

Jaws with claws

Henry Gee

Jurassic Park. A film directed by Steven Spielberg. Written by Michael Crichton and David Koepp. Released by Universal: 1993. Opens in Europe in July.

LIKE all good science fiction, Steven Spielberg's latest film epic *Jurassic Park* takes established science and pushes it just a little further than reality currently allows. It helps that the science is a potent mixture of dinosaurs (dim-wittedly omitted by Hilaire Belloc from *A Bad Child's Book of Beasts*), genetic engineering (aired with mingled fascination and disapproval at the dinner tables of trendy would-be theologians everywhere) and chaos theory (purveyor of psychedelic fractal images to the grunge generation).

The story goes like this. John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) is an eccentric Barnum-like millionaire who rents an island off the coast of Costa Rica with a view to making it a Mesozoic theme park — with real dinosaurs, cloned using the most sophisticated equipment money can buy ("no expense was spared" is his constant reminder). Armed with the kind of supercomputing and gene-sequencing hardware rarely seen outside a national laboratory, Hammond's scientists extract dinosaur DNA from the gut contents of mosquitoes interred in Mesozoic amber, amplify it, sequence it and stitch it together, the large holes filled with the appropriate nucleotide sequences from frog DNA. The reconstituted genomes are folded into doctored crocodile ova and left to mature within special plastic eggshells. With a little care and attention, the end result is a dinosaur squab.

The story begins with the park fully stocked with dinosaurs but not yet ready to be opened to the public. For a weekend of frank admiration, Hammond flies in a few of the scientists whose work — bankrolled by Hammond — has without their knowledge made the whole thing possible. A lawyer who needs to be satisfied of the park's safety procedures comes too (there have already been gory deaths among the workforce).

Thus arrives a gaggle of realistically awkward scientists — shy palaeontologists Alan Grant (Sam Neill) and Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern) set off by Jeff Goldblum's brash chaos theorist Ian Malcolm, who behaves like a rock star (he looks, in fact, like an Israeli entry for the Eurovision song contest). Oddly, Malcolm's function is to play Cassandra, warning that, through the butterfly effect, the elaborate theme park is destined to go horribly wrong, which it does, of course. No Spielberg film is complete without a pair of irritating children, and this is no exception — Hammond's grandchildren arrive to

complete the house party.

The scientific scheme is not completely outrageous; unless one looks too closely, there is nothing impossible about any of it in theory. Hammond takes his guests on the tour that would greet genuine visitors, during which they are privileged to witness the best popular explanation of DNA and cloning I have ever seen, in the form

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From eggs-tinct to eggs-tant — a dinosaur hatches out in *Jurassic Park*.

of an animation starring that soon-to-be-famous character 'Mister DNA' — a good way to get round the leaden monologue that usually passes for scientific explanation in films (museum exhibition designers should take note). In a clever and witty script, the characters pose the questions we ourselves would like to ask ("What about mitotic arrest?" asks Grant), only to have them gently pooh-poohed, reinforcing the impression that, given enough money and hardware, even the most difficult problems can be solved with ease. But only the lawyer is really impressed by the flashing lights. The scientists, although initially bowled over by the sight of real live dinosaurs, start asking difficult questions about hubris.

Then things start to go awry. To cut a long story short, treachery in the computer department leaves the electric fences switched off, and the guests marooned in the park at the mercy of big fierce *Tyrannosaurus*, small fiercer *Velociraptor* and their dentally advantaged friends. The rest is predictable. The bad guys get despatched in nasty ways, al-

though stylish exit replaces the egregious gore of Michael Crichton's novel, on which the film is loosely based. To be eaten alive by a *Tyrannosaurus* is unfortunate: to be so eaten while you are on the lavatory is undignified as well.

This is just the kind of superior all-action adventure that Spielberg perfected long ago in his *Indiana Jones* films, but with the addition of dinosaurs. The science, though treated extremely well, is only stuffing to ease the suspension of disbelief. After a ragged and hesitant first half-hour, the film jams into full throttle and roller-coasters all the way to the very end. Monsters jump from behind every bush and tree with toothy menace. Although they are dinosaurs (and con-

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vincing, too), they could have been any death-dealing automata for the film to have been a good example of its genre: substitute hostile extraterrestrials, lunatic Nazis or predatory androids and it would have been the same film with a different title — *Aliens*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *Terminator 2*.

Nevertheless, Spielberg's magic takes it a hair above the competition. The direction is superb, the script taut and bursting with *Indiana Jones*-like one-liners and (thankfully) irony and humour take the place of schmalz, sex and rude words. It is, though, incredibly violent.

Critics will carp at the predictability of it all, the gaping holes in the plot, the occasional woodenness. Ignore them. Despite rapid temporization in the cause of credibility among their peers when the preview ended, even the most dyspeptic hack was ooh-ing and aah-ing along with the rest of us while the film was actually playing. Go and see it. It's terrifying. And wonderful. □

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