

# CONAN

## An Interview with **PRODUCTION DESIGNER RON COBB**

by **BLAKE MITCHELL** and **JIM FERGUSON**



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**Ron Cobb first came to prominence as a satirical cartoonist for the LA Free Press in the Sixties. Branching out into films he was asked by friends to design the space ship of the same name for the SF cult classic Dark Star. Word of his talents reached the creators of Star Wars and soon he was sketching designs for the aliens in the now famous Mos Eisley Cantina sequence. Cobb continued in films by conceptualizing the spaceship Nostromo for Ridley Scott's Alien and designing interiors for the Mothership in Spielberg's E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial. After working on Raiders of the Lost Ark, he was assigned to the post of production designer for director John Milius' new sword and sorcery epic Conan, the Barbarian. .**

**FF** You had just finished working on Ridley Scott's, *Alien* when you became involved with Conan. How did that come about?

**COBB:** Essentially, it happened through John Millius, who was an acquaintance of mine, and who eventually became the director of Conan. He had always been interested in my painting and had said that someday he wanted to work with me on a film. Since *Alien* was wrapping, he expressed an interest in having me design a film for him. I gave him a call and found that he was in the midst of writing a new screenplay for a film tentatively titled *One Half the Sky*, sort of a "mountain man" movie, an old-time western that had a Conan or Wagnerian feel to it. It was the story of Jediah Smith, the first white trapper to cross the Rocky s into



**Conan in the home of the Wolf Witch.**



**Conan running from the aftermath.**



**Conan defeats an opponent in the pit.**

California. Lewis and Clark had done it a few years before, but much further north. I was ready to plunge into production design, but John wasn't quite ready to start as he was going to be off on a trip to Europe and wouldn't be back for a month. During this time I was also approached by Bob Greenburg for Ed Pressman. The Conan project was finally underway and they had signed Arnold Schwarzenegger. They asked me to do some concept drawings until John came back, and I said fine.

Now, I wasn't all that familiar with Conan. I'm familiar with the property,

but I'd never really delved into the Howard mythos or read the Conan stories before. But when I did, certain aspects really intrigued me. So I did a series of paintings from the original Oliver Stone script. They're still around somewhere and were incorporated into the project later. I'd spent about a month on painting and discussions, then John came back and I switched back over to the mountain man movie. I worked on it for quite some time; John was doing it for Dino DeLaurentis. But John was also hearing distant stirrings about the Conan project and it was something he had always wanted to do. He had been offered it once when he was in the middle of *Big Wednesday*, and when Ed Pressman heard that John was interested, mostly through me, (I had kind of passed the information on), they shot the Oliver Stone script over to John's office and left it on his desk. He read it through, then dramatically emerged from his office and announced: "Nobody can make this picture but me! Get Ed Pressman on the phone!" So I

found myself back on *Conan*, but this time with John. Since he was working for Dino on *One Half the Sky*, he approached Dino with the idea of switching to Conan, something I felt Dino might have considered more commercial, as he wasn't quite sure about the mountain man movie. He certainly was pleased, and they temporarily shelved the mountain man movie.

The whole package came with Arnold, but of course John wanted to rewrite it. It's very much John's policy that he directs what he writes, so he collaborated with Oliver Stone on a new script, and we were off and running.

**FF:** Does the final script that you shot contain any of Oliver Stone's work?

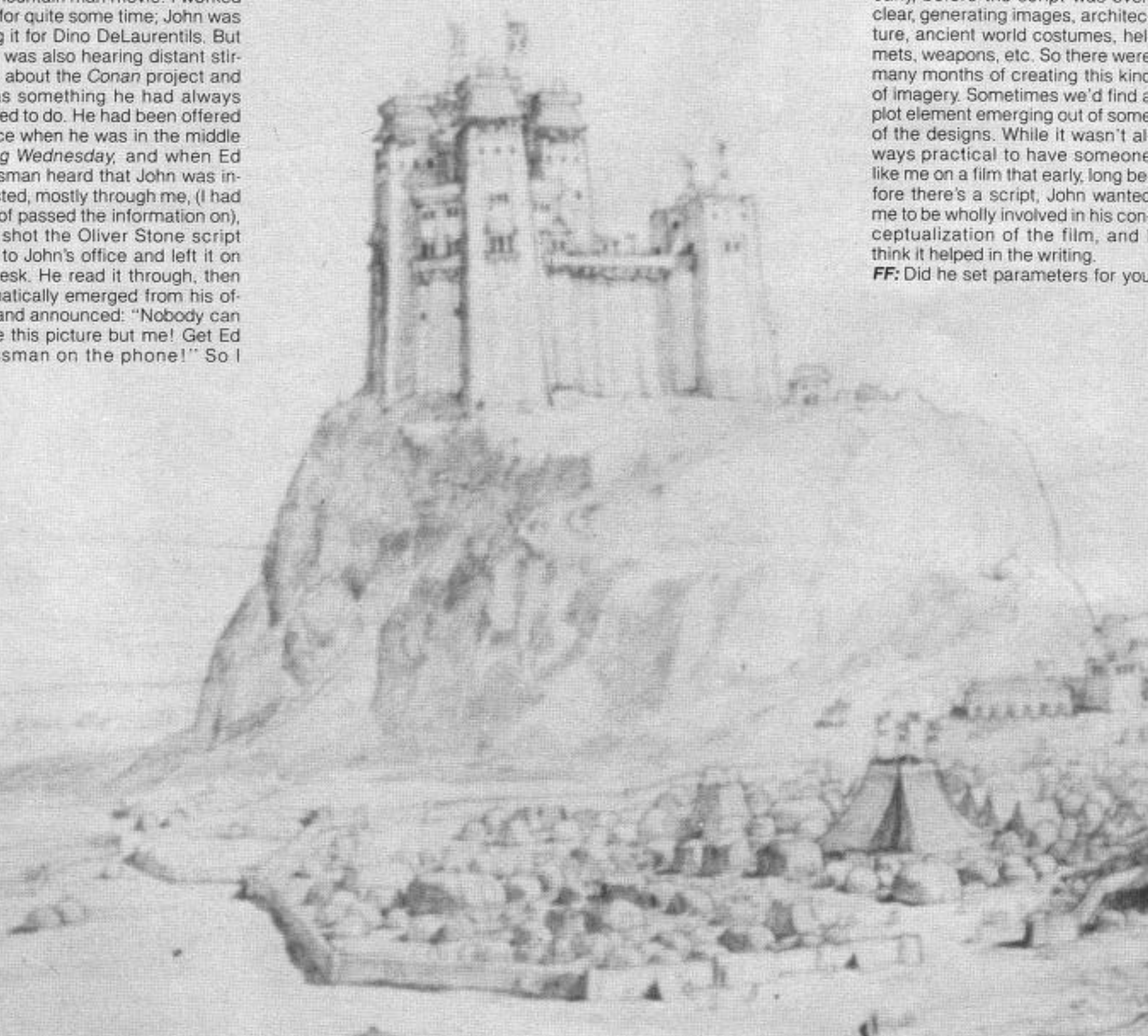
**COBB:** There are remnants of the

basic framework that Oliver Stone established, but it was a foregone conclusion that, step-by-step, John would make it almost totally his. Everything was modified, to some degree, from the first script.

**FF:** While all these rewrites were occurring, what were you up to?

**COBB:** John was always keen on the overall vision of how I saw things. He wanted me to start very early, before the script was even clear, generating images, architecture, ancient world costumes, helmets, weapons, etc. So there were many months of creating this kind of imagery. Sometimes we'd find a plot element emerging out of some of the designs. While it wasn't always practical to have someone like me on a film that early, long before there's a script, John wanted me to be wholly involved in his conceptualization of the film, and I think it helped in the writing.

**FF:** Did he set parameters for you



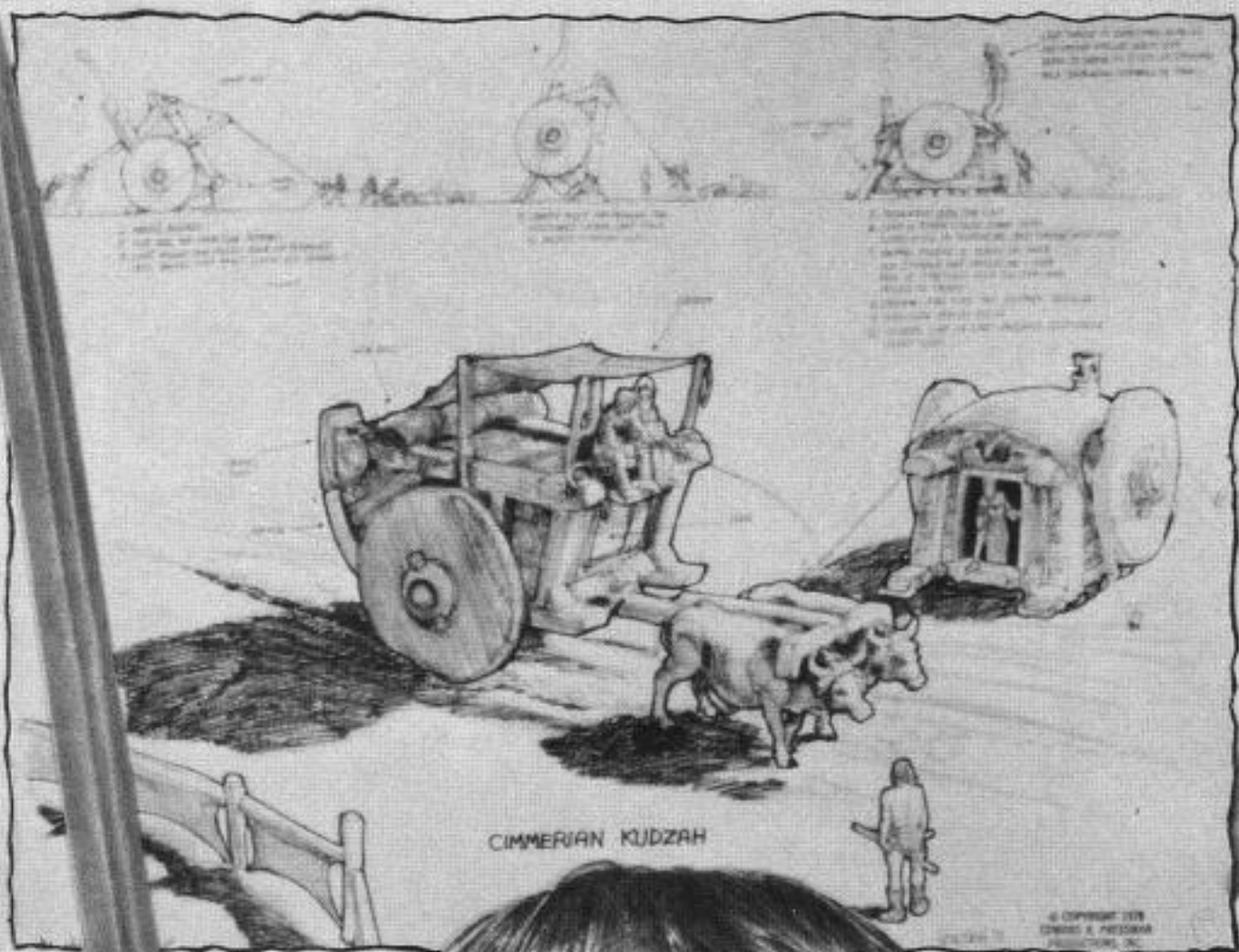
Photos: an early preproduction sketch of Thulsa Doom's mountaintop castle surrounded by countryside. Insert, upper right, Ron Cobb's idea for portable Cimmerian Kudzahs or hut-like dwellings. The upper miniature sketches show in detail how the Kudzah is converted into a stationary domicile. Lower right, Conan raises the sword made by his father (and designed by Ron Cobb).

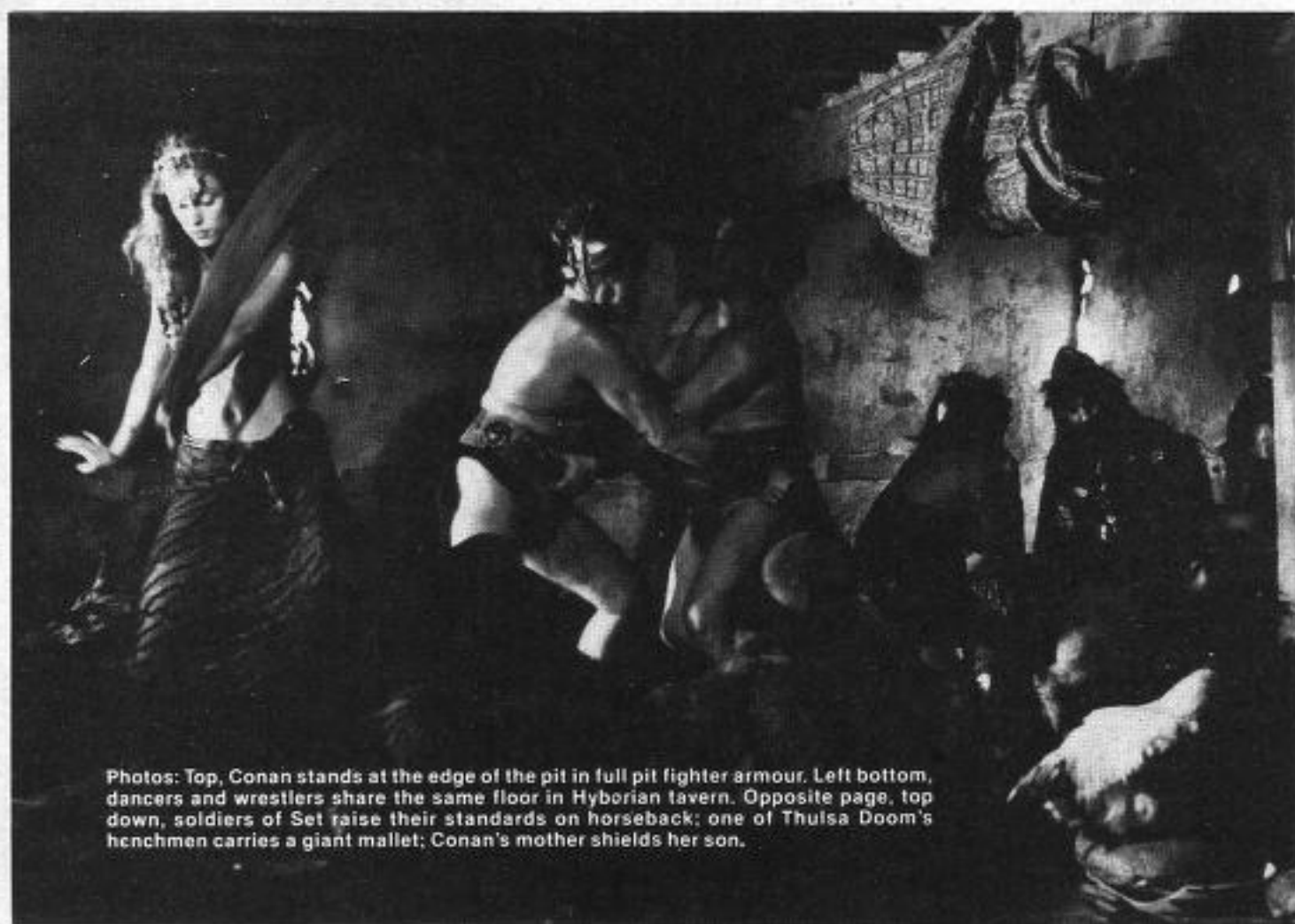
in your design work? Was your creativity ever inhibited?

**COBB:** John never set parameters. We'd discuss things and he'd come up with images, but then he'd leave the realization completely up to me.

**FF:** There's an inscription on Conan's sword, the one his father made for him as a boy. What is it?

**COBB:** That sword and the inscription on it was one of the first projects we knew we could design without the need of the script. I felt that the sword that Conan's father made for him, needed to be covered in rune-like inscriptions and naturalistic symbolism. So we sat down and thought through what Conan's people, the Cimmerians were like. I felt that we should use animal-like forms and I came up with the elk's skull with the curved-down antlers as the guard of the sword, and the pommel being sort of a hoof. As we got to the point of engraving the blade, I felt it was important that it say something meaningful and John wrote: "Suffer No Guilt Ye Who Whields This





Photos: Top, Conan stands at the edge of the pit in full pit fighter armour. Left bottom, dancers and wrestlers share the same floor in Hyborian tavern. Opposite page, top down, soldiers of Set raise their standards on horseback; one of Thulsa Doom's henchmen carries a giant mallet; Conan's mother shields her son.

Sword In The Name Of Crom." John wanted it to be readable because it would be a close up in the film. But I couldn't abide it being written in English, so I invented a script that actually was English and could be read, but you had to look at it twice before you realized it. So from every other angle it looks runic and strange. Most people found it delightful to discover that it really was English.

**FF:** In *Conan*, symbols play a large part in your designs. Why?

**COBB:** I've always been fascinated in the power of symbols. Symbols play an important part in ancient societies. I felt that it was important to work with that in mind. To develop a kind of symbol language, nothing really profound, but it was an interesting way to come up with evocative shapes for the sets and the motifs for the religion of the Cult of Set. One of the first and most important symbols which we needed to design was one which would symbolize the Cult of Set that Conan sees as a young child and which is indeleibly impressed



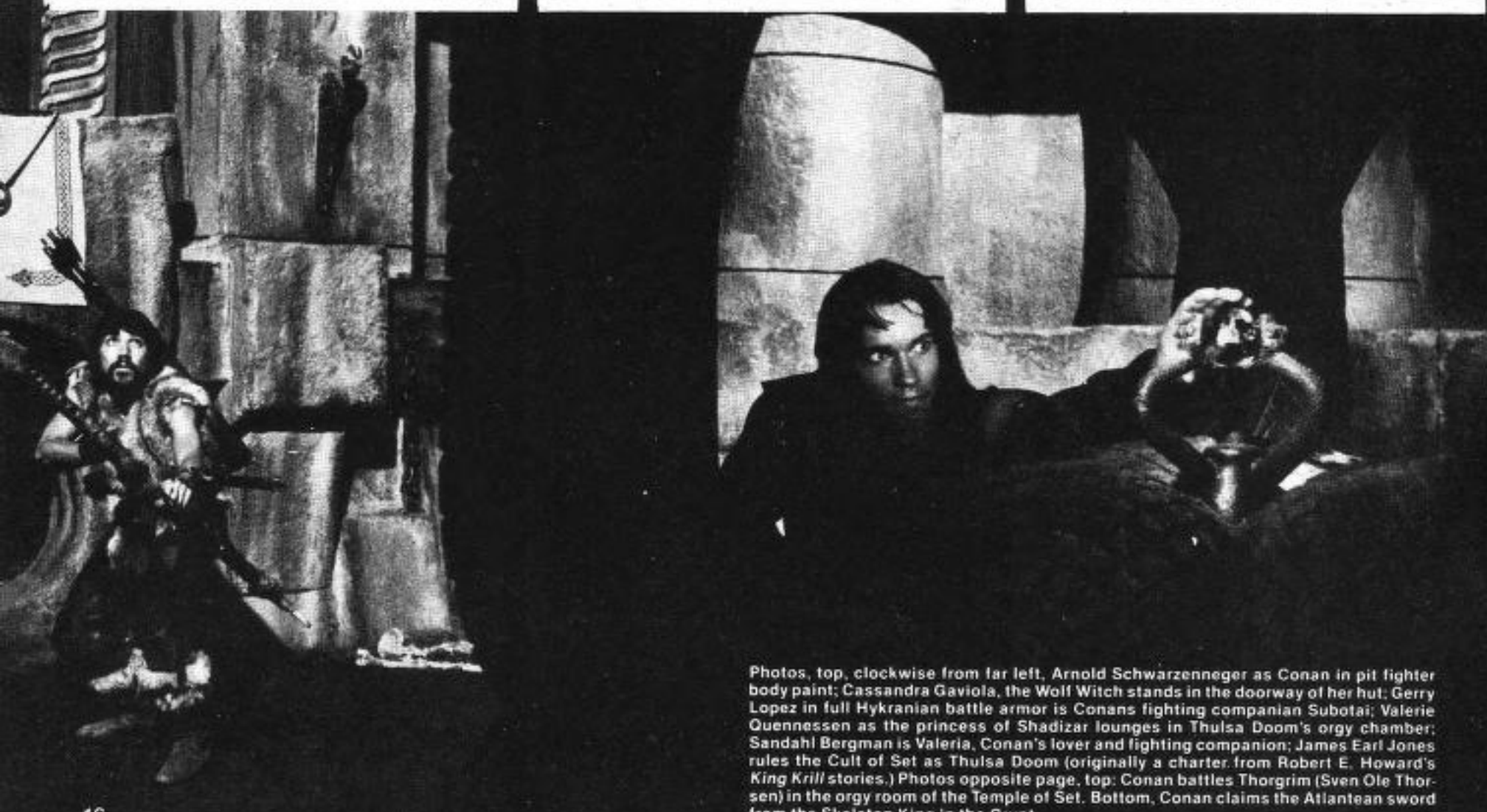
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on his mind. We had to come up with something very crisp and dramatic, and eventually cooked up the double-headed snake with the black moon and the black sun. John liked this very much and incorporated it into the script. It became the symbol of the Cult of Set. I didn't really read much of Howard's ideas about the Cult of Set, but amazingly came up with pretty much the same thing that he did. It was completely parallel because he symbolized it with a twin pair of snakes.

**FF:** Weren't you also involved in the costume design?

**COBB:** Initially, John wanted me to do all the costumes as well, and I gave it a try. But eventually we had to hire another costume designer to supervise the department because I just couldn't be there enough, as I was also constantly needed on the set. John Bloomfield was our costume designer. I bowed about a third of the way into the key costumes, and when it got down to the minor characters and extras and some additional costumes for





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Photos, top, clockwise from far left, Arnold Schwarzenegger as Conan in pit fighter body paint; Cassandra Gaviola, the Wolf Witch stands in the doorway of her hut; Gerry Lopez in full Hykranian battle armor is Conan's fighting companion Subotai; Valerie Quennessen as the princess of Shadizar lounges in Thulsa Doom's orgy chamber; Sandahl Bergman is Valeria, Conan's lover and fighting companion; James Earl Jones rules the Cult of Set as Thulsa Doom (originally a character from Robert E. Howard's *King Krill* stories.) Photos opposite page, top: Conan battles Thorgrim (Sven Ole Thorsen) in the orgy room of the Temple of Set. Bottom, Conan claims the Atlantean sword from the Skeleton King in the Crypt.



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the major roles, I just didn't have the time. I did some of the key costumes for the principles and some of the initial designs, but the bulk of the costumes are John Bloomfield's. They wanted to give me some sort of costume credit but I turned it down. John as the sole credit and he really deserves it. I can't believe the amount of work he did. We had thousands and thousands of costumes. Whether it was just mixing and matching from costume houses to give things a different look or designing from the ground up, they were excellent.

**FF:** You were originally supposed to shoot *Conan* in Yugoslavia but then you moved to Spain. Why was this, and did it cause any problems?

**COBB:** There were numerous of negotiations between Dino and the Yugoslavian government, but what concerned us most was that *Conan* was such an elaborate film to try to shoot there. Large quantities of new materials would be needed. Fiberglass and new plastics and foams would all have to be brought in, as they couldn't be found there. There were also difficulties in importing large quantities of exotic chemicals. Most film companies that have filmed in Yugoslavia in the past, have done so using natural settings and haven't done a great deal of special effects







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or elaborate set designs. They just dressed up an old town and shot a World War II movie or some similar thing. Like *Fiddler on the Roof*, where the few sets to be built were constructed out of traditional materials. But we needed simulated marble, light weight weaponry and armor that had to be made out of plastics and fiberglass. Also, we weren't completely in control of the labor situation, and we didn't have the flexibility to determine that certain things be done by a certain time. So, because so many production problems were beginning to add up, we decided to move to Spain. John had worked there before on *The Wind and the Lion*, and knew that they had more experience working on elaborate films.

**FF:** So it turned out better for you after all?

**COBB:** We thought it was a better move overall. While some of the locations in Yugoslavia were wonderful and were in some ways superior to the one's we found in Spain, other locations were superior in Spain, so it was a tradeoff.

**FF:** Weren't there some 50 sets you were responsible for?

**COBB:** Yes, I certainly was! That was the scariest but most stimulating part of being involved in *Conan*. John insisted that I immerse myself in every design of absolutely every square foot of every set. Every swirl of marble, every angle on every bannister, so I really ran myself ragged. The final design concepts were left entirely up to me. We built some very unusual interiors and exteriors. And a lot of it was a gamble as to whether it would look as good three dimensionally as it did in the plans and drawings. The craftsmen and laborers in Spain were excellent. They have incredible abilities. We modified many already existing sets. I wanted to build the Hyborian world totally from scratch, but try as we might, we couldn't stretch the budget that far.

**FF:** Didn't you also direct part of the film?

**COBB:** Yes, unofficially. John gave me the opportunity to do some of the second unit directing. Picking up odd shots, or where he wanted a particular look. I did some of the horses crossing the sand, someone walking across the strange landscapes, some of the title sequences, also the making of the sword.

**FF:** Isn't there a "humorous" be-

Photos opposite page: clockwise from top left, a frontal view of the mountain-top entrance to the temple of the Cult of Set; The Wheel of Pain being turned by young Conan and other Cimmerian slave children taken during the raid on their village; a Vanir raider in full battle armour; a mounted warrior from the Cult of Set attacks Subotai; two of Conan's more fearsome opponents, armed and ready; Valeria (Sandahl Bergman) is backed up against a wall; center photo, Conan (Arnold Schwarzenegger) stands ready with a giant-bladed axe. Photos above: top left, Conan in pit fighter makeup; top right, Valeria tends to the wounded Conan; center, vultures descend upon Conan where he is crucified to a tree, bottom, Conan and Subotai (Gerry Lopez) walk through a crowded market place.



hind-the-scenes story about two elephants?

**COBB:** Well, yes. In one of the city squares, we wanted all kinds of creatures. Goats, pigs, camels, and someone said that there were elephants in Spain so I put in an order for two. (Chuckle) So, on the day of shooting we had these two elephants. And they turned out to be members of the opposite sex. And they became amorous in each other in the middle of the shot. It's really something to be sitting there having all these people ready and be stopped by these great humping mountains. Unluckily you won't be able to see that in the film, but it was a showstopper to say the least. To get the shot we eventually had to peg them a respectable distance apart.

**FF:** How did you feel about Arnold Schwarzenegger as Conan?

**COBB:** I knew that the role would be extremely challenging, and I wasn't actually sure before meeting Arnold that he would have the right look. Bodybuilding physiques are very often "overfunctional." They don't always convey a functional workability. But I was delighted to find that Arnold was totally aware of this and had gone into special training for the film. When we met he had trimmed down to a very functional build. He looks terrific and John was convinced that he had the look. When we got to Spain, he looked good on the set, good in the costume, and even better on the screen.

**FF:** Is there any truth to the rumor that Arnold's voice has been overdubbed in the film?

**COBB:** Universal and Dino were worried about him being completely understood, because he still has a rather thick Austrian accent. John didn't think it was necessary or appropriate, but as of this moment I really couldn't say. What has happened is that Arnold was going to narrate the film and rather than go with that, John compromised and agreed on a different concept. Instead, we have Mako, the actor who plays the wizard in the film, narrate, because there was some concern as to whether the audience could fully understand Arnold's accent. But Arnold, speaking for himself on screen, is still Arnold, I believe. John was very keen to have his accent. He felt it fit the picture.

**FF:** Wasn't the original budget of Conan set at \$20 million?

**COBB:** There was a general agreement to hold it to \$17 million. It was going up and down for awhile but the desire was to hold it to \$17. I'm not sure, but I think it's crept up a bit, towards \$20 million.

**FF:** Who will be doing the score?

**COBB:** Basil Poledouris. It's finished and it's magnificent.

**FF:** You made a statement once that the film will be better because the "fan" didn't do it. How do you mean that?

**COBB:** I said that in the heat of passion, in the middle of an all night job. We were worried about fan reactions to it, the Conan fans. The purists are certainly going to be

(Continued on page 58)

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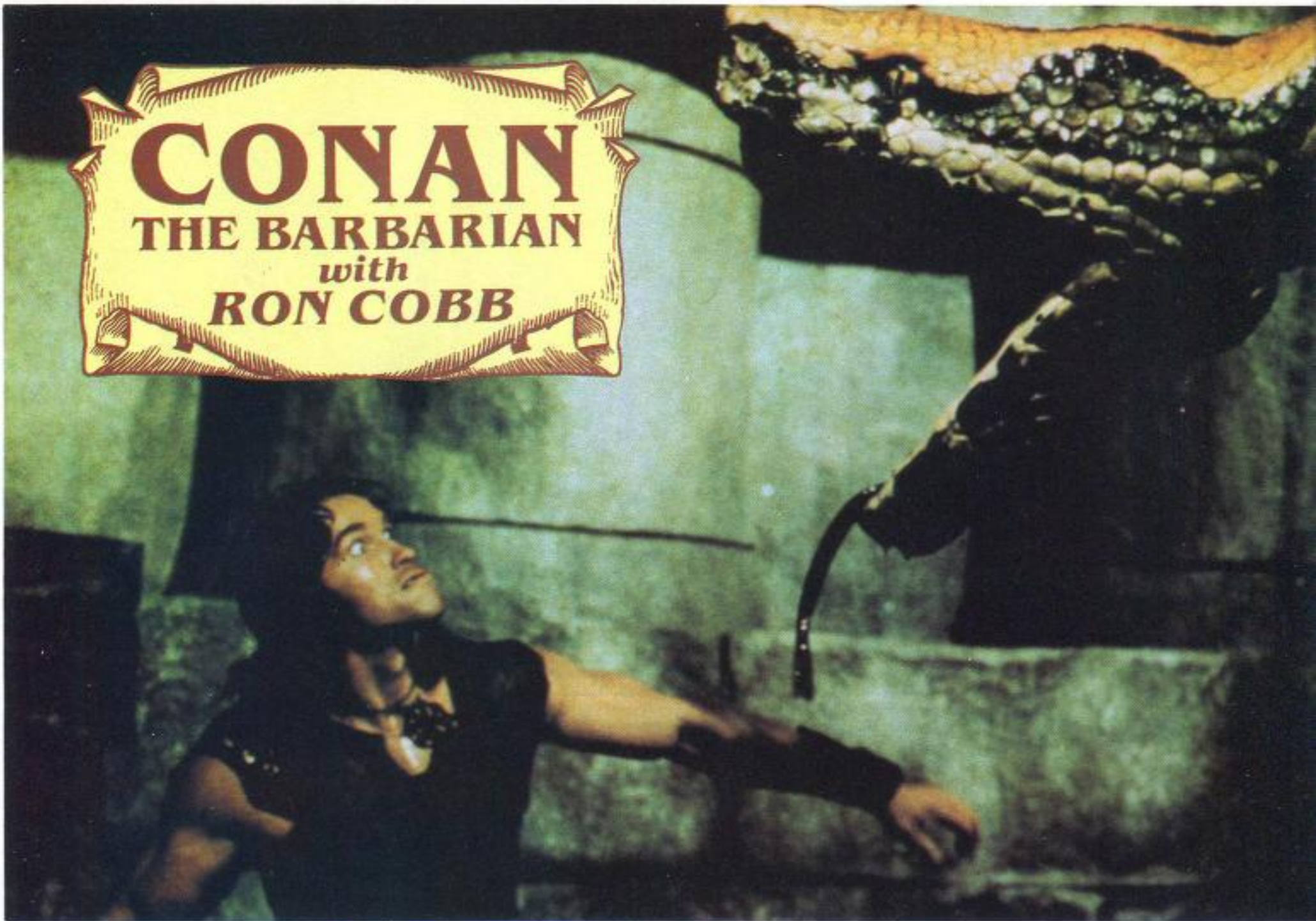
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# CONAN

## THE BARBARIAN

with  
**RON COBB**

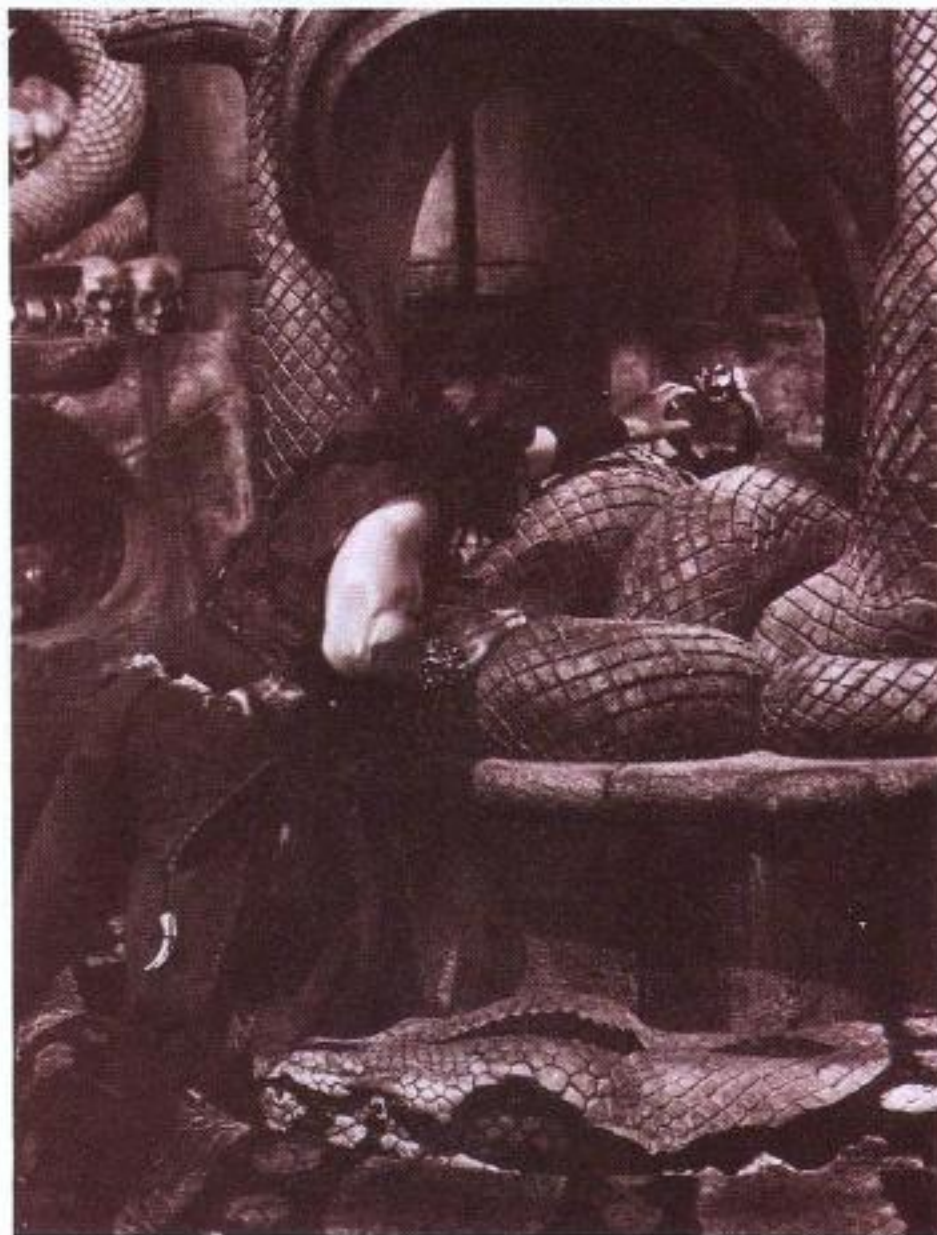


Conan grimaces in shocked disbelief as he is attacked by a gigantic snake.

(Continued from page 21)

very demanding about their favorite barbarian. Initially, out of a lack of familiarity with the property, but later with a kind of conviction, we decided we'd have to go our own way. We just couldn't sit there and directly follow every detail and make sure it was an accurate portrayal of Howard's world as Howard saw it. John and I needed to really cut loose and kind of reinvent Conan, reconceive him, we needed the freedom to take some liberties with the character. It had occurred to me that if fans had been doing it, the loving detail, the great accuracy would certainly get in the way of writing or doing anything original. I was quite taken by the reinvention of Conan which was going on in John's mind and to a smaller extent, my own. We were mainly concerned with the basic concept that this was primarily a period film. We wanted to make sure that the audience could believe that this time period really existed, so we were obsessed with creating the look of a real place in history. For consistency's sake, we had to be able to take some liberties with the Howard stories. It's enough like Howard to maintain the original flavor, but you are going to see the consistent vision of someone who has thought it all through anew.

**FF:** How close did you work with Nick Alder?



Conan leans precariously over the edge of the stone altar which holds the sacred jewel. Note the very real guardian snake which lies coiled at his feet.

**COBB:** As close as necessary. Essentially he was doing all the mechanical effects on the floor, so there wasn't that much for me to do. I'd supply him with the drawings, and I'd keep in mind what had to happen there, and we'd have to coordinate. For example, I designed the giant snake, how it should look, the externals, then we gave the drawings to Nick and he took them to London and had a sculptor sculpt it. But once it was sculpted, my job was over, except for the paint job at the end. Nick was the expert on how it worked, he put the thing together. He also started all the fires, burnt down all the buildings, catapulted flame pots through the sky, and made arrows disappear into actor's necks.

**FF:** Was he involved with the Wheel of Pain? Did it really work?

**COBB:** The Wheel of Pain was really just a design concept. There weren't any effects connected with it. I worked very closely with the construction manager, Aldo Puchini. He was brilliant at making it work, but I designed it to work. It didn't really grind grain but it could have, had the stones been heavier; the grinding stones were actually only hollow fiberglass. They looked and worked beautifully but Aldo had to engineer a metal skeleton, with accurate tolerances so that the grinding stones, once they were covered with wood, appeared to be turning and grinding. You

won't be able to see very much of that in the film though. We originally thought you would see more of the function of the wheel, so I had put a tunnel underneath it with village women coming out with sacks of grain. But as it turned out, the action was more intimately involved with Conan, and we get to see very little on the screen of how the wheel actually works. We just sort of hear it grinding in the background. I don't think it's even made clear in the film that what it does is grind.

**FF:** What about the temple set and the orgy room. What thoughts went through your mind when you set out to design these?

**COBB:** Some of it was already vaguely described in the script, so I used those ideas as a departure point. John wanted the temple to be inside of a mountain. I was thinking mandala and sunken floor, a circular kind of pit. John suggested a pillar and I decided it should actually be a phallic symbol. I felt that the room should be marble, and they ended up using flesh colored marble, which was appropriate. In this instance, I didn't do a painting of it but instead just drew up the plans. We had to be very careful that the action could take place in the space we had. During the shooting, we filled it with smoke and flaming pots and it really looked terrific.

**FF:** You went with miniatures effects instead of mattes. Why?

**COBB:** I was keen to avoid mattes,



Conan shares a tender moment with Valeria, his fighting companion and lover.

traditional matte photography, combining paintings with live action, or even combining models with live action optically. But even if we could have gotten good matte painters, John and I wanted to avoid them. We just liked to have everything real in the picture. Occasionally it was just impossible. We couldn't build an entire city. We employed Emelio Ruiz, a model maker and effects man, who convinced us that we could use a very, very old method: foreground models. We felt that this might really be the answer. We committed ourselves to doing an entire foreground model city where we shoot

through the model to the real landscape beyond. It's really all there. He built his model, some of it foreshortened, and it was very exciting when we first viewed it through the camera's eye-piece. Since the focal lengths between the model and background were the same, they looked like they were one. I even picked one particular spot of the city that I liked the most and made a rather detailed drawing of what I wanted there. He built it, we set it up and added people, and it was magnificent.

**COBB:** My tendency would be to move on, unless I thought it would be new ground. I enjoy the chal-

lenge of something I've never done before.

**FF:** The film was first set for release at Christmas, 1981, then it was moved to Spring, now it's set for May 14. When that happens, that usually means there's been problems. Is that the case here?

**COBB:** From dropping in on the editing now and again, my feeling is that John is still experimenting with different ideas, moving things, trying this, trying that. The post-production was just taking longer than anyone had anticipated. There were some basic plot lines shifted, a different emphasis put on this or that particular scene. It was just grinding on. A lot of hard work. But I don't really recall any major problems.

**FF:** Aren't you involved in a new film?

**COBB:** I have a tentative commitment to do the pilot for an American TV version of *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. It's tentative and really hard to say what will come of it at this point. We've got a lot of hurdles to cross, but I'm excited to be a part of it.

**FF:** Most of your work has been with genre films. Why have you chosen this field?

**COBB:** Primarily because that's where I think I can be of the most use. I have a speciality there. Science fiction and fantasy storylines contain more opportunities for imaginative design than any other kind of film. And obviously, that's very appealing to me. I love it! ■



Conan stands poised to strike as the skeleton of an ancient Atlantean king seems to move in the darkness.