

ON SET

BACK IN BLACK

Nearly four decades after bursting onto the scene, Ridley Scott is re-engineering the iconic xenomorph for an *Alien* prequel/sequel that's taking the sci-fi horror series back to its fright-filled roots. Total Film takes an express elevator to hell – aka the Sydney set of **ALIEN: COVENANT** – and comes face to face with a perfect organism. 🐛

WORDS JORDAN FARLEY

ALIEN: COVENANT

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MAKING OF



Ridley Scott remembers Shepperton Studios like he's just woken up from hypersleep. He remembers making movie history with *Alien* in 1979. Above all, he remembers his idle hands. How his own digits doubled for the finger-like legs of the facehugger twitching inside the egg. How he drew the film's storyboards while studio

suits ummed and ahned over the budget. How he would improvise and improve set-ups until seconds before shooting, all because sitting around – a common experience on film sets – would drive him “crazy”.

If Ridley Scott's own *Alien* memories are inextricably associated with idle hands, it's only right that the xenomorph itself, as revealed in *Alien: Covenant*, should be the product of a devil's workshop. “Why on earth would anyone make such a creature, and to what purpose?” Scott ponders, speaking to *Total Film* about the question that inspired him to bring sci-fi cinema's deadliest E.T. back to the big screen. It's a mystery that has nagged at the



78-year-old filmmaker's mind for half his life. “Did it come about by accident... or was it by design?”

One thing's for certain: intelligent design has rarely figured into the ad hoc evolution of the *Alien* series. Unleashed on an unsuspecting public in 1979, the genre-defining haunted-house-in-space horror has since mutated into an equally influential space marine actioner, a bleak prison planet slasher, an absurdist

nightmare and bland crossover franchise fodder. Scott famously returned to the series he launched in 2012 with *Prometheus*, an ambitious but flawed prequel about the origins of humanity and the identity of the elephantine Space Jockey. The R-rated horror grossed more than \$400 million worldwide, but was missing a key ingredient – the pharyngeal-jawed, razor-tailed, acid-blooded xenomorph. *Alien: Covenant* – a film that's equal parts *Alien* prequel and *Prometheus* sequel – isn't making the same mistake.

When *TF* meets the legendary Brit director on *Covenant*'s drizzly Sydney set, we're still recovering from our first close encounter. It's June 2016, and after eight days of location work in Milford Sound, New Zealand, production has shifted to Potts Hill in Australia – a decommissioned water reservoir previously home to Immortan Joe's Citadel in *Mad Max: Fury Road* and the bloody Okinawa battleground in *Hacksaw Ridge*. At one end of the vast, open-air space stands a colossal stone staircase littered with the scorched corpses of countless Engineers, the once great civilisation quite literally reduced to ashes by an act of mass destruction. At the other, surrounded by a mammoth

SHIP HAPPENS

On board with the crew of the *Covenant*, which is carrying 2,000 married colonists.





Katherine Waterston's Daniels with Michael Fassbender's Walter, just one of the androids he plays in *Covenant*...

'THE FIRST THING I DID WAS GO TO THE CREATURE WORKSHOP'

DANNY MCBRIDE

blue screen, hangs a section of the *Covenant*'s dropship, the short-range vessel mounted on top of an articulated 30-tonne gimbal that can pivot with the wiggle of a remote control. Today, Scott is filming a scene featuring Katherine Waterston's chief terraformist (and odds-on final girl favourite) Daniels. After being strapped in by the waist, a violent jolt knocks Daniels off her feet. As she slides perilously close to the edge, Waterston is able to cling on with her fingertips before "Cut! And reset". Take after take Waterston repeats the fall, before being joined by another crew member... holding the disembodied head of a xenomorph on a stick.

It's a faintly ridiculous sight, but the implication is clear: Daniels is in deep trouble, her planetary evac about to be thwarted by a killer critter whose structural perfection is matched only by



its hostility. Later in the day we glimpse the full majesty of *Covenant*'s new xeno as dancer Andrew Crawford emerges in a full-body foam latex costume, complete with a 30 kilogram animatronic head. Standing almost 9ft tall on built-in stilts, and covered in slimy K-Y jelly, he cuts an intimidating figure, even in the unforgiving Australian daylight. CG will still be used to convincingly realise the xenomorph's inhuman athleticism, but bringing back a man in a suit was "essential", according to Scott.

I learned a lot from the very first *Alien*," the director says, sidling up to *TF* while the special effects crew set up for another take, his hands never idle. "Sometimes the physicality of an actor doing something odd that you haven't thought of or you don't want to do digitally is useful. So whenever you can, always shoot the monster. Otherwise, you've got a horrible green picture. That'll kill you."

Killing, of course, comes naturally to *Alien*'s titular creature, much of which it did from the shadows in 1979, Scott famously hiding his monster from sight for much of the film. Here he's taking a different approach, giving viewers "a good old look" – the only avenue after 30 years of over-exposure. Naturally, everyone on set has a story about their first time. For Danny McBride, a life-long fan of the series who plays salt of the earth pilot Tennessee, joining the cast was an opportunity to geek out. "The first thing I did, as soon as I got here, was go to the creature workshop," he smiles, speaking with a distinctive drawl. "That's the coolest job on the whole movie. You see all your cast members with their faces ripped open!"

According to Waterston, *Alien*'s latest kick-ass femme, having a man in a suit terrorise her on set made all the difference. "That was so incredible," she says, decked in Daniels' expedition gear, her short hair and long, slender limbs

IS FIVE ALIVE?

The latest on Neill Blomkamp's *Aliens* sequel...

"Slim" is how director Neill Blomkamp responded on Twitter earlier this year when asked of the chances that *Alien 5* will make it to the screen. It's a far cry from June 2015, when the South African announced plans to start filming his quadrilogy-capper in Vancouver, with an enthusiastic Sigourney Weaver on board to reprise her role as Ripley, and give the *Alien* queen a fitting send-off. "It's an amazing script, and Neill and I are really excited about doing it," Weaver said at the time. If Blomkamp's attention-grabbing concept art is anything to go by, the film was also set to star Michael Biehn's Hicks and an adult Newt by ignoring divisive sequels *Alien 3* and *Alien: Resurrection*, effectively acting as an alternative sequel to James Cameron's *Aliens*. In October 2015, with cameras still static and the film that would become *Alien: Covenant* on the fast track, Blomkamp stepped forward with an explanation that "*Alien* is kinda holding/pending *Prometheus 2*. So I shall be working on other things". While *Deadpool* proved the power of a strategically timed leak, with *Covenant*'s proposed sequel already in the works, it seems increasingly unlikely that Blomkamp's *Alien 5* will ever burst forth and right the perceived wrongs of *Alien 3*'s brutal character cull. *JF*

ON SET



immediately reminiscent of Sigourney Weaver's Ripley. "We shot something last week where one of them was chasing me up an incline. It was so terrifying, because the guy can move *really* quickly. It's so much better than a stick with a tennis ball on the end."

But *Covenant's* headline creature isn't the xenomorph of old. Not exactly. Scott wanted to shake up Giger's biomechanical beast by adding a new organic element, with visible blue veins running down the xeno's body. Like the original *Alien*, there will also be a distinct life cycle for *Covenant's* xenomorph. "He evolves," Scott teases. "You see the step-by-step process. The hands of somebody is behind it." *Covenant's* script (credited to four writers: John Logan, Dante Harper, Jack Paglen and Michael Green, but not *Prometheus'* Damon Lindelof) also called for the introduction of a lethal new creation – the neomorph, an engineered killer seemingly born from the same black goo as the xeno. Insect exoskeletons inspired the xenomorph's armoured exterior, but for the neo, Scott turned to the ocean for stimulus. "I'd seen a hideous thing called a goblin shark, which has a hinged jaw," he says, scrunching his face in disgust at the memory. "It's not armoured. It has soft, white, flabby flesh,



'THE MORE YOU CAN PUT IDEAS INTO SCI-FI, THE MORE INTERESTING IT IS, DON'T YOU THINK?'

RIDLEY SCOTT

TO THE RESCUE
The crew's decision to respond to an SOS call seemed like a good idea...

and no muscularity at all. So that's really hideous. I thought: 'That's the neomorph.'" Needless to say, with two species of ruthless killing machines running around, the odds of *Covenant's* human cast surviving just dropped from slim to game over, man.

Set some 10 years after *Prometheus*, the *Alien* interquel focuses primarily on the crew of Earth's first large-scale colonisation ship. With the vessel designed to carry 2,000 passengers in hypersleep, it's left to 12 human crew members and one artificial person – Michael Fassbender's upgraded bot Walter – to ensure their safe arrival at a new homeworld. En route, they make a textbook mistake, responding to a distress beacon on a planet that appears to be a veritable paradise, with breathable air, food and water. But they quickly learn that this particular paradise harbours a horrific secret.

For Scott, having started with truckers in space and graduated to astronauts and scientists, a colony ship

was the next logical step, and came out of his research with real-life space travel on *The Martian*. "Mars is the threshold. Beyond that, you'll send long-range rockets off, but people will know they're never going to come back," Scott muses with infectious passion for the subject when *TF* catches up with him in an LA hotel in February 2017. "And if you don't invent the induced control coma, called hypersleep, you're going to have to have children on board. So you're a flying universe. The more you can put ideas into science-fiction, as opposed to things that go bump in the night, the more interesting it is, don't you think?"

The logical necessity of a ship designed to populate a planet is that every person aboard the *Covenant* is married, including the crew. It's a unique dynamic and the source of the film's meatiest drama. "That's one of the things that was most interesting about the script," says McBride, whose larger than life personality isn't merely a screen construct. "It makes the



ALIEN EVOLVED

Charting the growth of H.R. Giger's biomechanical beauty over nine films...

ALIEN 1979

The OG E.T. is one of cinema's all-time great movie monsters. Played by 6ft10in Nigerian Bolaji Badejo (his sole acting credit), the xenomorph's exoskeleton and visible musculature appear distinctly inhuman, though the almost entirely opaque dome conceals a human skull that hints at the beast's origins.

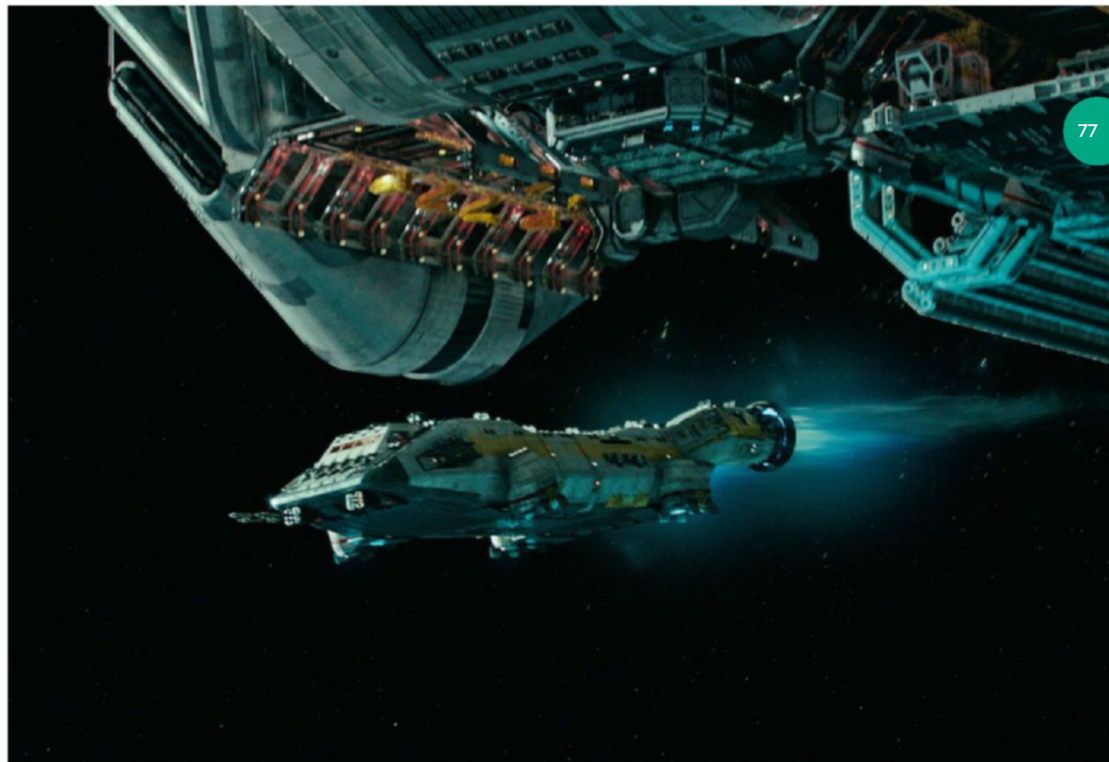


ALIEN: COVENANT



character have to not only look out for themselves, but someone else. If something happens to the person they're connected to, that instantly throws them off."

After landing on the seemingly uninhabited planet, the crew of the *Covenant* discover one lifeform. Albeit an artificial one – *Prometheus'* blond bot David. *Covenant* will also continue the story of Michael Fassbender's egotistical android and Noomi Rapace's surviving scientist Shaw (her whereabouts ominously unknown) after their seemingly successful search for the Engineer homeworld. Quite how David was saved from an eternity as a head in a bag remains to be seen, but the intervening years haven't subdued his rampant ego. "Essentially, he's 10 years without maintenance. So, whatever that does to your computers here, it might have a similar effect on him," Fassbender says, in costume as Walter with a nasty wound down his cheek that hints at a close encounter with a hostile



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ALIENS 1986

Cameron simplified the costume, sacrificing detail for flexibility in order to service his action-packed sequel's more agile xenomorphs. He also created the alien queen, a 20ft tall leading lady with a large crest above her head, an ovipositor for laying eggs and the ability to hold one heck of a grudge.

ALIEN 3 1992

The animal that *Alien 3's* runner is incubated in varies depending on your cut of choice (dog in the theatrical, cow in the assembly cut), but the quadruped that results remains the same. Faster, sleeker, taller, but physically weaker. The runner also emerges as an adolescent, unable to burst through the ox's ribcage as a chestbuster.

ALIEN: RESURRECTION 1997

The only visible change to the classic xenomorph in *Resurrection* is the exponential increase in surface slime, but there is a major new creature. The newborn is a biped born from an alien queen's womb, taking on more human characteristics, including eye sockets and a snouty nose. The physical model was built with visible male and female genitalia, before being removed in post-production.

ALIEN VS. PREDATOR 2004

Commonly known as grid (or nethead) *AvP's* alpha-alien is visually identical to its fellow xenomorphs, with only the checkerboard impressions left behind by a run in with a predator's net to tell it apart. It also appears to be stronger, and more tactically adept, taking down two hunters single-handedly.

organism. “Something we worked on in *Prometheus* was David’s vanity,” Fass adds. “You see him bleaching his hair on board the ship. The fact that somebody tells him what to do; you could see that that affects him in a negative way because he’s got such pride that he’s developed through his programming.” The only thing scarier than a robot with a superiority complex? An angry robot with a superiority complex.

David’s exploration and study of the Engineer homeworld takes him to the planet’s central plaza and the Hall of Heads – a refectory of knowledge for the technologically advanced species. Back on set, *TF* is taken on a tour of the hall, which has been built to scale on a cavernous soundstage in Fox Australia’s backlot. Instead of one monolithic head, as in *Prometheus*’ black goo room, the Hall of Heads contains seven enormous, half-built faces, arranged neatly in a line, with the plan to extend them vertically by a further 20ft in post-

production. Along the walls at the base of every head are cubby holes filled with scrolls, documents for learning that someone with nefarious intentions could make full use of...

As in this year’s *Assassin’s Creed*, Fassbender is pulling double duties as both David and new android Walter, who he describes as a “super butler” and fully dedicated to the crew of the *Covenant*. Any other differences? “It’s just a different haircut really,” Fassbender laughs, sporting Walter’s unassuming chestnut do. “No, after the David 8s went out they found I was disturbing people with my human traits. So this emotional thread of David was not introduced in any models after that.” Conversely, there isn’t a shred of vanity in Walter. “There’s no pride. He doesn’t have feelings of inferiority. His actions are purely based on logic and whatever’s necessary for the benefit of the crew.”

The crew of the *Covenant*, Walter included, react with bewilderment at the

discovery of a lone David 8 further from home than anyone has ever travelled. Not that they will have time to stop and question David’s presence after landing on a planet populated by engineered killing machines. “They catch David mid-hop, and he’s a bit of a mystery to them,” Fassbender says, cracking a wolf grin. “This film, once it gets going, it doesn’t let up much.” In other words, *Covenant* is consciously embracing the intense, terrifying, full-on body horror of the original *Alien*, while no longer lingering on the philosophical musings that caused so many to bounce off *Prometheus*. “It’s going to have the chill factor of the original *Alien*,” Fassbender assures. “The grittiness, as well. I think

SCENE-SETTER

Ridley Scott gets hands on at the helm of the *Covenant*.

‘IT HAS THE CHILL FACTOR, THE GRITTIENESS, OF THE ORIGINAL’
MICHAEL FASSBENDER

this one is just a lot scarier. *Prometheus* and *Covenant* are two very different films with the same DNA, essentially, and a completely new set of new characters, outside of David.”

Despite counting James Franco’s Captain and Billy Crudup’s second-in-command (not long for the world if his run in with a facehugger in the trailer is anything to go by) among their ranks, if anyone has a shot at making it off the Engineer homeworld alive it’s Daniels who, much like Ripley, survives on sheer will and resourcefulness. For Scott, it was important to continue the series’ tradition of fierce female leads. “I like working with women, particularly when they’re fun and they’re strong,” Scott nods. “My wife’s very strong. My mother brought up the two of us, Tony and me.



ALIEN VS. PREDATOR: REQUIEM 2007

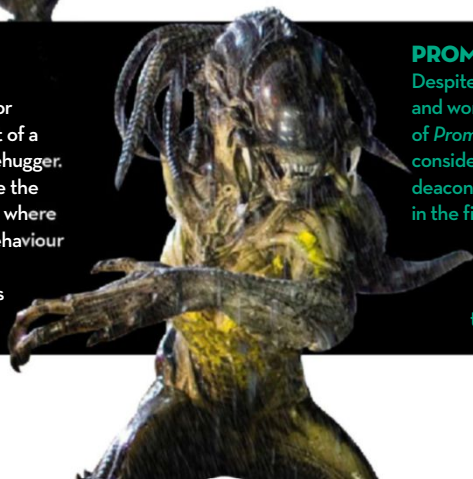
The risible *Requiem* is remembered for one thing: the predalien – the product of a predator being impregnated by a facehugger. Teased at the end of *AvP*, we don’t see the fully grown crossbreed until *Requiem*, where it has inherited both the predatory behaviour of the hunter species and the telltale dreadlocks/mandibles. As if their gobs weren’t scary enough already.

PROMETHEUS 2012

Despite being populated with weird and wonderful creatures, only one of *Prometheus*’ beasts could be considered a proto-xenomorph – the deacon. Bursting out of an Engineer in the film’s climactic scene, the deacon’s skin is paler, it has no tail and the pharyngeal jaw isn’t fully formed, but it’s clear where this is heading...

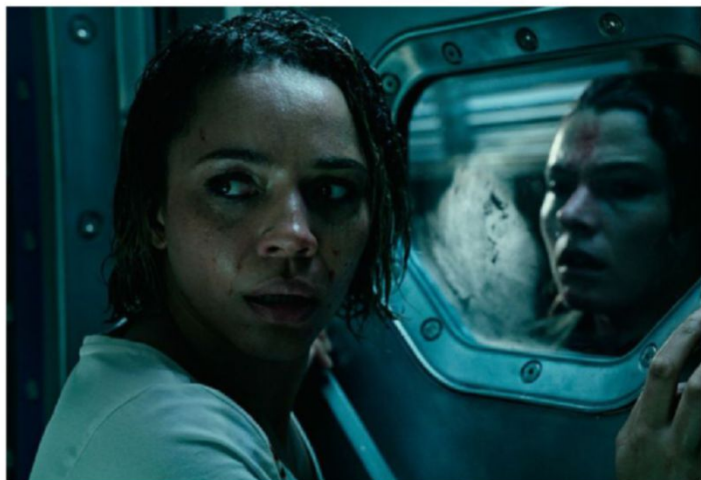
ALIEN: COVENANT 2017

The xenomorph is going through some major changes in *Covenant*. It’ll be a more organic, less biomechanical variation of the creature seen in *Alien* (its evolution still not quite complete). There’ll also be the neomorph, a deadly new version of the alien that has a nasty habit of bursting out of its victim’s backs. **JF**





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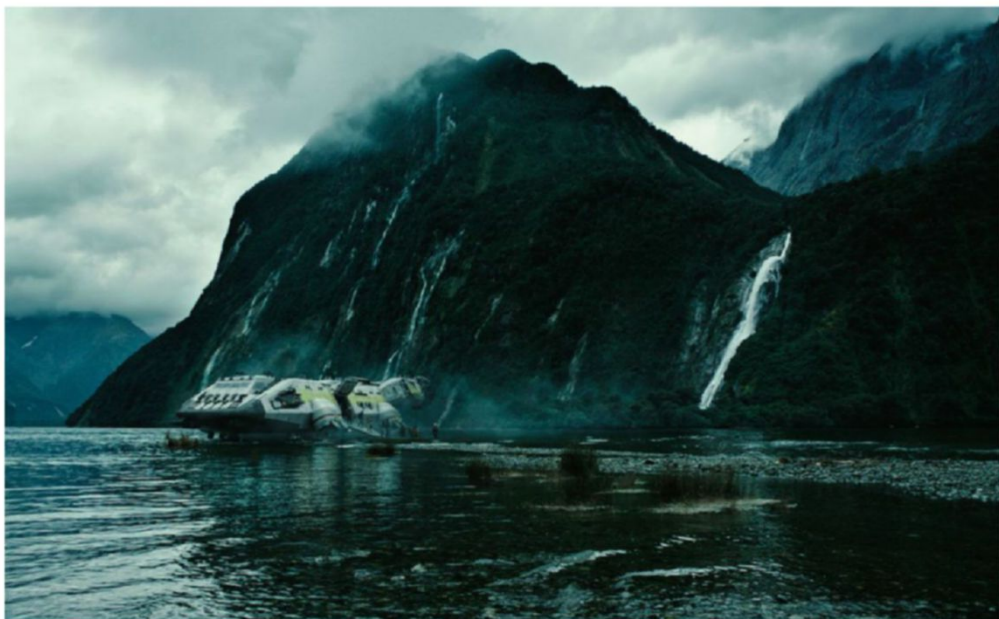
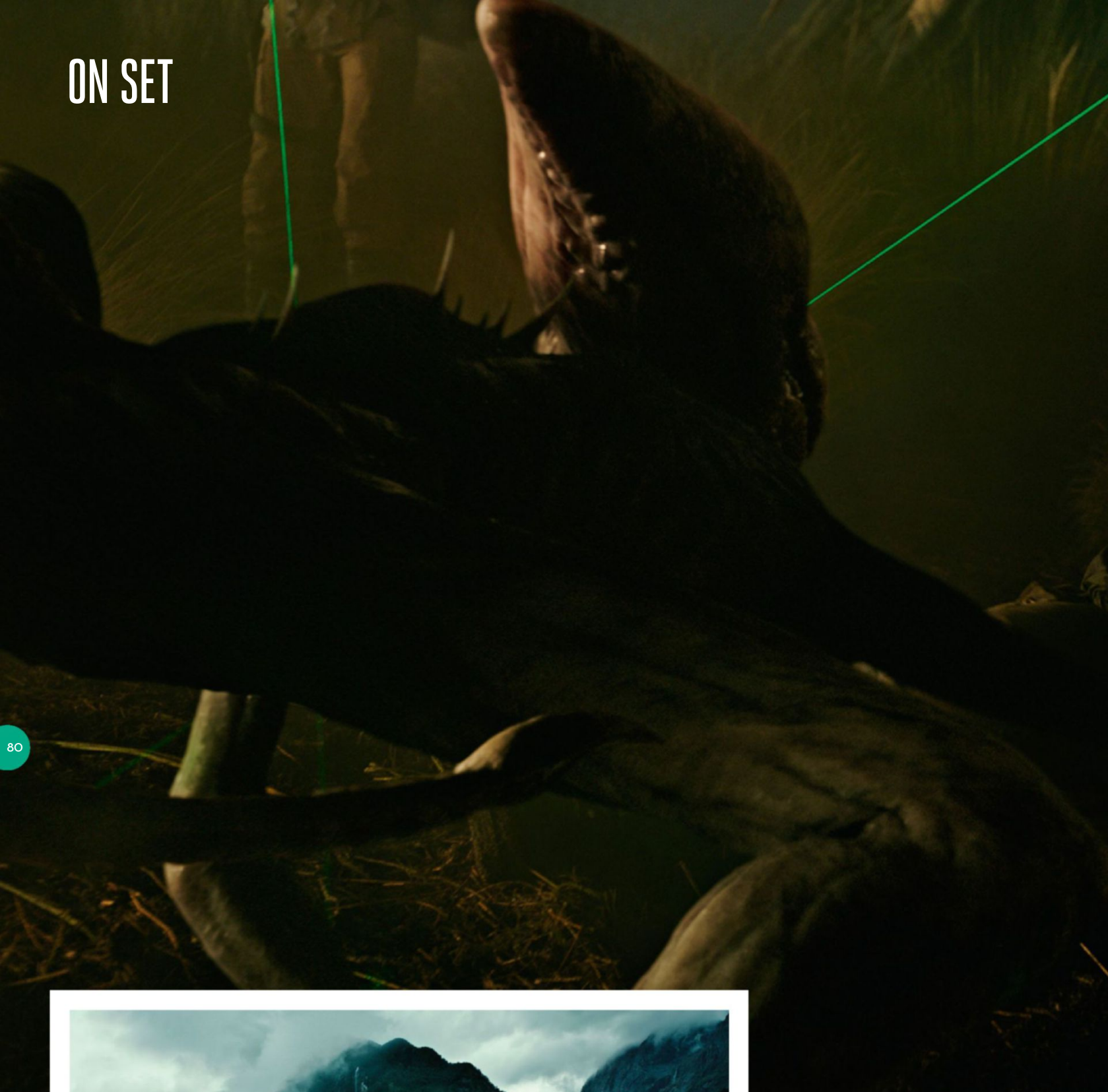
She was tough. So I respect them. Besides, I'd rather argue with a strong woman than a strong bloke – it's fucking less interesting."

Covenant marks Waterston's second blockbuster in the last six months, following a magical turn as Tina in *Fantastic Beasts*, but Daniels is a very different character to *Beasts'* uptight '30s wizard. "She's the chief terraformist. So when they get to the planet, she's in charge of making things grow there," Waterston explains. "She's a classic reluctant hero. I think if she were to be asked at the beginning of the film if she's particularly courageous or brave, she wouldn't know how to answer that question." Instead, Daniels' strengths are revealed to her over the course of the film. Waterston even pushed to ensure Daniels wasn't a superhero out of the box. Instead, she uses her existing knowledge and abilities to her advantage. "We've got all these great big trucks and forklifts. A lot of what I try to do in the film is incorporate what she would actually know how to use. They were making me too good at holding the gun, and fighting the aliens. I tried to make the movements a little bit more pedestrian." Following in the

footsteps of a character as monumental as Ripley, meanwhile, was a task Waterston didn't take lightly.

"[Sigourney] gave such an incredible performance. It stands the test of time. It's still so genuine and compelling and fascinating. And certainly, being a girl growing up in the '80s, those kinds of roles were pretty exciting for young women to see."

As for McBride, his position as the *Covenant's* pilot puts him in a good place to make it out alive, primarily because he spends most of his time off-planet, aboard the mothership. Best known for foul-mouthed comedies, the leftfield casting is even more surprising when you learn McBride wasn't sought for his comedic chops. "I assumed this role would be the wisecracking funny guy," he admits. "But because of the nature of this story, there isn't a whole lot of comedy. It starts out under some dire situations and it just gets worse from there." Scott may not have been looking for jokes from Tennessee, but he did have another cinematic icon in mind when casting McBride. "When I met Ridley, he said that this character was



like an homage to Slim Pickens in *Dr. Strangelove*,” McBride smiles. “So I brushed up on *Strangelove*, and then I watched different things with pilots in, just to see, like, what buttons do they push?” he adds, bellowing with laughter.

Representing the military side of the expedition is Demián Bichir’s Sgt. Lope and his “small, but courageous platoon”. If past *Alien* films are anything to go by, they’ll be as useful in a bug hunt as an assault rifle made of jelly. “Our main goal is to make sure everyone is safe at all times. That’s quite a task, especially when you land on an unknown planet, and you never know what you’re going



ALIEN: COVENANT

projects live and die over a 40-plus-year career. “*Covenant* will still keep us a way off the first *Alien*. I can do one more of these. It’s being written right now. But we’ll see whether that goes. The belly of the story is carrying on to *Covenant* and, hopefully, *Prometheus 3* – whatever you want to call it – because we’ve got a long-range plan as to how this evolves. And how this one ends will definitely take you on to the next one.”

It’s little surprise. After all, as a producer and director, few filmmakers have their fingers in as many pies as Scott. When *TF* catches up with him in February 2017, he’s in the thick of post-production, having moved *Alien: Covenant*’s release date ahead a full *three months* since our on-set encounter – a near unprecedented leap forward for a film of this scale. It’s a move that’s entirely testament to the speed at which Scott works. “This is the

'I CAN DO ONE MORE ALIEN. IT'S BEING WRITTEN RIGHT NOW'

RIDLEY SCOTT

third time working with Ridley and on each three of the experiences, it’s always been the same,” Fassbender recalls. “It’s not uncommon to see five screens in front of him, as he’s got five cameras going on at one time. He moves very fast and very efficiently, but with great passion and mischief.”

Behind it all is a man whose enthusiasm for movie making hasn’t waned since the day he stuck his hands in a slimy alien egg on a Shepperton soundstage. “I was in Australia last year. We wrapped in seven months. So I’ve been done since September,” Scott says. “I discovered fairly soon that I’m sitting there twiddling my thumbs, waiting for people to do things. In that time, I go off on something else, because technology helps me travel. When they finish the visual effects in London I’ll run them in LA absolutely clinically perfect. I do the same with music. I don’t have to go down to Abbey Road. Sounds great, but it’s really boring.” No one can ever accuse Ridley Scott of having idle hands.

ALIEN: COVENANT OPENS 12 MAY.

to find. We are far, far away from home. So we won’t start any fight, but we will make sure we’ll finish it if we encounter any...” Bichir says, optimistically.

By throwing together scientists, astronauts, down-to-earth pilots and straight-laced military men, the film is harkening back to *Alien* by throwing a group of ordinary people into extraordinary circumstances. Bichir in particular saw the similarities to Scott’s seminal early work. “It has many things that will bring you back to that, if you are a fan of the first *Alien*,” Bichir notes. “There’s a humanity to it, and there’s the roughness of the characters. That

will give you a sense of reality that is really hard to find nowadays in science-fiction films.”

With sequel plans changing on a seemingly weekly basis, Scott is already looking to the future of the *Alien* series. Neill Blomkamp’s proposed *Alien 5* [see boxout, page 79] has been put on the backburner, in favour of one more Scott-directed prequel/sequel dubbed *Awakening* (which we suspect may sit chronologically between *Prometheus* and *Covenant*), before closing the loop on the original *Alien*. “If it does well, you just go again,” Scott says with the matter of factness of a man who’s seen countless

ON SHOW

With the cat very much out of the decades-old bag, expect to see plenty of the aliens.