

Director: Michael J. Bassett
 Stars: James Purefoy,
 Pete Postlethwaite
 Release date: 19/02/10



MICHAEL J. BASSETT

(writer/director *Solomon Kane*)

INTERVIEW BY DANIEL ANDERSON

Ahead of the impending release of the fantasy action film *Solomon Kane*, Click caught up with the writer/director to discuss dark characters, children's TV programmes and doing justice to a pulp fiction legend.

CLICK: How would you describe *Solomon Kane*?

MJB: It's a heroic fantasy action adventure set in the 16th century telling the story of a brutal and violent naval captain who discovers he has forfeited his soul through his terrible deeds and has to find a path to redemption. You can tell I've said that a few times now can't you! It's based on Robert E. Howard's classic character of Solomon Kane but with an original story by me. It's not a kid's fantasy movie but is much more sombre and dark in tone whilst following a classic redemption story structure.

CLICK: How was it making the leap from your previous, smaller budget films to this much bigger undertaking?

MJB: The process is the same and planning is just as critical. Though this was a bigger budget I was trying to do more and bigger things so there was still never enough time or money, though the schedule was longer and the train set bigger. It was always a desperate struggle to get it done and in the end, some cool things had to be left by the wayside. There's a budget figure for Kane which is mentioned around the place which is vastly more than the amount of money I really had to make this film.

So the key to ensuring every dollar of the budget ended up on the screen was preparation. I thoroughly storyboarded

every scene and had a very clear idea of how I wanted it to look. Communicating that clearly to my colleagues and then developing their input too was hugely important. There were crew members on this film who had made dozens of films over the years and their knowledge is vital.

CLICK: You wrote *Deathwatch* as well but not *Wilderness* – do you prefer working from your own script?

MJB: I feel a greater sense of authorship if I write the scripts myself but really these days I'd be happy to take on a very cool project that someone else has originated. I've done various re-writes of other people's scripts that I'm attached to and once I've done my draft I always feel much closer to the material. With *Wilderness* I did do a

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very comprehensive re-write that pushed the violence and darkness of the characters whilst retaining the basic details of the original script.

In many ways it's much harder work when you write your own scripts as there's an extra burden on you during production because if something needs fixing then there's no one else to turn to for support. It makes the days a hell of a lot longer; I like the challenge but it can be exhausting. Ironically, when I'm writing I just want to be out shooting a movie and when I'm in the middle of the chaos of shooting, I just want to be at home peacefully writing – I guess I'll never be happy.

CLICK: Do you think marketing it in terms of Conan does it any favours as the characters are quite different?

MJB: Conan is a very, very famous character so inevitably that's going to be used, simply to get people to pay attention but I think the focus has been more on

Robert E. Howard as the creator of both characters rather than trying to imply to anyone that they're in any way similar. Truth is I have absolutely no influence on how the financiers and distributors choose to sell the film. Once I'm done with making it, it's kind of just taken away and little by little I hear about trailers, posters, release dates, etc. Mostly these are simply business decisions and not creative – each distributor has an idea how to reach their audience and you have to respect that. *Kane* is really quite a small film in a world of *Avatars*, *Clash of the Titans*, etc so whatever gives us a profile is fine by me. The only danger is that you could be accused of mis-selling

the film. As a fan, I hate it when that happens so I've tried to use what little influence I have at this stage to try and keep the marketing materials reasonably representative of the movie.

CLICK: Why do you think Conan has been given more attention in the media (movies, video games, etc)?

MJB: Conan (in the books at least) is a trickster, adventurer and lover as well as a warrior. He has huge appetites and is a vigorous and virile hero – despite his moments of great melancholy. I think he's a simpler character to understand than the darker and more complex Solomon Kane. And Howard wrote many, many more stories about him. Kane is really the antithesis of that – much more grim and serious. For my money Kane is more interesting, dark and complex but not everyone wants that. Conan also exists in a fully realized fantasy world so is very much more self contained. Hopefully my film will introduce a few

more people to the books so they can discover Kane for themselves. And also it's a self fulfilling prophecy – Conan is more famous so more know about him which means games developers, comic book publishers and film producers feed that existing awareness rather than trying to create a new brand to exploit. That's one of our challenges - finding an audience for an unknown character in a genre that has never really been served so well cinematically. I respect the producers for taking on that challenge and the financial risk it involves.

CLICK: Were you inspired by any other movies? (perhaps *Brotherhood of the Wolf*?)

MJB: I was inspired by other fantasy movies in a negative way; they showed me the kind of movie I knew I didn't want to make. I didn't want to make a fantasy movie that seemed to be embarrassed by what it was and felt the need to wink at its audience and be knowingly ironic about the fact there were sorcerers and monsters and damsels in distress. I wanted a world that felt grim and lived in and harsh and that the characters believed in. I love fantasy but can honestly say that there have very few fantasy films that I ever really liked because they just didn't take the genre seriously. Of course, *The Lord of the Rings* managed to rise above pretty much anything that went before it but three films in a whole genre is not very inspiring. I'm not saying I hate all fantasy films but unlike sci-fi where I think there are many real classics, I'm not entirely sure fantasy has had that yet. I'm not claiming that *Solomon Kane* is breaking new ground or anything but I think it does sit in a small niche of its own by being a serious-minded fantasy adventure.

By the way, I really admired *Brotherhood of the Wolf* and thought Christophe Gans made a terrific film. Samuel Hadida, who produced *Brotherhood*, also produced *Kane* so I think he saw the convergence as well. I thought the photography of *Brotherhood* was simply stunning so managed to persuade Dan Laustsen, the DP on *Brotherhood*, to come on board *Kane* and to my mind he does his best work yet. I really love the photography of my film.

CLICK: How did you come to cast James Purefoy as the lead?

MJB: It was a pretty easy call. I'd known James for a few years and had wanted to make something with him for a while. We'd planned to make a contemporary thriller but it never happened. When I was casting for *Kane* it was important to me that the actor needed to be a real man and there are only a handful of Brits who have that kind of presence. James is one of them but I think he's too often played the good looking romantic character. I loved what he did with Mark Anthony in 'Rome', revealing a nice line in sleaze and cruelty, and felt he could go even further and become a really classic movie hero-type. We met and talked about it and it was instantly very clear we were on the same page and excited about the potential of these stories. James is a really fit guy, rides brilliantly and knows his way round a sword so all that was something I knew I could use and enhance. I think *Solomon Kane* is, hands down, his best performance and I know he's very proud of it too. I hope it makes other directors and producers see him in a new light so he can get his teeth into other really meaty roles.

CLICK: How did your screenings go in Canada – isn't that the first time the public has seen *Solomon Kane*?

MJB: The Toronto Film Festival was the world premiere outing back in September and we played to a full house with lines around the block. I remember sitting in the car driving to the theatre with James Purefoy and seeing all these people lined up around the block and saying to James "Oh shit, I wonder which film is playing at the same time as *Kane*. It's going to make us look really bad." and then realising they were for our film. It's nice to experience that. The response was terrific and people seemed really taken with the movie.

CLICK: At the Toronto screening, Purefoy suggested you pushed the cast and crew hard in some very challenging conditions – a point which was also made on *Deathwatch* and *Wilderness* – do you think that extra effort comes out on the screen?

MJB: I like challenging productions and I expect to work hard and be pushed so I guess I did push everyone else pretty hard too. But the trick is to surround yourself with people who embrace that and I was fortunate enough to have a great cast and crew who gave their all. But that's all part of the desire to get as much done and to make as good a film as possible. It also kind of boils down to budget again; I wanted to make a film that looked far more expensive than it really was and felt like a 'big' picture. The only way to get that was to plan, collaborate and drive everything forwards all the time. It's easy when those people around you feel the same way and part of my job is to lead by example and show my passion for what I'm doing. I'm not a screamer and though I occasionally lose my temper I want the film making experience to be challenging but positive. No one else on the set carries the same pressures as the director but then again, neither does anyone else have that joy of trying to create something they can claim a real sense of authorship over. Sometimes the extra effort doesn't entirely come out on the screen but you've got to go there.

CLICK: Tell us how you went from voicing and operating Scally the Dog on *CITV* to writing and directing a 40 million dollar action adventure film? [We had to ask!]

MJB: Oh boy, I wish it had been \$40million dollars! Every time I read a budget number for *Kane* it seems to have doubled. The producers wouldn't thank me for offering an exact figure, so I won't but just don't believe all you read.

And as for the other thing, yeah, you found me out... I started as a children's TV presenter specialising in science

and nature when I was 17 because my initial ambition was, I suppose, to be David Attenborough. It never really worked out, mostly because I was only 17 years old and not a very good presenter.

When the TV presenting dried up and I was beginning to seriously think about trying to become a writer and director I was offered the chance to co-host all the children's shows on ITV in the afternoon. It was live TV and I was to do all the links between the programmes and interview the celebs of the day. The catch was, I had to do this as a puppet dog character called 'Scally'. I had great fun making up the silly voices and generally behaving badly. Because it was all live nothing exists anymore to prove otherwise [I hope] [alas YouTube says otherwise Michael!]. But it was fabulous, awful and hilarious chaos every afternoon for a year.

CLICK: Your characters are rarely traditional heroes, why are you drawn to these kinds of protagonists?

MJB: I just think anti-heroes are more interesting than regular heroes. They have longer character arcs and I can generally explore more interesting ideas. Dramatically, I'm drawn to the darker genres and subject matter. In *Deathwatch* I wanted to have a cross section of characters dealing with a horrific experience. With *Wilderness* I was handed the idea of these criminals being the protagonists and just felt they should be as nasty as possible because it would be more interesting to see how bad kids deal with a worse situation. And *Kane*, well he's got the perfect heroic arc – from darkness to light. I'm not quite sure what I'd do with a story about a genuinely good and undamaged character – I suppose I wouldn't be very interested in it.

CLICK: Do you hope that this film makes people seek out Robert E. Howard's originals?

MJB: I made Solomon Kane for people who had absolutely no idea who the character was and didn't care. I hope that after seeing the movie they become interested enough to seek out the stories and learn more about him for themselves. The more people who discover Howard the better as far as I'm concerned.

CLICK: What have the reactions been like from the territories where *Kane* has been released [France, Spain, Russia]?

MJB: I stopped following reviews and opinions a few months ago when the flood of voices just became too much to follow. It can be somewhat paralysing and at some point the film just has to go out into the world and stand or fall on its own merits. There's nothing I can do now beyond hoping that the marketing people do a good job. It seems to me that the reaction to the release so far has been pretty positive. Most of the early reviews from hardcore genre fans were really amazingly good, so for a while it seemed *Kane* was a film that other reviewers wanted to shoot down. Now with a much wider audience we've had the usual mixed bag of reviews; some really bad, some middling and some really positive but I guess the same that most movies get these days. What I want is for the audience to go and decide for themselves. ◀



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