

WORDS MATT GLASBY

SFX WHIZ GARETH EDWARDS FACED SOME VERY REAL DANGERS WHILE SHOOTING HIS FANTASTIC CREATURE FEATURE DEBUT IN MEXICO. HERE BE MONSTERS...

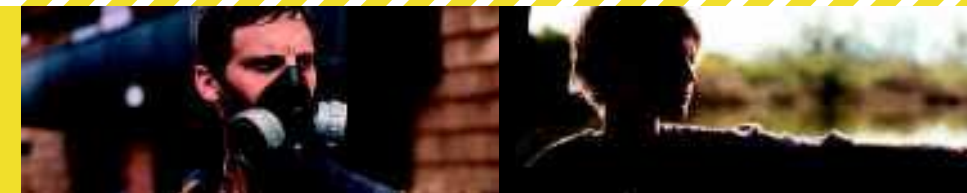


WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Part safari, part sci-fi flick, *Monsters* brings a much-missed ingredient back to its much-maligned genre: wonder. At the terrible beauty of the world around us. At the love and cruelty human beings are capable of. Oh yeah, and at the massive CG space squids that have colonised Mexico.

"It's a sci-fi, road movie, love story with giant creatures in it," explains star Whitney Able with some difficulty. No, "It's *Lost In Translation*, set in Mexico, with aliens," offers

The great divide: (right) real-life couple Scoot McNairy and Whitney Able cross Mexico's 'infected zone' to get home in Gareth Edwards' *Monsters*.



British writer/director/SFXer Gareth Edwards. At least everyone can agree on the following, from co-star Scoot McNairy: "It's not at all the film you think you're going to see."

He's not wrong. While *Cloverfield* strapped a romance to a well-oiled action narrative, and *District 9* was as much shoot-em-up as political allegory, the largely improvised, ultra low-budget *Monsters* (no official figure, but estimates run as low as \$15,000) subverts expectations at every turn. It's perhaps best described as a modern day *African Queen* with sky-high extra-terrestrial antagonists patrolling the margins of the tale, but even that only tells part of the story. "If you know exactly what it's going to be," says Edwards, "you don't need to see it." Trust us, you need to see this.

"NO ONE IN THE FILM, EVEN THE FILMMAKER, KNEW WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT."

GARETH EDWARDS

Set six years after a Nasa space probe has crashed over Mexico, the film follows McNairy, a photojournalist, and Able, his boss' daughter,

as they journey through the "infected zone" of Central America. Within this containment area, our many-tentacled guests fuck, fight and flatten things. This usually happens in the background but occasionally, terrifyingly, the creatures get up close and personal, the CGI-trained Edwards whipping up some suspenseful set-pieces on his laptop.

But the film's real genius is in concentrating on the mundane as much as the monstrous. The squids might be building-sized and dangerous as hell, but they are treated like rampaging illegal immigrants - think *Alien Nation*, but not shit - and Edwards paints this parallel universe from the ground up: barely glimpsed news reports, carefully placed CG signage and hurricane-flattened settlements (more on which later) bearing testament to serious monster mashing. Who needs a Statue of Liberty thrown straight at the screen to conjure a not-so-brave new world?

Appropriately for a film that's as much travelogue as creature feature, the idea came to Edwards on holiday. "I saw these fisherman pulling a net out of the ocean," he explains.

"They were teasing me with it, struggling with it, and I thought it would be really funny if when they got it open, inside was a giant sea monster. What was interesting about the image was that they weren't reacting to it, because obviously they couldn't see it, and so I started thinking of a monster movie that's set years after monster movies normally end, when everyone's just carrying on as normal. The extra appeal is that it would be really cheap to film, because none of the people in the background would be bothered by any of the CG stuff I was going to put in, and that would add to the realism."

Adding to the realism even more was the casting of McNairy (*In Search Of A Midnight Kiss*) and his real-life girlfriend (now wife), Able (*All The Boys Love Mandy Lane*). "We went down there with the notion that people who date and work together - it's the kiss of death," says Able. "We said if we can get through this we can get married, and so we did." Forced to choose between his debut feature's European premiere and his leads' American nuptials, Edwards picked the latter. >>

'THERE'S A LEVEL BEYOND THE MONSTER MOVIE, BUT WE'RE NOT TRYING TO PREACH'

GARETH EDWARDS



"LET'S JUST GO OUT THERE, FAIL, AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS."

SCOOT MCNAIRY

It wouldn't be the only time that art would imitate life. As Edwards, his actors, and a tiny crew shot guerrilla-style across Guatemala, Belize, Mexico and Texas, the film began to mimic its own making, incorporating people and places discovered along the way into its loose, unspooling narrative. "Our real lives and the storylines were bleeding in and out of each other during the entire trip," says Able. One scene has McNairy and Able, who are travelling through the jungle by boat, beset by otherworldly noises from the trees. "That's us waiting for some sandwiches to be delivered," laughs Edwards. "It felt sacrilegious to stop filming... Then these howler monkeys started screaming in the trees, so the reactions you see in the film are real."

More rumbles in the jungle were to follow. McNairy remembers "hiking through the trees at four in the morning with one flashlight. We had to stay in a really tight group because there were insurgents around. If they come across you there, they'll just kill you and bury you." Edwards, meanwhile, encountered some creatures of the non-CG variety. "The first day we got to our hotel at night and they're like, 'Scoot, Whitney, you're in this room, Gareth you're down just past the tigers,'" says McNairy. "We all kind of laughed, 'Oh, that's funny, tigers.' But sure enough his room was next to two Bengal tigers enclosed in chicken wire. Apparently the drug lords like to keep exotic animals to show their presence. I was floored." "I had a bad back because of filming," says the director. "I was limping and hobbling, but when I walked past these tigers, I had a miraculous recovery..."

If it all sounds a little too *Apocalypse Now* for comfort, the comparisons aren't lost on anyone. "Apparently Coppola was in Belize while we were, because he owns a restaurant



Going bump: (above) Andrew (Scoot McNairy) and Samantha (Whitney Able) hear strange noises coming from the rainforest; (below) extraterrestrial 'spores' grow on the trees – is this where the 'monsters' come from?



there," says Edwards. "We had these fantasies about going through the jungle in a boat and then pulling up somewhere along the river to find Coppola sitting there having gone completely off the rails." Although this meeting of mavericks never materialised, *Monsters* still bares all the scars and serendipities of its unorthodox shoot. "I think *Apocalypse Now* was a little bit more of a struggle," laughs McNairy, "but I would put us near the edited version of that. Even though Coppola was incredibly ambitious with that film, I feel like it was just as ambitious for us to do it with a skeleton crew and make a film that happened as it happened."

"THERE WAS ALWAYS DISASTER ON THE HORIZON, OR AT OUR HEELS."

WHITNEY ABLE

With a tiny budget, little experience and no script – the filmmakers used blue and black pages of keywords, one side physical, one side emotional, to map out what narrative leaps each new location might allow – the 31-year-old, first-time director was, justifiably, bricking it. "We had these little camcorders so we could do video diaries," he says. "I've never told anyone this actually, but I did a little piece to camera the night before the first day of the shoot and I unloaded all my thoughts about the film. In the morning my main priority was to delete it, because I'd aired all my fears about how it could all go drastically wrong."

"We were in a Guatemalan market and a guy pulled a gun on another guy and put it up to his head," says McNairy. "All of a sudden the cops start sprinting past me shouting, 'Run!' and I'm like, 'Alright, I should probably run now...'" The residents of the quiet mountain town of Creel, Mexico, weren't quite so lucky. "Two weeks before we got there, a drug lord came in and mowed down an entire restaurant," recalls Able. "There were 13 coffins on the street, two of them were baby coffins... Scoot and I had a moment, we sat and it was raining and we were looking at the coffins, and it was just so real and raw." Says an incredulous McNairy: "I just couldn't believe it. What could the drug lords possibly monopolise on? There's nothing there." Edwards is keen to stress, though, that "just round the corner is danger, but there's beautiful landscapes and the nicest people you could meet, too. It's that kind of contrast I wanted to put in the film."

Though armed guards laid on by the government accompanied the crew through Central America, the leads' US homecoming was scarcely less traumatic. One of the film's most indelible sequences was shot in the all-but-obliterated town of Galveston, Texas

in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike – like one of *The Road's* decimated cityscapes, sans SFX. "It was still so fresh," says Able. "There were people standing outside their houses, which were hardly recognisable, collecting their belongings which were spread out everywhere." Of course, those who seek monsters had better be careful they don't become monsters themselves. "We were shooting by this woman who had just lost her entire house," says McNairy, "then her dog came outside and someone ran it over. I said, 'Stop filming, this isn't about us.' I can't imagine what it's like to lose everything and then lose that one extra thing. It's like when all is lost, how much more can someone take?"

"THERE WERE MONSTERS. FOR REAL. ALL AROUND US."

WHITNEY ABLE

As outlandish fictions and exotic realities intertwine on screen, *Monsters* gains a strange, rolling resonance far beyond most films of its



Lonely planet: (below) Andrew (McNairy) plans the treacherous journey back to the USA; (bottom) Andrew and Samantha (Able) hit the road – but will they survive the infected zone?

genre. "When you're opportunistic and you hand so much control over to the environment and the people, some of that will inevitably start affecting the film," explains Edwards. As the keener metaphor-spotters among you may have gathered, the apparently unambiguous title has multiple meanings – even to the filmmakers themselves.

"The drug trafficking situation in Mexico is a thousand times worse than you think it can be," says McNairy. "It gives you a different outlook when you're back in LA and you're seeing people partying. I don't look at them like recreational drugs anymore, I look on them as a couple of children lost." His wife agrees: "I've never said this before in an interview and I don't know if it'll make sense, but there are a lot of drugs in Hollywood, and when I came back I wanted to shake people and say, 'Don't you understand? When you're going out to the clubs, doing cocaine, it's blood, it's family members killed, it's baby coffins.'"

But part of *Monsters'* power is in the fluidity of the central metaphor, which refers both to the outsiders themselves – be they aliens, immigrants, unfortunates – and those who treat them as such. "You draw from real-world scenarios to help justify these crazy situations to people, and inevitably you end up bringing up questions about immigration, or the war on terror, or the way people behave..." says Edwards. "There's a level beyond the monster movie, but we're also trying not to preach. It's more trying to throw up thoughts, ideas and questions – we don't have all the answers."

Answers or not, *Monsters* manages to achieve what great sci-fi should and almost never does. It makes you gaze in wonder at the screen, and then, when you leave the cinema, look at your own world again, anew. **TF**

Monsters opens on 12 November and will be reviewed next issue. For more go to totalfilm.com

MONSTER HITS

More low-budget breakthroughs...

SLACKERS 1991
Shot for \$23,000, Richard Linklater's debut is credited along with *sex, lies and videotape* for jumpstarting the US indie scene.

EL MARIACHI 1992
Writer/director/editor/composer Robert Rodriguez famously sold his body to science to finance his bullet-ridden \$7,000 actioner.

CLERKS 1994
Kevin Smith maxed out 10 credit cards and sold off his beloved comic books to raise the \$27,575 he needed to make his geekcom.

SWINGERS 1996
Doug Liman's indie may have been "money", but its \$200K budget wasn't. Still, it launched the careers of Jon Favreau and Vince Vaughn.

CUBE 1997
Cleverly making one 14x14ft set look like hundreds of cells, Vincenzo Natali created an endless mind-maze on a \$57,000 shoestring.

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT 1999
Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's \$20,000 shock-doc browned collective trouser with its geniusly thrifty conceit.

NAPOLEON DYNAMITE 2004
Jared Hess' MTV-backed comedy became an instant cult phenomenon, returning \$46m from its \$400,000 budget.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2009
For an outlay of \$11,000, first-time director Oren Peli adapted his own home to shoot this hellacious account of a haunting in suburbia.

'I THINK APOCALYPSE NOW WAS MORE OF A STRUGGLE... BUT I'D PUT OUR SHOOT NEAR THAT'

SCOOT MCNAIRY

