Written by Pat Jankiewicz
Tuesday, 20 July 2010 14:42

Ever look up at the sky and wonder if someone or something was looking back? The makers of the new independent feature GREY SKIES did, and unfortunately for us, the answer is “Yes!”

In a plot that could loosely be described as THE BIG CHILL meets SIGNS, several friends get together for a weekend reunion in the Michigan woods and find an otherworldly presence stalking them for a terrible purpose. After last year’s alien-abduction disappointment THE FOURTH KIND (which featured no actual extraterrestrials), it’s important to note that GREY SKIES pays off with some creepy, impressive aliens. These evil E.T.s were designed and built by Oscar-winner Barney Burman, who earned the gold with his cool, creative creatures for last year’s STAR TREK.

A-list monster makers like Burman, whose Proteus FX shop turned Tom Cruise into the grotesque Les Grossman for TROPIC THUNDER and handled the makeup for MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III, don’t normally decide to roll up their sleeves and do indie sci-fi movies. “But it was a good script,” Burman says, “and the makers of GREY SKIES are good people, so I did it and had a lot of fun.”

In fact, the artist reveals, “I consciously sought out low-budget films after STAR TREK. I wanted to be creative and actually put my hands on the clay some more—personally experience making things from scratch. On GREY SKIES, I had three interns doing it for credit, and we had fun playing together. I directed them on how to build the aliens—and mentioned that I didn’t want them to be seen in the film! What I like is to make things and not have them shown, because what you see in your imagination is far better than what you can create.

“More importantly, I didn’t want to have people look at my résumé and say, ‘Wow, TROPIC THUNDER, MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III and STAR TREK—we can’t afford him!’ I have seen that before, and didn’t want it to happen to me. I want to do films that inspire me to be creative, not just the ones that will give me a big paycheck!”

And GREY SKIES fit the bill. “Initially, I saw it in the breakdowns and sent out an inquiry,” Burman recalls. “All I said [in an e-mail] was, ‘Need aliens’? I got a response almost immediately: ‘Oh my God, yes, we need aliens!’ They had someone else set up to do it, but they went south. The producers were looking for somebody new, and were excited that someone like me had contacted them.”

When Burman took on GREY SKIES, “I had not won the Oscar yet—it was a good eight months before that. I had nothing to do in my shop, and had to find something because I was going crazy! I agreed to do this at a very low cost, had a lot of fun with it and was able to put my own creativity into it. I told the filmmakers, ‘Treat this like Ridley Scott’s ALIEN, where you never see it! I’ll make the creature for you, it will be better than what you’re paying for, you’ll wanna show it a lot, but don’t. And if you do shoot it, hide it behind things so you only get quick glimpses!’ They promised me they would, and I can’t wait to see the movie so I can verify that.

“Ours is sort of a different take on the standard alien,” Burman adds, “which hopefully makes it stand out a little bit. There’s something insectlike about it, in a subtle way.”

Actress Stacy Jorgensen, who stars as Jenny, one of the extraterrestrials’ human targets, reveals that the film was a family affair. “My husband Mark [Reilly] came up with the idea for GREY SKIES before he even met me. He and Michael Cornacchia, one of the awesome actors in the film and also one of our producers, had been talking about doing a ‘grown-up’ horror movie for a while. Then, when he met me, he told me he had been working on a cool alien film that revolves around a group of college friends having their annual reunion get-together at a cabin in the woods. He had characters in mind, and when I heard there was a chance for a strong female lead, I pressured him every day to get it done!

“Mark started writing it in September 2008,” she continues, “and we went to my mom’s house in Lake Michigan that year for Christmas. When he saw how beautiful and remote her property was that she owns with her boyfriend Greg, Mark finished that script before we even left the house on January 2, 2009! Greg and my mom were thrilled with the prospect of having a movie filmed on their property, and Michigan was really kicking into high gear with the tax credits, so

Greg helped me find investors. He and my mom agreed to feed and house the cast and crew, and the rest is history! My mom gets a craft service credit, and also wore about 10 other hats on the movie. That’s indie filmmaking at its finest, right?”

There were casualties, though. “I owe Mom a new floor,” Jorgensen laughs. “We did tear it up with everyone running around with camera carts and lighting rigs. I think she still has a C-clamp about 15 feet up on one of her beams in the living room! During the scene where someone’s throat gets sliced, we had about five blankets down to protect it from the blood, but we still managed to get some pretty deep gouges in her hardwood floor, and one of our team broke an heirloom vase in the kitchen the day we shot a big revelation scene!”

Filming on GREY SKIES began in mid-September 2009, and Jorgensen says, “Michigan is a beautiful place to shoot. I have always loved how beautiful their property is—they have 101 acres, deer in their backyard and three lakes on the property. It really was perfect for a horror movie because no one can hear you scream! We never had to worry about neighbors complaining or the police being called. Great for a horror movie, but bad if you’re in real trouble!”

Reilly recalls that the genesis of GREY SKIES actually occurred way back in 2005. “I was doing THE STAR WARS TRILOGY IN 30 MINUTES with Michael Cornacchia in Los Angeles when we came up with the story,” he explains. “We hit on the idea for an alien horror movie we could do ourselves. Using the one-location template, we got creative with characters and situations. I always wanted to explore the idea of aliens as our ‘slasher.’ Coupled with a recognizable horror stereotype like the old cabin in the woods, we knew we would be able to cut down on budget while exploring that scenario with something cool like aliens, instead of the usual ghosts, killers or zombies. We agreed that the idea of our characters experiencing an alien abduction would be interesting.

“Life moved on, we never got around to writing it and I got married,” he continues, “but I never stopped thinking about the idea. Finally, in September 2008, I had this vision of the very first scene and started writing. I fleshed out the characters, did some research and consequently wrote myself into a corner. I had half a script.” Then Jorgenson took him to the cabin in Michigan that Christmas, and “we knew we had found our location.”

And of course, he didn’t have to look far for GREY SKIES’ leading lady. “I had always been writing the lead for my wife—I write everything for her, I guess,” Reilly grins. “We both started to get really excited. While Stacy spoke to her mom about the logistics of filming there, I went to work. I’ll always remember the snow falling outside my window as I finished the very first draft. Stacy found our investors and a couple drafts later, in late February, the script was done and money was in the bank. It was insane how fast it came together.”

They soon found director Kai Blackwood. “Stacy acted in a short film called CUPCAKE that Kai wrote and directed; we went to the premiere, and I immediately bonded with him over our shared love of comics, movies and horror. At that time, we had just lost a director we wanted to work with when another feature of his got funding. Stacy and I were sitting on the couch days after that premiere, wondering where we would find our director. Suddenly, we looked at each other and asked, ‘What about Kai?’ We sent him the script that night, and later, he called us wanting to do it.”

The duo are equally happy about Burman’s involvement. “I was thrilled when he came onto the film, as was everybody else,” Jorgensen says. “But I was completely creeped out by his aliens. When Barney was working on them, I only saw them in pieces, never fully assembled. When they arrived on set via FedEx, I avoided that box like Brad Pitt at the end of SE7EN when he gets the package with Gwyneth Paltrow’s head! I told everyone on set that I absolutely did not want to see the aliens face to face until my first scene with them. That lasted for a few days. And then one night I was coming up the stairs from the lower floor of my mom’s house, where craft services, makeup and wardrobe were, and as I got to the top of the staircase, I caught a glimpse of one of the aliens moving toward me as our stunt coordinator, Banzai Vitale, was trying to get out of there. I almost fell down the stairs, I was so scared of what I saw.

“The first time I worked with the aliens was when we see them in the house,” she continues. “I was trying my hardest to avoid them until the end, but during that scene I had to see one of them! The first time I saw the alien queen was when she was in my face in the bedroom scene. Very creepy; she knew how to mess with me, too. The girl playing her [Kasia Kowalczyk] would cock her head and not speak to me to really mess with my mind so I would be scared of her. It worked—I think my heart stopped for a moment!”

Beyond Burman, GREY SKIES boasts other strong talents behind the camera. “Our DP, Gavin Fisher, is fantastic,” Jorgensen raves. “He did all of the ‘teleport’ lighting effects when the aliens come into each shot and when people are taken by the light. Our web designer came up with the poster, so I can’t claim any credit for that. He’s awesome as well, and all in all I’m grateful for the great team we assembled.” You can get a taste of their work in the trailer below, and find out more about GREY SKIES at its official website and Facebook page .

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