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T F C L A S S I C

THE WARRIORS

THIRTY YEARS AGO, A BROWN-LEATHERED GANG FROM NEW YORK KNOWN AS THE WARRIORS STORMED CINEMAS. WHAT FOLLOWED WAS BOX OFFICE GOLD, BEATINGS AND EVEN DEATHS. WITH FRESH INTERVIEWS, TOTAL FILM LOOKS BACK AT A TIME WHEN A CULT CAME OUT TO PLAY...

WORDS SEAN EGAN





'FROM OUT OF NOWHERE WE WERE THE NUMBER ONE BOX OFFICE FILM' WALTER HILL

New kids on the block: (above) the gang takes to the streets; (right) violence boils over between the rivals as the Warriors battle to get home.

IN FEBRUARY 1979, CINEPHILES WERE STARTLED TO SEE LINES AROUND BLOCKS TO SEE THE WARRIORS – A LOW BUDGETER WITH NO WELL-KNOWN NAMES.

They were equally startled to realise that, whereas the street gang culture of the film was one normally only depicted in motion pictures as a way of exploring social degradation, this movie portrayed it from the street gangs' point of view. And made it look desirable.

It was an obvious but revolutionary approach that clearly struck a chord with the young. *The Warriors'* glittering visuals, meanwhile, had a resonance for a different demographic: the renowned, hard-to-please critic Pauline Kael raved about it in *The New Yorker*. In short, it was a sensation. Recalls director and co-screenwriter Walter Hill, "From out of nowhere we were the number one box office film."

The glory of this scenario of David vanquishing the cinematic rival Goliaths was to be short lived though. When stories of people murdered at screenings began appearing, accusations flew that the film's fight scenes and its amoral stance incited violence. Paramount Pictures reacted to the furore by withdrawing all ads, thus severely threatening continued success for a film that had seemed destined to prove, in the post-*Star Wars* age, that gigantic spectacle and massive promotion were not everything.



The Warriors started life in 1965 as a novel by Sol Yurick, who hit upon the idea of taking the New York gangs he had observed in the '40s and '50s and mixing them up with the Greek classic *Anabasis* by Xenophon, which depicted an army of 10,000 men embarking on a heroic homeward trek across enemy terrain. Producer Lawrence Gordon happened upon a coverless edition of *The Warriors* in paperback on a bookstore discount spinner and was immediately hooked. "Simply put, it was a very good idea for a movie," he tells *Total Film*. "It was a great chase film. I still get chills thinking about it." Gordon optioned the book and commissioned a screenplay from David Shaber. He then recruited Walter Hill to rewrite the Shaber script and to direct.

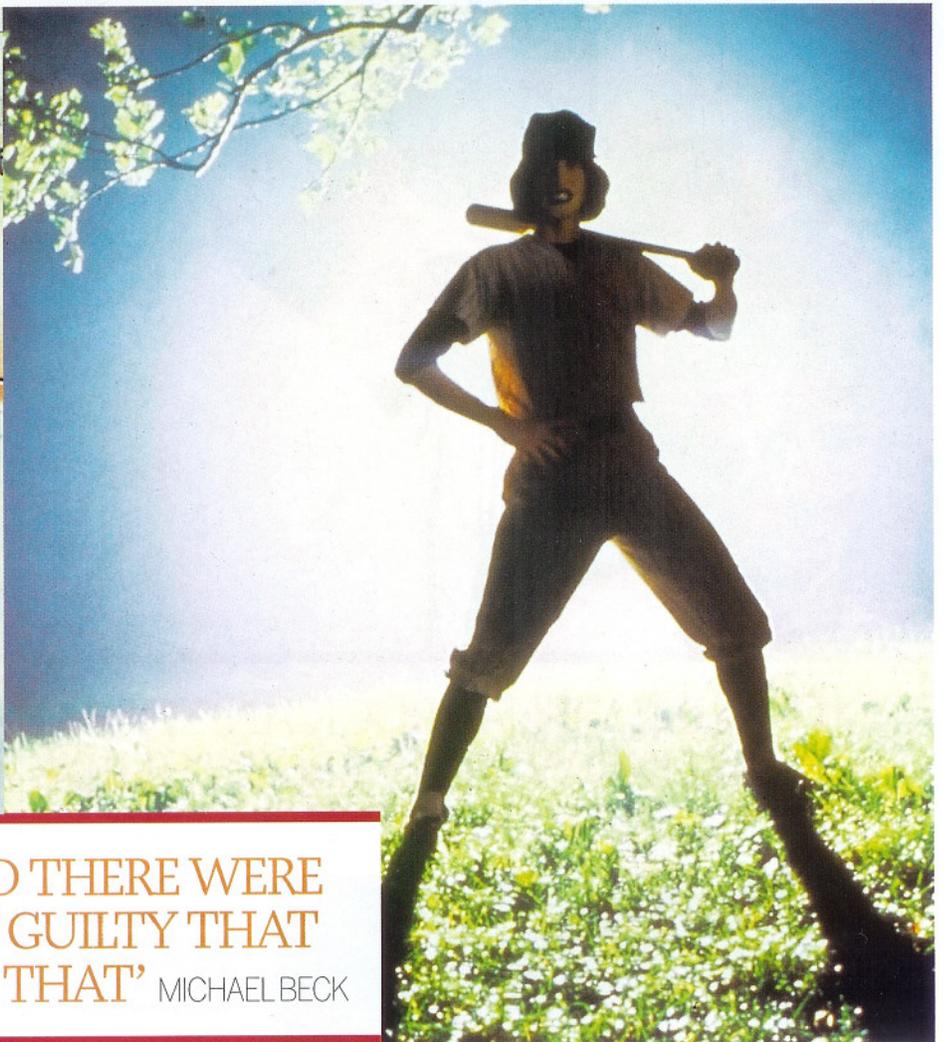
Hill admits he didn't much like Yurick's novel but, like Gordon, was struck by the simplicity of the basic idea. However changes were necessary in the adaptation. For one, the sheer nastiness of the gang in the book (gang rape, ritualised killing) had to be softened. Secondly, the novelist's protagonists had been under 16 while

the film depicted men mainly in their late twenties. "That really had to do with the labour laws more than anything else," explains Hill, in reference to the impact child actors' short working days would have had on the extremely low budget provided by Paramount.

With the cameras ready to roll, the plot Hill had constructed on the foundations laid by Yurick and Shaber went like this: Cyrus is the leader of the Riffs, the largest gang in New York. He calls a gang pow-wow (a "conclave") in a Bronx park, where he tells the nine-man deputations from the various gangs that there are 60,000 of them to 20,000 New York cops and that the "future is ours".

Immediately after this preposterous but persuasive speech – delivered mesmerisingly by actor Roger Hill – Cyrus is shot dead by Luther, the demented leader of The Rogues, who promptly pins the blame on The Warriors, an implausibly mixed-race aggregation from Coney Island. When the cops raid the venue, scattering the gang members, The Warriors find they must make their way back to their native turf 27 miles away through a city whose various gangs are all out to get them for their supposed treachery.

To make matters worse, they are bereft of weapons as conclave attendees had voluntarily left them behind in a gesture of goodwill. Of course, their dilemma would be over if their pride allowed them to simply remove the >>



‘WE WERE SURPRISED THERE WERE INCIDENTS. WE FELT GUILTY THAT THE MOVIE CAUSED THAT’ MICHAEL BECK

Fox getting thrown into the path of an oncoming subway train while grappling with a cop, leaving Mercy and Swan to now become the love interest, while an entire subplot involving Swan being captured by and escaping from a rival gang was jettisoned.

Despite Hill’s trojan-like writing work, the most famous line in the movie – Luther’s now iconic taunt of “Warrioors – come out to plaaaay!” – is, ironically, not his. “It wasn’t in the script,” points out Kelly. “Walter said, ‘Just make something up’. I said, ‘I gotta try to do something that’s strange and different’ and I found these beer bottles.” Kelly placed the bottles over the ends of his fingers and played them like castanets as he intoned the jeer over and over in the voice of “a guy downtown who was one of the creepiest people I ever knew.” He adds, “I honestly didn’t know if he would keep that in there.”

In the final week of shooting, the cast found themselves asked to film a series of brief, dialogue-heavy scenes on a subway train. Hill had decided that the day scenes in Coney Island at the beginning were to be removed so as to enhance the neon-dappled mood, necessitating some exposition. Says James Remar (Ajax), “It works really well... having it start in the evening. Deborah Van Valkenburgh’s eye fading

into the dissolve into the sunrise is a beautiful shot. It has more of an impact.”

However Hill’s other plans for the movie’s content were spoiled by the necessity perceived by Paramount to get *The Warriors* to the cinema as quickly as possible to stave off the competition of other gang-related pictures, including the similarly-titled *The Wanderers*. The limited post-production window meant that Hill was prevented from opening and closing scenes with comic-book panels.

For different reasons, he was also denied the right to refer to the Anabasis legend that had inspired Yurick. Hill: “I said that I thought the movie was incomprehensible unless you understood it was in some kind of science-fiction mode and that it was in some way based on the Greek antecedents and that it was comic book in its nature.” Only when he got the opportunity to issue a director’s cut on DVD in 2005 was Hill able to implement his original plans.

O N 12 FEBRUARY, A CLASH IN PALM SPRINGS AT A WARRIORS DRIVE-IN SCREENING RESULTED IN A FATAL SHOOTING.

By 15 February, there had been three *Warriors*-associated deaths in four days, the third a stabbing in which the killer

yelled “I want you!”, a line superficially similar to a part of the *The Warriors* script. The American media was suddenly crammed with stories near identikit to the storm generated in the UK eight years earlier by suggestions that another youth gang-related movie – *A Clockwork Orange* – had inspired murder and rape. There were reports of fights occurring in cinemas across the nation to the backdrop of Swan and co’s travails. Some fleapits quickly dropped *The Warriors*, while others persuaded Paramount to pay for security at screenings.

“I think all of us were surprised that there were actual incidents and certainly initially felt some sense of guilt and responsibility for being in a picture that would cause that,” admits Michael Beck (Swan). “But in every instance where there was violence... Kids who were predisposed to that as they were in gangs already, were gathered together in a place where they normally wouldn’t have been to see a movie about gangs and from that came some incidents.”

Hill agrees, adding, “The deeper question is if 99 and nine tenths of your audience was moved in an aesthetic way by the thing and this microcosm of one one-hundredth or one one-millionth or something went out and did a bad thing, is that a reason not to have the film? What price are we willing to pay for >>



THE REMAKE

Tony Scott has signed on to direct a remake of *The Warriors*, although he prefers the word "retooling". "The original doesn't stand up very well, because it was very '70s New York, but this one I'm doing about the gang culture in LA," he's said. Real life gangs and *Warriors* fans the Crips and the Bloods are reportedly keen to participate.

Remake or retool, the idea gets the thumbs down from participants in the original film. Gordon: "I think anybody that remade it would be making it purely for commercial purposes." Waites simply opines, "It's madness." You can supposedly find out for yourself in 2010, though talk of the film has been circulating in the industry for a decade.

Meanwhile, when told that internet sources state he is going to appear in the remake, Beck laughs: "News to me. What would a 60-year-old Swan do? Be a social worker?"

'IT'S LIKE VISUAL ROCK AND IT'S BURSTING WITH ENERGY. THERE'S A PSYCHEDELIC SHINE'

PAULINE KAEI



Sports mad: (above) rival gang the Baseball Furies; (left) Swan and Mercy (Michael Beck and Deborah Van Valkenburgh).

is noticeably low and the landscape so prior to the likes of drive-by shootings as to seem like a playground.

Yet leaving aside its age, it is puzzling that *The Warriors* ever acquired accusations of

freedom of expression?" The director also rejects the notion that a non-judgmental movie about gangs would lead to bad behaviour. "It is non-judgmental in that it does not have an overview," he says. "It is absolutely judgmental about conduct and codes of honour."

Whether Hill got a bum rap or not, the spotlight on Paramount made the studio lose its nerve. "They pulled the advertising," Hill recalls. "Which wrecked the business of the thing or certainly severely limited it." Though he adds, "It was a profitable film," *The Warriors'* domination of the American box office came to an abrupt end less than a month after release.

IN THIS - ITS 30TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR - THE WARRIORS IN SOME SENSES NOW FEELS ARCHAIC MAINLY BECAUSE OF FASHIONS NOT SEEN OUTSIDE SHOREDITCH.

It's astonishing to realise that *The Warriors* carried an 'X'-certificate when first released in the UK: the swearing

irresponsibility in the first place. For the fight scenes were clearly never meant to be about realism: the violence is less about capturing the chaos then prevailing in a crumbling New York, more about creating the kind of stylised rumbles found in *West Side Story*. "It is really comic-book violence. You can hear the kapows and the bams," says Beck. "It's really not the kind of realistic violence that even the movies of the day had." In a way, the 2005 *Rockstar* videogame - for which most of the original cast lent their voices - saw the movie find its true quasi-cartoonish level.

The Warriors has now risen above both a period-piece status and notoriety and regained the position it had just before the violent incidents, when word of mouth and critical kudos indicated it was something special. It is now a cultural landmark, having spun off, not just games, but figurines and a comic book. The cast are also still in demand things like this year's Coney Island 'Conclave' (a screening with a Q&A and signings).

As Hill points out, "To me, what's kind of interesting is there was never any retraction of the positive [notices]." The most positive of those notices of course was that of Pauline Kael. She enthused of the film: "It has - in visual terms - the kind of impact that 'Rock Around The Clock' had when it was played behind the titles of *Blackboard Jungle*. It's like visual rock and it's bursting with energy... There's a night-blooming, psychedelic shine to the whole baroque movie." Even hardass *Time* critic Frank Rich, who didn't like a film he considered tedious and woodenly acted, had to concede, "Hill creates creepy poetry out of menacing shadows, glinting switchblades, garish graffiti and charging subway trains."

"When I became aware that maybe the movie was going to hang on in people's minds, it was in the 1980s," says Hill of *The Warriors'* enduring stature. "As I was travelling about making films and everything, I was always asked about *The Warriors*." He adds, "And they never asked me about violence."

Beck dates his own apprehension of the movie's longevity to around a dozen years ago, when a buddy of his then 15-year-old son exclaimed, "Oh man! You're the dude that played Swan in *The Warriors*!" Beck: "This was before videogames came out about it or before the 25th anniversary stuff. That was when I knew for the first time this was a cult movie - because it had now skipped generations."

Says Gordon of the phenomenon that resulted from his perusal of a coverless paperback three decades plus ago: "In my office I have one-sheets of all the movies I've produced and when people come in, they say, 'You made *The Warriors*?' That's the first thing they say. And there's some pretty big hits up on the wall." **TF**