

The Interview

WITH its decadence, debauchery, drunkenness and drugs, the early Hollywood depicted in Damien Chazelle's *Babylon* is a far cry from what we might imagine when we think of the 1920s.

For 15 years, *Whiplash* and *La La Land* director Damien, 37, has been researching and building the world of *Babylon*, his epic comedy-drama about that period as the film industry pivoted from silent films to 'talkies'.

Starring Hollywood icons Brad Pitt and Margot Robbie along with Diego Calva, Jovan Adepo, Li Jun Li and more, the film tells a story of early cinema and the wild lives behind it - the dreamers who want to contribute something great to the world, the silent film stars who struggle to adapt to talking roles, and the musicians whose stardom ascends as sound comes to cinema.

"We all sometimes have that misperception that the olden days, so to speak, were tamer or quainter than today," says the director.

"I think this period, the 20s, and what Hollywood was like at this time... it was so new. The money was new, the art form was new, and the city was growing - it's still new.

"So there was this kind of freedom. There was this Wild West sort of thing. Anything goes.

"You wound up with this moment in time that is sort of unprecedented, that is way wilder and more transgressive than I think people imagine when they think of martini glasses and Charlestons. It was a lot more than that."

Babylon sees Brad, 59, star as Jack Conrad, a famous silent movie star who is at the top of his game when we meet him.

"I didn't know that much about 20s Hollywood. Except for the stories George Clooney shared about his early years!" quips the actor.

"Silent films didn't have dialogue to rely on, they only had the occasional title card, so the performances have a style to them that's different than what we have now," adds Oscar-winner Brad of playing a silent film star who struggles to adapt to talkies.

"It was just a different language, it's very, very animated, which is so antithetical to our approach today."

It felt like we were at a party for a week, not just a night!

As Damien Chazelle's *Babylon* comes to cinemas, **RACHAEL DAVIS** chats to stars Brad Pitt, Margot Robbie and more about the 1920s Hollywood epic

Babylon also stars *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Suicide Squad*'s Margot Robbie, 32, as the vivacious, and ambitious Nellie LaRoy, who dreams of becoming a movie star.

"I loved playing Nellie, she's like a tornado," says Margot. "She's such a physically and emotionally demanding character, because she just demands so much of you and of the people around her. But she's a blast."

Nellie meets Diego Calva's character Manny Torres - an elephant handler who wants to work on a movie set by any means - at a huge bacchanal of a Hollywood party held in a mansion outside of the city.

Hollywood newcomer Diego, 30, reveals: "I tried so many things before being an actor, and before going to college and starting film direction and the script writing - I literally was the coffee guy, you

know, I'm the PA and boom operator. So I really relate with this idea.

"I didn't care how, I just wanted to be part of the movie. And I think he [Manny] is the same. I fell in love with him right away with that determination."

Margot reveals that she also found an affinity with the livewire actress she portrays, particularly in relation to her Hollywood career.

"Fortunately, we have things not in common, but we have a lot in common too," she says.

"I think I definitely identify with the parts of her that are just so determined to make it, to get to Hollywood and make it and make people pay attention, and get the jobs and get on the film set.

"And you see a lot of our characters kind of have that.

"You know, it's what Manny and Nellie really bond over at that first party... 'I want to be on a movie set.'"

That first party is where we meet most of the characters and are introduced to the riotous tempo of the film. Featuring hundreds of extras and background performers, the scene is an intoxicating spectacle.

"It was madness!" says Margot of filming the scene. "These aren't set builds, these are actual locations, and there's not much CGI in this movie at all to speak of, so it really is immersive.



Hollywood A-listers Margot Robbie and Brad Pitt

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Babylon star Brad Pitt



Babylon director Damien Chazelle and stars Jovan Adepo and Li Jun Li



play the trumpet, while professional trumpet players also appear on Justin Hurwitz's energetic jazz score.

"As actors, we always like to embark on different journeys with different characters, so getting to have a more musical element to my preparation was really cool - especially it being for Damien, who is musically inclined.

"I feel like music always is a character in all of his movies, so it was cool to get to be the next person after Miles [Teller], who got to play the drums [in *Whiplash*], or Ryan [Gosling] playing the piano in *La La Land* - I got to play the trumpet for this movie."

"I wanted the movie to move at a clip and have this kind of party-fuelled sort of energy," adds Damien of the film's rambunctious score.

"So the music, I guess, became kind of this heartbeat to it.

"A lot of times we'd play it on set in some of these party scenes, so it helped set the tone for everyone.

"It felt kind of like doing a musical but not, you know? It had a little bit of that energy."

■ *Babylon* is in cinemas now



Margot Robbie as Nellie LaRoy and Diego Calva as Manny Torres in *Babylon*



Brad Pitt as Jack Conrad