

THE HISTORICAL EPIC FEATURE and
the creation and making of

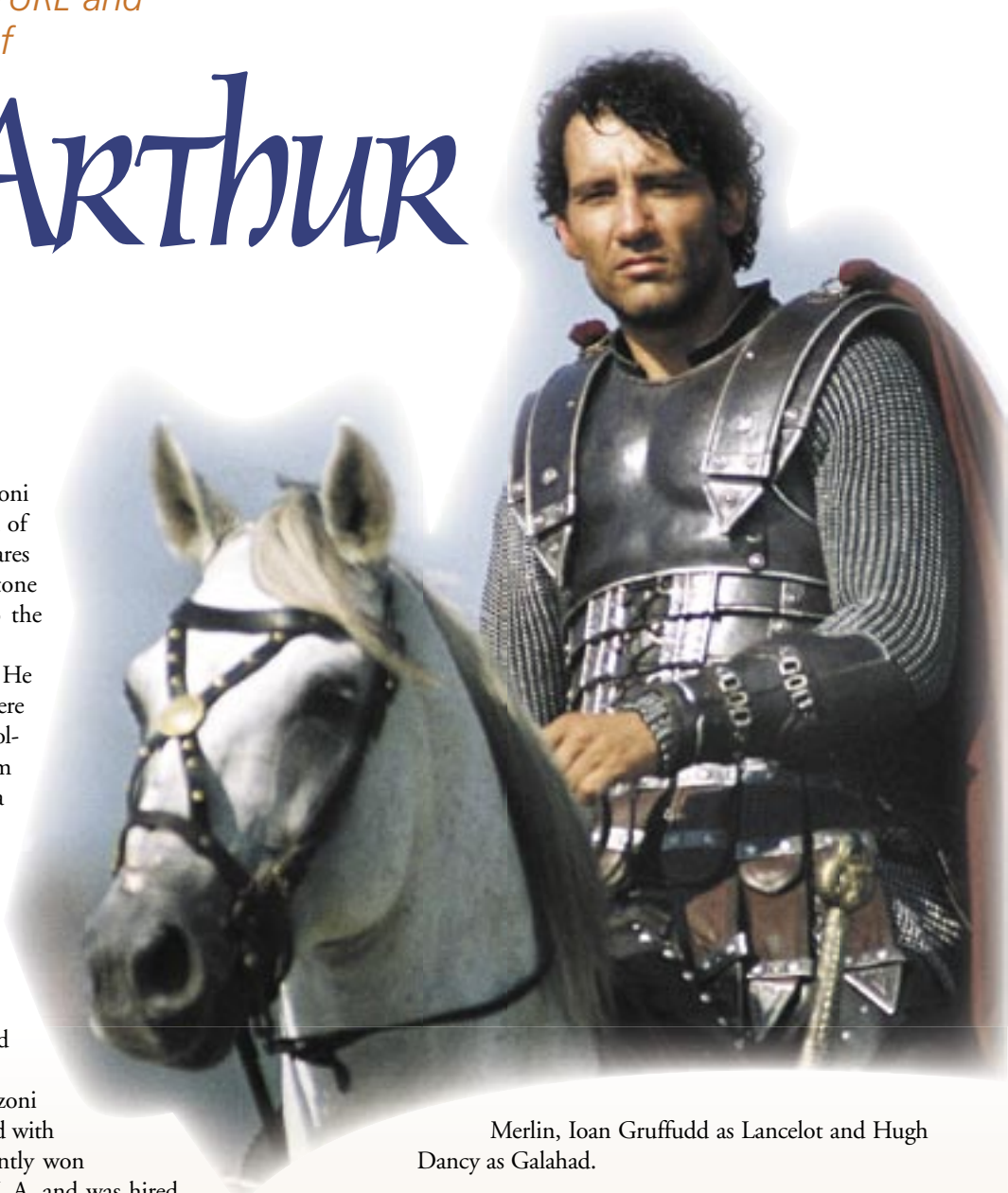
KING ARTHUR

by Kate McCallum

In this issue screenwriter David Franzoni describes his realistic historical presentation of the legendary character King Arthur. He shares with us what went into getting Touchstone Pictures' epic extravaganza *King Arthur* to the silver screen.

David Franzoni was born in Vermont. He attended the University of Vermont where he studied geology and vertebrate paleontology while operating a small commercial film company. After graduation he hopped on a motorcycle and adventured through Europe, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia and Australia. Upon his return to Vermont, he ran a toy company, an arms plant and a photofinishing company. He then moved to Los Angeles to become a screenwriter; and in 1980, he sold an original screenplay called *Sweet Dreams*, which was later turned into the comedy *Jumpin' Jack Flash*.

Europe beckoned once again, and Franzoni moved to Paris for two years where he worked with French director Bob Swaim (who had recently won the César for *La Balance*). He returned to L.A. and was hired to adapt the book *Citizen Cohn* for HBO. The film starred James Woods and earned Franzoni the George Foster Peabody Award, the Pen West Literary Award, the Cable ACE Award and a nomination for an Emmy. In 1997, he wrote Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*. In 2000, *Gladiator* garnered Franzoni an Oscar® nomination for Best Original Screenplay, and the film received the Oscar for Best Picture. That same year, Franzoni began writing his original screenplay *King Arthur* for Jerry Bruckheimer. That script was recently produced by Disney, directed by Antoine Fuqua and stars Clive Owen as Arthur, Keira Knightley as Guinevere, Ray Winstone as Bors, Stephen Dillane as



Merlin, Ioan Gruffudd as Lancelot and Hugh Dancy as Galahad.

scr(i)pt: *The story of mythical King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table has been the subject of several feature films, books and legends. Why again, and just whose idea was this?*

Franzoni: It was my idea, and why again? Actually, it's not again, it's a very different version. It's *King Arthur* as *The Wild Bunch*. We go back to the so-called Dark Ages and search for that key historical moment where the myths of Arthur originated. It was a brutal time. Rome was pulling out. Petty kingdoms were collapsing, especially north of Hadrian's Wall where the indigenous people struggled against one another and the encroaching Saxons. There was

a leader, Lucius Artorius Castus, who, we believe, remained behind with his cavalry. That cavalry is key to the myths of Arthur and his Knights: They were Sarmatians. The Sarmatians, a nomadic horse culture from the Asian Steppes, had been sent to Britain by Marcus Aurelius. Their descendants remained in Britain—stationed on Hadrian's Wall and at Ribchester—as a separate cultural entity until well after Rome pulled out.

By this time all the Roman regulars had gone, so you had ex-Roman forces made up of local recruits, and this essentially little-known force of Sarmatian cavalry, to stand against the Saxons. In an earlier draft, I tried to be more accurate about how the invasion proceeded. The Saxons had come to the isles to settle and then began a journey of conquest. What happened next was the historically illusive figure of Artorius/Arthur and his Sarmatians waged war against the Saxons—apparently a sustained, professional cavalry campaign which culminated at the Battle of Badon Hill where the Saxons were crushed. From that moment, in early British history, the legend of Arthur and his band of Sarmatian cavalry became elevated forever.

Of course in an attempt to “purify” the legend and make it 100 percent Celtic, the Sarmatians were written out; and Roman Artorius was made the Celtic Arthur. Later, the Sarmatian myths were Christianized, and the whole thing was once again rewritten to become a medieval legend. For instance, the Sarmatians had a holy cup that was a source of great quests which likely became the Christian/Medieval Arthurian Grail. Also, the Sarmatians worshipped swords stabbed into the earth, had a Lady of the Lake, used round tables and so forth.

scr(i)pt: *Why were you personally interested in taking on this story?*

Franzoni: There are two reasons: The idea of doing *King Arthur* as *The Wild Bunch* is cool in and of itself. But, a long time ago when I used to go to the libraries for research, I found a paper on Lucius Artorius Castus and how it was possible that the legendary King Arthur emerged from this historical Roman commander. Over the years I've become more

and more convinced. Most importantly, however, I was intrigued with the idea of giving back to the world the lives of these Sarmatians which British history had basically written out of existence, especially by the Celtic myth-makers who will insist it was their people, that there were no Sarmatians. I wanted to give history back the Sarmatians lives and give them the glory that they deserve.

I also took a shot at the Pelagian Heresy because it was running through the world, and especially Britain, at that time. If you look at the teachings of Pelagius, they coincide pretty well with the basics of chivalry. It gives Arthur both a reason to leave and a passion to stay; and it gives him a complete alternate reality from the pagans around him, especially his own men who were obviously all pagan. Again, the other thing that intrigued me was the mythology of the Sarmatians. One of the more fun discoveries was, whereas the Celtic/Christian version of the Grail contained the last Merlot of Jesus, the original Sarmatian chalice was filled with hashish. (No, we don't have the Knights sitting at the Round Table with a hookah in the middle. In fact we don't deal with the Grail at all.)

scr(i)pt: *I understand that you used famed Arthurian scholar and writer John Matthews as a historical consultant. How much did he help you with research and where else did you find historical facts?*

Franzoni: We have three major historical experts onboard: Linda Malcor, a renowned Sarmatian/Arthur expert, Jeannine Davis-Kimball, a famous Sarmatian anthropologist; and John, one of the world's Celtic experts. John's done a tremendous amount of research, and it was great fun hanging out with him on the set. Unlike most Celtic experts, John has a very open mind when it comes to dealing with the Sarmatian connection. Linda, likewise, is a true scholar with—as every true scholar must have—a completely open mind. John brought to our attention the fact that there was a fort on Hadrian's Wall of Sarmatian cavalry with a name very much like Camelot—a Latin name. John is going to bear the brunt of the Celtic attack on all this, as the British need



PAGE 32: **Clive Owen** as King Arthur, PHOTO: Jonathan Hession ©Touchstone Pictures and Jerry Bruckheimer, Inc. ABOVE: Screenwriter **David Franzoni** on the set of *King Arthur* just outside the hall containing the Round Table

for Arthur and his Knights to be indigenous is akin to people who need to find aliens at Roswell no matter what.

The earliest and most consistent references to Arthur call him a Roman—period. But as Linda Malcor has pointed out, the Celtic proponents have essentially tried to shoot that knowledge down. For instance, some “journalist” in Dublin got hold of an early draft of our script and wrote a blistering attack on the project ... citing the usual Arthurian myths as if they could in any way be proved. In other words, the Celtic myths say that Arthur was a Celt. Therefore, our factual evidence that he was a Roman must be wrong! Even one of the oldest Celtic poems describes Arthur as a Roman. When the British press quickly ran out of direct arguments, they went completely beyond the pale. [One news source] ran an article describing how Antoine and I got into a huge shouting match on the set—that we nearly came to blows—and that we had to be dragged apart by stuntmen. (Mind you, no ordinary crew member is man enough to handle a writer and director when they go at it!) This fight took place, however, when I was in Malibu and Antoine was in Dublin—Celtic myth-making's finest hour.

I remember having lunch with Jeannine Davis-Kimball when she asked my wife how many acres a horse needed for grazing so that it wouldn't contract certain diseases. (My wife has horses.) When we asked why she wanted to know, she said friends of

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hers were excavating the Sarmatian cavalry pastures at Ribchester; and, since they knew they had about 5,500 horses, they want to calculate how far to keep digging. Now if the British archeologists hadn’t spent so much time chasing mummies in Egypt, they’d have long ago sorted out their own country’s fabulous past. Instead, we are just scratching the surface.

scr(i)pt: *Was there anything that you found in your research that you didn’t get to put in the film and you wished you could have?*

Franzoni: Some of the myths of the Sarmatians. There were more in previous drafts. I wanted to deal with the Round Table—a common shape of table among the Steppe people—and all the other myths which can be traced circumstantially to the Sarmatians. I wanted to say, not so much “This is where all this stuff came from,” but “This is who these people were as human beings.”

scr(i)pt: *The Arthurian tales have been so romanticized. How do you think that happened? Can you speak to this and the fact that this film may become a mythos-buster?*

Franzoni: On one level we have to understand that Merlin didn’t fly through the air and turn people into chipmunks. If you believe that, it’s hopeless anyway. I mean, what myths are we busting? We know myths are lies, right? What is fascinating is that the myths came from something—someone, some event. Going back to those origins is always going to be more fascinating than the myths because the truth concerns real people, in the real world, facing real life-and-death issues. Rome left. The Saxons came, and the only real force standing between the locals and death was this Sarmatian cavalry led by Artorius, a Roman. They met on Badon Hill to settle the fate of Britain, many, many generations ago. The heroism displayed on that day makes myth.

The Sarmatians were the finest horsemen who ever lived and unbelievably hardcore on every level. If you read Ovid’s letters home

after he was exiled by Augustus, he describes what it was like living on the Black Sea when your next-door neighbors are Sarmatians. Those guys could have eaten the Hells Angels and spit out their Harleys. That day on Badon Hill must have been unforgettable.

scr(i)pt: *How would you best describe the overriding theme found in this interpretation of Arthur?*

Franzoni: When you say theme, I think about what this story is really about. It is about how the human spirit—when kept whole by extremely tough individuals—can never be beaten. The Sarmatians were strangers in a strange land; and, as I’ve said, they were very brutal people. Brutal. But they live on today in myth, songs and poems.

scr(i)pt: *Wouldn’t you say that’s the warrior archetype?*

Franzoni: Well, hopefully. And, hopefully, the film is about who we are and not just about who we should be. Lord Byron once said that the only two men in history who ever used war to create a better world were Leonidas and George Washington. In our minds they are stale ciphers; but look at their lives, and you find real human beings who made staggering choices. Because they are real—not myths or gods—we are capable of making those choices, too.

scr(i)pt: *What advice might you give to a writer who is tackling the historic bio as far as accurate portrayals and speculative drama?*

Franzoni: The most important thing to make “accurate” is what it is about. You can make mistakes in costumes. You can even twist facts for dramatic reasons—it doesn’t really matter if you’re faithful to the overall truth. You have a “good idea,” which is *King Arthur* as *The Wild Bunch*; but, unless there’s a real reason for doing it, it’s going to be empty. I personally feel the writer has to find a legitimate reason for doing it. It shouldn’t be about making money or getting an Academy Award®. That’s all bullshit. What you want to do is have a reason that is important to you so you can write the story. As far as the accuracy goes, do all your own research first. Just roll around it. Then, when you get ready to go forward, turn [that part] over to the experts.

scr(i)pt: *So, from concept to sale—how did you sell the idea?*

Franzoni: It was almost as easy as

Gladiator. I mentioned to my agent that I wanted to do *King Arthur* as *The Wild Bunch*, and he was in a meeting with Mike Stenson who works with Jerry Bruckheimer. Mike loved the idea, so did Jerry—like, would you come on over and talk about this? You get *King Arthur* as *The Wild Bunch*, Merlin as Ho Chi Minh, the Picts as the Viet Cong. Rome leaving is the fall of Saigon. Sold.

Director Antoine Fuqua came onboard last winter. We sat down and talked through the whole thing. We went to London, did some casting, got the money from Disney. If Jerry Bruckheimer wants to make a movie, it’s not real painful.

scr(i)pt: *Did you do a treatment first?*

Franzoni: I was contracted to write a treatment for Disney. Jerry and I talked through the story. I usually do not outline or write treatments, even for myself. But they wanted something on paper because Jerry was already after a director before I started the script. I did a very brief treatment. I put in some pictures of the Sarmatian cavalry.

scr(i)pt: *You included pictures and images?*

Franzoni: Yes, it was a cool thing, a fun thing. My son has a collection of spears and daggers which are Sarmatian, so I brought several of those in to show Jerry when I walked him through the beats of the story. It’s great to be able to hold something in your hand that’s thousands of years old; it instantly connects you with—in this case—the people you’re writing about.

scr(i)pt: *What did you prepare and/or write up through the time of the film’s debut? Did you work at all with the film’s director, Antoine Fuqua?*

Franzoni: I went to Italy on vacation with my family and started writing the script. It took me about a year to get the first draft. Then Mike Stenson and I worked on it. We got Jerry’s notes and worked some more. Then it went to Disney, and they brought another writer in. He did very, very little work, though I was not crazy about the dialogue changes. Then I came back on and worked through the entire production with Antoine. Antoine is perfect for this version of Arthur—he was a kid from the inner city and probably knew a few “Sarmatians” back in Chicago in his day.

scr(i)pt: *Did you participate during production?*

Franzoni: The whole thing. My 12-year-old son is even a villager. When I arrived in Ireland, they were nearly finished building Hadrian's Wall; and I was stunned—even after *Gladiator* I was not prepared for the immensity of the set. I hope the audience doesn't think it's CG. It was actually quite moving. Jerry, Antoine and I had taken a chopper from London up to Hadrian's Wall—the real one, of course—and it's pretty much worn down. Then we walked along the top of this very accurate reproduction, and it's a mile long! Very impressive, very moving.

scr(i)pt: *Can you speak a bit more about your writing process ... what you did that year to craft this challenging story?*

Franzoni: I usually never outline. I feel outlining interferes with the creative process—kind of like reducing your vision to a memo. But in this case, because Jerry was already talking to directors before I even started writing, he asked me to do a brief treatment/outline which I did and it was actually fun. It wasn't detailed, but general, with images of the Sarmatians and their gear.

Then I wrote beginning to end, not thinking about structure (which I feel is an illusion anyway), just getting the best story possible on paper. You have to remember that the act structure was designed to give people breaks at plays to go have a leak. So, I'm not structuring my story around someone's bathroom issues. I never really use scenes, that is, scenes that have a beginning, middle and an end. A scene should set something in the script in motion and not resolve it until later, preferable within the structure of another so-called

scene. This way the piece has momentum.

In general, I had to tell a completely fresh tale of a completely fresh King Arthur—Lucius Artorius Castus, dux of cavalry—and the Sarmatian cavalry he commanded in Britain. The usual tomes of Arthur (the Celtic/Christian version—like Thomas Malory, etc.) have been done. With the possible exception of *Excalibur*, I don't find the books compelling. The reason, in my opinion, is that everything has been sanitized to make a Christian morality tale. Of course many of the Sarmatian pagan elements survive (Lady of the Lake, sword in the stone, the round table, etc.) and that includes the Grail.

So, you have to sort through many things: our preconceptions of Arthur and his Knights; who Lucius Artorius Castus may have been as a human being; who the Sarmatians may have been (again, as humans); what the times were like (Rome pulling out—we are set back in the Dark Ages, not medieval times); the encroaching Saxons ... all that. You go back to Ovid who was banished by Augustus in 8 A.D., to a terrible place on the Black Sea. Here, his neighbors were a maniacal, out-of-control tribe of Sarmatians, the very same tribe that would eventually do time in the Roman army in Britain. Read *Ovid* and you get an immediate, personal impression of these warriors. Believe me, they are not your knights in shining armor—Hells Angels, maybe ...

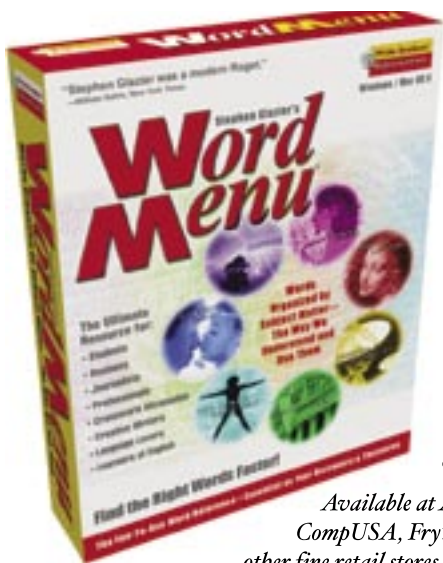
There exists a wonderful description of the battle where the Sarmatians—who would become Roman cavalry—were defeated on a frozen lake by Roman legions, which I used as a model for a battle between Arthur and

his Sarmatians against the Saxons. So ... you go back to the period and do the human research and read what you can. I did the same thing on *Gladiator* then turned it over to the pros to get all the details straight.

Then the production takes on a life of its own and in our case, getting stuff right in detail is tough. On *Gladiator* when you called down to “ye olde sword and helm shoppe” and put in an order for 200 Roman swords, they knew you meant gladius or spathas. People have been making Roman gear for the movies for decades. But when you call up and ask for Sarmatian swords and armor for men and horses, the chance they will get it right is dramatically low. To get the chain mail we wanted we had to order from a factory that produces it for the S & M trade! Malory will roll over in his grave. (i)

We can look forward to more epic storytelling from David Franzoni as his future projects include: Hannibal for Revolution Studios, Rifts for Jerry Bruckheimer, and his own screenplay, which he will direct.

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