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A History of Alexander on the Big Screen

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A History of Alexander on The Big Screen

by Jeanne Reames-Zimmerman

Oliver Stone's *Alexander* arrived in theaters on November 24, 2004 – one of two big-budget films slated to deal with the life and times of the conqueror. The other, to be directed by Baz Luhrmann and produced by Martin Scorsese, will not begin shooting until 2005. And despite Luhrman's protests that his film will go forward, the general mood in Hollywood seems to be "wait and see." In addition to these two high-profile Alexander projects, a small, independent film about Alexander's youth, *Alexander the Great of Macedonia*, produced by Ilya Salkind (known best for *Superman*), was filmed and slated to appear this fall, but it is now simply listed as "coming soon" and may never appear at all.

The last attempt to put Alexander on the big screen came almost fifty years ago, in 1956, with MGM's *Alexander the Great*, featuring a young Richard Burton in his first starring role. Charlton Heston was initially offered the role of Alexander but turned it down, saying later, "Alexander is the easiest kind of picture to make badly." If Burton's Alexander is the best known, there have been other celluloid Alexanders since. Nicolas Clay starred in a 1981 BBC docudrama, *The Search for Alexander the Great*. There was also a 1917 black-and-white silent Swedish film called *Alexander den store*; an Indian political film *Sikander* in 1941 with an Indian Alexander (Prithviraj Kapoor); and a black-and-white, never-sold pilot episode for a TV series called *Alexander the Great*, starring a pre-*Star Trek* William Shatner as Alexander and a pre-*Batman* Adam West as Cleander (essentially Hephaestion). This pilot was originally shot in 1964 but not seen until 1968 as a TV special.

The three-time Oscar-winning Oliver Stone (*Midnight Express*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*) has been captivated by Alexander since his youth and produced an initial Alexander script in the mid-1980's, beginning serious movement forward on the project in the early 1990's. But there were other competing proposals that fell by the wayside. These included a ten-hour miniseries project for HBO, produced by Mel Gibson, who (if rumor is to be

believed) may join instead the Luhrmann production in the role of Philip, Alexander's father. Christopher McQuarrie (*The Usual Suspects*) also proposed an Alexander project, which he reputedly sold to Warner Brothers. Yet the next thing anyone knew, Martin Scorsese was involved, and Leonardo DiCaprio had been tapped for Alexander (instead of McQuarrie's choice of Jude Law). Then Scorsese began to be associated with the Baz Luhrmann project, previously under Dino de Laurentis, not Christopher McQuarrie. McQuarrie himself says he is primarily a writer, not a director, yet the Luhrmann/Scorsese script is based on a trilogy by Italian novelist Valerio Massimo Manfredi (Luhrmann's original choice), not the one penned by McQuarrie and Peter Buchman. Meanwhile, Warner Brothers is handling Stone's film. Confused? So was anyone trying to keep track of the mad shuffle, and exactly what happened is difficult to know. Even Ridley Scott, the director of *Gladiator* (2000), toyed with an Alexander project, proposing what might have been the wisest casting idea of all – a complete unknown for Alexander, to be surrounded by a supporting cast of name stars.

It was far from certain that Stone's *Alexander* would ever make it to the box office since it has been put on hold numerous times for one reason or another. For



Fig. 9. Colin Farrell rides in as the first big-screen Alexander in almost fifty years (*Alexander*, Warner Brothers, 2004).

instance, in November 1998, according to the Athens News Agency, the Greek government rescinded its earlier promise of assistance in filming, and Culture Minister Evangelos Venizelos said, "At the present time, it is not at all certain whether we would find any grounds for cooperation, at least on the script." Apparently, among other things, the Greeks were not thrilled by Stone's interest in portraying Alexander's homoerotic affairs. Even earlier problems included Stone's initial choice of scriptwriter, Gore Vidal, who turned him down in no uncertain terms: "I'd never work for you. You distorted Kennedy, you distorted Nixon, and you lack the one quality a director needs most – talent" (quoted in *Salon* in 1996).

Alexander is, arguably, Stone's most ambitious production to date and a long-time pet project. Certainly, the narrative departs from more conventional linear storytelling, moving back and forth in time with events linked thematically rather than chronologically, as an aged Ptolemy (Anthony Hopkins) narrates certain events in Alexander's life that he regards as particularly pivotal. In the film's official production notes, historical consultant Robin Lane Fox says, "Cramming every incident of Alexander's extraordinary life into one feature film would be quite literally impossible."

Early rumors and an old quote from Stone himself suggested that (in the spirit of his other biopics) Stone would follow conspiracy theories about the deaths of both Philip II and Alexander. In December 2002, Stone told *The Guardian*, "I was intrigued to discover that his famous father, Philip II, had been assassinated under mysterious circumstances . . . [and] In Alexander's own untimely death at 33, we have again strong evidence of a conspiracy of family clans." Philip's murder and Alexander's final illness are topics over which historians themselves have disagreed, and questions of conspiracy were present even in antiquity. Although many Alexander specialists believe the conqueror died of illness and conspiracies do offer dramatic appeal, Stone, in the end, adopted a compromise. No clear conspiracy is ever laid out; it is merely intimated as one possible cause for the conqueror's death, leaving viewers to

draw their own conclusions.

The film's accuracy of detail owes much to Lane Fox, the film's historical consultant. Examples of this accuracy include Alexander's armor and helmet, modeled on ancient descriptions and artwork; the purple and gold cloak sported by Alexander, modeled on the cloak taken from Tomb II at Vergina; and the blue-glazed recreation of the Ishtar Gate for Alexander's entry into Babylon. The military costuming is generally well done, and great attention has been given to recreating reality on several levels, from the dust and confusion of battle to the scars on Farrell's body – the kind of detail easily dropped in a Hollywood blockbuster but one that suggests a respect for small things on the part of Stone. Lane Fox himself told *The Australian* in July 2004, "My colleagues told me that for historians, Stone was supposed to be like Satan . . . Like the poet John Milton, I have to say I quickly became very fond of Satan. Anyway, the claim that Stone has no historical sense is completely untrue."

Yet ahistorical choices were made. Some are for dramatic or pragmatic reasons. For instance, the horse used as Bucephalus is a North Light Friesian, a small draft horse, and enormous by the standards of ancient Greek horses (see Fig. 9). Nonetheless, Friesians are known for their showy trot, intelligence, and easy natures, and are, thus, popular in Hollywood. Furthermore, several events in Alexander's campaigns are conflated or simplified; for example, two mutinies become one, two conspiracies become one, and the Hydaspes and Malli battles are combined. Such substitutions make sense even if the historian may recognize the inaccuracies of them. Likewise, Stone's decision to have actors employ a variety of accents (Irish, English, Scottish, Welsh, and Albanian for Olympias) was an attempt to convey the ethnic variety in Alexander's expedition – a choice that some will call clever and some will call merely forced.

Other elements in the film are more difficult to justify. For instance, and in contrast to Alexander's helmet, the crown sported by Angelina Jolie as Olympias in some scenes is anachronistic despite the fact we have quite a few examples of women's jewelry and diadems from female graves in

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Macedonia. Even if those examples are early Hellenistic, any would have been more authentic than what Jolie wears. Likewise, the drape and cut of Macedonian civilian clothing seems off despite the input of Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, author of *Aphrodite's Tortoise: The Veiled Woman in Ancient Greece* (2004) and *Women's Dress in the Ancient Greek World* (2002); and there is an overabundance of unmitigated white although the Macedonians were not particularly noted for undecorated, unbordered clothing (much less for blindingly white cloth).

Yet one must admit that a story is an organic whole that succeeds or fails based on more fundamental criteria than the cut of a costume. One ought not to miss the forest for the trees, and if author Flannery O'Connor famously said, "Fiction is after truth," nonetheless, historical films are not documentaries. That may make their validity dubious for historical purists, but they are fiction, which has a different aim. Where is the story in the history? The novelist (or director) will have to make choices about what to include, what not to include, and what to modify in order to render something comprehensible to a modern audience. That does not excuse laziness or failure to do research. One should practice the art of getting it right, to paraphrase historian and published novelist Dr. Judith Tarr.

Nonetheless, capturing the period spirit is, in my own opinion, more critical than creating detail-perfect sets. Otherwise, one has only an elaborate costume drama. The real challenge of this genre is to allow characters to be properly historical without pushing them past a point with which modern viewers can identify. I believe it is precisely in how well an author/director/screenwriter blends the needs and goals of the story with attention to authentic detail that creates the alchemy of good historical fiction, either in print or on film. If I approached Oliver Stone's *Alexander* with trepidation, I came away pleasantly surprised. If not *Lawrence of Arabia* (and Colin Farrell certainly is not Peter O'Toole), it is easily the best fictional portrayal of Alexander produced to date on film.

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