

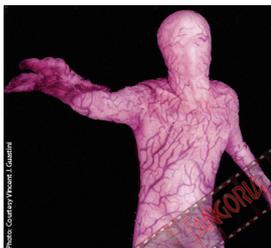
Deep Inside “AREA 51”

Written by Abbie Bernstein
Friday, 25 February 2011 09:19



Although he’s been acting professionally for most of his life (Fango-worthy credits include BLOOD WARS, BROTHERHOOD OF BLOOD, NIGHT SKIES, WISHMASTER 3 and HOBOKEN HOLLOW), in the past few years, Jason Connery has expanded his horizons to directing. He’s now in preproduction on the mixed-martial-arts actioner THE PHILLY KID for Warner Bros. and producer Joel Silver, but Connery’s first three films have all been science-fiction/horror stories. PANDEMIC dealt with a sinister disease outbreak in a small town, THE DEVIL’S TOMB was about a military squad that unearths you-know-what and now AREA 51, produced as one of the After Dark Originals and premiering this Saturday, February 26 on Syfy, explores a series of unfortunate events at that legendary military site.

Speaking by phone from Louisiana, where he’s prepping PHILLY, Connery explains his particular trip to the alleged alien repository: “Without giving the plot away, it’s about a group of journalists who are finally allowed to go into Area 51, and the U.S. Air Force basically says, ‘We’re going to show you that there are no aliens and get rid of this whole conspiracy theory.’ Sure enough, they’re shown around the facility and kind of feel a little bit like, ‘Hmm, are we really seeing everything there is to see?’ and then all hell breaks loose. The story is various different occurrences that happen in the facility simultaneously, which is a sort of domino effect, until you get into why this is happening and how it came to pass.”



As for how Connery’s involvement in AREA 51 came to pass, he recalls, “I got sent the script by After Dark. I had talked to them about a different script that didn’t work out, and then [after receiving AREA 51] I went in and pitched the idea of what I wanted to do with it, and they liked that. Then I met with the producers and started collaborating with the writer [DEAD AIR’s Kenny Yakkel, working from a story by Lucy Mukerjee] and went down to Baton Rouge, and that was it. Syfy had certain criteria. It is going to have a small theatrical [release] as part of a double bill as an After Dark Original, but it’s showing on Syfy first.”

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Syfy has certain parameters when it comes to the movies they produce and air, but Connery notes, “It’s not that specific in any one way. They have their act breaks—there are eight, so they need to have establishing shots for when you come back from the ads, so you can re-establish where you are. They need certain action to happen. It’s not absolute, but they know what they want, and it didn’t actually detract at all from the story. In fact, what’s lovely is that they love the picture, which is great. They’re certainly the people who know their audience.”

Blood and mayhem certainly appeal to Syfy’s audience, and Connery says the network didn’t enforce many restrictions on the makeup and creature FX designed and created by Vincent J. Guastini. “Well, I think [AREA 51] is more violent [than DEVIL’S TOMB] in some respects, because there are two particular aliens, a mother and son, that are very antisocial. So there’s a certain amount. I always try and do it in a way that isn’t completely in your face. I don’t want to give it away, but there are a number of moments where your imagination is left to really determine what has happened. But,” he laughs, “there is also the full-on kind of nasty-alien thing going on.”

The network also knows which actors it likes, which Connery says influenced some of the casting. “That was something that I really wanted to be involved with because, having been an actor, I love to work with them, and it was a short schedule and I needed the cast to come ready to go, and also to come in with enthusiasm—and in that sense, I really got a great group. I knew Jason London from THE DEVIL’S TOMB, so I brought him in. Syfy loved Rachel Miner [from After Dark’s PENNY DREADFUL] and she was great; Bruce Boxleitner auditioned for the colonel, and I thought he was fantastic. He just was about to come out in TRON: LEGACY, and apart from being a great guy, he’s such a solid actor, has done a number of films for Syfy and was perfect for the part. There’s nothing better than having his kind of persona on the set, because he comes with the excitement of doing what he loves to do, and you can’t buy that. John Shea was terrific, and Vanessa Branch is an American actress but was born in Britain, so she does a great British accent. We wanted to give [the journalists] a little bit of an international flavor, so Vanessa’s character is British.”

Various techniques were used, Connery explains, to get AREA 51 done on time and on budget. “There are elements in the movie that worked for the amount of time we had to shoot, and also the budget. We shot in one location, although if you watch the movie, I don’t believe you’re going to think we did, because it was a lot of builds [sets constructed within the location]. We had a lot of space—it was in a disused mattress factory, so we had huge rooms to work in, and we could also construct in there, like a soundstage. So we created all these different corridors and other environments. I like to get as much coverage as possible, and we had a second camera—not a 2nd unit, but a splinter camera—that really helped us with coverage. I certainly think all the actors knew, coming into the project, that we had 15 days, so they were pretty well versed on the fact that we weren’t all going to be sitting around. It’s about banging it out and, as

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I said, getting as much coverage as possible, so that you hopefully don't have to cut to a horrible shot.”

The “splinter camera” was used for several different purposes, Connery adds. “It depended on the day. We had it mopping up after us for inserts and things. Say we had a scientist using a syringe. He would do all that in the wide, and then when it came time for the inserts, [the splinter camera would] do that while we moved on to the next set. But sometimes that would be the second camera shooting what we were shooting, and then sometimes it would be off covering things that either we'd already done and we needed a different angle or shot on. We tried to work it as hard as possible to get all of that, and on the whole, it turned out pretty well. We were using 35mm [film]—Syfy was adamant about that.”



Connery had previously shot THE DEVIL'S TOMB on essentially one location, making it look like a huge facility, and says that was a useful experience when it came to tackling AREA 51. “A lot of money [in filmmaking generally] is spent moving location, and it's just not viable [on a low-budget production], because you can't shoot during that time, and moving everyone, transpo and so forth, is a big deal; you have to have a little more money to do that. I would prefer to see everything on the screen, and you can get very creative in an environment, with builds and things. And I really don't feel like when you watch AREA 51, you'll be like, ‘Oh, they're confined in one space.’ ”

Baton Rouge, Louisiana has never been noted for its resemblance to the Nevada desert where the real Area 51 is located. This wasn't as problematic as it sounds, though, according to Connery. “[The film's action] is set up to be inside the facility, except for the back of the facility. And like they have at a lot of those airbases, there is an area of grass and a square where they do various maneuvers and have exterior meetings, so all of that worked for our base. But I did need some establishing shots and outdoor images to sell it as the desert, so we did an extra day in Barstow [California], and we got some airbase shots there and also a lot of desert stuff to sell that element.”

While dealing with all the technical and visual challenges, Connery took equal care to delineate solid character development among the trapped individuals. “I always feel like if you don't know or care about the people in the film, there's no point in telling the story,” he says. “We have a lot

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of themes going through this one, because while mayhem may be ensuing in one part of the facility, other things are going on in the other parts, so we do unfold a lot of character elements there during the course of the film. I'm not sure how much detail I should go into as far as how many aliens there are and what their criteria is, but let's say that there are a number of different ones, and they all have distinct characteristics. And there is quite a lot of hat-tipping to various conspiracy theories about what's in there.

“It's not tongue-in-cheek,” he adds, “because it's very real for the people in the movie, but I've tried to instill humor as well. And when people are in environments where things have gone completely haywire, very often, that's when some black humor comes out. I feel like it's a healthy mix, and certainly you do get an idea of all the different personalities involved.”

One of the films referenced in AREA 51 is 2007's NIGHT SKIES, in which Connery starred as the sole survivor of an alien-abduction incident, based on a real account (by a man who has been incarcerated for murdering his never-found companions). Connery says AREA 51 incorporates some of that film's concepts: “Not specifically that sighting, but certainly the idea of what was seen.”

The plausibility of real aliens was discussed among the AREA 51 cast and crew, Connery notes. “There are always, of course, people talking about having heard a story, or they have one of their own about one night they were walking somewhere and saw something, or they heard someone who said...’ ”

Connery is well aware of a few higher-profile, bigger-budgeted films dealing with Area 51 set for release later this year, including Oren Peli's same-titled found-footage opus of the same title, the alien/buddy comedy PAUL and J.J. Abrams' SUPER 8. However, his AREA 51 has the advantage of coming out first. Also, Connery observes, “When I speak to people, everyone has their own experience, their own idea of what's there or what's happening or their own conspiracy theories, so I think there's plenty of room [for a number of films on the subject], because it's all interpretive. At the end of the day, people are truly fascinated by the idea of there being a universe that is almost unimaginable in size—and find it very difficult to believe that we're the only ones in it. I really think this film has its place and that audiences will enjoy it, and if they go with it, there's some fun stuff. I have to say, I'm very proud of it. I think it has a lot going for it.”

{comments on}

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