



TRUTH OR DAMODAR

Highlander: Endgame's Bruce Payne Gets Badder—and Balder—in the *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* Movie

By Cory J. Herndon

The big-screen *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*, starring Jeremy Irons, Thora Birch, Justin Whalin, Marlon Wayans, Kristen Wilson, Zoe McLellan, Lee Arenberg, and Bruce Payne (to name but a few) is playing in theaters as you read this article—get out there and buy your ticket if you haven't seen it yet. Bring the magazine—you can read it in line.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS offers not just one but two classy actors from across the pond in the film's major villainous roles. While Academy Award-winner Jeremy Irons's plotting mage Profion pulls Machiavellian strings from the city of Sumdall, his henchman Damodar mercilessly pursues a plucky band of heroes. Damodar heads the Crimson Guard, the secret police of Sumdall, who have become an extension of Profion's power.

Damodar is brought to nefarious life by actor Bruce Payne. Genre fans might recognize Payne from his recent role as Kell in *Highlander: Endgame*, Wesley Snipes' nemesis in the *Die Hard*-on-a-plane picture *Passenger 57*, or perhaps from his memorable turn as Jurgen on the television series *La Femme Nikita*. While filming a "mysterious, high-profile project" in Victoria, British Columbia, Payne was able to speak with us about acting, his work in the *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

movie, memorable roles from the past, and the finer points of dancing with a steadicam.

GROWING PAYNES

Movies appealed to Payne from an early age. "When I was a wee, wee lad—you know, about two weeks ago—I was fascinated by the movie industry." That wee lad took this fascination seriously even then. "It wasn't lightweight. I realized that it was actually a vocation as opposed to a career. I think they're two very different things. We all have to live, we have to pay our bills on time, but a vocation is a very different psychological prerequisite for doing what we call 'acting.'"

Despite his early start, Payne wasn't born with a script in hand. "Growing up, I decided to test the water by enrolling in a school called the National Youth Theatre, an incredible establishment in London." Payne describes the experience as "four hundred kids thrown together to work on seven plays."

The young performer, though, had found his calling. Soon, he enrolled at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. "Of course you have to say The Royal AcAdHdemy of DramAHtic AHt," he laughs, "or else they won't let you in."

Payne doesn't believe that the tradition of drama in England is all that different from acting stateside, or on the

other side of the world. "People say 'traditionally trained,' but you're only traditionally trained if you stay inside the lines. I never did that. From a very young age I was exposed to No theater, Japanese films, German films, French films. I was attracted to the whole spectrum of the medium."

Not long after completing his studies at the Academy with a Royal Command Performance of the climax of "the Scottish play" before the Queen ("of England," Payne added helpfully), he set out to become a working actor. Success came quickly, and Payne landed roles in a string of British films such as *Privates on Parade* and *Absolute Beginners*.



Be careful where you scratch if you're wearing this gauntlet.

DAMNED IF YOU DAMODAR

All of film's best bad guys—except maybe Dennis Hopper—have been classically trained British actors. Damodar's success as a villain will ultimately rest with the audience, Payne believes. "The thing that will make it stand out will be the audience's reception. I truly do believe in the power of the people. An audience knows very much—after sitting inside a theater for an hour—how they feel."

The ensemble of actors worked well together despite the extremely short resumes of a few cast members. "I was privileged to be among a cast that was not jaded," says Payne, "A cast that wanted to make a fascinating movie, based on good, solid, old-fashioned story techniques."

The veteran was especially impressed with co-star Zoe McLellan, with whom he shares an intense scene. "Zoe's got a really good kind of central core to her. She's a very natural person, and unless she led me completely up the garden path, a very honest person. Coming from a real kind of . . . gentle, strong center."

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Payne believes that the preparation time director Courtney Solomon built into the production schedule pays off on screen. "We were blessed with the fact that Corey purloined and secured a sensible time to just work. Not so much rehearsal, but sitting around a table, day in, day out, working through the script. It is the way it should be done."

Unfortunately, as Payne knows, such work time must come from somewhere, and producers aren't crazy about rehearsal as a rule. "I really do believe that most producers have a creative element inside them that wants to make a great picture. I really believe that," Payne insists. "I've known a lot of producers over the years who like to say, 'what a wonderful story!—as long as it doesn't cost too much.'"

COMBAT READINESS

Payne has developed a reputation for talent with the blade, and he gets ample opportunity to show those skills in this film.

"I guess I'm very much a little boy at heart. I love those swashbuckler movies we've all seen a hundred times. Fortunately, I went to a classical drama school," he says. "During my

studies I learned the short sword, dagger, epee, foil, broadsword—you name it." Payne, who "had the privilege to know some great fight choreographers," wasn't content with that, however, and has never completely stopped his stage combat training. Whenever he can, he fences in L.A. and tries to pick up something new with each swashbuckling film.

Beyond weapons, clothes often make the villain. Damodar is outfitted with only the best in evil equipment, naturally. "The costume was the closest of any to the original design." The armor, says Payne, produces an "almost samurai/Joan of Arc period" look to the character. "The breastplate is very gladiatorial. All the way down to the stomach part I look like an armadillo."

Then there was the gauntlet. "It was just incredible, the workmanship was just amazing. It's actually quite beautiful to look at." Appearances deceive, though. "Underneath it had this ominous presence, these little holes that were actually made out of the face of this kind of strange-looking beast. It was like, 'What's gonna come out of there?'"

So he fences and thinks fantastic armor is cool. But is he a roleplayer?

Payne's hectic schedule doesn't leave time for leisure activity such as gaming. When he does game, it tends to be electronic. "Myst and Riven I'm a big fan of. You know, if I had the time to play games, they'd probably detract from what I do. Some of them you could play forever."

He'll also drop a quarter or two for the sake of entertainment. "If I'm in a city where I haven't been in a while, and I know they have a really good arcade . . . well I'll be down there in a heartbeat."

STEADY AS SHE GOES

Some speculate that Payne might be planning to direct a film soon. "There are so many aspects of filmmaking that I just think are incredible. I think that the camera is an amazing instrument. It can do so much work for you as an actor . . . it's like being inside a conversation. It's like another character in the film."

Embracing knowledge of film's technical aspects, he believes, can only help an actor. "The more you understand about it, the more you can dance with it. Because that's what you're doing, you're dancing—especially if you're working with a steadycam."



You'd look impatient too if you had to deal with those pesky heroes.

For now, Payne's career as an actor shows no sign of slowing down. Unfortunately, he was not at liberty to name his current projects, saying only, "It's two humongous things, but I can't talk about them yet."

Security is getting out of control, says Payne. "It's a weird world we live in now. I mean, most of the scripts that I have have these serial numbers printed over every single page, 'you will go to jail, you will have to suffer the death penalty if you let your grandmother look at one single page . . .' Okay! It's their money, so you know I'm bound by that. It's frustrating."

Payne would also be happy to work with director Corey Solomon again, perhaps even in another *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* picture. He appreciated how the director relied on his actors for ideas and valued their input.

"He would share things," says Payne, "He's the director. That's always number one. But like a head chef, he's in charge of the kitchen. You bring the part that you're asked to bring to it. When you're trusted this much, then it leads to even more collaboration. More comes out. Some people are incredibly intimidated by it, which I think is a bizarre situation. Why would you want to be involved if you're going to be intimidated by it? You want to be intimidated by someone, get in the ring with Mike Tyson."