Film Close-Up: Gerard Butler

by Joey_Berlin

GERARD BUTLER - Gerard Butler plays Spartan King Leonidas in the action film '300.' CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros Pictures. With chiseled abs that would make Adonis jealous, Gerard Butler stars as the bare-chested Spartan King Leonidas in the action epic "300." Blending historical fact with computer-enhanced fantasy, the film's surreal spin on ancient Greece is lifted straight from Frank Miller's graphic novel, inspired from a legend about 300 Spartan warriors who held off a massive army, against astronomical odds. Butler buffed up big time for his role. The Glasgow-born actor is emerging as a top box office draw thanks to the astonishing success of "300," although few people would know the actor on the street. He was unrecognizable behind his mask in the 2004 musical, "The Phantom of the Opera." Following his debut in 1997's "Mrs. Brown," Butler has been seen in "Dracula 2000," "Laura Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life," "Reign of Fire" and most recently, "Beowulf & Grendel." Butler took an odd path to his vocation, having first earned a law degree from Glasgow University where he was president of the school's law society. He caught the acting bug by chance when Steven Berkoff, the acclaimed British actor-writer-director, spotted him in a coffee shop and promptly cast him in a stage production of "Coriolanus." Butler will next co-star with Pierce Brosnan and Maria Bello in the crime-thriller, "Butterfly on a Wheel."

Q: How did the artwork in the graphic novel of "300" help you play King Leonidas?

A: You could tell so much just from the way that Leonidas would position himself, just those stances and the way he walked and the way he moved. I had just read the graphic novel when I first went to meet director Zack Snyder, and I was jumping around the room going, "These guys are like animals!" I'm jumping up and down, I was pretty much on top of the coffee table, you know. So I found the source material was such a kick-butt, pumping story with very, very unusual heroes. They're kind of bastards, you know, tough as you like.

Q: It is a whole other reality, and every line of dialogue seems to be delivered with an exclamation point. That has got to be challenging to an actor.

A: It's a fine line to tread. I mean, I think people kind of too easily rubbish the work that it takes to perform in an action movie and especially one like this, because you're dealing with tricky dialogue that's not in any way modern or easy to express. You're dealing with values and situations and scenarios that are so huge and difficult to comprehend. And as you say, you're in a whole other reality. On the one hand you have to be as big and as powerful and as compelling as that reality. But on the other hand you have to be human and real. Otherwise there'd be no story. It wouldn't penetrate in any way into an audience's heart.

Q: Talk a little bit about wearing that skimpy leather armor. Do the clothes make the man?

A: To me, the clothes taketh away the man, and then eventually make him, ha-ha. I think when we first wore the clothes it was like, what the heck is going on? We had to look at each other and laugh because sometimes you prepare for a film and there can be one thing that nobody thought about that is actually a gaping error. When we put on those costumes it was like, is this one of those gaping errors, that it just looks ridiculous? But of course after a day of just walking around in it, you get to a point where you feel OK. And then for me, because I've had to wear a lot of interesting outfits and costumes, then I start to allow it to define me, to define my character. And I trained so hard that a combination of the training and the costume helped me become that king, to the extent that when I put on the cape and the leather, I felt pretty powerful standing up there.

Q: What was your training routine like, to achieve that physique?

A: I have never trained so hard for a role. I mean, I actually really overdid it and got into quite a lot of trouble after the film. I had months of recuperation and physical therapy because I trained myself into the ground. I actually kind of broke off from what the producers wanted. They wanted me just to stick with the film's trainer, who I loved. He was great. But his was a very internal style of training, about developing explosiveness and endurance and stamina, which was great. But I know as an actor, I can produce that anyway. I have that fire inside me. I also wanted to build and sculpt, but I still trained with him to keep everybody happy. Then I had my own trainer, too. And then I had to go and train with the stunt guys for two hours. So I was doing six hours a day, and I was already buggered after three days. And it was seven months of this.

Q: You have had to wear so many costumes for films over the years, is Halloween your favorite holiday now?

A: Come Halloween, I'm always the worst dressed. I have no imagination. I think it's because I wear costumes so much, I feel kind of silly going out and finding one because I know I'll never do a job anywhere near what a brilliant costume designer can do. So I'll come up with maybe a pair of sunglasses and say I'm Elvis. When I was playing Dracula, though, in "Dracula 2000," I actually kept my outfit on and my contact lenses, and I went out like that!

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