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Sunday, Mar. 19, 2006

Exclusive: Mel Gibson's Apocalyto Now

By Tim Padgett/Veracruz

"I need to see the blood!" shouts Mel Gibson. "Your character is going to die soon!" He picks up a bullhorn: "Attention! We are all dying here! We are all dying!" The Oscar-winning director is standing in a rock quarry near Veracruz, Mexico, shooting a hellish scene for Apocalyto, his action epic about the ancient Maya. Hundreds of local extras--many of whom have never seen a movie, let alone acted in one--are pounding fake limestone to build a temple used for human sacrifices. Gibson wants one of the extras, covered in white lime dust, to visibly cough up a glob of fake blood. But something keeps getting lost in translation. Take after take, the young man, who speaks only Spanish, politely covers his mouth as he hacks. A second candidate for the role does the same. Gibson finally lets out a tortured howl, digs vainly for a cigarette in his empty pack of Camels and turns the set into his own Thunderdome. The translator does his best to convey the passion of the Mel.

The blasts turn to laughs soon after when, to lighten the mood, Gibson has the crew bring out a stuffed jaguar and leads the extras running away in mock terror. But later he admits to TIME, which this month was given the first look at Apocalyto's production, that the utter inexperience of most of the cast is a price he's paying for the authentic feel he wants in the film, in which dialogue is spoken solely in Yucatec Maya. If people were imagining that Gibson, 50, might coast a little after his 2004 movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, inspired not only months of controversy but also nearly \$1 billion worth of ticket sales, the director has given his answer: Nope. If anything, this film is a more ambitious project than *The Passion*--although success does make some things a mite easier. Gibson had to walk a *via dolorosa* to find a distributor for *The Passion* and ended up distributing it more or less himself, but Disney's Touchstone Pictures needed only to read Apocalyto's script before signing on to release it in early August.

The Passion experience--especially the part in which critics hurled anti-Semitism charges at Gibson, an ultraconservative Roman Catholic whose father has questioned whether the Holocaust happened--thickened Gibson's hide along with his wallet. So if there are complaints about Apocalyto's portrayal of human sacrifice

by the Maya, whose mostly impoverished descendants today are a cause célèbre for liberals, Gibson says he won't care. "After what I experienced with *The Passion*, I frankly don't give a flying f_____ about much of what those critics think."

Still, he likes to confound expectations--he wears a cross containing relics of martyred saints, but he can swear like a Quentin Tarantino character--and those who peg him as a reactionary may be surprised to learn that his new film sounds warnings straight out of liberal Hollywood's bible. *Apocalypto*, which Gibson loosely translates from the Greek as "a new beginning," was inspired in large part by his work with the Mirador Basin Project, an effort to preserve a large swath of the Guatemalan rain forest and its Maya ruins. Gibson and his rookie cowriter on *Apocalypto*, Farhad Safinia, were captivated by the ancient Maya, one of the hemisphere's first great civilizations, which reached its zenith about A.D. 600 in southern Mexico and northern Guatemala. The two began poring over Maya myths of creation and destruction, including the *Popol Vuh*, and research suggesting that ecological abuse and war-mongering were major contributors to the Maya's sudden collapse, some 500 years before Europeans arrived in the Americas.

Those apocalyptic strains haunt *Apocalypto*, which takes place in an opulent but decaying Maya kingdom, whose leaders insist that if the gods are not appeased by more temples and human sacrifices, the crops will die. But the writers hope that the larger themes of decline will be a wake-up call. "The parallels between the environmental imbalance and corruption of values that doomed the Maya and what's happening to our own civilization are eerie," says Safinia. Gibson, who insists ideology matters less to him than stories of "penitential hardship" like his Oscar-winning *Braveheart*, puts it more bluntly: "The fearmongering we depict in this film reminds me a little of President Bush and his guys."

But the project also fulfills Gibson's need for speed. The hunk who played *Mad Max* 27 years ago wants to "shake up the stale action-adventure genre," which he feels has been taken hostage by computer-generated imagery (CGI), stock stories and shallow characters. To rattle the cage, he says, "we had to think of something utterly different." The *Mad Maya* hero in *Apocalypto* is Jaguar Paw. His escape through the Mexican rain forest will "feel like a car chase that just keeps turning the screws," says Gibson, flashing one of his patented bug-eyed expressions. True to the no-pain, no-gain credo of his other films, *Apocalypto* seeks to deliver enough pre-Columbian punishment--like the decidedly non-CGI mauling of a character by an animal--to rival the medieval gore of *Braveheart*. "I get pretty banged up in some pretty awful ways," says film newcomer Rudy Youngblood, 25, the Comanche and Cree Indian from Texas who plays Jaguar Paw.

Gibson is betting the chase will feel even hairier thanks to a new digital camera system, Panavision's Genesis, that yields a "tremendous sensation of velocity," says cinematographer Dean Semler, who won an Oscar for *Dances with Wolves*. All the doom and zoom sound fun, but the ancient Maya are also called the Greeks of the New World--they invented the concept of zero, built astonishing cities and used a more complex calendar than ours. Gibson insists the glory gets its close-ups too. Says Richard Hansen, a Maya scholar at Idaho State University, head of the Mirador Basin Project and a consultant for *Apocalypto*: "This is by far the best treatment--the first treatment really--of the

Maya any film has ever done. I'm amazed at the detail Mel's shooting for."

In fact, says veteran production designer Tom Sanders, Apocalyto "is the hardest show I've ever worked on." Stacks of archaeology books and magazines are strewn about a massive warehouse in Veracruz, where an army of costume and makeup artisans from Mexico and Italy are painstakingly re-creating feathers of the nearly extinct quetzal for royal headdresses and long, looping earlobe extensions for warriors. (Because those prostheses are difficult to apply, the actors must wear them for days on end, which rather spooks fellow guests at the Fiesta Americana Hotel.) This month Gibson starts filming at a sprawling and meticulously appointed city of Maya pyramids and markets that Sanders' crew spent six months building outside Veracruz. It all suggests a Titanic-size budget, but Gibson will say only that his production company, Icon, is spending less than \$50 million. (The Passion cost \$30 million.)

Given that controversy hit his last film months before it even finished production, Gibson has been careful to build Mesoamerican goodwill for Apocalyto: two-thirds of the cast and crew are Mexican, and Gibson has donated \$1 million to communities in Veracruz state affected by Hurricane Stan last year. Mexican cast members like Mayra Sérbulo, 30, a Zapotec Indian who plays a villager, say they expect some criticism of the film from Mexican nationalists (who also tore into Salma Hayek's Frida), especially since it touches on the raw issue of human sacrifice, which scholars don't believe was a prevalent Maya practice until the post-classic period, after A.D. 900, when fiercer influences like the Toltecs and Aztecs arrived. It is in that period, not coincidentally, that Apocalyto is set. "But I'm frankly surprised and excited that someone is making a film about an indigenous Mexican culture that most Mexicans don't even know all that well," says Sérbulo. "I feel valued by this movie."

Gibson nonetheless is a lightning rod--pro-Mel and anti-Mel blogs abound on the Internet--and he knows that even non-Mexican detractors will ask why, if he's so morbidly fascinated with the bloody deeds of Jewish Pharisees and Maya priests, he doesn't hold a mirror to his own church and film the Spanish Inquisition. Gibson won't say that's a future plan, but he nods and agrees that "there are monsters in every culture."

The more immediate question is whether Apocalyto can repeat The Passion's success. After all, devout Christians willing to sit through Latin and Aramaic dialogue to see Christ crucified vastly outnumber Maya scholars. Gibson seems certain that the film's "kinetic energy" will make Maya language and culture "cool" enough to attract a crowd. Maya prophecy says the current world, which began 5,000 years ago, will end in 2012. So, even if Apocalyto flops, Gibson will at least have given the Maya one last chance to get the word out.

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