



TUESDAY 9 JULY 2019, 7:15PM. Playhouse Cinema.

JAWS. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Written by Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb. Music by John Williams.

Starring: Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss, Robert Shaw, Lorraine Gary, Murray Hamilton.

Jaws was the film that initiated the era of the blockbuster. The tale of shark terror easily surpassed **The Godfather** as the all-time Hollywood box-office champion. Although **Star Wars**, **E.T.** and **Raiders of the Lost Ark** would set new records a few years later, **Jaws** created marketing precedents that became the Hollywood norm. It proved that a film, under careful guidance from its distributor (in this case Universal), could precipitate an international pop cultural event. In the States Universal utilized *saturation advertising* on television. The company purchased one 30-second ad on every prime-time television program, all networks, during the evening of the three days preceding the premiere; this was so successful that it became standard operating procedure in the American film industry. It convinced movie executives that the small screen should be fully exploited

for advertising the big screen, not avoided like it had been in the past. Sensational poster art also contributed immensely to preparing an eager, panting public for the event. In China 1975 was the year of the rabbit, in the USA however, 1975 was the year of the shark. It caused as many people to stay out of the water as Hitchcock persuaded people to avoid taking a shower 15 years earlier.

Spielberg's third feature-length film (after **Duel** (for TV) and **The Sugarland Express**) proved that a single film, marketed in the right way, could make a lot of money for everyone connected with it. Spielberg wasn't even 30 yet when he finished **Jaws**, but it certainly set him on the path to become the biggest brand in film business since Disney.

Based on a best-selling book by Peter Benchley, who also wrote the script together with former improvisational comedian Carl Gottlieb, the film is an ingenious mixture of terror and humour that made the fortunes soar of those closely connected to it. The three main actors -Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss and Robert Shaw- were not accredited *bankable* stars, but became major ones after the film. Composer John Williams won his first of four Oscars for Best Original Score and duly turned into Hollywood's ideal earworm. Spielberg did not win an Oscar because he wasn't even nominated, so he had to be contented with millions of dollars and an open cheque for each of his next projects.



Not that the making of Jaws was a pool of unrippled water. Spielberg originally wanted to combine real-life footage of sharks off the coast of Australia with shots of a fin and, for the more immediately menacing scenes, film of three life-size mechanical sharks, all nicknamed Bruce, after Spielberg's lawyer. Super lawyer Bruce Ramer's client list also includes Clint Eastwood and George Clooney, and the substantial contracts he negotiated for his clients prove that he is a far more effective shark than mechanical Bruce ever was. No hard feelings then: his description of the relationship with Spielberg is succinct: *"He came in, we clicked, he stayed. We've had a great, fun time. He was a wonderful guy then, and he's never changed. Am I a shark in my job? Only if it's a positive thing to be,"* he recently admitted with only a hint of a chuckle.

The Bruces were designed to work in fresh water, but out in the salty Atlantic Ocean off Martha's Vineyard, where crucial scenes were shot, the most state-of-the-art one promptly sank and a team of divers had to rescue the poor blighter. Difficulties with the corroding Bruce contributed to the doubling of the movie's budget, but they also heightened its dramatic pulse. With the creature so often out of action, Spielberg came up with the ingenious idea of using the camera as the shark and filming the attacks from the predator's perspective. The shark ended up appearing only halfway through the film, and initially only briefly. The audience imagination filled in the gaps far more potently than any explicit exposure would have done, goaded by Williams' deeply unsettling, repetitive music.



Jaws remains a remarkably gripping experience, even after more than four decades and when a plethora of far lesser blockbusters have passed by and been forgotten. It all starts when a beautiful girl goes skinny-dipping at midnight, and we hardly see anything, yet hear and feel the fear. The tremors that go through the cinema are real. That first scene is as potent as the shower sequence in **Psycho**. Only the second act is slightly hampered by pretensions. When the mayor wants to keep everything under wraps and argues with the police chief Martin Brody (Scheider) about closing the beaches of the Long Island tourist resort preparing for the 4th of July influx, the social conflict that might arise never materializes. The mayor soon disappears from the screen and the story turns to Herman Melville for inspiration. None of the local fishermen wants to risk their lives in stalking a Great White Shark, except that old man of the sea, Quint (Shaw), a loner with a penchant for scurrilous language. He offers Brody his services as a shark hunter, forsakes his isolationism, in order to become a modern Ahab looking for his Moby Dick. Together with marine biologist Matt Hooper (Dreyfuss) the trio set out for the chase.

The third and final act of the film, when Spielberg's camera shows the three characters trapped on a boat while it is the malevolent force that hunts them down, the hunters becoming the hunted, is electrifying cinema. The dialogue between the disparate men is terrific, but Quint's long monologue stands out. Spielberg said that his friend Howard Sackler, who was an uncredited writer on the set, one day observed, "*Quint needs some motivation to show all of us what made him the way he is and I think it's this Indianapolis incident.*" Spielberg asked, "Howard, what's that?" And Sackler explained the whole

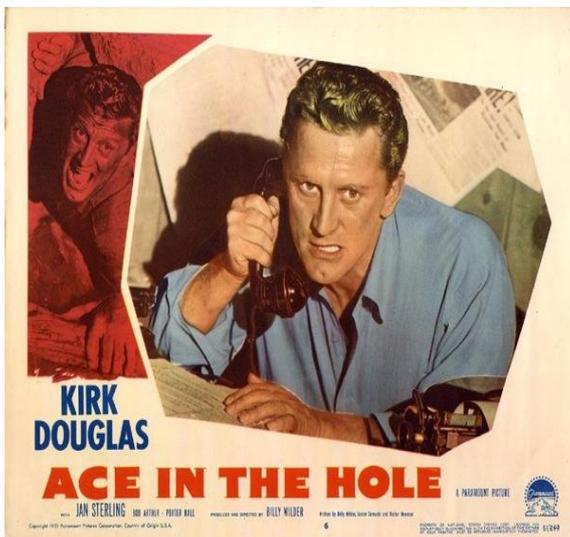
incident of the Indianapolis and the Atomic Bomb being delivered, and on its way back it was sunk by a submarine. Sharks surrounded the helpless sailors who had been cast adrift; it became a horrendous piece of World War II history. Sackler didn't write a long speech, only about three-quarters of a page. But when Spielberg showed the script to another friend, director John Milius, he asked if he could take a crack at this speech. Milius wrote a 10-page monologue, a brilliant one, but out-sized for the **Jaws** that Spielberg was making. Robert Shaw took the speech -he was a fine writer who had written a successful play (*The Man in the Glass Booth*) earlier- and brought it down to a few pages. What rests is one of the great scenes of American cinema of the seventies. Spielberg sets up the finale with superb dramatic skill. And the focus on those three wonderful actors clears out further unnecessary padding and helps to turn the film into an unforgettable treat, an edge-of-your-seat thriller that has lost none of its elemental power. Particularly on the big screen, where, unlike at home, the pause button is unavailable...

Tony Janssens. www.invernessfilmfans.org

Our next screening... **Ace in the Hole**

The first film in our... **Billy Wilder Season**

Playhouse Cinema, Eden Court. Monday 22 July 2019 at 8:15pm.



Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* is one of the most scathing indictments of American culture ever produced by a Hollywood filmmaker. Kirk Douglas gives the fiercest performance of his career as Chuck Tatum, an amoral newspaper reporter who washes up in dead-end Albuquerque, happens upon the scoop of a lifetime, and will do anything to keep getting the lurid headlines. Wilder's follow-up to *Sunset Boulevard* is an even darker vision, a no-holds-barred exposé of the American media's appetite for sensation that has gotten only more relevant with time.