



It's an iconic, if baffling, cinematic image – a disembodied stone head floating in the sky and James Bond wearing a nappy. Welcome to ZARDOZ...

THE FUTURE DOESN'T WORK

By Ed Fortune

Some films are lauded as classics because they bring something new and unique to our growing culture. Others are incredibly technically accomplished, changing the state of the art forever. Others still hold a haunting, timeless quality that speak to our very being and cannot be replicated. In the case of John Boorman's *Zardoz*, however, it's none of those. *Zardoz* is a classic because it's a glorious mess of science fiction ideas and '70s strangeness that also features a young and muscular Sean Connery wearing very little for most of the movie.

Zardoz is set in the year 2293 on a post-apocalyptic Earth and was filmed in 1974's Ireland (Ireland is still the go-to place for grim and dismal wastelands; it's where they film a lot of *Game of Thrones*). Connery plays Zed, a wasteland warrior clad only in extremely short red pants and a red bandolier – though at one point he wears a white wedding dress. Zed and his clan of Exterminators worship a giant stone floating head, called *Zardoz*. Zed discovers the secrets behind his God and finds his way into The Vortex, a heavily

protected and secluded zone filled with immortal humans who have grown bored and strange with the weight of years.

The plot is so haphazard and odd that it tends to appear in the top ranks of weird movie lists. Boorman, who both wrote and directed the feature, drew upon the likes of Aldous Huxley's story *After Many a Summer* and the third part of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. As an idea, it's classic science fiction. It's an examination of human nature and human sexuality and posits the consequences of immortality and hubris. The central premise revolves around the use of religion as a form of social control, though in this case the holy book turns out to be something rather unexpected.

Boorman was well aware that his movie was difficult for audiences to swallow at the time. His solution was to open the feature with the character of Arthur Frayn, whose disembodied head bobs around the screen rambling on about the line between illusion and religion. It doesn't help that Frayn has drawn on his beard

and moustache in magic marker, and it looks like he's wearing his boxer shorts as a hat. The explanation doesn't help. It really doesn't.

Boorman at the time was a rising force in the movie industry. After the commercial and critical success of *Deliverance* (which he directed and partially rewrote), he could basically indulge himself. He initially cast *Deliverance* star Burt Reynolds to take on the role of Zed, but the actor was unable to film due to a hernia. It's also worth noting that Burt had recently shot to fame, thanks in part to this role and a well-timed nude centrefold in *Cosmopolitan*. Reynolds was also angling for a role as Bond at the time. Meanwhile, Sean Connery was both desperate to shake off his 007 image and finding it hard to find work after appearing in the mostly forgotten, but recently re-issued, police drama stinker *The Offence*. Connery's fee cost one-fifth of the film's total million dollar budget but was well worth it. Boorman and Connery are still friends to this day and got on very well during the filming.

The bulk of the budget went on special effects, so much so that they skimmed on a lot of other things. For example, they stretched the costume budget by simply painting on parts of the barbarian's gear, rather than using actual clothes. The giant head was modelled on Boorman's own face (making the director the literal and figurative God of the movie). The large prop was dangled on a crane and was pretty problematic. They didn't have enough room in the studio to film the flying head scenes, so they used the parking lot instead. The head would get the movie into trouble from the French press, who thought it was the head of Lenin. Many of the hippy clothes used by the immortals were quilts the director had acquired while making *Deliverance*. Of course, the entire 'no budget for clothes' may have just been an excuse to have most of the actors wander around in next to nothing. *Zardoz* is notorious for its rampant (yet not terribly sexual) nudity.

Other effects were also quite problematic. One key scene involves Connery and his co-star Charlotte Rampling ageing rapidly. It's an incredible moment (although also appropriately odd), but of course, this required the use of lots of facial make-up. Seemingly, Connery does not like having his face touched too much. The long and challenging scene took three attempts to shoot and, at one point, to say Connery apparently got quite annoyed at the technical team is an understatement.



Seventies audiences were not really ready for the movie, and it was a critical and commercial flop. Commentators to this day doubt if we will ever truly be ready for *Zardoz*. Legendary film critic Roger Ebert described it at the time as "A trip into a future that seems ruled by perpetually stoned set decorators" and also, "an exercise in self-indulgence". He's not wrong. Boorman said many years later that "It was the '70s, and I was doing a lot of drugs. Frankly, even I'm not entirely sure what parts of the movie are about". This alone has made the movie a gift to film studies students across the world; not only is it well-produced and crammed with metaphor, but it's also a great example of pretension in filmmaking. Ironically, one of the key themes of *Zardoz* is also hubris.

Zardoz is very much a Boorman movie. Throughout, he uses one critical piece of music (Beethoven's 7th) to evoke mood and drama, and this is a technique he used heavily in both *Deliverance* and his later works. *Zardoz*, however, is not the lowest point in

the director's career. The next film he helmed was *The Exorcist 2: The Heretic*, a movie roundly regarded as ridiculous and awful. Luckily, he ploughed on to pursue another dream project; sword and sorcery epic *Excalibur*, for which he won an award at Cannes and is generally regarded as a fantasy classic. He went on to greater heights from there. *Zardoz* also gave Sean Connery the (literal and figurative) exposure he needed, and despite the movie itself being a flop, the in-your-face physicality of the movie did his career no harm at all.

The movie went on to inspire similarly crazy projects around the world and in other sorts of media. There's even a DC Comics villain (called Vartox) who's based loosely on the character of Zed. As odd as *Zardoz* seems, its significance should not be underestimated. It is a true classic because of its overly indulgent storyline and crazy scenes and deserves a place on your movie shelf.

ZARDOZ is available now on Blu-ray, released by Arrow Video.