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JURASSIC PARK III

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Sam Neill returns but the director has changed for the third encounter with prehistoric creatures.

By MARC SHAPIRO

You knew this was coming. After all, didn't *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, mixed reviews and all, make a mint? We're talking franchise, baby! Which means that *Jurassic Park III* is a slam dunk. Or is it?

"What could go wrong with *Jurassic Park III*?" asks director Joe Johnston, who has taken over the reins of this dinosaur thrill ride. "This film is going to be compared to the first two, and whatever I do is going to be compared to what Steven [Spielberg] did on those. For me, it's a pretty loaded situation to walk into."

Producer Larry Franco is also leery of calling anything a sure thing. "It seems like a slam dunk, but at the same time, a lot of people are thinking, 'What else can they do?' And for a while, we were thinking the same thing."

Ed Verreaux, the new film's production designer, is fairly certain that *III* will be the charm and, tongue not so firmly in cheek, is already looking to the future. "Hopefully, there won't be 10 of these things. At least, I hope I won't be doing them."

Whatever the future scenario, *Jurassic Park III* certainly always seemed to be on the minds of Universal and Spielberg. "It would be safe to say that after *Jurassic Park*, peo-
people were already starting to think, "This was something special, and we should capitalize on it, " Franco says. "There may have already been talk about III and possibly IV."

"I think everybody wanted to wait a certain amount of time between sequels," Johnston adds, "but I don't think anybody wanted to wait too long. Four years was about right."

"It was all such a blur," relates monster maker Stan Winston. "There was always talk about Jurassic Park III. There was a lot of, 'Well, we're working on the script.' I don't remember the definitive moment but, all of a sudden, it became real and we weren't just talking about it anymore."

From the beginning, however, Jurassic Park III would

"You can't have a Jurassic Park film without some people dying horribly. We're definitely not lightening things up."

~Joe Johnston, director

appear to be on a different track. For starters, there's no Michael Crichton source novel (though Crichton did take part as a producer). In addition, Spielberg was too busy working on A.I. to helm this film in line with Universal's suddenly accelerated schedule, which began midway through 1999. A first-draft script was already nearing completion at this point; now all Jurassic Park III needed was a director. "When Steven asked me if I wanted to do the next Jurassic Park, I looked around the room to see who he was talking to," Johnston laughs. "When I saw nobody else in the room, I figured he was talking to me."

Johnston certainly had the pedigree to wrangle dinosaurs. As a special FX man, he had toiled on two of the Indiana Jones films; as a director, he had piloted Honey, I Shrunk the Kids, The Rocketeer, Jumanji and, on a more intimate level, October Sky. "Joe has a background with effects," explains Franco. "It was obvious that he was going to put more into this than a 'wham, bam, thank you ma'am' big-time effects movie. He was almost the perfect choice for this, because we knew that the movie would not only deliver on the special effects, but that it would also have a heart as well."

For the next year, Johnston worked closely with a number of writers on various drafts of Jurassic Park III. (The scripting lineup included Craig Rosenberg, Peter Buchman, Charlie's Angels' John August and Election's
The raptors are smarter this time around—and they’re still good with brute force too.

Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor; while final credit had yet to be determined at pre-stime, Buchman is singled out for the screenplay on advance posters.) At the time, no idea was strictly set in stone, and Johnston remembers that “a lot of story ideas were explored and discarded.” Franco laughingly recalls the writing process: “You’re thinking, ‘Shit! How tough can this be?’ You’ve got jungle and you’ve got dinosaurs. The truth is that it is not that easy.”

For the sake of not spoiling the fun, Fango will paint the story and creature particulars in broad strokes. There is yet another group of people, once again headed up by Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill), that travels to the dinosaur spawning grounds of Isla Sorna on what can only be described as a multifaceted mission. There are new beasts as well as the old reliables. There’s plenty of land, sea and air action and, yes, people get munched. But rather than recycling old bits, the impression is that legitimate pains have been taken to liven things up.

“We knew that we had to introduce at least one or two new dinosaurs,” says Franco. “Once we decided we needed a pterodactyl, we knew it had to be the biggest one. Spinosaurus [a huge meat-eater] was a fairly easy choice.”

Casting Jurassic Park III turned out to be another ongoing challenge. Johnston notes that “the dinosaurs have always been the stars of the Jurassic Park movies,” and there was another reality to deal with during the casting process, according to Franco: the budget. “It’s always an issue with the studio on something like this, where you’re spending big money on special effects, that they don’t want to spend a lot to hire real stars,” Franco says. “We got lucky on this in that everybody is a really great actor. Everyone we approached was interested, because it was Spielberg and Joe Johnston. Nobody we talked to was worried that they would be upstaged by a dinosaur.”

For JP III, the thespian newcomers include William H. Macy; Téa Leoni; Alessandro Nivola, Michael Jeter, Trevor Morgan, Bruce Young, John Diehl and Mark Harelik. While the original film’s Laura Dern puts in a cameo, the first to sign on for a return trip was Neill.

“It was kind of nice to make Dr. Grant’s acquaintance again,” he laughs. “The main reason I decided to come back was that everything felt fresh again. There was a new director, some new ideas and a new cast. The only old dinosaur around was me. And the fact that you have to expect surprises is no surprise for Grant. That he’s been struck by lightning twice and has once again ended up in this hellhole is the lot of heroes, I guess.”

The total number of shooting days was locked down at 79, a fairly reasonable number for such a massive film. As for the budget, nobody is willing to give an exact figure, but Johnston offers this comical insight: “The budget is the equivalent of 5
million Roger Corman movies—the old ones that cost about $40,000 each."

Like the previous film, *Jurassic Park III* spent its first month of shooting on a number of jungle-heavy islands in Hawaii. Then it was back to the Universal lot in California, where the production took over a half-dozen soundstages and a massive river set was built outdoors and under protective camouflage at the back of the studio, far from tourists' prying eyes. The consensus among all involved is that making *Jurassic Park III* was no picnic—and one of the biggest stumbling blocks was the fact that, despite months and months of preparation, the film began shooting without a fully completed screenplay.

"Logistically, it was easy," says Franco. "It was never a situation where we said, 'Shit! How are we going to do this?' We never had a completely finished script, but we pretty much knew the sets where the action was going to take place. It never got to the point where we were panicked because we had to shoot something in three days and we didn't know how we were going to do it."

For Johnston, the challenges were pretty cut and dried: bring the film in on schedule and on budget, and be constantly ready to decide—often with very little notice due to constant script revisions—what was going to be shot and which scenes would be discarded. In

addition, the director notes, "This was not an easy film for the actors on a sheer discomfort level. They were wet, they were cold, they were underwater, they were in harnesses. I wanted audiences to believe that these people were going through hell."

And in the case of Neill, he really was. "I have a phobia about being trapped underwater, and there's a scene where some

certain dinosaurs will be placed for a still-to-be-filmed battle sequence. "I came aboard with only eight weeks to get all this together."

"The challenges on a movie like this are always new," says Verreaux as he walks across the lot and into another set, which he describes as a dinosaur kennel where a particularly nasty bit of creature action takes place. "The thing that's been new with this film is that we've constantly been chasing the script. It has basically been a moving target in which we've constantly had to adjust to changes. This set wasn't even in the screenplay two months ago."

Verreaux moves into yet another set where canyon walls, an integral element of a chase sequence involving flying reptiles, rise up from the stage floor to the top of the set. He continues the tour to another part of the stage and into a mockup of an island observation building which will figure in a particular dinosaur attack. "Usually, with a movie like this, you like to have a locked-down script at least four months before you start the movie," Verreaux continues. "But at this point, we're still not sure about a lot of

How do you give the Spinosaurus a manicure? Very carefully!

"Everything felt fresh again. There was a new director, some new ideas and a new cast. The only old dinosaur around was me."

—Sam Neill, actor
stuff. There may be one sequence at the
dend of the movie that will involve a heli-
copter. But we still don't know."
The designer concludes the tour in yet
another cavernous soundstage in which a
massive canyon wall, studded with pre-
curious bits of catwalk, overlooks a 20-
foot-deep pit that, when filled, has been
the center of much of the close-up river
shots. Perhaps feeling uneasy about
emphasizing the script situation, Ver-
reaux concedes that "something this stuff
always works out. It's been
good working with Joe be-
cause of his special effects
background. It's been easy
for us to just sit down with
pencil and paper and just
sketch something out. We
haven't really had to re-
 invention the wheel. With
two other Jurassic Park
movies behind us, we've
obviously done a lot of this
stuff before."

Winston agrees with
the notion that much of
Jurassic Park III is familiar
territory as he walks
through the warehouse
that houses the current
crop of dinosaurs. Rather
than simply trotting out
the usual suspects, much
of the dino work in JP III
is focused on modification and subtle im-
provements. "We knew the raptors would
be back, but we felt that with the
advancements in technology, there would
be a certain amount of redesigning
involved," he says. "With the raptors, we
wanted to bring in something you haven't
seen before. We've extended the snout
slightly, added quills on the males and
basically changed the look to something
approximating the real raptors.

"In general, we've made all the dino-
saurs more mobile," Winston continues.
"The mechanics are more internal, which
in turn makes the animals more active.
With the Jurassic movies, it has always
been, 'What can we do to improve things
and what could we have done better?'
and that has been our attitude with this
. film." Especially, says Winston, as it per-
tains to the not-so-well-kept secret that
there's a new beast on the block. "That
Spinosaurus is one big motherfucker," he
laughs. "Like everything else, it has been
a huge undertaking, because when you
go as big as we've gone with this dino-

saur, it becomes a problem technically."
But despite the challenges, there have
been very few surprises and/or difficulties.
"Things have gone relatively smoothly," W
inston says. "We haven't had the onus
since Jurassic Park of not doing something
comparable. We knew we could do it. The
things we improved on were able to
improve on without much stress. There
were lots of little problems, but none that
anyone will know about." As Winston
moves around the warehouse, pointing
out old and new dinosaurs, he explains
why the Spinosaurus and the Pteranodon
didn't crop up in the previous Jurassic
Park films: "It's simple. We just haven't
seen all the [island's] dinosaurs yet."

The JP III tour winds its way to the
backlot and through an entrance in the
camouflage where the river canyon, done
in rich shades of prehistoric green, is be-
ing prepped for filming. Today, a scene
that to this point only existed in the
pages of Crichton's first Jurassic novel
will finally make it to the screen: a water-
bound attack by the T. rex on a boatload
of the film's characters.

In a nearby tent, Jurassic series vet-
eran Michael Lantieri, part of the mass-
ive crew putting the dinosaurs through
their paces, is taking a coffee break as he
explains some of the intricacies of JP III's
relationship between full-scale model
work and CGI. "A good part of the dino-
saur effects are live-action, and we're
quite proud of that. Obviously, when
you're seeing it full-body and it needs to
be leaping and jumping around, we can't
deliver that. That's where Industrial
Light & Magic comes in. We made
maquettes of the creatures and sent them
over to ILM to scan. They also came
down to the set to photograph individual
pieces. It has been hard work and every
shot has been a test, but we've come
through all this in pretty good shape."

At pre-strike, Johnston was hard at
work preparing the film to go before the
MPAA. It's a given that Jurassic Park III
will go out with a PG-13 rating, but bring the
children and Granny? The
director does not neces-
sarily think so. "Depending
on what we do here,
this could be as scary as
the previous two," he says.
"Let's face it, you can't
have a Jurassic Park film
without some people dying
horribly. We're definitely
not lightening things up.
And PG does stand for
Parental Guidance."

And while he's not neces-
sarily interested in tak-
ing part, the director hints
that Jurassic Park III will
most likely not be the end
of the road for the series.
"We didn't purposefully
leave this open for a
sequel," he notes, "but there is some-
ting in the works for a fourth film that
would be more of a departure from the
previous movies. Personally, I think they
pretty much have to get off the island
after three films."

Franco, who jokes that the most pres-
sure anyone had on this film was the fact
that Jurassic Park III had to be a summer
2001 release, agrees with the notion that
the franchise could almost go on forever.
"Jurassic Park should go on until people
say, 'We've had enough of this.' But I
don't know if they ever will."

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