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AUTEUR DIRECTOR **DARREN ARONOFSKY** MADE HIS NAME WITH TWO OF THE MOST ELEGANTLY UNCOMFORTABLE MOVIES OF THE LAST 10 YEARS. HIS NEW FILM, *THE FOUNTAIN*, TAKES HIS VISION ONE STEP FURTHER. BY ANTHONY BOZZA

Over the course of his three feature films, visionary writer-director Darren Aronofsky has courted controversy as much as he has won praise. *π* (1998), a black and white exploration of mathematics, greed and God, won a slew of accolades, but was criticized for emphasizing style over substance. *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), an adaptation of the Hubert Selby Jr. novel of the same name, depicted the delusion and erosion of four Brooklyn drug-addicts with a Technicolor visual intensity that was seen by some critics as nothing but a shock tactic. In his new film, the 37-year-old has outdone himself brilliantly: wedding a unique aesthetic

to a narrative style that will undoubtedly be revelatory to some and reviled by others.

The Fountain is a millennial fairy-tale: an epic that bridges the 16th century with the 26th century, a journey that follows a simple story told three times via three incarnations of the same two souls. It is the tale of an embattled Queen and a conquistador searching the New World for the mythical potion that will save her empire; it is the present-day story of a scientist desperately searching for a cure to halt the growth of his wife's brain tumor; and finally, a future astronaut's journey into the unknown, hoping to save all that he loves. Ultimately *The*

Fountain is a meditation on themes that have defined mankind since the dawn of civilization: love, death, and immortality. "When I was cutting *Requiem* in 1999, I started to think about what there was to do in sci-fi," Aronofsky says. "I had seen the first *Matrix* film and appreciated how every great sci-fi idea had been rolled up in that movie, from the hacker movement and Phillip K. Dick to William Gibson's cyber-punk stuff, to a lot of philosophy as well. I was also turning 30 at the time, and 30 is the first time when you realize that your wild twenties are over. It is when you realize that you are not fully immortal. When you turn 30 you realize that eventually

you will turn 40, then 60, and eventually you will die."

Aronofsky was also taken with the Fountain of Youth myth, which had never truly been tackled in film. "I wondered why no one had ever made a film about it," he says. "It's one of our great stories. It's in The Bible, it's in *Gilgamesh*, Ponce de Leon went searching for it in Florida. And today it still resonates, everywhere from *Extreme Makeover* to *Nip/Tuck* to people buying makeup and cream to try to look younger." Aronofsky was also inspired by David Bowie's "Space Oddity." "The idea of a character floating through space, in this case, in a bubble, not a tin can, far away from

home, informed my early story ideas," he says. "I was also reading about 16th-century Spanish conquistadors at the time. I always describe my writing style as being a tapestry-maker in that I take things I find interesting and pool them, weaving them together more than writing a story in the traditional sense. There is, however, an arc through the film. Really, it's a simple love story: A man and woman are in love and the woman is, tragically, dying. The woman is coming to terms with it while the man is running away. Slowly, he comes to terms not only with her dying but with his own death as well."



the spotless mind

past ↗

↙ future

The film stars Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz, who inhabit the three incarnations of the couple brilliantly, lending each era an individual subtlety without fragmenting the grand emotional arc that binds the film. Weisz is also Aronofsky's fiancée, and was not his first choice for the role. "It was Hugh's idea," Aronofsky says. "I was completely against it—I was terrified about it at first. I've never worked with anyone I've had a relationship with. Film sets are really intense pressure-cookers. The set is so intense that you are always in so much emotional pain. That's why I didn't want her to be there—I knew it wasn't going to be

happy-go-lucky the whole time. And it wasn't. There were times when I hated her. But ultimately, because we knew each other very well, I was able to communicate things to her with more ease and she was able to trust me. It definitely helped the film."

The Fountain isn't only unique thematically and structurally; it is visually rich and sensuous—as fantastic and organic as myth itself. It is a feast for the eyes, immersing the audience in a world both part and apart from recognizable reality. The historical and modern-day portions of the film are not entirely accurate. Instead they are defined by a more Joseph Campbell-esque every-hu-

man philosophy: The skyline of the city in the present day portion of the film was dubbed Montradelphia, as it was part Montreal, part Philadelphia and a few other North American cities (the film was shot on sound stages in Montreal).

Aronofsky was however, adamant that *The Fountain* remain focused on human experience. There was no CGI used anywhere in the film, and though much was digitally manipulated, every bit of backdrop was created from elements that were shot on film. "There was digital work, but everything in the film was photographed; meaning

light came down, hit some object, went through a lens, and onto film which was developed in a lab," he says. "I wanted everything to have an organic feel. So many sci-fi films, even those with the biggest budgets end up looking more like cartoons than live action."

Some of the film's most unforgettable images are those of the future, of the astronaut floating to a distant nebula in a spaceship that resembles a spherical terrarium. Space and the stars look realistic, but not cold; they are undulating rivers of amber and gold. A telescope didn't capture these images—it was, in fact, a microscope. "We found a man named Peter Parkes in the U.K., who

has been shooting photos of chemical reactions and microorganisms for 30 years," Aronofsky says. "We hired him to shoot stuff for us that we then digitally collaged together to create this whole new feeling of space." It makes sense that Aronofsky's take on outer space was crafted from bits of our world's micro-space: Not only does it lend weight to the end sequence of the film—one as much about man's inner journey as it is about space travel—it also characterizes the director's quest. Aronofsky might make films that explore extremes, but he strives to relate the outer limits to shared human existence at every turn.

