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ALIEN COVENANT

EXCLUSIVE: THE BEAST IS BACK IN RIDLEY SCOTT'S BACK-TO-BASICS CHILLER!



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NIGHTMARE

AFTER YEARS OF HESITATION, RIDLEY SCOTT IS ONCE AGAIN UNLEASHING THE SPACE-BEAST THAT SPAWNED A MILLION BAD DREAMS. BUT CAN *ALIEN: COVENANT* BRING TERROR BACK TO THE *ALIEN* FRANCHISE?

WORDS HELEN O'HARA



"It was like the shark in *Jaws*," considers Ridley Scott of the monster he first unleashed back in 1979. "You don't show it too often. Really make him exclusive. I was trying to keep the creatures pulled way back, show enough of them to make you squeamish. You're gradually building the tension to the right moments. Then you let 'em have it."

He laughs, because there is a trace of sadism beneath the 79-year-old director's distinguished exterior. On the set of this year's *Alien: Covenant*, Scott merrily got someone to chase his cast when he needed them to flee in terror, and could sometimes be seen cackling over some detail of the gore-strewn scenery. If the chief criticism of his 2012 *Prometheus* is that it wasn't scary enough, *Alien: Covenant* aims to prove the director still knows how to send shivers down our spine — while, incidentally, cracking spines with a brand-new birthing monster.

"It really traumatised me!" recalls star Katherine Waterston of seeing said monster, the 'Neomorph', in final footage from the film. "You'd think you'd be prepared if you read the script, but I'm not ever prepared for Ridley's antics. Ridley gets genuine pleasure out of terrifying people."

Covenant's roots lie in the original *Alien* film, and the mystery of the derelict craft where the Alien eggs were discovered. To Scott, the Xenomorph always seemed *designed*, a "bio-mechanoid weapon" that could clear a planet of life in a matter of weeks. But who would build such a thing? And why? These questions shaped the prequel, *Prometheus*, but its answers did not reach the Alien itself. Scott nixed the creature's inclusion, considering it played out after four *Alien* films. The director

likes to evolve, to try new things. Even for this sequel, he initially resisted. "The beast is done. Cooked," he told Yahoo in 2014.

But by the following year Scott had had a change of heart, and decided there was life in HR Giger's incomparably terrifying creation yet. "One of the great joys Ridley had [on this] was getting back in touch with his old friend, the Alien monster," says screenwriter John Logan, who came aboard in late 2015. "He was delighted, from our first conversation, to really double down on the beast. I think Ridley wanted a change-up after *Prometheus*, which is a brooding and expansive and sort of theological movie. First thing I said was, 'Look, I love all the philosophical ideas, the grandeur, but I want to write a really scary horror movie. I want to write a rollercoaster ride.'"

Scott agreed, and the two set to work in earnest to make an *Alien* film that would develop *Prometheus'* philosophy, while filling outer space with screaming once again.

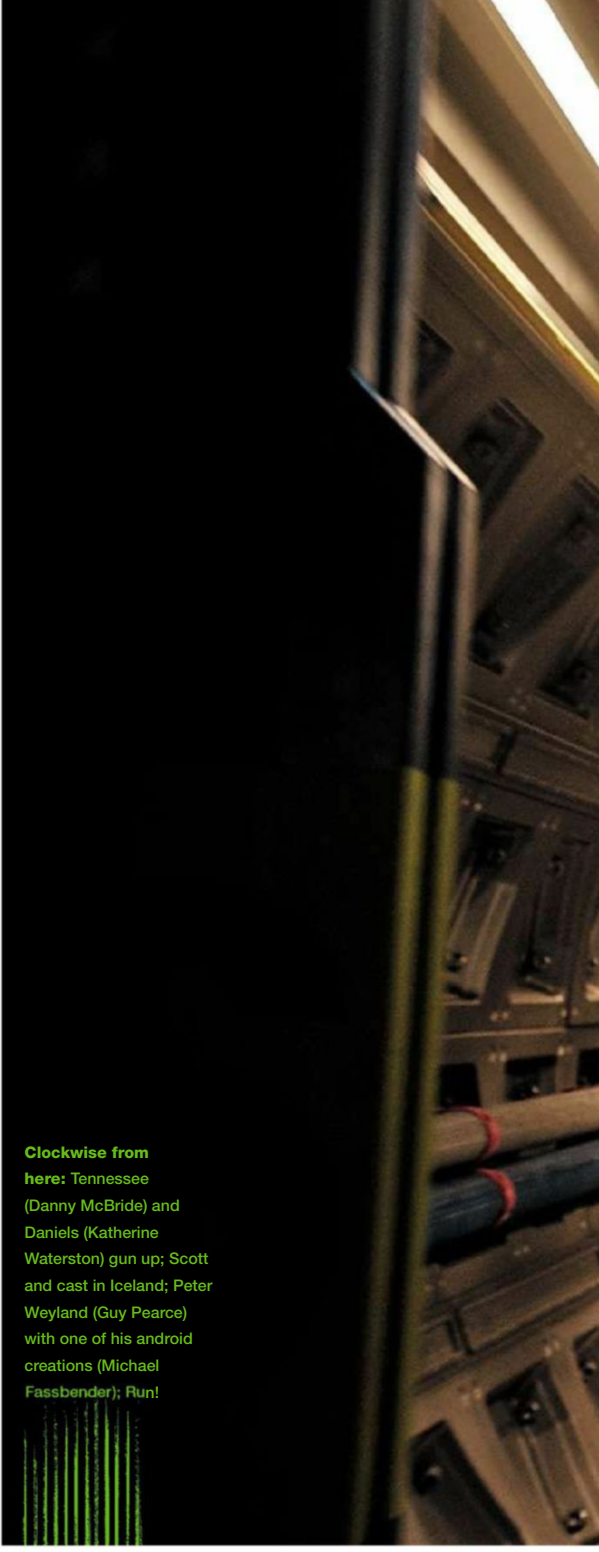
THE CONSTRUCTION OF ^{their}

rollercoaster brings *Empire* to Fox Studios, Sydney, one warm autumn day in late May 2016. The complex, a collection of handsome 1930s buildings, was originally the Royal Agricultural Society's barns, where farmers brought herds for exhibition and sale. But *Alien: Covenant's* livestock is human rather than bovine. The spaceship *Covenant* carries 2,000 colonists in stasis, plus a small crew to populate a new world, Origae-6, a decade after the events of *Prometheus*. When the ship picks up a distress call from an unexplored planet, they set off on a rescue mission that leads to acid-blooded trouble.

Michael Fassbender returns in a dual role, as *Prometheus'* dubious android survivor David and his descendant Walter, a member of the *Covenant* crew ("My first question was, 'Do I get paid double?'" Fassbender quips). David was last seen as a severed head but, explains the actor, that was no great obstacle. "I always knew that we had a place to go with the head because we also had a body. He's a synthetic, so it wouldn't be a crazy thing for him to get reattached." Fellow survivor Shaw (Noomi Rapace) presumably helped restore his bonce, but somewhere in the intervening decade she disappeared, for reasons the film will make clear.

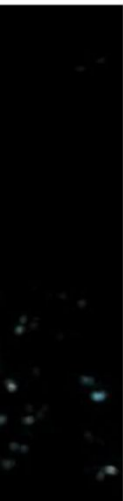
Walter, like David before, keeps the ship running while his crew sleeps. James Franco's affable Branson is captain, with Billy Crudup's devout Oram his first officer. What's unusual about the *Covenant* is that the entire crew is composed of married couples, off to populate their new planet. "Pilgrim fathers set sail across the Atlantic to the New World," notes Scott. "Probably a lot of them were married. It's the same idea here."

So Franco's Branson is married to Waterston's Daniels, third in command (like Ripley in the original film), and Crudup's Oram to Carmen Ejogo's biologist Karine. Pilot Tennessee (Danny McBride), a close buddy



Clockwise from here: Tennessee (Danny McBride) and Daniels (Katherine Waterston) gun up; Scott and cast in Iceland; Peter Weyland (Guy Pearce) with one of his android creations (Michael Fassbender); Run!





of Daniels', is paired with fellow pilot Faris (Amy Seimetz), and communications head Upworth (Callie Hernandez) with Ricks (Jussie Smollett). Finally among the core cast, there's a security team led by another married couple, Sergeants Lope (Demián Bichir) and Hallet (Nathaniel Dean).

"It raises the stakes," says McBride of the marital links. "As opposed to everyone [being] in it for themselves, they have someone they care about in danger as well." That's true from the earliest scenes, when disaster of a non-creature kind strikes the Covenant, but it grows ever more acute as the story progresses. By all accounts, Logan's screenplay is calibrated for maximum terror, doling out death with sadistic ease. "[Characters] have to die at the time that serves the drama," he shrugs. "We spend a lot of time mapping everything out. If this person gets infected *then*, how long will it take for the mutant to gestate? These Alien monsters don't just pop up overnight."

In *Alien*, what stuck was the sense that these Nostromo crewmates were real people, just in space. This crew shares the same matter-of-fact competence, although they have a greater sense of purpose. They are pioneers sailing into the vast unknown, the lives of 2,000 frozen shipmates in their hands, an entire civilisation ahead. And so Scott needs us to care about the characters aboard the vessel, not just the spectacular hellscapes they're about to face.

"The whole notion that Ridley is primarily a visual filmmaker is ridiculous," claims Logan. "Any writer he's ever worked with will tell you he's about the play, the characters. He loved the fact that I wrote really dense, complicated scenes. And he's rigorous about making sure that, in a movie where people die, it has to matter."

ALIEN: COVENANT IS the first film in the franchise with significant outdoor scenes and vegetation. So the first two weeks of filming were spent in New Zealand, with the cast bonding at a remote beauty spot called Milford Sound. Rudyard Kipling once called it "the eighth wonder of the world", but it's rarely seen a film crew visit, given its inaccessibility and near-constant rain. Scott, naturally, leapt at the challenge, shooting through the downpour. "When it rains, hundreds of waterfalls appear," he marvels. "Beautiful, wonderful place. The only thing is that at twilight, you get midges. It's a pain in the ass."

Further sets, ruins of the Engineer civilisation scattered with bodies, were built at Potts Hill near Sydney. "I don't like that location," admits Fassbender. "It has a grey feeling to it, almost like the clouds are hanging over it all the time." But Fox Studios is the film's base. It's bordered by two stadia dedicated to Australian rules football, cricket and rugby, and on the set everyone wants to wrap well

before tonight's Aussie rules match (Sydney Swans versus North Melbourne) causes traffic chaos. Fortunately, Scott moves fast, shooting with four cameras and generally getting what he wants on the first or second take. By lighting for multiple angles and hiring actors ready on take one, he does what many films would call a day's work by 11am. "That's how we do something like this in 74 days, not 130," he shrugs.

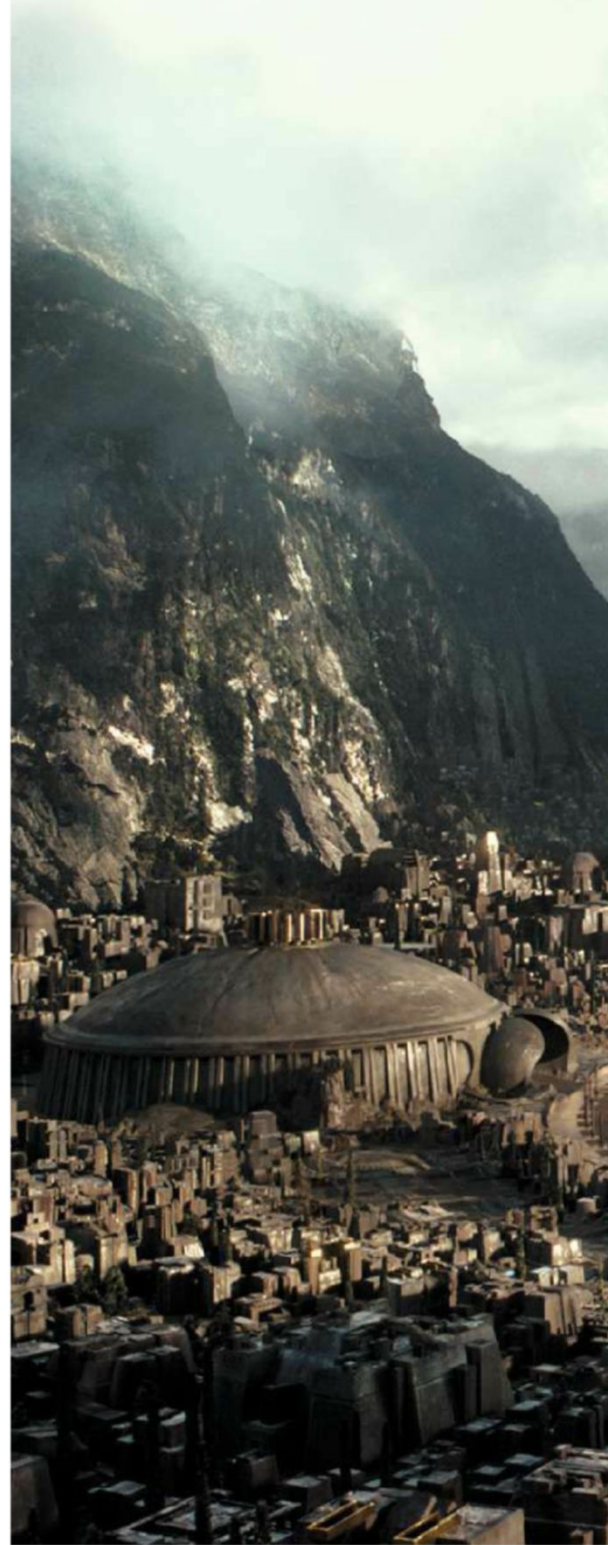
The largest interior set is the Covenant's terraforming bay on Stage 7, a vast space centred on an enormous vehicle simply called 'The Truck'. Today, however, Scott is filming on Stage 1, a pitch-black space that causes instant fear of lurking Xenomorphs. There's a small pool of light at one end of the stage, spilling onto a corridor wrapped around a small, angled medical bay. Bichir's Lope lies on the operating table while Hernandez' Upworth treats his scratched face ("They will work in special effects, and it will look even grodier!" Bichir cheerily explains later). McBride's Tennessee alternately holds Lope's hand and checks his drip. Things are tense, but it's under control.

After a quick rehearsal and a couple of takes, Scott has what he needs. Across the stage, construction resumes on a 'Hall Of Heads', Engineer faces looming like Easter Island statues, with steps leading into nothing between them. "I don't know if you call the Engineers a race, but they're a civilisation," says production designer Chris Seagers. "We discovered the wheel and fire. The Engineers discovered a method of travel, something magnetic. This Hall Of Heads thing, was there a hierarchy? How did they store information? Was this a library? There's a whole other movie here."

Later in the day, on Stage 1, something has gone horribly wrong in Medical. A crew member's body lies on the floor; blood drips down a window. The medical monitors, blinking green before, now flash red. Waterston's Daniels and one of her shipmates grab guns and come running. "Walter, location of unidentified lifeform. Any location at all!" yells Daniels desperately. There is a slight pause. "Good!" beams Scott, seemingly happiest when chaos reigns.

"I DON'T REMEMBER not knowing *Alien*," says Waterston. "I saw it too young. There's a vague memory, like I'm recovering from [some] sort of trauma." Stepping in as the female lead of an *Alien* movie can't be easy, given the long shadow of Sigourney Weaver's Ripley, but while Waterston shares some of the qualities Weaver brought — intelligence, wary grace, height — Daniels is a distinct proposition. "What I really like about her is she's sharp," says Waterston. "She's very concerned about the safety of the crew and the mission, but she's not [self-] righteous at all."

Waterston studied real astronauts, picking up on their psychological resilience as well as





Clockwise from here:
Could this be the Engineers' homeworld?; Fassbender on Fassbender; A horde of Engineers look to the sky; A figure, unleashing pods previously seen in *Prometheus*.



details about cutting hair in zero-G with a sort of modified Hoover. That partially inspired her Joan Of Arc-style bowl cut, though she also modelled it on Ezra Miller's crop in *Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them*, which she — perhaps alone in the world — thought was “really cool”.

Another *Alien* staple is the synthetic androids, one per ship, that keep things running while the humans are frozen in their hypersleep. In this instalment, however, there are two. Both may look like Michael Fassbender, but they're so profoundly distinct that he treated them as two separate roles he happened to be working on concurrently.

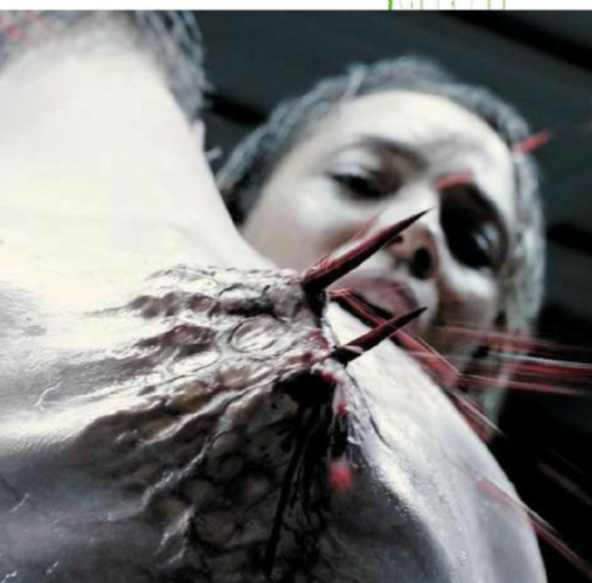
Newcomer Walter is more robotic. “The technology within [Walter] will be more advanced,” says Fassbender, “but his ability to have an emotional response to a painting, or a relationship, is not the same.” Fassbender modelled Walter's logical attitudes on *Star Trek*'s Spock, and his body language on impeccably elegant designer Tom Ford. Then he simply avoided reacting to anything like his crewmates. “I'm sure it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be paid to *not* deliver emotion,” says Waterston drily of her co-star. “You don't realise how many expectations you have from a human being: I smile, you smile. [But] when we're all terrified, we look to him. Nothing! There's a bit where we're running, and everyone else is scrambling and panting, and his knees are popping up like they're on strings, effortlessly! It's uncanny.”

Walter is loyal to his crewmates — it's in his programming — but the returning David has no such allegiance. David was a prototype, once lavished with care by his creator Peter Weyland (Guy Pearce), only to see his father humbled by the Engineers. “I found that character really galvanising,” says Logan of David. “My approach was to create a backstory with Weyland [glimpsed in the trailer and developed in the film's opening scenes], and the disappointment David has with humanity over the years, finally letting that go deep into his psyche in a very damaging way. Every great story needs a great antagonist, and David in a way is the antihero of these *Alien* movies.”

David's chambers on the planet show someone who has been studying life cycles and evolution. “Idle hands do the devil's work,” warns Scott. “This AI believes he's marginally superior to his creator, which creates an emotional reaction called anger. They've made him way too intelligent and way too sensitive. That was the error you'll find out [about] in *Covenant*.”

So the film's philosophical issues are argued out between the two synthetics, Fassbender playing against himself (“*Finally!*” he laughs) as David tries to win over his peer, driven by his own vanity. David witnessed a cycle of creation in *Prometheus* — Engineers, humans and synthetics — and saw his own creator destroyed. The obvious next step is to create life of his own to complete the circle.





Clockwise from top left: Do androids dream of electric clippers? A long-haired David (Fassbender); A blood-spattered Xenomorph; Carmen Ejogo's Karine faces a spinebuster; Daniels lets rip; Someone's having a bad day.

WHICH BRINGS US to the real stars of the show: the HR Giger Xenomorphs that have made hearts nearly burst out of chests since Scott's first film. Die-hard fans will notice the Aliens in this film don't look *quite* like their 1979 predecessor, but only because the monsters are closer to Giger's original art. As Conor O'Sullivan, head of the creature shop that designed both hydraulic and suit-based versions of the villain, explains, "The classic Alien was pipes and tubes; this is more naturalistic. Everything Giger did was very elegant, and sometimes in the past the Alien has got lost in its horror story, trying to make a creature that is more and more horrifying. We've got back to this horrible elegance."

Modern technology has made certain things easier: you can 3D-print Alien eggs and make endless replacements for the fragile, semi-translucent Alien skulls. They've also made extraordinarily realistic corpses for certain doomed crew members, to the point where Katherine Waterston, waiting on set one day without her glasses, became quite concerned that one of her colleagues was standing in an uncomfortable, hunched position between scenes. She went to check he was alright, only to realise 'he' was a straw-filled dummy. By *Empire's* visit, midway through the shoot, O'Sullivan's shelves are stacked with similar "corpses" — and one of the creatures responsible, the Neomorph, stands coquettishly nearby.

The Neomorph is a small, pale fiend, straddling the exact line between horrifying and cute. It was inspired by Scott's fondness for nature documentaries on living nightmares like goblin sharks. "Some of those nature videos are so stomach-churning that they don't pay me enough to watch them," shudders Logan. "But Ridley will see something to do with insects swarming, for example, which eventually finds its way into a movie. Usually there's some sort of grotesqueness we find interesting."

Scott will, it seems, be holding back some of his gruesome notions for future instalments: he is planning at least two more films before linking up with the original *Alien*. "Right now we've got a ten-page synopsis," he reveals. "John Logan's doing it. And we know where we're going with it." He is not ruling out the idea of using a digitally de-aged Sigourney Weaver to bring back Ripley: "You could do that," he allows. And Logan promises "different mutations" of the Alien to come.

In the meantime, the focus is on making audiences so scared they'll want to cry for Mother. The cast are convinced this objective has been met. "I honestly feel this will make *Prometheus* work more for some people," says McBride. "It's interesting what that film set up, but to me this is a straight horror movie."

Prometheus may have put substance above scares, but *Covenant* hopes to restore the Xenomorph to its rightful place in our worst nightmares. The beast is back. Get ready to scream. 📀

ALIEN: COVENANT IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 MAY

BADGES OF HORROR

CREW PATCHES FROM THE ALIEN SERIES, WITH THE BLOOD WIPED OFF

ILLUSTRATIONS JUSTIN METZ



ALIEN (1979) — The USCSS Nostromo shoulder patch, designed by Ron Cobb, was inspired by a 19th-century French army uniform button.



ALIENS (1986) — The Sulaco's Colonial Marines are, this insignia reveals, the 2nd battalion of the 9th regiment.



ALIEN 3 (1992) — Worn by staff in the Fiorina 161 correctional unit, its motto nods to the penal colony's monastic leanings.



ALIEN RESURRECTION (1997) — 200 years after the events of *Alien 3*, Earth's armies have come together to form United Systems Military.



PROMETHEUS (2012) — There are notes of foreboding to this patch. That winged being might just be Icarus, another doomed hero.



ALIEN: COVENANT (2017) — These figures are a nod to the archetypal image of the Ark Of The Covenant, as seen in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN