

Interview: Neil Marshall, Axelle Carolyn Battle the Elements in ‘Centurion’

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CHICAGO – Some movies were clearly a lot of “fun” for the cast and crew. A different f-word may come to mind when the cast of the period action/adventure “Centurion” thinks back on the film’s brutal production. Director Neil Marshall (“The Descent,” “Doomsday”) and his lovely star and wife Axelle Carolyn recently chatted with us over breakfast at the James Hotel and it’s clear that the challenge paid off in a film of which they are very proud.

“Centurion” tells the legendary story of the Ninth Legion, a group of Roman soldiers in 117 A.D. who ran into an unexpected force when they attempted to stretch the empire to Scotland. There they encountered a warrior people known as the Picts and, well, let’s just say that things got ugly. Starring Michael Fassbender (“Inglourious Basterds”), Dominic West (“The Wire”), and Olga Kurylenko (“Quantum of Solace”), “Centurion” is a dirty, grimy, violent film with no real heroes or villains, merely people fighting for survival.

Marshall made it clear early on that he was to demand a lot of his talented cast. “It was going to be punishing and I made sure to warn everybody in advance. “If you’re going to sign up for this thing, it’s going to be tough.” Luckily, they stood by it and nobody complained despite the physical punishment. With Michael and Dominic, I had auditioned them both for Doomsday. So they were both actors that I really liked and wanted to work with and the opportunity for this one was pretty straightforward. Michael fit like a glove and Dominic is larger-than-life anyway.”



Neil Marshall, Centurion

Photo credit: Magnolia

Everyone on the cast did their own stunts in near-freezing weather with minimal takes on a seven-week shoot. Clearly, filming “Centurion”

was not for the faint of heart. As for stunts, Marshall says, “There were a few stunts that were too dangerous but it was going to be a very physical film and I wanted the actors to BE physical in it. Everybody was warned well in advance how awful it would be...”



Axelle Carolyn, Centurion

Photo credit: Magnolia

“We did all of the fights ourselves,” Carolyn interjects. “We had rehearsals with the stunt people and they were there just in case to make something look good but I don’t think any of that was used. None of us were doubled. There were little things and big things like falling off a cliff but, for me, the only time I had a double was the shot where I get pushed over the wall, they wouldn’t let me do myself. I did ask quite a bit though.”

Carolyn continues, “We had quite a bit of training. I had a few sessions of horse-riding. I had some archery training and some stunt training. I went to the gym quite a bit to build up some strength. It’s not just physical — it’s physical in the cold. It’s fighting the elements as much as who you’re fighting. So you need to have enough stamina to keep going.”

As for why he would choose to shoot a film in the worst possible conditions, Marshall says, “I don’t want the actors to remember to have to shiver. It’s all real...Overall, it was trying to do so much in so little time. We did the whole thing in seven weeks. Very short for this kind of movie. I think the most we ever did was three takes on anything. The actors quickly got up to speed. Everybody was on top of their game. And it helps keep the energy and the momentum up. If you keep everybody moving, it’s the best way. As for individual scenes, obviously the main battle. We only had like three days to do it. Even the fireballs were all real. There’s nothing CG in the film. Everything is for real. And working with a limited amount of extras to make it look as epic as possible. In a lot of those scenes, if you turn the camera a bit, that’s where the battle ends. We were packing it in.”

Naturally, a film about a superpower entering a foreign land and encountering inhabitants they don’t expect or understand is going to be read as an allegory about the war in Iraq. Neil says, “I definitely didn’t intend that reading when I was writing about but I certainly allow room for that reading. It’s kind of like in the ’70s when practically every film that came out was thought to be about Vietnam. This one has a parallel for sure and when I was writing it became apparent that it was about a superpower invading a small country and being defeated by guerilla warfare. It’s interesting that in 2000 years, not much has changed. And I thought I’d leave it at that and if people read that into it, it’s fine. But it’s primarily an action-adventure movie.”



Axelle Carolyn, Centurion

Photo credit: Magnolia

“Centurion” continues a pattern of Marshall films that use very few sets and almost entirely take place outdoors. When asked why this interests the filmmaker, Marshall says, “It’s that I love location filming. I love reality. This is seen, in my mind, as the complete opposite of 300, which is all green-screen, effects, slo-mo, unreal from start to finish. I would take location filming over studio filming any day and I would take studio filming over green-screen filming any day. I just find it kind of soulless. And this is all about the elements, the landscape, the weather — it’s as much a part of the story as the characters are; their journey through it. I very much approached it like a Western with big skies and impressive landscapes. I deliberately chose as well that we would film in the middle of winter in the worst possible conditions.”



Michael Fassbender and Olga Kurylenko, Centurion

Photo credit: Magnolia

As for the films that inspired “Centurion,” they may not be what you expect — “The cavalry movies of John Ford — I see a pretty strong parallel between them. The Romans are like the cavalry and the Picts are like the Comanche. Also, films like Walter Hill movies tonally. First Blood — gritty, rainy, bloody. I really like that feel. Last of the Mohicans. A lot of Westerns.”

While most Westerns have cut-and-dry heroes and villains, “Centurion” really only has one “bad guy” with most of the characters on both sides of the conflict being painted in gray instead of black-and-white. Marshall goes into more depth, “It was something that evolved in the script. I wasn’t interested in having a one-dimensional or two-dimensional villain. I find that if you have a villain with a motivation that you can understand and even sympathize with then it makes them far scarier and obviously makes the film more real. By enhancing their back stories, it makes it much more of an even playing field. I just found that really interesting. It deals with gray areas. It’s far more honest than pretending that there are heroes only on one side.”

With his focus on the elements and on-location filmmaking, you might expect Neil Marshall to push against the trend of 3D filmmaking, but it's actually the opposite and he told us that he's planning a film in 3D called "Burst" "about people exploding in 3D" and to be produced by Sam Raimi. As for the trend, "Certainly, as a filmmaker, I have interest in it as a new tool. My next project is looking like it will be 3D. I want to experiment. I dread the idea that EVERYTHING will be done in 3D. Certain genres work better. Horror being a great example. I don't know. We'll see."

Finally, as the couple were starting to eat, we discussed the lasting power of "The Descent," a film that seems to grow its following every year. Marshall is clearly awed and, as he says, "overwhelmed by it." As to why it's held up, he's not even sure himself other than to say, "It captured some kind of atmosphere or touched on something with people. I think it basically disturbed and scared people."

Check out the next cult hit of Neil Marshall and Axelle Carolyn's with "Centurion," now playing in some markets and expanding to others while also being available currently On Demand and through your Sony Playstation 3 and Microsoft Xbox 360.



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