Caprica/Galactica designer Richard Hudolin talks spaceships

Originally published at http://www.denofgeek.com/tv/caprica/20099/capricagalactica-designer-richard-hudolin-talks-spaceships

Richard Hudolin has extensive experience in production design over a wide range of shows, but he does seem to have specialised a bit in science fiction over the last decade, with major contributions to the new TARDIS in the 1996 McGann Doctor Who movie, and a mind-bending stint on Battlestar Galactica. Now he's continuing to lend his talents to Caprica, so we thought we'd talk spaceships a bit with him...

What were your initial thoughts on updating the original viper from Galactica?

Well, we reinvented everything. Even the Mk.II we actually did some modifications on. We got rid of the Egyptian references and stuff like that. We just kind of elongated it a little more and made it a little more slick. Then there's the mark 9 viper, which is something that never got made. Bryan Singer was going to do Battlestar Galactica at one point. They actually set up and had an art department and started building, and they stopped when he decided he was going to take off and do something else.

The mark 9 original drawing was left over from all of that, which we inherited. Now we didn't have any money to build it, so we started building it over the course of time, and ultimately we wound up with a finished mark 9. So that was a kind of inherited thing. As we had extra money we'd build a part of it to shoot over or around, and then we'd continue building and building and building. It took almost two or three years to build that thing, because it was never really budgetted. We could have built it in a month if we had to, but we never had the money [laughs].

What's your own favourite ship from the show?

It'd have to be the Galactica itself. It was just so complicated and it was just so much fun to do for the mini-series. It was one massive connected set in the mini-series, which was how we were able to do that continuous three-minute shot of Kira running through the ship meeting all of the people. once we went into the series we were in different stages and we couldn't set that up in its original configuration; we had to break at the hub and then go into another stage.

Why did the Cylon raider take a more radical departure from the original designs, compared to the other ships?

Our mandate was to create something new and totally different and do pretty much whatever we want, and Bonnie Hammer, who was the chief over at Sci-Fi and the overall boss, really wanted to go for something totally different. So when you're given a blank slate like that and you look at what they did in the past, you kind of look at that and jump off from there. Now visual effects had a lot to do with the design of the exterior of that ship, because we worked very closely together, and seeing how the exterior only existed in Gary Hutzel's world in the visual effects, he had more to do with the design of that than I did.

You also worked on the Prometheus in Stargate SG1, I think?

I worked on Stargate for five seasons. I did the pilot and five seasons - I can't remember whether I did the Prometheus or not [laughs].

Blocky ship? Very impressive-looking and very popular with the fans...

You know I probably did it but I don't even remember since the launch [laughs].

Could I ask you about your redesign of the TARDIS for Doctor Who in the mid-nineties?

Oh that was fantastic; that was a great show to work on. I didn't know anything about the show when they called me. It was retro-tech but it involved all kinds of different...it was like taking Jules Verne and putting your own stamp on it. The [TARDIS interior] was just a whole collection of different architectural styles. I'd ask myself how the Doctor would do it, and I'd have a ballroom with a piano, or over there a library with those big rolling ladders, and over there like a Roman archway or a gateway to somewhere else...so again it was one of those situations where there was something that already existed and the people that I was working with said 'We don't want to go back to that - we want to get far away from that; whta do you think you can do?'. And so I started coming up with these concepts and they just all loved them. The further I went, the more they liked it!

Are you proud that the TARDIS in new Who was so influenced by your revamp of it in 1996?

I think that's great. I'm influenced by other designers, and if they're influenced by me, I think that's fantastic, that's a fair trade. It's right that they should take what I've done and make it theirs.

Was it refreshing to have a slightly cleaner slate for Caprica in terms of design?

Well, I shot the pilot while I was finishing off Battlestar, last season. It's fifty-eight years before the Cylon war, so we're kind of re-inventing what Caprica was. It's a lot of fun and a great challenge. Dealing with Ron Moore and David Eick and the writers, we can actually get on the phone and say 'What do you think it should be?' [laughs]. And we come up with all these different ideas...we try and actually bring some of the Battlestar feeling into some of the designs in a subtle way, because by the time you get to fifty-eight years later, these are things that would have evolved. It's kind of like you're retro-fitting something, but you have to make the sense and the logic work for stuff that's going to happen sixty years from now. So it's a real little mind-twist to get some of the stuff right. But if you've seen the pilot, I thought everybody did a really great job on that.

Do you think you'll be sticking with sci-fi? You seem to be doing a lot of it now...

[laughs] Here's the story: I did Doctor Who, which I didn't know was sci-fi - to me it was just a great show to work on. And I had done a whole lot of other shows that weren't science-fiction. Lot of film work, drama, comedy, musical and so on. So I did the pilot for Stargate, and that was a huge success, and then I did five seasons of it. Then I said to myself that I had to get out of here in case people started saying 'All you do is sci-fi'!.

So after I left Stargate I made a big point of taking shows only like drama. comedy, western, whatever...anything but sci-fi. So I then did the pilot for Haunted with Michael Rymer, and that got picked up and shot in LA. Then that went by the wayside, and while I was working on something else, Michael Rymer rang me inviting me down to meet David Eick. When he told me had Battlestar Galactica going, I went 'Oh shit!' [laughs].

And then I said to myself that if I don't take this, it's not going to come around for another forty years, and at that point I probably won't be able to do anything [laughs]. So I took it, and that went for five seasons, and between seasons I would do other things like Painkiller Chain and Eureka, and that evolved into Caprica. It's just one evolvement after another that keeps me in this world right now, but it's nothing that I actually planned.

Richard Hudolin, thank you very much!