

REVIEWS

Jean-Jacques Annaud's Quest for Fire

A pack of hungry wolves stalk a lone tribesman in the wilds of 80,000 years ago. Their bloodthirst adheres to the unwavering law of the animal: kill in order to survive. We quickly apportion our sympathy to our weaponless human ancestor, urging him on as he makes a narrow escape. But we soon learn that our sentiments may have been prematurely drawn. These proto-humans differ frighteningly little from the animals. In fact, their savagery goes one step beyond. They butcher their own kind mercilessly. We are faced with the unavoidable: human beings have a common origin with the beast.

This disturbing truth runs through the opening moments of *Quest For Fire*, a Franco-Canadian production. One need not be a Creationist to feel disquieted. Constantly threatened by the ultimate barbaric act - nuclear incineration -, the last thing we humans need is a film that adds to our fatalism.

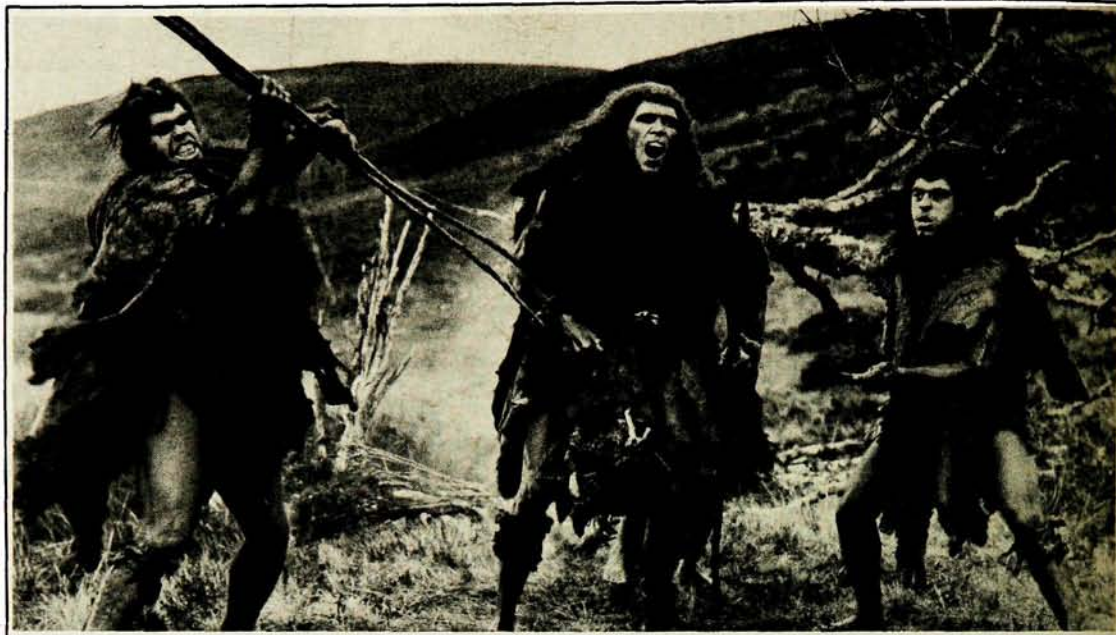
It is, therefore, with unexpected serendipity that one finds *Quest For Fire* to be one of the most hopeful and inspirational stories about the human journey ever filmed. It is a magnificent cinematic achievement, certain to stand as one of the greatest motion pictures this country has ever been associated with. *Quest For Fire* is about as realistic a portrayal of the beginnings of humankind as we're ever going to get. And much to our delight, it also happens to be one of the most entertaining films made in years.

Shot entirely on locations around the world, with exquisite photography by Claude Agostini, *Quest For Fire* traces the long and arduous journey of three Ulam (early Homo sapiens) warriors who've been left with the task of searching out fire for their tribe. The Ulam do not yet know how to create fire. They equate it with life itself. Without it, they are powerless and vulnerable to the cruel world around them.

Naoh, Amoukar and Gaw (played by three superb actors, Everett McGill, Ron Perlman and Nameer El-Kadi, respectively) embark on an odyssey filled with indescribable hardship; blood-drenched battles with cannibal tribes, snow and rain, and the ever-present threat of animal predators.

What is so remarkable about *Quest For Fire* is that, despite some of the most gruesome scenes ever to show up on the screen, it is essentially a very moving and uplifting story. Much of the credit must go to the aforementioned actors. Despite being hidden under pounds of make-up, and distanced from us by 80,000 years of language development, the three swiftly shatter these barriers and crawl right into our hearts. While the Ulam are certainly not the most advanced and "civilized" of the tribes roaming the earth during the Ice Age, Naoh and his two friends exude a certain inquisitiveness which makes us instantly identify with them. It is not long before their hardship becomes our hardship; their quest, our quest.

This very ability - to engage us in the



• A brilliant odyssey in an uncharted world, *Quest's* warriors prepare to defend themselves

notion that we human beings have been on an odyssey from the very beginning - is part of *Quest For Fire's* brilliance. For this accomplishment alone, praise must be extended to the film's prime movers: executive producer Michael Gruskoff, director Jean-Jacques Annaud and screenwriter Gerard Brach, with a good hand for producers John Kemeny and Denis Héroux who saw the project through completion. They've not only managed to give us an extremely informative film, but a relevant and poignant one as well.

What's even more amazing is that *Quest For Fire* never degenerates into fairy tale. While its realism is unceasing, the scenes of bloodshed and gore are interspersed with genuinely humorous and "human" episodes such as when the three warriors are chased up a sapling tree by a sabre-tooth tiger. They remain clinging to its fragile branches for over a day before realizing the tiger is no longer there.

And when the three meet Ika, a whippy, little female from the "mud people" tribe (played charmingly by Rae Dawn Chong), we are treated to some truly revelatory scenes. Ika not only teaches them how to create fire (by rubbing two sticks together) but gives Naoh a whole new outlook on life, or, more succinctly, on the facts of life.

Restricted by characters who lack a coherent language, the makers of *Quest For Fire* have wisely conscripted the renowned linguist and author Anthony Burgess, and anthropologist Desmond Morris, to help bring life to our apish ancestors and the situations they were likely to experience. Both gentlemen have contributed admirably. Never does humour approach camp, never does awkwardness become infantile. The primitivism expressed in this film is always scientifically sound. The attempted words and exaggerated actions of our human forebearers, while at times amusing, are convincingly pure and virginal.

They mesh seamlessly with the film's central purpose: to show how humankind coped with its loss of beast-like innocence.

In this sense, *Quest For Fire* is as courageous a film as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and may very well be eventually considered as a companion piece to Kubrick's masterwork. It is a film that can be shown in every country of the world because its message needs no translation. We human beings are together in this journey.

And where are we going?

Quest For Fire doesn't extrapolate on this. It's not the film's purpose. But when Naoh and Ika (expectant with child) sit gazing at a glowing full moon at the film's end we can almost see Kubrick's Star Child floating through space towards Higher Consciousness.

Our quest is clear.

Stephen Zoller •

QUEST FOR FIRE d. Jean-Jacques Annaud p. John Kemeny, Denis Héroux exec. p. Michael Gruskoff sc. Gérard Brach based on the novel by J.H. Rosny, Sr. co-p. Jacques Dorfmann, Vera Belmont languages created by Anthony Burgess body language & gestures created by Desmond Morris music Philippe Sarda d.o.p. Claude Agostini ed. Yves Langlois assoc. p. Michael Moore, Claude Nedjar, Garth Thomas (Europel p.des. Brian Morris (Scotland and Kenya), Guy Comtois (Canada) music performed by The London Symphony Orchestra, Les Percussions de Strasbourg pan flute solo Simion Stanciu conductor Peter Knight creat. makeup consult. Christopher Tucker cost. des. John Hay, Penny Rose princ. cam. op. Al Smith unit man. Peter Bray p. co-ord. Barbara Shrier asst. to d. Laurence Duval p. compt. Wilma Palm asst. to p. Karen Fried princ. makeup Joan Isaacson, Suzanne Benoit, Josiane Deschamps sp. efx. makeup Stephan Dupuis asst. cost. des. Blanche Boileau ward. mist. Renée April body movement coaches Desmond Jones, Peter Elliott casting Lesley de Pettitt (London), K. Hazzard (Toronto), A. Champagne, A. Rysphan, (Montreal), Lois Planco (New York), Ellen Chenoweth (Los Angeles), Mamade (Paris), Dominique Cheminal (Nairobi) stills Takashi Seida props master Brian Payne props Enrico Campana, Gareth Wilson gaffer Maris Jansons best boy Frieder Hochheim grip Carlo Campana const. man. Claude Simard sd. superv. Ken Heeley-Ray loc. mixer Claude Hazanavicius dialogue ed. Martin Ashbee sd. efx. eds. David Evans, Kevin Ward re-rec. mixers Joe Grimaldi, Austin Grimaldi asst. ed. Glenn Berman crew in Canada: p. man. Stephan Reichel 1st a.d. Matthew Vibert 2nd a.d. John Desormeaux,

Michael Williams 3rd a.d. François Leclerc, Jennifer Jones asst. unit man. Doug Smith sc. superv. Joanne T. Harwood p. sec. Luise Massari cam. op. Paul van der Linden, Andy Chmura 1st asst. cam. Paul Gravel, Robert Guertin, Greg Farrow 2nd asst. cam. Paul Morin, Michel Girard, Patrick Clune head makeup dept. Michèle Burke sp. efx. makeup John Caglione makeup artists Pipsan Ayyote, Jocelyne Bellemare, Normande Campeau, Kathryn Cassault, Micheline Poisy, Inge Klaudi, Marie-Josée Lafontaine, Kathleen Mifsud, Louise Mignault, Linda Preston, Denise West hair/wigs Bob Pritchett, Barbara Alexander, Jenny Arbour, Richard Hansen, André Lafrenière, Ivan Lynch, Fautina Recio makeup lab. tech. Frans Sayers, Luc Champagne body painters Michel Sequin, Marc Sequin, Grace Yu sp. efx. superv. Martin Malivoire sp. efx. tech. Neil Trifunovich, Mark Molin elec. David Hynes, Adam Swica gen. op. Jock Brandis grips Johnny Daoust, Pierre Charpentier, Emanuel Lépine asst. art. d. Raymond Larose ward. assts. Fabienne April, Sylvie Bellemare, Mariane Coulon, Mario Davignon, Maureen Gurney, Johanne Prigent, Martin Sauvè p. acct. Kay Larlham unit pub. David Novak & Associates (Quinn Donoghue) driver capt. Rick Disensi animals provided by Gentle Jungle, Inc. animal consult. Ralph Helfer crews in Scotland & Kenya: p. man. Matthew Vibert 1st a.d. David Bracknell 2nd a.d. Terry Pearce p. coord. Angela Heald p. sec. Jackie Fritz asst. unit man. Chris Knowles performer coord. Bob Jordan loc. man. (Kenya) Rick Anderson art d. Clinton Cavers 2nd cam. op. Keith Woods 1st asst. cam. Ronnie Ancombe, George Bottos 2nd asst. cam. Larry Lynn, Christophe Bonnière p. asst. Valerie Craig

London contact Laura Grummitt head makeup dept. Sarah Monzani princ. makeup Michèle Burke, Sue Frear, Maureen Stephenson makeup Lyne Desmarais, Nick Forder, Colette Kramer hair/wigs Barry Richardson, Stuart Artinstall ward. Janet Yates, Briony Anderson prop. master David Jordan const. man. Terry Apsey grip Michel Chohin boom Denis Dupont p. acct. Paul Cadioui unit pub. David Novak & Associates (Chris Nixon) animals provided by Mary Chipperfield Promotions animal consult. Jimmy Chipperfield mammoth cost. Colin On Lp. Everett McGill, Ron Perlman, Nameer El-Kadi, Rae Dawn Chong, Gary Schwartz, Naseer El-Kadi, Frank Olivier Bonnet, Jean-Michel Kindt, Kurt Schiegl, Brian Gill, Terry Fitt, Bibi Caspari, Peter Elliott, Michelle Leduc, Robert Lavoie, Matt Birman, Christian Benard, Joy Boushell, Lydia Chaban, Mary Lou Foy, Dena Francis, Robert Gondek, Hélène Grégoire, Sylvie Guilbault, Lloyd McKinnon, Steve Ramanuskas, Georgette Rondeau, Rod Bennett, Jacques Demers, Michel Drouet, Michel Francoeur, Charles Gosselin, Bernard Kendall, Benoit Lévesque, Joshua Melnick, Jean-Claude Meunier, Alex Ouaglia, The Great Antonio, Jacques Caron, Jean-Pierre Gagné, Hercule Gaston Héon, George Buza, Danny Lynch, Butch Lynch, Luke McMasters, Adrian Street, Mohamed Siad Cocke, Tarlok Sing Seva, Lolamal Kapisisi, Hassannali Damji, animal stunts Joe Campassi, Brian McMillan, Shawn Gruskoff, Karin Dew stunt performers Dwayne McLean, Brent Meyer, Tim Huleatt, Bonnie Gruen, p.c. ICC-Ciné Trail (Montreal), Belstar Productions/Stephen Films (Paris), in association with Gruskoff Film Organization running time 90 min. col. 35mm dist. 20th Century-Fox.