Interview: Alex Proyas

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Australian-born Alex Proyas made his name in music videos in the 1980s before scoring a huge cult hit with The Crow. His 1998 sci-fi noir Dark City proved the intriguing template from which The Matrix was struck a year later, though in itself it took many years to build up the huge cult following that has finally seen a director's cut released, and talk of a sequel. Proyas' problems with Fox regarding studio interference on his 2004 sci-fi blockbuster I, Robot led to an enduring rift with the company, but now the director is back with Knowing, a dark tale of prophecy and disaster starring Nic Cage...

What attracted you to *Knowing* when it was in turnaround?

The central concept of the time capsule with a set of predictions in it really grabbed my attention, like a kind of odd little urban myth. But that was really only the springboard for some of my own ideas which came out of thinking about that notion. The movie takes some pretty unexpected twists and turns. People are really only getting the tip of the iceberg through all the trailers. On one level it's kind of a disaster movie, I guess, if you want to think of it in those terms. But it's actually the characters and ideas, most importantly, that interested me. I'm always fascinated by characters who are on a quest for truth in some way, and Nic Cage's character in this is really on this kind of spiritual quest for meaning. He believes that the universe has no meaning. He's looking for his purpose in the world, and that really intrigued me. It takes on a somewhat metaphysical aspect. The more I dug into that, the more interesting stuff came up.

Does the film enter into the current religious fray?

The film tries hard not to hit people over the head with my own views. I'm pretty much agnostic. I'm sitting on the fence. I'm pretty much in a search for meaning just like Nic Cage's character. You can pretty much

interpret this movie under whatever belief system you happen to subscribe to. What's also interesting to me is that you can interpret things specifically in two different ways. The movies I love don't preach to their audience, but allow them to come up with their own thoughts and allow them space to think. That's sometimes a lethal thing to do for a film-maker. I've done that in the past and it's resulted in my movies not being understood and not succeeding at the box-office. All the stuff that means that it's harder to make movies. But these are the sort of movies that I like, and that I tend to get excited about, and so that's what I tend to want to make.

You could have had any of quite a few bankable stars for *Knowing* - what led you to Nic Cage?

Nic's someone that I've been wanting to work with for so long. I think it's the fact that he is true to the spirit of everything that he does, one hundred percent. He doesn't hold back. I think that's why he's had such an incredibly eclectic career. He doesn't try and edit himself and he's an experimentalist in many ways. He pushes himself to the limit to find some sense of truth in his characters, and that seemed totally appropriate for this particular character. I'd hoped so, when we first started working, and I was very much rewarded.

You've cited *The Exorcist* a few times as the kind of metaphysical thriller that you were aiming at in Knowing. Wouldn't Nic Cage make a good Father Karras...?

[laughs] I hadn't thought about that. Firstly, I think he probably would be, but that's not suggesting that anyone should be crazy enough to actually remake *The Exorcist,* which I think is one of the greatest films ever made. I hope they leave that one alone, as they should!

Did Rose Byrne come in off the back of *Damages*?

No, Rose is someone that I've known personally for many years. We're both from Sydney in Australia, so we've run into each other many times, even just socially. It's a pretty small town - you know all the actors here after a while [laughs]. I've always watched her work with great interest. Rose started very young; she started acting in a soap when she was about fourteen, so she's been popping up in things for quite some time even though she's still very young - it feels like I've almost grown up with her work! So it really had nothing to do with *Damages*. At one stage we weren't sure that we'd get Rose because of the schedule with *Damages*, but the producers were very nice and very cooperative and we managed to work around her schedule.

It's been about five years between *I, Robot* and *Knowing*, which is not an unusual length of break for you between movies. Do you push many different projects of your own in these periods?

I tend to tinker with things for a very long time, and I'm tinkering with several things usually. Having said that, Knowing was something that I was very focused on and I did rewrite it many many times, personally or with other writers. I put a lot of thought into it, and sometimes, unfortunately, it goes over people's heads. Or maybe not. Maybe they believe I don't put enough thought into it, or something. I do like to make it work on many levels and it takes me some time to be satisfied with that. It's a challenging movie, and not just some typical disaster movie. It might seem like that when some people see the trailers. But it doesn't pull any punches and it challenges some pretty fundamental genre requirements. It also took me some time to work around Nic's other projects, because he was someone I always wanted to work with on this. It really took a very brave actor like Nic to make this, because a lot of less-great actors would have balked at some of the...surprises, let's say, in this movie. If you make something that's a bit challenging on more than one level, it takes a bit longer to do. If I wanted to do a dumb action movie any time during that five years, I probably could have. But if you're sticking to something that you really want to make, sometimes the process is a little slower.

***Dark City* took a long time to become the big cult film it is now, whereas *The Matrix* hit big a year later almost on the back of it - so do you hesitate to make a film now that might go over some of the audience's head?**

No, because that's kind of all I can do. The thing that I am incapable of doing is just taking on a script that I know will be a commercial success. The fact is that even if you work much faster than I do, the process of making a movie is going to take you at least eighteen months, or maybe two years. From the moment that you've cast it and the studio gives you the green light, it's usually going to be eighteen months for anything of any complexity. So the notion of spending that period of time on something that I don't a hundred percent believe in, where it feels like I'm saying something personal, to me seems insane. I just wouldn't want to spend that period of my life doing something like that. I mean, I'm only going to get to make another ten movies [laughs], if I work really hard. And I want them all to have...whether or not people think they're good, bad or indifferent, that's up to people to judge, but I want them to have significance and meaning to me as an artist. At some level that's really all I care about.

Has the recent talk of a *Dark City* sequel led to any new developments on the project?

Not really, because that's just me spitballing in interviews like this. It's had a fascinating history, because, as you know, it was a box-office disaster. It wasn't marketed well and it just completely fell through the cracks. And then, over the years...it used to be that people came up to me to talk about The Crow, and now everyone who comes up to me goes 'Dark City!'. The fan-base really built through the DVDs and now the Blu-ray. The fans are what managed to get the director's cut done. And then when the director's cut came out, it was actually the top-selling Blu-ray for a couple of weeks in the US. It seems to build all the time with this film. The notion of doing a sequel for a ten year old movie that was a box-office disaster is pretty bizarre, I have to say! But it's actually made the studio enough money now and there seems to be enough interest in it that we're looking into it. Whether or not I write a story that I'm happy with and I want to make into a movie, I don't know. It might take me another ten years, and Rufus might be looking a little long in the tooth by then - I hope not [laughs]. But it is something I think would be fun to do. Going back and doing the director's cut reminded me what it was like being in that world, and I really enjoyed it. So the notion of spending some more time there would be quite pleasurable, I think.

Could I ask what new slant *Dracula Year Zero* has on vampire mythology or the Dracula legend? What you've been saying recently about it suggests it's really something special.

What grabbed me was this script that I read. It's one of the very rare situations where I...actually, no: it's the only situation where I've ever been given a script and I've gone 'This is terrific! Let's start shooting!'. What's good about it is that it redefines the character - and to a certain extent, it's a no-brainer concept, which is the transformation of Prince Vlad of Transylvania into this iconic character. It really is his journey into darkness and his motivation as to why he makes that decision, and it is a conscious decision that he makes to walk into darkness. I just found it really emotional. Dracula is the most-filmed character in the history of movies, and the notion of me doing a Dracula film was the furthest thing from my mind, but it really was this script that galvanised me into thinking that this is such a cool, revisionist notion of this character that I think people could really respond to. Having said that, we're at a point where I don't know if it will be my next movie. It's just that we're at budgeting. It's a big medieval epic, and therefore an expensive movie, so we're still in the budgeting and casting mode.

Would it have some potential as a trilogy or a series of films?

Every movie that any studio makes these days, they want it to have that potential. Every movie that comes out that's a successful part of a franchise. The word 'franchise'...I remember hearing that word in

Hollywood parlance about ten years ago and thinking 'Are you talking about a McDonald chain?'. That was the only context in which I heard the word 'franchise'. And now franchise is the most commonly-used word in studio- speak. [glumly] So obviously if the first one does well, they'll definitely want to make more of them.

Your visions are large and expensive - do you ever wish you could pull a Woody Allen? Just go and knock out a movie round the corner with your friends...?

Well, Knowing is my version of that [laughs]. I got to shoot it in Australia and I had a very supportive studio who let me do everything I wanted to do. It was not as big a budget as I, Robot and it felt like I was getting back to basics. Unfortunately with me, because I'm not Woody Allen, I'm not satisfied with just people talking in a room. I wish I was. I do have certain visual requirements that I need to create for my movies, and unfortunately they're expensive. They are getting cheaper, I have to say. Technology is making them cheaper, but they're still expensive compared to your basic drama situation.

Could a change in regime at Fox ever see you directing an *I, Robot* sequel?

Possibly. The irony is that there's a chap by the name of Peter Rice, who currently runs Searchlight, who's a very good buddy of mine. We actually made Garage Days together and he's a great guy who's had extraordinary success in that arm of Fox, recently with Slumdog Millionaire, and with many other films of that sort of independent scale that have done extremely well. I wish he was the guy that I could deal with. But unfortunately, currently he isn't. But yeah, it's not like I object to the studio. It's the regime, the people who are currently running it who are totally...put it this way: they're not the film-makers' friends. And I'm not the only guy saying that.

Alex Proyas, thank you very much!

Knowing opens in the UK on Wednesday 25th March.