

Mike Mendez Kicks Butt With “BIG ASS SPIDER” (w/trailer)

Written by Michael Gingold

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There’s a new giant arachnid in town, and it’s creeping toward the South by Southwest Film Festival—under the title its director always hoped it would have. Fango spoke exclusively to the man who’s unleashing a BIG ASS SPIDER, whose world-premiere trailer can also be seen below.

Just announced as one of the Midnight selections at this year’s SXSW (running March 8-16 in Austin, TX), BIG ASS SPIDER was helmed by Mike Mendez, who has made a name for himself with such slyly comic horror films as THE CONVENT and THE GRAVEDANCERS. He brought the same sensibilities when he was offered this latest project—though he had a few misgivings at first about taking it on at all. “When the script [by Gregory Gieras] came to me,” he remembers, “it was called DINO SPIDER, and my first reaction was, ‘Has it come to this? Really?’ And the answer was yes [*laughs*], it had! I was really kind of torn—not that there’s any shame in doing B-monster movies, but they’re not necessarily my first love.

{youtube}TSINiSEWqwQ{/youtube}

“But as I read the script and talked to the producers,” he continues, I thought it was fun and I liked what they had to say, which was basically that they wanted to make a Syfy-type movie, just better. They felt the market was flooded with kind of Z-grade product, and felt that for the same means, if we cared and tried much harder, we could do something special. Now they had my attention, and once I started to talk about the creature, pretty soon I fell in love with the project and got very much into it, and MEGA SPIDER became the filming title.”



The film sees a humongous alien spider breaking out of a military lab to rampage across LA, with exterminator Alex Mathis (Greg Grunberg) and his security-guard pal Jose Ramos (Lombardo Boyar, pictured right with Grunberg) standing between the monster and the city’s complete destruction. Unlike its Syfy-bred ilk, in which a straight face is the order of the day, this film allowed Mendez to bring his customary sense of humor to the table. “I felt it was

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important that if you're going to make a giant-spider movie, you can't take it entirely seriously," he says. "Obviously there are certain mandates that certain companies have for these types of movies, and I thought the best thing I could do was ignore that, because I don't care about the company mandates. I care about the viewers, and what is going to be the best experience for them. Plus, it's always best when you're making a low-budget film to play to your strengths, and I've always felt most comfortable with comedy.

"Then, once the cast started falling into place, they were all kind of natural comedians as well, so it felt like the right thing to do was keep kicking it in that direction as far as we could. The end result is not an outright comedy, and it's certainly doesn't making fun of itself; we just went with, "How would you react if there was a giant spider?" There were a lot of fun possibilities that could come out of that, which ultimately led us to the final tone of the movie, which is more in the vein of GHOSTBUSTERS." That also led to the title changing, first in Mendez's mind and ultimately on the final movie. "As we were filming, the way it was manifesting itself naturally led me to believe that the movie I was making was called BIG ASS SPIDER, because that reflected its vibe and its attitude."

Grunberg and Boyar, according to the filmmaker, had a lot to do with maintaining that vibe. "We were fortunate enough to get Greg, from HEROES and ALIAS, and he brought Lombardo on board," Mendez explains. "I was not familiar with Lombardo—I knew he had been on THE BERNIE MAC SHOW—but the moment we met him, we knew he was the one, and he ended up stealing the movie. Their chemistry is amazing. I felt so blessed and fortunate to have actors like those two who really fed off each other and the script, and fed off what we were doing and kicked it upward into something that was not there on the page."

For the supporting cast—and even the tiniest parts—Mendez called on a number of people he knew, from GRAVEDANCERS star Clare Kramer to Ray Wise, who appeared in the sales trailer for the director's upcoming OVERKILL (see it with details on the project [here](#), and look for more on this site soon) and Lin Shaye from the Xbox short DOGGIE HEAVEN, which Mendez produced for director James Wan. In smaller roles, look for the likes of AUTOPSY and NIGHT OF THE DEMONS remake director Adam Gierasch (he's the one getting his face melted off RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK-style in the trailer) and the inescapable Lloyd Kaufman.

"It was important to keep it in the family and work with people I knew," Mendez says. "There was a certain freedom in the fact that we were shooting in Los Angeles, and it was a super-low-budget movie. My attitude was that when I was a kid, we used to make little movies in our backyards with our friends, and through my experiences in independent film, it had kind

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of lost its simplicity and joy. And I wanted to really get back to that, and my roots. So we brought that spirit of completely independent filmmaking that I had when I was young. It was so liberating, and I wanted to get as many of my friends involved in it as I could. So all the extras, background players and day players were found via Facebook. I would put these notices on my page saying, ‘Hey! Who wants to be squashed by a spider?’ And my friends would say, ‘I want to do that!’ Extra work can be a drag and not a lot of fun, but I felt that if I made the set comfortable and made them integral to the scenes we were shooting, they would have a great time. Yeah, I put them through hell—a lot of them can tell you how many times I made them run up and down the street from a giant spider—but at the end of the day, at least from what they tell me, everybody loved it.”

The most important part of the equation, of course, is the mega-big-ass-spider itself. Creature features of this type aren’t necessarily known for having the most convincing FX, and Mendez was initially determined to do something different. “I wanted a different look from your typical Syfy movie, which I describe as a handful of Bulgarians in the middle of an empty field poking a giant praying mantis with a stick. “I wanted motion and a different texture, so what I really hoped to do was go back and do it all with stop-motion. Now, the producers looked at me like I was crazy, and they were probably right, because in this day and age, with the budget we had, to do a full stop-motion movie would have been far more technologically advanced than we had the means for.



“So I was begrudgingly like, ‘All right, let’s see what we can do with CGI.’ We started talking to different CGI companies, and this company from Pakistan called ICE Animations said they wanted to do it, and I, being a dumb American, was like [*grows*], ‘Pakistan?! Do they even have computers?!’ Then they showed me a sample of their stuff, and I shut up really quickly, because they were amazing. So I had the fortune of working with ICE Animation, which wants to be sort of a Weta of independent film, a one-stop shop for all your digital needs, and saw this as a bridge to working with American companies. We became a guinea pig for that, and there were a lot of growing pains, but overall they were amazing and really gave it their all. They constantly wowed me with the stuff they were pulling off—and now, in retrospect, I believe I held back, because I didn’t believe a lot of the effects could be done digitally, and that stuff

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turned out phenomenal. I mean, we have digital vehicles, digital buildings, digital helicopters, digital rubble and smoke and fire. We'd just shoot an empty street, and they'd add several cars on fire, and all the rubble and the decayed buildings. It made the movie look 10 times bigger, if not more than that.”

As a result, Mendez became a convert to CGI, which he plans to incorporate into his feature features. “Suddenly, I, who had not been a digital fan, was like, ‘Oh my God, there is a lot to be done here with the right people and the right mindset,’ ” he says. “I still like practical effects, but I have a feeling that mine will have digital aid from now on.”