EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

That’s When They Got Me. It’s Like Fishing.

Alejandro Monteverde talks with Paul Salfen about directing Zero A.D.: The Birth of Christ, in theaters December 11 from Angel Studios, and about the years he spent off a nativity story he did not want to make.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Official theatrical poster for Zero A.D.: The Birth of Christ. From the Angel Studios press room, labeled Zero AD Key Art.

Alejandro Monteverde did not come looking for the nativity. *Zero A.D.: The Birth of Christ*, his new film for Angel Studios, opens in theaters in the United States and Canada on December 11, 2026, a week before *Dune: Part Three* and *Avengers: Doomsday* arrive on December 18. The official one-sheet bills Deva Cassel, Sam Worthington, Ben Mendelsohn, Gael García Bernal, and Jim Caviezel. The official logline is as stark as the title: an empire in decay, a ruler consumed by fear, a star over Bethlehem, and Mary protecting the child promised to save the world as Herod’s terror erupts into the slaughter of the innocents. Monteverde, the director of *Bella*, *Sound of Freedom*, and *Cabrini*, told Paul Salfen he is under no illusion about the neighborhood. “We’re coming out against two of the biggest film franchises in cinema history, Dune and Avengers,” he said. “We’re definitely the underdog. So we definitely need the support, the power of the audience. We need them to come and show up.”

He also told Salfen something more surprising. He passed on the movie. He did not want to make it. He was off the project for years. Then they asked him to read the script, just to give his opinion, and that is how they landed him.

THAT'S WHEN THEY GOT ME

Salfen put the difficulty on the table early. The birth of Jesus has been told many times, and a new version would face scrutiny no matter who made it. Monteverde did not argue. He called it a challenge, and a massive undertaking, and then he told the story of how long he spent walking away from it.

“I passed on this film. I didn’t want to make this movie. And I was off the project for many years, and for those reasons,” he said. “And it was not until I was asked to read the script just to give my opinion. And I remember reading the script and really disliking the script, and I was like, oh man. And they were like, well, what would you do? And that’s when they got me. It’s like fishing. Well, if I was to do this, I would do it this way. I would do this.”

That question did what a direct offer had not. Monteverde came onto the project as a writer. He and his co-writers, Rod Barr and Leo Severino, did a full rewrite, work he said took another two years. The project itself, from the start, has been almost 12 years in motion. He has been on it for a good five. Official credits list Barr, Monteverde, and Severino as the writers. Severino and Eduardo Verástegui produced. Angel announced the film in 2024, when it was still titled *Bethlehem* and already shooting in Morocco, as a spiritual thriller built around Herod’s slaughter of the innocents.

“It was a very, very, very, very challenging film,” Monteverde said. “Absolutely one that I did feel at one point that, I was like, okay, if this is a way to go, this is not a bad way to go, because it became so challenging physically as well. Those kind of films where it required almost every single thing of yourself. And it was the most challenging film that I think I will ever make in my entire career.”

> *“That’s when they got me. It’s like fishing.”*

IF I FALL, I WILL DIE

The comparison he reached for was not another Bible picture. It was *Free Solo*, the documentary about a climb with no rope. He remembered thinking, that is exactly what I am going to be doing on this film.

“It’s really taking a very challenging task. But if I fall, I will die,” he said. “And that became a companion on this film, because, and not necessarily a physical death, even though that was still, but just the idea of not being able to finish this very ambitious vision.”

He made the terms plain to the company. His first speech to the crew, which he remembered as 400 or 500 people, was not a pep talk in the usual sense.

“I told everybody, if you give me 100 percent of yourself, there’s no way we can finish this film. If you give me 200 percent of yourselves, we may be able to get 50 percent of the film,” he said. “The other 50 percent is a collaboration.”

The beautiful part, he said, is that the film was made by people of all kinds of philosophies and beliefs. Whatever it is that everybody believes, this is a collaboration. Call it God, call it the universe, call it nature, whatever you want to call it. They were going to make themselves vulnerable, and they were going to collaborate with the elements, with the sun, with the wind.

“The whole film was designed around the elements,” he said. “And if the elements didn’t show up, well, the script says two characters come out of the perfect African sun. And if there’s no sun, then what? I had no other day to shoot. So it was really, really putting yourself in these very, very risky situations, because I knew that that was actually going to be part of the storytelling. It was that intensity from the filmmakers.”

A MOTION PAINTING

The memories from the set, he said, are great, and also strangely incomplete. The work was so intense that he almost went into survival mode. When he sees some of the shots now, he does not always remember being there. He was in a different mindset. This, he said, is the film that is different from anything he has ever done, or will ever do, because he does not want to replicate it.

The distinction he kept coming back to was simple, and then it was not. Filmmakers make motion pictures, a picture in motion, 24 or 30 frames, framed, lit, acted, shot. On this film, he started diving into paintings.

“A painting is, you really dive into the subtext behind the imagery. A painting can take a painter sometimes a year or two to paint it, because it’s really time, like one single stroke means something,” he said. “And I got together with my cinematographer and I said, shall we attempt this?”

They started designing very complex shots, then handed those designs to the production designer, who built the sets according to the shots. There was a lot of moving through time and space, and a lot of engineering on the set. Almost 95 percent of the film, he said, was shot practical. Maybe four or five shots are otherwise, the wide shots of the cities, “and you can tell them right away.” Besides that, they built it, they shot it, and they traveled in time, creating passages of time in the edits, with people running and changing in the back with doubles, in order to create the subtext of a spiritual side of the question: navigating through time and space without a cut.

Salfen asked what he told himself, on the way to set, that kept him on the path. Monteverde had been practicing something he called surrender, trying to let control go. The film, he said, was perfectly designed for years. By the time he arrived on set, the whole film was designed. He remembered saying, look, if I die, if you follow this, and his job was to show up and execute.

“But at the same time, like the great Orson Welles said, you have to leave room for divine accidents,” he said. “And that’s kind of like what I would say to myself. I will come in with all the preparation. But I knew that there were going to be things that were going to go a different direction. And I just had to surrender.”

He also reached for Sidney Lumet. Sometimes, Lumet said, the job of the director is to stay out of the way of what the movie wants. When things went outside of what Monteverde had envisioned, he tried not to fight them.

“It’s just kind of like surrendering to the current of the river, so you can flow the storytelling of this movie.”

SEVENTY-SEVEN DAYS

Salfen asked about a Hail Mary moment, the kind of leap a person has to take when the window is brief. Monteverde did not point to a single day. He pointed to all of them.

“Every day I would show up and say, today is the most difficult day of the entire shoot, but that was every day,” he said. “The greater the challenge, the greater the glory. So every day was like we achieved something, but it was just one day, and we shot for 77 days. So it was 77 days like that of a constant, like waking up and being like, okay, how are we going to achieve this?”

The shots he was trying to land were not ordinary coverage. He described very complex, very one-take work, including a seven-minute shot for which the lights of an entire town were being controlled as the camera moved, a collective effort he compared to a DJ playing with the lights. He did not even know, at the time, the amount of work that took: two or three months of pre-lighting, with lights two or three miles away just to light the rim of the mountains in the back.

“It was a collective work in order to be able to achieve the vision of this movie.”



Official still from Zero A.D.: The Birth of Christ. From the Angel Studios press room, labeled Zero A.D. Stills.

WORK WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

Salfen suggested the film might inspire other filmmakers, as Monteverde's other work has, and asked for advice for someone who has a story to tell. Monteverde was wary of the usual kind of advice. If Christopher Nolan were to give him advice, he joked, well, you get $300 million, so the advice is not going to travel.

"The greatest advice is work with what you have and really, really find your limits and create as much as possible," he said. "I've seen films that are shot for $100,000 that I love, and I see movies that have $200 million that I can't even finish. So it's not the budget. It's how much creativity can you put with what you have, and work with people that want to work with you."

He used to chase the rabbit, he said, wanting to work with this person or that person, including people who did not want to work with him. The turn was simple. Work with people who want to work with you, and you can create a stronger team. He would much prefer to work with people who believe in him than with people who are just there because of the paycheck.

"And I think the best advice sometimes comes from stillness. Go and spend some time by yourself and you'll know left or right. Sometimes the best advice is not to get advice, because then you can get confused. Let me see where I'm supposed to go here."

A FILM THAT SHOULD BEGIN WHEN THE MOVIE ENDS

What does he hope people take from it? Reflection, he said. We know the story, and we know it almost in a very superficial way. It almost became too cute: the birth happened in a cave, or in a stable. If this is the story, he wanted to take it as a story. There is a prophecy that this king is going to be born, but he is going to be born in conditions that are very unacceptable, almost extreme poverty, under a ruler who is the most violent ruler of the time, who sent to kill every child of two years old because he felt the prophecy was threatening his kingdom.

"It's to reflect, what is it that we celebrate? What's Christmas?" he said. "And I think this is a film to give a deeper meaning to these days. And it's a film that should begin when the movie ends. And that's the kind of cinema I like to make."

> *"It's a film that should begin when the movie ends."*

The line fits the rest of the conversation. He did not want the assignment. He got hooked by a question. He designed the film for years, then tried to get out of its way. He shot for 77 days as if each one might be the last, and he still talks about the work as a collaboration with forces he cannot fully command. The movie, in his telling, is not supposed to finish the thought. It is supposed to start one.

As for what comes next, he was careful. “I always say my next movie is the one that is actually getting made,” he said. He has four or five films he has written, sitting in different places, and it is a matter of which one goes. If *Zero A.D.* does very well, he said, he does have a film that is a very, very big movie. He just needs this one to open the path.

That path now runs through December 11, and through an audience he is openly asking to show up. The official title on the one-sheet is *Zero A.D.*, with the subtitle *The Birth of Christ*. The rating is PG-13, for strong violent content, bloody images, and thematic elements. The running time is 1 hour 55 minutes. Monteverde came up through film school in Austin, made *Bella*, which won the People’s Choice Award at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival, then *Little Boy*, then *Sound of Freedom*, the 2023 Angel Studios release that grossed $250 million worldwide, and *Cabrini* in 2024. This is the film he says he will never try to make again. It is also the one he almost never made at all.

FIND ZERO A.D.: THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

In theaters: December 11, 2026, in the United States and Canada, from Angel Studios. International dates are to be announced.

Tickets: angel.com/tickets/zero-ad

Official site: angel.com/movies/zero-ad

Official trailer: Zero A.D.: The Birth of Christ | Official Trailer | In Theaters Dec 11 | Angel

The film: Directed by Alejandro Monteverde. Written by Rod Barr, Alejandro Monteverde, and Leo Severino. Produced by Leo Severino and Eduardo Verástegui. Starring Deva Cassel, Sam Worthington, Ben Mendelsohn, Gael García Bernal, and Jim Caviezel. Running time: 1 hour 55 minutes. Rated PG-13 for strong violent content, bloody images and thematic elements.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.
