

GOING DOWN

AFTER THE SEISMIC SUCCESS OF *PARASITE*, BONG JOON HO HAD IT UP? THE ANSWER WAS TO LEAVE EARTH ALTOGETHER — ROBERT PATTINSON IS PITTED AGAINST HIMSELF,

THE WORLD AT HIS FEET — SO HOW ON EARTH WOULD HE FOLLOW AND IN BONKERS SCI-FI **MICKEY 17**, IN WHICH THE DIRECTOR TRULY GOES FOR BROKE

DOWN



WORDS
JOHN
NUGENT

SOME CALL IT “MOVIE MAGIC”. SOME CALL IT “MOJO”. THE FRENCH CALL IT “*JE NE SAIS QUOI*”. FOR DIRECTOR BONG JOON HO?

“BONG SAUCE”.

In Director Bong’s eighth feature film, *Mickey 17*, Toni Collette plays a character obsessed with sauce, desperate to discover a new one on a distant planet. Her character describes the condiment as “the true litmus test of a civilisation”. It provided the perfect metaphor for how the filmmaker adapted the novel the film was based on, Edward Ashton’s *Mickey7* (more on that name change later). “Edward Ashton is such a great writer,” Bong tells *Empire*, through his regular interpreter Sharon Choi. “The novel is such a great read. Basically, what I tried to do was put my strange intuition onto that story. Like the sauce that Toni Collette’s character always talks about — well, I just splashed Bong sauce on the novel.”

The world has been hungry for Bong sauce. We’ve been salivating for years. It’s been half a decade since *Parasite*, Bong’s riotous 2019 social satire, which became one of the most successful South Korean films of all time, sweeping up the Palme d’Or at Cannes and four Academy Awards (the first ever awarded to a South Korean film), including Best Director and Best Picture. A week after those Oscars, Martin Scorsese wrote Bong a letter of congratulations, told him, “Rest, but don’t rest too long” — and urged him to immediately get going on his follow-up, eager to see what his unique, idiosyncratic mind would produce next. Fans have been excitedly impatient for their next Bong-hit ever since. “I know it’s been quite a long time,” he acknowledges, “but for me, I’ve never had a day off. I just kept working, non-stop.”

Mickey 17 is the result of that work, finally arriving next year. Like Ashton’s book, it tells the futuristic story of Mickey Barnes (played in the film by Robert Pattinson), a working schlub in 2054 who signs up to be an “expendable” (not the Sylvester Stallone kind): a disposable employee for a distant colonial planet, designed to take on deadly tasks, and “reprinted” with a fresh body and the same memories whenever he dies. Then, unhelpfully, Mickey 17 — the 17th iteration of the original Mickey — doesn’t die when he’s supposed to, and Mickey 18 shows up. Suddenly, there are more Mickeys than you’d find in a Disneyland gift shop.

It’s a big deal. After 2006’s *The Host* and 2013’s *Snowpiercer*, *Mickey 17* marks Bong’s long-awaited return to science-fiction, his return to the English language — and the biggest, most ambitious production of his career so far. It is also, according to its lead actor Robert Pattinson, “absolutely insane”.

For seemingly everyone who has worked on the film, this is a point of accord.

Pattinson’s co-star, Naomi Ackie, simply says: “It’s *wild*. How many genres can we fit into this thing?” Her castmate, Steven Yeun, agrees: “The script was kind of this fever dream. So funny and smart. I don’t even know how to describe it. It just felt like *Bong*.”

This, then, is how Bong chose to follow up the seismic success of *Parasite* — a sci-fi comedy about an idiot who gets himself repeatedly killed. Which begs the question: what happens when you get Bong sauce *everywhere*?

Not even Bong knew what Bong was doing after *Parasite*. The filmmaker had at least two projects cooking before *Parasite* was even released, including a South Korea-set horror, and a story set in the UK and the US, based on a “real-life event”, which he eventually shelved due to its “ethical” implications. “And it was then,” he says, “that *Mickey7* just fell in my lap.”

Shrugging off any suggestion that this is his big response to all those Oscars — “It



was great that *Parasite* was received so well internationally, but my next film really didn’t have much to do with the aftermath,” he asserts — the manuscript for *Mickey7* was sent to the director by producers Jeremy Kleiner and Dede Gardner before the novel was even published. “They found it unique and strange,” he explains with a smile. “So naturally, they ended up tossing it to me.”

Bong was instantly intrigued. Here was a chance to play in a science-fiction sandpit again

— and with it, the chance to explore his favourite themes. “It’s definitely a genre that I love,” he acknowledges. “For me, the biggest joy with sci-fi is that you’re able to talk about the human condition in quite a bold and irreverent way. I’m really not interested in big, fancy spaceships or laser beams.”

While *Mickey 17* does tangentially include *one* big, fancy spaceship, the film is, Bong states, “the most human story” he has ever made — warts and all. “Ultimately, the story

is about how pathetic humans can be,” he says. “It’s almost like you can smell every human character in the film — their piss stains and their smelly socks.”

There is appeal in piss stains here. In Ashton’s novel, Bong found a way to tell another story about inequality, capitalism, and authoritarian structures that need dismantling — in a very eccentric, Bong Joon Ho sort of way. What kind of nightmarish world would create a system

where you might willingly kill someone, over and over again? “I was quite immediately hooked,” he says. The Bong sauce quickly began to flow.

Much of the film remains faithful to the novel: as in the book, it is set in the distant future, on the ice planet of Niflheim, where an expedition of humans are attempting to colonise its inhospitable climate, with the aid of expendable technology. But some elements are very different. The aliens that the humans



Clockwise from main: Expendable Mickey Barnes/Mickey 17 (Robert Pattinson) confronts Mickey 18 (Pattinson); Director Bong Joon Ho (right) on set; Mickey gets a reprint and a new life; Villains Kenneth Marshall (Mark Ruffalo) and Ylfa (Toni Collette).



encounter on the planet, the ‘creepers’, play a much bigger role, for one thing. “I really wanted to accentuate the dignity that the creepers carry as the indigenous creatures of this planet,” Bong explains. “So I strengthened their presence in the film.” (Ackie got to keep a puppet version of one of the creepers as a wrap gift. “It’s on my shelf at home,” she says. “Everyone comes round and says, ‘What is *that*?’”)

There are other changes. In the book, the antagonist, Marshall, is simply a grumpy military bureaucrat. In the film, he’s a deranged, peroxide-toothed politician played by Mark Ruffalo, joined by his equally insane wife, the aforementioned sauce-fan Ylfa, played by Collette. “They’re quite silly,” giggles ➤

Bong of his villains, who he says are partly inspired by real-life dictators. “I think that follows the irreverent tone of this film. They are dictators with a lot of flaws — but those flaws are actually what makes them more dangerous.” Obsessed with his own popularity, Marshall hosts a talk show for the residents of Niflheim, “Tonight With Kenneth Marshall”, and employs a man in a pigeon costume, played by comedian Tim Key. (After the trailer for the film was released, the book’s author Edward Ashton wrote a baffled post on X: “Not for nothing, but who the hell is the guy in the bird suit??”)

The character of Berto in the book, Mickey’s supposed best friend, has evolved too, becoming Yeun’s Timo. “Timo occupies this in-between space,” explains Yeun. “He kind of acts as this bridge between the overworld and underworld.” But the biggest change Bong made to Ashton’s novel was to the title — from *Mickey7* to *Mickey 17*. Poor, hapless Mickey dies ten more times in this version of the story, “reprinted” even more after his deadly tasks, from radiation-heavy spacewalks to being a literal crash test dummy.

The extra deaths are not just sadism on the director’s part — “I know I’ve created serial-killer movies (*referring to his 2003 thriller Memories Of Murder*), but I’m not that pervert guy!” he promises — rather, an opportunity to magnify the key ideas. “It’s Mickey’s job to die,” Bong explains. “Dying is like clocking into work every day. I changed it to 17 to enhance the drudgery of his everyday job — the working-class aspect of his life.” To become an expendable, you’d have to be pretty desperate. And Mickey — who is escaping massive debts, and an Earth seemingly collapsing from environmental disaster — is desperate.

The ingredients were all in place. The sauce was starting to simmer. Now the director simply needed his Mickey. “I was looking for an actor who had this goofy, endearing feel,” Bong explains on his casting hunt, using the word “goofy” in English here, “while also feeling like a wild beast. Kind of crazy.” He giggles again. “When I was looking for all these qualities in one man, I immediately thought of Robert.”

It was in Robert Pattinson, finally, that Bong Joon Ho found someone who could match his freak.

It is a matter of public record that Robert Pattinson loves to go weird. In the years since abandoning his *Twilight* teen-heartthrob status, he has embraced the offbeat. He reportedly once told his agent, in fact, that he only wanted to play “total freaks”. So when the role of Mickey Barnes came along — described by producers in their early conversations to Pattinson as “an impossible part”, he recalls — his interest was significantly piqued. “As soon as they said that,” he says with a mischievous grin, “I was like: ‘Oooh! An impossible part, you say?’” It would not be easy. Not only would



Clockwise from above left: Mickey’s mate Timo (Steven Yeun); Mickey finds one scenario unpalatable; With love interest Nasha (Naomi Ackie); Ready for a dangerous mission; Ackie and Bong having fun on set.



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BONG JOON HO

the actor have to play Mickey 17, an oddball loser despised by characters in the film as a “goddamned print job”, he would also have to play Mickey 18, his near-psychopathic variant, a “mutant Mickey”, as the director labels him. These two Robert Pattinsons come face-to-face, interact, pass objects to one another, fight, even at one point consider an unwise sexual encounter. Pattinson famously hates watching his own performances — how did he feel watching a *double* performance?

“It’s not so bad,” he says. “It’s funny to see when certain scenes work, because when you’re doing it, you’re like, ‘There’s no way that this is going to look like I’m reacting to myself at all.’ It just feels very disjointed. To see it actually work is fascinating.”

Using a clever mix of body doubles and CGI, the effect is “seamless”, says Ackie. “We were well prepared for it. It just took a bit longer. With Director Bong, every single frame is completely thought through.” Yeun shrugs off the challenge of two Robert Pattinsons: “Well, I only got to work with one Robert Pattinson,” he says. “So I was fine.” (Bong is reluctant to give away too much about how the effect was achieved. “You know, I had silly ideas of lying during interviews,” he laughs, “and revealing that Robert Pattinson was actually a set of identical twins.”)

For Pattinson, the trickiest challenge was modulating his performance between 17 and 18, often on the same day. “It’s not like we shot one character first and then the other one. We were switching between the two characters constantly.” Though the Mickeys are almost genetically identical, there are some subtle differences. “We tried all these different make-up things to differentiate them at first,” Pattinson recalls. “We just ended up with this one tiny little snaggle on 18’s tooth. It’s barely noticeable, but there was something about it that made you move your mouth slightly differently.”

He also modulated his voice. We should probably talk about the voice. The internet has already talked about the voice quite a lot. (“Robert Pattinson Is Doing Another Weird Voice In ‘Mickey 17’ And Everyone Loves It”, ran one headline.) “My initial idea was to do impressions of Steve-O and Johnny Knoxville [from *Jackass*],” says Pattinson, chuckling to himself. “I love Steve-O’s voice. We did it on the first read-through. And Bong was like, ‘That voice sounds like



nails on a chalkboard.' I was like, 'Is that a good thing?' He was like, 'No.'"

The strange, weaselly East Coast accent he ultimately landed on was an "amalgamation" of many things. "It's a little like Stimpy," he says, referring to the cult '90s cartoon *Ren & Stimpy*. "When 18 comes in, it's a little bit more like Ren." The idea, he explains, was to find the combination of pitilessness and fury in the characters. "I just had this idea that he's kind of like a dog with a complete lack of self-worth. He just keeps turning up, reporting for duty. But then I hope the reveal is that it's a combination of deep, misguided guilt, and also survival. It's him just saying, 'I'll just keep lowering my expectations the whole time.'"

These Mickeys are quite different from those in the book. Bong's script turns Mickey from a "sardonic historian", as Pattinson calls him, into an awkward, rodent-y nonentity. Most protagonists in genre films of this kind "have something innately heroic about them", argues Pattinson. "[With Mickey], it's sort of like if Arthur gets the sword out of the stone, he doesn't learn anything, puts the sword back in the stone, and goes, 'Oh, thank God that's over.'"

This guy, it's fair to say, is no Batman. For Pattinson, it was an opportunity to try something completely different from anything he'd done before. "It's why I want to do any movie," he says. He cites in particular *Memories Of Murder* — which sees an ensemble of detectives frequently land absurd dropkicks on one another — as a big influence. "It's one of my favourite movies," he says. "I was always thinking I'd love to do something like that. It has this really unusual style, where

all the characters make these incredibly unexpected choices, but it never seems self-conscious. When they have the motif of the flying kicks, it never feels like he's trying to be random."

Director and star had a mutual respect. Bong "really loved Rob's recent works", he says, especially his "reserved performance in *Tenet*" and his "explosive energy in *The Lighthouse*. So I already had a lot of trust in him as an actor." He immediately saw that energy manifest in front of him. Pattinson is "an actor that obsessively delves into his projects", Bong says. "He just started chewing on this project and character. It was kind of like watching a beast go after his prey."

It was a beast he had to be willing to let go, too, multiple times, dying on screen over and over again. These moments are classic Bong: a dark blend of morbid humour and genuine humanity. "The point is that you feel sorry for the guy," Bong explains, "and the many various ways in which he dies. They're all kind of funny, but you feel *bad* finding it funny." It's a delicate path to tread. "It's quite brutal," agrees Pattinson. "The line between comedy and horror is quite thin. That's Bong's style in a lot of ways. He's making a statement about a corporation or government's lack of empathy towards an individual. There's a scene where I'm coughing up blood in a containment tank, and even when I was doing it, I was like: 'Wow, this is horrendous!'"

It's in Ackie's character, Mickey's main squeeze Nasha, that Bong manages to thread the needle between those tones. "There is tenderness there," she notes, pointing out a scene in which Nasha quietly holds Mickey in a hazmat suit while he is slowly gassed to death,



"THE TWO MICKEYS SOUND A LITTLE LIKE REN AND STIMPY."

ROBERT PATTINSON

in the search for a vaccine against the alien planet. "She feels like the heart of the film — the message of the film is to just fucking love people and respect them, regardless of where their station is." In among the sci-fi craziness and cartoon voices, there is a yearning in *Mickey 17* for us to honour the dignity of life — human, creeper, or goddamned print jobs alike.



Clockwise from far left: A mass of furry 'creepers' assemble on the ice planet of Niflheim; Yeun is in the driving seat; Pattinson and Bong get on with the paperwork.

When *Empire* speaks to Bong over Zoom, it is a few days after his 55th birthday. We ask what he did to celebrate. He offers an apologetic chuckle. "I just had a day where I got to confirm, once again, that I am a middle-aged man," he says with a weary smile. "I always want to stay a young filmmaker."

Nobody enjoys getting old, not even Oscar-winning directors. But perhaps immortality — at least the version of immortality offered here — is not especially appealing, either. "In most sci-fi films and fantasy stories," Bong says, "eternal life is treated as something sublime, spiritual, profound. I was really captivated by the idea that human printing is not respectful at all. You're literally reproducing humans like an inkjet printer."

Pattinson briefly considers if he would ever take the opportunity to be reprinted. "I mean, probably not," he says. "I love the description of the process of reprinting, when they first describe it to Mickey: they're like, 'Yeah, so basically, you're going to be made out of human excrement and chicken bones and trash.'" Death, the cast and crew agree, is a useful motivator for life. "Part of the reason why life is so precious and important is because we have to constantly analyse and reanalyse," says Ackie. "What are we doing with the time that we have if you start to take that away?"

There is one line in the film that Yeun keeps coming back to, a line heard in the trailer: "What does it feel like to die?" "I really pinged on that question," Yeun says. "I think there's something interesting in there about what it means to make a new world. If you are pioneers and you do want to make

something more, what is that going to take?"

As a cinematic pioneer, it's a question Bong has asked himself. *Mickey 17* is not an obvious or easy follow-up to a universally beloved film like *Parasite*: it is kooky and bewildering and filled with a very specific sense of humour. Rumours abounded online, especially when its original 2024 release date was pushed back by a year, that this oddness may have led to a tussle on the final cut of the film — rumours Bong is happy to dispel.

"With *Okja* and now *Mickey 17*, I was given the final cut as part of my deal," he explains. "The studio respected my final cut rights. Of course, during the editing process there are many opinions and many discussions that happen. But this film is my cut, and I'm very happy about it. It was a long process, but it was always smooth and respectful." After a torrid experience with the notorious Harvey Weinstein on the international release of *Snowpiercer*, Bong is perhaps no longer willing to take any chances. Pattinson is thrilled. "It's really cool that a studio has done this film, and that Bong pushed to have the final cut on it — to make something that does feel incredibly unusual."

If there's one thing that will stay immortal, Yeun argues, it's the film itself. "All of Bong's films are evergreen," he says. "They keep evolving over time. If you're open to it, it'll take you on a weird, mind-opening ride. Maybe you'll struggle with it for a while, but perhaps it'll come back to you in a year or two or ten, and it'll speak to you differently. Bong leaves things to the chaos. And I love that about him."

The Bong sauce can be an acquired taste for some — but it stays fresh, long after it has splashed everywhere. 🍷

MICKEY 17 IS IN CINEMAS FROM 31 JANUARY

DOUBLING UP

EVERY ACTOR'S DREAM
CO-STAR? THEMSELVES



MOON

In Duncan Jones' moody sci-fi, Sam Rockwell's solitary astronaut Sam finally finds some company, in the form of... himself. Is it a clone? Or is *Sam* the clone? The pair then have the mother of existential arguments. "I'm the original Sam! I'm Sam fucking Bell! Me!"



MULTIPLICITY

Ever feel like you could do with, well, more *you*? In Harold Ramis' 1996 comedy, Michael Keaton's Doug Kinney has a machine churn out three clones. They're not quite the full picnic, especially Lenny, who keeps calling Doug 'Steve'. Doug stops cloning after that one.



ORPHAN BLACK

Tatiana Maslany's con-artist Sarah Manning meets her match 276 times in this musing on the ethics of cloning. Maslany played 17 iterations, from headstrong Sarah to maniac Helena. Like all great sci-fi, this TV show examines humanity without pulling punches.



ANT-MAN AND THE WASP: QUANTUMANIA

We always knew that there were myriad variants of Jonathan Majors' Kang The Conqueror. And in *Quantumania*'s mid-credits scene we saw a whole legion of countless Kangs, jumping up and down with glee, raring to go, ready to rule the multiverse. We'd never see them again. ALEX GODFREY