The Den Of Geek interview: Tom Woodruff Jr.

Originally published at http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/89672/the_den_of_geek_interview_tom_woodruff_jr.html

The man who has made and worn the Alien suit in all the movies since 'Aliens' talks with DoG about his extraordinary trade...

Tom Woodruff Jr. has played the 'Alien' in every entry in the franchise except Ridley Scott's original. He also makes the beast itself –and many others besides – in tandem with long-term creative and business partner Alec Gillis. Woodruff and Gillis are an Oscar-winning creative partnership that flourished in the workshops of the late Stan Winston in the 1980s before founding their own Amalgamated Dynamics workshop in the early nineties. Their amazing prosthetic and animatronic creations grace the likes of Starship Troopers*,* Hollow Man*,* Jumanji*,* The X-Files Movie *and many other films. Tom was kind enough to have a chat with us a couple of days ago…*

To start at the end, can I ask you what ghastly horror you're going to go off and work on after this chat?

We have a small project going on right now in the shop; it's actually not even a film-connected project. Things are getting a little bit slow right now with all of this talk, and SAG and the producers trying to come to some kind of an agreement to renew their contract, which expired at the beginning of July, so it's time to see how that goes.

So it's time to make some of the short movies that you guys like to make to blow off steam?

Yeah, we've been playing around with some short films. I threw one of mine up on YouTube, just a two-minute short; I'd built a replica of the Batmobile from the old TV series. When I got that done, I just had to take it back to the original location where they shot the TV series, and ended up putting that up. So you'll find that if you do a search under 'Woodruff Batmobile', it comes up [*see link at end*]. It's been fun to have a little forum where you can throw these things out and see how people react to them.

What can you tell us about *My Cousin's Keeper* and working with Lance Henrikson on it in 2007?

It was just such a great opportunity, and it came about because when we finished *AVP*, we were doing a lot of press here at the studio. We have a great display room and they love to shoot interviews and stuff there. Lance had been over here and he was hosting a couple of things, a special on HBO or something, for *AVP*. We were just talking about shooting short films, and he was just so supportive of the whole thing, so I just thought what the hell, I'm going to ask the guy if he'd be interested in a role in this thing which I'd already scripted and was planning to shoot. And he said yeah, why not? And he was great – he came in and gave me a whole day. We shot this whole thing in a weekend, and he came in on the second day. And I'll tell you, man, it's just great having somebody of his calibre [*laughs*]. Everybody else has to kind of step up to the plate and really do a good job, just to make it all compatible in the movie.

Do you act in it yourself, without all the usual prosthetics?

Yeah, and you know what? I don't want to do that again. It's just too much. For me, it's just…I've always wanted to make films, and I've always made films; as a kid, super-8 films and all that kind of stuff. But it's too much to try and concentrate on directing, acting and producing, all in one thing – when I'm not actually that accomplished in any one of those areas [*laughs*], much like the one-man-band, the guy that never really took music lessons.

So many SFX guys get into the director's chair, from Cameron and Fincher through to the Brothers Strausse, Joe Johnston, Phil Tippett…do the two of you have any plans to direct?

We certainly do, and to that end we've been working on a lot of projects on our own, developing projects and scripts over the years. We're basically putting together a whole catalogue of projects that, once we're able to make that break, we have things that we can go back to and present, and hopefully get that support and funding for.

These are monster movies…?

Yeah, they are. Having worked in the business as long as we have, you sort of recognise the way the thought process works. Being who we are, if we're gonna make this move, we've got to go out with our best shot. And we're not known as the Romantic Comedy guys [*laughs*]. We want to come out with something that is interesting and unique, but definitely within the world that we're known for.

I was wondering how new technologies have affected your work over the years. To what extent have new techniques like 3D sculpting and fused deposition modelling taken over from some aspects of traditional sculpting? Have you noticed a big shift?

I agree that it's definitely moving in that direction, though no, I haven't noticed a big shift. It's like anything – the newness of it is completely intriguing, but the practicality of it has not matched the interest in it just yet. For us, there's still something about getting hands on clay, in terms of sculpting. But I've seen beautiful things, absolutely beautiful sculptures in z-brush, and with the idea that yeah, you can take all of that data and you can have it output or you can have it cut or reproduced in some kind of a tangible form…

I know there have been some successful applications of that. I think a good portion of *Iron Man* was done that way. I think it's great; it's a great time-saving device, because our pre-production schedules are getting shorter and shorter. But I know that it comes at a great cost right now. For us it's…I can't say it's not in our comfort zone, because we love the technology, but it's just not within our experience yet to be able to make that kind of a jump, especially with some of the great sculptors we've had in here that have been able to turn out maquettes in just an afternoon or a day, and have that kind of flexibility in terms of the size and reproduction capabilities.

Do you think you guys might also evolve as Phil Tippett did, using great legacy skills to advance CGI?

I don't know, honestly. We've talked about it so many times. It's really been tough because you see…there's so much CGI stuff out there, but there's such a wide range of quality to it. There's definitely great [*CGI*], but there's also plenty of stuff that's mediocre or sub-par. By principle, it's becoming part of the film-making process, and I don't think it's being evaluated for its effectiveness.

I'm certainly getting more and more reaction from audiences that they're sort of getting played-out on CGI. Whether people can verbalise what it is about the story that doesn't feel real or not, even if it's on a subconscious level, it's kicking people out of the story. We still go to the movies and we love spectacle, we love monsters and all that stuff, but if you get kicked out of the story and you suddenly realise that you're watching some effect, then it's counterproductive to what the movie experience is.

Is it concerned with knowing that there was some physical entity there with the actor? Or is it more to do with the quality of the rendering and the motion?

I think it's two things – for one, the quality of the look. It's something that's deceptive about matching lighting. We've found that if you have something on the set that's actually there, in the same light with the same environment as the actor, it absolutely looks like it belongs, that it's of that world.

With CGI, you go in and you go through a lot of painstaking processes of duplicating the lighting, and there's still…I don't want to be misread, as if I'm the guy saying CGI doesn't work. It does. But when it does work it comes at the cost of a great amount of work and a great amount of time to put in to make it work. A lot of that time and a lot of those costs aren't available to as many movies as are trying to use it today. But I think you can tell that there' something that still doesn't look right.

And then the other thing that I find that is most revealing, is where there are camera moves that just defy physics.

Yes!

I'm glad to hear that the audiences are saying the same thing because it makes me feel like I'm smart, maybe [*laughs*]. But I see these totally physics-defying camera moves and I'm exhausted, tired of them.

Have there been any breakthroughs in materials that have let you do better or quicker work since you started out?

It's funny, because what I've found is that a lot of the materials that we use today and which have been around in the industry for so long, are actually not as good as they used to be. Even the nuts-and-bolts application of making stone for using moulds, or jackets – the quality just doesn't hold up. We're finding that the quality of our foam latex, which has been around as a material since the thirties for make-up appliances…now we'll have certain runs of foam latex that really aren't that good anymore. I don't know if its finding fillers, or substitute materials or components that are trying to keep costs down…whatever it is.

In a way a lot of our materials have been compromised by inferior quality or inferior production, and we find that we're wishing we could go back to the days when you could make an Ultracal mould and trust that you would get eight or ten runs out of an oven before it starts to break down. Now they break down after one run, and we're forced to go with more costly materials like silicone and epoxies and time-consuming lay-ups in that realm, just to be able to counteract the poor materials.

I've always wanted to see you guys do a full-scale werewolf – is that happening in *Cirque Du Freak*?

We're not supposed to talk about any of the characters in *Cirque Du Freak*, so I'm going to have to be mysterious and say no comment [*laughs*].

Fair enough – can you give me your expert opinion, then, on the best movie werewolf to date?

Well, I can only give you my opinion, I don't know how expert it is [*laughs*]. What I've found that's funny with a question like that, is that the answer's always based on who you were when you first saw that. For me, when I think of a werewolf transformation, I always think of *An American Werewolf In London*. And then there's a lot of younger guys that kind of knock it today, and they all laugh about the intercutting and stuff, but for me I have a hard time separating that from my first impression of when I saw [*David Naughton's*] hand stretch out, and I saw that face stretching…and the sound effect was so effective, and so was the counterpoint of the music that was playing when all this stuff was happening. Then we saw his feet extend and his heels go up in the air [*laughs*]…

I still look at that today, and I know exactly what that is now, but I'm still looking at it with the same kind of naiveté that I had when the movie first came out in 1981.

So your work doesn't spoil movies like that for you?

No, it doesn't! And in a way maybe it's like I'm the happy village idiot – I know how it's done, and I do things like that all the time, but I can still see some work like that that affected me when I was younger, that still thankfully has that effect; that fun.

But that's my long-winded answer to say 'I think *American Werewolf* was cool!'. [*laughs*]

I'm kind of hoping that the answer is no, but are you sick of talking about the Alien by now?

No [*laughs*]! No I'm not. We've been very lucky to have had as many runs at that character as we have.

When you get a new *Alien* film, is it less fun for you because you have so much of the pre-existing material to hand, so it's more like re-

vamping stuff that you did in the previous three or four movies?

Yeah, honestly I feel like there's creative handcuffs that are put upon us, because it is necessary to stick to the realm of the character that's already been seen. I would love to work on an *Alien* film and totally…not so much re-invent the alien, but devise a new alien that's of that same world, but is still different. We had little stabs at it, like with the newborn creature in *Alien Resurrection*; story-wise it just didn't have the impact; it wasn't as impactful a character.

I know we got to come up with the alien hybrid in *AVPR*, but the bigger the movie, the more the process becomes a collaborative process, and there's so many voices that have to be listened to and adhered to that in a way it can't help but compromise a single creative direction. So even that – as challenging and as fun as it was to create something new, it still had its down side because there were so many people involved.

I would think that you guys have got some ideas then for *Alien 5*, if it ever happens…?

We've talked about different alien characters probably since as long as we've been working on the movie; *Aliens*, even, when we were still working for Stan Winston, talking about different configurations and different types of aliens that were still proper for that story, that we never get a chance to realise.

It seems like every time you get into the Alien suit, it's such a hard experience that it nearly kills you. Do you do it to keep control of the vision or is there a certain amount also of propriety in the role by now?

A lot of it is just to control the vision and make sure that our work doesn't get compromised at the last minute by somebody who doesn't understand it the way we feel we understand it, in terms of movement and presence and all that stuff. Definitely the last movie [*AVPR*] was physically the worst. It was physically the most challenging, and there were many times when I thought maybe it's not in my best interests anymore to do this.

But then I still enjoy it. in a way. The physical hardship aside, there's that aspect that I like. I guess I do have some propriety in it. I'm stuck on - having done it so many times - that I want to keep doing it, keep perfecting it. I want to find a way to keep it true and keep it interesting.

Did you see *The Incredible Hulk*?

I haven't seen it actually, but I heard that it was much better than the first movie, which is good.

I wondered what you thought about the feeling that a prosthetic Hulk may have been a good idea?

Well, we certainly talked about it in early meetings. We produced a couple of pieces that were used entirely as on-set reference, and never appeared in the film. We did some eye-line heads, so that the actors had a focus, and some green hands that were used basically as placeholders by actors on set, something for them to deal with that was replaced by CG. But in early meetings we were trying, without being completely obstinate, to get them to understand the value of having a prosthetic Hulk. Even if it was just a character that was used in long-shots, or seen in over-the-shoulder shots of the Hulk, looking down on the actors…

To us, it makes total sense. Not just to us, but I think it *does* make total sense. But it's so difficult; it's adding a whole extra element to a film-making process which is becoming so regimented by, you know, 'Here's the way we do it...we do it the way we see it, we do the shots from the storyboards, we shoot the background plates, we add the character digitally'.

It's so difficult to turn that ship around and say 'Yes, *but*...what about…?'. Look, here's a dozen shots where you're going to be shooting the character from the waist up, and he's not even going to be doing a lot, just standing there. Even if he's just something for the other actors to deliver key performances to, much in the way that another actor would just be the recipient. We're not going to try and wow you and create a nine-foot tall hydraulic Hulk that will bounce around and cost $4 million…our goal would be to find something that could still be a person in a suit so you have that immediacy of general motion, but certainly animatronic details that would function.

But it never works [*laughs*]. We never get past the meeting stage.

Do you think such things get excluded from productions because they would hold up production? That they would actually be more expensive than CGI, which is reputed to be a very expensive luxury…and yet maybe the way that you guys do it would be better but it would cost more in terms of time?

I think you're correct. There's certainly more of a cost than what it costs us to build it: we deliver a budget proposal and say 'Here's what it costs to design and build it, and here's what it's gonna cost – here are the puppeteers you're going to need on set..'. Like we found on *AVPR*; we built an animatronic alien hybrid to do things that I couldn't do in the suit; to do things faster or more extreme – the head could turn around 180 degrees and the body could do the same…

It had some very cool moves and it also had enough power to lift a fully animatronic head with mandibles that could extend. So we had this beautiful thing, and ultimately we only used it for one sequence where it impregnates the pregnant woman in the hospital. We were going to be using a lot on the rooftop scene for the final battle. But even though we had it up there on set, it was in its tent…just twenty feet off the rooftop set it was determined that the time it would take to bring in a fork-lift, move it over there, the hours that it would take to line everybody up…they just didn't have the time and the schedule.

So in a way, that's still a cost-based decision. They don't have the time and the schedule because it costs so much money to have the crew standing around while you bring a puppet in. But in the long run, in terms of the impact, I still think you get far more value having a combination of CG and practical effects. I still think animatronics, even with the time it takes to get a puppet on set and have puppeteers deliver a skilful

performance, it still costs less than relying totally on CGI. But it’s a difficult mindset to challenge.