

Candid Cameron

By Frank Barron

It's a long way from small-town Ontario to becoming Hollywood's golden boy, but that's the journey taken by James Cameron.

He's currently enjoying the phenomenal success of *Avatar*, which has made him the first director to shoot a film that has grossed more than \$2-billion worldwide at the box-office. The film is up for nine possible Academy Awards in March. With his previous billion-dollar record-breaking film *Titanic*, Cameron proclaimed himself "king of the world" when he won his Academy Award. Now he can claim to be "emperor of the universe," thanks to *Avatar*.

Cameron, 55, is happy to talk about his past, present and future projects. He is one of the few producer-directors who readily hits the global road to promote his own movies – fitting, perhaps, given his one-time employment as a commercial trucker.

Born in Kapuskasing, Ont., some 830 kilometres north of Toronto, in 1954, Cameron grew up in Chippawa, in the Niagara region of Ontario, fascinated by movies before moving with his family to California in 1971.

"I was a truck driver, and then a bus mechanic," Cameron explains, "but I wanted to be a filmmaker. I loved going to movies, and I thought that I could do that. And when I got to Hollywood, Roger gave me my start."

Roger is veteran film producer Roger Corman, who was Cameron's mentor.

"When I was a teenager, I was influenced by scifi films. I liked seeing the distant future. *Star Wars* had a huge impact. I did a low budget *Star Wars*-type movie for Roger.

"I've always wanted to do different things, like *Avatar*. I wanted to make this film even before *Titanic*, but we didn't have the technological equipment."

Avatar had a huge budget, reportedly the most expensive movie ever made, prompting some to suggest it's easy to have a hit movie when you spend the money Cameron did.

Corman recently defended his protege: "James Cameron was magnificent in low-budget work. Despite the amount of money he spends, he spends it intelligently. I

see it on the screen. With other producers, when you see their pictures, you wonder where the millions went.”

Says Cameron, “The \$500-million to make Avatar is an over-inflated figure. The money goes to people, the actors, the artists, etc., and it helps the economy.”

Cameron recalls first working for Corman as a neophyte, but when Corman’s Galaxy of Terror fell behind schedule, “Roger asked me to shoot some extra dialogue for the principal cast. I started writing an entire script, excited about this new work, and later wrote The Terminator, made into a movie on a \$6-million budget. Then I wrote Rambo, and a draft of Aliens.”

Cameron says he started filming Avatar in 2005, taking computer-generated (CG) technology “to the next level. We used over a thousand CG artists.”

Well known for directing Aliens and the first two Terminator movies, Cameron also helmed the science fiction television series Dark Angel, with 14 hours of shows, but the acclaimed show starring Jessica Alba was cancelled by Fox- TV despite a loyal core audience.

“We were cancelled prematurely,” he says, with a bit of rancour. “I wouldn’t do network television again because I just don’t like the politics of it.”

As for the difference between TV and features, “Working in television reminded me of my roots as a guerilla filmmaker, starting out with Roger. It’s doing films in 20 or 21 days. Just rapid fire. You have to work instinctively.

“Television is different. You start to create some goodwill with your audience and you can shape it. You can increase or lose your audience, but you have control over it on an ongoing basis. You only have one throw of the dice with a film, and that makes everyone very cautious about every decision that’s made.”

While Titanic in 1997 made \$600-million U.S. and permitted him to make that memorable, bold claim – hardly deniable at the time – at the Academy Awards ceremonies that he was “king of the world,” he worked on documentaries in the interim so it had been 12 years between feature hits.

Says the 55-year-old Cameron, “When I make a film, I may work on it for a year or two, and when it comes out, it gets slammed into theatres on a Friday, and by Saturday night you know with dead certainty whether the last couple of years of your life have been worthwhile.”

His advice to young filmmakers is simple. “Go get a camera and make a film. Just start doing something. Don’t theorize about what it might be when you get there.

There are ways to get your work seen. Just see what worked and what didn't work."

At a recent press conference, Cameron was asked if a sequel is planned for Avatar. He commented, "I said, 'We're going to spend a lot of money and time and energy creating not only a process, but the computer-generated asset ... millions of dollars. So it really makes sense to think of it as the potential start of a franchise, or a saga that plays out over several acts

"I have it mapped out, but I haven't written the scripts yet. That was certainly the intention from the beginning."

He didn't feel Avatar was overtly an environmental message "in that we're beating you over the head throughout the film. I think it's less an intellectual message and more something you feel emotionally. I wanted people to feel the environmental message. Not having it droning on as information.

"Science fiction can operate on many different levels. It can operate as a cinema purely of the visual, of imagination. But historically, the science fiction that I grew up on has a message, usually in the form of some kind of warning. As much as I loved Star Wars, it was a moment in history where science fiction became more escapist fantasy and less a warning and less an intellectual meeting. Avatar was an attempt to merge science fiction back to its roots of having a warning."

The heart of the film, Cameron adds, is "that we all see what we want to see. As kids we are very curious, and I think that as we get older we need to stay curious and informed. But I think most importantly we need to have an openness about other cultures and other points of view. I think we need to reach out and see people from other perspectives. I think films are good at doing that."

Where did Cameron get the idea of Avatar? "It came from every place," he explains. "It came from a lifetime of observation, not only of nature, but of reading comic books, science fiction, fantasy, watching movies. This is my reaction to a lifetime of being a fan of fantasy and science fiction, and wanting to give back, wanting to create a world with all these images and these ideas.

"But sitting down to a blank page and starting the story, I had to come up with 'How do we get to the planet? How do we meet the alien culture?' That's how the ideas crystallized around this concept of the avatar and linking with the avatar."

Cameron considers himself "blessed as a filmmaker, to be able to travel the world and to meet people in all different cultures and language groups. I've tried to live my life in that way and I suppose the film is asking us to do that as well. We have to see the world through other people's eyes."

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