

INTERVIEW WITH AVATAR DIRECTOR JAMES CAMERON

‘I knew what to do’

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LONDON — After creating a brave new world, James Cameron finds himself backed into the same old corner.

His latest extravaganza, *Avatar*, about an interplanetary conflict on a distant moon, is expensive, revolutionary and destined to be either a disaster (“Dances with Smurfs!” online sewing circles scoffed when images of the story’s aliens first leaked) or a landmark.

But Cameron has gambled big before — on 1991’s *Terminator 2*, the first film to cost more than \$100 million, and, of course, with 1997’s *Titanic*, which went on to win 11 Oscars and gross \$1.8 billion worldwide.

Still on this brisk morning in a London hotel suite, Cameron admits to pre-release nerves. *Avatar*, after all, meets none of the criteria of what constitutes a blockbuster these days. It is not a sequel, a remake or adapted from a comic book.

Its leads, Sam Worthington and Zoe Saldana, are far from bankable movie stars. And he is concerned the marketing thus far — highlighting the action and extraterrestrials — might turn off the female audience that made *Titanic* the biggest box office grosser of all time.

“It’s about getting women to understand it’s not just a boy’s hardware movie,” he tells QMI Agency. “The studio always knee-jerks back to what creates the most razzle-dazzle in 30 seconds, and it’s always going to look like an action movie — like *Star Wars* with dinosaurs.”

Critics enthralled

Still, indications are his worries may soon be over. Since its premiere last week at London’s Leicester Square Empire Theater, early reviews have been glowing.

Even critics seem enthralled.

“I was waiting for a *Titanic* backlash because we were so well-reviewed on that film. But I guess you go away long enough they forget or they feel like want to reward you for coming back.”

Not that, he says, he ever intended to stay away. Rather, he was merely waiting for the technology to catch up with the concept he had for *Avatar* 14 years ago.

Now playing in both 3D and 2D, the movie follows a paralyzed ex-marine named Jake Sully (Worthington) who travels to an alien moon called Pandora which is inhabited by peaceful, blue-skinned, golden-eyed humanoids called the Na’vi. Scientists (led by Sigourney Weaver) have cloned a genetically-engineered half-human, half-alien body that he can control psychically. His mission is

to infiltrate the village of “blue monkeys” and “savages.” Instead, he finds himself drawn into the clash between the Na’vi and the greedy, destructive humans.

Cameron, who spent the past decade embarking on undersea expeditions and shooting environmental documentaries, says he was convinced to resurrect the project when he saw the computer-generated Gollum in Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

“I had kind of abandoned (*Avatar*). It was like, you know, maybe we’ll never be able to do this — maybe we’ll never be able to crack the code of how to do photo-real CG. It wasn’t just the photo-reality factor because I knew we’d get that — it was how do you translate what the actors do exactly, facial muscle by facial muscle, to the finished character.

Tyrannical perfectionist

“If I couldn’t do that, it didn’t make any sense to me as a director. It might make sense to other filmmakers who have more patience for the animation process or are more interested in the animation process. But my gig is with actors.”

That admission might surprise those familiar with Cameron’s reputation as a tyrannical perfectionist.

Has Cameron, who grew up near Niagara Falls, Ont., softened in the past decade? Possibly. Reflecting on his early career, he says, “I was pretty manic, pretty focused. The funny thing was is how crystal clear everything was. I knew exactly what to do.”

And if he could give his younger self some advice? “It would probably be: Just be more respectful to the people around you. That’s a learned art; it’s a learned part of the art of leadership.”

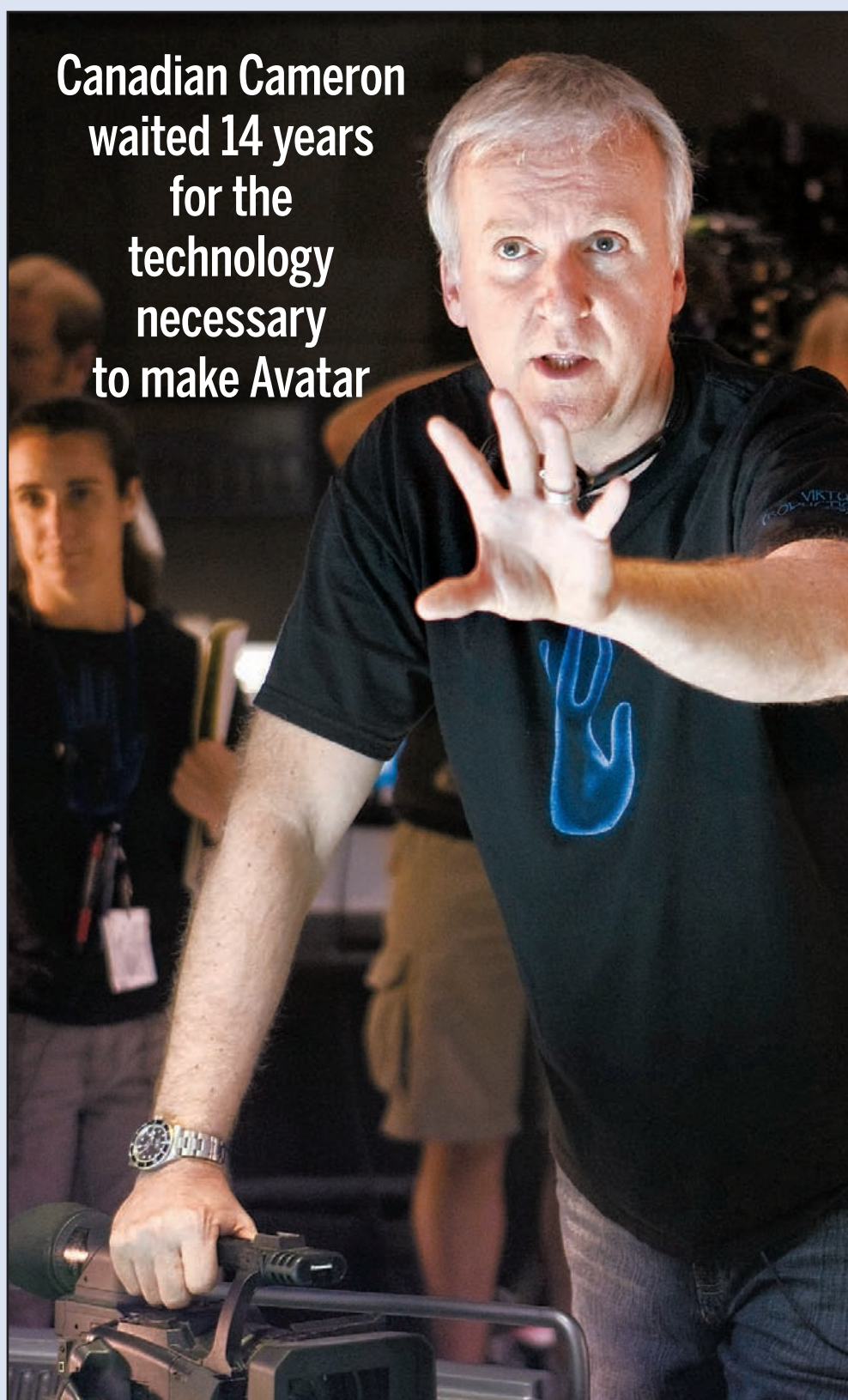
Looking ahead, however, he doesn’t expect his next hiatus from filmmaking to last nearly as long.

“I’m going to an expedition project right after this and then I’m going to make another film right away.”

What that movie will be, he isn’t saying. But he confirms what it won’t be: a small drama, the kind he used to say he wanted to make whenever he finished his latest exhaustive epic.

“Self-knowledge is a beautiful thing if you can get to that kind of clarity in your life. And you know it never did happen and it ain’t ever going to happen. People can stop asking me, ‘Aren’t you ever going to do a small movie?’ And the reason is I have intimate scenes in every movie I make, so I feel perfectly satisfied that I make that movie every single time. It’s just that it’s got a lot of other stuff in it.”

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Canadian Cameron
waited 14 years
for the
technology
necessary
to make *Avatar*

Canadian James Cameron directs a scene from his new sci-fi epic, *Avatar*. The film — the most expensive ever made — came from an idea Cameron had 14 years ago, but was unable to realize because the technology wasn’t yet available to accomplish the effects he wanted.