

DIRECTOR'S CUT... STEVEN SPIELBERG

The film-maker on what makes a good story **BY SIMON THOMPSON**



Ask Steven Spielberg how he felt when he first walked on to the sound stage of *The BFG*, and the answer may surprise you: "Completely overwhelmed. Like I might not be able to pull it off."

This may be the most famous director on the planet, the man responsible for inventing – and then redefining – the blockbuster, through such memorable films as *Jaws*, *Raiders of The Lost Ark*, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Jurassic Park*, alongside Oscar-winning explorations of humanity in films such as *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*. But Roald Dahl's tale of the friendship between a little girl and a giant was, he claims, one of his toughest challenges to date.

"When I saw the different levels of complexity and the technology required to realise even a single shot," he says, "I was, for the first time since *Jaws*, completely overwhelmed. I wasn't sure exactly how to pull it off."

His candour is surprising. After all, during a career spanning more than 40 years, Spielberg has taken over £6.5billion at box offices worldwide, making him the highest-grossing film director in history. Surely nothing could faze him? But it's precisely this honesty and willingness to rise to a challenge that has made him the award-winning director he is.

Speaking in LA on the eve of the film's US release, Spielberg, 69, is relaxed and charming. Even after more than four decades directing, and just about every plaudit possible, he retains a childlike enthusiasm for his work.

"This is something I have always loved to do, telling stories that are from the imagination," he

says. "When I do history movies the imagination has to be put aside. But with this film there were no barriers, so I felt liberated and like I could do anything... and it brought back feelings I had as a younger film-maker."

Almost from the beginning of his career, Spielberg's connection to that childlike world has informed all of his films. Whether it's the horror of *Jaws*, the straight-up adventure of *Jurassic Park*, or shining a light on the inexplicable cruelty of humanity (and possibility of redemption) in *Schindler's List*, his movies are united by a sense of wide-eyed wonder, of a good tale told well. And, perhaps most importantly, he has that great knack of boiling something complicated down to a very simple premise.

In Hollywood it's called an "elevator pitch" – a way of summarising a whole project in one sentence. *Jaws* is about a shark terrorising a small-town beach. *ET* is about a boy helping a lost alien go home. And *The BFG*?

He laughs. "It's a story about friendship, it's a story about loyalty and protecting your friends and it's a story that shows that even a little girl can help a big giant solve his biggest problems."

"I'm just looking for a good story – and sometimes good stories are right in front of our faces. This was not about a comparison of how tall Sophie is compared to the BFG, but about how big their hearts can grow together. That was the metaphor that made me want to tell the story."

The enthusiasm is infectious – and humbling. Ask the man who made dinosaurs come to life and recreated the D-Day landings in such gory detail if he ever feels challenged by a new film, and he almost snorts in disbelief – he only feels challenged every single time he makes one. It's the challenge, he says, that's part of the fun.

"I could have made *The BFG* with actors on oversized sets using a digital blend, but I wanted the giants to look beyond human," he says. "The only way I could capture magic with the giants was to animate them based on the performances of the actors I was casting and have the animation be super-photorealistic."

That childlike wonder extends to the fact that, with this film, Spielberg's realised a long-held ambition: to make a Disney movie. And to his mind, *The BFG* had to be a Disney movie.



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"Roald introduced that combination of darkness and light that was Walt Disney's original signature in his earlier works, such as *Dumbo*, *Fantasia*, *Snow White* and *Cinderella*," he explains.

"I have directed films at every studio except Disney, so this was the first time I got to make a picture that has *Sleeping Beauty*'s castle and Disney embossed on the beginning and the end of the picture. I'm really proud of that."

What next? *Indiana Jones 5* is supposedly in the pipeline, as are four other films, including the science-fiction adventure *Ready Player One*, in which he will reunite with Mark Rylance – the Oscar-winning Brit actor he turned into the Big Friendly Giant.

Oddly, however, a scan through his directing credits (the Internet Movie Database lists 56 projects with his name as director) would seem to suggest that, somewhat extraordinarily, there remains a gap on his CV. Has Steven Spielberg, teller of so many great tales, ever actually told a straight-up love story?

He thinks for a moment before answering. "I think this is a love story," he says. "Just a different kind of love story. It's a love story that children have for their grandparents, it's a love story that parents have towards their children. I think this is the closest that I have come to telling a love story." **P**

● Turn to p23 for our preview of *The BFG*.



Above: Spielberg brings Roald Dahl's creation to life in his latest release, *The BFG*, with Mark Rylance taking on the role of the Big Friendly Giant and Ruby Barnhill as Sophie. Left: Talking through the script with Ruby. Below: With Robert Shaw, Roy Scheider and Richard Dreyfuss on the set of *Jaws* in 1975



* On its release in July 2008, *The Dark Knight* made more money in its first six days in the US than *Batman Begins* made in its entire run.

BLOOPERS!

7 movie mishaps you (probably) never noticed... but won't be able to miss now!



UNFORGIVEN (1992)
Gene Hackman is a great actor – but even the best need a little help sometimes. In the jail scene, his script is clearly visible inside the *Duke of Death* book he's supposedly reading from.



THE DARK KNIGHT RISES (2012)
Literacy would seem to be another thing to add to Gotham City's growing list of problems – when Bruce Wayne is researching the jewel thief, a headline in *The Gotham Times* misspells "Heist" as "Hiest".



GONE WITH THE WIND (1939)
The sweeping American Civil War drama is recognised as one of history's greatest movies. But when Ashley returns wounded, a supposed "oil lamp" can clearly be seen to have an electrical cord dangling from it.



BEN-HUR (1959)
Charlton Heston's greatest movie is full of bloopers – tyre tracks on the roads, a plane visible in the distance, an extra heard yelling: "Get an ambulance!" But the most obvious is a watch worn by a chariot racer.



RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK (1981)
When Indy thinks Marion has been blown up in the truck, there is a close-up of him drinking with the monkey at an outside bar. Casual as anything, a man passes by wearing modern jeans and a T-shirt.



STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE (1977)
The trio of actors at the heart of the first *Star Wars* film were unknowns – and in one scene, Mark Hamill's inexperience shows. After blowing up the Death Star, he jumps out of his X-Wing, sees Leia and says: "Carrie!"



THE GODFATHER (1972)
When Sonny is shot at the toll booth, the force of the bullets smashes the windscreen of his car. Except... when his bodyguards arrive moments later to find the eldest Corleone sprawled on the floor, the glass is miraculously in one piece again.