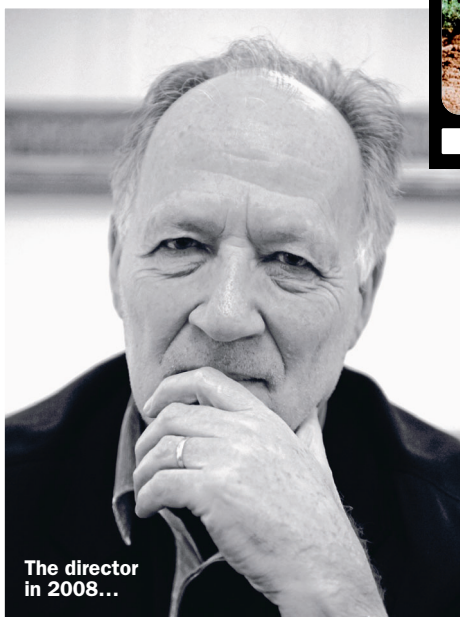


# HERZOG'S HONOUR

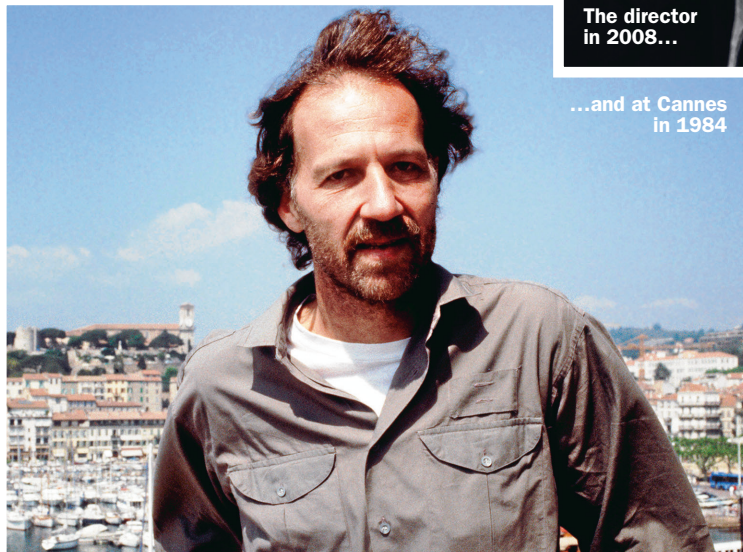
Fresh from starring alongside Tom Cruise in upcoming thriller *One Shot*, director Werner Herzog will be crowned with a Lifetime Achievement Award at DIFF 2011. *Rob Garratt* met the notorious German auteur

The phrase 'strong-minded' does not quite do Werner Herzog justice. This is a man who has declared war on the Greek military, dragged a 360-tonne boat over a small mountain, and who once cooked and ate his own shoe after losing a bet.

In 2006, the German director refused to stop a TV interview with BBC journalist Mark Kermode despite being shot by an LA sniper in the middle of the interview – instead revealing to the camera a bloody flesh wound – before rescuing Oscar-winning actor Joaquin Phoenix from a car wreck near his LA home (he happened to be walking past) just a few days later. Yet the last thing Herzog wants to talk about is these headline-grabbers. Mention his near-death on-set experiences and he merely sniffs. 'Yes a couple of times I nearly died, but who cares? The only thing the audience cares about is what's on the screen.'



The director in 2008...



...and at Cannes in 1984

other star attraction Tom Cruise. 'We'll probably be sightseeing [in Dubai] together,' Herzog tells us sincerely in his thick German accent. 'We will have been battling each other in front of the camera and will be walking into friendship in Dubai.'

To mark Herzog's anointment, this year's DIFF will host a special screening of his epic 1982 masterpiece *Fitzcarraldo*. Inspired by the life of a Peruvian oil baron's deluded

attempts to build an opera house in the middle of a rainforest, it saw Herzog recruit thousands of tribal natives to haul a three-storey steam boat up the 40-degree slope of an unnamed Amazonian peak. 'I've done about 60 films by now, but this one stands out because it was quite a blind design,' he laughs. 'Since then, there's no challenge I've turned away from.'

Herzog certainly likes a challenge, having lived a dual life scouring the corners of the natural world as a documentary filmmaker. Recent works include last year's 3D flick *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, a stunning first look at recently discovered 30,000-year-old etchings preserved in a hidden French cave; the Oscar-nominated profile of human life in Antarctica *Encounters at the End of the World* (2008); and *Grizzly Man* (2005), the tragic story of



Fitzcarraldo (1982)

Timothy Treadwell, who spent 13 summers living among wild bears in Alaska until they killed and ate him and his girlfriend.

That work has most in common with Herzog's latest movie, which will also be screened in Dubai next week. For *Into the Abyss*, Herzog tracked down and talked to five inmates on death row before deciding to focus on Michael Perry, a 29-year-old who was eight days away from execution when Herzog interviewed him, after being found guilty of a brutal triple murder 10 years ago.

'I'm trying to discover uncharted territory, something dark and deep and ruthless in our souls,' says the filmmaker. 'It's quite fascinating that these are people who know exactly how they will die and when they will die, and we do not. Life has a certain urgency, and you live it and you cherish it and you eventually die. The fact that you don't know when you'll die is a great blessing.' The film, released in America just four days before we spoke to Herzog, has helped to fuel

**'A couple of times I nearly died, but who cares? The audience only cares about what's on screen'**

a fresh debate about capital punishment in the US and is likely to sit as one of the most memorable from Herzog's epic oeuvre.

The director himself says he cares nothing for posterity – 'I'm not going to be around, so I'm not worried' – but, without a hint of arrogance, maintains that there will be an 'afterlife' for his own work. 'There's no finish to my film's lives, they will keep being discovered,' he says. 'Things I did 40 years ago have become more mainstream; it's 15-year-old kids who write to me nowadays. I was never out of the picture. I've always been around somehow.'

*Into the Abyss* will be screened at DIFF on December 13 and 14. See page 29 for info ●



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