Actress Briana Evigan has been all over the fright genre in the last couple of years, yet she has managed not to do the same kind of horror story twice. She faced zombies in FEAR ITSELF’s NEW YEARS DAY episode, a slasher in SORORITY ROW and the surreal genre-blending of S. DARKO, with the home-invasion shocks of Darren Lynn Bousman’s MOTHER’S DAY coming up next. And this month saw Lionsgate’s DVD release of BURNING BRIGHT, an animal-attack entry in which Evigan shares the screen with a very hungry tiger.

Actually, as the disc’s featurette reveals and Evigan explains, it only looks like she and the big cat have scenes together. “I never actually worked with the tiger,” Evigan says. “I basically got to break down an entire house that they built for me, and did some greenscreen work, but mainly I worked on those sets with nothing, which was cool, because I had to pretend that all this was happening to me.”

BURNING BRIGHT casts Evigan as Kelly, a college-age girl caring for an autistic preteen brother Tom (Charlie Tahan) and dealing with a ne’er-do-well stepfather (THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT’s Garret Dillahunt). He has sunk every penny he—and Kelly—have into a planned safari attraction, and purchased a tiger with an especially violent history as its centerpiece. When a hurricane bears down on the area, Kelly and Tom wind up trapped in their boarded-up house with the vicious feline—portrayed by a number of trained Bengal tigers that were composited into footage with their human co-stars.

“I did meet the tigers” during the shoot on Universal’s Orlando lot, Evigan recalls, “and I spoke

with the trainers a lot. They had these wires that went through the house, and they put meat on them and shot it across the rooms and the tigers would just launch after it. Apparently, meat is the way to get a tiger to do anything [*laughs*]. If I wasn’t in the picture, you’d see it attacking a big piece of steak. There were a lot of tricks like that that the trainers had been working on, but I could never work with them. If a tiger saw a person acting the way I was, running and banging and screaming, it would probably sense all that fear and freak out.

“There was a real hurricane that came through Florida,” she continues, “so I went home for five days while they shot a lot of the tiger work. I got to watch it when I got back, which really helped, to see what I was supposed to be running from. It’s like they filmed two movies—one with me and one with the tigers.”

She was able to work more closely with Tahan, and recalls the experience warmly. “He was 11 when we were shooting, I believe, but he was so grown-up and mature and smart, and really into his art. He looked up tapes on autism, really did his research and did a killer job. My cousin is actually autistic, and it was interesting to see the same behaviors. I mean, every kid who’s autistic is very different; they don’t have the same symptoms. But they’re some of the smartest people ever; my cousin would read dictionaries and has a bigger vocabulary than I’ll ever have. He’s so smart, and I feel like Charlie really nailed that.”

BURNING BRIGHT director Carlos Brooks also wins Evigan’s seal of approval, in part because he and producer David Higgins responded to her initial misgivings about the script. While she enjoyed the concept, she felt that Kelly, on paper, wasn’t an especially strong character, and during a trip home to Hollywood in the midst of the S. DARKO shoot (to attend the MTV Movie Awards, where she and Robert Hoffman won Best Kiss for STEP UP 2 THE STREETS), she met with the duo to discuss it. “I just felt that if you didn’t care about Kelly, why would you care if she survived? I needed people to love her, and that’s where the changes came in. We made Kelly more likable, and gave her a lot more personality than I’d seen when I first read it. We built her up so much that now, she’s my favorite character I’ve played.”

And she does a bang-up job in the film—literally, in a number of the action setpieces, though she reports that she never really got hurt while making BURNING BRIGHT. “I did get some pretty bad burns in my armpits for some of the harness work I did in the laundry chute,” she says. “They had these really thin wires underneath my arms when I would climb, and when I would do a quick jump or held on for too long, it would burn me. So I got all that new skin-care stuff, all of which worked wonderfully.”

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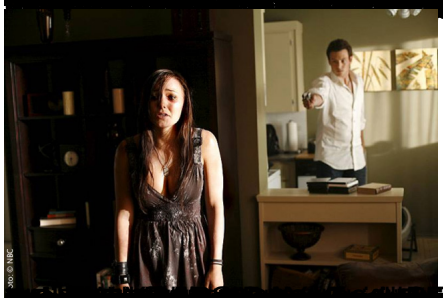
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