but finish sixth. Or you can finish first but your time is not so good. What do you prefer? Me, I prefer to beat my own record, even if I don't get the trophy. 🏆

**VALERIAN AND THE CITY OF A THOUSAND PLANETS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 2 AUGUST**

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