

There are some things in this life that seem to have always been here, which carry such a level of perfection that we as mere mortals cannot possibly fathom that they were created by human hands. For genre fans, one of these wonders exists in the form of a little movie called *Predator*.

Over the years, various filmmakers

guez's Troublemaker Studios in Austin, TX. "I had the poster on my wall, so it made a big impression. And being a fat kid with braces named Nimrod, I was very much into hiding; movies were a way to do that."

Antal previously helmed the under-rated *Vacancy* and *Armored* (featuring Laurence Fishburne, who also stars in *Predators*), but this journey into a proven

and I thought, 'How can we return to the jungle without feeling like we're repeating everything?'

"So my whole pitch to Fox," he continues, "was to take it to another planet—where, when you see [the *Predators* game] preserve, you understand why they gravitated toward the rain forest in the first movie; it felt like something they had

PREDATORS IN THE MIDST

By DREW TINNIN

have taken a hammer and chisel to the towering sphinx that is John McTiernan's 1987 Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle, slowly chipping away at it. These vandals have been responsible for *Predator 2* (which didn't hurt *too* badly, even given the dreadlocked Rastas and unwelcome urban landscape), and the unfortunate duo of *Alien vs. Predator* and *Aliens vs. Predator—Requiem*.

And now, *Predators*, directed by Nimrod Antal and produced by Robert Rodriguez, is set to uncloak July 9 from Fox. But before you throw up your arms in the face of what seems like another cash-in, consider what would happen if the right group of people were part of this project—people who cared about the source material and wanted to truly expand the mythology. Better still, what if a full-blown, self-professed film geek took the directing reins?

"I went to see the first *Predator* when I was 14," Antal tells Fango during a break on the new movie's shoot at Rodri-



It's back to the jungle as everyone's favorite alien hunters target a fresh crop of human prey.

at home, or could be recreated. That was something that Arnold [Schwarzenegger] responded to when I talked with him. He didn't care for the second *Predator* at all. Ultimately, he didn't do it, but people just liked that feeling of the first movie."

What does separate this new chapter from the original is the characters and their relationships. Gone is the elite military unit; instead, *Predators*' storyline (scripted by Alex Litvak and Michael Finch) forces a group of total strangers—all dangerous in their own right—to band together in order to survive. They've been plucked out of their day-to-day lives from different corners of the world, deemed worthy opponents in the *Predators*' eyes. And they all have secrets, each equally compelling.

"That was sort of the criteria I had with the writers," Rodriguez explains. "If we were going to bring in all these individual characters, I wanted to make sure that each one is strong enough—even if it's only hinted at—that the audience

likes them or is interested enough that they would want to follow him or her in their own movie. Each of them could be the star of their own film, because they have a rich enough mythology. It's a great jumping-off point."

When news of Fishburne joining the cast as marooned character Noland surfaced, some fans expressed disappointment, since the role seemed like a perfect cameo opportunity for Schwarzenegger's heroic Dutch. "It could've been," Rodriguez admits, "and it would've worked fine. What's nice about it being someone else is that it expands the world even more. If it was a guy we'd already seen, we would think, 'OK, that must have been the limit of [the *Predators*]' fishing trips.' Laurence came in and is not playing anybody you've seen before. It's just captivat-

Good thing for Royce (Adrien Brody) that there are Earth weapons on hand on this alien planet.

franchise is new territory. "It's a bigger film, and working with visual effects and prosthetics is something I hadn't done in the earlier movies, so that's exciting. It has been an awesome experience, and a big deal for me to be given this chance, so I'm very happy and grateful to be involved."

An equally rabid cinephile, Rodriguez has been attached to *Predators* as far back as the early '90s, when he wrote a first incarnation of the screenplay. "Originally, I just wanted to get back to the jungle," he says, "because that's what I loved about the first one. They had gone to the city [in] *Predator 2*,



ing, and the audience is really going to dig this. You want to see *his* movie."

When Fango visits Troublemaker Studios, most of the actors are gearing up for a grueling night shoot, and the production is rushing to assure they have all the takes they need. While we marvel at the creature design art and storyboards plastered on the walls, members of the cast are ushered in to talk about their *Predators* roles. One of the more mysterious of the group is a Yakuza samurai known as Hanzo; elusive and covered in Japanese mob tattoos, he's played by Louis Ozawa Changchien.

"Hanzo is not very talkative," the actor says. "He's a man of few words. There's also a glove for my character that hides two missing fingers, and has a crest on it with a hidden meaning." Once the tattoos have been applied after an almost three-and-a-half-hour process, Ozawa feels truly transformed: "Having those done is like putting on a costume. It's like, all right, now I'm ready for battle!"

Brazilian actress Alice Braga already has experience with sci-fi action from *I Am Legend* and *Repo Men*; here, she plays a sniper named Isabelle who is haunted by



Predators' "heroes" may have killed before—but not nearly as many as the monstrous villains.



Nothing in Royce or Isabelle's (Alice Braga) training prepared them for the combat they now face.

her past. "Nimrod gave me a little manual that the Army hands out to snipers," she reveals, "and that was great, because it explains the skills and what it takes and how the training process is. It told me a lot about my character and how tough she needs to be. You can't be emotionally attached to anything. All those little details helped to build the role. She's kind of a tough cookie."

Also part of the truly international cast is Oleg Taktarov, one of Russia's most popular movie stars and a former UFC champion, who plays Nikolai in *Predators*. "He has a friendship with Edwin [played by Topher Grace], and we exchange some nice moments. I kind of tried to put the best of all Russian characters from movies like *Battleship Potemkin* into my guy. Even my tank top is like a



Do you really *need* Arnold to return when you've got bad-ass Laurence Fishburne as one of your leads?

Russian Navy type."

What fans will be most excited to learn is that Nikolai's presence involves the return of the now-iconic Gatling-type Minigun that Jesse Ventura wields in the

"We all knew going in that attempting to recreate the first film and its characters would be a huge mistake."

—Nimrod Antal, director

original film. Unfortunately for his comrades, however, one of the *Predators* has one too. "Yeah, but that one is more of a laser," Taktarov notes. "Mine is heavier, more than 100 pounds I have to carry around with all the ammunition." Although Nikolai will likely resonate with audiences regardless, the actor knows he has a responsibility to handle the weapon with style and flair. "I understood that, and I'm carrying it with pride. It's like a torch I'm bringing from one movie to the other."

Fango then corners a bloody, beaten-down, wrist-sprained Grace, and the veteran of TV's *That '70s Show* quickly acknowledges how odd the decision to cast him as disgraced physician Edwin seemed at first. He's not allowed to elaborate, but does discuss what it has been like to take on such an uncharacteristically physical role. "That's the thing; people say, 'You've kind of been in an action movie [Grace portrayed

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