The Den Of Geek interview: Darren Lynn Bousman

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Repo deals with an organ deprived future society where your liver or heart or kidneys may be forfeit if you don't keep up the payments, and can be loosely described as a rock-opera...

The publicity for *Repo* has a very retro feel – is your obsession with body parts and genetics a tribute to grand guignol and the old Technicolor horror, or do you have something important to get off your chest on these subjects?

Well, there's a bunch of styles that went into making Repo. The look of the film and that kind of retro feel that you're talking about, it's just a fascination that I have with propaganda. I love propaganda posters. If you look a lot at the posters that we have out right now, they're very propaganda-based. There's just something cool about that because they're so sinister, yet they're trying to be fun, and that's a great juxtaposition there. Those old wartime posters, they've got this kind of happy look to them, but when you realise what they're promoting and what they're saying, it's not happy at all.

That was our idea with Repo, that here's this company that's basically condoning murder by repossession, yet the posters wanted to be light and happy but the subject matter very dark.

Does the film contain political comment on the right-wing feeling and commercialism that's in the culture now?

Yeah, one hundred percent. Obviously first and foremost we made it just to be entertaining, but it's got a lot bigger statement in it than the Saw films which I've done. The Saw films were violent and they were horrific but they had a message to them – appreciate your life. This is more making a statement on society as a whole now.

I live in Los Angeles, and you walk down Beverly Hills and you see girls who are obviously in their forties and they're trying to make themselves look like they're in their thirties. Plastic surgery and enhancing your body has become a thing that's just taken over. I think everyone's guilty of it – it's not just the plastic surgery botox women, it's people like myself as well. I lay out to get tans, and I go to the gym to try and sculpt my body as well, because everyone wants to look perfect. No-one wants to look like a slob.

But some people take it to new and extreme measures; they get breast implants, they get butt implants, they have their lips puffed out. I think that people are afraid to be themselves anymore. The whole movie is about that, about genetic enhancement. If you could replace your heart, your kidneys, your liver, your lungs, your spine…would you do it?

I think that's the next stage. That's what we're evolving into as a society right now; if we can get bigger breasts, we do it. If we can get our lips to look fuller, we do it. But what happens at the next step? What happens if we're able to get a brand new heart, new lungs, new kidneys, new eyes? That's what the whole movie's about, that fascination that we have to sculpt our bodies and become perfect.

It has the potential to be a very gory film – is that something that you held back on?

Very much, yes. This is not Saw. There is blood and violence in it – there's a lot of blood and violence – but it's by no means a bloody and violent movie. As a genre, it's more sci-fi than anything. In the Saw films we used the gore…that was what they were about, these horrific traps, about people that were getting massacred. This is not it at all. That's a very small part of the movie, which at its core is a sci-fi drama.

That said, I don't hold back on the blood and violence, but it's more comical than anything. It's not to be taken seriously.

Do you think it would sit well in a box-set with Rocky Horror Show, Little Shop Of Horrors, Phantom Of The Paradise…?

Yeah, it's fun. I grew up on musicals, and the musicals that inspired me to make this movie, it wasn't…when I grew up, one of my favourite experiences was seeing Jesus Christ Superstar, because I have such a fascination with music. I think that in my next life I would like to be a rock star.

Last night I went to the Bruce Springsteen concert, because he was playing here in Orange County, and it was amazing, because music unites people. You had a sold-out amphitheatre, everyone singing and dancing and clapping…and that's what music does to people. You go on treadmills and you work out, and what do we do? We listen to our iPod, to music. And at the weekends, people go see movies, they sit home and watch DVDs. So if you can combine these two things successfully, you've tapped into two of people's past-times.

As a kid growing up, musicals spoke to me, because I loved music and I loved movies. So some of my favourite films were Rocky Horror Picture Show, were Little Shop Of Horrors…those two you mentioned and Jesus Christ Superstar, I was involved with as theatre, and those were three of my favourite productions.

This movie is a little more serious than Rocky Horror Picture Show, but there's a kind of camp thing as well. But that's one of the things that I was cautious about. This is such a weird genre to ask people to buy into –a 'horror rock opera'. I had to make sure that I made it fun as well, but I think that the audience has to know that it's okay to laugh. In Little Shop Of Horrors and Rocky Horror Picture Show, you know from the very first second that it's okay to laugh.

Does Sweeney Todd's success encourage you for the prospects for Repo?

Yeah, but I think that we have a much harder battle to fight with Repo, because we don't have Johnny Depp and I'm not Tim Burton [laughs]. Sweeney Todd had this massive star power behind it and you had the cult following of Johnny Depp and Tim Burton, and I think that helped people into it. Also Sweeney Todd was based on a very very popular musical, so people went in with a built-in fan-base and wanting to like Sweeney Todd.

We're fighting an uphill battle because I'm Darren Bousman, I've directed a few Saw movies, and no-one knows the music of this. We started off as a stage-play for about four or five years, in Los Angeles off-Broadway, but we were always culty, we were never mainstream. I think that's what I liked about it – our stage performances were very dark and fucked-up, and I think that's what drew people to them. I think of the movie in the same way. Yes, I'm glad that Sweeney Todd came out, and it showed that these movies can be successful if they're marketed correctly. So it's encouraging.

There's a lot going on with musicals in the future – I was reading in the trade that a couple more rock operas just got green-lit. I think that these type of movies are going to make a come-back. They were huge in the seventies, with Tommy, Hair and Jesus Christ Superstar, and then they kind of died off. I'm hoping to see a rise in them because I think they're such a great movie experience.

How was it filming with such diverse talent as Paul Sorvino, Sarah Brightman and Paris Hilton?

It was a circus on set every day, but in the best possible way. Who would ever think that Sarah Brightman and Paris Hilton would star in the same movie together, let alone doing scenes together, singing together? The most surreal day was one of the first days we were filming – there's a scene with Paris Hilton and Sarah Brightman singing with one another, and Paris Hilton is screaming at Sarah Brightman that she's a better singer than her. So they have a sing-off, and it was so surreal.

What was more surreal was how much of a family we became. Everyone loved everyone. Paris, when I first heard of her I thought that she's going to be a diva, she's never going to hang out with anyone, she's going to be in a different hotel. But I could not have been further from the truth.

Everyone hung out in the same restaurants in the same hotel. It was awesome, and it was the saddest experience leaving this family because – unlike most movies – we had a huge prep time in making Repo; we had to record an entire album before getting to the filming stage and then we had three weeks of rehearsal, so when all's said and done, we al spent about seven to eight months together making this thing, from the recording of the album, to the rehearsal, to the shooting. By the time we were on set, we like this family, so it was crazy. It was really easy too.

And Sarah Brightman – I mean it's Sarah Brightman, the world's biggest-selling soprano! It took just one phone call – I called her up and said I want you in this movie. I didn't think there was a chance in hell she would do it, but I had to ask. After five minutes' talking to her, she said I'll do it.

What made you think of Paul Sorvino for the movie? It seems a bit of a departure for him.

It's funny, that's really what I thought too. I wanted to be 'what the fuck' about it – pardon my French. I wanted people to look at the cast and say 'what the fuck!'. Paul Sorvino seemed to me like such a crazy choice, because who ever would think of Paul Sorvino doing this? I came to find out that Paul is a classically trained operatic star – that's what he started off in, doing opera. He has an amazing operatic voice. It was a no-brainer for Paul.

He's known for Goodfellas. If you ask the majority of people in the street to name a movie that Paul Sorvino's been in, it's Goodfellas, he played the mafia guy. Well, Paul wanted to be known for his voice – he's an amazing singer, yet no-one knows that, they know him as the guy that whacks people in this movie. So Paul saw it as an opportunity to expand his audience through this movie, let people know that he can sing.

A project this off-beat and hard to categorise must be almost impossible to fund in Hollywood. Were the Saw films strictly a means to an end in realising Repo?

Yeah, it was. This is the hardest thing I've ever done and I'm guessing that I ever will do, because it's so different. The Saw films were a cakewalk compared to this. After Saw 2, it was a franchise – they knew there would be an audience for it and I had all the support in the world from everyone.

With Repo I wanted to make a musical where everyone sings and there is no talking – and I want to cast Paris Hilton! Every studio in the world freaked out, saying there's no way we're gonna make this. Knowing that if I went back and did Saw 4 I would have had three big box-office hits, and I had the luxury of doing a movie like this…I could never have done this movie if I wouldn't have done the Saw films, because it's too risky, it's too out there and quite frankly it could have hurt any chance I ever could have had of being, you know, a big director.

The Saw films gave me the kind of flexibility to show that I can do these kind of movies, that I can turn round a big box-office number. But Repo to me is a very personal project. It's my passion project.

I'm sick of seeing the same movies. I'm sick of seeing cookie-cutter, manufactured movies. I open the paper up and I look down to see what's playing right now and it's like 'I've seen that movie before, I've seen that movie before'. I wanted to do something completely different –something that hadn't been done, so people wouldn't or couldn't compare.

There's nothing you can compare Repo to. When you see the movie, you'll know what I'm talking about, It's hard to find a comparison. You can't really compare it to Rocky Horror Picture Show, you can't really compare it to Jesus Christ Superstar…you can't really compare it to anything, and I think that to me is the selling point of this movie; I

wanted to show that little weird movies like this have a place in Hollywood, and that people will embrace them. But right now we're being shoved the same studio crap time and time and time again.

There's kind of like a rebellion on my part as well. I mean, three sequels back to back to back. I'm about to go in and do a remake, so I had to do something that was different and creative this time.

What's the remake that you're doing?

I'm doing something for Dimension right now, for Weinstein. I'm supposed to start pre-production on Scanners, which is a remake of a David Cronenberg film. So this was my chance to do something that would be a little liberating.

Are you nervous about the launch of something so different?

I'm extremely nervous! But this is not a movie that you'll know if it's successful right after it's released. I'm guessing that this is the kind of movie that you'll know ten years after it was released if it was successful. If you look at the history of any rock opera, something like this, you're met with failure and then you become cult.

Rocky Horror is the perfect example. Rocky Horror Picture Show did not become an overnight success. It was only in the midnight screenings and all of this that Rocky Horror Picture Show found its audience. Anytime you ask an audience to embrace something different, I think the immediate reaction is 'it's bad'.

As an audience – myself included – you always look for what you can compare the movie to. If you can't compare a movie to something, if it doesn't sit in any sort of guideline then it's wrong, and if it's wrong it must be bad.

That's my fear, that people will look at Repo and not be able to compare it to anything and think that it's bad. But I think that in time people will look at this movie and see that it's exactly the way it's supposed to be.

Some of my favourite movies were met with extreme opposition when they came out – Blade Runner, Brazil…these are movies that were revolutionary at the time they were made, but people didn't get them. Blade Runner, the critics hated when they first saw it. It wasn't until ten years later that people were like 'Wow! Blade Runner's amazing'. Same thing with Brazil – Terry Gilliam had the hardest time convincing people on Brazil, and now it's thought of as being one of the greatest sci-fi films ever made.

So having realised this personal project, do you feel obliged to continue with some more conventional work for a while, even after Scanners?

Yeah. Here's what my personal philosophy of what my goal is from this point forward. Steven Soderbergh is one of my favourite examples: here is a guy who does big Hollywood movies like Ocean's Eleven, Twelve, Thirteen – and then he does a really small personal film and then he'll go back and do another big, huge movie and then another small personal film.

My idea is to play in those parks. I want to do those big blockbusters, the big movies that I know will turn in great box-office numbers, but I don't want to betray the other side of me that wants to be artistic and wants to make movies that challenge people. Things that aren't safe.

Do you have any more musicals in you?

Well, this is an exclusive, nobody's heard this, but we wrote Repo as a three-part movie, this being the middle part. Basically Repo is about what happens when organ repossession becomes legal, and the reason that happened is that there's an epidemic where everyone's organs failed, with everyone dying. Basically, they thought it was the apocalypse, and this company figured out how to save humanity.

The first movie was basically about the apocalypse, the organ failure, but it was too big, too massive for our kind of budget, so we did the middle part – what happened after the epidemic with the repossession thing. So I would love to come back and explore this world again – it's such a cool and interesting and unique world. When you see the movie, you'll know what I mean. We had an amazing production designer, who's directing Saw 5 right now.

It's a world that I want to go back to and play around in. But I've got other passion projects that I want to do as well, more kind of off-the-wall, risky things that I would love to explore, that aren't musicals.

Having made such an enormous contribution to what's known as the torture-porn genre, is it something that you see declining or going to the next level?

It's hard to tell. There's a common misconception with these movies, which is that they just started with Saw and all of this. They've been around forever. I would love to take credit and say that the splat-pack started this movement. We didn't. We just reinvigorated it – it's always been there. Back in the late sixties and early seventies, there are all these movies on torture and dismemberment. The first one that I can remember having an effect on me watching it – it didn't have the violence but it was still all about the torture – was a movie called Lady In A Cage. It was a horrific movie. I think it was in the late sixties, it was James Caan's first movie.

Then you go to Last House On The Left, which is basically a group of insane people torturing a family and two girls. Wes Craven is the king of this, and if anyone started it I think it was way back then. I think what happens is that you just find there are rises and falls in the sub-genres of horror.

Horror's got so many sub-genres – the zombies, the psychological, the spiritual, the slasher…I think that every so often a new spike occurs in a sub-genre. George Romero started the zombie movement and then all you saw were zombie movies, one after another after another.

And then there were the slashers in the eighties, with all the teenagers being killed, and right now it's the torture porn. So I think what's going to happen is that the torture-porn sub-genre will die off, and maybe another sub-genre will occur. Maybe it's the horror musical [laughs]. Fingers crossed…

You're going to see another spike in a different sub-genre, but when it comes back it's going to be more brutal than it was. If you go back and watch Last House On The Left, it's got a lot of violence in it but we've pushed the violence further now. When we come back to torture porn again, we will take it to the next level. It will be more gruesome and more violent, pushing the envelope even further.

Is there a moral issue there? Is there a point at which we should say that the line's far enough ahead?

Film-makers, I think, are going to keep re-defining where the line really is. There are taboo subjects right now that people would never touch upon, but I think what's going to happen is that they're no longer going to be taboo, they're going to open back up, and that there'll be a new taboo subject. So I think that the line keeps moving on what we can and can't get away with.

That said, some of the most disturbing things I've ever seen have nothing to do with violence, have no violence even associated with them, like abuse of children. Anytime I see anything like that, it's horrific to me, horrific. One of the most disturbing movies I ever saw was Palindromes – you don't see anything horrific, it's just the subject matter that's horrific. I think you're going to see a lot more of that.

Me, I'm kind of bored by the violence, I'm bored by seeing people hung up…I want to see what the next thing is, and it doesn't necessarily have to be about blood and violence.

Does the mechanic of making movies change when you're working with other people's material, as opposed to Saw 2, which you wrote yourself?

Yeah, Saw 2 is a movie that I was trying to get made for many many many years, I had it in my head. Also I think that when I was directing Saw 2, I didn't have to ask anyone if I wanted to change anything, because it was my script.

I'm working with NBC right now, I'm doing a TV show called Fear Itself, which is like the new Masters Of Horror, and it's a different experience for me because I didn't write the script, and I'm finding myself second-guessing all my choices, like 'Was the writer meaning this? Or was he meaning that?' So it's a different beast going in to direct a movie like Saw 4, which was written basically by two guys new to the franchise. I'd been with it from Saw 2, Leigh [Wannell] had been with it from Saw 1, and there was a shorthand – we knew what we wanted, what we could get away with and what we could do.

In Saw 4, it’s kind of a different beast, because you have brand new writers coming in to this world that we’ve created years and years and years ago, so there was a much bigger challenge to do Saw 4 than there was in one through three.

Is Saw a franchise you’re going to go back to, or are you definitely finished with it?

Never say never, but I have nothing left to say with Saw. I don’t know what’s left to tell with it. The first movie was based around a serial killer who was dying of cancer in the first one, so there’s only so many stories that can be told in that. But again, as I talked about the rise and fall of the subgenres of horror, in ten years Saw might be the perfect thing to return to. But right now I can say that I’m done with it.

Thank you Darren Lynn Bousman.

Repo – The Genetic Opera is released in the USA in August. No news yet of a UK release.