



## Back to the Jurassic

### Tuesday, October 13, 2015

*While I am on a roll, digging through my old [Spielberg Film Society](#) reviews, here's one from issue #53, written a few months before [Schindler's List](#) appeared, contemplating a very different beast that shook up cinema-goers earlier that summer:*

#### *Spielberg Rex – Downwind from Jurassic Park*

by Joe Fordham (August 1993)

You know this already: His thirteenth feature, twelfth with John Williams, first action/adventure big-teeth monster thrill from a best seller novel since the phenomenon of *Jaws* eighteen years ago just crashed into movie theatres atop a tidal wave of T-shirts, T.V. ads and mammoth industry and audience anticipation -- all this, and *Schindler's List* in black and white to follow in December. Has Spielberg finally flipped out? Did he walk into a studio trap? Can there be any hope that this his latest movie can live up to expectations?

*Jurassic Park* is relentless, witty, savage, cunning, Mother Nature in the raw. It is also

surreal, primeval, pastoral, with a staggering, majestic, eye-defying beauty of dinosaur characterizations (more praise for Tippett later). It is by no means a children's movie, though two central characters (Ariana Richards as sweet and terrified Lex, Joseph Mazzello as her raggedy dino-know-all little brother Tim, both completely convincing) mark a return to form for Spielberg as a director of children. It is also a very sly, smiling, razor-toothed attack on humankind's survival instincts and its fascination for theme parks. Cuddly velociraptors now only \$24.99!



Two years ago, Michael Crichton's bone-stomping adventure story, *Chaos Theory* run amuck amongst dino-clones on Isla Nublar, became the talk of the town in Hollywood. Inevitably the Steven Spielberg film (check out the possessory credit relegated to the end of the final credit roller) streamlines plot and rearranges themes. The bare-bones story is intact, 'God creates dinosaurs. God destroys dinosaurs. God creates man. Man destroys God. Man creates dinosaurs. Dinosaurs eat man....' but the emphasis has changed.

Spielberg's deft sense of humor, together with Crichton's and David Koepp's screenplay, transform the dominant theme of *Chaos Theory*, into what amounts to a science fictionary MacGuffin. It's still there to support the story and to give Jeff Goldblum some of the best lines (see above, and a great one with reference to the *Pirates of the Caribbean*), but it mainly serves as an intro to exchanges between the characters, most notably in a wacky seduction scene between Goldblum and Laura Dern. In short, *Chaos Theory* is made subservient to the dynamic of the plot common to all disaster movies; the 'Get-Me-Out-Of-

Here' dynamic, a creeping sentiment Spielberg has milked in us all before and does again to great effect as we trundle into the park in our electric Ford Explorers through the gates of Jurassic Park. Bang those jungle drums, Mr. Williams....



The whole laying out of characters, dino-threat and thriller subplot slowly bring us to this point, as the huge Kong-sized gates swing open with their corporate JP logo. We all crane to see venom-spitting *Dilophosaurus*, roll those windows up.... nervous chatter in the control room.... 'Quiet!' hisses Muldoon

(steel-eyed Bob Peck, superb as the tight-wrapped, reptilian park ranger, as lethal as they come; we see him, we know we're in for trouble... supporting-actor Oscar potential?) 'They're approaching the *Tyrannosaurus pen*....' But nobody's home...or so we think....

Without giving scenes away, Spielberg completely disarms us, playing with our anticipations, making us expect to see and be afraid, then bringing us face-to-face with the inhabitants of the park in a way we did not expect. Sure, there are scares aplenty with, brilliantly, very little gore (on a per gallon quota, far less than *Jaws*), but the unexpected

impact is of a different kind, a visual net effect, the main difference from Crichton's book.

Spielberg has Rick Carter's outrageous production design, the whole vision of the theme park to end all theme parks, with cuddly souvenirs and fossils breaking out of restaurant support posts; he has Dean Cundey's Spielberg light show; John Williams' sweeping, predatory score; Goldblum under control, Sam Neill out for blood, Laura Dern packing lead and even Dickie Attenborough crumbling before our eyes. Not to mention the verdant landscape of Kuai and the heart-stopping vision of animator Phil Tippett, brought to life by CG pioneer Dennis Muren, and interacted on-set by special effects coordinator Michael Lantieri and creature-man Stan Winston (these people need Oscar recognition; Tippett deserves a Nobel Prize).



Crichton has pteradons, an aviary, a river raft encounter with T-Rex, an earlier scene with Ellie and the raptors, a different fate for T-Rex, a different fate for the dino-eggs, a different fate for the park creator Hammond. All praise should go to Crichton for his original and imaginative ideas, no doubt many changes were due to budget, pace and previews, but the main difference between his story and Spielberg's is its darker character entirely.

This is 'a Steven Spielberg film,' as noted earlier. For example of Crichton's films, look at *Westworld*, *Coma*, *The Great Train Robbery*, all directed by him, or *The Andromeda Strain* for a Robert Wise version of Crichton's story. All are taut, chilling, cautionary, speculative tales, as is the movie *Jurassic Park*, yet one scene in particular in that movie marks a great distinction from Crichton's work: the Petticoat Lane scene. It's not in the novel, and here we learn why Hammond built his island. It's not for greed, as in the novel. He just loves these creatures and the enchantment they provoke.

If in *Jurassic Park* Spielberg has unleashed an often savage, scary beast, it was born from a desire to make the ultimate dinosaur movie (rumors of Indy Jones meeting dinosaurs go



back to 1984). It is a love for the dinosaur that the score will let you hear, or the first view of the brachiosaurus will let you see. That is why the movie has a 'happy' ending, that is why T-Rex ends the movie as he does, and that is why it takes Doctor Grant some effort to make Hammond leave the island when it's falling down around his ears.

We are reminded throughout the movie that 'dinosaurs' are still around today, ecologically speaking, in the form of birds. While the dinosaurs

of Jurassic Park will surely perish, their relatives remain to remind us of their antecedents, keeping the dinosaur alive in our hearts and imaginations.



And that is why Spielberg made this movie. The great, ennobling beasts have come back to humble us and prevent us from becoming too cocky about our own great indestructible reign over planet Earth. We see it in the eyes of the brachiosaurus, hear it in the roar of the tyrannosaurus. They're laughing at us from their fossils. Added to this, this movie is still one heck of a great thrill ride. See it and judge for yourselves -- before you too become extinct.

#### Editorial Post Script:

In his letter to us, Joe writes more about his feelings for *Jurassic Park*: "I've tried to contain myself in this article... but, reading it over, it seems as gushing and emotional as any of my previous reviews I've sent you! What the heck, I got a big kick out of this movie...." He states further: "...I can't believe I didn't mention my favourite scenes in this article -- the whole thing with the raptors in the kitchen and the beautiful little scene with the kids eating all the food just preceding that. What about when the snake slides by the velociraptor's eye! (BRRR!) I also love it when Dickie turns to his gamekeeper and says, 'I wonder if you would be so kind as to go and fetch my grandchildren?' Bob Peck just says, very quietly, almost under his breath: 'Sure....' I also believe the line 'Clever girl' will go down in Spielberg history with, 'Yes, I know you will' and 'We're gonna need a bigger boat.'"



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