At face value, films like those in the UNDERWORLD series are all about the glitz, the intrigue, the makeup, the leather, the latex…and the corsets. But behind all of the glamour inherent in these films—the latest of which, UNDERWORLD: AWAKENING, topped the U.S. box office this weekend with an estimated $25.4 million—is the fighting. The power. The physicality. The subtle yet impressive chess game that boxers call “The Sweet Science.”

And while the focus of the films is the beautiful and lethal Kate Beckinsale (and her corsets!), it all begs the question, “Who taught this diminutive lady—an actress, a mother, a poet—how to kick ass?” The answer: Brad Martin. Stunt coordinator and 2nd-unit director on the first two UNDERWORLD films as well as the latest sequel (and quite literally a ton of other high-profile films), Martin is the Yoda to Beckinsale’s Luke Skywalker, the Mickey Goldmill to her Rocky Balboa. During Fango’s visit to the AWAKENING set one cold and rainy day, we had a chance to talk with Martin about the new film, designing fighting styles for specific characters and where he stands on the seemingly ever-present CGI-vs.-practical-FX debate.

FANGORIA: You’re almost at the end of filming; is there one memory that is the most telling

about this experience?

BRAD MARTIN: Well, we haven’t shot the final fight yet, but the opening battle we did with Selene before she gets jettisoned into the future was quite memorable. It was a great sequence where we see Selene at her finest. We get to see her take out humans for the first time, and witness the true nature of what she’s all about.

FANG: When it comes to the fighting, are you using an amalgam of different styles?

MARTIN: I like to call it “Hollywood-do.” It’s whatever looks good for the movie. We take something from everything. Selene definitely has a specific fighting style; there are a certain amount of things that don’t work for her. Kung fu does not work with Kate, and neither does wushu. There may be a bit of Aikido…

FANG: Or Krav Maga…“tight” stuff, basically.

MARTIN: Like THE BOURNE IDENTITY style, but in a more anime way.

FANG: Like jeet kune do?

MARTIN: No. We have her “trap” once in a while like in jeet kune do, but it has been a more straightforward, raw fighting style with a very brutal twist to it. For instance, there’s been a lot of neck-breaking, a lot of arm-breaking, a lot of nerve destruction and that kind of stuff.

FANG: This is the first UNDERWORLD in 3D; have you made a lot of changes in your approach from the series’ previous movies?

MARTIN: Well, the action is generally the same. What we’ve found out with 3D is that it’s not

necessarily great to be very “cutty,” with quick edits. So we’re trying to keep the movements a lot longer, the shots longer. I still think there are times, though, that we need to edit quickly to make the action itself look good. There’s only so much we can do with wirework and big action moves. Sometimes you have to break it down to a fine, specific amount of time, but for the most part, it’s going to generally be the same.

FANG: How are you taking advantage of the 3D cameras with your action setpieces?

MARTIN: I definitely had to take a quick study on the whole process and how it all needs to work. It’s quite a bit different compared to 2D. There are foreground differences; in 2D, you can usually stack something in the foreground when you don’t want to see something, but in 3D that may be a bad thing. If you’re trying to block something, you don’t want to focus on it, and in 3D, you’ll always focus on what’s in the foreground. So you have to take out things like that. There’s this thing that occurs when you’re panning across an action, or following the player in the action, called “ghosting.” You might get a ghost image, since in 3D, you’re shooting with two different cameras at the same time. If it’s not extremely fast, like medium-speed, that’s a very bad thing. So there are many times when we have to choreograph the action and the shots so as not to get that effect. That takes out a few tools I like to use.

FANG: Are you having to slow the fighters’ actions down?

MARTIN: Never. You can’t do that. The minute you start slowing things down is when it looks bad. In terms of 3D, we only shoot at 24 frames a second at regular speed, and in post, as much as I can get in there, I’ll ramp it up to 22 frames, which makes it look just a little bit edgier. That being the intention when I shoot it, I’m not too worried about it, knowing we’re going to do that in post. But you can’t shoot at 22.

FANG: How much wirework are you using? Is it mostly being used for controlled falls?

MARTIN: With the wirework, we have Kate dropping off buildings, like we do in every UNDERWORLD. We have people getting thrown all over the place, which is also wirework. It’s basically throws and falls.

FANG: So it’s not Yuen Wu-Ping-style stuff?

MARTIN: It’s the same idea. I mean, all wirework kind of originated with Wu-Ping and all of the Hong Kong guys, right? It’s just that we’re taking it to a new level.

FANG: So it’s more based on reality?

MARTIN: My technique, and what I like to do with Selene and the wirework we do in the UNDERWORLD movies, is that I try to keep things on a more realistic level. I don’t like the floatiness. There are certain things that Wu-Ping and his brother, Yuen Cheung-Yan, do that are “floaty’ in the Hong Kong wirework world. I wanted to make things more realistic, like, “What if this really happened?” Make it more dynamic and more impactful—that’s the goal.

FANG: What are your key action setpieces? Are there a few big ones, or a lot of little ones?

MARTIN: I’d say there are actually three big setpieces. The first was the stairwell I was telling you about, when Kate is fighting in her prime. The second one involves the coven, where we built this medieval underground set beneath a waterfall, which is where all the vampires live. The Lycans have tracked them down, found out where they live and come down into this underground lair, which is quite cool. The last setpiece is going to be down in Coal Harbour, and is basically a parking structure for the Antigen corporation, which is where we are right now. There’s another section where we’re supposed to be in the medical facility, and a big fight down in this very cool-looking garage. Those are the big sets. The coven is probably the biggest set we constructed, but because of budgetary reasons, we could only build so much.

FANG: Beckinsale has experience doing these kinds of movies; are Michael Ealy and other newcomers to the series doing action, or do you have other people you’re working with who have done it before?

MARTIN: Michael’s not doing too much. I don’t know how aware you are of the story, but there is an “über-Lycan,” this 12-foot-tall werewolf, and it’s a complete CG creature, so we obviously don’t have to train it to do anything [*laughs*].

FANG: But you have to have actors interacting with it, obviously.

MARTIN: Mainly, it’s just Kate and a bunch of my stunt guys doing that interaction. [Co-star] Theo James does a little bit. Theo is very talented in his own right. He doesn’t have to do too much in this movie. We did a little with him in the coven, where he has a CG whip and takes out a couple of werewolves, which is pretty cool, but since everything was digital, he didn’t actually have to spin it around.

FANG: How are you choreographing the Lycans in general?

MARTIN: I have a very specific view, as I do with Selene’s style, of what I think the Lycans can do, what we can do with them and things we shouldn’t do with them. Since they’re more animal than human, there’s grabbing, which we do a little bit of, and throwing, which again, we do a little bit of, but that’s almost the extent of the human motions. Everything else is slashing and biting and thrusting.

FANG: It seems that their posture is more open.

MARTIN: It’s more open, and they’re lower in a crouching position—more like a football linebacker, with a lower center of gravity. Sometimes I feel a bit limited as to what we can do based on their style, but once in a while, we’re able to find some money to do something quite cool with the CG werewolves. Unfortunately, the guys in the suits can only do so much.

FANG: What percentage would you say is CGI vs. practical FX?

MARTIN: The first UNDERWORLD was founded on doing everything practically. I had a wire team, much like Yuen Wu-Ping. With Len Wiseman, the director of the first two and a producer on this one, we kind of founded everything on trying to do things for real. That was very cool. The second one held out, and most of the time was practical. In the third movie, which I wasn’t a part of, there was a lot of CGI. In AWAKENING, it’s quite a bit more CGI than I would have hoped, but there’s only so much you can do with a 12-foot werewolf and some of the shots we want. So sometimes I find it a saving grace, even though it wasn’t the tone of what we wanted to do; it helps sometimes, most definitely, and the CGI is getting so much better nowadays. It’s not necessarily a bad thing.

FANG: Do you have some of the same creature performers as you did on the other movies?

MARTIN: Brian Steele, our lead werewolf on the first three UNDERWORLDs, wasn’t able to make this one, but Richard Cetrone, my stunt werewolf on the first two, is back to be the “hero werewolf” in this one. So, yeah…we have the same werewolf guy.

FANG: Is this one of these productions that happened very suddenly, or did you have a lot of preproduction time?

MARTIN: Actually, all of the UNDERWORLD movies have been great for me as far as prep. They’ve given me ample time to do what I needed to do to make the action right, and these are

among the few movies I do where the action is a character in itself. So it really needs that attention to make it right, and I was given that. I was given 10 weeks of prep on the first one, and I think I had eight weeks on the second one and 10 again on this one. We had a lot of time to do it right. Unfortunately, the script wasn’t completely finished when we started filming, so there are some things we’re playing catch-up on right now for the ending, but we’re in a good spot.

FANG: What about locations? On the second movie there was a lot more done on a soundstage, but when you’re working on a location like this, how do you rehearse and get ready?

MARTIN: It is difficult. They did give us our own little stage at the studio where we were able to rehearse, and given the specs of the location, we planned all of our stunt rigs to those. So we were able to basically use on our stage the exact same rig that we were going to have on location, and rehearse that way.