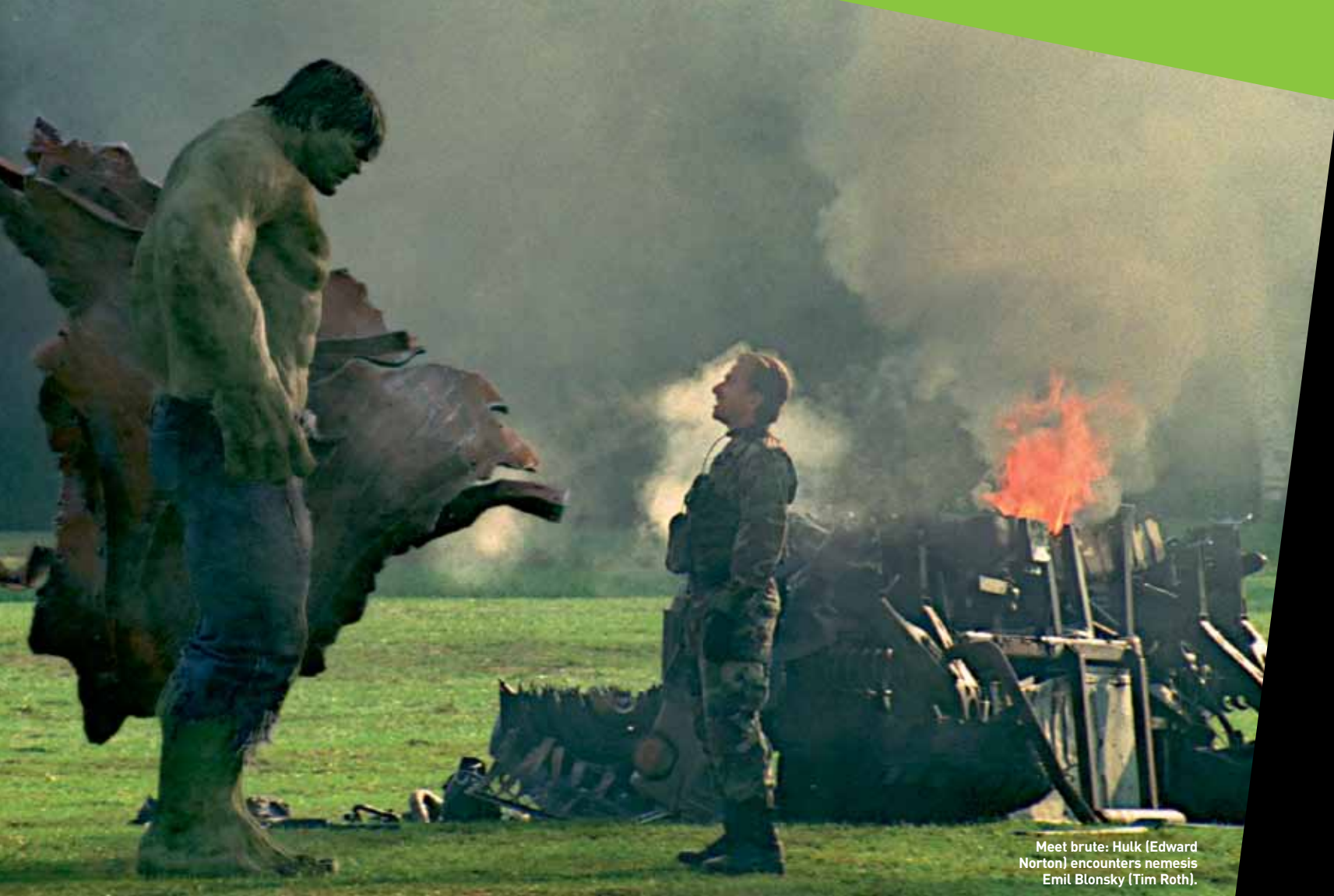


HULK VS. THE ABOMINATION. ANG LEE'S LOUIS LETERRIER'S BALLS-OUT MONSTER STUDIOS? EMPIRE FINDS OUT PRECISELY SCRAP-HAPPY KINDA-SEQUEL THE

ARTHOUSE/BLOCKBUSTER VISION VS. MASH. STAR EDWARD NORTON VS. MARVEL WHO'S THROWING THE PUNCHES FOR INCREDIBLE HULK... >>

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN

FIGHT CLUB



Meet brute: Hulk (Edward Norton) encounters nemesis Emil Blonsky (Tim Roth).

THE HULK IS STANDING INSIDE AN OFFICE IN HOLLYWOOD — AND HE DOESN'T LOOK HAPPY. THE TOP OF HIS MISSHAPEN HEAD SCRAPES AGAINST THE CEILING. HIS MOUTH

is twisted into a snarl of naked fury. His hands are coiled into fists the size of hams. He looks as if he might, at the slightest provocation, hurl a watercooler through a window, rip a filing cabinet in two, or use a photocopier to *splat!* everyone around him into jelly pancakes.

Fortunately for the puny humans milling about, this office is the Los Angeles base of Marvel Studios, and the olive behemoth towering above them merely a 'life-size' cardboard standee. Still, the presence of their beefiest creation glaring down as they go about their business is a constant warning. He doesn't look like someone who will forgive a second failure.

Not that "failure" is exactly the right word to describe 2003's *Hulk*, Marvel's first attempt at bringing the classic character to the big screen. Visually, Ang Lee's film was

a work of art, fusing tour de force editing, nifty comic-book panel effects and shots so beautifully composed you could hang them in the Louvre. Still, at DNA level, something was off. The pace was slow, the mood funereal,

the climax an abstract set-piece involving a dishevelled Nick Nolte rambling like a hobo who's been at the Diamond White. It was, many acknowledged, a thought-provoking psycho-drama. But where was the *fun*?

"I love and am very proud of certain aspects of Ang Lee's *Hulk*," says Kevin Feige, Marvel's president of production, of the tentpole movie that made a profitable but disappointing \$245 million worldwide. "Walk into a comic-book shop and you'll find 'one-shots', standalone stories that don't exactly exist within the continuity of the characters. I love the idea that that's what Ang Lee's *Hulk* was: a singular vision that explores specific elements of the mythos. But what we're doing now is *really* starting the Marvel *Hulk* franchise."

This summer's *The Incredible Hulk*, then, is a reinvention from the ground up, with a new director, a new cast and a fresh approach. Gale Anne Hurd, the *Terminator 2* and *Aliens* veteran who has produced both films, announced in 2002 that Lee's monstrous hero was "not the *Hulk* everyone expects to see from having read the comics and seen the TV series". Now she acknowledges that

turning their back on the character's roots was a mistake: "This version *is* the *Hulk* that people know. And I think, from reading the [message] boards I read when I can't sleep at night, that the fans are happy about that."

"I liked the idea of a moral person at war with this thing inside of him."

EDWARD NORTON



Stop, gamma time! Bruce Banner straps in for a testing session.

STEP ONE FOR FEIGE AND HURD WAS TO FIND A DIRECTOR WHO COULD TAKE THE HULK BACK TO OLD-SCHOOL BASICS. ENTER LOUIS LETERRIER, AN AMIABLE

and energetic Frenchman who, as a young boy, marvelled at Bruce — or rather, 'David' — Banner's small-screen adventures. After hearing about the project at a meeting with Marvel, the director of the two *Transporter* films flew home to Paris and worked with a graphic artist friend to create a series of illustrations, which he sent to the studio. Not long after, he was offered the job.

Visiting Leterrier at Hulk HQ, a building complex in West LA that also houses production offices for *Iron Man* and *Transformers 2*, **Empire** gets a first-hand look at the paintings, which are spectacular, cinematic and gloriously over-the-top. One portrays *Hulk* grappling with not one, not two, but *six* polar bears; in another the gamma freak trashes an NYPD squad car; while a third shows *Hulk* squatting beneath a moonlit Central Park bridge, as oblivious passers-by stroll above. Between them they showcase all the potential — from comedy to tragedy to pulse-pounding excitement — inherent in the character.

Leterrier's office is littered with more toys than Harry Knowles' basement: *Hulk* hands sit alongside towers of comics and prototype action figures for the new movie. Even after two years of 18-hour days and endless debates over details as minor as whether Bruce Banner wears jeans or chinos, the director's enthusiasm for big green lunks in

BRIEFING

The Incredible Hulk

Released: June 13

Budget: \$125 million (estimated)

Director: Louis Leterrier (*The Transporter*, *Transporter 2*)

Starring: Edward Norton (who also scripts), Liv Tyler, Tim Roth, William Hurt, Tim Blake Nelson

Story: Dr. Bruce Banner (Norton), while on the run from the American military, desperately seeks a cure for his gamma-irradiated condition. Meanwhile, soldier Emil Blonsky (Roth) undergoes his own gamma-transformation and

emerges as a creature larger and more powerful than Banner's own alter ego: The Abomination. **So it's a sequel?** Sorta. Chronologically it follows on from Ang Lee's *Hulk*, but has a different cast and draws inspiration more from the TV show.

Director Louis Leterrier and Norton enjoy Bermuda Shorts Day on set.



stretchy pants remains undiminished. "Six times the budget, six times the problems, you know? Sometimes I'm like, 'Is this too big for me?'" he muses. "But I actually feel really comfortable. It's definitely my best movie. Which doesn't say much! But it is the *Hulk* movie that people are expecting, and I feel good about that."

Whereas the Ang Lee version made you wait ten minutes for Eric Bana to turn up and 40 for the first look at his angry alter ego, this is no origin story: Leterrier promises a *Hulk*-out within the first 180 seconds. And from there the mayhem doesn't let up. The US military, led by General 'Thunderbolt' Ross (William Hurt), is in hot pursuit of Banner for the power he wields when he loses his cool. And an over-the-hill soldier called Emil Blonsky (Tim Roth) craves that power for more selfish reasons, purposefully turning himself mid-film into a diabolical mutant known as The Abomination who's almost twice the size of the *Hulk*. It's wall-to-wall spectacle, spanning the globe from the North Pole to Brazil to New York, requiring a leading man with action chops and a taste for amped-up summer blockbusters. So, naturally, the architects of *The Incredible Hulk* picked up the phone and called in... Edward Norton?

NORTON IS STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF A BUSTLING BAR AT THE TURTLE BAY RESORT IN OAHU, HAWAII. A FEW FEET AWAY FROM HIM, JUDD APATOW,

Bill Hader and Jason Segel sit at a table, deep in conversation. It's the end of March and we're all here for the global press junket for Apatow-produced comedy *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*: **Empire** to interview Segel, Hader and co., Norton to take a surf-and-suntan break with his girlfriend, Marshall producer Shauna Robertson. And although Norton probably isn't conscious of the fact, right now he's demonstrating why he's the perfect pick to play Bruce Banner. Despite being the biggest star in the



Blonsky and General Ross (William Hurt) track the burly beast.

room, he somehow avoids attention — where Segel is pestered for autographs and photos, Norton manages to melt into the crowd. Which is exactly what Banner, the scientist-on-the-run, is doing in South America at the start of *The Incredible Hulk*.

“Edward is super-humble,” says Leterrier. “If you look at him, he never buys clothes. He wears the same faded jeans the wardrobe lady gave him after *Fight Club* — shrunken, all frayed up — or a ‘Paper Street Soap Company’ T-shirt from that movie... He’s super-clean, obviously, but he wears the same clothes every day.”

Feige adds, “It’s a pretty awesome sight in the movie to see this demure, slight figure running away from Humvees or leaping off the rooftops of Brazilian favelas. You feel for him. This is a guy who’s supposed to be in front of a blackboard in a classroom, working on experiments to better the world. Somebody you would least expect to turn into a raging Hulk. Plus, Edward has got that duality down

MICHAEL ZEPPELLO/CON INTERNATIONAL

GAMMA GIRL

LIV TYLER IS BETTY ROSS 2.0

“There’s no bouncing in this film,” insists Liv Tyler. “No bouncing at all.” She is referring, of course, to the Hulk’s preferred method of transport and one of the more maligned aspects of Ang Lee’s interpretation, which saw the irradiated one leaping across the Arizona desert like an immense green wallaby. “I had these weird bouncing dreams after watching that,” she recalls, “but thankfully there’s none of that here.”

Stepping into the shoes Jennifer Connelly wore last time around, Tyler takes on the role of Betty Ross, Bruce Banner’s former colleague and the beauty to his beast within. But several years after Banner’s apparent death at the hands of his highly combustible dad, Betty has a new job, a new life and a rather less angry boyfriend. “At the beginning of the film you see that despite everything she’s slowly begun to rebuild her life. But then suddenly Bruce is back, and she’s in complete shock. I spend most of the movie like a deer caught in the headlights.”

As a self-confessed geek, Tyler spent time preparing for the role as the bookishly beautiful physicist by delving into Hulk mythology with star and scripter Edward Norton. The pair spent countless hours discussing Bruce and Betty’s history, right down to what

THE INCREDIBLE HULK

pat — look at *Primal Fear* or *Fight Club*. I think that was the big draw to us and to him with the project.”

The other big draw for the unlikely action hero was the fact that, like his director, he’s a huge fan of the classic TV show. “It sometimes gets relegated to Lou Ferrigno and green paint and ’70s kitsch,” Norton says. “But that show doesn’t talk down to the story and Bill Bixby is really amazing in it. He brings this incredible lonely pathos to that character. That was what attracted me to this — the idea of a moral person at war with the thing inside of him, and the lonely fugitive aspect of it.”

Thanks to Norton and Leterrier, references to the TV series are littered throughout the film: another Lou Ferrigno cameo (he played a security guard in the 2003 version), a shot of Banner walking forlornly down a road, a musical nod to the *Lonely Man* theme and, as showcased in the teaser trailer, Bixby-style gamma fire burning within the Hulk’s eyes.

Writer Zak Penn (X2) had been working on a draft for this project even before the Ang Lee Hulk came out. A comic-book fanatic, he had crammed his screenplay with elements from the Marvel universe, like top-secret spy agency S. H. I. E. L. D. and perpetual superhero sidekick Rick Jones. But when Norton signed up to star, the intense actor asserted creative control — as is his wont when joining any project — and did his own pass on the script. Out went the in-joke cameos (well, most of them) and in came, says Leterrier, “a balance, a more realistic feel”.

But rumours hang over *The Incredible Hulk* that Norton has proven a difficult collaborator. While Penn came up with the basic storyline that remains, Norton surprised everyone at Comic-Con 2007 by stating, “I came >>

exactly they were working on prior to the first film and the nature of the ill-fated experiment that first turned Banner into his raging alter ego.

“You know, Edward actually goes through a similar sort of transformation,” she muses of her co-star. “On screen he’s this very serious and sexy movie star. But in person he’s actually more like Woody Allen! It’s fascinating: on camera this whole other thing happens to him but he’s really just a very sweet nerd — in the nicest way.”

Erroneous internet rumours currently have Tyler connected to a remake of *The Last House On The Left*, but she won’t, as far as she’s aware, be appearing in an update of the Wes Craven chiller. She will instead make her horror debut in Bryan Bertino’s *The Strangers*, a disturbing tale about a couple being terrorised while trying to get away from it all at an isolated holiday home. “It’s a really eccentric, dark little movie,” she says gleefully of the film which looks to be the wholesome, dulcet-toned actress’ most disturbing project to date. “I think they actually wound up cutting a little because it was too realistic — people thought it was a snuff film or something.”

JAMES DYER

THE INCREDIBLE HULK



Banner and Betty (Liv Tyler) search for a cure. Is it in the fridge?



Double chemistry was never like this.



The Abomination: a wild and crazy guy.

into this and I wrote the screenplay." More recently, there have been whispers of serious in-fighting between the star and Marvel over the final cut, which seem to be borne out by Norton cancelling the majority of his press interviews for the film at short notice.

While Leterrier and the producers acknowledge that Norton is unafraid to speak his mind ("passionate" is the preferred term), they deny there's been a serious falling-out. "I haven't had an argument with Edward and I've been working with him for a year," says Hurd, while Feige insists, "Those kind of discussions happen all the time on all films. They just don't usually happen with someone as famous as Edward Norton..."

"G RRRR!"
TIM ROTH
BREAKS OFF FROM HIS LESS-
THAN-FEARSOME ROAR
WITH A LAUGH. THE BRITISH

actor is midway through a chat with *Empire* about his latest screen incarnation, and completely failing to give us a satisfactory demonstration of said incarnation's primal

"Playing The Abomination reminded me of old fringe theatre."

TIM ROTH

rage. Which is probably for the best: after all, The Abomination is a blackhearted, 15-foot-tall man-beast whose idea of a good Friday night involves picking up an ambulance and using it to batter people to death. "Is this the most outlandish character I've played? Well, there's this and the monkey," he grins, referencing his malicious chimp Thade from Tim Burton's *Planet Of The Apes*. "To be honest, I just thought it was a bit of fun. I take characters seriously, but you can't take this stuff *too* seriously. My mantra was, 'Are my kids going to think this scene is cool?' And I've got some really interesting stuff to do. There's one pre-final change scene in a mirrored washroom which felt like some bizarre Iggy Pop video. A very, very strange, sick quality — a raw power vibe."

Roth had a tougher time in his scenes as veteran soldier Emil Blonsky, relentlessly chasing Banner — "I had to bloody run, all the time. And I couldn't get myself too in shape beforehand because then you don't look like you're over the hill!" — than in bringing The Abomination to life. "All that stuff reminded me of doing old fringe theatre, >>

**TURN ON,
TUNE IN,
HULK OUT!**



During its long run, The Incredible Hulk TV show saw some fairly ridiculous situations turn meek Bill Bixby into mean, green Lou Ferrigno. Such as...

- Problems with a flat tyre.
 - Being pushed down a mountain by a Bigfoot impersonator.
 - Dealing with a pesky operator in a phone booth ("I don't have 25 cents!!!").
 - Being tied up and fed soup by an elderly Japanese woman.
 - Being placed in a small room with a ravenous black panther.
 - Being buried in a sand pit.
 - Falling into the churning water of a boathouse and being repeatedly carried over the paddlewheel.
 - Kicking over a beehive and then being surprised when the bees get mad.
 - Being stuck in a cab in New York rush-hour traffic ("You don't understand, I have to be there by four!").
 - Getting a speeding ticket.
 - Having a row of computers fall on him.
 - Running into a bear trap.
 - Being forced to land a 747 without any instructions.
 - Being placed in a cage with an angry gorilla.
 - Being thrown under a Mardi Gras parade float by a guy in a gorilla suit.
 - Eating poisoned sushi.
 - And finally... Trying to help a midget wrestler known as 'Half Nelson' by climbing into the ring for him, only to be clobbered by a beefy wrestler in spite of Banner's numerous cries of, "Stop! You don't know what you're doing! You're making me ANGRY!"
- GLEN FERRIS, WITH THANKS TO
WWW.KENNETHJOHNSON.US**



They won't like him blah blah...



He got gamma: Banner mid-transformation.

really. I got the movement guy from Planet Of The Apes hired, and also this great stunt freerunner guy. We did a few weeks where we just went into this room, put the suit on and came up with how the character moves — a new version of human. Incredible fun.”

Norton got the same kick out of the process. “Making an effects-driven movie is a different sort of thing for me,” he says. “I’ve played a lot of lo-fi tough characters, but I hadn’t done anything before that involves this interface between acting and effects. The notion of having this character split and getting to play both halves was a big part of deciding I had something to bring to this.”

Back in Leterrier’s office, where the director and his editor are making final tweaks to the film, **Empire** is given a tantalising glimpse of two of the showdowns between Hulk and his nightmarish nemesis. First, a sequence in broad daylight on a university campus, in which a goading Blonsky, pumped-up on gamma serum but not yet Abominable, leaps with superhuman agility over Hulk’s head as our hero flails at him with two huge plates of steel. Then, the climactic monster mash in Harlem, where the two giants roar — their voices enhanced with the bellows of bears, camels and a Whipsnade’s-worth of other beasts — before going at each other in a 26-minute mêlée that Leterrier describes as “the biggest bar fight in movie history — with New York as the bar”.

Even though you can’t move these days without tripping over a new comic-book movie, the Harlem showdown, replete with thrilling handheld camerawork, gives *The Incredible Hulk* a precious USP: the sight of a superhero taking on a physically terrifying foe. The Abomination could eat Lex Luthor, Dr. Doom and The Joker for breakfast, and still ask for extra toast. His rampaging presence manages to turn our musclebound hero into an underdog — and, unlike in Ang Lee’s version, this Hulk can’t leap five miles in a single bound or change size.

The images we’re shown also back up Leterrier’s claim that the visual effects in the teaser trailer were far from being a finished product. The warring digital characters — created with new technology that used reflective paint and lasers to finely map Norton and Roth’s faces as well as their bodies — now look virtually photo-real. And they’re still being refined by effects house Rhythm & Hues, right up to the film’s delivery date. Curiously, R&H recently worked alongside CFC Framestore on *The Golden Compass*, notable for its cast of CG polar bears. Could



Hulk paints the town green.

Leterrier’s vision of Hulk battling a pack of Arctic ursines still come to pass in the sequel?

Or could there be something even more awesome in store? Like the Spider-Man franchise, *The Incredible Hulk* introduces some famous comic-book characters in small roles — Samuel Sterns (Tim Blake Nelson), who’s destined to become scheming genius The Leader, and Doc Samson (Ty Burrell), who’s introduced in the 2008 movie as a benign psychotherapist but might just gain superhuman strength and green hair down the line. And it’s common knowledge that Marvel is hoping to merge several franchises to form the Avengers movie, in which Hulk, Thor, Iron Man and maybe even little ol’ Ant-Man unite to take on what Feige describes as “a foe so great that no single hero can fight them”.

But the most thrilling possibility is raised by Leterrier, with a twinkle in his eye, just as we wrap up our afternoon in his office. “You know what I would love to see? Hulk versus Iron Man. That would be crazy!” And which would be the villain? “I think the Hulk. After being chased for so many years, I would lose it. I would be like, ‘Screw them! They used me, abused me... now I’m rebelling!’”

Tony Stark might just need a bigger suit.

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» **The Incredible Hulk is out on June 13 and will be reviewed in a future issue.**