

# 'Fire the DIRECTOR'

Steve O'Brien investigates the times in Hollywood history when replacing the person at the helm of a film turned out to be a blessing in disguise



## GEORGE CUKOR, GONE WITH THE WIND

This multi-hour 1939 civil war epic suffered one of the most tumultuous productions ever, speeding through three directors before it became the highest-grossing film ever made. Victor Fleming walked away with the Best Director gong at the Academy Awards in 1940, yet it was George Cukor who'd help shepherd it to the screen until a major fallout with its leading actor led to his dismissal.

Producer David O. Selznick had been working with Cukor on a big-screen adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's famed novel for two years before filming commenced on January 26, 1939. Eighteen days later, Cukor was gone.

The reasons for his departure are shrouded in mystery. The director's biographer, Emanuel Levy, claims that Clark Gable had him removed because Cukor had knowledge of the actor's past as a gay hustler, but other accounts simply suggest that Selznick was unhappy at the rushes coming from the set.

With Cukor gone, Victor Fleming, who was directing *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) at the time, was bussed in from MGM to complete the film. ➤

## DID YOU KNOW?

Even an A-list director like James Cameron (*Titanic*, 1997) isn't immune from being sacked. He was let go from the 1978 movie *Piranha II: The Spawning* after too many clashes with the producer Ovidio Assonitis.

One recent example of a director leaving a movie midway through production is Bryan Singer on Freddie Mercury biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018). He was replaced by former child actor Dexter Fletcher.

George Cukor with Clark Gable during production of *Gone with the Wind*.



Movie sets are hardly the most Zen-like of workplaces. Imagine those hundreds of people all looking at you, the director, for a yay or a nay. It's a colossal, brain-frazzling responsibility. And then there are the egos – of your cast, of your crew, of your bosses, hell, even of you yourself.

There are the continual headbutts with the studio over your vision for the film, 'artistic differences', they call it. The producers want one movie, you want another... No wonder we hear so many horror stories about chaotic, toxic film sets.

But firing a director? Things have to get pretty bad for a studio to let the person in charge go once a film is already shooting. But amazingly, it has happened and, often, it's turned out for the better. Here are five examples when a movie losing its director mid-way through production actually worked out...

Later, when Fleming was forced to temporarily leave the project due to exhaustion, yet another director, Sam Wood, was brought in for three weeks worth of shooting, though his work remains uncredited.

Although many of Cukor's scenes were later reshot, Selznick estimated that "three solid reels" of his work remained in the final cut. And, despite the various directors the movie burned through, the result is surprisingly cohesive. After all, it's not considered one of the greatest films for nothing!

**ANTHONY MANN, SPARTACUS**

When he was cherry-picked by Universal to direct their 1960 big-screen version of Howard Fast's 1951 blockbuster novel, *Spartacus*, Anthony Mann was a filmmaker known mostly for shoot-'em-up westerns. Not that he was the studio's first choice for the gig. Laurence Olivier and David Lean, directors who weren't exactly strangers to a mega-budget historical epic, had turned the job down before Mann was approached.

Only there was little on Mann's CV anywhere near the scale of this production and it soon became clear to Universal and the movie's star and executive producer Kirk

Douglas, that he wasn't up to the job. "He seemed scared of the scope of the picture," wrote the actor in his autobiography, *The Ragman's Son*, adding that in the first week of filming, Mann "let Peter Ustinov direct his own scenes by taking every suggestion Peter made. The suggestions were good, for Peter, but not necessarily for the film."

Just seven days after Mann started on the movie, Douglas requested the studio's approval to fire him. Douglas agreed to pay the humiliated director's \$75,000 fee in full even though he would no longer be on the picture.

Almost immediately, the actor called in Stanley Kubrick, with whom he'd worked on the 1957 war picture *Paths of Glory*. Though it would be the only film in Kubrick's oeuvre in which he didn't have complete creative control, his skill behind the camera and obsessive perfectionism would help create one of cinema's true masterpieces.



**RICHARD THORPE, THE WIZARD OF OZ**

Boys Town (1938) director Norman Taurog had shot much of the test footage for *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), but MGM eventually settled on Richard Thorpe (*Tarzan Escapes*, 1936) to bring L. Frank Baum's acclaimed novel to life. Thorpe (pictured left) shot for nine days, including Dorothy's first encounter with the Scarecrow, and a number of scenes in the Wicked Witch's castle. But two weeks into shooting, it became clear to producer Mervyn LeRoy that Thorpe "didn't quite understand the story".

Not only had the director envisioned the Wicked Witch as elegant and beautiful, along the lines of *Snow White's* Evil Queen, but his version of Dorothy was more mature than the innocent pigtailed version in the finished film. Photos from the time show Judy Garland in a blonde wig wearing heavy 'baby-doll' make-up, a look that was jettisoned after LeRoy sacked Thorpe.

George Cukor, yet to be fired from *Gone with the Wind*, was brought in as creative advisor, and he set about refashioning Dorothy and steering the film's tone and design in the direction we're now familiar with. Victor Fleming then signed on November 3, 1938, only to be replaced by King Vidor on February 13, 1939, after Fleming was parachuted onto *Gone with the Wind* to replace Cukor.

Despite having had five directors, it was Fleming, who'd been on set for the longest time and shot the most footage, who was credited as the film's sole director. There was little of Thorpe's vision in the final movie, with Cukor and Fleming taking the most credit for visualising the wonderful, wonderful world of Oz.

**PHILIP KAUFMAN, THE OUTLAW JOSEY WALES**

At the time he was inked to direct *The Outlaw Josey Wales* in 1976, Philip Kaufman was considered a fearless auteur who'd been feted by some of the darlings of the art-house film world. So he was an odd choice for a western that its star, Clint Eastwood, hoped would strike box office gold.

Having directed as many movies as Kaufman had – four – Eastwood soon grew impatient with his methodical shooting style. Producer Robert Daley duly fired Kaufman, with Eastwood promptly taking over directing.

The sacking proved controversial and the Directors Guild of America put pressure on Warner Bros. to reinstate Kaufman, which they refused to do. The studio ended up paying a \$60,000 fine, after which the DGA created the Eastwood Rule, which prevented any actor or producer from firing a director and then taking the job themselves.

The studio probably would have thought the \$60K fine worth it, as the film became one of Eastwood's most cherished westerns, grossing \$31.8m against a \$3.7m budget.



**RICHARD DONNER, SUPERMAN II**

Backseat driver producers are the bane of any director's life, but usually both sides are content to lock horns until the movie comes out, when everyone claims they got on like a house on fire. Despite the incessant interference in his work directing 1980's *Superman II*, Richard Donner had every expectation that he'd be walking down that red carpet for its eventual premiere, despite his shaky relationship with producer Pierre Spengler.

*Superman II* was mostly made back-to-back with its predecessor, 1978's *Superman: The Movie*, and Donner had assumed he'd finish the sequel after completing promotion for the first film at the end of 1978/beginning of 1979. But when Donner received a telegram telling him his services were no longer required, he realised he'd lost the battle.

Spengler, and fellow producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind, brought in Richard Lester, with whom they'd worked on 1973's *The Three Musketeers*, to finish the job Donner had started. The decision to sack Donner meant a retooling of the script, with various key personnel – including original screenwriter Tom Mankiewicz and actor Gene Hackman – refusing to return.

In the end, the finished film included much of the material shot by Donner and Lester was credited as the sole director. While purists wailed about the lost Donner cut (which eventually saw the light of day in 2006), it was Lester's more comedy-accented version that helped the film gross \$190m.

Kirk Douglas (below) and Laurence Olivier with Anthony Mann (right) on the set of *Spartacus*.



It took five directors to bring *The Wizard of Oz* we know and love to the screen.

