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THE

EXCLUSIVE

# PREDATOR

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AMERICAN ANIMALS • WIDOWS • JACK RYAN



# THE

**Original *Predator* screenwriter Jim Thomas looks back on the unlikely origin story of one of cinema's greatest monsters**

# HUNT

# BEGINS







# THE HISTORY OF ANY FILM PROJECT IS AT BEST A RASHOMON EXPERIENCE.

It all depends on the point of view of the observer or participant. Mine is just one perspective. But as with all movies it begins with the script. The evolution of *Predator* should be of interest for the simple reason that my brother John and I, as novice writers, managed to sell a spec-script to a major film company without the benefit of an agent or lawyer, and saw it go into production within a year. A rare event in Hollywood.

Our story is one of right timing, the right subject matter, perseverance, and certainly a healthy dose of luck.

An editor for *The Hollywood Reporter* recently told me there is a story making the rounds that my brother and I used to sneak onto the 20th Century Fox lot and slide our script under the doors of executives and producers. It's a myth. But it's something we didn't try only because we didn't think of it.

My brother John and I had both been beach lifeguards for Los Angeles City and I was living in a small room of an old house on the beach in Marina del Rey. I had written several scripts and had a good sense of form and style, and I had the basic idea for *Predator*. My brother was recovering from an accident sustained from jumping out of his tower to make a rescue. I asked him if he wanted to collaborate, he said yes, so we set up shop at the one place most comfortable to us: the beach. With an old cable spool for a table and a beach umbrella for shade, we devoted the next six months to writing and rewriting the script.

The conceit of the story was always, "What would it be like to be hunted by some dilettante, extra-terrestrial sportsman, the way we hunt big game in Africa, as trophies?" In fact, the original title of the script was 'Hunter'. The first scene of the script, never shot, opened inside an alien spacecraft, focused on a screen revealing a kind of hunter's guide for Earth. It rapidly flipped through all the dangerous game, coming to focus on a human form. A complete bio-mechanical analysis followed, the human finally dressed and armed as a soldier. The screen then zeroed in on a location in Central America and then we were on Earth with our team.



**Clockwise from top left:** Dutch (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Dillon (Carl Weathers) with Predator victim Blain (Jesse Ventura); Ventura gets some finishing touches to his gaping wound; Dutch blends into his environment; The Predator emerges from a lagoon; Writer Jim Thomas in the jungle.







We wanted to avoid as much as possible creating a story featuring a man in a rubber suit. We needed a real character for the Predator, one that had its own arc, personality and, of course, vulnerabilities. The best rubber-suit stories are the ones that keep the creature hidden away as much as possible, revealing it in stages. *Jaws* is a perfect example. *Alien* is another, with the metamorphosis element and only brief, terrifying reveals inside darkened spaces and flashes of light.

Our approach was to reveal the Predator in stages. The first reveal, which was never shot probably because CGI was in its infancy, was high up in the jungle canopy. We focused on the soldiers silently moving through the forest. Then, a butterfly which landed on a limb, fanning its wings. The butterfly flew away, leaving behind an image of itself which slowly faded — and then the limb itself moved. We didn't reveal the Predator himself until the end of the first act, and then only his heat-vision POV and his ability to mimic his prey. Then the camouflage effect was revealed when the Predator made his first attack, on Shane Black. Still later, we revealed that under the camouflage effect was a very complex-looking alien warrior: a thinking, calculating hunter.

Saving the best for last was the face reveal of the alien creature itself, which Stan Winston rendered beyond what even we had envisioned. We imagined him as something a bit more lithe and simian-like than was finally rendered, but when we saw Stan Winston's creation, we had to admit it was impossible to beat. As good as it gets for a man in a rubber suit.

## WHEN WE HAD

a polished draft, my brother and I faced the daunting problem of selling it. Writing it was the easy part, we soon realised. With no nepotism available we only had the query letter to turn to. "Dear —, This is the story of an extra-terrestrial hunter who comes to this planet to hunt the most dangerous species, combat soldiers in the jungles of Central America" — short and sweet and hopefully tantalising. The feedback was overwhelming. I think I had a collection of over a hundred rejection letters from every studio, producer, lawyer and agent that we could come up with.

I had been working part-time as a grip, electrician and sound-man on non-union, low-budget films and commercials, which made me feel I was at least involved in the industry I longed to be a part of. A cinematographer friend of mine said he knew someone who he believed had a contact inside 20th Century Fox. I met with the guy, who I quickly assessed as being a bottom feeder of the Hollywood scene, gave him the script and agreed to a percentage if it sold. I wasn't impressed, but the guy was a hustler and what did we have to lose?

His inside contact at Fox turned out to be a script reader, but here's where Lady Luck dealt a card: it turns out that at that very moment a major change was taking place at Fox, one administration replacing another. Our inside contact liked the script but had no-one to submit it to. So she left it behind with a note, "Read this."

A young, ambitious junior executive found the script on his desk, read it and liked it — his first project. But our real lucky break was the fact that the new studio president was Larry Gordon, a successful producer who had been mentored by Roger Corman, and *Predator* was just his kind of script. Timing can be everything.

A couple of months later, I had just returned from a run on the beach when the phone rang and I raced to answer it. A guy identified himself as the head of business affairs at 20th Century Fox, saying they wanted to buy our script and hire us to rewrite it. One of those crystalline moments I will never forget.



## THE NEXT ELEMENT

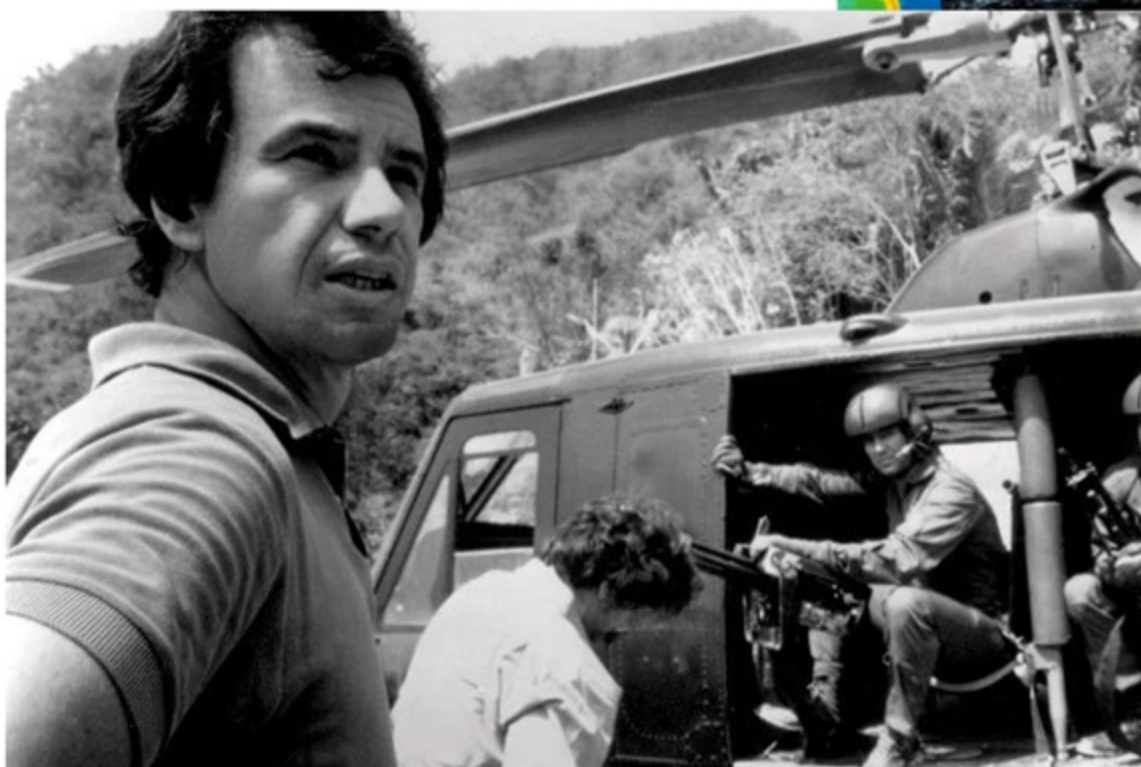
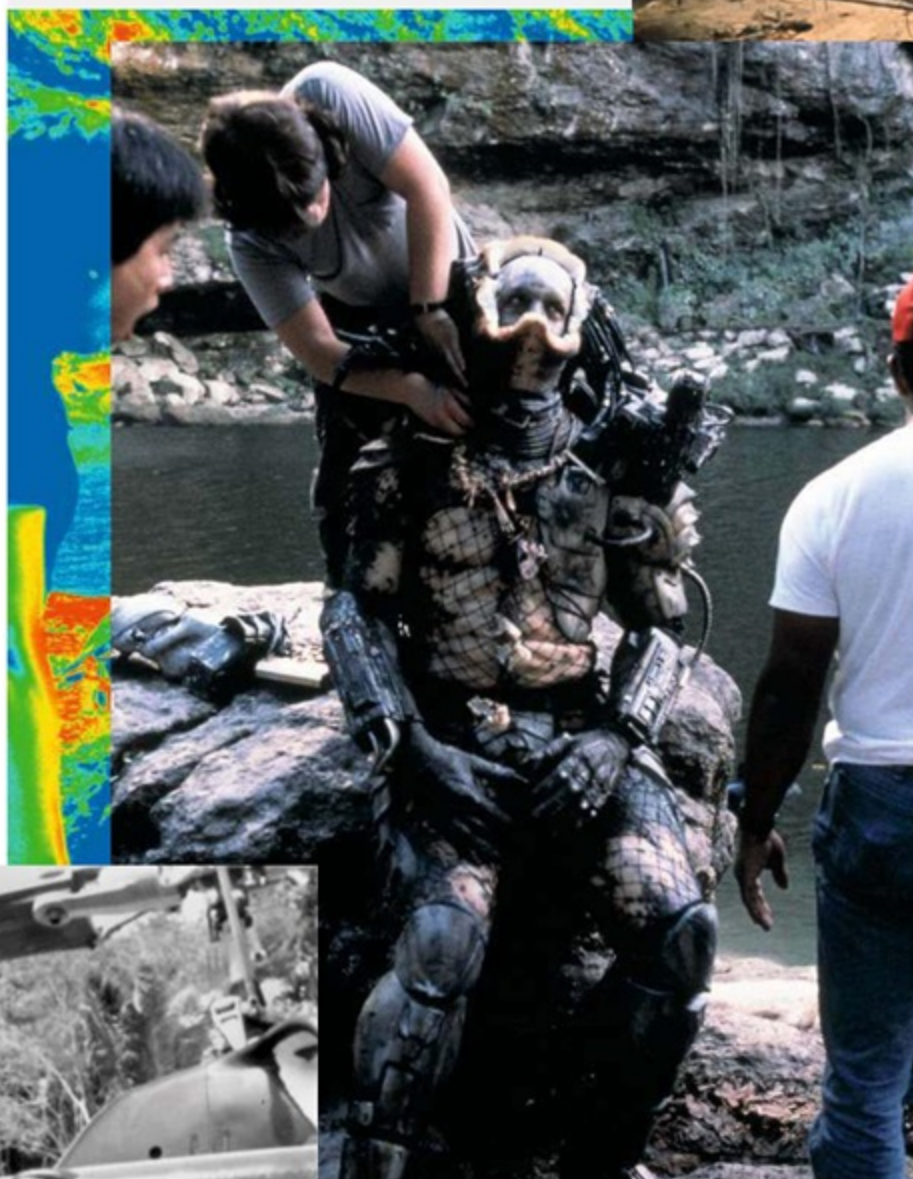
of the script process for many writers is the development phase, which can be a nightmare. Fortunately for us we were spared that element, as a director was assigned to the project from the very beginning. Geoff Murphy was known as the Steven Spielberg of New Zealand, and was also new to Hollywood. We hit it off and spent the next several months on the Fox lot preparing the script for production. We were living the dream. Or so we thought.

When Arnold Schwarzenegger became attached it all came to a screeching halt, and all because of *Conan The Barbarian*. Geoff had previously interviewed as a possible director for the next *Conan* movie, but in his New Zealand wit had referred to Arnold as Conan The Librarian, which Arnold apparently didn't find amusing. So Geoff was off the project, and soon we had a new director to work with: John McTiernan.

Once a director is attached, what often happens is they have their read and then say, "Now, here's the way I see it," which essentially means a rewrite, and sometimes a complete rewrite. Which was to be our fate. The problem was, we seemed to have a complete block when it came to understanding what it was John was wanting to communicate to us about rewriting our story. It just wasn't going to work. More importantly, we didn't understand why the script had to be so radically changed in the first place. But it's a director's medium, so reluctantly we took our bow and stepped away from the project. Heartbreaking. It had been a great ride while it lasted.

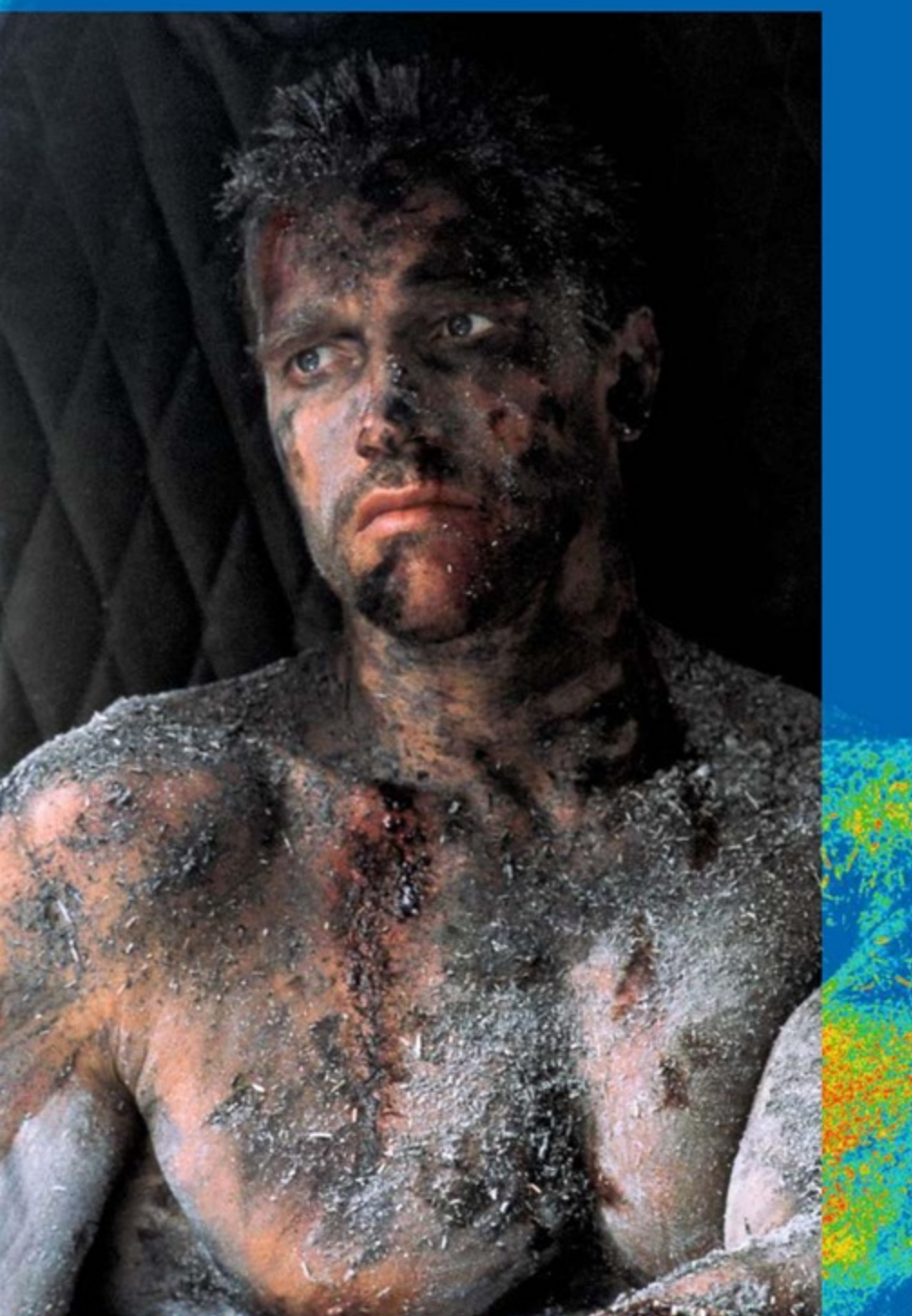
We heard the studio had hired David Webb Peoples, co-writer of *Blade Runner*, to rewrite the script based on John McTiernan's notes. Great. *Blade Runner*. So we made a deal at Disney and moved on with our budding careers in the screen trade.

And then another memorable phone call, this time from our new agent at ICM, Bill Block (it's easy to get one *after* you've sold a screenplay. Trust me, they come out of the woodwork like roaches). "The rewrite is in," he said, "and the studio hates it. And they want you back, and for more money, and they want you to go to Mexico for production." Doesn't get any sweeter than that. We were back, as George Costanza would say...



**Clockwise from top left:** Going Commando: The elite soldiers are ready to head into the jungle; Cast and crew take a breather; Dutch in contemplative mood; Kevin Peter Hall becoming the Predator; Director John McTiernan on location.





## OUR FIRST MEETING

with Arnold Schwarzenegger took place at the Beverly Hills mansion of Marvin Davis, the oil billionaire who then owned Fox, and whose son, John, was a producer on the film. After clearing the Uzi-bearing guards at the gates, we wondered where in this palatial mansion would our meeting take place? In the living room, the den, the library, the billiard room? Nope, in a hot tub, and of course, buck naked, with Arnold's ever-present cigar. But despite his weird sense of humour, Arnold is a very smart, perceptive guy, and despite the casual setting, seriously wanted our take on the character he was to be playing.

I said, "You've just done a film called *Commando*, in which you are first introduced carrying an entire tree over one shoulder with a chainsaw in the other. This Paul Bunyan reference tells us immediately this is going to be a comedy of some sort. There may be action and bullets and explosions but nothing is ever going to 'happen' to you. But if you'll play this soldier more like an Everyman, a real guy who can bleed and die, there will be real, classic jeopardy."

He seemed to have gotten the message, and to his credit I think he did it like a real Everyman, with no self-parody. The last scene of Arnold flying off in the helicopter is not your typical Arnold ending. This is a guy who has truly survived a death-defying ordeal.

And still the Hollywood intrigue continued. Reading over the cast we saw the name of a young writer named Shane Black, cast as the radio man, Hawkins. We knew Shane was one of the writers Fox had approached to do the rewrite but had declined for some reason. We soon learned the producer, Joel Silver, had cast Shane in the movie so he'd have a back-up writer on hand in case we gave him any trouble on location. And the irony of that was while we were in Puerto Vallarta, where most of the film was shot, Joel slipped us a copy of Shane's script, *Lethal Weapon*, Joel's next picture, with the potential of rewriting it. Fortunately, it didn't come to that, and the rest is history.

Shane did contribute some colourful jokes to the film, I give him credit for that. He's just finished directing *The Predator*, and we wish him and the franchise all the best. Anything can and does happen in Hollywood.

## THUS BEGAN AN

amazing adventure in Mexico for the next five-to-six months, an experience I'll never forget. Hanging out with the fascinating cast of 'manly men' in the jungle every day (two of whom would later become governors), the stuntmen, the production people from the US, Australia, and Mexico, the charm and beauty of Puerto Vallarta as a backdrop. It was a one-of-a-kind experience and I truly enjoyed every moment of it.

We had no idea at the time that the film would go on to become an icon of sorts, taking on a life of its own and establishing itself as part of the current culture. It was at a Comic-Con promoting *Predator 2* when I saw my first Predator tattoo, which was a bit weird. Now if you Google Predator tattoos you'll find pages of them, and some pretty remarkable artwork too.

But the full impact of what had evolved from our script was only realised when I visited Stan Winston's shop a few years later. In the entranceway he had a gallery of his creations, on pedestals like Roman statuary: the Predator at eight feet tall, the Alien, and the Terminator. They have become part of our current mythology, much the same as the Cyclops, the Minotaur, Grendel and others that preceded them. Fantastic creatures that came from our primitive fears of the unknown, the darkness beyond the campfire. ●



# MONST

**The designers of the original Predator on the evolution of their grisly creation**

WORDS ALEX GODFREY

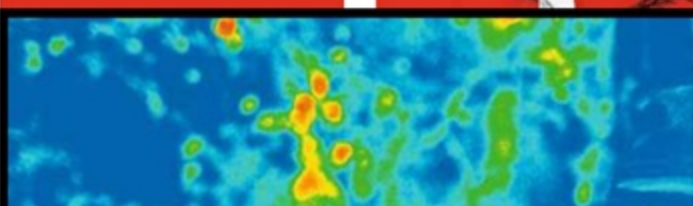
## 1. MONSTROUS MONSTER

A company called Boss Film was originally tasked with creating the Predator suit, then a more organic design, and housing none other than Jean-Claude Van Damme. It was a disaster from the start. "Steve Johnson from Boss Film was not happy about that creature at all," says Steve Wang, who was there as a sculptor. "He kept complaining about how it was a terrible design, but he was forced to build it because the design came directly from the studio. The biggest problem everyone saw right from day one was the fact he had this leg extension, and the technology for it back then wasn't far along — people couldn't really walk in it, and not being able to walk on that terrain in the middle of the jungle, it's horrible. It was just a bad idea."





# PRED



## 2. BELGIAN vs PREDATOR

When the suit was unveiled in the Mexican jungle, spirits immediately sank. Van Damme, a martial arts star in waiting, hated the experience. "People said he was complaining that they were covering his face," says Wang, "because he said he was gonna be a big star. People thought that was funny: 'Had no-one told you that you were actually going to be a monster?'" Besides, being encased in the thing troubled the actor physically. "I heard he was very claustrophobic," says Wang. "So when they put the suit on him he kind of froze." Van Damme spent an unhappy two days on set, and was no doubt relieved to escape the experience when, with an unworkable creature, the production was put on hiatus. At least one shot of Van Damme's invisible Predator remains in the film — that of Shane Black being dragged to his death.



## 3. HIGH CONCEPT

With the shoot on hold, Stan Winston was hired to create a new Predator from scratch, thanks to his success on *Aliens* and his friendship with Arnold Schwarzenegger. A designer named Alan Munro had painted the Predator as a futuristic, humanoid soldier with dreadlocks, and Winston was asked to draw the face under the mask. "The big emphasis was, 'This thing has to work,'" says Stan Winston's son Matt, "because the Boss Film design had been impractical. And Dad said, 'If we're dealing with a man in a suit, let's really break ground with the face.'"





## 4. NO SLEEP TILL MEXICO

With the Stan Winston Studio already busy, and Winston focused on his directorial debut *Pumpkinhead*, a tiny team — Steve Wang, Matt Rose and Shannon Shea — had eight weeks to build the Predator from scratch. “It was insane, we literally weren’t sleeping for three days at a time just to get things done,” says Wang. “Oh my God, I can’t tell you the hours,” sighs Shea. “Years later I was working on *Predators*, and one of the painters was saying how much he admired Steve Wang and wanted to paint the new Predator with the same passion that he did, and I said, ‘Well, then you can’t leave the studio. Steve and Matt wouldn’t leave the studio.’ They would sleep on the sofas.” Rose still seems scarred. “It was crazy,” he says. “Everyone was really worn out with it. We were all working way too long, we wouldn’t even go home. It was a very different time then. Not as romantic as people think it is.”







## 6. FACE ACHE

The Predator's mandibles came from a surprising source. Flying to an *Aliens* event in Japan with James Cameron, Winston sketched some early ideas, and Cameron sneaked a peek. "James looked over Dad's shoulder while he was sketching," says Winston, "and he said, 'I always wanted to see mandibles on a monster.' So Dad experimented with that." With the design signed off, Winston tasked Richard Landon with building the mechanics. "I had no experience of radio-controlled mechanisms," says Landon. "I'd only built cable-controlled mechanisms. But Stan said, 'I want you to figure this out.' So I did." Tensions, though, were rising. "Stan asked Richard to do that first, then have me sculpt on top," remembers Rose. "And I said, 'No!' I was 21, and I was pissed off. I said, 'We have no time for this nonsense. I'll sculpt it, and Richard will make it fit. Take it or leave it.' The head was already too huge, even with Kevin Peter Hall's proportions. It was lucky I said no, because the head would have been at least one-and-a-half times too big. It's still too big."



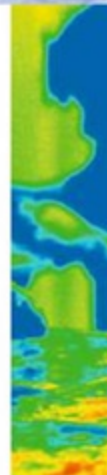
## 5. BLADES OF GLORY

Director John McTiernan told Winston he wanted the Predator to be more technological, so Wang set about designing some blades for the creature's arm — because of his love of a certain hairy mutant. "I was a huge fan of Wolverine and I kind of ripped it off," he laughs. "I was a big kid, loving superheroes, so I thought: 'Let's do some blades!'" Wang would take inspiration from anywhere and everywhere. For the paint job on the armour, he found what he was looking for in... a puddle. "Steve was so frustrated because he didn't want the paint job to just be chrome," says Rose. "It was the '80s and everything was chrome or gold or brass, boring. His head was spinning. We were walking and he stopped and pointed at the ground and said, 'That's it.' And it was this puddle. I thought, 'That's it, Steve has gone completely mad.' But in the puddle was motor oil, which had that rainbow effect. He said, 'That's the armour colour.' That's how he came up with it."



## 7. CLAW LORE

A maquette builder called Wayne Sturm had created the first 3D reference model for the Predator, and on the side of the ankle was a claw. Rose, says Wang, then did the fine detailing on it — but the claw's origins are not steeped in deep lore. "Things happened so fast, a lot of times we just made shit up as we went," says Wang. "It was literally, 'A claw would look cool, put a claw on it.' No-one questioned it. A lot of the iconic things from those days was just people making shit up, and then it's on screen." Shea agrees, although he puts such activity down to "sheer panic. Matt watching the hands of a clock move and just doing it. And I don't recall in the original art that Predator was wearing sandals. I don't know when that happened. But Matt sculpted him wearing sandals. The Predator can turn himself invisible, he can fly across the universe, and he's basically wearing Birkenstocks. You'd think he'd be wearing something a little more substantial."

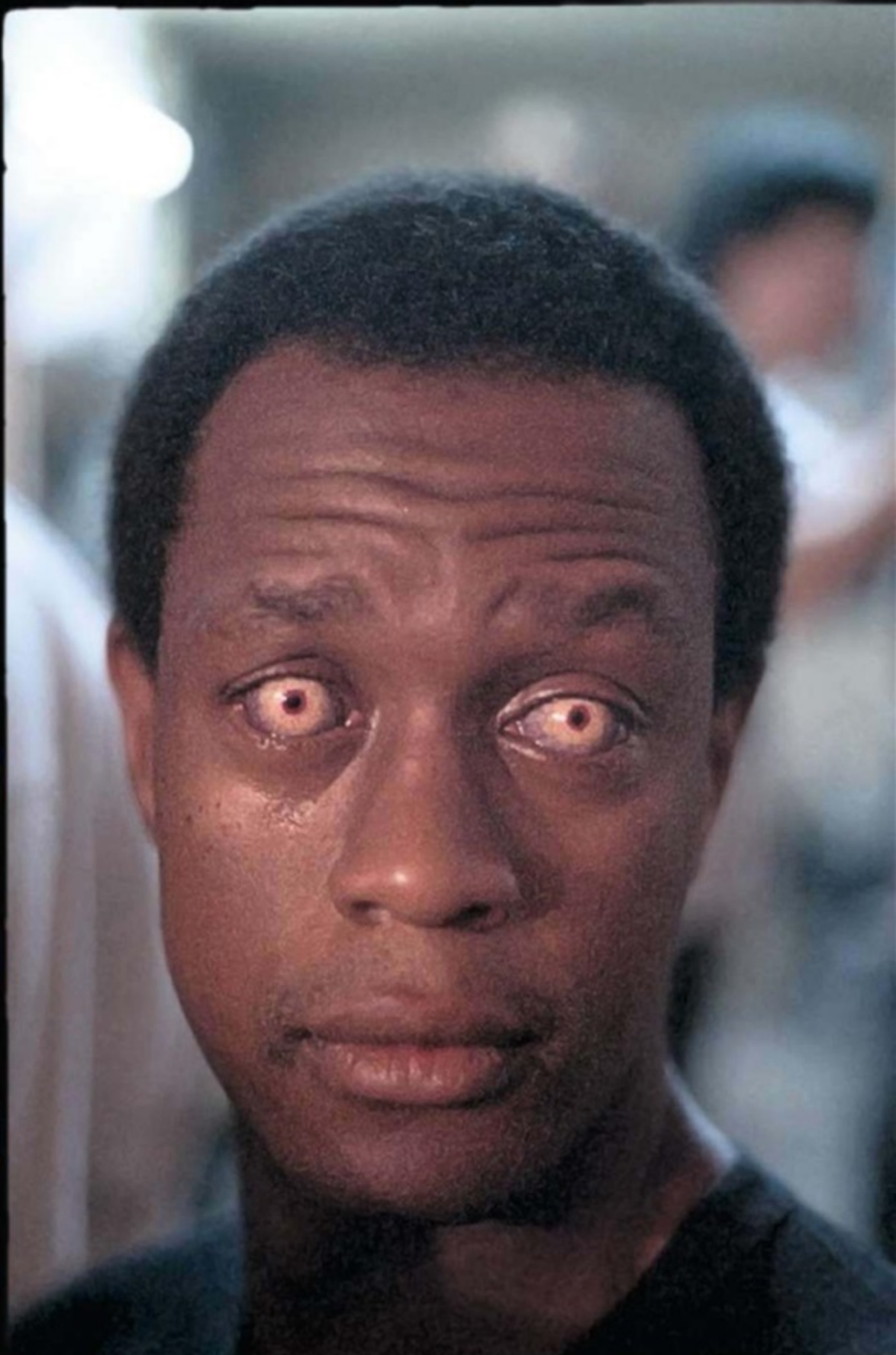
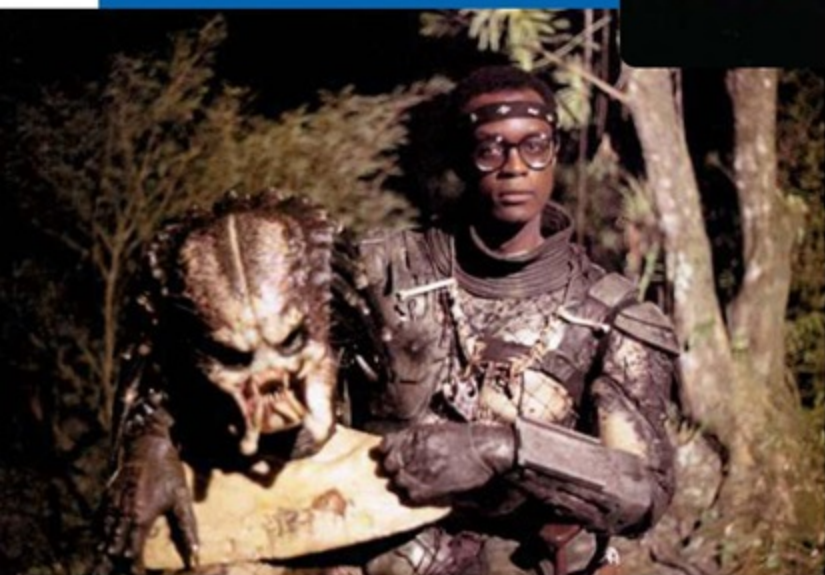






## 8. THE MAN IN THE LATEX MASK

Kevin Peter Hall's height was perfect for the Predator, and the suit was then built to capitalise on his idiosyncrasies. "Kevin was very tall but his upper body was small, compared to his legs," remembers Wang. "I wanted the Predator to have more of a muscular dancer's body, and not as big as Arnold, because he needed to climb trees. So I made his upper body a bit bigger to balance off his legs." Shea recalls how they had to slide the actor into the suit with not a millimetre to spare. "You had to make the suit as tight as humanly possible in order for it to move well and not bunch up in the elbows or shoulders or groin. We had to put KY Jelly on Kevin to get him into the suit. He'd put on this powder blue spandex suit and we would get tubes of KY, slather him up and put him in."



## 9. EXPLOSIVE ACTION

On set, in the suit, Hall buoyed everybody with his sheer enthusiasm. "Kevin was amazing," says Wang. "We thought the Predator would be more aggressive, and move fast, but Kevin's take was more methodical, more graceful." Fortunately, he also survived certain death when the Predator's rockets exploded in his face. "The shoulder cannon was supposed to fire at the critter that runs out of the log," remembers Landon, "but instead of firing a single blast, it unwrapped in a ball of flame that engulfed Kevin's head. And it let out a cloud of smoke half the size of an automobile. I was ten metres away and a small piece of exploding shrapnel nicked me in the collar bone and drew a little bit of blood. The gun was completely destroyed, it vaporised like a giant firecracker. All of us shook with panic. But without missing a beat, Kevin stepped forward out of the cloud and said, 'What happened?' He'd been wearing the stunt head, so a three-inch thick foam-padded football helmet. He was accidentally wearing protective gear."





## 10. PREDATOR vs PREDATORS

One of the first shots on the film was of the Predator emerging from the lagoon. Filmed in sections over two weeks, to grasp the small slither of daily magic hour the jungle provided, they finally got it, divers weighing down Hall each time before he rose up. The bigger problem was creepy-crawlies. "That damn lagoon, it had snakes in it," emembers Rose. "Killer snakes. Deadly. I'm not joking in any way. They called it 'two steps', because they bite you, you take two steps and you're dead. We came across a baby one that Brian Simpson [creature effects] killed by one of our coolers. He killed it really quickly, just pulled a knife out, slammed it down and chopped it in half. It was spinning around for what seemed like half an hour. And that lagoon was also filled with leeches! I wouldn't go near that damn lagoon but Kevin wasn't nervous at all, he would go right in."



## 11. "DAD'S FRANKENSTEIN"

All of the crew speak of Winston with deep affection. "He was really my mentor," says Wang. "Taught me a lot of good life lessons, shared a lot of his wisdom with me. I worked hard and tried to make him proud." Shea says similar: "Stan was like a dad to a lot of us. We were young men and we looked up to him and wanted to be like him. He was so charismatic and so generous. He basically said, 'I'm gonna put this multi-million picture in your lap. And you're gonna deliver it.' Us three children." Winston, meanwhile, remembers how proud his father was of the creature they all created. "Predator stood as one of the titans of the many characters that came out of the Stan Winston Studio," he says. "It truly became an iconic character — in some ways it was Dad's Frankenstein. It spawned many sequels, has lived on in comic books and video games. That was the one for him. He drew that guy, and his team made that first one. These artists got no sleep and helped Dad make it a reality." ●

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# THE ALIEN KING

With a new cadre of soldiers and a beefed-up alien threat, **The Predator** aims to restore an iconic monster to its former glory. For director Shane Black, it's all about recapturing the spirit of '87

WORDS JAMES DYER









# “JESUS TAP-DANCING CHRIST! IS THAT... PINK?”

A blushing vision descends from the sky as actors Boyd Holbrook and Trevante Rhodes look on, dumbstruck. A helicopter, pink as a baboon's arse, whips through the air to settle in a field next to them, a grinning Keegan-Michael Key waving manically from the lilac interior. On the vehicle's rosy fuselage, the silhouette of a naked woman reclines suggestively, the words "My Secret" and "Heaven Sent" wrapped around her curves in flowery script.

"Well, that's fancy," observes Olivia Munn, as she, Rhodes and Holbrook shoulder weapons, grab their gear and get to the chopper — albeit one that appears to have been jacked from a sex-toy expo.

"What did you expect?" says Rhodes, grinning at his ride between takes. "This is a Shane Black movie, man."

In the early '90s, Black was the undisputed king of the Hollywood spec script. His screenplays, fuelled by a childhood spent inhaling pulp novels as fast as they were printed, were action-driven rides that refused to shy away from the awkward or absurd, punctuated by dark humour and biting dialogue. It wasn't long before his words were worth their weight in gold,





Clockwise from here: The Upgrade Predator, a genetic hybrid that absorbs the DNA of its prey; Boyd Holbrook's Quinn takes aim; Director Shane Black and pal on set; Keegan-Michael Key as 'Loonie' Coyle.

earning him a record \$1.75 million for *The Last Boy Scout*, a figure dwarfed soon after when he sold *The Long Kiss Goodnight* for a ludicrous \$4 million in 1994.

Black's calling card, more than wit or one-liners, has been his delight in twisting genre tropes, turning convention on its head. When a Black character plays Russian roulette, there are brains on the wall at the first trigger pull. When the P.I. breaks a window with his fist, he ends up in the ER. And when the master villain is unmasked, he turns out to be Trevor Slattery, whose Lear was the toast of Croydon. It should come as no surprise, then, that when a bunch of misfit soldiers need transport in a hurry, *Air Dildo* is the only way to fly.

Three decades after Black got his big break with the script for *Lethal Weapon*, his work has lost none of its edge or pep. Off-screen, however, much like Danny Glover's Murtaugh, the filmmaker had started to feel a little too old for this shit.

"You hit 50 and you remember thinking all this was gonna be so wonderful when you were 20," he says, wearily. "And it is, but I wish I still had the same spark, the same friends, the same feeling and enthusiasm that I had when I was young. Basically, I was feeling old. And then someone at Fox mentioned *Predator* to me."

Midlife crises can take many forms, of course. For some it's an impractical car. For others a tryst with someone born after *This Life* went off the air. For Black, the *Eat Pray Love* moment came equipped with dreadlocks, mandibles and a shoulder-mounted plasma caster.

"I had so much fun making that film," he recalls. "Just rolling in the mud and playing soldier. It's why I wanted to go back and do it all again. Of all the things I could have chosen to represent a return to a youthful environ, it was the *Predator*."

Not only was Black being offered a chance to revisit a singular experience from his youth, he was told he could bring on board Fred Dekker, a close friend since school, with whom he'd written *Monster Squad* back in the '80s. It was perfect.

"I thought, 'That'll do it!'" he recalls. "Go back in time to those halcyon days standing in line in Westwood waiting on *Raiders* at the National Theatre when we were both just kids. The idea of being a kid again, playing in that particular sandbox with Fred — that appealed to me. I thought, 'This'll be a lark, an adventure, a chance to feel young again.'"

**ONLY IN THE** hottest years they come. And this year it grows... wet. When *Empire* first arrives at *The Predator* set, on a remote farm just outside Vancouver, it's a far cry from the sweltering Mexican jungle. Deep pockets of icy mud suck at our insulated wellies (a welcome loan from the prop department) as we squelch down the drive, a relentless drizzle whipping us around the head. It's April 2017, day 35 of the shoot, and the ultimate big-game hunter has been waylaid by inclement weather. Shooting has stalled for the past three days with barely a break in the deluge, and tempers are fraying.

"This fucking weather, man," growls star Thomas Jane, chewing on an unlit stogie the size of a courgette. We've had weather they've never seen in the history of Vancouver. Guys here who are 50, 60 years old have never seen shit like this. The schedule has been fucked!"

Today, though, Team *Predator* is fighting back. Articulated cranes with giant rain shields have been deployed to keep the torrent at bay and, with a hint of sun at last peering weakly from between ash grey clouds, filming is back on.

Outside a large, burnt-red barn, Holbrook and Rhodes lean against a battered Winnebago. A quick peek inside reveals wall-to-wall firepower. Rifles and pistols adorn almost every surface, while jars of ammo line the kitchenette shelves like an anarchist's spice rack. If you ever fancied holidaying in a conflict zone, this is the RV you'd want to be driving.

Black is camped out in a nearby tent, a thick black Puffa jacket keeping out the worst of the chill. He does not, if we're honest, look particularly rejuvenated. Hunched behind a monitor, he sucks furiously on a vape stick, glancing enviously at Rhodes, who takes long, deep drags on the stub of an honest-to-God cigarette.

"He's the only one in the film allowed to fucking smoke," Black grouches. "You can cut off people's heads, skin their corpses and blow their fucking brains out, but the second someone picks up a cigarette the studio will shut your ass down."

He takes another hit, a cloud of thick vapour billowing around his head. "I use this thing because I'm desperately trying to quit. But this is a war movie, you know? They're soldiers. What else are they fucking gonna do?"





Led by Holbrook's Quinn McKenna, Black's band of brothers is about as far from Dutch Schaefer's crack unit as it's possible to get. A ragtag bunch of outcasts and burnouts affectionately dubbed 'The Loonies', they're thrown together by circumstance when the bus taking them to a military psych unit is waylaid by the ornery alien.

"The first movie was all whacking each other on the butt with muscled, cable-like arms," says Black. "That's fun and all. I mean, who doesn't like a good muscular butt slap? But I wanted to go leaner and meaner."

Consisting of Rhodes, Jane and Key, along with Alfie Allen and Augusto Aguilera, The Loonies are exactly that: each one as damaged and broken as the next, with inner demons to spare.

"It's basically saying, 'What if you had the forgotten ones? The marginalised soldiers who didn't get a chance to win that coveted spot on the elite team with Arnold. What would happen if you took the least likely unit ever to go up against the Predator?'"

In the scene we're watching, The Loonies are tooling up to head off in pursuit of McKenna's son Rory (played by *Room*'s Jacob Tremblay), recently abducted by the same shadowy cabal that has covered up the Predators' existence to-date. There's no equivalent of Old Painless — Jesse Ventura's ludicrous megagun — on show but military hardware abounds, with M4s, MP5s and Škorpion machine pistols passed around like candy bars. Even Munn, whose evolutionary biologist, Dr Casey Bracket, wouldn't seem an obvious poster child for the NRA, cocks and locks her sidearm with quiet competence.

"It's a micro-aggression that women are shown as either Lara Croft Tomb Raiders or the emotional stay-at-home caregiver," she opines. "Any time you see a man in a movie, nobody wonders, 'How do they know how to work that weapon?' So I said, 'How about she just knows?'"

"This isn't the '80s movie," chips in Holbrook. "Which was so stereotypical. You know, the Native American has the headband, the cowboy has chewing tobacco and the smart guy has the glasses. That's just not relatable now. Hats off to the original but this one's rooted in reality. We're letting the story speak for itself, rather than overriding it with those huge guns and oiled muscles."

## PUERTO VALLARTA, MEXICO. 1986.

A camo-streaked Schwarzenegger raises one ham-sized fist and four men freeze instantly in their tracks. He spreads his fingers and the commandos fan out, taking up defensive positions in the undergrowth. Ahead of him, Sonny Landham stands alone in a clearing, staring into the jungle while fingering the medicine pouch around his neck. He's rigid with tension; beads of sweat trickle down his face.

"What is it?" hisses Schwarzenegger, creeping cautiously up behind him. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"There's something in those trees..." Landham rumbles, portent hanging on his words. Both men study the foliage with mounting dread. The camera follows their gaze into the canopy, where we strain to pick out a shape among the branches.

Without warning, Landham breaks into a run. Fumbling with his belt as he sprints full-tilt for the tree line, the hulking soldier dives into the shrubbery, yanks down his trousers and proceeds to shit his guts out behind a bush.

"That's the part of the scene you don't see," laughs Black, remembering the incident. "He'd been barely holding it in the entire time! Bad water at the hotel. *Everyone* got sick on that movie."

Punishing heat, venomous snakes, and rampant diarrhoea were all fixtures on John McTiernan's *Predator* shoot. But

despite a wide assortment of discomforts, the 25-year-old Black was having the time of his life.

Uneasy with the nihilistic tone of 'Hunter', producer Joel Silver had ordered a new version with the laughs dialled way up. It didn't work. So, as the script doctor *du jour*, Black had been asked to step in. Reluctant to tamper with an already great screenplay, he refused. But, with one eye on the beautiful Mexican resort town where the production was based, he agreed instead to a part in the film. It would, he assured Silver, allow him to be easily accessible if script work was required.

"I always liked Jim and John Thomas' original script," Black says. "I knew the studio would come all the way around the maypole and end up right back at that version, which is exactly what happened."

And so, Black found himself on camera instead; playing soldier with the literal biggest stars in Hollywood. Surrounded by waxed chests and arms the size of traffic bollards, the young screenwriter was like the only punter at SummerSlam '86.

"It would have been extremely daunting were they not all such great fun. There wasn't a bad one in the bunch," he says. "Bill [Duke] and Jesse [Ventura] were very imposing figures. Bill was so intense — this huge guy with burning eyes — but he was a gentle giant. And when my mom and dad visited me on set, Jesse took us all out to dinner. He was the sweetest man."

Most of all Black gravitated towards the brooding Landham, though. Infamously volatile, Landham was the production's wild card. So much so that, legend has it, the studio hired a bodyguard to protect other people from *him*.

"They hired that guy to stop him getting drunk!" Black amends. "Because when he was sober he was great, but he had a short fuse when he drank. I became his de facto bodyguard because, for some reason, I was the only one who could talk him down."

Schwarzenegger spent almost all of his downtime pumping iron, when not challenging Ventura to bicep-measuring contests or dining out with Maria Shriver, who he flew off to marry mid-shoot. Meanwhile, Carl Weathers maintained the fiction that he didn't work out at all, insisting his physique was God-given, while sneaking off to the gym when his co-stars were in bed.

"Carl had just done *Rocky III*. He would take us to disco night in town and get up and dance while they played *Living In America*. The Mexican crowd would







**"You can cut off people's heads, skin their corpses and blow their fucking brains out, but the second someone picks up a cigarette the studio will shut your ass down."**

**SHANE BLACK**

The Predator shows off its shiny new armour.



**Clockwise from right:**

Loonies Williams (Trevante Rhodes), Lynch (Alfie Allen), Quinn, Coyle and Baxley (Thomas Jane); Jake Busey as the son of Peter Keyes — his dad Gary's character in *Predator 2*; Olivia Munn as biologist Casey Bracket; Jacob Tremblay's Rory, Quinn's son.



go nuts! They'd just watched the movie and here was the star in their little town, hitting the dance floor."

Big actors with bigger personalities, Dutch's commandos were a force of nature onscreen and off, their macho chemistry so effective that half the film's battle seemed already won. The problem was the other half. The monster, the Predator itself, was not working. A reptilian lobster housing a then-unknown Jean-Claude Van Damme, the creature looked ridiculous and everyone knew it.

"The decisions that were arrived at were very slipshod and last minute," Black recalls. "What's the monster look like? Fuck it, this." Eventually, they brought in Stan Winston but it was a scramble. Even that was like, 'Fuck it, get Winston. He's got two weeks!'"

Production shut down while Winston worked and, with a little help from James Cameron, who pitched its signature mouthparts, a very different creature began to take shape.

**"MY FAVOURITE PART** is when you see the Predator's face, when it removes its mask. It's so cool! 'Cause it's like a bug, but it's not a bug — it's a bug *man*! And then Arnold Schwarzenegger goes hand-to-hand with him and it's *awesome*! That was bad... ummm."

Ten-year-old Jacob Tremblay glances nervously at his mother. Mrs Tremblay cocks an eyebrow, indicating the presence of very thin ice.

"I can't say that word or I'll get in trouble," he says, sheepishly. "It was bad-A-S-S," he spells the word out carefully

and earns a satisfied nod from Mum.

Spelled or spoken, the sentiment stands. Winston's badass alien might have been thrown together in a fortnight but it would go on to become one of his most famous creations and a monster movie classic. Now, in a locked room at the back of the costume department, *Empire* finally comes face to face with it. *El diablo que hace trofeos de los hombres* — the demon that makes trophies of men.

The Predator — or 'Yautja', as it is known in the vast expanded universe of comics, books and games — is just as we remember from that first big reveal: sunken, beady eyes; mottled, reptilian skin and gaping mandibles revealing inner rows of pointed teeth. Aside from its attire — fitted armour plating, rather than the fishnet look we're used to — the Predator is wholly familiar; an old friend. Which in itself represents a problem.

"The challenge became to make it frightening," says Black. "Cause upon that hinged everything — whether you bought our heroes going up against him and felt a real threat for them. We had to invent a scenario in which the Predators were mysterious and scary again."

Black and Dekker's handiwork

resulted in the 'Upgrade'. Predator plus. Bigger, meaner and nasty as hell. Ten feet tall and midnight black, bristling with spines, skin thickened with chitinous organic armour — the product of harvesting DNA from the deadliest creatures on every world it's hunted. The ultimate expression of Predator dominance. It is, it's fair to say, one giant, ugly motherfucker.

"Our idea was that on Predator World things haven't stood still," Black reveals. "It's not like they congregate and just wait for the next bus to Earth so they can hunt some more. Things have moved on."

The next step in Predator evolution, it's an escalation for the mythology and one that will, with inevitable tedium, draw ire from certain quarters of the internet.

"There are some fans that will say, 'This new Predator movie sucks. Here's what I would do.' And they go into such detail. Like, 'I want the Black Blade clan — or whatever — to discover that they're genetically inferior to the Yautja Prime!' Really? No matter what, There's always going to be a group of fans who go, 'Fuck you, *Iron Man 3* guy! So, the Predator's





gonna be Ben Kingsley when he takes off his mask, right?' No. That's a funny joke, though. I've only heard that one 12 times today."

**WHEN WE NEXT** catch up with Black it's on a sofa in the front room of his LA home. It's June 2018 and the edit is all but done, with only final visual-effects work to complete. Black reclines on cushions, idly scratching the ears of his bull terrier, Ollie. Still vaping, but with slightly less fervour. Here, surrounded by walnut bookcases lined with his beloved detective novels, Black is at ease, his memory-lane marathon all but complete.

"Yeah, I couldn't have been more wrong about the lark part," he says, with a rueful sigh. "If I had known how arduous and time-consuming this would be..."

It's been a long slog, longer than anticipated, with the release date pushed from February to September and substantial reshoots taking up the early part of this year. Black's cheeky chopper has, disappointingly, been replaced by a still garish but less risqué weather-copter ("Clearance issues with Victoria's Secret, I think") and large sections of the finale have been revisited. Contrary to internet scuttlebutt, he says, the additional time was not to save a production in crisis. It was for reasons far more prosaic.

"The first time we shot the third act it was daytime," he explains. "It's all this spooky stuff but then it's bright sunlight. It just didn't work. So I said, 'Ummm, can we do this again at night?'"

Has it made all the difference? "Well, yeah," Black snorts. "The difference has been night and day."

*The Predator* has not been the carefree return to twentysomething life that he'd hoped for, but Black is happy with the result. Inspired, he says, by *Stranger Things*, which milked every drop of nostalgia from '80s horror, Black has worked a similar trick for action movies. He's composed a love letter to his youth, filled with callbacks, homages and everything he loved about the film he made 31 years ago.

"I wanted to make the ultimate conglomeration," he says. "Roll it all up in this movie, this wild ride with a group of misfits who have one last chance to recapture the life they'd previously neglected. To go out in a blaze of glory."

A lark, in other words. An adventure. A chance to feel young again. ●

THE PREDATOR IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 SEPTEMBER

# EVERYONE VS PREDATOR

THIS SUMMER THE PREDATOR IS UP AGAINST A TEN-YEAR-OLD BOY. BUT THAT'S FAR FROM ITS UNLIKELIEST ADVERSARY



## BATMAN!

BATMAN VERSUS PREDATOR (1991)

Drawn by an unseasonably hot Gotham summer, the Predator goes toe-to-toe with the Dark Knight, whipping him soundly until Alfred shoots it with a blunderbuss.



## TARZAN!

TARZAN VERSUS PREDATOR AT THE EARTH'S CORE (1996)

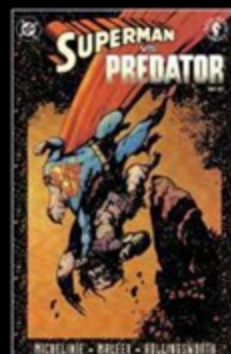
Predators attack Jane! Tarzan kill Predators! Quite how the Lord Of The Apes takes down the aliens with a knife and a chimpanzee we have no idea. But who cares? It all happens at the Earth's core!



## JUDGE DREDD!

PREDATOR VERSUS JUDGE DREDD (1997)

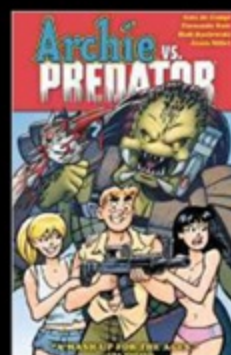
Dredd fights Pred in this Mega City One crossover, in which the grimacing lawman teams up with PSI Judge Schaefer, a distant descendant of Dutch, Schwarzenegger's character in the original film.



## SUPERMAN!

SUPERMAN VS. PREDATOR (2001)

Afflicted by a convenient alien virus that weakens his powers, Kal-El finds himself on the wrong end of a hunt, getting trounced before teaming up with the Predator to take down villains in the final act.



## ARCHIE!

ARCHIE VS. PREDATOR (2015)

Archie and his Riverdale chums head to Costa Rica for spring break, only to end up partying with an unexpected alien. Its targets? Betty and Veronica! Archie lures it out using Jughead in drag. Hilarity ensues.