

Laurence Fox is the hero we deserve – and I have just the role for him

A long-neglected anti-feminist fantasy franchise could be just the thing to capitalise on the actor's truth-speaking notoriety

Stewart Lee

26 Jan 2020

The actor and pop singer Laurence Fox achieved peak Laurence Fox this month after explaining racism to a black female academic, photographing carrots sarcastically, doubting the existence of some Sikhs, fraternising with the Cumming-trumpets of the *Today* programme, and warning women under 35 of all races that he would withhold the bounty of his coveted white penis from their hungry vaginas unless they held their disagreeable tongues, even if they got on their knees and begged.

Fox has been described, often unfairly, as many things in the past two weeks: a brave freedom fighter, a musician, a privileged white male, an actor, a denier of Sikhs, and a teller of uncomfortable truths to a world where “the light has been turned down on the age of reason”, though admittedly by Fox himself. But Fox may be about to be best known to millions in his new role as the Earthman warrior-poet Fox Gardener, the Minstrel of Gor.

In 2012, I wrote a piece for the *Quietus*, reappraising the sword and sorcery pulps of the 30s, such as RE Howard’s enduring *Conan the Barbarian*, CL Moore’s forgotten feminist *Jirel the Swordswoman*, and PG Wodehouse’s prophetic *Jolyon the Beastslayer*, about a wealthy London lawyer who is transported to feudal Japan, where he must wear a kimono and club oriental mammals to death with his 20th-century sport bat.

Consequently, I am now lazy producers’ go-to writer for doomed cinematic reboots of fictional barbarians, their rights available via drunken neglect or legal intimidation. “Is your client familiar with John Norman’s *Minstrel of Gor*?", my baffled agent was asked.

During a three-day brainstorming session with the producers in a Soho hotel room earlier this week, I explained that Norman’s 35-volume series of Gor novels debuted in 1966 with *Tarnsman of Gor*, and follows the adventures of displaced British professor Tarl Cabot, on the distant planet of Gor. The streets of its capital, Ars, are arranged around a foul-smelling tree trunk with oracular properties, The Telling Pole, and fruits and vegetables are satirised.

Gor differs from the world of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s 1912 *A Princess of Mars*, which inspired it, as all Gor’s women are pliant sex slaves who accept their role as the silent Play-Doh™® of men. Author John Norman, a philosophy professor who wrung the soiled underwear of his fiction though a Nietzschean knicker-mangle, lost his contract with DAW Books at the turn of the century, perhaps at the hands of the one foe even Tarl Cabot could not defeat – the so-called “politically correct brigade”.

Earlier attempts to film Norman’s politically *in*-correct fantasies failed. 1987’s *Gor* featured Playmate of the Month Rebecca Ferratti in a shrew-skin bikini, and Oliver Reed as Sarm, an evil epicure so jaded the endless cavorting of the slave girls of Gor could not tear him from his mead goblet, Reed perhaps remembering better times when he made an elephant walk to Innsbruck.

The unpublished *Minstrel of Gor* should have been the series’ 10th instalment, falling between 1975’s *Castrati of Gor* and 1976’s *Charcutiers of Gor*, but was withdrawn due to the rage of Canadian progressive rock band Rush. Lyricist Neil Peart accused Norman of plagiarising their similarly Ayn Rand-inspired *2112* album, in graf-

fiti sprayed on to the writer's pet capybara, Friedrich, written in fictional Gorean runes, painstakingly invented by vocalist Geddy Lee out of his own head.

In *Minstrel of Gor*, Fox Gardener, a former hippy songwriter who has become disillusioned with the insipid "Canyon Grove" scene and its innate liberal hypocrisy, finds himself transported to Gor. Here his anti-trade union power ballads become tools in the culture war between the desert-dwelling Goreans and the snowflake-worshipping Observers of the High Ground, who tolerate women's voices.

My potential employers had originally wanted to adapt 1977's *Slave Girl of Gor*, in which an attractive '70s campus feminist poet, Judy Thornbush, wakes up chained to a rock on Gor and begins the brutal process of learning her place, at the hands of unfeeling barbarians for whom Shulamith Firestone's seminal *The Dialectic of Sex : The Case for Feminist Revolution* isn't really a thing. But the rights for *Minstrel of Gor* were available at half the price and all the books are basically the same anyway.

All through our three-day session, the producers checked and rechecked their Facebook updates and Twitter feeds, trying to game the zeitgeist, and the haunting omnipresence of Laurence Fox filled the room like a cloud of yellow steam rising from a hot urinal trough. But with a man's laughing face.

Fox's media saturation proved the politically correct concerns that had forced Norman to tinkle his later Gor novels into the toilet of e-publishing were undeniably in retreat. The time had come to find an actor to embody Norman's once-unmarketable philosophy of compassion-free power and the privilege of birthright.

Norman himself had imagined *Minstrel of Gor*'s titular hero as the hard rocker Ted Nugent, and had compared Gardener to him in the novel ("Gardener came out of the rectangular door. He looked quite like Ted Nugent from music." *Minstrel of Gor*, page 56). But Nugent was now 71 and the sentiments of his best song, *Jailbait*, while chiming with the Gorean worldview, spooked investors. Who was our Minstrel of Gor? Newsfeeds fizzed and Twitter twatted. The answer was staring us in the face.

Furious online snowflakes predicted Fox's Sikh-denying ejaculations would end his acting career. But *Minstrel of Gor* might yet make Fox, who may yet agree to star, an unlikely action hero of the calibre of Rick Hill, Eric Allan Kramer, or Manis from *Every Which Way But Loose*. My employers drank wine over dinner, and spoke of Paweł Pawlikowski's *Cold War* and the Macedonian beekeeping drama *Honeyland*. But they saw dollars floating on the turning tide. We are, as someone once said, beyond good and evil.

The Ted K Archive

Stewart Lee

Laurence Fox is the hero we deserve – and I have just the role for him
A long-neglected anti-feminist fantasy franchise could be just the thing to capitalise
on the actor's truth-speaking notoriety

26 Jan 2020

<www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/26/laurence-fox-actor-fantasy-film-gor-stewart-lee>

www.thetedkarchive.com