

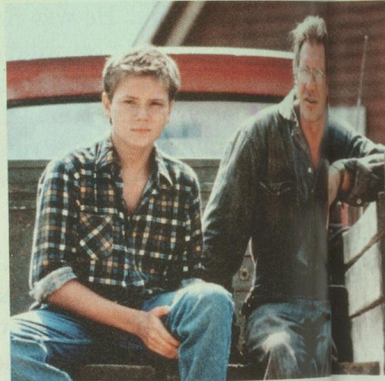
sense to try to either eliminate River's part or say, 'This is the [whole] movie.'

Convinced that there was no cost-effective way to salvage *Dark Blood*, the insurance company made the call to abandon the project and pay out the claim to the original investors, at which point the insurers themselves owned the film. It was a financial decision, but for some of the filmmakers, it also seemed like the appropriate one. "For me, the most respectful thing was to close it, not attempt to finish it, and let bygones be bygones," says Powell. "George always wanted to finish the movie. He's a director. I can understand that." The insurance company then took the roughly 1,500 pounds of 35mm film that had been shot and stashed it in storage. Sluizer, distraught over Phoenix's death and unsure if he even wanted to keep making movies, had already moved back to Holland.

*Dark Blood* sat in storage until 1999, when Sluizer heard some disturbing news. The insurance company (which has since been bought by another corporation) didn't want to pay to warehouse his film anymore—and was planning to destroy it. "That's when I said, 'No, no, I'm going to save it from destruction,'" says Sluizer. So he did, although he won't explain exactly how he got his hands on the footage. "I have good assistants, if I can put it this way, and some people who are clever in finding the right key," he says with a laugh. "I am an enterprising person."

In other words, the director stole his own film? "You can use the word you want to use," says Sluizer, who never heard anything from the insurance company after he mysteriously came into possession of his movie. "I think I was moral and not immoral, but you could say you [shouldn't] take something you don't own. Obviously I'm responsible for what I did. I'm not going to say I'm proud, because I think that's silly when you do something which you think is necessary. I don't want to make this bigger than it is, but if a cathedral or the Guggenheim Museum starts burning and you don't put [water] on it, you can say you've done nothing bad—you've just looked at it. But you didn't try to *save* it."

**O**N CHRISTMAS DAY, 2007, Sluizer was on vacation in eastern France, riding ATVs around the foothills of the French Alps with his family, when he suddenly collapsed. Acting fast, his son called the fire brigade, who evacuated him to a local hospital. From there an ambulance drove him five hours to a cardiovascular hospital, where he underwent surgery that saved his life. It turned out he had suffered an acute aortic dissection. "Normally within five minutes you're dead," says the director. "I'm in that sense a miracle."



Sluizer spent more than a year in physical therapy, relearning how to sit and then stand and walk. During that grueling period of recovery, he finally reached a decision: He needed to complete *Dark Blood*. "I had the feeling that I had to finish the creative work which hundreds of people had done together," he says, "so that it would be there for anyone who wanted to see it." Sluizer was still in very poor health, and his doctors told him he might not have long to live. "I said, I want to finish the film before whatever happens. At least I will finish my job as best as I could."

To pay for the film's completion, Sluizer solicited donations on a Dutch Kickstarter-style site called CineCrowd, raising around 15,000 euros. The rest of the \$450,000 it would eventually cost to finish *Dark Blood* came from private donations, the Netherlands Film Fund, and his own company.

But money couldn't solve the biggest problem: how to stitch the incomplete material into a coherent film that people might actually want to sit through. After much deliberation—Could he somehow incorporate animation? Make it a silent film?—Sluizer settled on a voice-over to fill in the narrative gaps. He thought about having an actor do it, but in the end he just chose to use his own voice. (At one time it was reported that he wanted Joaquin Phoenix to do the voice-over, but Sluizer says that was never something he seriously considered.) "It took many months before I came to the most simple solution," says the director, who



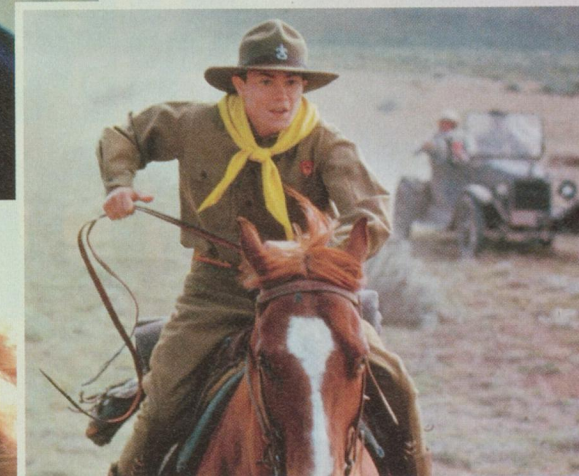
now spends most of his time in Nice, France. "I decided to just tell what's missing."

Will anyone want to hear the gruff-voiced auteur narrate his own unfinished film? Some viewers will find out how well Sluizer's solution works when *Dark Blood* premieres at the Netherlands Film Festival on Sept. 27. Sluizer, for one, is pleased with how the movie turned out. "It's a complete film," he says. "It's not pieces stuck together. It has a beginning and it goes up to the end, like it should. The film is finished."

**A**T THIS POINT, *Dark Blood's* future is uncertain. It could screen at more festivals ("I have at least 25 invitations," Sluizer says), along with noncommercial venues like schools and museums. Because of the situation with the insurance company, the director doesn't own commercial rights to the film, so any potential theatrical or DVD release would have to be negotiated down the road. And his medical situation remains precarious. "I'm busy trying to keep alive," he says. "My whole body is a wreck." In December, doctors told Sluizer that, among other issues, he has a dangerous aneurysm in his abdomen. "I'm a dying person," he says.

But in some ways, Sluizer's poor health is liberating: He doesn't really care what anyone else thinks. "I have the advantage of being, as I call it, a man after death and before

(Clockwise from far left) Wil Wheaton, Phoenix, Corey Feldman, and Jerry O'Connell in *Stand by Me*; with Keanu Reeves in *My Own Private Idaho*; in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*; with Martha Plimpton in *Running on Empty*; with Harrison Ford in *The Mosquito Coast*



death," he says, referring to that near-fatal aortic dissection in 2007. "I have total freedom of doing what I think is useful, valid, and correct. That's my motivation, and that's good enough."

While Sluizer is confident he's doing the right thing, not everyone is pleased to see him digging around in the difficult past. Phoenix's family declined to comment on the film's completion, but a family spokesperson says that "they want no involvement with this" and they "have moved forward from those painfully sad days." Sluizer hasn't heard directly from Phoenix's family, although he says that his daughter, who is credited as an assistant on *Dark Blood*, has had "a pleasant conversation" with two of Phoenix's sisters on Facebook.

Ira Deutchman, the former president of Fine Line Features, which cofinanced the original *Dark Blood* production, isn't thrilled with Sluizer's decision to finish the movie. "I didn't think it was a great idea," he says. "That's still my personal feeling. My impression is that there was no way that there was a completed film there. I hate the idea of somebody trying to create something out of nothing just for the sake of having a River Phoenix film."

For Phoenix's fans, it's no doubt a complicated question. Is it better to leave the tragedy-stained movie alone—to move past what might have been and let the actor's small body of finished work forever speak to his talents? Or does the world deserve to see his final performance, however rough and imperfect it may be? Karen Black, who still tears up when talking about him, thinks the answer is easy. "What would River have wanted?" she says. "What would *any* actor want? An actor wants his performance to be *seen*. In my opinion, I don't think there's any further discussion." ■