

'Hitchhiker's Guide' finally completes its ride to Hollywood

BY CINDY PEARLMAN

NEW YORK — It's possibly the only hitchhiker who took two decades to find a ride.

For 20 years, every studio in Hollywood turned down the idea of turning the cult sci-fi phenomenon *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (originally published in 1979) into a major motion picture.

Some blame the British Monty Python-esque sensibility. Some blame the fact that this stuff is just plain weird. Would movie audiences accept a story about a middle-class English twit lost in space with a two-headed politician, singing dolphins, philosophical sperm whales and various planetary pit stops, including a church where people pray to the altar of a giant nose that sneezed mankind into existence?

It also didn't help that "Hitchhiker's Guide" creator Douglas Adams had dubbed his project "the un-Star Wars."

Fans of the British radio and TV series almost never got to see the movie, which opens Friday.

"Adams was a world-class procrastinator," says screenwriter Karey Kirkpatrick. "It didn't help that this was a man who used to say, 'I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make when they go by.'"

Adams didn't realize that his life also had a deadline.

In 2001, Douglas was living in Los Angeles to work on the "Hitchhiker's Guide" screenplay. To fit into his new surroundings,

he put down his pint, got rid of the fish and chips, and joined a gym to get rid of his gut. Then he dropped dead of a massive heart attack at age 49.

"Honestly, I thought we were out of the movie business at that point. I thought the 'Galaxy' was closed." says his friend and longtime collaborator Robbie Stamp. But finally the "Galaxy" quest ended. Disney gave the film the green light after Adams' untimely death.

The movie stars Mos Def as Ford Prefect, Zooey Deschanel as space babe Trillian, Stephen Fry as the narrator, and Sam Rockwell as the two-headed space leader with no smarts.

"The Office" star Martin Freeman plays bumbling space explorer Arthur Dent, whose planet Earth has been blown up to make way for a new space highway. He has no choice other than to relocate to the far reaches of the universe with his strange group of cohorts.

They must face the Vogon Soldiers (created by Jim Henson's group) who are overweight, overwrought, over-the-top space meanies who want to kill all humans. The always charismatic John Malkovich plays a character not in the books named Humma Kavula, a church leader of sorts who worships at the altar of a big nose.

"Malkovich wanted in because he was fascinated by this interesting take of organized religion," Stamp says. "The idea is that we were sneezed into existence. Malkovich kept saying, 'I can't believe you're going to get away with this.'"

There was much debate about what to leave in or take out from the books.

"Questions included, do we really need an existential whale falling through space while pondering its existence?" says Kirkpatrick.

The answer was yes.

Casting was another concern.

"We didn't want to go down in

history as the people who screwed up 'The Hitchhiker's Guide' for all the fans," Stamp says.

When Kirkpatrick was hired to pick up the screenwriting duties, he wasn't just given Adams' last screenplay, but also the hard drive to his computer.

"I began the project thinking that Adams had a great beginning and an amazing ending, but no middle," he says. "The middle was my job."

He decided early on that the film should have a "Wizard of Oz" structure to it.

"Arthur Dent is clearly Dorothy. He travels to see the Wizard and the yellow brick road is deep space.

"The Wizard is a character called Deep Thought," he says. By the way, Deep Thought is a huge space rock, voiced with class by British actress Helen Mirren. She had an easier job than actor Sam Rockwell, who plays the lame-brained leader of the galaxy, Zaphod Beeblebrox.

"I shouldn't say this, but my girlfriend said to base the role on Vince Vaughn," Rockwell says, laughing. "Actually, I couldn't do an entire movie as Vince so I threw in some Elvis when I deliver the line, 'Hey, baby, do you want to see my spaceship?' I threw in some of Bill Clinton's charm and a little of George Bush's bravado and arrogance."

Deschanel was the only self-proclaimed "Hitchhiker's Guide" geek on the set.

"I read all the books when I was 11," she says. "I just thought it was the coolest, most sophisticated thing ever. But did I understand it? No."

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From office space to outer space: 5 questions with MARTIN FREEMAN

Martin Freeman, star of the widely popular British series "The Office," stars as the hapless Arthur Dent, a bloke taken for a ride through space in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," opening Friday. He was earboud long enough at the Ritz Carlton in the Big Apple to answer a few local planetary questions.

Q. *There was an early race to see what American actors might be cast as Arthur Dent, with names like Jim Carrey being floated around. How does someone without any familiarity to American audiences get cast in the end?*

A. I can't even explain it. I was certainly an admirer of the "Hitchhiker" books growing up in England. I remember the books being around my house, but I certainly didn't dream of playing Arthur one day.

Q. *NBC has remade "The Office" for American audiences. Did you secretly hope that the U.S. remake would be rubbish?*

A. Honestly, I was open to the idea of a new "Office." I have nothing invested in the idea of the American version being a hit or not. It certainly doesn't affect the legacy of the British one. But I did see the pilot for the American series, and I thought it was really good. It was close to our version and very faithful. Plus, the guy who played my character was really good.

Q. *The tagline of the movie is "Don't Panic." What makes you panic?*

A. Forgetting people's names. I'm just so easily embarrassed.

Q. *Your character begins the movie knowing he only has five minutes left on earth before the*

planet explodes. What would you do during those five minutes?

A. I'd panic. I'd be terrified.

Q. *Is it important to be a hit in the United States with this movie?*

A. There are two schools of thought. Some think if you haven't made it in America, then you're a bum. Some think, "What do they know over there?" I just care that I've made a good film because in a few days, I'll either be a pr— or a hero to fans of the work. I'll either be a star or it will be "Martin who?" But in the end ultimately you have to sleep with yourself and be proud on your death bed.

Cindy Pearlman

