

EMPIRE OF THE SUN



STEVEN SPIELBERG DIRECTS

In deciding to make a film from J. G. Ballard's novel *Empire of the Sun*, producer-director Steven Spielberg took on an extremely difficult task. The story is set in Shanghai during the week of December 7, 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. As a result of time differences across the Pacific Date Line, it was already the morning of Monday, December 8th in Shanghai when the Ballard family, preparing for Christmas festivities, heard the news.

For them, and the people of the city, the war started at once. The Japanese were already in Shanghai carrying on their war with China. They immediately opened fire, sank a British warship, captured an American gun-boat and rounded up all Europeans and Americans. They were herded into concentration camps where most of them remained until the war ended in 1945 with the dropping of

the first Atomic bomb.

This is the background to Ballard's story. While drawing extensively on his own observations and memories (he was 11 years old at the time) he has written a hypnotically compelling tale of a young boy who is separated from his family, interned in another camp, he goes through the years fighting a desperate struggle for existence — starved, beaten and betrayed, never knowing whether his parents are alive or dead.

During these years of horror and privation, the young boy grows up witnessing death and destruction on a scale so enormous that before long it becomes just a matter-of-fact daily routine.

The appeal of this terrible chronicle to Spielberg is at once apparent: he has always been inclined towards stories with children or young people, set within family relations of various kinds, combined with backgrounds either touching on fantasy or so adventurous that excitement is the order of every day. But with *Empire of the*

Sun he is dealing with subject matter so real that there can be no flights of fancy into make-believe worlds.

Young Jim, who is truly a hero but whose courage lies in being able to cope with an impossible daily existence, does however, imagine himself briefly in another life. He comes to admire all things American which he discovers as part of the war against Japan, and at times he thinks of himself as an airman flying the beautiful machines which cross the skies.

With this element Spielberg found a subject dear to his heart giving him a true reality and wide international appeal. Getting it on film however, proved to be enormously complicated. Working from a clever adaptation written by playwright Tom Stoppard, he started in Shanghai on March 2, 1987. Trying to recreate the city (now very much modernised) wasn't easy.

At one point, the burning of hundreds of old rubber tires (to create the black smoke which

resulted from the Japanese assault on the city) brought so many complaints from the residents that the authorities fined the film company \$13,500 for causing toxic elements to pollute the air. An airport and Olympic stadium, where Jim was confined for most of the war, were recreated in Jerez de la Frontera in Spain, with all other interiors being filmed at Elstree Studios outside London.

Playing the role of Jim is Christian Bale, who was last seen in the TV mini-series *Anastasia*, and has been a junior associate with the Royal Ballet in London. Also in the cast are John Malkovich, Miranda Richardson and Nigel Havers. Malkovich's first film role was in *Places in the Heart* for which he received an Academy award nomination. He went on to play important roles in *The Killing Fields*, *Eleni*, *Foot for Love*, and the soon-to-be-released *The Glass Menagerie*. In *Empire of the Sun* he plays the American, Basie, who helps Jim more out of necessity than friendship.

Miranda Richardson caught the attention of both critics and audiences in her first major film role in *Dance With a Stranger*. Nigel Havers, is from the National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company, and was last seen on cinema screens in *Chariots of Fire*, *Passage to India*, and *The Whistle Blower*.

While filming in Spain, Spielberg came up against a barrage of criticism from the townspeople and the media for working on a closed set, and from the film unions for bringing his British unit with him. He finally agreed to a press conference where he gave his only published comments about his film.

Giving as his reasons for working on a closed set he said, "I still believe that movies are magic. A good magician wouldn't invite you backstage to see where the rabbits and birds are hidden before they fly out, or to show you how they accomplish their other acts of magic. So why should I?"

About the film itself he commented: "Like many other filmmakers I want to show the awful effects of war. It is unlike any of my other films in that it is a picture without science fiction overtones, and it's not a motion picture filled with relentless adventures."

He went on to say that he doubted whether he would ever get away entirely from science fiction and films about imagination. "But it's just that at the moment I'm finding such great satisfaction in being a father myself that I love directing what I know about children, my own child, and the story of what young Jim went through in *Empire of the Sun* touched me deeply." (Spielberg and actress Amy Irving have a 2-year-old son.)

—Gerald Pratley

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