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STARLOG Magazine started covering the world of SF & fantasy in 1976. Its sister magazine, FANGORIA, has been “America’s Horror Magazine” since 1979. For the time being, STARLOG Magazine and its website are no longer operating. However, the SF, fantasy and comics universe is still going strong, and so we will be keeping the STARLOG brand alive via Fangoria.com. Inaugurating STARLOG’s return to web will be a series of on-set interviews with the cast & crew of M. Night Shyamalan’s fantasy epic.

Paramount’s THE LAST AIRBENDER (coming out July 1 in 2-D, RealD 3D and digital 3-D) is based on the animated series AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko. In addition to our interviewees Nicola Peltz and Noah Ringer, the cast includes TWILIGHT’s Jackson Rathbone, SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE’s Dev Patel, IRON MAN’s Shaun Toub, SPIDER-MAN 2’s Aasif Mandvi and SUNSHINE’s Cliff Curtis. Here’s the synopsis:

“For nearly a century, the Fire Nation has waged its deadly campaign for global domination over its fellow tribal nations of Air, Water and Earth. They offer but one choice to the tribes who fall to their might: complete surrender, or complete annihilation. As the villagers vainly attempt to defend themselves, they stand behind the chosen few who can command their nation’s element and ‘bend’ it to their will. Backed by enormous armies and weapons of destruction, however, the firebenders have already eliminated every airbender on the planet and now, they turn their attentions to the Water Nation, headquartered in their northern fortress.

One day, young waterbender Katara (Peltz) is out practicing her skills with her brother Sokka (Rathbone) when they discover a young boy named Aang (Ringer). But as Aang's airbending skills become apparent, Katara and Sokka realize that they've found more than just the last airbender. As the prophesied Avatar—the only one who can control all four of the elements—the young airbender is the lone weapon that can repel the Fire Nation's onslaught and ultimately restore balance to the war-torn world. But can he master his bending skills and become the hero he needs to be before it's too late?

Look for the upcoming Patel, Rathbone, Mandvi, producer Frank Marshall and Shyamalan posts. But for now, let's introduce you to the two young actors, Peltz and Ringer. It's a short chat, which is only appropriate, as they're the shortest leads in the film.

Peltz made her feature film debut with 2006's DECK THE HALLS and only had one other major screen credit before landing THE LAST AIRBENDER. "I used to play ice hockey a couple years ago, then I got into acting," says Peltz. "I never got into martial arts, but I had to train for that in the movie. I started training in October [this interview took place in July 2009], and I learned kung fu and then Tai chi. And in February, after I knew the basics, we started learning the moves for the movie."

Peltz submitted herself for the part in AIRBENDER, and was quite familiar with the waterbender character, having faithfully watched the series with her younger twin brothers. "I'm so blessed I have this part," she grins. "I was so excited when I got the audition and got closer and closer. When Night called, I screamed in joy!

Little girls everywhere look up to Katara and her strength as a young woman. "I like Katara because she's a great role model, not only for little girls, but also for women. She's really mentally and physically strong, strong-willed and -minded, but she's also caring and compassionate. Oh, and she's a water guardian. The movie has a lot of values, but it's also fun. It's fantasy, but it's also a really cool battle between good and evil."

She started working with Rathbone before she knew that he was part of the TWILIGHT phenomena. “I read the first book, and my friends told me about TWILIGHT, but I saw the movie after I met Jackson, so I didn’t realize that he was in TWILIGHT. I was like, ‘Hey, I auditioned with him!’ ”

Working with Shyamalan has been a blast for the young thespian. “Night is an amazing director,” Peltz concludes. “The thing I always like is that after he gets the set the way he wants it, he’ll do two takes, and then give you a third take to do things the way you want to. It’s really freeing.”

Noah Ringer had begun practicing Taekwondo, the martial art and national sport of South Korea, at the age of 10, his skills later garnering accolades, including the title of American Taekwondo Association Texas State Champion. Early on, Noah had begun shaving his head to help cool off during training. When his friends and his instructor, all fans of the animated series, noted how much he looked like the television hero, they started calling Noah by the nickname of “Avatar.” Intrigued, he began watching the series on DVD, and he really connected with the martial arts sequences. When it was announced that Paramount was conducting international casting calls for roles in THE LAST AIRBENDER, Noah—urged by his Taekwondo instructor—made a DVD audition tape, even painting the character’s signature blue arrow on his already shaved head.

Ringer started watching AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER “About three years ago. Since I’ve been shaving my head, everyone’s called me Aang, and they said I had to watch this cartoon. This movie is different, though, but it had to be changed to fit a movie. They’re both a bit different, but very good.”

“A great experience” is how Ringer describes working on his first film. “I love working with all the people, learning more about acting, camera angles, special effects and how to be flexible,” he

explains. “I hadn’t acted before this movie, so after I got the part, I went to acting school for a month, and then we started shooting. They teach you how to focus, move your emotions around, and get a hold of them… It was cool.”

Speaking of cool, what has been the coolest thing about this movie? “I think some of the sets. They’re really cool.” And the hardest? “The Steadicam shots are the hardest. It’s so tough to get the techniques [right for] the camera. I mean, it’s more performance, I don’t really have to hit anyone. I’m a black belt, so it can be difficult sometimes. I haven’t had one fight scene that hasn’t been changed or adapted either for camera angles or lighting.”

He isn’t sure what he’ll be doing after AIRBENDER, but if the movie is a hit, the plan is to make this...you guess it...a fantasy trilogy. “I think I’ll take a little break, and then we’ll see what happens. I’m probably going back home to Texas for a while.”

Keep coming back to Fangoria.com for more AIRBENDER set visits.

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