

SPOTLIGHT ON SPIELBERG



In a close encounter with Hollywood's greatest director, **Gabrielle Donnelly** learns how Steven Spielberg's latest plan to film the adventures of legendary Belgian boy reporter Tintin owes much to the *Indiana Jones* series

THE FANS OF Tintin, the adventure-prone boy reporter with the dog in the iconic action comic strips by Belgian artist Hergé, are legion. It seems almost too appropriate, therefore, that when it comes to making the film of the books – a trilogy of films, in fact, the first of which is due to hit the big screen in 2009 – the director should be Hollywood's own leading icon among action directors, Mr. Steven Spielberg. With their trademark blends of adventure and humour, their strong visual styles and simple stories focusing on unabashed entertainment, the works of Spielberg and Hergé seem a match made in heaven.

Yet surprisingly, when I meet Spielberg in Beverly Hills this spring, he tells me he did not discover Hergé's work until after he himself had already hit the big time with his own, famous *Indiana Jones* adventure series.

'In fact,' he says, 'it was when *Raiders of the Lost Ark* came out that I read a review in a magazine which compared it to Tintin, and I'd never even heard of him. I asked my assistant, "What is this Tintin?" So she went to find out and came back with five books, all in French, which I don't understand. But I didn't need to read the captions; I could understand the entire story just by looking at the pictures. The artwork – and the story-telling through it – was brilliant.'

For a story junkie like Spielberg, that was enough to hook him. 'This was in 1983, and I was in London at the time shooting *Indiana*

Jones and the Temple of Doom. I called my assistant, Kathy Kennedy, who said, "Let's go and talk to Hergé himself." So we arranged to fly to Belgium to meet the great man, but sadly he passed away the very week that we were to go.' Hergé, alias Georges Prosper Remi, died on 3 March 1983, aged 75, from bone cancer.

'But a week after the funeral,' continues Spielberg, 'his widow, Fanny, said, "Please come over anyway. I'd love to talk to you about this, because his work was the love of his life." So we went over and met her and made a deal back then, and the films, which Kathy and Peter Jackson and I are going to make together, will start opening in 2009 – I'm directing the first one, Peter will direct the second, and we'll probably co-direct the third. They'll all be made in motion capture, which was the technique used in films like *Polar Express* and *Beowulf*, where we get real live actors to perform the roles, so you have their voices, but the images on the screen don't always look like the actors. We're all very excited about it. It took a long time to bring this to the screen for the same reason that it takes a lot of my movies a long time to be made, which is because I want to get the screenplay absolutely right. And sometimes that just takes time.'

Steven Spielberg has been a perfectionist for all of his life. He was born in December 1946, in Cincinnati, Ohio, the son of Leah Adler, a concert pianist and restaurateur, and

her husband Arnold, a computer engineer, and says now that he has memories dating back to when he was six months old. 'I only know how old I was at the time because my parents have since told me. We were at a service in the synagogue, I was in a stroller going down the aisle, and there was the light above the ark there, the *ner tamid*, or eternal light, and all these old men were marvelling at this little six-month-old child and handing me crackers like little matzos. I don't know why I remember it, but it's vivid in my mind.'

When he was 12, Steven was given an 8mm camera, and immediately started to run around the house making films with it. 'And they let me!' he remembers, with something between a laugh and a groan. 'Which was a big mistake because it meant destroying half of the house, setting the back yard on fire for an effects shot, or blowing up a can of Cherries Jubilee, which created a mess that to this day people can't paint over, so it's become like a permanent Jackson Pollock fresco. My parents gave me a lot of space to be a movie-maker, and in some ways that was good, because although I came of age in the Sixties, I never wanted to be a hippie or a yippie, I never took drugs and was never part of that acid generation. I just wanted to make movies.'

His first feature-length movie was *Duel*, the tense and haunting story of a businessman

Above: Hergé's comic strip hero Tintin and his dog Snowy, next in line to receive the Spielberg magic





Above: Steven Spielberg at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, with Cate Blanchett and Harrison Ford, who co-star in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. Right: Harrison Ford and Steven Spielberg on the set of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*



PHOTOGRAPHS: CORBIS

Steven Spielberg directs his young stars (clockwise from top) Robert MacNaughton (Michael), Drew Barrymore (Gertie), Henry Thomas (Elliott) – with E.T., title character of the film *E.T., The Extra-Terrestrial*

driving across the Californian desert who is mysteriously tailed by a beaten-up truck, leading eventually to a race to the death. It was shot in 16 days for \$375,000 and, 34 years after its release, is still hailed as a masterpiece of suspense. Extraordinarily, Spielberg was only 23 when he directed it.

‘When I went to Europe to promote the film, I’d never even travelled abroad before,’ he says. ‘OK, I’d gone to Mexico a couple of times because my family lived in Arizona for a while, but I’d never really left America. So my first trip ever was when Universal sent me to open *Duel* theatrically in Rome. I arrived at the city, got to the Hassler Hotel near the Spanish Steps, the phone rang, and an interpreter was saying, “I have Federico Fellini on the phone for you.” Fellini had just seen *Duel* in a press screening and wanted to meet me. I hadn’t even unpacked my bags!’

‘I walked out to the Spanish Steps to meet him, waited 20 minutes, then a woman came up the steps and waved to me – I don’t know how she recognised me – and she took me to meet him at the Grand Hotel. We met in the lobby of the hotel, walked into the dining room, and someone said, “Oh, Mr. Fellini, you can’t come in here, you’re not wearing a tie!” Federico Fellini! We stayed in communication from that day on, and his assistant told me that the last thing he read before he died was a letter I wrote to him when he was sick. He was a major influence on my career.’

Spielberg’s career from *Duel* to the present is quite simply jaw-dropping – here’s a roll-call of some of his most successful, blockbuster films of the last three decades, from *Jaws* (1975) to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), then the *Indiana Jones* trilogy (1981, 1984, 1989), *E.T.* (1982), *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler’s List* (both 1993), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Minority Report* (2002), *War of the Worlds* (2005), and on to this year’s latest in the *Indiana Jones* series, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. Ask him today what is the secret of his success, though, and he only shrugs.

‘I’ve never had a career plan,’ he says cheerfully. ‘I don’t premeditate my films and I’ve never said to myself, “I’ll do something dark, then dark, then light, then dark, then dark.” I think where I am good at my job is that I do know spontaneously when a film comes along whether it’s the right time for me to do it, or whether it isn’t. Sometimes my wife will remind me where my strengths are and are not. I remember a few years ago I’d acquired the script for *Meet the Parents* and I was preparing to direct it, but my wife read the script and said to me, “You are not directing this movie. You can produce it – but you are not going to direct it.” I said, “How come?” and she replied, “Because you’re not funny enough!” So I listened to her, and now I’m glad I did because I wound up producing it, with Jay Roach directing.’

He talks often and affectionately of his wife, actress Kate Capshaw, and their brood of seven children – his, hers, and theirs – ranging from Kate’s daughter Jessica, now 38 and an actress like her mother, and Max, 23, the product of Steven’s marriage to Amy Irving, to the couple’s youngest daughter, Destry, who turns 12 in December. Spielberg maintains he’s an indulgent parent, as his parents were to him, although Kate would like him to be stricter.

‘That’s our biggest argument,’ he says, ‘because my wife believes in more restrictions for kids than I do. My main philosophy when it comes to raising my children is simply that I want them to have as much freedom as I dare allow them, remembering that we live in a world that is much less safe than when I was their age. I let them do everything they want to explore their potential so that they can test what interests them and then go down the road of their own choosing.’

‘Max, for instance, has had very different dreams from my own. He’s sort of forged his own trail and he’s now designing video games and electronic arts, which have been his whole love since he was three years old and began to play video games for the first time. He’s on a creative team and one of these days, he’ll design a game called something like Grand Auto Theft IV that will make \$500 million in one day, and he’ll be super successful.’

Just like his old man, in fact. ■