

THE RESURR

*...and screenwriter Joss Whedon
seems like just the man to restore
the "Alien" series to its old glory.*



h, I really suck," moans screenwriter Joss Whedon.

Never fear, though—this isn't the cry of an insecure, self-conscious artist criticizing every aspect of his craft. Rather, this is a frustrated Whedon making his second attempt to throw a piece of trash across his office into the wastebasket, and missing once again.

The NBA may never be calling on Whedon, but the "old, wizened" 32-year-old is definitely the man of the moment when it comes to adding a touch of quirkiness to the horror genre without sacrificing its inherently creepy charms. Currently, Whedon is serving as creator, writer, occasional director and executive producer of TV's sleeper hit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which blends comedy, horror and action much more successfully than the theatrical movie it's based on. Then, this Thanksgiving, there's the mother of all sci-fi shocker sequels, *Alien Resurrection*, from Whedon's script and directed by French auteur Jean-Pierre Jeunet (one-half of the team responsible for *The City of Lost Children* and *Delicatessen*).

"The first two words I have on *Alien Resurrection* are 'Jorge Saralegui,'" Whedon begins. "He is the executive at 20th Century Fox who said, 'It's time to do another *Alien*,' because he thinks it's still a franchise that can make the studio money, and besides, he also loves the *Alien* films. He knew me from the *Buffy* movie, so he asked if I was interested in writing the next one, and I wanted to do an *Alien* because I love those movies too. That also made it more difficult and the most daunting thing I've ever done, because I'm like every guy who sits there and says, 'I'll tell you what I would do if I were to write an *Alien* movie.' And then they said, 'OK, what would you do?' and I went, 'I, uh, hold me, it's so scary.'"

Once the initial shock wore off, Whedon was able to come up with a Ripley-less treatment that impressed the powers that be at Fox. "It was about Newt, androids and the Company," says Whedon. "I don't want to talk too much about it, because there are some things in there I might want to pirate at some point." However, as much as the studio wanted to embark on a new direction for the franchise, they were still cautious about taking that step without the series' flagship star, Sigourney Weaver. "They really felt that they wanted some continuity with the other movies, and that before they were going to commit they would see if they could interest Sigourney, because it

This time, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) gets closer to the Aliens than ever before—and in more ways than one.



Photos: Suzanne Tenner

Photos: Copyright 1997 20th Century Fox

ACTION

IS AT HAND



They're back and
just as slimy for an
Alien Resurrection.



In a coma for decades, cloned after hundreds of years—she's looking awfully good for her age.

Photos: Suzanne Tenner



It's hard to believe that anything could faze Ripley by this point.

would make them feel better," Whedon recalls.

So a script was commissioned from Whedon that would now include the heroic Alien-fighter. Of course, since Ripley dramatically died in *Alien*³, Whedon felt it would be a copout to simply skew the events in that film in order to service his premise in the new one. "I don't like to ignore things like they never happened," Whedon says. "I think *Alien*³ is a good movie, and the great thing about it is that they made their own film. They didn't get Joe Action-Hack in there to do a rehashed

sequel. It is as different from the other two as they are from each other. When Ripley sacrifices herself at the end of the film, it's very moving. But to screw with a reality like that and act like the previous movie didn't exist would not be fair."

Hence, Whedon thought long and hard about how to resurrect Ripley so that he, along with fellow die-hard *Alien* fans, wouldn't cringe at the idea. "Everyone was like, 'Oh, it's so cheesy that you're bringing her back from the dead,'" the writer recalls. "At first I felt the same way, but then I figured out how to make it so it wouldn't be cheesy. Then the whole movie became about what it's like to bring somebody back from the dead. Not only was that not cheesy, it was like, 'I've written a film about something that matters.'"

By now, most fans are aware that Ripley is "resurrected" by the Company through the cloning of her DNA, with the intent to extract the Alien offspring from her pregnant womb. The Company plans to raise their own little army of Aliens, but they don't expect one thing—the "meat by-product"

of Ripley, who has not emerged from the process exactly the way they would have liked. "The film is about humanity, self-invention and what makes us human and gives us a sense of identity," says Whedon. "I felt that if we were going to bring someone back from the dead, let's make a movie where death is the ultimate threat."

Luckily, this starting-off point greatly appealed to Weaver, who signed onto the project. Unexpectedly, her notes on the first draft of the script encouraged Whedon and company to push Ripley even further. "She said that she wanted to play this person who is on the edge morally," laughs Whedon, "and I was afraid she would shy away from that and want to make it prettier and more heroic. We did lose the shaved head, even though I quite liked that."

When it came to setting the tone for the rest of the story, Whedon looked back to the previous films for guidance. "We thought the second one worked the best because it was the biggest crowd-pleaser," he recalls. "The first one was visionary and terrifying, but we already know what to expect and we couldn't do much of that again. So we wanted to have more

"To screw with [an established] reality and act like the previous movie didn't exist would not be fair."

action mixed with the horror and amp up the suspense. We also didn't want to get too close to the third one, because I don't think that incredibly nihilistic integrity lends itself to sequels."

The next question of *Alien Resurrection*, according to Whedon, was "Who is the group?" "The first one was basically truck drivers, the second one was military guys and the third one was monk prisoners," Whedon notes. "What I wanted to see was *The Wild Bunch*. I wanted to see pirates, bad guys, Jesse James types, so we came up with a group of smugglers as our main characters. Because we were bringing Ripley back from the dead, that made her somewhat larger than life, so I wanted to heighten that a bit by making these other guys a little more colorful and badass and not dressed exactly the same."

In the film, the smugglers run a ragtag ship called the *Betty*, with Ripley on board unsure of whose side she's on. When the ship becomes infested with Aliens, our heroine steps back into action while trying to deal with her own mortality and coming to terms with being something not quite human. However, this time around the Aliens are much smarter than they ever were before, and this new level of intelligence makes stopping them even more daunting.

"Part of the mandate was to feed off the success of what worked in the other movies, but also make it fresh," says Whedon. "At first I was like, 'I must reinvent the film now, because every one of these movies has been so original,' but it wasn't like I could make mine a musical. Ultimately, I realized that I needed to tell a good story. There are plot twists, but what makes it interesting is that I have characters in here that I feel are new, even if they play to the standard parts in that *Platoon* movie genre. They at least feel real, have something to say and are going through something I care about emotionally."

The primary cast of characters includes:

—Call (Winona Ryder), one of the smugglers who has a hidden agenda—she's actually a terrorist sent to stop the Aliens.

—Elgyn (Michael Wincott), the leader of the group who takes care of his team at all costs.

—Vriess (Dominique Pinon), the ship's wheelchair-bound mechanic.

—Johnner (Ron Perlman), the "team asshole," according to Whedon. "He's very colorful and a prick, but that doesn't mean he's not good in a fight and won't watch your back. He's just a crappy guy, unapologetic and very self-serving."

—Dr. Wren (J.E. Freeman), who brings Ripley back from the dead.

—Gediman (Brad Dourif), another scientist involved in Ripley's cloning and the Alien breeding.

—DiStephano (Raymond Cruz), a soldier who falls in with the smugglers.


—Christie (Gary Dourdan), the second lieutenant, a "big-ass gunman who is the cool-headed team member."

—And finally Hillard (Kim Flowers), Elgyn's lover and "sort of a badass."

"One of the absolutes in an *Alien* movie

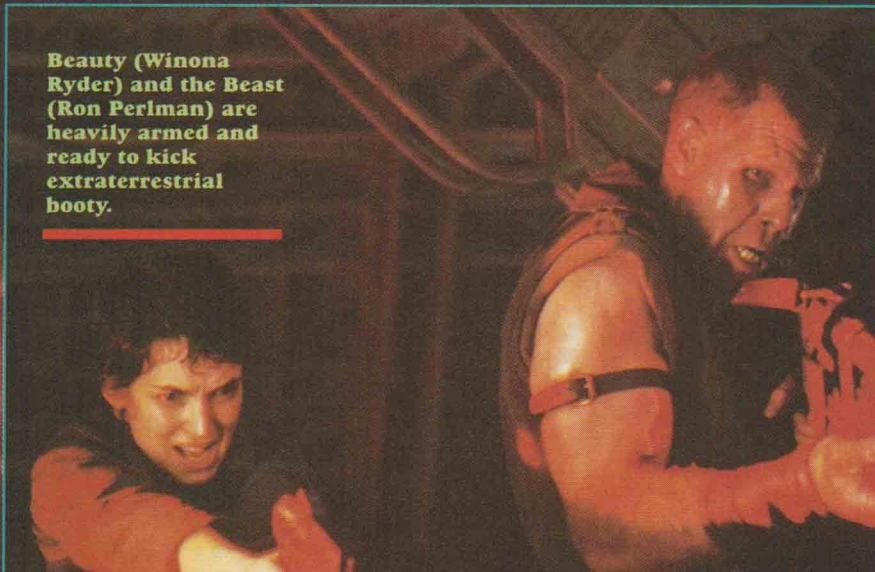
is that you shouldn't know exactly who is going to die," Whedon says. "When Tom Skerritt bought it in the first movie, I was like, 'But he's pretty. He's the hero. What's going on?' So I tried to breathe enough fire into all of [my characters] so you really don't know which of these guys is going to make it. I think what happens is that when people write about these movies, they write about one or two of the characters, and it becomes obvious who is going to survive."

As for the Aliens themselves, Whedon doesn't want to reveal too much, but he does note that there will be a good number of them, though not as many as in *Aliens*. "There are a bunch of them coming out of the woodwork, and I did come up with a few things people haven't seen before," the writer says. "There's also something we refer to as the 'Newborn,' and that's all I'm going to say for now. He's a real interesting fellow."



An Alien smiles for the camera—but who'd get close enough to take its picture?

Beauty (Winona Ryder) and the Beast (Ron Perlman) are heavily armed and ready to kick extraterrestrial booty.



Watch your step when you venture into deep space.

While the scripting stage might have come off without many hitches, a key problem that plagued the production was finding a suitable director. As in the past, a new, young visionary was sought to guide the series into fresh territory, but when the time came to begin production, all the visionaries were either a) working on other movies, as was the case with Anthony Waller (who was helming another sequel, *An American Werewolf in Paris*; see page 46) or b) hesitant about tackling such a big-budgeted American movie (i.e. *Trainspotting*'s Danny Boyle).

"Danny was attached for a while and we talked about changing some small stuff in the script," explains Whedon. "Then when Danny decided to quit, he said, 'It's there on the page, I don't know what there is to add,' which I'm sure he was just saying to be nice."

With Boyle's departure, *Alien Resurrection* was left director-less for quite some time until the idea came up to hire Jeunet. There was only one problem: He doesn't speak English. "He had a couple of translators on the movie, but basically he said 'action' and 'cut,' though he spoke more before the shoot was over," recalls Whedon. The writer adds that this ultimately didn't pose a problem with the crew (which was predominantly French), since the entire script was broken down into very specific storyboards so that everyone knew exactly what would be shot every day, right down to the camera angles. "Jeunet is very commercial, and I mean that in the best sense," Whedon says. "I think this movie, for all its strangeness, has been made very accessible and very exciting because of him."

The script wound up being pared down significantly from Whedon's "kitchen-sink" early versions. "I tend to give them everything in the first couple of drafts," the writer reveals. "I'll do every variation and punch so they can pick and choose the setpieces and characters they want, and other things can be cut out so it won't be incredibly expensive. We really wanted to make a film that was intimate, too; we wanted to give the feeling that we're trapped with this small group of people. So we didn't create this huge over-the-top escape in the way you would plan it for Superman or James Bond or something like that."

The most surprising aspect of Whedon's relationship with *Alien*

"One of the absolutes in an *Alien* movie is that you shouldn't know exactly who is going to die."

Resurrection is the fact that no one rewrote him along the way—an unusual occasion in this day of big-budget writing by committee. "I can say rather emphatically that nobody else has touched the script," he says. "I did some work with Jean-Pierre straightening out things, cutting some stuff for budget reasons and working out a more feasible, shootable ending, but the structure and theme stayed pretty much intact."

The major changes, if any, were cosmetic in nature, according to Whedon. "One of the characters I wrote had no legs," he explains. "Jean-Pierre wanted to put Dominique Pinon in that role, so I just wrote in the script that his legs didn't work. He's the ship's mechanic, but he's in a wheelchair, which creates some major problems when they're trying to get out of there."

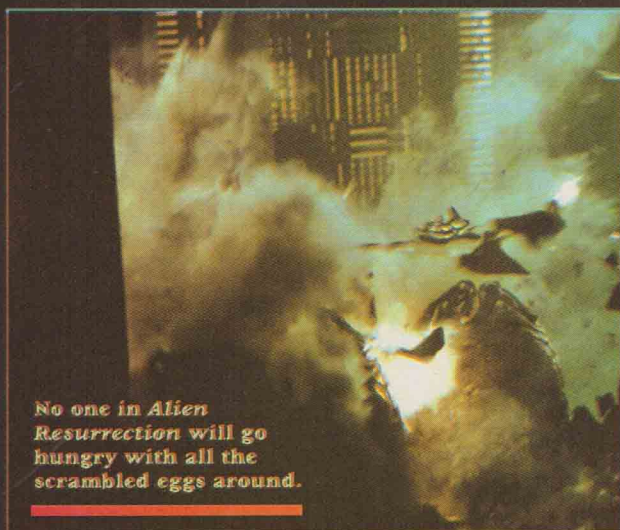
As *Alien Resurrection* is readied for its late November release, Whedon has been busy preparing for the second season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which received rave critical notices in a season glutted with TV genre fare trying to capture that *X-Files* vibe. "Part of the reason I wanted to do *Buffy* was to do a high-school horror show," says Whedon, who notes that there are several major changes in store for the forthcoming season, including two new recurring villains named Spike and Drucilla, whom Whedon describes as "the Sid and Nancy of the vampire set." "We're going to try to do a bit more of everything this season," says Whedon. "I want to get a little more money to amp up the stunts and make the action work better. There also some characters I really like, such as Angel and Cordelia, who are becoming more popular, and we'll be featuring them a little bit more as well."

Though Whedon comes from a family of TV comedy writers (his grandfather wrote for *The Donna Reed Show*, *The Dick Van Dyke*

Show and *Mayberry R.F.D.*, while his father worked on *Alice*, *Golden Girls* and *Benson*), he decided to follow his own genre enthusiasms when he entered the business. "If the stuff I do works, it works because I'm a fan," he says. "I've loved these worlds, and to fi-



Some of the newcomers to this series find out the hard way about that acidic *Alien* blood.



No one in *Alien Resurrection* will go hungry with all the scrambled eggs around.

nally be a part of them, like with *Alien Resurrection*, is incredible." Yet he's found it quite a challenge lately to juggle his big-screen career with his new full-service TV executive producer position. "I really don't have time anymore to write the spec scripts I would like to," says Whedon. "In fact, I have no time to sleep or eat. I dimly remember I married someone at some point and she's very attractive, but..."

There has been a little time for

Whedon to squeeze in a rewrite of a spec screenplay he sold years ago entitled *Afterlife*, noting that "a worse thing than rewriting is being rewritten. *Afterlife* is a dramatic thriller that's at Columbia, and they hired Jean-Claude Van Damme behind my back after they bought it, so I walked. It's no offense to Jean-Claude, but Linda Hunt would be more appropriate for the lead. I thought it was such a bad idea, but now there's this whole new regime there and I'm rewriting it for them."

Regarding the state of horror, Whedon is quite pleased that interest in the genre is spreading beyond just the hardcore fans, particularly with the recent success of *Scream*. "They really stopped making horror movies for a while," he says. "I think the problem is that a horror movie is about what's going to happen next, and it doesn't lend itself to mass repeat viewing the way other films do. So they fell by the wayside, but all you need is an intelligent person or two like a Kevin Williamson or a Wes Craven to say, 'You know what, there are movies out there to be made in the genre,' and it's not some stupid thing. People forget that you can make a good movie, and there is a need for that."

And Whedon couldn't be more pleased at the reaction the teaser trailer for *Alien Resurrection* has been generating, hoping the film can continue the upward trend of scary films making a comeback in the marketplace. "People cheered when the trailer came on at this theater I was at, and that makes me happy, because it means they really do want to see another *Alien* movie."

Meanwhile, Whedon is back to doing what he doesn't do best—vainly attempting shots across his office into the garbage can. By this interview's close, he's 0 for 4. "As you can see," he concludes with a devilish smile, "I gave up basketball for my writing."