



RAIDERS of the LOST ARK



Above left: Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) and Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen) are tied to a stake as the Nazis prepare to open the Ark. Above center: British actor Ronald Lacey plays the sadistic Nazi Toth, who pursues Indiana Jones from Nepal to the Taurus dig in Egypt. Above right: Harrison Ford prepares to make the swing over a pit during the opening scenes of the film. The film crew can be seen in the background. Left: Sallah (John Rhys-Davies) and Indy (Harrison Ford) discover the Lost Ark concealed in the ruins of the city of Taurus.

All the best ideas seem obvious as soon as someone else has thought them up. This is the case with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* — it now seems obvious that a great idea for a movie would be to take a story that is a pure distillation of practically every pulp adventure magazine published during the 1930s and give it the big-budget, high-screen-treatment after the manner of *Star Wars* — but if anyone else apart from George Lucas had tried to get this project off the ground I doubt if any of the Hollywood companies would have shown a flicker of interest in it. I also doubt that if anyone other than Lucas and Steven Spielberg had made this picture it would be anything near the success it is.

I have the grim suspicion that film producers in Hollywood and places elsewhere are looking at *Raiders* and saying to themselves: "Hmmmm, that looks easy. We just get an adventure story with lots of action; a few jokes, set it in the 1930s, mix in some occult mumbo jumbo and away we go. Of course we can only afford a budget of 200,000 US dollars and instead of Spielberg we'll get my brother-in-law Sid to direct it but otherwise the suckers in the crowns will never know the difference." Walk, when the flood of cheap *Raiders* imitations starts to arrive we suckers are going to know the

difference because there is much more to *Raiders* than meets the eye. Lucas's and Spielberg's biggest achievement with *Raiders* (and one should also credit Lawrence Kasdan, who wrote the screenplay, and Philip Kaufman, who co-wrote the original story with Lucas) is that they have mixed all the above ingredients just right. But most importantly they have created the whole thing with just the right amount of humour, which is the most difficult task of all to accomplish with a picture like this. It would have been so easy to get the balance wrong and end up with two hours of High Camp.

That's exactly what happened when George Pal brought the 1930s pulp hero Doc Savage to the screen in 1975, and the same thing applies to the De Laurentis version of *Flash Gordon*. But while there are plenty of camp elements in *Raiders* they aren't treated self-consciously. Instead they are presented with a straight face and the viewer can either enjoy them or ignore them, depending on his or her age and mental development (and the two aren't necessarily connected). In this respect *Raiders* even improves on *Superman II*, though if it comes to the crunch I think I'd have to rate *Super* the higher of the two (but that's just a personal preference, folks).

One hopes that someone will tie De Laurentis to a chair and make him watch *Raiders* several times until he gets the point about how this sort of movie should be approached. But I suspect that cultural and generation gaps will prevent him, and other film makers of his ilk, from ever grasping the point. The secret is, of course, that Spielberg and Lucas have an unshakably personal involvement in the material and their obvious enjoyment of putting it on the screen is communicated to the audience. They may have their tongues in their cheeks but they don't treat their material cynically, unlike some film makers I could mention . . .

The marvellous self-contained opening sequences in *Raiders* set the tone for the rest of the movie — they are a glorious mixture of spectacular, fast-paced action and sly humour. It all begins like some *White Hunter* film of the 1930s with the archeologist hero, Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford, who is surprisingly good in the role), hacking his way through the jungle with two sly guides (boon to become one) and then entering a gloomy cave to obtain a precious carved head which is protected by an amazing variety of lethal devices. It's the sheer abundance of these devices and the way they are unleashed upon Jones and friend —



swiftly building up in visual absurdity (though never too absurd) to culminate in what appears to be a giant ball bearing that chases Jones with the speed of an express train as the cave self-destructs around him — that makes clear to us *Raiders* isn't simply a 1981 remake of a 1930s movie but an exhilarating celebration of the entire action/adventure genre, incorporating the pulps, old movie serials and comic books.

The light touch is maintained when we rejoin Jones back in pre-World War 2 America. Like Superman he is two separate people — when abroad he is the tough man-of-action with a leather jacket and whip coiled permanently at his hip but when at home he is a mild-mannered, but handsome, college professor who is obviously adored by every female member of his class.

After this brief exposure to the intellectual side of his persona the story proper begins with Jones being requested by the government to track down the Lost Ark of the Covenant which contains the fragments of the two stone tablets on which the 10 Commandments were inscribed. It seems that the Ark contains a great power that could be harnessed for destructive purposes and Hitler is anxious to get his hands on it (when I first heard about *Raiders* I presumed the Ark

referred to in the title was Noah's and couldn't understand why Hitler wanted it . . .).

The first step in the quest involves locating a certain gold medallion that contains a vital map. The medallion is in the possession of none other than an old girlfriend of Jones' called Marion (played by Karen Allen, last seen trying to cope with Al Pacino's leather-fetish in *Cruising*). Marion is a rather tough young lady who runs a bar in, of all places, Nepal, and judging from the exterior shots her establishment must be the last opportunity to fill your tank before Tibet. As an indication of just how tough she is our first sight shows her participating in a drinking competition with the local drunk, who is built like a Yeti, which she wins. She makes Lois Lane look like a push-over.

Even Indiana Jones has some trouble persuading her to cooperate but after a violent and spectacular intrusion by a bunch of comic book Nazis Marion sees the light and accompanies Jones to Cairo with the medallion. In Cairo there is more violent action, including one of the best visual jokes in the picture (which I won't spoil by describing to you), but Indiana succeeds in locating the Ark and goes about excavating it right under the noses of an entire German army. Alas, the Nazis

then get the upper hand when Indiana is betrayed by his old archeology rival, Belloq (*Paul Freeman*) and sealed, with Marion, in a tomb along with around a million poisonous snakes (a fear of snakes is Indiana's only weak spot), not to mention a crowd of mummified corpses in an adjacent tomb.

After escaping from the tomb there is a well-choreographed fight involving Indiana, a giant German and a Flying Wing aircraft that goes out of control, followed by an even more spectacular action sequence during which the stuntmen perform some truly harrowing stunts on a speeding truck (and even *under* a speeding truck).

There's a brief romantic interlude on a ship but as in the *Star Wars* movies Lucas makes sure that the "mushy stuff" is treated with irreverence. After some clowning around Indiana actually falls asleep when Marion finally gets him into bed . . .

But then the Nazis pop up again, this time in a U-boat, and grab both the Ark and Marion. However, in James Bond style Indiana hitches a ride on the outside of the sub all the way to his secret base (presumably holding his breath for long periods during the journey).

After more action the climax occurs when the Nazis open the Ark in a desert



Opposite top left: Marion (Karen Allen) finds herself surrounded by ancient rotting corpses. Opposite below left: Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) calmly brushes a horde of tarantula spiders from his bearer's back. Opposite right: A member of the special effects team demonstrates the abilities of one of the mechanical dummies used in the climax of the film. Left: Indiana Jones gains access to the German archeological dig, disguised as an Arab. Above: Indy ducks behind a German plane during his fight with a huge German soldier. Below: Marion holds her winning from the drinking competition which takes place in her Nepalese saloon.

canyon and by this time the picture has changed its mood, the humour being left behind. The sequences showing what happens after the Ark is opened are a bizarre mixture of DeMille's *Ten Commandments*, *Fantasia* (the Bald Mountain section), the climax of *Close Encounters* and even *Scanners*.

It's all very impressive and a considerable achievement for effects supervisor Richard Edlund but I dread to think how some of the more literal-minded fans are going to react to it. Very soon, I'm afraid, we will see the first lengthy treatise attempting to prove a connection between the power in the Ark and the Force, etc, etc (I must admit my big fear was that Yoda would pop out of the Ark).

As with *Star Wars* there is much fun to be had in spotting the filmic references in *Raiders*. Apart from the ones I've already mentioned, plus *The Mask of Fu Manchu* which also centered around an archeological hunt (for the death mask and sword of Genghis Khan) and similarly ended with a death ray machine going out of control and wiping out the Fu's followers, I think *Raiders* owes most to the James Bond movies. But then the early Bonds themselves exploited the basic format of the old movie serials, dressing up the non-stop action, hail-breadth escapes, etc,

with a veneer of sophistication and tongue-in-cheek humour that enabled "adults" to enjoy the fun without feeling guilty about it.

But though *Raiders* may be nothing more than a Bond movie set in the 1930s it has more style, *panache* and wit than any of the recent Bonds, including *For Your Eyes Only*. It also has a sense of narrative pace and sheer exuberance that has been missing from the Bonds for a long time and shows up just how lifeless and mechanical the Bond series has become.

As I write this I haven't seen any reviews of *Raiders* so I'm curious to know how the more intellectual critics are going to react to it. I suspect that while admitting its technical artistry some will complain that it's depressing to see so much skill and money go into the making of a film that is essentially mindless, labelling it as a further indication of the intellectual and artistic bankruptcy affecting the new breed of young American film makers who can only make films by cannibalising the old Hollywood carcass instead of producing films that are genuinely original etc, etc. Well, all this may be true and no doubt I will feel guilty as hell when I go and see *Raiders* for the second and probably third time . . .

