



# ICEMAN

TIMOTHY HUTTON CONFRONTS A LONELY  
CAVEMAN IN AN UPCOMING MOVIE  
FROM THE FROZEN NORTH.  
JAMES VERNIERE REPORTS.

Universal's *Iceman* is a difficult film to categorize. It is, on one level, the story of a primitive human who is revived after spending forty thousand years frozen in Arctic ice, and as such it is reminiscent of any number of genre films in which creatures from another time find themselves marooned in the twentieth century. Yet *Iceman*, which boasts a sensitive script by writers John Drimmer and Chip Proser, is also a serious exploration of the nature of being human. This is no caveman-on-the-loose movie. It is a dramatic reworking of the *Savage Child* theme, a portrait of humans as they once were and may never be again. It examines what we've become—and what we've lost in the becoming.

Adding to the confusion (is this a genre film or not?) is the participation of Australian film director Fred Schepisi, whose previous films, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *The Devil's Playground*, and *Barbarosa*, were so critically acclaimed that many referred to him as the first great Australian director (somewhat to the dismay of fans of Bruce Beresford and Peter Weir). So what we have is a filmmaker who's known for making "art" films, a serious plot which contains elements of science fiction, and a star—Timothy Hutton, as an anthropologist—who'd probably throw a fit if anyone suggested he was playing second fiddle to a caveman.

Apparently one of the reasons the filmmakers are shying away from the sf label is that *Iceman* was inspired by actual events. As the film's production notes explain, in 1898 workers in Siberia found a perfectly preserved specimen of *Mammoth mastodonus*, the woolly, tusked, prehistoric ancestor of the elephant. (History records that they ate it, but others have been found, and experiments are being conducted in an effort to clone the beast.) Screenwriter John Drimmer came across that bit of information and wondered, "What if they find a human?"

Last May, Drimmer, along with publicist Lois Smith and myself, flew to the *Iceman* set in Vancouver, British Columbia, to find out what had become of

Drimmer's initial "What if?" Only two weeks of shooting remained when we arrived, and the mood of the cast and crew was a combination of exhaustion and giddiness. (In fact, on day one a local doctor arrived to shoot everybody up with B-12.) Several weeks of filming on location in Churchill, Manitoba (where temperatures dip as low as fifty degrees below zero), and on ice fields near Summit Lake, Bitter Creek, and on the Salmon, Chickanin, and Bear glaciers have left the filmmakers dazed and humbled. There will be no artificial snow or plastic ice in *Iceman*. But if there is no doubt about the verisimilitude of the film's location, there are some questions about the film's plot.

"The only science fiction in the film is the first heartbeat," says Drimmer, speaking of the long-frozen *Iceman*'s revival. "The rest of the story is a human drama." We are sitting in a trailer in the bus depot that is being used to shoot the final interiors. Outside, an assistant director blasts a pocket horn at regular intervals to warn us that the cameras are rolling in the vivarium: a full-scale, five-hundred-thousand-dollar reproduction of the *Iceman*'s natural environment, built out of chicken wire, burlap, and ABS foam. (After the *Iceman* is revived, it seems, the scientists place him in the vivarium to observe his behavior.) Inside the enormous domed structure, Schepisi is directing Timothy Hutton and John Lone, who plays the *Iceman*, as they act out their initial meeting.

Standing just off-camera are the film's makeup experts, Mike (*Raging Bull*) Westmore and Michele (*Quest for Fire*) Burke. Between shots they pat Lone down with mineral oil, smear him with dirt, and adjust his makeup and costume. Lone himself is formidable as the protohuman. Short but muscular—the filmmakers appear to have opted for a Hobbesian primitive, "nasty, brutish, and short"—Lone sports the ridged brow and bulbous skull of our evolutionary forebears; but unlike the Neanderthals of *Quest for Fire*, a film *Iceman* will certainly be compared to, Lone's primitive is





recognizably human, despite his overdeveloped teeth and nails and the elaborate ceremonial scars that cover his body. (What isn't scarred is raw and bleeding.) Lone's Iceman survives not because he lives in harmony with nature, but because he prevails against the malevolence of his environment, and in keeping with that philosophy it is clear as the shot progresses that the Iceman might kill the curious anthropologist at any time. The tension is palpable, made even more intense by Schepisi's demanding method: take after take is shot until you feel that someone is about to scream. That tension is rewarded. Later that evening at the dailies the footage is startling. Spontaneous applause erupts as we sit in the bar, nibbling peanuts and guzzling beer.

Director Fred Schepisi, who gave screenwriter Drimmer a warm welcome to the set—"You're the reason we're all here"—sees *Iceman* as an opportunity to expand that small but vocal coterie of admirers he earned with his previous films. "I was attracted to this film," says the blond Australian, "because I felt it could be a thought-provoking but also commercially entertaining picture, full of pace and energy. I want this film to have, as Nabokov put it, the precision of poetry and the intuition of science. I have to be careful, though. Already somebody said to me, 'You're not going to make it too poetic, are you?' What I'm searching for is the perfect balance: a good picture that people will bloody go and see."

Like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, *Iceman* should be more than an action film with a science fiction premise. It promises to be an exploration of the nature of being human and a portrait in contrasts: the contrasts between modern and primitive, between science and mysticism, between the civilized and the savage. And if the success of Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Quest for Fire* is any indication, then clearly modern film audiences are curious about the origins of the species. Why? Perhaps it is because we know we are a hair's breadth away from the species' extinction. 17



(1) Drillers for the Polaris Mining and Exploration Corp. discover the cryogenically preserved body of a primitive human in an ice cave. (2) Later, bearing a primitive weapon and ceremonial decorations, the Iceman (John Lone, an Obie Award-winning stage actor) tries to grasp what has occurred. (3) Anthropologist Stanley Shephard (Timothy Hutton) and the Iceman wander across the ice fields pursued by scientists in the employ of the Polaris Corp. (4) Director Fred Schepisi confers with Hutton and Lone on the location near Summit Lake and Bitter Creek, while (5) the filmmakers set up dolly tracks at the foot of the Chickamin Glacier. (6) Shephard strikes a forlorn pose amid the Arctic wastes.

