

Trouble In the Forest

'Robin Hood' no easy shoot for Costner and merry band

BY JUDY STONE
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

New Orleans

WITH A couple of big household names such as Robin Hood and Kevin Costner, Jimmy the Greek might make it odds on that a box-office hit is just around the corner. Maybe yes. Maybe no. Odds aside, movie audiences are unpredictable.

At a presentation here, rumor had it that Costner was going to do a dance of "damage control" when he met the wolves of the press pack eager to see whether "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves" showed scars from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that had reportedly dogged the \$50 million production. (The film opens in San Francisco Friday at the Coronet Theater).

After a screening, critics were lukewarm to the film, cool to Costner's performance and upbeat about Alan ("Truly, Madly, Deeply") Rickman stealing the show with his black comedy take on the evil Sheriff of Nottingham.

It wasn't the best of times for Costner. Though "Dances With Wolves" won seven Oscars, including best director and best picture, Costner's honeymoon clearly was over.

The buzz focused on Premiere magazine's cover story hallyhoosing the "16 agonizing weeks" on the "Robin Hood" set. The article detailed conflicts between Costner and his old friend, director Kevin Reynolds. Costner wanted to go for broke with a British accent. Reynolds and the producers thought he should stick to language that comes naturally. M magazine cutely labeled (or libeled) Costner as a "safe sex symbol... hero for the new age — half John Wayne, half Shirley MacLaine." ("It rhymes!" Costner quipped.)

To make matters worse, the Washington Post featured an attack on "Dallas in Wonderland: Oliver Stone and JFK's Assassination," now on location here. Costner stars as Jim Garrison, the flamboyant former New Orleans district attorney. The Post skewered Garrison's "zany" investigation into the assassination as a "fraud" and questioned the purpose of Stone's movie. Meanwhile, reporters noticed that Costner seemed on edge last Sunday when he was given more page revisions from Stone who has been changing the script as his controversial production proceeds.

Costner didn't want to talk about Stone's movie: "We're here for 'Robin Hood.'" The actor looked jaunty enough in his forest green sports shirt, but seemed uncomfortable even as he candidly acknowledged problems on the "Robin Hood" set. He had

"Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves" opens Friday at the Coronet.

turned down the offer to star when he first read the script, co-written by Pen Densham and John Watson. Costner liked their unorthodox approach, showing Robin's development from spoiled son of a nobleman to leader of the rebel band, but he thought the script needed work.

In searching for a "Raiders of the Lost Ark" beat to Robin's story, the writers had added several new elements to the age-old legend and aimed for an "irreverent, bawdy tone." Contrary to all the conflicting historical myths, they sent Robin off to fight under King Richard I (The Lionhearted) in the third Christian crusade (1189-92) to win the Holy Land back from the Muslims.

In the bloody opening scene, set in a Jerusalem prison, a bedraggled, chained Robin Hood saves the life of Azeem, an aristocratic Moor (Morgan Freeman) who escapes with him to England. Densham says the character was inspired by Queequeg, the savage harpooner of "Moby Dick," but he also thinks of him as a "medieval Mr. Spock." He didn't try to reconcile the difference.

"I thought it would be wonderful to have a Muslim and a Christian fighting side by side. The Arab world had medicine and astronomy then and maybe even knew about the telescope. I think we're respectful of their value system in an impish way."

Well, Azeem isn't part of the controversy; the Sheriff of Nottingham is. When the Morgan Creek producers hired Reynolds as director, Costner agreed to come on board (for a reported \$7.5 million). Morgan Creek wanted to get the jump on two competing Robin Hood projects. After Costner was signed, Tri-Star dropped its plans. Twentieth Century-Fox switched gears and rushed through a TV film that recently aired starring Patrick Bergin and Uma Thurman as Maid Marian.

Costner had thought that he and Reynolds could collaborate on revising the script, but he didn't realize how much pressure Morgan Creek was putting on Reynolds to speed up production. The two had worked together on "Fandango," a first feature for the director and first starring role for Costner. The time-bind during "Robin Hood" strained their relationship, Costner admitted, while trying to minimize it at the same time.

"I've had problems with all my directors," he said. Even Costner directing Costner? No pangs of inner conflict? "No," Costner said, laughing. "He was completely compassionate and understanding."

But Costner didn't have time to work on the script and time to rehearse on "Robin Hood." "The first script was 135 pages, which scares everybody right away because there are usually only 115, and directors always say, 'I can make this play fast.' Kevin



Clockwise from top: Kevin Costner as Robin Hood, Alan Rickman as the Sheriff of Nottingham and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio as Maid Marian

wanted the story to leap ever farther than it does. I think he took three weeks to write and he began with the sheriff. To get a world-class actor, he had to beef that part up. Then the script swelled to 140 pages. Now there was a producer's problem because it would be a really long picture. Some of my scenes started to get cut in half. It was like a page count. I think that was fudging. I didn't think it was a role to be fudging with because Robin Hood in reality borders on a boring character. It is such a familiar story. You have to give the obligatory speeches that everyone knows and find an original

way to do it."

Costner fought unsuccessfully for rehearsal time to expand Robin Hood's role. Still, he spoke appreciatively about the different kind of brigand he plays. "It's not just a lark. His life has been cut off. He's been in prison for five years. He's very troubled by his relationship with his father. But the part was beginning to be shrunk in a way that wasn't comfortable for me. I wanted to use an English accent but Kevin told me on the first day that he didn't want it. That was rough because I was afraid we'd have a United Nations movie of accents. Granted I was not the greatest at doing the accent with only one day's practice, but in terms of the movie experience I thought it would be a big cheat not to do it."

If there were reservations about Costner's accent, there were none about his horsemanship or archery. He did most of the stunts himself with the exception of a scene swinging through the air a rope while dodging the fire the sheriff's men. However, Costner's double who bares his back while Robin is bathing a waterfall. The scene is meant to be significant in the relationship between Robin and Maid Marian (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio). The first time she sees his scars and realizes he has changed. The wounds, however, don't show and Maid Marian's line "Tell about your scars" was cut. A nude scene seems gratuitous.

When someone suggested there is an outrageously tongue-in-cheek quality to Rickman's performance of the sheriff who occasionally complains about his terrible childhood, the British actor warned, "Be very careful of the word 'campy.' There's a whole extraordinary relationship he has with the witch which goes on in the bow of the castle with rats and toads and spells and upside-down crosses and bits of old liver on the air. When you have that as an environment, where do you go but up? Unfortunately — or fortunately — the information that the old hag's mother was edited out.

Costner believes that Reynolds was disappointed because he couldn't make everything happen his way. The director wasn't the one to speak for himself because he shies away from news conferences, according to the Morgan Creek producers and the publicity staff of Warner Bros., which is distributing the film. "Kevin's name is as a director, and he wanted

influence every decision," Costner said. "If you can't, you feel it in effect completely your movie. You do get influenced by other people. If you don't have final cut that's going to happen. I bargain for final cut [with "Wolves"] but that meant I also had to put money in my own movie."

Despite his reservations about the fact that he still hadn't seen the complete final print, Costner said, "I've seen enough to know that it's good. I think Kevin directed a really wonderful movie. It's completely reflective of his work plus some things that the producer wanted to see smoothed out."

Costner's own newfound fans seem to weigh heavily on him. He would trade everything to get back my anonymity," he said. Skeptic asked if that meant he would be ready to give up his visits to the White House. "That's a special thing. That's not a thing I look forward to. I've become friends with the president, but still think voting is a private matter. Fame has offered me the opportunity to see the world in a way that a lot of people can't see. Fame didn't mean anything to me when I was choosing my script earlier and it doesn't mean anything to me now.

"When I say I would trade it, think there's too much attention paid [in] too many magazines. I don't want this to turn into a circus session, but no one likes to be watched or scrutinized all the time... I haven't gotten calloused. I haven't gotten to the point where people say, 'Forget about it.' It doesn't mean anything. It bugs me. It affects me for weeks. Everybody learns by mistakes but they don't have to be committed in front of the world."

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