EMPIRE WINTER PREVIEW

Mount Doom

Empire hits Everest's base camp to experience new heights in the extreme survival genre

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EVEREST

THE TRUE-LIFE DISASTER MOVIE | OUT **SEPTEMBER 18**

Top: Rob Hall (Jason Clarke) and Scott Fischer (Jake Gyllenhaal) debate what will get chapped next. **Above:** Seaborn Beck Weathers (Josh Brolin) joins Hall (Clarke) for a gentle afternoon stroll.

ROUCHED BENEATH A CRYSTALLINE-BLUE ICE buttress, rocking back and forth on crampons, Jason Clarke is showing **Empire** his holiday pics.

"Straight down, dude," the Australian grins, swiping at his iPad. "Literally straight down 12,000 feet. We were going along with ice-axes. Sixty-mile-an-hour winds, it was. And that's the ridge-line there. Yeah, dude, it's a fucking ridge-line. Marty (*Henderson*) was on the middle and our guide Paul was on the other side, which was still death. If one of us had *slipped*..."

They call it 'summit fever': the mania that grips otherwise rational men and women, driving them to pit themselves against Earth's most monstrous peaks. Clarke's act of derring-do, a trek up New Zealand's Tasman Glacier over Christmas 2013, required *cojones* of titanium. But next to the ultimate mountaineering challenge, the subject of the movie the star is currently shooting and the reason he was cliffhanging in the first place, it was the equivalent of a tricycle ride around the park.

As the marketing for Everest has trumpeted, the top of "the Big E" is, at 29,029 feet, as high as the cruising altitude of a passenger jet. Oxygen is scarce, the temperature scouringly cold. A rogue storm can blow in on a dime and make descent impossible. Put simply, humans were not built to be there. But for at least the past century, people have tried. When asked, before his third attempt in 1923, why he continued to put himself through hell in his pursuit of the wind-lashed vertex, George Leigh Mallory replied, "Because it's there."

The slopes of Earth's highest mountain are littered with frozen corpses, at least 200 of them. The area above 26,000 feet is even known, like a particularly gnarly area of The Crystal Maze, as the 'Death Zone'. This is where, in 1996, the most notorious disaster in Everest history played out. There have been numerous books written about it, with titles like Left For Dead. Magazine think-pieces and documentaries have sifted through the facts, attributing blame and recounting horrific details. And now, almost two decades after the tragedy that left nine extra bodies on the mountain's icy shanks, there is a big-budget 3D feature film, with a crackerjack ensemble cast and cutting-edge VFX.

"I think the right amount of time has now lapsed," says producer Tim Bevan, who has shepherded the Working Title/Universal project for a decade. "What's important is to try to go places where not everyone else is going in cinema. And no-one has gone up Everest."

THERE WERE TALKS, EARLY ON, OF SHOOTING EVEREST entirely via greenscreen. After all, Gravity recreated space; why not mock up this equally unforgiving environment with pixels?

That all changed once the director came onboard. Icelandic filmmaker Baltasar Kormákur is a rugged outdoorsman. He was once nearly fatally trampled by a horse, while he turned down a chance to compete in an Olympics sailing event so he could continue at theatre school. For his movie The Deep, he spent hours in freezing water so he could steady the body of his lead actor. "Baltasar is a tough Viking," says producer Nicky Kentish Barnes. "He's all about endurance."

There was no question, then, of him crafting this tale of survival on a temperature-controlled soundstage. "That's not the kind of filmmaking I'm interested in," shrugs Kormákur, who has the brooding good looks of Eric Bana. "I'm interested in going places. In Iceland we like to push to the limit. And a movie shot completely in a studio, you have too much control. Eventually you end up with something totally dead and you don't know where that death started."

Instead, he pushed for the first two portions of the 67-day shoot to take place on actual mountainsides. First, Everest visited Everest, with the production flying into Nepal in January 2014. They discovered that even getting there was rife with peril. "Lukla is known as the most dangerous airport in the world," notes Kormákur. "It's a huge bowl, so to leave you have to basically throw yourself off the mountain. There was a crashed heli where we landed. I think someone had died."

Near the Everest base camp, and later up the Dolomites range in Italy, cast and crew discovered what they were made of. It was the equivalent of shooting The Towering Inferno in a real burning building, a gruelling endeavour of the type rarely seen in big-budget filmmaking today. "You don't have to act much when you're at the real altitude and it's minus 20," says Jake Gyllenhaal, who plays Scott Fischer, leader of the Mountain Madness expedition, one of several competing to make the ascent. "At points in time it got so cold that we were on the edge of frostbite. You get a little scared, you know? And that fear is an interesting feeling."

"It got so cold, we were on the edge of frostbite."
Jake Gyllenhaal

Above: Director Baltasar Kormákur lends a hand.

Jason Clarke — who, as well as that Tasman Glacier trek scaled Ben Nevis alongside co-star Martin Henderson as prep-work — plays gregarious Kiwi Rob Hall, leader of the Adventure Consultants expedition. John Hawkes is wiry Seattle postal worker Doug Hansen. Josh Brolin is Seaborne Beck Weathers, a "nerdy Texan" with right-wing views who, says Brolin, "probably shouldn't have been climbing Everest".

Thrown together as near strangers, the stars bonded between shivering fits. In the Himalayas, they helped haul camera equipment — "They were basically donkeys," grins Kormákur — and hunkered down at night under electric blankets in a ratty hostel. "The food was horrible," the director grimaces. "I don't want to be insulting to the locals, but it wasn't something you'd want to eat." Hawkes remembers it being too cold to read his book: "You couldn't do anything but lie there. I had to bash the ice out of my socks in the mornings."

In the Alps, at least, there was an improvement in the cuisine. "A lot of fucking wine and pasta," laughs Clarke. I was calling John 'Seven-Course Hawkes', because he'd take the whole menu. He was going, 'They're not too bad, these Europeans...'"

THERE'S A JOKE AMONG CLIMBERS: "THREE attributes of a good mountaineer are high pain threshold, bad memory and... I forget the third." What they're making light of is the fact that, at a certain altitude, your brain cells start to die. That's one side-effect of extreme height. Other symptoms read like the side of a pill bottle you don't want to go anywhere near: insomnia, fatigue, dizziness, vomiting, amnesia, hallucinations... When you climb a mountain, you're battling not just the elements, but your own body.

Roughly 16,000 feet up Everest, the film crew didn't experience the whole shopping list, but got more than enough of a taste. "There's something trying about it," says Brolin. "We all lost 15lb up there, even though we were eating more than we usually did. Your body's just working so hard." Even the hardy Kormákur found himself struggling. "We couldn't have the time we really needed to acclimatise. The actors were getting really moody, and people started getting sick. Real sick. Myself, I was just trying to fake that I was alright, not showing that my head was splitting. Finally I tried to shoot a small scene outside a tent, and it was the worst scene I've ever shot in my entire life. It was not usable in any way. After seeing the footage I was like, 'This is no way to put this film together.'"

Negotiating Everest's Khumbu Icefall and its plunging abyss. **Below:** Setting the scene: on location at one of Everest's base camps.

And so the next phase began. While a two-man camera crew prepped to head all the way up to the peak of Everest to shoot wide shots and background plates, the production made a pit-stop at Cinecittà Studios in Rome, then hunkered down at Pinewood in the UK, where the 007 Stage was transformed into the apex of the planet. This is where, in summer 2014, **Empire** is treated to Clarke's iPad slideshow.

"Let it snow! Let it snow!" yells a crewmember through a megaphone, cueing an instant indoor blizzard. Clarke tucks away his tablet, straps on his bulky backpack (stuffed with bubble-wrap) and clambers back into position. It's an incredible sight: the giant soundstage is filled with huge, artificial ice-crags, one 40 feet high, while at its centre is a plunging abyss. This is the Khumbu Icefall, one of the most perilous sections of the Everest ascent. For today's scene the actors have to inch across the six rickety ladders, strapped together, that span the crevasse.

This is all a lot more cushy than they've been used to. But Kormákur is grappling with a new problem: it's not cold *enough*. For one thing, the faux snow is not cutting it. "It gets in the actors' eyes," he explains with a head-shake. "Soap flakes are okay for spin-drift, and potato works for a few things. But if potato gets stuck in a beard, it looks like you have potato in your beard." To compound matters, several actors have intense third-act scenes coming up. Gyllenhaal's big moment was shot on a real mountain so cold his nose-hairs froze, and the new close-ups need to match its verisimilitude.

After much head-scratching, the solution turns out to be simple. "We imported from Holland loads of real snow," says Kormákur a year on. "Then we filled a huge plastic box with it, dropped the temperature down to zero and blew real snow at the actors." He smiles. "It's the weirdest thing I've ever done."

EVEREST IS A TALE OF PRIDE, HUBRIS, BRAGGADOCIO, bad luck and dodgy decisions. There will be moments of chilling horror and feats of extraordinary heroism. There will be breathtaking, wind-scoured vistas. There will be 3D yaks.

"The movie is about the edges of human endeavour."

Tim Bevan

"It's about the edges of human endeavour," is Tim Bevan's elevator pitch. "It's not a crampon movie. It's a movie with huge characters and gigantic emotions, that happens to be set on a mountain. Our main concern is that you care about these people putting themselves through the most gruelling conditions. And then every now and again you punch the most amazing image that you could possibly imagine. Just stunning beauty."

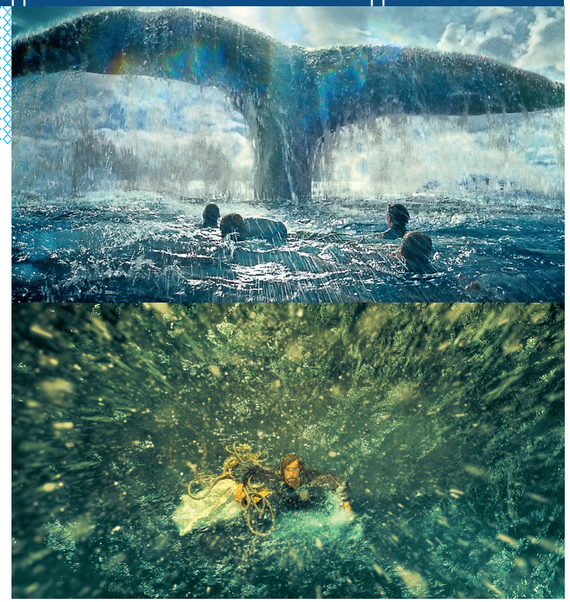
High of concept and high of budget, Everest has the potential to icepick its way to the top of the box-office chart. The precedents are encouraging: even the ropey Vertical Limit was a surprise hit in its day. But the movie could also be a serious award-season contender. The script, based primarily on Beck Weathers' book, is by Simon Beaufoy (Slumdog Millionaire) and William Nicholson (Gladiator), not the kind of writers who turn out Cliffhangers.

Spectacle's all well and good. But Baltasar Kormákur admits that the biggest hook for him was the chance to explore the psychology of those who strap on boots, knowing they're playing Russian roulette against a mind-bogglingly big, bastard rock. Since his film began shooting, 39 more lives have been claimed by Everest, most during the avalanche in April this year.

"A lot of people condemn climbers who do these things," says the director. "And I wouldn't do it myself, especially given what's happened in Nepal lately on the mountain. But I understand them a lot more than I understand those who spend all their time in their mother's basement with a computer. It's like jumping from an airplane or speed-driving. You're risking your life... but what's the point of having life if you're not going to live fully?"

EVEREST IS OUT ON SEPTEMBER 18 AND WILL BE REVIEWED IN THE NEXT ISSUE.

ALTERNATIVELY...



IN THE HEART OF THE SEA

FROM THE HIGHEST PEAK TO THE FIERCEST OCEAN...

OUT **DECEMBER 26**

"IT WAS BRUTAL," SAYS CHRIS Hemsworth of the 19th-century seafaring at the heart of Ron Howard's In The Heart Of The Sea. "Basically, it was like being in the trenches. They went away for two or three years, ridiculously young. On many occasions there were all sorts of disasters."

The "disasters" that befall the crew of Nantucket whaling ship The Essex include huge squalls, drowning, an unprecedented attack by a furious sperm whale, shipwreck and starvation. The spectre of cannibalism also haunts the crew, played by Hemsworth, Benjamin Walker, Cillian Murphy and new Spider-Man Tom Holland.

"They don't make movies like this anymore," says Murphy. "It's about belief, conviction and strength of mind over body. It's also a film about friendship and loyalty. It's one of those films you get so satisfied by because you go to a place you would never normally go to."

Originally set for a March release, In The Heart Of The Sea bobbed back to its current December date because Howard reckons "it's more of that early-winter kind of feel in terms of the tone". This shift may also relate to the awards-friendly literary elements of the yarn. The events on which it's based became the inspiration for Herman Melville's Moby Dick and the author is featured in a framing device, played by Ben Whishaw. But Howard's film, drawn from Nathaniel Philbrick's non-fiction account, adds a different focus.

"Occasionally it felt like it was going to take the shape of a Boy's Own adventure but then reality kept rearing its head," says Howard, who has now moved on to his third Dan Brown thriller, Inferno. "There is a tremendous survival story that is there in the story. It's just not what Melville chose to write about."

IAN FREER