

Interview: Chris Strompolos of 'RAIDERS! The Story of the Greatest Fan Film Ever Made'

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CHICAGO – When it comes to movie fandom, there are acolytes and obsessives, but few stories are better than three fanboys in 1982, who loved a certain film so much they decided to do a shot-by-shot remake. This is chronicled in the new documentary, “RAIDERS! The Story of the Greatest Fan Film Ever Made.”

Chris Strompolos was one of those boys – he portrayed Indiana Jones in the remake – and he was joined by his childhood friends Eric Zala and Jayson Lamb. They were 11 years old when they started their project, and came back to it in the next seven summers (yes, they aged to teenagers during the process). In 1989, they finally showed the results of their efforts in a local hometown premiere, and promptly left behind their childhood obsession. The 1980s video quality film then went into the underground cult world, until emerging in 2002 at the “Butt-Numb-a-Thon” film festival sponsored by the Ain't It Cool website (and founder Harry Knowles). The result is legendary – the fanboys were in the spotlight again.



Chris Strompolos (center), Jayson Lamb (left) and Eric Zala in 'RAIDERS! The Story of the Greatest Fan Film Ever Made!'

Photo credit: Drafthouse Films

Fast forward to the early years of this decade. In preparation for a documentary about the making of the remake (which became “RAIDERS!...”), the three original boys (now men) put up a Kickstarter campaign to shoot the only scene not in their original adaptation – the airplane scene where a Nazi is decapitated by propellers. The documentary chronicles not only the behind-the-scenes of shooting that sequence, but also the story dubbed, “The Greatest Fan Film Ever Made.”

In anticipation of the Chicago screening – at the Music Box Theatre – of “RAIDERS!,” one of three participants, Chris Strompolos, talked with HollywoodChicago.com about the strange re-emergence of a childhood compulsion that followed Strompolos all the way to middle age. Oh,

and Steven Spielberg makes a cameo appearance.

HollywoodChicago.com: In asking you questions now, I sort of feel like an interviewer when he asks Paul McCartney to talk about The Beatles – long ago and far away. What does it feel like to talk about something that happened when you were a kid, and does it come easy to access that part of your history?

Chris Strompolos: It is a bit anachronistic and strange. The natural human tendency is to evolve forward, and leave the past behind. But it was this very thing, that we did as children, that has been the catalyst for our participation in the film world.

So the last handful of years – with the documentary, the book and all the interviews – has charged us with the odd responsibility of assembling and mining our past to get the facts straight. With that, there is an emotional archeology – no pun intended – to get that stuff in line and make sense of it.

HollywoodChicago.com: I don't recall from the film if this was mentioned, but at what point during the initial process did you and Eric realize that you couldn't go any farther, and what you had is what you were going to get?

Strompolos: By 1989, we had finished. We had done all the scenes, and we felt that we had done all we could do to emulate and pay tribute to the original movie. It was in a viewable format, and it captured what we felt like we wanted to do. By that time, we were all going to college, and that was kind of it. We sailed into the sunset. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the remarkable facts of the film, lost to many people in our current world, is that you accomplished the scripting and much of the filming without a way to replay the film on video or any format. If you can recall, what was the most difficult part to recreate from both your memory and the research that you had gathered?

Strompolos: We worked from memory for the first three years on it, because home entertainment hadn't developed yet. But Eric wanted to be a comic book artist, so over the course of one summer we assembled the Lawrence Kasdan script and any kind of 'Raiders' memorabilia we could get our hands on.

Eric then sat down and hand drew, from memory, over 600 separate storyboards to use as a blueprint. Then when the film did come out on Laserdisc in 1984, we realize that what we had assembled so far was 100% accurate. So to finish it, we had the source, but still relied on those story boards.

HollywoodChicago.com: As I recall, the first time the film was shown beyond your group was at the Ain't It Cool 'Butt-Numb-a-Thon' event. What blew you away about the reaction to that screening, that you didn't expect?

Strompolos: Yes, it was September of 2002, and a multi-generation copy had ended up at that event. That was the first time it was shown in public, totally unbeknownst to Eric, Jayson and I. This started out with a life of its own, and we weren't even there, and at that point had gone our separate ways. We had a world premiere a year later, and that we were involved in, at the Alamo Drafthouse in Austin, Texas – we were all reunited at that time.

That screening was life changing and mind blowing. Not only was I reunited with Eric and Jayson, but also I saw the hundreds of people waiting in line to see the film. We all thought there was something else going on. [laughs] When we realized it was for our film, we were saying out loud, 'don't these people realize they're standing in line to see a crappy Betamax [videotape] movie, that we shot in our backyard?' At the end, we got a standing ovation, and that set things in motion to this point. It was also at that screening that Harry Knowles of the 'Ain't it Cool' website coined the term, 'The Greatest Fan Film Ever Made.'

HollywoodChicago.com: You portrayed Indiana Jones in your epic. What did you notice about Harrison Ford's performance in your multiple viewings, that you brought to the character, and consequently what tips would you give to anyone who might tackle the character of Indiana Jones?

Strompolos: Well first, even though he is one of the biggest movie stars ever, people still don't understand that Harrison Ford is also a very hard working actor. As much as he is viewed as a curmudgeon, the man still worked very hard to create Indiana Jones. His nuances and emotional content in 'Raiders,' along with the difficult physical aspect of the role, was how I empathized with that creation. It really kicked my ass, especially when we redid the 'Nazi plane scene' a few years back.

For anybody who is going to tackle Indiana Jones in the future, it won't be the character they will be compared to, but Harrison Ford. Indy is Harrison, and Harrison is Indy. The iconography of that marriage is so profound in the history of cinema, that the challenge to make it separate will be difficult. One more tip for future Indys – go to the gym [laughs], and know that there are big shoes to fill. Also, keep your hat on.

HollywoodChicago.com: You went back to film the Nazi plane sequence, after raising money to do it on a Kickstarter campaign. How was that, in many ways, more difficult to accomplish since you were no longer children who felt no boundaries?

Strompolos: It was extremely difficult, mainly because we took on the same philosophy as when we were kids – if we're going to do it, let's do it as best we can. In context, there was no difference in the resources we had available, in child vs. adult. But as an adult, you have to push things differently, and so much of it comes down to hard cold cash, and then begging, pleading and leveraging. It was about instilling the value of the project in people's minds, so they would collaborate with us.

The plane scene turned out to be a brutal exercise, while assembling an incredible team of people to pull off a highly sophisticated in-camera action sequence, with a lot less resources than the original production.



Promotional Poster of 'RAIDERS! The Story of the Greatest Fan Film Ever Made!'

Photo credit: Drafthouse Films

HollywoodChicago.com: Like the Beatles, you, Eric and Jayson are somewhat bound for life, or at least bound through the revival of this phenomenon. What was the most difficult moment between old friends, in putting together this documentary and/or bringing the full movie to life. What kind of adult contractual necessities were involved?

Strompolos: That question summarizes the natural protocol of having to put a documentary together that would be interesting. The approach that Eric and I took was if we're going to document this, let's do it warts and all. Let's not shy away from the darker components of the process, it's all got to be on the table. We hoped that the filmmakers – Jeremy Coon and Tim Skousen – would handle the narrative well, and they did.

Eric and I wanted that for the documentary, and basically made a pact to follow through. There was nothing to 'get over,' we'd gotten over everything. We talked through it all, and we signed everything. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: How about Jayson?

Strompolos: With Jayson, he is a bit different, and is the dissenting voice, but even as kids he was the dissenting voice. However, I believe it made our chemistry awesome. The trio needed some friction, and that is what made the whole process work. With this documentary, the resurgence of the past, and in getting Jayson to come on board, it was all about including him.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were blessed by the great Steven Spielberg for the adaptation. Was there anything you specifically wanted to ask him in your meeting, and were you able to get a satisfactory answer from it?

Strompolos: Well, in those sorts of meetings you don't really go into it with any specific questions, because a lot of the meeting is taken up by the fact that you're trying not to pee yourself, because you're meeting Steven Spielberg. [laughs] 'Holy shit, I'm talking to Steven Spielberg!'

We basically were all in a child-like state, but it was everything I ever wanted in meeting him. He was extremely warm, encouraging and paternal. He did say a couple things, primarily that he had watched the film and it had inspired him. That was a wonderful takeaway.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did he give you any advice beyond that feedback?

Strompolos: Eric did ask that one question at the end. It was, 'as far as forging a career in the film industry, what advice do you have?' He basically said 'choose the story you want to tell, and tell it to the best of your ability.' That's very simple, very zen, but it really is true.

HollywoodChicago.com: Final question, what is your ranking of the other three Indiana Jones movies, worse to first?

Strompolos: There will be disagreement, and a lot of it is generational, but the order of preference pretty much follows the timeline of their releases. Worst to first, 'Kingdom of the Crystal Skull,' 'The Last Crusade,' and 'Temple of Doom.'

"RAIDERS! The Story of the Greatest Fan Film Every Made" will screen at the Music Box Theatre – 3733 North Southport Avenue, Chicago, beginning on June 17th, 2016. Chris Strompolos will make an appearance at the Music Box Theatre on June 19th, [click here](#) [15] for details and to purchase tickets. For more information about the the "Raiders Guys" adaptation, [click here](#). [16]



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