

ATTACK OF THE 16 FOOT BEAR!

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ILLUSTRATION THE RED DRESS

GEORGE CLOONEY, SHADY PRODUCERS, THE COLD WAR, AND A CREATURE THAT DIDN'T WORK.
THE RIDICULOUS TRUE STORY OF **GRIZZLY II**, A FILM THAT HAS TAKEN NEARLY 40 YEARS TO COMPLETE





Happy campers: Tina (Laura Dern) and Ron (George Clooney) get cosy in the great outdoors.



Here and below: The 16-foot 'devil bear' in all its grizzly glory.



Right, top to bottom: The Director of Bear Management, Samantha Owens (Deborah Raffin), briefs the rangers; Lance (Charlie Sheen) gets spooked.

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and that 16-foot 'devil bear', albeit a villain that almost never appeared on camera.

For two people involved, it was the starting point of Oscar-winning careers. For others, it was enough to trigger their exit from Hollywood. But what exactly happened during that fateful shoot in communist Hungary? Why has it taken nearly 40 years for anybody to see the damn thing? And what has triggered its re-emergence from the wilderness?

"It was a *really* crazy thing," Clooney says now. "I haven't seen it. And I actually don't know that I want to."



"DON'T TRY TO contact me. There is no money for the film. I'm leaving the country in ten minutes."

It had all been going so well for *Grizzly II*. It was a sequel riding off the back of a surprising hit. It had future A-listers George Clooney, Laura Dern and Charlie Sheen, in their first film roles. It had a 16-foot bear. And it had pulled off the remarkable feat of staging an entire rock concert, in then-communist Hungary, for the film's climactic sequence. But on 14 August 1982, the day before principal photography was due to start, with over 300 cast and crew ready to go, producer Suzanne Nagy received the gut-punch phone call from her producing partner, Joseph Ford Proctor: there was no cash, and he was abandoning the project.

And that was just day one. What followed was a bloody trail of cinematic guts stretching across four decades, with bitter recriminations, legal battles and actual fistfights over a film that was never finished, or released. In the intervening years, *Grizzly II* has taken on an almost mythological quality; after a while, some questioned whether it even existed. It has had, after all, the kind of colourful history that could somehow include a Japanese plastic surgeon, a future *Strictly Come Dancing* judge, the man who played Darth Vader, an exploding blood pump, the Hungarian secret police, a mysterious warehouse fire, a script supposedly rewritten by the caterer —

IN THE HOLLYWOOD trade press, it was known as 'Jaws With Claws'. *Grizzly*, the original 'bearsploitation' thriller, arrived in 1976 — the year after Steven Spielberg's shark tale invented the summer blockbuster. Nobody had any illusions about what it was emulating. Not even the people who made it. "I had read the book by [Peter] Benchley, *Jaws*," remembers David Sheldon, the co-writer of both *Grizzly* and its doomed sequel. "Actually, I read the book later on. But I knew that Steven Spielberg was going to do a movie based on it." In 1975, Sheldon's friend and sometime colleague Harvey Flaxman paid him a visit. Flaxman told him of a camping trip he took in Yellowstone National Park that ended badly. "During the night, there was a bear scare. People were running, a lot of panic. The incident actually made big headlines."

Sheldon listened to this story and inspiration struck. "I looked at him and said, 'My God, there's a movie in that!'" The two men, who had previously worked in theatre together, agreed to write a script; within three weeks, it was done. "And within another three weeks," Sheldon says, "we were planning production. The movie was financed."

The original *Grizzly* shoot, with journeyman director William Girdler at the helm, was not without its issues. "We had to make it look like it was summer in Yellowstone," Sheldon recalls. "It was midwinter, and it was snowing. We had to melt the snow off the leaves of the trees." As with the shark on *Jaws*, the bear on *Grizzly* brought its own headaches. "We built a mechanical bear. But it was left out in the rain. It was totally unusable." A real bear was summoned instead. "The only things that this bear could do was walk forward and run away and rise up on its legs. We had a fish, on a string, on a pole. I mean, this was not a tame bear."

Still, filming passed largely without incident, and Sheldon's instincts were correct. Despite terrible reviews, *Grizzly* grossed \$39 million against a \$750,000 budget. "Fifty times the cost of the movie!" Sheldon notes proudly. It was helped, no doubt, by audiences still gripped with *Jaws*-mania, and a marketing campaign only too happy to pour fuel on that fire; one poster tagline for *Grizzly* read, shamelessly: "THE MOST DANGEROUS JAWS IN THE LAND."

With numbers like that, a sequel seemed inevitable. Sheldon got to work on a script for *Grizzly II*, this time with his wife, Joan McCall, about a deadly grizzly bear that terrorises a Woodstock-style festival, and planned to direct the film too. "I was all set," Sheldon says. "I even did the casting." It was Sheldon who hired Clooney, Sheen and Dern in their early roles as ill-fated campers, remembering them as "kids, really. But very professional. George was very charming."

Grizzly II was coming together. But it started falling apart around the time when the project was picked up, in 1982, by Joseph Ford Proctor,

a charismatic young producer who had previously worked with comedian Jerry Lewis. (That relationship ended acrimoniously; Lewis would later confer him with the nickname 'Joseph Fraud Proctor'.) Sheldon found himself an early victim of Proctor's less-than-honourable plays. One day, the entire cast and the crew were flown over to Hungary — without the supposed director. Sheldon had been replaced. "I was lied to," he says, bluntly. "I had no idea. They just left me behind. [Proctor] had no intention of me directing. I felt like shit."

SURE, IT WAS one of those old-fashioned cheap movies," says Clooney. "But for me, it was a big break!" There was a certain crackle of excitement as production on *Grizzly II* geared up behind the Iron Curtain. In the summer of 1982, Clooney, Sheen and Dern were flown over to Budapest; with them were the original *Nurse Ratched*, Louise Fletcher, playing the park superintendent who organises the concert (she would later call the film "the most ridiculous thing I've ever been associated with"), and John Rhys-Davies, fresh off his *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* success, as Bouchard, a French-Canadian bear tracker who refers to himself in the third person with lines like, "Leave this devil bear to Bouchard!"

Taking place entirely on location in Hungary, to reap the benefits of less prohibitive taxes and lax environmental laws, the shoot started big. Second-unit photography would film a giant pop concert on a Soviet army base — for real. 'Beast Festival', as it was known, was a historic moment for Hungary; since falling under Soviet rule, gatherings of more than ten people were reason

enough for police questionings. Western music, live, was a rarity. Yet somehow, this cheap killer-bear sequel had staged the country's largest gathering since the 1956 revolution. Nearly 50,000 people attended. All, effectively, as extras for *Grizzly II*.

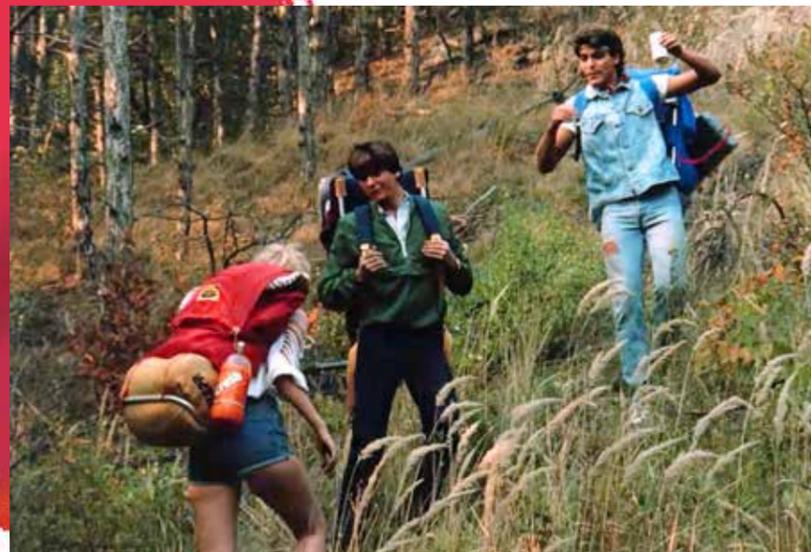
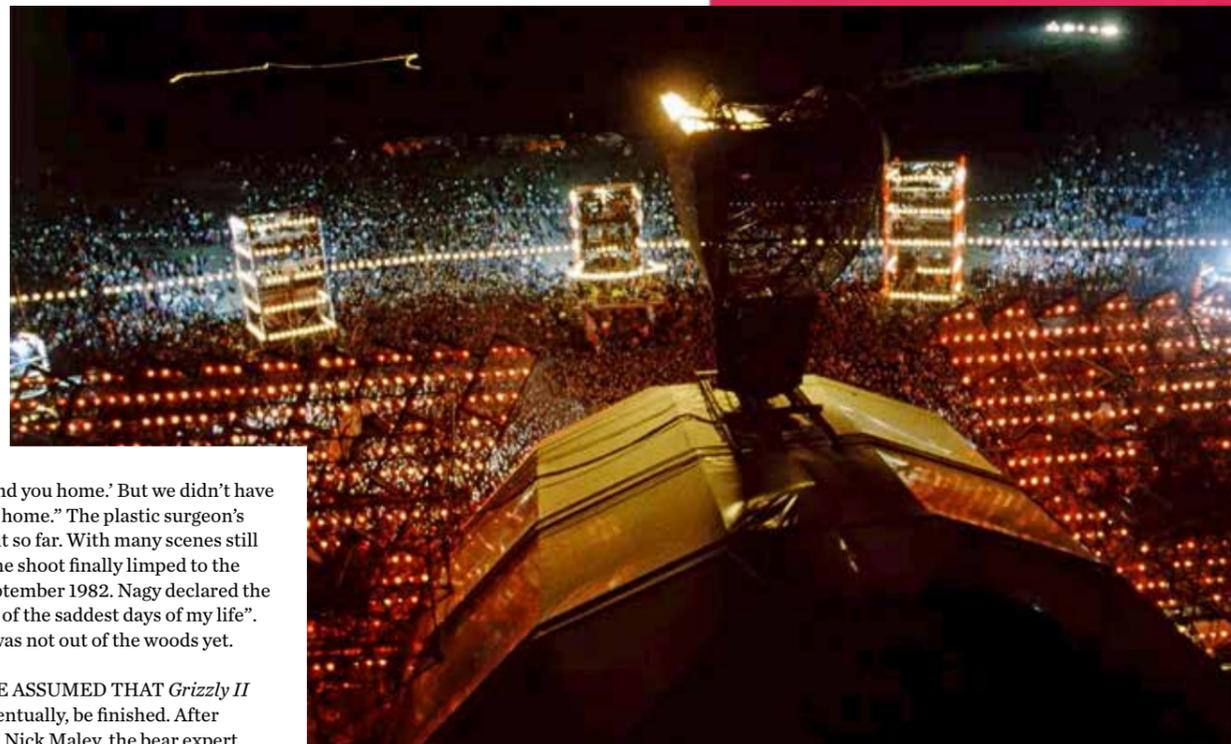
"It was fabulous," remembers Hungarian producer Suzanne Nagy. "A lot of London-based, cutting-edge, New Wave characters." Among them was Toto Coelo, of Top Ten hit 'I Eat Cannibals' fame, and 'The Predators', a fake band created for the film, boasting future *Strictly* star Bruno Tonioli on choreography duties. "It was a logistical nightmare," says Tonioli now. "A Steadicam operator nearly crashed into my lead dancer. I thought he was going to die."

It was the day after Beast Festival that Nagy received the bombshell call: Proctor declaring that the film was bankrupt. Except, she didn't get it herself. "He didn't have the guts to tell me," says Nagy. "He called my husband, who was not in the film business." Nagy, barely having slept from overseeing the concert, was shellshocked. "I was actually stunned. I was not even able to understand what my husband said."

Hundreds of cast and crew were ready to go. And there was apparently no money in the bank. The entire film was in jeopardy. Yet only hours later, in a twist that came to be typical of *Grizzly II*'s bizarre behind-the-scenes rollercoaster, Nagy received another phone call: "I am looking for Joe Proctor. My name is Tari Jamaki. I am a plastic surgeon from Los Angeles. I will invest in the production. I came to see the bear."

It remains unclear where this Japanese backer had sprung from, or what motivated his investing half a million dollars in a movie about a devil bear. All that mattered was he gave the

Below:
Tina, Ron and
Lance march
on, blissfully
unaware of the
encroaching
ursus horribilis.
Right: Speaking
of which...



'We're gonna send you home.' But we didn't have the money to go home." The plastic surgeon's money only went so far. With many scenes still left to be shot, the shoot finally limped to the finish line in September 1982. Nagy declared the wrap party "one of the saddest days of my life". Still, *Grizzly II* was not out of the woods yet.

EVERYONE ASSUMED THAT *Grizzly II* would, eventually, be finished. After wrapping, Nick Maley, the bear expert, flew back to London and expected to continue second-unit photography. But when he landed, he was surprised to find that his bears didn't join him: placed into captivity by Hungarian authorities over a pay dispute. Maley later returned to Hungary on a bear rescue mission. "When I went back to the workshop," he says, grimly, "I was told that the whole place had burnt down." The whereabouts of his bears remain a mystery to this day.

Undaunted, Nagy and Szóts pressed on with editing. The results were not promising. "It was bad," says Nagy. "Slow. Just disastrous." A rough cut was assembled and screened for a sales rep. The screening was paused almost immediately. "What the fuck is this?" Nagy remembers him saying. "I cannot represent this film." It confirmed their fears. The film was unusable.

Months turned into years as disputes over *Grizzly II* bubbled and occasionally boiled over. In 1983, Nagy received a bill for \$170,000 in unpaid fees from the Hungarian production company. Nagy, by now living in New York, hired a lawyer and agreed to meet the company in Vienna, rather than Budapest — "because it's a capitalist country". Instead of being met by the production company, three Hungarian secret policemen sat down. "They said, 'What's going on with the film?' I said, 'None of your business.'" Nagy shrugs off this little slice of Cold War enigma. "Very mysterious film!" she chuckles.

After years of legal battles, Joseph Proctor finally signed over the film's rights to Nagy in 1988. But by then, Nagy was ready to leave the film industry; her first husband was dying of cancer, and she had switched careers into running an art gallery. Most people had forgotten about *Grizzly II* by then, anyway; others had tried to forget. The film fell into limbo.

Decades went by. Most of the actors enjoyed successful careers, unscathed by the experience. Szóts died in 2006, having never directed a film



film an 11th-hour stay of execution. "The banker was already packing in the hotel," recalls Nagy. "I called and said, 'Stop! I have the investor!'"

Filming could resume. But Proctor's sudden exit sent the production veering off course. Rumours spread among the cast and crew of money running out. Having mostly been hired by Sheldon, many were perplexed, too, to find André Szóts, a French-Hungarian commercials director with limited English and no experience in Hollywood, running the show. He seemed out of his depth. "The director was lost and didn't know what he was doing," says Clooney. A fast-and-loose approach to the script was encouraged; curiously, the Hungarian caterer was among those to put in a rewrite. "Yes, the caterer," confirms Nagy, "but crew members also."

The set was tense and chaotic. There were reports of fistfights, extra-marital affairs and the constant threat of money running out.

And then there was the bear.

THE PRINCIPLE WAS that there would be three bears," explains Nick Maley, the British animatronics expert behind many *Star Wars* creatures, who was recruited for *Grizzly II*. "There would be the 16-foot marionette version. There would be a half-size animatronic bear which was fully mechanical. And then we would put a guy in a suit."

It was this guy-in-a-suit bear, with a partly mechanical head movement, that proved problematic. David Prowse, better known as Darth Vader, had tried on a prototype in London, but by the time filming had started, it was not yet ready. When Maley's team moved to Hungary for pre-production, Proctor provided him with a local crew he didn't know or trust. A local mime artist was recruited to play the bear.

With an unfamiliar crew, technical problems mounted. "We had an issue with a blood pump that wasn't built the way I would've built it," says Maley. "It exploded." Think the final scene of *Carrie*, and you're not far off. "It didn't put me in great graces with some of the crew. Let alone Rhys-Davies, who was next to it when it exploded."

Ultimately, only a few scant minutes of bear footage was actually shot. "It was a lot like *Jaws*, in the sense that they didn't have the bear," says Clooney, laughing. "They just had a guy holding a bear claw on a stick." Clooney, Sheen and Dern — whose scenes total around five minutes, their characters being the first to be killed off — spent six weeks in Budapest, largely in their hotel, or walking along the Danube. "To do, like, two scenes! They would go off and shoot and they left us [in the hotel]," Clooney recalls. "They didn't know what to do. We didn't know what to do!"

Then they stopped getting paid. "Cheques started bouncing," says Clooney. "They were like,

again. Proctor, meanwhile, lived up to his Jerry Lewis-bestowed nickname, charged and jailed in 2012 for tax evasion.

Then, at some point in the 2000s, the rough cut — with a temporary soundtrack consisting entirely of Michael Jackson songs — leaked online. Those who have seen it have few kind words to say. "I went into shock when I saw it," says David Sheldon. "It was terrible. There was no bear in the movie!" Maley watched it and thought: "My God, this must be the worst movie I ever made."

But Nagy, who by now had become the film's caretaker, was heartened, encouraged by the curious cult that sprung up around it. "It was good," she says, "because it kept the mystery about this film alive." In 2018, now financially independent from her art business, Nagy decided that *Grizzly II* must be completed. "I thought, 'If I don't finish this film, I'm the biggest jerk that ever existed in the world. I have to do it.'"

It's a different beast. Originally running at 97 minutes, the 1983 rough cut has been digitally restored, with stock footage added, and repetitive scenes removed. "We ended up with 74 minutes," says Nagy. "The minimum length for a feature." It is set to finally get a limited release this year, its appeal now mainly as a strange footnote in B-movie history. But after such a ridiculous journey to screen, will anyone actually see it?

"I suspect it's going to look very dated," says Maley. Tonioli has some caveats. "Just put a disclaimer," he pleads. "We were all very, very young." Sheldon is more intrigued. "I would like to see it," he says. "Just out of curiosity." He then ponders, drily: "They may even have added some bear scenes to it, for all I know."

Clooney, meanwhile, is not so sure. "It was a bad time for hair and clothes. And a really bad time for young actors." He laughs. "I have a sense that I've finally found something that's worse than *Batman & Robin*." ●

Above right,
top to bottom:
Director André
Szóts on set
with producer
Suzanne Nagy;
Building the
huge concert
stage set.
Above left, from
top: A crowd of
50,000 attend
'Beast Festival';
Pyrotechnics
backstage as the
bear looks on;
Bouchard (John
Rhys-Davies)
fights back.