



# ANIMAL TRAGIC

A cantankerous leading man. Locals so annoyed, they tried to blow up the set. And a squirrel that was very, very drunk. The making of '60s musical extravaganza *Doctor Dolittle*? You've never seen anything like it in your life

**A**S SAS MISSIONS GO, THIS ONE WAS A CINCH. THE TARGET: A CONCRETE/SANDBAG DAM ERECTED BY THE enemy in the middle of the British countryside. The plan: soldier A would creep under cover of darkness and set explosives on and around the dam, while operative B would create a diversion immediately before detonation by setting off incendiary devices on the hillside. But just as the squaddies prepared to detonate the charges, they were interrupted by the glare of a police flashlight. Operation Destroy Dolittle had failed.

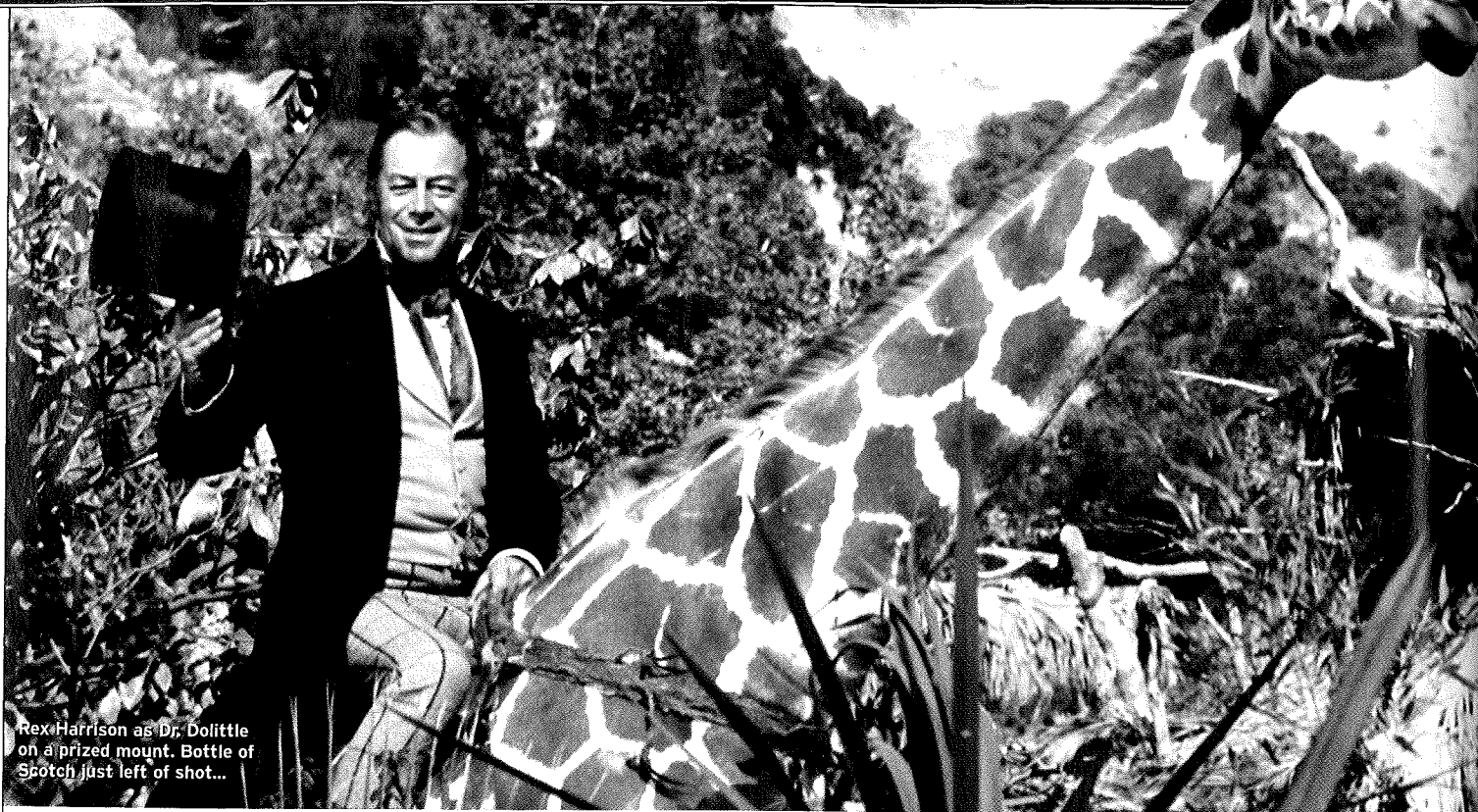
By the time the movie was released, almost everyone involved in *Doctor Dolittle* would have reason to wish these renegade SAS soldiers had succeeded in blowing up the cursed film's set. Its soundtrack album would languish in 99-cent bins for decades to come; there would be unpleasant memories of dyspeptic knife fights, *faux* suicide attempts and drunken squirrels. Its Oscar nomination for Best Picture would be widely ridiculed as one of the Academy's most egregious mistakes, while its producer would have a near-fatal heart attack. Its studio, 20th Century Fox, would be on the brink of bankruptcy, and if the animals were talking to anyone, it was to their agents.

*"Doctor Dolittle is planned for worldwide release for Christmas 1966 — Hollywood's Christmas present to the world!"* 20th Century Fox press release

**T**HE STORY OF DOCTOR DOLITTLE'S TRIP TO SCREEN IS REALLY THE STORY OF ONE MAN'S ENTHUSIASM FOR making that trip, and that man was Arthur P. Jacobs: 'Apjac' to his friends. A rotund chain-smoker of thin cigars, bon vivant and apparent perpetual-motion machine, he was a recent initiate into the filmmaking side of the business,

having previously worked in PR (where, among others, he had repped Marilyn Monroe). In many ways he was a man of the moment, though, an early example of the independent producers who were rapidly becoming the new masters of Hollywood. Unlike the old studio execs, who could put a movie project together in an afternoon, simply marshalling writers, actors and technical crews from the staff payroll, these new freelancers worked outside the system, buying options on original material, matching it with talent and presenting it to studios as a package. They were the progenitors of the Jerry Bruckheimers and Joel Silvers of today.

These new outlaw producers depended on being able to option material irresistible to a studio, and Apjac had been circling *Doctor Dolittle* for some time. The books had been perennial favourites since they had been published in 1920. Based on a series of letters written by Hugh Lofting to his children while he served in the trenches of World War I, they told fantastic stories of a country physician who conversed with wildlife. Disney had been the most obvious and persistent suitor, but the Mousedom's legendary thriftiness had continually sabotaged any deal (after one particularly stingy offer, Lofting cabled a Disney exec: "I have only one question — I have a four >



Rex Harrison as Dr. Dolittle on a prized mount. Bottle of Scotch just left of shot...

year-old son and I wonder why Mr Disney doesn't want him too? What's wrong with him?")

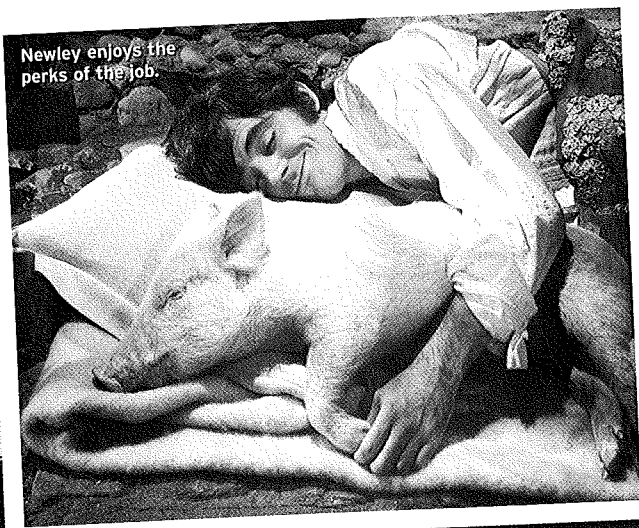
When Apjac heard that yet another deal had headed south (though not this time with Disney), he moved in. At a meeting with Christopher Lofting — by then the Lofting Estate's representative, and by now tired and frustrated at the endless snafus — he informed him that not only had he lined up Rex Harrison for the title role, he had also secured Alan Jay Lerner, the stellar writer-lyricist who had delivered Harrison's critically lauded hit, *My Fair Lady*. Jacobs had also put together a \$6 million budget which, he told Lofting, 20th Century Fox had found more than workable. This was a go-project — all Apjac needed was for him to sign on the dotted line. Seeing the possibility of the film actually finally being made, Lofting granted a six-month option.

In fact, neither Rex Harrison, Alan Jay Lerner nor Fox had ever heard of the project, and the figure of \$6 million was one Apjac may as well have thought of in the elevator on the way up to the meeting. But no matter — playing 19 ends against the middle was his speciality. What he knew, though, was that Lerner and Harrison had been good friends ever since *My Fair Lady*. If he could persuade Lerner to write the film, then Lerner had a good chance of persuading Harrison to be in it. With those two in place, Fox would undoubtedly jump at the chance to make the picture. After all, they already had *The Sound Of Music* in production, and word on it was very good indeed; the family musical was obviously the genre *du jour*.

The plan worked. Lerner committed to the

project and brought Harrison on board. With his star and writer in place, Apjac next signed up enthusiastic director Richard Fleischer. Fleischer was in many ways an obvious choice; despite never having directed a musical before, he had brought in complex special-effects movies such as *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* (1954) and *Fantastic Voyage* (1966) with the minimum of fuss. All Apjac had to do now was sit back and wait for the screenplay. It never arrived.

As author Mark Harris records in his excellent book, *Scenes From A Revolution: The Birth Of The New Hollywood*, Lerner had a reputation for being slow at the best of times; on *Dolittle* he excelled himself. The first deadline had been October 1, 1964, which passed with not a whisper from Lerner. A second deadline for a 30-page treatment a month later similarly whizzed by. Even more worrying, Lerner performed several vanishing acts. On one occasion, Apjac flew to New York to pick up



Newley enjoys the perks of the job.

the supposedly completed treatment, only to be told that his writer had suddenly decamped to Rome. Worse, the producer subsequently learned that not a single word had actually been written — months after the original deadline. The production schedule was now in tatters. A final deadline of April 1965 was set and missed. Apjac called Lerner in a panic, only to be told that he would now be unable to start any work on *Dolittle* until October at the very earliest. In May a devastated Apjac fired Alan Jay Lerner.

And then, in December, he fired Rex Harrison.

## HARRISON WAS A NOTORIOUSLY PRICKLY CHARACTER, CAPABLE OF IRRESISTIBLE CHARM

and effortless elegance which could mutate into paranoid rage in the space of a single Scotch; and Harrison's Scotches were rarely of the single variety. He had an intense dislike of being asked to perform impromptu numbers in public — which he often was — and had developed a method for discouraging such requests. The most popular song in his repertoire was *I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face*, from *My Fair Lady*. When it was requested, Harrison would often respond with a version he had subtly altered: commencing with the lyric, "I've grown



Samantha Eggar, Rex Harrison, Anthony Newley and William Dix search for the exit clause in their contracts?

accustomed to my prick," Harrison would treat onlookers to an increasingly genocentric version of the delicate ballad — part of a complete reworking of the musical, which Harrison would inform his stricken audience he had entitled *My Big Cock*.

Worse still, he was in the midst of a disintegrating marriage to Welsh actress Rachel Roberts. It was a union that would make Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald look like Ma and Pa Walton. Fleischer would be an appalled witness to the couple at their worst in a restaurant in Portofino, Italy, where they had a house. After a day's solid drinking, both Roberts and Harrison were not at their best, and Fleischer started to become concerned when, to the surprise of the restaurant's patrons, she broke into her "Basset Hound" routine, letting out a series of deep-throated barks and woofs.

"She would do this whenever the mood struck her," the bewildered director later wrote, "and apparently the mood struck her while she was sashaying down the aisle of this elegant restaurant. It did not augur well." Minutes later things took a turn for the catastrophic. A gigantic smashing sound echoed through the plush eatery as Roberts demolished the table setting with a sweep of her arm. Fleischer turned around to see that she had grabbed a carving knife, which she was now waving aggressively in her startled husband's direction.

"Her face was wild, nostrils flared, mouth twisted into a nasty snarl," Fleischer remembered. "Then the cursing started — a

screaming torrent of coarse abuse which I couldn't understand because it was either gibberish or Welsh. She tried to stab first one hand then the other with the knife — she wasn't kidding. If she'd connected, she'd have pinned him to the table top." Concerned not only to keep the peace but to protect his star, on whom the studio had now taken out a \$1 million insurance contract, Fleischer finally coaxed the knife off Roberts and decanted the pair into a cab.

When he heard that Lerner had been fired, Harrison predictably blew his top. The songsmith was the only reason he had agreed to do the movie in the first place. He was temporarily appeased by the appointment of Leslie Bricusse, who had written the title song for *Goldfinger* (1964), and all seemed finally to have settled down — but then Bumpogate erupted.

The character of Bumpo Kahbooboo had been a problem from the start. Though Lofting was no racist, he did have the casually condescending attitude towards black people typical for his time. Bumpo, an African prince who yearned to be white, was evidence that the stories were very much of their period. The part had been extensively re-written by Bricusse (as it would be in the books when they were republished during the '80s), and Apjac had reasoned that Sammy Davis Jr. would be perfect for it — he was universally popular, and also had a lightness of touch that would offset any remaining distastefulness. When he heard of the plan, Harrison threw another fit. Davis was a song-and-dance man, a vaudevillian, he >

## PAIN IN THE A-LIST

Rex Harrison wasn't the only notoriously "difficult" movie star. Also infamous for giving their directors migraines are...



### MARLON BRANDO

Notorious for general orneriness, Brando famously turned up to the set of *Apocalypse Now* having not bothered to learn his lines, while on *Superman* he announced that he intended to essay the part of Jor-El as "a green suitcase". But less well known was his world-class pain-in-the-arsery

on 2001 caper-flick *The Score*, where he refused to take direction from helmer Frank Oz unless he spoke to him in his "Miss Piggy" voice.

### LINDSAY LOHAN

After a good start with the likes of *Mean Girls* and *Freaky Friday*, Lohan royally pissed off almost everyone on the set of *Georgia Rule* by failing to turn up on set several times, citing "heat exhaustion". Executive James G. Robinson finally lost patience with his tardy starlet, publishing an open letter noting that, "I am well aware that your ongoing all-night heavy partying is the real reason for your so-called 'exhaustion'."



### WESLEY SNIPES

The notoriously difficult *Blade* star minimised his contact with *Blade: Trinity* director David S. Goyer, using his stand-in whenever a shot didn't require his face, and remaining in his trailer at every opportunity. Co-star Ryan Reynolds is subsequently reported to have said that he couldn't think of Snipes without feeling nauseous.



### FAYE DUNAWAY

"She was a gigantic pain in the ass," was director Roman Polanski's view of Faye Dunaway, whom he directed in *Chinatown* — not an unreasonable point of view since, among other things, it has been claimed she lobbed a cup of her own piss at him.



### VAL KILMER

"The most psychologically troubled human being I have ever worked with," was Joel Schumacher's verdict on Kilmer, adding that the only alteration he had to make to the batsuit when George Clooney took over was to "dramatically enlarge the codpiece". The *Island Of Dr. Moreau* director, the late John Frankenheimer, seemed to concur: "Cut — now get that bastard off my set!" was his reaction to Kilmer's final scene.



HEADPRESS, AQUARIUS, BETTY

# BRING OUT THE CHIMP

Veteran ape-actor Cheeta on *Doctor Dolittle*, his final movie (from which he was dropped "for unprofessional behaviour")



Tarzan's Maureen O'Sullivan, Cheeta and Johnny Weissmuller

What are your most vivid memories of *Dolittle*? Rain. The incompetence of the English animals. And, oh, just a lot of wonderful memories – Tony Newley, Rex Harrison...

Harrison had a reputation for being difficult and a bit of a drinker. Is it true? Utter nonsense. Rex was a warm, witty man, a light comedian of genius and a very special human being – and I wouldn't ever call him "a bit of a drinker".

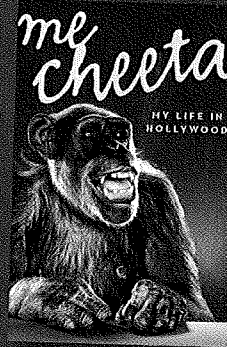
He claims you once bit him... Why? There was that side to him – that need to embellish things that every great raconteur has. You could call it a compulsive inventiveness, or you could just save everyone the analysis and call him a pathological liar... Sorry, he says I bit him?

Um, yes. In his autobiography... Jesus. The standard line on Rex is that he was a decent human being but a mean drunk. But since he was drunk all the time, how could you tell? That's why I could hardly call him "a bit of a drinker" – he was, let's face it, a pathetic, chronic alcoholic.

Okay. Your autobiography has rave reviews. Do you see it as the first in a new genre: chimp lit? What you've got to understand is, here's Rex doing *If I Could Talk To The Animals*, and between takes he's aiming kicks at farmyard fauna. I mean, he *did* talk to the animals, and all he ever said was, "If this unspeakable fucking shit of a monkey upstages me again I'll blah, blah, blah..."

Cheeta, thank you. I'd say ask his girlfriends if you don't believe me, but so many of them went mad or committed suicide. Look it up!

Me Cheeta: The Autobiography is out now.



complained. He could only possibly work with legitimate actors. It was him or Davis. Luckily he had a plan: how about Sidney Poitier?

Apjac was irritated but, yet again, complied with his temperamental star. But the situation would need careful handling. He approached Poitier, who, to his surprise, was interested. But Jacobs had already all but offered the role to Sammy Davis Jr.. He would need to tell Davis that his services were no longer required, without letting him know that he was being replaced at Harrison's insistence. Equally, Poitier would have to be convinced that he was first choice for the role, ideally without knowing that Davis had ever been in the picture. It was therefore a nervy Arthur P. Jacobs who attended the Broadway musical *Golden Boy*, in which Davis was starring, and after which he had planned to meet the star in his dressing room. The champagne that Davis sent over during the interval as a "thank you" to his presumed new producer did nothing for Apjac's nerves. But he had no idea just how difficult this encounter was going to be.

When Apjac finally got backstage, he was greeted effusively by Davis, who happened to be entertaining another guest in his dressing room: Sidney Poitier. Apjac gazed on in horror, but divined by the two's smiles that neither had yet mentioned the project to the other. He thought quickly: if he could just separate them before the reason for his visit was raised, there might be a chance of averting disaster. He didn't get that chance. "Listen, Sidney," Davis said to his friend, "I'd love to go out for a drink, but I've got to meet these guys about a part I'm going to do for them in *Doctor Dolittle*."

Without a word, Poitier walked out. (In fact, the whole role of Bumpo was finally cut from the screenplay when the budget, nearly three times the figure of \$6 million he had plucked out of thin air, finally reached the desk of Fox head honcho, Dick Zanuck.) But Harrison had not finished his interfering. Now unhappy with Leslie Bricusse, he demanded he be canned in favour of British songwriting team Flanders and Swann; he subsequently announced that the screenplay was vile, and if it was not completely rewritten he was out. Finally, Zanuck lost his temper. After Harrison's demands had led to Fox managing to piss off two of Hollywood's then aristocracy, he wasn't in the mood for any more ultimatums. "Fuck Harrison," he yelled. "We've been jerked around enough. We'll find someone else."

When Rex Harrison found out that he had in fact been replaced by, of all people, Christopher Plummer, his tone changed considerably. The problems, he said, had all been his agent's doing – he was delighted with the screenplay, and of course would cooperate with the production fully. This left

the small problem of Plummer, who would have to be bought out of a contract he had already signed, and thus became one of *Dolittle*'s few unalloyed winners, pocketing \$85,000 (around \$500,000 in today's money) for taking a few phone calls and reading a screenplay.

Weeks later, when Fleischer departed for Castle Combe to commence principal photography, he must have done so with a degree of trepidation. He knew he had a monumentally complex movie to make, with a capricious and unpredictable star. What he had no reason to expect was high-explosives.

## CASTLE COMBE — WHICH THEN, AS NOW, MODESTLY DESCRIBES ITSELF AS "THE PRETTIEST

village in England" — is buried deep in the Wiltshire countryside. It boasts a fine medieval church and a 14th century market cross among its other gems. What it doesn't boast — not unreasonably, being 160 kilometres from the coast — is a sea-front, making it an unusual choice of location for *Dolittle*'s home, Puddleby-On-The-Marsh, which Bricusse had declared to be a fishing village. With typical industriousness, the Fox production department had not only strewn the place with lobster-pots, fishing-nets, ships-in-bottles and other maritime bric-a-brac, but had dammed the river and built a false sea-front. Despite being bribed with a new high-powered communal TV aerial (the production had to remove all the individual aerials), the village burghers were still irritated at the imposition, not to mention the absurd notion that Hollywood could actually improve on "the prettiest village in England".

It was a sentiment shared by a young SAS officer, one Ranulph Fiennes, who was one of the renegade military men who attempted to stop Hollywood in its tracks by blowing up the set. "A school-friend of mine told me about his plans to wreck a big, concrete sandbag dam at Castle Combe. It was a very pretty little village, and 20th Century Fox wanted to muck it up to film *Doctor Dolittle*," Fiennes — a man who would later manifest the same decisiveness and determination by leading expeditions up the White Nile, across Antarctica unaided and, against all medical advice, sawing off the ends of his own frostbitten fingers with a fretsaw — told military magazine *Legion*. "So we decided to destroy the dam as a protest on behalf of the villagers. I'd been doing explosives courses and had become very good at blowing things up with minimum explosives. At the end of each day, I decided not to hand back what I felt I had sort of "earned". I thought it might come in useful. So for two months my car was growing ever more full of explosives.

I was asked to create a diversion, which I did, using incendiaries. However, the police had been tipped off and, despite using my recently acquired knowledge of escaping canines by plunging up to my nose in a stream, they caught up with me in the car park."

Fiennes was eventually fined £500 and booted out of the SAS. Unimpressed with the severity of the sentence, Fleischer remarked that the judge must have thought that having a name like Lieutenant Ranulph Twisleton-Wykeham Fiennes was punishment enough.

During the detailed pre-production, one important fact about shooting in Castle Combe had been neglected: Castle Combe is in the United Kingdom, which has strict quarantine laws. For a full year the animals that were to star in the movie had been undergoing training in California. A full \$1 million of the spiralling budget had been allocated to not only training the individual animals, but recreating the bright lights, unfamiliar noises, screaming tantrums and general chaos of a movie shoot so the beasts wouldn't be unduly alarmed. All this work was now useless. With only weeks to go, new UK-based animals and trainers had to be found; the result of this last-minute change is perhaps best illustrated by the tale of the drunken squirrel.

The sequence was simple enough: a squirrel was to sit and apparently converse with a parrot. But as Harrison later reported, things didn't go according to plan. "They got the squirrel out of its cage and it was no more tame than a lion," he recorded. The trainer's first solution, tying the tiny animal down with wire leg-cuffs, predictably resulted in the animal struggling wildly. After repeated attempts to quieten down the reluctant star, Fleischer suggested giving it

a Valium — a drug with which the set was by now no doubt awash. A last-minute call to a vet persuaded them against the idea when the vet informed them that Valium was contra-indicated with regard to squirrels, in that it was fatal to them. They might, however, try gin. A fountain pen was duly loaded and a shot of Tanqueray squirted into the animal's mouth. Ironically, the gin seemed to have the same effect on the

"We're postponing for three days," said choreographer Herbert Ross. "The giraffe stepped on its cock."

squirrel as it tended to have on Rex Harrison, the tiny animal becoming increasingly bellicose, simply writhing and squeaking even more angrily. Fleischer suggested they give it another belt. A second shot was administered. For a few moments the plan worked: "They did get a few seconds of film showing the squirrel nodding and swaying in a suspiciously drunken manner," wrote Harrison. "They were so pleased with their success, they thought they'd give it one more tot and get a picture of the squirrel with the parrot, deep in conversation, just as the script ordered. The last shot did it. There must be some footage

somewhere showing a squirrel swaying around, then finally falling over in an indecent sprawl into a stupefied sleep."

Inevitably, the difficulty of working with barely trained animals took its toll on almost everyone concerned. Trainers were trampled by elephants, liver disease spread from chimp to human. "I was bitten by chimps, a Pomeranian puppy, a duck and a parrot," an increasingly bad-tempered Harrison reported. On one occasion, an LA-based production manager spotted choreographer Herbert Ross tramping across the studio lot when he was meant to be supervising a sequence. "We've postponed for three days," Ross shrugged. "The giraffe stepped on its cock."

But in the end, it was neither the hostility of the locals nor the uncooperativeness of Anglo-Saxon fauna that drove the production back to Burbank. It was the weather. For a full month, as predicted, it rained — the fields in which *Dolittle* was meant to shoot were rapidly transformed into quagmires knee-deep in mud and laced with the pungent scent of tons of exotic dung. After only five days of usable film had been shot, Apjac cut his losses and took the production back to the studio.

Things weren't much better there. The sets had been built with slightly inclined floors so that they could be regularly sluiced. But under the beating Californian sun, the stench, both of the animal urine and faeces and the gallons of concentrated ammonia used to swill the sets, was nauseating. An outbreak of hepatitis led to the whole cast having to undergo a course of painful vaccinations. Still, at least they had three weeks filming in the tropical island paradise of St. Lucia to look forward to... >



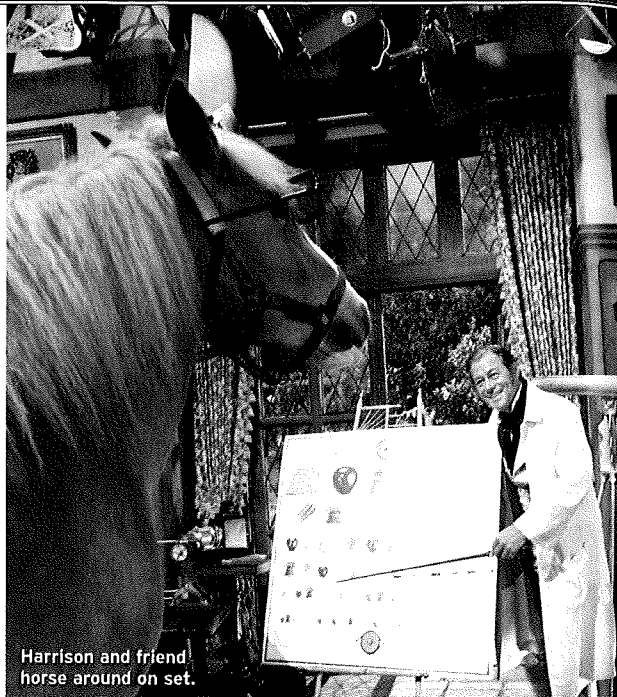
Dolittle: almost certainly going to get stung by Health & Safety.



A clearly overjoyed Harrison gets ready for his close-up.



Richard Attenborough and Harrison Ford screen time with the legendary Pushmi-Pullyu.



Harrison and friend horse around on set.

**BY THE TIME THE PRODUCTION ARRIVED IN ST. LUCIA, THE STRAIN WAS BEGINNING TO SHOW.**

Harrison was now thoroughly exhausted. He chartered a three-masted schooner on which he and Roberts lived (mainly to separate themselves from the other cast members, with whom he had irreparably fallen out), or rather, mostly drank. By now downing a couple of cocktails before breakfast, Harrison would make his displeasure at various production decisions known by sailing his schooner in and out of shot.

In the evenings, the sound of the couple's screaming rows would echo round the bay. On one occasion the regular yelling match was followed by an alarming splash and an even more alarming silence. Fleischer later pieced together what had happened. "Apparently there had been some fairly heavy drinking," he drily recorded, "and then a violent argument in the evening. Rex had gone to bed but was awakened by a terrifying scream from Rachel, and then the sound of a body hitting the water. He rushed to the deck, where he found Rachel's shoes at the rail."

Harrison dived into the water and swam for what he took to be his suicidal wife, only to find a log wrapped in that evening's clothes. Behind him he heard hysterical laughter.

Even the giant fibreglass snail in which Dolittle was to sail away caused problems. As soon as the monstrous prop was unveiled on the beach, local children gathered and began enthusiastically lobbing rocks at it and any member of the crew who happened to be nearby. Subsequent enquiries revealed that the island's water had been extensively contaminated with bilharzia-carrying snails, causing serious disease among the islanders who, quite naturally, didn't take to the appearance of a giant effigy of one

"Insects terrible from very wet summer STOP Six people ill last week from dysentery STOP Pls send 1 dozen cans insect repellent immediately STOP" — Telegram from the St. Lucia production to 20th Century Fox

of the ghastly molluscs being set up on their doorstep, and interpreted its presence as some kind of violent insult — it was as if someone had decided to erect a giant statue of a mosquito in an area ravaged by malaria.

By the time *Dolittle* finally wrapped, its budget would be in the \$18 million range (around \$115 million today), but despite the nightmarish shoot, hopes at Fox were still high for the movie. A marketing memo, reprinted in *The Studio*, John Gregory Dunne's masterful account of a year in the life of 20th Century Fox, bears testament to Apjac's optimism. Included in its suggestions were that Local Boards Of Education declare Doctor Dolittle Day and release children from school, and that

the production receive a possible award from the Society For The Prevention Of Cruelty To Animals. It ended simply with the suggestion, "Discuss Vatican screening".

Apjac's confidence was tragically misplaced. In late December 1967, Fox released *Doctor Dolittle* to reviews that ranged from the condescending to the vitriolic. *The Chicago Tribune's* Clifford Terry likened it to an iceberg: "One-ninth of it should be observed, and the rest is better left well enough alone." *Time* magazine, meanwhile, commented that "size and budget are no substitutes for originality or charm".

The critics had got it right. To this day, *Dolittle* is one of Hollywood's least beloved musicals. Bricusse's songs are, with the exception of *Talk To The Animals*, instantly forgettable, the acting uncertain and the animals charmless. Its Oscar nomination for Best Picture, then, is best explained by a ruthless campaign by Apjac, in which the Fox screening room was booked for screenings for 18 straight days, each preceded by dinner and limitless champagne. Further publicity innovations, designed to impress the Academy as much as the public, included a premiere in which Harrison arrived accompanied by Chee-Chee the chimp — both attired in full evening dress.

After sales and marketing expenses, Fox's much-delayed Christmas present to the world cost \$25.5 million dollars (around \$160 million today), leaving the studio almost bankrupt. The next three years saw Fox lose a further \$100 million, and led to the firing of Dick Zanuck, for which at least a generation has reason to give thanks: one of the first decisions he made as an independent producer was to give an unknown tyro a shot at a novel he'd just optioned, despite the fact that it featured animals and looked like it had the potential to be a nightmare shoot. The director was Steven Spielberg. The movie, *Jaws*. ■

**BITCHES, BROS & DOPED UP HOES**

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