# The Den Of Geek interview: Michael York

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*Michael York left Oxford university with a degree in English in 1964 with plenty of acting experience via the university and through touring with the National Youth Theatre. He began a fruitful association with Franco Zeffirelli during a theatrical production of Much Ado About Nothing, and would work again with the Italian director in The Taming Of The Shrew (1968) and Romeo And Juliet (1968), eventually reuniting with Zeffirelli to play John The Baptist in the celebrated mini-series Jesus Of Nazareth (UK TV, 1977).*

*By that time, York had made an enduring mark on screen science-fiction as the 'Sandman' Logan in MGM's hit 1976 science-fiction film Logan's Run, possibly the last real blast of SF dystopia before Star Wars changed cinema and sci-fi forever a year later.*

*York is an accomplished and celebrated writer, but perhaps most beloved to modern audiences as 'Basil Exposition' in Mike Myers' 'Austin Powers' franchise. With Logan's Run finally due for a feature-complete region 2 DVD release in September, Michael was kind enough to look back with us on a sci-fi film classic that we remember fondly…*

**I understand you were talked into doing *Logan's* Run by a colleague at the Ahmanson theatre in the mid-seventies…?**

That's exactly right.

**What were the underlying issues that he felt you had missed?**

Well, I was just going on the script, and of course that's a very dangerous thing to do. I just didn't think it was for me. But this young member of the company was deputed to drive me back and forth [*laughs*] so we would chat all the time, and I mentioned that I'd had this script, and he asked to take a look at it, so I said 'Of course'. He came to pick me up the next day practically wagging a finger at me saying 'You've got to do this – you may not be aware of it but it's pressing a lot of buttons. And he was absolutely right.

It's interesting – there's a whole 'boomer' generation…I meet them all the time; people come up to me and say 'There was a film when I was growing up that really got to me', and I'd say that I know which one it was – *Logan's Run*. But then I asked them to define why. What was it about

the film? The sense of having to give it all up before you'd even got started? The hedonistic society? You had everything. I guess it's a bit of everything, you know…?

**Is it partly to do with the seventies itself…the orgy scenes and the poppers?**

Oh, it's totally pre-AIDS [*laughs*]! That's all I can say. Yes, it did reflect the *Zeitgeist* somewhat.

**Was *Logan's Run* satirising the age limits in Hollywood itself?**

I haven't heard that [*laughs*]. That's a very far take on it. I don't think so. This was a certain 'in-between' era, where the youth culture hadn't entirely taken over, and the demographics of movie-making weren't predicated on what eleven year-old kids wanted. It was actually a wonderful time, and certainly before special effects became *so* special that they ran off with the movie. Obviously there were some pretty impressive things, but they didn't get in the way of the narrative.

**Since sci-fi wasn't a sure-fire hit at the time, did you feel you were taking a risk doing the film?**

I think every film is a risk. There's no guarantee of anything. I think I'd made enough movies by that time to realise that the sure-fire big studio thing had as much chance as the little upstart independent.

**Which was a particular characteristic of the seventies, I guess…?**

Yeah – the old studio system had finished, But I'd been doing this long enough to have been signed up by two studios, Paramount and Columbia. And I was very happy that my name was on this long, long list [*laughs*], before things changed. But I think change is the constant factor. You live with it and nothing is for sure.

**Did you read the William Nolan book before you approached the character?**

No.

**Is it ever a temptation to let the settings and costumes half-play a role in sci-fi or period drama?**

Yes, though you obviously turn up with a concept of the role. But then you feed it into the mix of the director's vision and that of the producer and the designer…

We started off in location in Dallas, where they'd found this giant mall. It was an era where America was just beginning with the whole mall thing, and this was a very early one; it was an 'apparel market', a giant enclosed space and there are some pretty impressive modern buildings in Dallas too. And then it was more conventionally back in the studio with MGM.

**Since you worked with Jenny Agutter again a couple of years later in *Riddle Of The Sands*, I guess you got on very well together…?**

Yes, enormously. I think we liked each other. There were things that constantly needed fixing every morning; the dialogue…it was also the first time working with Michael Anderson, who became a great friend and colleague. A wonderful person! Genial, positive, open to everything, and he'd done everything in the movies. He was first signed on as the tea-boy, I think [*laughs*]. He had a wonderful rapport with everyone on the set. He was no little mini-Hitler with riding boots and crop.

**So he was open to suggestions?**

Yeah, and we had a very benign and intelligent producer, Saul David.

**What can you tell us about the sequences that were cut from the film or re-edited, such as the ice-sculpture that Box makes of Logan and Jessica?**

Yes – I don't remember much about that, but apparently to get a PG rating they had to cut out a bit of nudity.

**Enough nudity was left that quite a few people were surprised at the rating it got. Were you?**

[*laughs*] Don't forget, America was started by puritans, so there's a strong streak. It would be considered nothing today.

**A lot of people think that there had been some kind of sexual connection between Logan and Francis, or that Francis was more than platonically interested in Logan. Was that a factor with them…?**

[*laughs*] They're best buddies, you mean? It's certainly potentially there, but it's never demonstrated. How interesting [*laughs*]! I never saw that, mainly because Richard [*Jordan*] was so butch and masculine and testosterone-fuelled that it didn't really come into it, you know?

**It was a great shame that we lost Richard Jordan so early –**

Oh – tragic!

**What sort of a person was he?**

He was funny! Very funny. Dangerous too - he had a wonderful quality. Kind. Soft. Wonderfully complex man! A terrible loss.

**Was there some kind of a policy decision about whether the two British leads in *Logan's Run* should have American accents?**

Sort of, yeah. The issue was that we're in the future, so no-one really knows what the action is going to be in the 23rd century, or whatever it was. But in order to fit in with the rest of the cast, Jenny and I sort of had a…not

even a mid-Atlantic accent, but an overtone, without being slavishly modern-American.

**Did you lose a lot of takes to props and tricks that didn't work on cue?**

Yes! Those wretched guns misfired as much as they fired. They were fuelled by gas-jet. There were a lot of highly technical things, yes, but thank God we weren't standing against blue-screen all the time [*laughs*].

I remember meeting Christopher Lee a few years ago. He said 'I've just done *Lord Of The Rings*' - or something else – 'and I just had to stand against the blue-screen, and it was so boring. When we did the *Musketeers*, that was us for real!'. It makes a big difference.

**Do you find getting inside a character difficult in that kind of green-screen set-up?**

Yeah, it is, but I think that acting is basically using imagination and instinct and putting it all together. So it's just another technique you have to master.

**How did Michael Anderson feel about letting you do the flood scenes in *Logan's Run*? It seemed a more dangerous set-up than would be allowed now for the lead actors.**

[*laughs*] Yes, I suppose it was. But nothing like poor Kate Winslett and Leonardo Di Caprio had to put up with in *Titanic*. The entrance to the underground part of the city, that was the water garden in Dallas, and made a very plausible entrance.

**I think by this time you'd already stood in for your own stunt-double on *The Three Musketeers*…?**

Oh, yes, from the second day [*laughs*]. But Dick Lester's very special, because he would often shoot with five cameras. Substituting stuntmen or doubles was very hard, so he encouraged us as much as possible to do our own stuff. And when you're young and stupid as I was then…

**In the latter half of *Logan's Run* Peter Ustinov gives an amazing performance – did he just tear up his script and start inventing?**

Absolutely. It was a sheer delight to be around Peter for numerous reasons. For one thing, he was one of the most legendary raconteurs, so his stories were extraordinary – not to mention his delivery of the stories [*laughs*]. That funny old man with his story about cats…he was onto Cats way before Andrew Lloyd Webber

got hold of T.S. Eliot.

**Did the cats make it even harder to get continuity in the Ustinov scenes?**

Well, we had to work on a set that was sort of quarantined – it was closed up. These animals lived there, I remember. It wasn't the most savoury atmosphere to work in, but it was effective [*laughs*].

**Did plans for a sequel ever come up for *Logan's Run*?**

It was mentioned, and I think that William Nolan had written it. There was a TV series, briefly…the next instalment that I've heard about is the remake, with a colossal budget.

**Would you be interested in playing the Ustinov role?**

I would love to. Peter was about the same age, if not younger. But no, that performance of his he just pulled out of the air; that old Southerner with his genial stories [*laughs*].

**Since you were already an established actor when *Logan's Run* came along, what influence did the film have on your career?**

It's very hard to assess. Although being involved in a success is always much more useful than the opposite. I suppose it made one a little more bankable…it's a fact of life of the business, but one I don't spend a lot of time dealing with.

**I have the very good Region 1 version with your commentary and that of Michael Anderson…can you tell us about the new Region 2 edition of *Logan's Run*?**

You know, I haven't seen it either. I've assumed that it's very much like the American version, that they would use our commentaries, but I don't know if it will have other features such as out-takes or all those other things that one's come to expect. I'd like to see a copy.

In fact I've just spent the last two months in England filming in the West country…

**Could I ask what you were filming?**

Yes, it was for television; it's a Rosamund Pilcher novel called *Four Seasons*. And, in fact, I'm coming back [*laughs*]! Because it's the four seasons, and we were there and shot some for the Autumn, and I'm now coming back for the Winter [*section*].

**I very much enjoyed your region one commentary on *Logan's Run*, where I was surprised to find that you were responsible for the phenomenon of Farrah Fawcett in the 1970s…?**

It's true. I was playing tennis and I saw this blonde vision of delight and found out that she was an actress. She was then Farrah Fawcett-Majors, married to Lee Majors. And I did indeed suggest her to the casting director and she got the role of Holly. And of course, all other subsequent careers developments I am chiefly responsible for [*laughs*].

**Did you get a percentage?**

Oh, can you imagine? She was a lovely girl, and Michael Anderson Jr. was her fellow doctor.

**Do you look back on *Logan's Run* with affection?**

Very much so. Oh yes. For one thing, because of working with Michael Anderson. I don't say this about every director, but he was a lovely person. And it all comes from the top, so the working atmosphere was very benign and creative.

**Obviously the special effects aren't up to the current standards, but what are the qualities of *Logan's Run* that you think would still shine through for younger people seeing the film?**

I think in a way you have an advantage that the special effects don't overwhelm the story. The cart is not before the horse. But yeah, probably for a younger generation it will look enormously old-fashioned because you're not being whizzed around the set. But again, that's what I see as an advantage. It has a wonderful film score, I have to mention, by Jerry Goldsmith and…I can't tell! I cannot be objective about it [*laughs*].

Especially because when you look at a film, it's like reading a diary – you remember irrelevant things that happened on that day. How you were feeling or what was cut, what worked. But generally the feeling I had was that it was a great pleasure to make – and we all remained friends, from Dan Melnick, who ran MGM at that point, to Saul David, until he left us.

**Did Basil Exposition take over from Logan as the character people want to talk to you about?**

[*laughs*] It's a generational thing. Yes, certainly. Who would have thought that this little, unpromising independent movie…you never know! You just go by instinct. I read the script that my agent had said, saying 'What do you think of this?', implying that he didn't think much of it [*laughs*]. I was glad to have been proved right, not just once, but three times.

**Will you be in the next Austin Powers film?**

Well, I shall be furiously upset if I'm not! I have this fantasy that Mike [*Myers*] is so talented that he could easily play all the roles if he wanted to, and get away with it.

**You moved to America such a long time ago – is there anything irresistibly British about you that can't be erased?**

Absolutely, and it's not just the accent too, which seems to have been impervious to environment. I've always seen myself as international rather than American, and really as an Anglo-American. That description feels

comfortable. I've lived here since "76; I'm married to an American and most of my family here are American. But psychologically I have one foot here and one foot there. So it was a real thrill for me to go back to England and to spend time there and catch up.

**Is there some kind of English delicacy - or something like that - that you instantly gravitate to when you come back?**

[*laughs*] I don't know. Where do you live, by the way?

**London.**

Well we were over in the West country, over in Bath. All places that I'd driven through before on the way to somewhere else – Bath and Cornwall. And it was great to be able to luxuriate in this area. I had free time in this movie, and before coming over I thought 'Well yes, that's when I go to London'. Because that's where people go [*laughs*]. But I didn't once go to London, because it was just so beautiful and special being in this other part of England.

**You've done very well as a writer – do you have any more projects going at the moment?**

Well I hope so. I was just thinking about it this morning, actually. It's hard work, because invariably when I've done books, I've been doing my day job as well. Although I do think the one affects the other. I'd certainly love to do more.

**Does your vote still count towards the Oscars?**

Yes, I'm a member of the Academy.

**Do you find it hard to single out the merits of a great performance in an otherwise poor film?**

This is one of the hardest things…and I will not vote until I've seen everything. It used to be a question of driving down to the academy, and you had a pass to the movies. The effect it had on the choice made it very restrictive, because people, for the most part, would hedge their bets and not go out unless they felt that they were going to see something that was worth their time.

What happens now is that everything is put on a DVD. It's not the ideal way to see a movie, although I must say our screens are getting bigger and especially with the hi-def, you get a much better idea. But at least it made the choice broader. You started getting more interesting things. A lot of independent movies, for example, were nominated. So I think that's been the great virtue of the studios sending out VHS and then tapes and now the DVDs. But there's nothing like going to the actual movie house. I'm very lucky – I live ten minutes from the academy, so I do try and spend as much time as possible viewing them on the big screen.

**Michael York, thank you very much!**

*The region 2 special edition of Logan's Run is released on 22 September. You can find out more about Michael York at his official website.*