

14

Dir: Steven SPIELBERG / USA
Released in Britain: 1976
Running Time: 125 minutes
Colour: Technicolor
Estimated Attendance: 35 million

Out of the blue it came, as lean and mean as a Great White, sinking its fangs into box-office records, and inventing the modern blockbuster. Beside this witty, wicked breakthrough hit from some kid called Spielberg, most other Hollywood thrillers are just plankton.

JAWS

Director **Steven Spielberg**
 Producers **Richard D. Zanuck, David Brown**
 Screenplay/Story **Peter Benchley, Carl Gottlieb, Howard Sackler, John Milius**
 Director of Photography **Bill Butler**
 Editor **Verna Fields**
 Production Designer **Joe Alves**
 Music **John Williams**

Chief **Martin Brody** • **Roy Scheider**
 Captain **Quint** • **Robert Shaw**
Matt Hooper • **Richard Dreyfuss**
Ellen Brody • **Lorraine Gary**
 Mayor **Larry Vaughn** • **Murray Hamilton**
Ben Meadows, The Editor • **Carl Gottlieb**
Lenny Hendricks • **Jeffrey C. Kramer**
Chrissie, First Victim • **Susan Backlinie**
Tom Cassidy • **Jonathan Filley**
Estuary Victim • **Ted Grossman**
Michael Brody • **Chris Rebello**
Sean Brody • **Jay Mello**
Mrs Kintner • **Lee Fierro**
Alex Kintner • **Jeffrey Voorhees**

THE STORY

Convinced that the remains of a girl found on the shore indicate a shark attack, Martin Brody – chief of police in the Long Island resort of Amity – decides to close the beaches. Pressured by prominent citizens including Mayor Vaughn, who argue that the victim might have been mangled by a boat and point out the disastrous consequences of a shark scare on the tourist trade (the Fourth of July influx is imminent), Brody reluctantly agrees to post guards and warning signs instead. The shark kills a small boy and, with the beaches now closed, local sportsmen set out on a shark hunt. They return triumphant, but Brody is assured by Hooper, an oceanographic expert, that the dead shark is not the Great White that perpetrated the attacks. The distraught town council agrees to pay the \$10,000 demanded by Quint, an experienced shark-killer, to do the job for them. Despite Brody's pathological fear of the sea – increased when he and Hooper find the deserted wreck of a fishing boat attacked by the shark – he forces himself on the sneering Quint as an assistant along with Hooper. After a prolonged chase in which the shark seems to have become the hunter, Hooper is lost when he goes over the side in a diving cage to try a tranquillising dart; and Quint, rejecting any advice in his obsessive vendetta (he was one of the few survivors when his ship was torpedoed in shark-infested waters after delivering the Hiroshima bomb), is killed when the shark succeeds in demolishing the boat. Clinging despairingly to the wreckage, Brody contrives to blow the shark to bits with a compressed oxygen tank from Hooper's diving equipment. Hooper reappears unharmed, and Brody exultantly discovers that he has lost his fear of the sea.

WHAT THEY SAID THEN ...

Jaws is a perfectly acceptable, and sometimes genuinely exciting, entry in the disaster stakes. The ltsenish first act, in which the police chief finds himself an enemy of the people because his action threatens prosperity and his inaction threatens security, would have been much more effective had a brilliant opening sequence (a solitary moonlit bathe by the first victim) not made the shark's



presence so unequivocally evident that the dignitaries who try to argue otherwise are merely uninteresting straw dummies.

Nevertheless the plot is much improved by ruthless trimming of Peter Benchley's original novel. The resulting streamlining allows Spielberg to make some effective gestures towards setting the teeth on edge (quite literally as Quint, making his first appearance at a turbulent council meeting, imposes silence by suddenly scraping his fingernails down a blackboard). The sense of edgy unease is beautifully transmitted in a series of tiny, throwaway moments like the one on the crowded beach where Brody is politely listening to an importuning citizen but really trying to see past his obstructing body for any signs of alarm at the water's edge (and we suddenly realise we haven't heard a word the speaker is saying either); or when, just as a lookout gives the all-clear for swimmers, we seem to catch a momentary glimpse of a dark shadow he has missed.

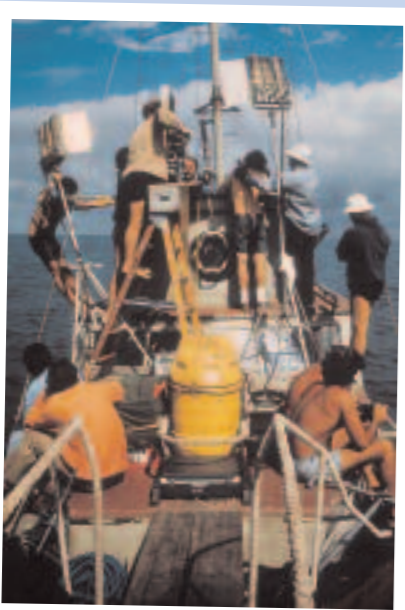
Once the trio of shark-hunters head out to sea in their boat (where they remain for the rest of the film), *Jaws* finds itself on firmer ground with a brisk narrative that neatly blends documentary (the fascinating details of equipment, skills and mystique required for a shark-killer) and fiction (the exciting duel with a monster whose size and cunning gradually inflate in the mind) with a just measure of unpretentious psychological insight (initially hostile, the trio are gradually drawn together, but only by the euphoria of their communal effort). Here, with the battleground boldly staked out by the marker buoys trailing



Above The meticulously spectacular *Gone With The Wind*, the Technicolor mother of all romantic historical epics, **Below** changed the movies and the way they are marketed for



**'You're gonna need
a bigger boat.'**



BAFTAS

4 nominations, 3 winners

Film Editing: Verna Fields

Music (Original Score): John Williams

Best Picture: Richard D. Zanuck and David Brown

Sound

WHAT WON THAT YEAR?

Actor: Jack Nicholson *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Actress: Louise Fletcher *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Directing: Milos Forman *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Best Picture: Saul Zaentz and Michael Douglas *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

BAFTAS

6 nominations, 0 winners

WHAT WON THAT YEAR?

Film: *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*

Direction: Stanley Kubrick *Barry Lyndon*

Actor: Al Pacino *The Godfather Part II/Dog Day Afternoon*

Actress: Ellen Burstyn *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*



behind the harpooned shark, but suddenly and alarmingly abandoned as strategically placed shots suggest a guerrilla warfare in which the shark steals up to reconnoitre the enemy or retreats to contemplate attack on the placidly vulnerable boat isolated in the middle of nowhere, Spielberg almost manages to invest the shark – like the nightmarish petrol-tanker in his earlier *Duel* – with the quality of a Jungian archetype.

His good work, unfortunately, is partially undone by a script straining to become Herman Melville and ending the portentous profundities delivered by Robert Shaw's Quint (more Old Man of the Sea than Captain Ahab) by projecting him, not unexpectedly, into the jaws of his own unconvincing, mechanical Moby Dick.

WHAT THEY SAY NOW ...

As the first movie ever to reach the \$100 million mark at the US box office, *Jaws* is routinely cited as the monster hit which ushered in the era of the high-concept summer blockbuster. But not even the grumpiest critic of the Hollywood money-making machine would deny that Spielberg's masterpiece earned this status on pure technical merit; the film remains such a watertight thrill ride it even manages to get away with that pesky mechanical shark on viewing after viewing.

Spielberg understood that establishing the reality of the broader scenario was key to making it work, and Amity Island is, from top to bottom, the most real-feeling, lived-in place in any of his pictures. With the sole exception of Robert Shaw's oversalted sea dog Quint, the characters here seem to breathe Earth air, not movie air; the witty economy of the script is matched only by the improvised comic and dramatic grace notes Spielberg accommodates both in the Brody household and on the boat. A lesser director would have made a



Above left The meticulously spectacular *Gone With The Wind*, the Technicolor mother of all romantic historical epics, **Below Left** changed the movies and the way they are marketed for **Below** changed the movies and the way they are marketed for **Below right** changed the

hateful corporate stooge out of Murray Hamilton's character, instead of the anxious, vacillating master of ceremonies we actually get; and look how skilfully Roy Scheider and Lorraine Gary suggest latent fault-lines in their marriage with just the odd loaded glance. Given the movie's notoriously chaotic genesis, it's remarkable how controlled and meticulous *Jaws* has always seemed in its portrait of a community imperilled – not just the trailblazing prototype for your high-stakes event movie, but the absolute model for how to do it right.

CLASSIC QUOTE

Brody: 'You're gonna need a bigger boat.'

SCENE STEALER

The opening: Chrissie (Susan Backlinie) dives out to sea and faces a hideous, thrashing ordeal as the shark's first course. Still one of the most brilliantly unnerving scene-setting overtures in modern cinema.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Robert Shaw – Spielberg's third choice for Quint, after Lee

Marvin and Sterling Hayden – wrote Quint's speech about the fate of the USS Indianapolis himself, with uncredited help from Howard Sackler and John Milius.

The scene where Hooper finds Ben Gardner's head was shot and added in post-production when Spielberg decided the film needed one more big shock.

On his next projects Spielberg switched editors, reportedly aggrieved that Oscar-winning veteran Verna Fields received so much insider credit for its success.

IN THE CHAIR

Only a handful of times in his subsequent career has Spielberg come close to matching the all-round tautness and resonance of *Jaws*. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) achieved the former but only the former, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) a good deal more of the latter. He would soon abandon the primal themes of these early films in favour of weighty liberal Oscar bids, but not even the garlanded *Schindler's List* (1993) completely managed to exorcise a nagging preachiness and sentimentality in his output. Returns to genre material, notably the back-to-back sci-fi diptych *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001)