

# *A Hopeless Idea for a Film About Alexander Is Finally Successful*

By Mark Landler

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MUNICH - In the fall of 1987 Thomas Schühly found himself in producer's hell, otherwise known as the set of "The Adventures of Baron Munchausen." He was fighting with his director, Terry Gilliam, whose surreal tale of an 18th-century German fabulist had fallen behind schedule, run wildly over budget and was about to be shut down by its Hollywood paymasters.

While Mr. Schühly fought to keep the bondsmen at bay, he quietly tinkered on a proposal for an even bolder project that, given his circumstances, seemed about as rooted in reality as the mad German baron.

Now Mr. Schühly is eagerly awaiting the release of that film, "Alexander," a \$150 million historical epic about the Macedonian warrior who conquered nine-tenths of the known world by the age of 25.

Oliver Stone wrote and directed the movie, which stars Colin Farrell as Alexander and is scheduled to open on Nov. 5. Like other Hollywood projects of obscure provenance that are later picked up by a marquee filmmaker, "Alexander" will be known, first and foremost, as Mr. Stone's film.

But it is in many ways Mr. Schühly's baby: a grand dream born in the dark days of "Baron Munchausen" and nurtured over nearly two decades by a proud German producer who was desperate to resuscitate his career.

"I was trying to survive; I was trying to give myself a future," Mr. Schühly, 53, said in a cafe in Munich, not far from where he lives. "A lot of people said I was finished in the industry."

A self-described "crazy German," he spent \$500,000 to design costumes, armor and sets for "Alexander" in the early-1990's, before there was even a script. In its sheer audacity, the story of his quest bears an echo of Alexander, who led his armies from the Balkans to the Himalayas in a matchless feat of conquest before he died in 323 B.C., all of 32 years old.

Mr. Schühly, working with Mr. Stone and another German producer, Moritz Borman, is managing to bring his "Alexander" to the screen before competing Alexander projects from an army of screen conquerors: Steven Spielberg, Dino De Laurentiis, Martin

## Scorsese and Baz Luhrmann.

"He's the godfather of the project," Mr. Stone said in a telephone interview from Paris, where he was working feverishly to finish editing. "Thomas is a unique producer. There's nobody quite like him."

To be sure, Mr. Stone said, he had long thought about making "Alexander," even as a film student at New York University. Mr. Stone wrote the screenplay for a more cartoonlike conqueror in "Conan the Barbarian" (1982), with Arnold Schwarzenegger. In "The Doors" (1991) he infused a dash of Alexander into Jim Morrison, a rock star with visions of grandeur.

Still, he said, it was Mr. Schühly who turned his musings about Alexander into a concrete project. In 1989 he sent Mr. Stone a 170-page pitch, known as a producer's specification, for a biography of Alexander. The only other director Mr. Schühly considered, he said, was Francis Ford Coppola.

Mr. Stone was enthusiastic, but there was no market then for "swords and sandals" films. That changed in 2000 with the box-office success of Ridley Scott's Roman epic, "Gladiator."

Mr. Borman, whose independent, German-owned company, Intermedia, had made "Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines," was able to line up \$150 million-plus in financing in Germany, France and Italy as well as the United States, where Warner Brothers is the distributor.

"I wanted to insulate Oliver from a pure studio picture because I knew this would be an incredibly difficult journey we would take," Mr. Borman said in an interview from his office in Los Angeles. He admired Mr. Schühly's tenacity and made a deal with him. They knew each other from German film circles but had never worked together.

The "Baron Munchausen" debacle had hurt Mr. Schühly, but he bounced back in 1995 to produce "Der Totmacher" ("The Deathmaker"), a well-regarded German film, and was the executive producer of "The Triumph of Love," a period romantic comedy with Mira Sorvino that was released in 2001.

With "Alexander" suddenly bankable, Mr. Schühly began a lively correspondence with Mr. Stone about how to turn a thinly documented historical figure into a character who could carry the weight of a big-budget motion picture. He gave Mr. Stone what amounted to a classics tutorial, referring him to ancient Greek scribes like Plutarch and modern writers like Gore Vidal.

"He was a wonderful teacher," Mr. Stone said. "I was a very willing student and learned a lot from him. For me it was a dose of fresh air, because it was an exposure to classical German education."

Mr. Schühly, a Jesuit-educated lawyer from southern Germany whose father was an industrialist, learned his trade as a producer for Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the groundbreaking German director who died in 1982. He made his reputation outside Germany with "The Name of the Rose," an adaptation of the medieval best seller by Umberto Eco, starring Sean Connery.

Mr. Schühly tried to get Mr. Connery cast in "Baron Munchausen" and pushed his name again for the role of Alexander's father, King Philip, which ended up being played by Val Kilmer. He is the first to admit he has passionate views about people, not least Alexander the Great.

"Oliver once asked me: what is greatness?" he said, contemplating his umpteenth cigarette. "It's not just conquering the world. Genghis Khan conquered the world. Hitler conquered the world."

Alexander, he explained, did not exact revenge after his conquests, at least not beyond what was required to consolidate his dominion. As he marched across Egypt, Persia and India, he sought to integrate West and East, defying the cultural purity preached by the ancient Greeks.

For a German like Mr. Schühly, the historic echoes are unmistakable. So, too, he says, is the film's relevance to events in Iraq. "It's what Alexander did after he conquered a country that interested me," he said. "If war is part of our nature, the question is, what do we do after it?"

Robin Lane Fox, an Oxford historian who was an adviser and has written a book on the making of the movie, said Mr. Schühly "was enormously important because he kept saying that they must measure up to Alexander. They couldn't just turn him into a decadent Roman emperor."

In the end, though, it was the director's call, and Mr. Schühly was forced, at times grudgingly, to defer. Mr. Stone tackles Alexander's homosexuality, for example; Mr. Schühly would have played it down. Mr. Stone perceives his hero's struggle in Freudian terms; Mr. Schühly said, "There's no room for 19th-century Viennese psychoanalysis in this film."

These are quibbles, however, in what Mr. Schühly said was the most rewarding partnership he has had since Fassbinder. And there is the added satisfaction of having beaten all those other Alexander films.

Emboldened by his success, Mr. Schühly wants to produce another historic epic, this one about the Crusades. Never mind that Ridley Scott is coming out next year with his own \$130 million film on the subject.

**Mr. Schühly insisted that his project would focus less on thrills and more on the differing views of God in the world's great religions. "My goal is not to make money," he said, "but to leave some marks in history."**