The Den Of Geek Interview: Kenneth Johnson

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Kenneth Johnson created both the original Incredible Hulk and Bionic Woman TV series in the 1970s, going on to invent from scratch the acclaimed world of 'V' in the mid-80s, where lizard-like aliens descend upon a vulnerable Earth in beguiling form with the intent of ravaging the planet. Johnson later developed the Alien Nation TV series that further explored his timeless themes of cruelty, humanity and redemption, as well as taking Johnny 5 for a second outing on the big screen in Short Circuit 2. Johnson has had enormous influence on the current shape of TV sci-fi, and Den Of Geek was very happy when he spared us a little time to look back on his work and discuss future projects, such as the possible movie that may ensue from his recent literary revisting of the 'V' universe in his 2008 novel, 'V: The Second Generation'…

With a background in classical theatre, were you a geek yourself? Did you dream of making sci-fi TV and movies?

[laughs] No, not at all. I got interested in the theatre when I was in about the eighth or ninth grade. Actually the first thing I did was a radio-play adaptation of War Of The Worlds, the one that Orson Welles had done in 1939 that scared everybody to death. It wasn't because I happened to be seeking a science-fiction piece; I came across it in a book that I had been reading, and I thought this'd be fun to do. And it was a radio-play, and I had just bought a tape-recorder, so it was the confluence of circumstance…

Having made such a huge contribution to television science-fiction, are you now typecast yourself, in that it's easier for you to get a sci-fi project off the ground than anything else you might have in mind?

I don't know that it's easier, but certainly type-casting does happen, yes. I always tell the students that I teach, 'be careful what you first success is, because that's what they'll want you to do for the rest of your life'. And that's pretty much the case. But science-fiction is a wonderful area of speculative fiction to work in, because you can work with allegory and metaphor, and do some classic things, actually, under the guise of a more contemporary-feeling piece.

Were you always someone interested in the theme of inhumanity, and found that science-fiction particularly suited that?

When I was – well, also in the seventh or eighth grade, I chanced to see all the film that was used in evidence at the Nuremberg trial, and it was an eye-opening, shocking experience for me to see what those death-camps had been like in World War II. I had never heard of the word 'holocaust'; I had been raised in a

very anti-Semitic, bigoted household and heard hate-words and racial slurs all the time; every day of my life, as I was a kid growing up. And for some reason I just knew instinctively that it was all not right [laughs]. So I turned in a different direction from that, and when I had an opportunity later on to do pieces of work that could strike out against discrimination and prejudice and intolerance, I embraced the opportunity and took it on.

So it's very likely that you would have followed these themes even if your first success had been in a different type of work?

Oh yes, very much so. I am very much of a humanist and very much of …I'm intolerant of intolerance [laughs].

In terms of being fertile ground for your 'visitors' scenario, do you think this period twenty years after 'V' is a more or a less frightening time?

God, I don't know; it's always frightening, isn't it? When I was growing up everybody was building bomb shelters and nervous about the world being destroyed, although I must say that I never had any fear of it myself. I guess when you're ten or twelve years old, you feel pretty indestructible anyway, in spite of intercontinental ballistic missiles aimed at you. I think that there's always one difficulty or another. Certainly right now, economically, it's very hard over here particularly, but if anything I feel that because of globalisation and increased interest in one country being inter-related with another country, that we're heading towards a time that could conceivably be a whole lot better than everything has been in the past.

'V' dealt with propaganda, which was arguably more of a study in history at the time, but which has now become an extremely topical issue…the idea of propaganda and the spin we are being fed on reality. Do you feel it was a prescient work, in that sense?

Well, it's funny…when I did 'V' originally, I of course went back and looked at Triumph Of The Will and the kind of propaganda films that Leni Riefenstahl had made for Hitler. There are a number of shots in 'V' that are actually framed the way that she framed some of the shots that she made in Triumph Of The Will. I was anxious to shake America and the world up a bit when I did 'V', because we had all suffered our own small traumas and tragedies in our own little lives, but we'd never had a sea-change such as World War II brought upon us…since then, really. Since December of 1941. And I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to make people think about how they would react to extraordinary circumstances, and to create a cast of characters that would give me a spectrum of people that all reacted differently, so that different people in the audience would focus on the character that they felt was probably the most like them. So it was a wonderful opportunity to make people think…

Do you feel you succeeded in that objective based on the feedback you've had over the last twenty-odd years…?

Oh my God, yes [laughs]. It's amazing, and it still comes in on a daily basis. I get emails from people all over the world, and literally at least a dozen or so come in every single day, from people who also say that they were eight or ten years old when 'V' first aired, and now they're late twenties, early thirties and looking at it again and going 'Oh! There was a lot more going on than I realised'. Many people comment on how it helped to shape their lives. Many educators have written me telling me how they use 'V' as a teaching aid in their classrooms- often pairing it with Triumph Of The Will [laughs]! It was very gratifying to see that it did have exactly the impact that I wanted it to have. And certainly the critics and reviewers from around the world really got on the bandwagon and saw what I was trying to do and were incredibly supportive. That, and the public's reaction to how much they embraced it was extraordinarily rewarding and continues to be on a daily basis [laughs].

Have you been pleased with the reaction to 'Second Generation' since its publication?

Originally I was going to do a mini-series sequel that would pick up the story twenty or so years later. Warner Bros and I sold it to NBC at the time and then NBC dilly-dallied around for a couple of years and went through all kinds of nonsense; not at all like my original experience with Brandon Tartikoff twenty years ago – I basically told him the story and he said 'Here's a cheque – come back when you're done'. These guys just messed around for a couple of years. Finally we pulled the project back and took it to a couple of other places, but by then the whole TV-movie market had fallen apart, and mini-series particularly – nobody was trying to do them. I, in the meantime, had transformed it into a novel because I really felt that it was a cool story, and that I knew there would be a fan-base for, and I've been very pleased with that. I have since

discovered that I own the motion picture rights to the original ‘V’. We’re eagerly trying to get that set up as a movie. Hopefully, if it’s successful, which I really feel that it would be as there are hundreds of millions of fans out there, then we would follow it up with a movie version of the second generation. That’s the big, broad game-plan.

Of course, the only thing fans might lament is the absence of the original actors, many of whom were keen to reprise their roles…

Of course – in re-doing the original we’d have to go back and recast, because Mark and Faye and those people are just the wrong generation for it. Faye’s character, particularly, needs to be a young intern…but then, if The Second Generation should ever take shape, my plan would be – and had been, when I was going to do the mini-series – to bring them back. How fabulous, to have the same actors pick up the role twenty years later. That would be so cool [laughs]. And they were all very much on board and eager to do it. But the response to the book has been very good, the reviews have been excellent and I’ve gotten – again – many notes from people all over the world, who have really expressed a lot of enthusiasm for it.

But who could play Diana if not Jane Badler?

[laughs] I know! It’s a challenging thought, but fortunately one that I don’t have to face yet. I have a website [see link at end] where people can go and be completely updated. And then there’s a lot of rumours flying around at all the other ‘V’ websites…but the real story will always be at my website.

Just to clear the matter up, then – the TV version of The Second Generation is definitely not a happening thing?

Not at this point, no. My desire is to make ‘V’ happen first as a motion picture that resurrects the original and then follow up with The Second Generation as a movie – or maybe more than one movie, because there’s certainly enough material for two movies in the Second Generation novel.

Millions of Diana fans – including myself – thank you for the casting of the role. But Jane Badler was fairly little-known at the time. What did she have that accorded with your idea of the character?

Well, there were no big stars in ‘V’ originally at all. They were all good, solid actors, some of whom I had worked with before and others that I was meeting for the first time. I was well into the filming of ‘V’ before I actually cast Jane. I had read a lot of women. I was looking for someone who could be instantly iconic even though she probably has one of the smaller roles in the piece, in the original ‘V’. She only worked about nine days out of the fifty-day shoot. But because of the character, she was certainly elevated [laughs]. It was interesting. I had read a lot of women and finished filming one night and had to run back to Warners for the casting session to meet Jane, who had been brought in by our casting director and I walked into the room and took one look at that face and those eyes and thought ‘Oh please God, let her be able to say her name!’ [laughs]. And she was wonderful. She absolutely captured the essence of the sort-of dominatrix dragon-lady that I was looking for and without having to over-play it at all. She was in the right place at the right time.

‘V’ snuck in a great deal of historical and social commentary, but did the kind of ‘Dynasty’ vibe, as exemplified in the power rivalry amongst the visitor, play an important part in selling the project? Or did you have a free hand?

No, I had a pretty free hand. Brandon loved the story that I told him and the nature of what I was trying to do, and trusted me to do it, and I must say that – except for changes that I made in the script – we pretty much shot my original first draft of ‘V’. That’s pretty much how it came out of my head – we filmed every line. There was nothing left on the cutting-room floor.

How did ‘V’ get out of your control after the first mini-series?

Warners was anxious to move on and do a television series, because that’s where you really make your bucks as a studio. Although they can be prestigious, mini-series are often pricey and don’t make a lot of money for the studio. They were eager to do the sequel as quickly and cheaply… and dirt [laughs] as it possibly could be done and get it out of the way. I had real concerns about the erosion of quality and ultimately decided that I couldn’t do it in the kind of manner that they were talking about; the classic illustration of ‘creative differences’. It was a bit like having a baby and giving it over to foster-parents that you didn’t trust to raise. And I was right, unfortunately [laughs]. It was too bad what they did with it.

Do you think you'll ever have the will to sit down and watch it…maybe when you're eighty or ninety?

[laughs] Oh no! All of my friends who worked on it told me 'Don't ever watch it. Kenny – it is not the script that you guys wrote'…I had three very talented writers working on it with me. But once I left, they brought in a new producing team and a new writer and a new director, who proceeded to rather disembowel it. I've only ever seen about thirty seconds by accident as I was channel-surfing one day, and recognised the scene. And after thirty seconds, I turned it off, because I watched them, in thirty seconds, make every mistake they could possibly make in thirty seconds. And I realised that I could never possibly watch the whole thing. So…no!

The formula to successful sci-fi, such as Galactica, tends to follow your own approach to sci-fi, which is very character-driven. Are you aware of how much you've influenced the landscape of current television science-fiction?

Well, I've heard people say that, and of course it's very flattering and humbling to hear that. Again, I think it comes out of the sort of classical education that I had at Carnegie Mellon, which was designed to help us understand the classical underpinnings of any sort of drama, whether it was Sophocles or Shakespeare or Ibsen or Tennessee Williams or whomever, and I was trying to follow that credo as I was creating the work that I had done, so that there was always something working underneath the surface, a substantive layer underneath the commercial appeal. It's great when you can be able to eat your cake and have it too [laughs]. And that's what I've always tried to do.

But is that something that you've had to fight for against demographics and the desires of the networks?

Oh, always [laughs]. Of course! Occasionally they'll just leave you alone and let you do what you do, as Brandon did with 'V', as CBS ultimately did with me when I was doing The Incredible Hulk. The bigger a hit the show is, the more they leave you alone [laughs]. Because they don't want to mess with it. It was the same with Alien Nation. Fox thought they had Lethal Weapon with aliens, and I said 'No no no'. It would be much more interesting to do In The Heat Of The Night, and let's do the racial prejudice and the discrimination and the culture clash. That would give me wonderful dramatic conflicts and humour and allow us to do a piece that is more than just a police procedural. It becomes a really deeply-felt piece about what it's like to be different. That's what we did, and that's why I think it was so successful as well.

Is Alien Nation closest to your heart amongst your projects?

It's funny, people say 'What show are you the most proud of?'. It's a bit like saying 'Which of your children do you like the most?'. I'm very very proud of all of the shows. The Bionic Woman, The Incredible Hulk and Alien Nation were all adaptations, in one way or another, of something that was pre-existing, and so, because of that, I think I'm probably the most proud of 'V', because it all sprang completely from my little pea-brain, and continues to be a piece of work that I'm incredibly proud of. On the other hand, Alien Nation was the show on which I absolutely had the most fun of my entire career. I had a cast of wonderful people, all of whom loved each other, all of whom wanted to be there; we were doing a show that was both wonderfully popular but also was about something… I loved the fact that we kept getting awards from all the different minority communities in the United States [laughs]. It was great; we'd get awards from the Asian-American community, the Japanese-American community, the Hispanic-American community, the gay and lesbian community, the Jewish community…everybody thought it was about them, y'know? It was great. Also, we had a great amount of fun. In the new DVD release that's just come out of our five Alien Nation movies, there's a family gathering where I got the whole cast together in my living-room and we had four video cameras running…

The Bionic Woman stands out amongst 70s feminist heroes as being perhaps the only one who didn¹t need to get into a bikini to guarantee ratings, unlike Wonder Woman or Charlie's Angels. Was that a fight you had to make at the time, or was the target demographic always primarily female anyway?

I never even thought about either the demo or trying to get Jaime into a swimsuit…except for Bionic Beauty, where she was in a 'Miss America'- style pageant. I was never targeting a specific demo…just trying to tell good stories. Although – and this is unique in the annals of sci-fi — all my shows from Bionic Woman through to The Incredible Hulk & 'V' to Alien Nation drew as many females as males. The largest audience segment

for all my shows was actually adult women. I think that’s because of my focus on character and emotional relationships.