

INTERVIEW

Super Mario returns: 'King of Cannes' bounces back

Famous Lebanese producer promotes Terminator 3 with 'determination'

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Special to The Daily Star

CANNES: "I'll be back" – these words may be lodged in the minds of millions as Arnold Schwarzenegger's most famous catch phrase, and this week, Mario Kassar is back in Cannes to promote the third episode of the blockbuster franchise, Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines. The legendary producer was on hand to reflect on his illustrious and eventful career.

Born in Beirut in 1951 to a Lebanese father and Italian mother, Kassar's journey has seen him reach the heights of Hollywood power with a string of commercial hits such as the Rambo films with Sylvester Stallone, Terminator 2: Judgment Day, Basic Instinct and Total Recall. He also produced critically acclaimed movies such as the Oscar-nominated Chaplin, Rambling Rose, LA Story and The Doors.

Kassar is back with long-time

business partner, Andy Vajna, and the new C2 Pictures, and was in a jubilant mood as he discussed the forthcoming release of the new Terminator movie. With a rumored budget in the region of \$200 million, largely from German financier Intermedia, the film is possibly the most ambitious independent picture in Hollywood history.

However, Kassar, a man notorious for his flamboyant parties, was more excited by the story of T3 than worried about the costs. "We don't discuss numbers but we're pretty confident. Of course it has a big budget, but if you look at all the big films coming out this summer they all have big budgets."

The story of T3 takes place 10 years after the events of the previous film. John Connor (Nick Stahl), now 22, finds himself under the threat of the T-X, Skynet's most sophisticated cyborg killing machine yet. Connor's only hope for survival comes, once again, in the indomitable shape of Schwarzen-

egger's Terminator. The two must join forces and work together to fight the technologically superior T-X, or face the end of human civilization.

"It's every child's dream to have a powerful robot under their command and who follows orders completely," Kassar stated when discussing the film's plot, his voice rising in excitement. The film promises to be even more action-packed than its two predecessors.

Kassar rejects the accusations that the series' violence has a detrimental effect on today's audience, particularly given the current uneasiness with the ongoing "war on terror."

"I have heard this argument before that the movie industry is in some way responsible for the terrorism we're faced with now, but I don't believe it. These are comic strip characters based in the future, based outside of reality. If you turn on the TV these days, you find loads of cop shows and reality shows that have far more everyday violence than

anything else," he said.

Kassar also laughed at the suggestion the Terminator could play a positive role in the resolving of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"This character is based in fantasy. You can't put it into a political situation; it has nothing to do with the current crises. In any event to achieve peace you don't need terminators, you need people with minds that are looking for peace."

When asked if, given the state of world affairs, he would seek to make films with a Middle Eastern subject matter he replied, "I make movies which have no national boundaries and no religion. I look for stories about humanity which have a worldwide appeal. However, if I found a project which was interesting and had a subject matter to do with the Middle East then that would be something I would certainly think about in the future."

Recalling the struggle it took to get the original Rambo film to the screen back in the early 1980s in First Blood (1982),



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Kassar joked, "Don't forget it took two foreigners (i.e. himself and Hungarian partner Andy Vajna) to make that movie about Vietnam and that whole era."

When asked about his birthplace he admitted that while he did grow up in Beirut he hadn't been back in quite a while, although he was looking forward to his return someday soon. "As

far as actually filming in Lebanon," he added, "I haven't considered shooting there in the past. However, if I saw that I could guarantee the security of the actors and the crew, and the safety situation improved then it is something I would look at for future projects."

When asked about how he felt about coming to Cannes this year, the veteran simply

said, "I've done everything and seen it all before. The only difference this time around is I'm doing 60-70 interviews spreading the word about the new movie. It's like I'm not just the producer anymore, I feel like one of the actors."

As for his future plans, Kassar simply quipped, "I'm working through the summer on Terminator as we release around the

world, starting in July in States, then I'm going to take a week off. I need a holiday!"

For a man who has enjoyed a successful 30-year career in one of the world's most notoriously ruthless industries, the secret to his longevity was simple. "There is no secret. The only way is to never give up, have lots of energy, perseverance and determination."