

Scots director looks west after sci-fi snub

Hooray for Hollywood!

By Murray Scougall

A SCI-FI movie shot on an Aberdeenshire beach for just £8000 is turning heads in Hollywood.

Yet its director is furious after being snubbed by the Scottish film industry.

Mark Stirton filmed *The Planet*, an ambitious film packed with special effects, entirely on Balmedie Beach in just 10 days.

After completing post-production, the Aberdeen writer and director began sending e-mails and DVDs to American studios, hoping someone would show an interest in his labour of love.

And they certainly did.

"I've had e-mails from executives at Paramount and Fox, which is just great," enthused Mark.

"Paramount told me they've some new TV projects coming up — which I'm not allowed to talk about — and they're looking for a replacement for their *Star Trek* spin-offs.

"I heard from Rick Berman, an Emmy Award-winning producer, and he was very encouraging about the film.

"Fox were looking for another sci-fi movie, so I pitched a new *Alien* sequel to them. I know the chances are remote, but I might as well give it a go."

Mark says the film's information pack has been downloaded more than 70,000 times from his website. Indeed, the first fan website has just been set up in honour of *The Planet*.

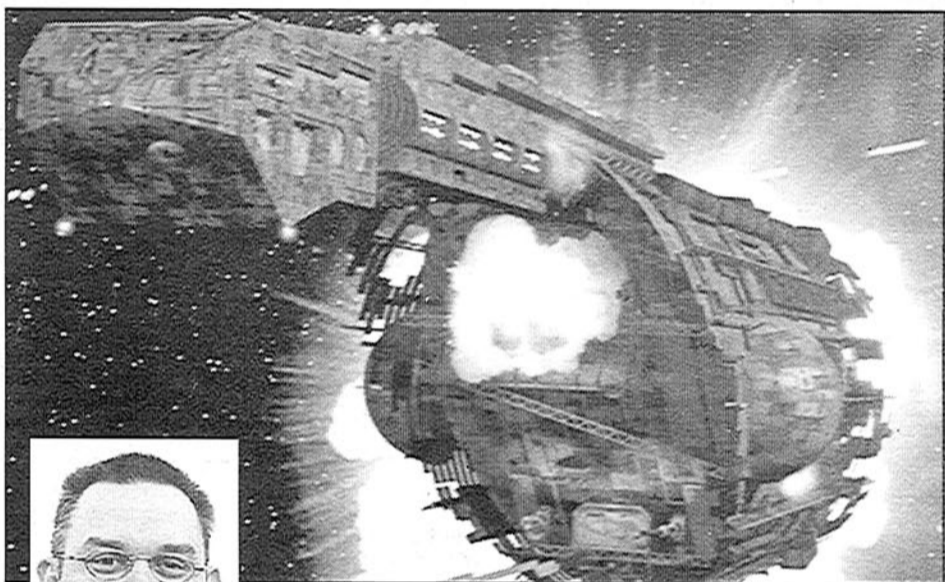
Perhaps best of all, though, is the news that Mark is in the process of signing a contract with Sky that will grant the satellite TV broadcaster rights to screen the film for three years.

The Planet stars champion Scots bodybuilder Mike Mitchell as leader of a group of mercenaries who crash-land on a barren planet and must fight strange life forms to escape.

The opening scenes are worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster — a huge space battle that sees their ship blown to pieces. Creating the effects and creatures — plus transforming Balmedie Beach into an alien world — meant long hours for 18 months.

"About three months into creating the effects we realised it was going to take a long time. Eighteen months of post-production is standard for a Hollywood movie, but they have hundreds of people — we had three.

"We worked every day with no time off. We did it on computer software in my flat, so from



■ (Above) A special effects scene from the opening of Mark Stirton's home-made sci-fi movie *The Planet*.

the moment I woke until I went to bed I'd work on it. There were a lot of 17-hour shifts.

"All the time I was thinking, 'If we can pull this off we can do anything.' The cast were like kids when they saw it, they were so excited."

Despite the buzz the film has created in Hollywood, Mark has been dismayed by the film industry at home.

Funding

He'd written to Scottish Screen asking for funding but got a short reply saying lots of people make home movies and they wouldn't be able to help.

This was despite Mark having already made a successful short film — *Removals* — that was shown at festivals in the UK, Europe and New York.

"I wasn't going to let that stop me, so I just decided to do it myself," Mark explained.

"I sent Scottish Screen copies a few weeks ago along with an incredibly polite letter and there's been no reply.

"I think our industry is in a terrible state. One reason we're sending copies to America is just to get out of here. I'd love to film my next movie in this country, but it's hopeless.

"Commercial filmmaking isn't encouraged. They don't seem to be interested in something that's simply entertainment.

"But if I managed *The Planet* without help, imagine how it could have been with some assistance."

Mark, who's been a TV cameraman and vision mixer, made his first film when he was 25, a 10-minute horror called *Spooked*.

"We knew the best we could hope for was that *The Planet* would become a cult hit," admitted Mark.

"And it certainly seems to be going that way. It's opening doors for me, too. I've been in Edinburgh having meetings with film producers who like what we've done.

"We've appeared on Japanese and Italian websites and film magazines are showing an interest. *The Blair Witch Project* started on the Internet and became huge.

"The film throws audiences because they see all this action and special effects, then hear these accents from North-East Scotland. But we're getting good reviews.

"*Lord Of The Rings* director Peter Jackson and Sam Raimi, who directed *Spider-Man*, came to prominence making their own hand-held films. I'm simply trying to do the same.

"In the first fortnight selling the film from my website we've sold a decent number of DVDs with orders from New Zealand, Australia, Turkey, France, Russia and the UK. We hope to sell enough to cover the budget.

"We'll be hitting as many film festivals as possible and I'm arranging for the film to be shown on limited runs in Scottish cinemas. The premiere will be at the Belmont Cinema in Aberdeen in September."

Meantime, Mark is still waiting for word from Los Angeles that could see *The Planet* take him to a whole new world and provide him with the perfect Hollywood ending.



■ The cast of *The Planet* pictured in action on Balmedie Beach.

