

“IMMORTALS” Beloved, Part One

Written by Trevor Parker

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Director Tarsem Singh, the visionary talent behind the ornately stylish films *THE CELL* and *THE FALL*, is usually an energetic chatterbox engaged in a constant whirl of motion. On the set of his new fantasy/thriller *IMMORTALS* (which topped the box office this past weekend), however, Fango's scribe mentions to him that he seems somewhat subdued, even looking a bit...lopsided?

“We had the wrap party about four days ago, and my calf exploded. I just broke,” Singh explains. “It happened in the middle of a dance; I thought somebody had kicked me. I continued dancing, and now my legs are totally gone. I feel like a f**king handicap. I feel so impotent not being able to jump up and talk to the actors. I’m sitting in the back with a monitor, I’ve got a mic in my hand. I feel like a really bad DJ.”

Fango is here on set to watch one of the last days of filming on *IMMORTALS*, Relativity Media's epic take on Greek mythology. Dressed in an awful green paisley shirt, Singh is sitting in the corner of a bleak subterranean dungeon set. He's setting up the shots for a clattering battle scene involving dozens of sword-wielding stuntmen, while still managing to chat during breaks in the action; he notes that he's glad his injury occurred so close to the end of filming, since he's a staunch believer in leading from the trenches. “For an action thing, if the director is standing around with an umbrella, it's not going to work. You've got to get in there, in the shit, and do it!”



IMMORTALS, scripted by Charles Parlapanides and Vlas Parlapanides, tells the story of the peasant Theseus (Henry Cavill), who has secretly been chosen by Zeus to oppose the despotic King Hyperion (Mickey Rourke). Hyperion is scouring Greece for a mythical weapon that can free the powerful Titans, who have been imprisoned for eons deep inside Mount Tartaros and

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are thirsting for revenge. Theseus must rally a band of fellow outsiders, including mystical priestess Phaedra (Freida Pinto) and cunning slave Stavros (Stephen Dorff) to save mankind from Hyperion's hordes.

For those already thinking that this plot comes off as pretty damn generic, Singh wants you to know he felt the same way. When asked what he found appealing about the project when it was first pitched to him, he states bluntly, “Very little. When I saw their script, it was like, ‘Theseus goes to a door, and there’s a hundred-headed monster there, and Theseus fires something at it,’ and I thought, I don’t know how the f**k to do that script. It was so unreadable, I told the producers that if any actor said they really wanted to do this script, do not hire them. Most producers do not regularly even read screenplays. I said to Mark [Canton, IMMORTALS producer], ‘When do you read the script?’ and he said, ‘When the gross kicks in.’ I thought that was the funniest line I ever heard, f**king brilliant.

“For me, I just read it and said, ‘This is undoable. If you really want an actor to say no to you, send them this.’ They would send it out to so-and-so actor, and when that actor said ‘No,’ I would say, ‘Thank you.’ When we had to move forward with casting, I said I would find somebody on my own, and I went to three or four people and told them, ‘You have to go on the thing I never have—faith.’ I mean, the script had like five lines for the actors, and usually it was, ‘They’re coming this way! Run that way,’ that kind of stuff. It really was nothing like what it ended up being.”

Between takes, as stoutly muscled extras in body paint and battle armor mill about either snacking or smoking, Fango asks Singh the obvious follow-up: So why agree to direct IMMORTALS? “For me, I look for a thing I think I can put my DNA on. If I can do that, I don’t care if it’s a tampon ad or whatever; I’ll get in there. Usually I’m not interested if it’s a serial-killer film, space movie or period piece like this. I have to look at that one element that interests me, and I’ll go with that.

“My mom said something to me that made me think, ‘Hmmm...if I can put that in the movie, that’s what I’ll make. That can be the theme of the film.’ I’ve been an atheist since I was 9 years old; specifically, I’ve been a blasphemer. If you name the religion, I’ve crapped on it. My mom is really religious, so we have kind of a strange relationship that way. Just recently, when she was coming back from temple and I was just crapping and crapping on the religious stuff, she turned to me and said, ‘How do you think you’re as successful as you are, if it wasn’t for my praying?’ ”

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He smiles and continues: “The worst thing that could happen to a guy like me is if I die and there is actually a God up there, and he goes, ‘You f**k. I’ve been dying to screw you up, but because of this woman praying for you, I gave you all of that good shit!’ I just thought that idea would be really interesting. If I did it as a contemporary thing, with all the issues of Muslims and Christians, it would be too on-the-nose. If you say ‘Greek gods,’ everybody knows that was rubbish.

“So I thought it would be a good theme to deal with, and I just put it in a situation where the reasonable people lose! The one senator who’s actually saying, ‘There are no gods, gods are simply metaphors to control people’—he gets killed. Because usually [the audience] loves that! And that’s the theme we have. The right guy is wrong, because lo and behold, there *are* gods. I could not find a reason why gods would allow things like this happen [in the storyline]; it took me two or three months to figure out how if my mother’s side were right, what could be the reason that God could let concentration camps or anything similar occur? If there is such a big God, He’s definitely not benevolent; we mean less to him than ants mean to us.



“But if there’s one thing that the gods would value more than anything else, it’s free will. When most cultures deal with the concept of free will, they muddy it up so much, saying, ‘There is free will, but there is also heaven and hell, and everything is predetermined,’ and none of that makes sense to me, so I just went one particular way and said, ‘The reason the gods do not interfere is because if a god did show up tomorrow, we’d all say, ‘Oh my f**king God, he’s amazing!’ and [makes bowing-down motion] and your free will would be compromised, as would your true nature. The example I always give is that I would have a very hard time taking a *Barely Legal* magazine and masturbating in a bathroom if I knew for certain that Jesus or Mohammed had once walked through that door. I would just go away. Your true nature would not come out. It has to be on faith, it has to be on belief. It cannot be on proof. So for IMMORTALS, I took proof out. Free will would just be too compromised if gods showed up on the lawn of the White House and said, ‘Take us to your leader.’ ”

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Singh confirms that the studio gave him plenty of freedom to rewrite the script and take things in the thematic direction he wanted. “Relativity were brilliant,” he says. “Brilliant, or maybe just thinking, ‘How the f**k is he going to do this?’ They left me alone, and it has become one of those things where once the train gets momentum, it’s harder to stop it than to let it go. Suddenly enough money had been spent that it *had* to go ahead. And we got to make the film we wanted to make.”

Like many of his contemporaries, Singh got his start through music videos; his distinctive clip for R.E.M.’s ‘Losing My Religion’ earned him early accolades. From there, he built his reputation in the lucrative realm of commercials, directing a raft of spots for top brands that sought out his ability to deliver grandeur and scope (Fango recommends his 1998 Nike spot, featuring an evil soccer team made up of winged gargoyles). After finding critical and box-office success with his first narrative feature *THE CELL*, which managed to transcend the then-feverish pop-culture hype surrounding star Jennifer Lopez, he returned to the dependable paychecks of the advertising world while concurrently trying to raise funding for his dream project, *THE FALL*. A meditation on the liquid nature of storytelling, *THE FALL* was eventually made after Singh auctioned off his own house in order to bolster the budget, and was released to minor art-house acclaim in 2008. Considering this unusual career path, it’s curious that Singh ended up behind a megabudget, multiplex-friendly Hollywood fantasy.

“I spent 17 years collecting money for a film that I knew no one would be interested in financing,” he explains. “Try pitching a story where the lead is a 6-year-old fat Romanian girl. Nobody’s going to finance it, but it’s what I wanted to do. That’s where my heart was at that time. After *THE FALL*, I just read all the scripts in town. Most directors usually, correctly, weigh a good script and say, ‘That’s a good story to make.’ That approach bores me. I just look for that one small element that interests me, and go from there. I wanted to do three visual films, and this is the third one. After this, I’m going to do something like *MY DINNER WITH ANDRE*. That’s the example I always give, but it’ll probably be something a lot more gritty and shitty, with bad actors you can make act well with shaky-cam. I just feel like I’ve had my go here, and loved it.”

He adds that he prefers to be off directing at any given time, whatever the project. “I must be a hack, because most of the [directors] I love hate the process of filmmaking. They like the editing, they like it where they have control, and I don’t. I shoot 300 days of the year, I live on a set, and I love it.”

Surrounded by armies of stuntmen and an impressively expansive catacomb of a set, Fango asks how he feels about the huge scale of this shoot, as well as working with a budget that’s

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been estimated to be somewhere north of \$120 million. Singh laughs and says, “What I usually do is much bigger than this. I guess the scale of this is big, but it’s small for me. The best quote about budget I ever heard was from [David] Fincher. In our early days, he wanted to do his first movie, and he was saying for a movie to be good, it needs to cost \$1 million a minute. That’s what he had calculated. They told him at the studio, ‘Nobody’s going to give you \$60 million for your first film,’ and Fincher said, ‘I wouldn’t want it, because I wouldn’t know what to do with a one-hour film.’ For me, if you really want that sophistication of image, the budget does need to come out to something like what Fincher figured.”

TO BE CONTINUED