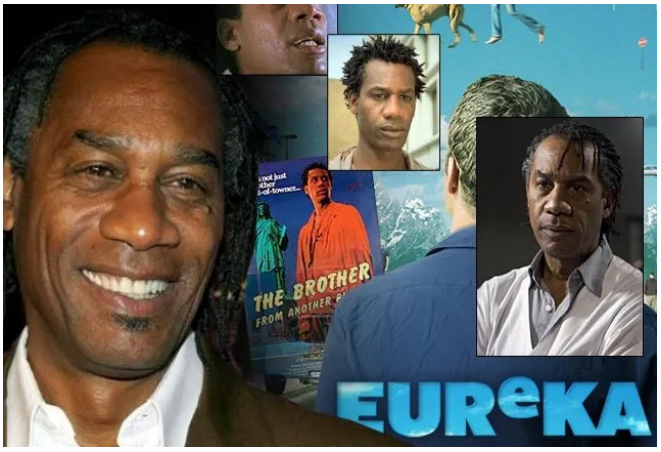
The Den Of Geek interview: Joe Morton

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Martin Anderson | 27/07/08



On the eve of season 3 of Eureka, Joe Morton talks with us about Terminator 2, Brother From Another Planet and hyperventilating...

Joe Morton is an accomplished theatre and film actor well known to science-fiction fans for his starring role in John Sayles' cult The Brother FromAnother Planet*. He later went on to appear as Miles Dyson in James Cameron's smash-hit* Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, and in the John Woosci-fi actioner* Pay Check*, based on a Philip K. Dick short story.*

Morton is about to begin his third season as resourceful tinkerer Henry Deacon in Eureka *(UK: 'A Town Called Eureka'), and we were lucky enoughto catch up with him late last week just before he headed off to Comicon in San Diego...*

Can you tell us about any major changes coming up for Henry Deacon in season 3 of Eureka?

My look is different – I shaved off all my dreads. And he becomes, at one point, the Mayor of the town.

Are there any other changes that will make season 3 stand out from its predecessors?

I think there are a lot more special effects this year, especially in the first episode. Lots of CGI this year - a lot more than there has been in thepast.

Any particular reason for that?

I'm not sure – I think they just wanted a bigger and bolder look.

What have you discovered about Henry since you first gave the part some shape? Something that maybe surprised you when you firstcame across it…?

A nice surprise was that he had a sort of dark past, and part of that past was Kim. And that's something, I think, that I hadn't really expected. Whenthat storyline came along, it sort of gave me another facet through which to see who Henry was, in terms of how he loves and how deeply heloves, etc…

Is there enough development in season three to keep you fresh and interested in the role?

Oh yeah! Because Henry is the go-to guy, and because his point-of-view – for the most part – is the 'silver lining', then all things are possible[*laughs*].

How has working on *Eureka* changed over three seasons?

I think we're more of a plot-driven show now, whereas we were more of a character-driven show when we started.

Is that a transition that early fans of the show might lament?

I make it a habit of never trying to judge what an audience might think, only because all points of view are too close, because we're doing it everyday, I think that the actor's point of view is sometimes too close to what the material actually is. So when you get fresh eyes and bring in theaudience on it, you kind of get a more fully-rounded idea of what it is that you're doing.

You're about to go off to Comicon…

That's right, and I was there last year too.

What kind of things do the fans generally want to know about?

Last year they wanted to know what was going to happen between Carter, Stark and Allison. That seemed to be the big question. I think what itwas last year…we were taken to our panel discussion, and seeing the number of fans that were out there for the show was a wonderful and heart-warming surprise. That was the biggest thing for us – we didn't expect anything quite that large.

You've said that you were careful not to take many negative roles when you were starting out; Is it too late now for you to playsomebody evil?

No, as long as it has a point of view. If there's a reason for this guy to be a bad guy, then that's terrific. I'd love, actually, to play somebody who isreally smart and really horrible [*laughs*].

You've played many senior police officers – do you think your family background in the military has contributed to that projection ofyourself?

A little of that may be true. Certainly, coming from a military background, that's obviously…my father was, and so I have that in my head. But I also

think that what happens is that how you start out is kind of how Hollywood ends up seeing you. So even though, technically speaking, I started offdoing *Brother From Another Planet*, playing a role like Miles Dyson [*in Terminator 2*], you are placed in that position of playing someone who isvery human and an authority figure all at the same time. I think it just all rolls out from there.

In *Brother From Another Planet*, you kind of broke a long-standing cultural discussion of African-American males dying very early in sci-fi films and horror. *Brother* seemed to come along a give a much more positive message – was it an important film for you to make?

Absolutely. When I read the script I was pleased at exactly what John was pointing at, which is that you have many African-Americans who livewithin their community and who have all kinds of talents but no place to actually display or exhibit those talents; and that was a lot of what *TheBrother From Another Planet* was about.

Is it a film you look back on with fondness?

Absolutely. It's still one of my favourites.

It's kind of an illusion for us sci-fi fans that you're a 'sci-fi actor' – if you check out your body of work, it has a far wider range. Does itannoy you to get over-associated with the genre?

Yeah, I've done lots of different things, but somehow science-fiction always seems to come back around. But yes, one wouldn't think of menecessarily as being a sci-fi actor, although I've done, obviously, a few.

In *Badland* you departed somewhat from what many may think of as a typical Joe Morton role. How did you approach something thatintense?

Well basically what I did was think that here was a guy who figuratively could not stand on his own two feet, and so I made that as physical as Icould, so that physically he has a hard time maintaining any kind of balance. For me that was great, because – as you say – a lot of the time I'mplaying characters with both feet very firmly on the ground. This guy did not, and that was a great challenge and a lot of fun to do.

Is that normally how you approach a role, such as when you played Colin Powell…? That you begin with the physicality and work yourway in…?

Well, with Colin Powell, you're dealing with a real person, so I did lots of research and read his biography and read as much as I could about hisinvolvement with the government and what the government was doing, etc. so I could try to formulate what I believed was his political point of viewin terms of the events that take place in that play.

Are you surprised that the *Terminator* franchise is still going strong?

Not really, because I get asked all the time if there's going to be another instalment of the Terminator thing. I think that because it did so well andbecause the fans loved it so much, it doesn't surprise me that they would do sequel after sequel. What would have surprised me would have beenif James [*Cameron*] had stayed with all of them. That would have surprised me. Of course, he didn't. But I think the fact that they're being made iskind of the normal thing. It's like the Batman franchise – once it proves itself to be successful then it's something that people are going to want togo back to over and over.

Was *T2* a new scale of production for you at the time or was it just another gig?

Oh no, it was much bigger than anything I'd ever done before. To see that kind of money being spent was something of a shock [*laughs*]. To gofrom *Brother From Another Planet* to *Terminator 2*, you're going from…we spent $350,000, if that much, on *Brother*, and then you go from that to amulti-million dollar movie with James Cameron and Arnold Schwarzenegger and Linda Hamilton…and it's a whole other ball game.

Did you maybe risk hyper-ventilating in your final scene in *Terminator 2*?

No, actually what happened was that we'd gone round and round as to how to film Miles' death, and I told James about a car accident that I'd beenin several years before that. The fact that I had a collapsed lung, that's where all that breathing came from. So when I told him and showed himwhat it was, we all got excited and thought that that's how we would do it.

How do you feel the film has aged in the last eighteen years?

It doesn't seem to age at all. Because it was set so much in the future, and because it was so ground-breaking in terms of the CGI that Jamesused, and because of all of these 'authority characters', the Terminators in the movie, I'd say – very strongly – that it just holds together really well.

With your work on *Tribeca* and *Sunday On The Rocks*, amongst others, can you see yourself committing to directing in the near future?

Absolutely. I'm actually going to be directing an episode of *Eureka*, towards the end. I've been doing a lot of directing off-Broadway the last coupleof years, so yes, that's very much in my future.

Do you still retain the rights to *Invisible Man*?

I do, and I'm in conversations with the public theatre in New York, to get it done there.

Having worked with such a wide and interesting range of directors, like John Sayles, John Woo and James Cameron, were there anywhere their technique for handling actors surprised you a bit?

What you find with really good directors is that they *kind of* leave you alone. They've hired you because they know the kind of work you do and thesense of how you'd approach it. So usually they'll just stand back and maybe give you a nudge once in a while in terms of something specific theymight want in a particular scene. But I think that the good ones basically just leave you alone.

As a Philip K. Dick fan, I recognised the problems with *Paycheck*, but I still liked it. What do you feel about the film now?

Paycheck I thought was a really, really good idea. I never got an opportunity unfortunately to read the novel, but I loved the idea of how to deal withintellectual properties. I just don't know that we necessarily got to the heart of that particular idea. I think it became more of a chase movie thananything else.

Are you a general fan of science-fiction yourself?

Hmmm, kind-of sort-of. I suppose I prefer kind of epic dramas like, oh I don't know…*Lawrence Of Arabia* or *Apocalypse Now*; those are the moviesthat I have a tendency to be most fond of.

If you were going to recommend a science-fiction movie to a complete neophyte, which would it be then?

My favourite is *Alien* – the first one.