

ON SET  
EXCLUSIVE!

## PREDATOR RESURRECTION

THE HUNT IS BACK ON. WITH ROBERT RODRIGUEZ HOLDING THE CREATIVE REINS, PREDATORS PROMISES TO BE THE TRUE SEQUEL TO THE ORIGINAL, ARNIE-STARRING JUNGLE BOOGIE. AND THIS TIME, THEY'RE TAKING THE BLOODY SAFARI OFF-WORLD

Words: NICK DE SEMLYEN

**K**RRRAAAWWRRRH! "EMPIRE IS STARING INTO THE SNARLING MAW OF A PREDATOR. ITS GIANT MANDIBLES ARE TWITCHING CRAZILY, ITS DREADLOCKS SWINGING. WE'RE CLOSE ENOUGH TO SEE THE ALGAE-GREEN BLOTCHES ON ITS SLIMY FOREHEAD, AND WHAT LOOKS LIKE DRIED BLOOD

encrusted on its inner fangs. The creature's piercing amber eyes are locked onto ours, gleaming with frenzy. And when a Predator gives you that look, it can only mean one thing. You're about to have your bones crushed by a glaive, your spine ripped from your body and, very likely, a large chunk of your homeworld nuked, just for shits and giggles.

Well, either that, or you're in Austin's famous geek hub, the Alamo Drafthouse, on the opening night of the SXSW film festival, sitting way too close to the front at the presentation that's unveiling the third Predator movie (which doesn't also have Aliens in it) to the world. Which, fortunately, is the case. On the stage before us stand three men, beaming like kids on a Twizzlers binge. Director Nimród Antal is wielding a clunky remote control, allowing him to control the jaws of the animatronic Predator head we're kissing-distance from. Next to him, legendary SFX wizard Greg Nicotero is using another to operate the monster's upper face. And the ever-ice-cool Robert Rodriguez, clad in customary distressed leather jacket, is looking atypically gleeful as he holds his iPhone up to a microphone and loops a sample of the creature's iconic snarl-purr... "KRRRAAAWWRRRH!"

The theatreful of sci-fi fanatics go wild, then go even wilder when Rodriguez invites them to operate the head themselves, then virtually implode when they're each given a torch which replicates the tri-mark laser-sights of the Predator's plasma caster. If you could bottle the geek energy in the room, it would power a thousand Xboxes. And this isn't

## PREDATORS

**Released:** July 8**Director:****Nimród Antal**  
**Starring:** Adrien Brody, Topher Grace, Danny Trejo, Walter Goggins, Alice Braga**Plot:** A motley assortment of killers and badasses are snatched from the surface of the Earth and dropped into an alien rainforest. It soon dawns on them that they're on some kind of safari planet — and they're the prey.

## MONSTER SQUAD

THE NEW MEN AND WOMEN WHO AIN'T GOT TIME TO BLEED



## ROYCE

**Aka:** Adrien Brody**Background:** Expert mercenary.**Weapons of choice:** AA-12 shotgun, machete.

## CUCHILLO

**Aka:** Danny Trejo**Background:** Drug cartel enforcer.**Weapons of choice:** Twin Uzis, Butter knife.

## NIKOLAI

**Aka:** Oleg Taktarov  
**Background:** Russian Special Forces.**Weapon of choice:** Six-barrelled GE M134 Minigun, taken from a helicopter — an homage to the original's "Ol' Painless". >>

a surprise. Only three years ago, the fittingly titled Aliens Vs. Predator: Requiem seemed to sound the death knell for not one but two of cinema's greatest monsters. Over the past few decades they've been subjected to countless indignities, getting thumped with a broom by a comedy granny, turned into the mewling 'Newborn', and being called "pussyface" by Danny Glover. But now, finally, Hollywood is waking up to what it's been squandering. Hence the imminent Ridley Scott prequel to the Alien franchise — and this, what promises to be a return to the hard-R thrills of the original Predator, made by people who are not only some of the world's coolest filmmakers, but also die-hard fans.

"I ran into James Cameron a few weeks ago and just had to confirm a rumour," smiles Rodriguez on-stage. "I'd heard it was he who came up with the design for the Predator's mouth. He said it was true. So now you know for sure." He fiddles with his iPhone and cues up the sound file one more time.

**T**HE TROUBLEMAKER TITAN HAS EVERY RIGHT TO FEEL GIDDY — THIS NIGHT'S BEEN A DECADE-AND-A-HALF IN THE MAKING. BACK IN 1994, WHILE PREPPING DESPERADO, HE HEARD THROUGH HIS AGENT THAT 20TH CENTURY FOX WAS OPEN

to making a second Predator sequel. He got scribbling a spec script, without much thought for cost or logistics.

"Cameron did Aliens; I wanted to do Predators," he tells *Empire*, the morning after the SXSW presentation. "All-out war, lots of creatures — any idea I could think of, I just shoved into the script. It was about a guy and his crew who are abducted and taken to a hunting planet. They end up being chased down by this whole tribe of Predators. It was big and crazy. Then Fox decided they wanted to bring Arnold back. They decided that was what they needed."

One rewrite later, the main character had morphed into Schwarzenegger's stogie-chewing Major Dutch from the original. It was now 1996, and despite the fact the star had turned down Predator 2 (his role was rewritten for Gary Busey), Rodriguez, fresh off From Dusk Till Dawn, was despatched by Fox to pitch his idea to The Big Man.

"It was a very interesting evening," recalls Rodriguez. "It was a Monday night at Arnold's restaurant, Schatzi — cigar night. Everybody was there... George Clooney, Quentin Tarantino, Jean-Claude Van Damme sitting at a table with John Milius! And in the middle: Arnold, a giant cigar in >>



Welcome to the jungle: Adrien Brody and co. get gun(g)-ho. Note the Jesse Ventura-style M134 minigun.

his mouth. I don't drink, but by the end of the night I'd had a glass of wine for my nerves and got a little buggy. Suddenly Arnold turns to me and says, 'So! Pitch me your story! And by the way, we have to go back to the jungle, not like that bullshit Predator 2! I go, 'Well, actually, it is set in a jungle, but it's a jungle on another planet.' He liked that — it all looked promising."

But if it's greenlit, Arnie can kill it. Several months later, word came back that Schwarzenegger had fallen out with the producers. There would, it seemed, be no Predators.

In the strange world of showbiz, though, anything can happen. And in this case, anything did. A Fox executive was leafing through a filing cabinet in early 2009 when they came across Rodriguez's yellowing script. Soon the suits were scrambling to reach the filmmaker, who by now had his very own film studio and two major franchises.

"They flipped for the off-world setting," Rodriguez says. "And they liked the idea of going back to basics: fear, mystery, suspense. They asked me to direct, which I couldn't because of scheduling. But while I was thinking about it, I walked

**"CAMERON DID ALIENS; I WANTED TO DO PREDATORS. ALL-OUT WAR, BIG AND CRAZY."  
ROBERT RODRIGUEZ**

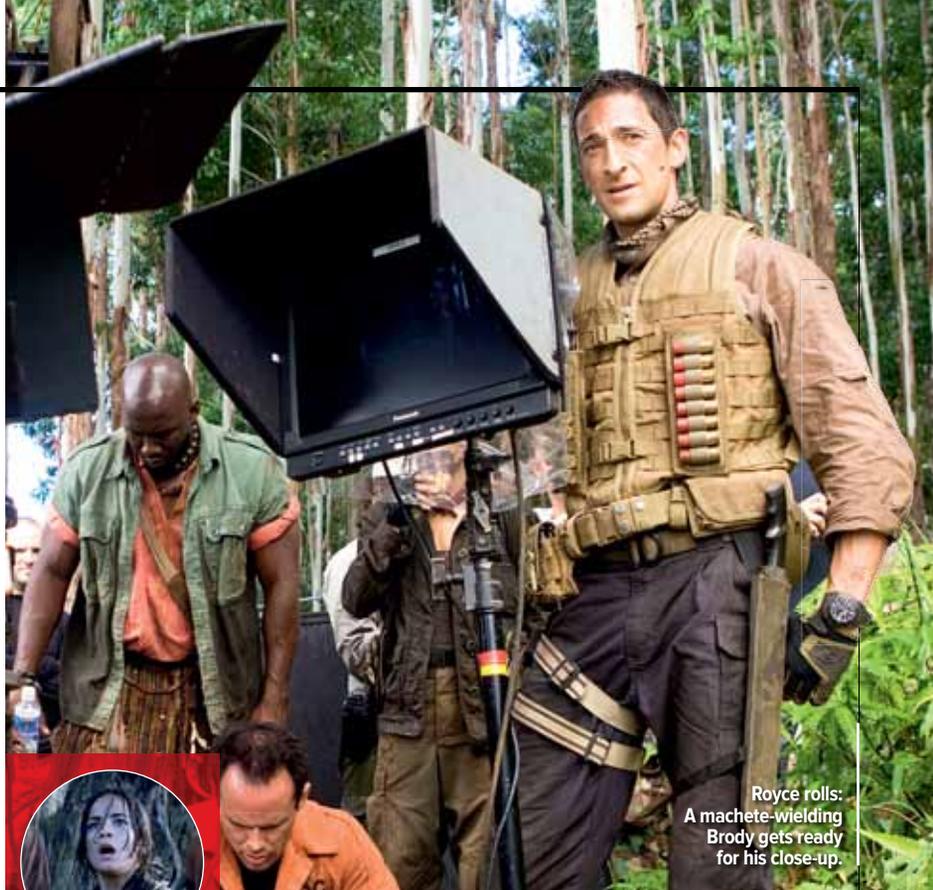
around my studio and noticed the artists had collections of Predator heads. They were all big fans. So I told Fox I'd supervise the project here on my own turf. I wanted to walk onto the parking lot and see Predators roaming around!"

**D** ECEMBER 2009. EMPIRE IS AT TROUBLEMAKER STUDIOS, A FEW MILES FROM THE ALAMO, VISITING THE PRODUCTION AT THE TAIL END OF THE SHOOT. FITTINGLY FOR THE PLACE THAT'S PRODUCED THE ANARCHIC LIKES OF

Sin City and Grindhouse, there's a hair-down vibe — a slightly tatty Christmas tree outside the design workshop is festooned with spear-wielding wooden Predators instead of baubles. Also fittingly for the place that made Sin City and Grindhouse, there's gore *everywhere*.

First we're shown around the clearing where the aliens bring their trophies. It's not a pretty sight. Spinal columns hang from burnt cedars, cleaved skulls and rib-bones litter the mulchy ground, animal hides lie draped over rocks. Our next stop is a storage room-turned-meat locker, where skinned carcasses (all headless, some human, many of indeterminate species) hang from hooks. One looks like a giant turkey, one has six legs, another resembles a cross between a deer and a lobster. All have been unlucky enough to meet a Predator.

"The reference point is Hieronymus Bosch," laughs Nimród



Royce rolls: A machete-wielding Brody gets ready for his close-up.



**ISABELLE**

**Aka:** Alice Braga  
**Background:** Ex-sniper in Israeli army.  
**Weapon of choice:** Blaser R93 LRS2 precision sniper rifle with hi-tech scope.



**HANZO**

**Aka:** Louis Ozawa Changchien  
**Background:** Yakuza assassin.  
**Weapons of choice:** Beretta 92FS, katana.



**STANS**

**Aka:** Walter Goggins  
**Background:** San Quentin convict — killed 38 people in three states.  
**Weapon of choice:** Prison shiv. >>

Antal, taking a break from shooting a cave scene elsewhere on the lot. "I wanted the jungle to look as hellish as his paintings. And Fox have been really cool — they're actually encouraging me to shoot grislier stuff for the unrated DVD!"

Antal, US-born but of Hungarian ancestry, debuted with *Kontroll*, a 2003 thriller set on the Budapest Metro. His move to Hollywood began shakily with *Vacancy* and last year's little-seen *Armored*, but Rodriguez saw major potential. Plus, Antal *really* wanted the job.

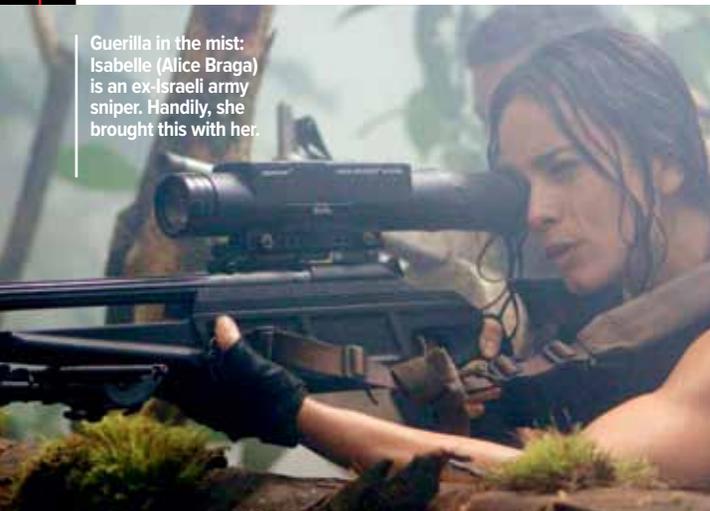
"When I lived in Budapest, my barber had a Predator tattooed on his arm," says the director. "The character's just legendary. When I got the call to say I'd got this job, I was with the three childhood friends I'd seen the original film with when I was 14. We hadn't seen each other in 20 years, but for some strange reason we all ended up together again on that night. It all shows that dreams do come true."

Nostalgia is all well and good, yet Antal's task on *Predators* is not to take viewers back (though the "classic" Predator does appear for the first time since 1987) but to forge forward and expand the mythology. Take the setting. It's not the Predators' home planet (Yautja, according to people who own *Farscape* mousemats), but an unnamed interstellar game reserve. The plants are carnivorous, the birdlife comprised of brain-eating buzzards, the jungle littered with lethal booby-traps. If there's a Pandora, you might want to go there for some R&R after a tour on this place.

Then there are the baddies themselves. "The Predator you know is the eight-track version; you're going to meet the iPod version," says Nicotero, who points out that almost all the creature shots are practical. "There's a whole tribe here of Super-Predators that are more ferocious, more cunning, more hideous. It's like the difference between dogs and wolves."

"The old Predator has a code of honour," says Rodriguez. "These guys are sadistic. They're berserkers — *absoluterito*."

"Our villains are hunters, so we've given them a bunch of different techniques," adds Antal. "There's a Falconer, a Predator with this UAV, a weird flying device, his 'eye in the sky'. Is it a robot or a living organism? Maybe both! >>



Guerilla in the mist: Isabelle (Alice Braga) is an ex-Israeli army sniper. Handily, she brought this with her.



Mandible on fire: The original "classic" Predator makes a long-awaited return. Along with some new friends.

There are Predator dogs — we call them 'Pred-hounds' — that'll fuck you up. And then there are flushers, drivers, trappers... Plus, the Predators aren't the only aliens the humans meet on this planet. We haven't made it easy on these guys!"

**W**HO, THEN, ARE "THESE GUYS"? WHILE HUMANS IN MONSTER MOVIES ARE GENERALLY THERE TO MAKE UP THE CORPSES, WHAT MADE BOTH PREDATOR AND RODRIGUEZ'S TOUCHSTONE, ALIENS, truly great are the absurdly macho ensemble casts. The former, in particular, is a film populated by sweaty beast-men who like to compare their lovemaking techniques to that

**"THE PREDATORS FROM THE OTHER FILMS WERE LIKE DOGS. OUR ONES ARE WOLVES!"**  
**GREG NICOTERO**

of a T-Rex. How can Rodriguez and Antal possibly jack up testosterone levels to that reeking height?

Seems they've taken a left turn instead. Inspired by 1932 thriller *The Most Dangerous Game*, the original script's cadre of soldiers has been changed to a group of disparate international badasses, yanked from Earth and forced to form an uneasy alliance.

The mix is eclectic, including Danny Trejo, Laurence Fishburne, Alice Braga and *The Shield* stand-out Walter Goggins. And then there are the *really* wild cards. Rom-com regular Topher Grace seems as confused as anyone that he's in there as a shady doctor: "Do you remember that song, 'One of these things is not like the others'? That's how I feel in this movie!" And possibly strangest of all, considering this is



**MOMBASA**

**Aka:** Mahershalalhashbaz Ali  
**Background:** Member of a Sierra Leone death squad.  
**Weapon of choice:** AKS-47 assault rifle.



**EDWIN**

**Aka:** Topher Grace  
**Background:** Claims to be a surgeon. An expert in botany.  
**Weapon of choice:** Scalpel.



**NOLAND**

**Aka:** Laurence Fishburne  
**Background:** Now that would be telling!  
**Weapons of choice:** Anything he can prise from a Predator's cold, dead claws.



Lair's flare: Topher Grace's botanist-cum-killer ventures into the unknown.

a film about Rasta reptiles with laser nets, is the fact the cast is headed up by an Oscar-winner.

Not that Adrien Brody sees anything odd about him going face-to-pussyface with a Predator. "I approached Royce with my usual level of focus," he shrugs. "My nightly ritual was poring over paramilitary training books. I was studying meditation. I wasn't eating sugar. I wasn't having sex."

There is, though, one refreshing throwback to the mountain of the '80s. Russian UFC champion Oleg Taktarov not only has the shape of Schwarzenegger, but the Austrian Oak's verve for self-promotion. "Everything I touch in Russia is highest in the ratings!" he roars at *Empire*. "And I have a mystical story for you. I got offered a job in Indiana Jones 4. But when I read the script I realised, 'Oleg, if you take this part, you can't come back to Russia! This guy gets punched in the face by 70 year-old Harrison Ford and is eaten by ants!' This year, we go to Hawaii for Predators, when it strikes me that this is the place where they shot Indiana Jones. I think, 'Shit, I'm in the same jungle, I'm also playing a militant, but this is a militant who I'm proud to play. The guy who can sacrifice his life for others!'"

**A**FTER A 22-WEEK SHOOT, INCLUDING THAT SPELL IN HAWAII ("WE SHOT THE CRAZIEST WATERFALL STUNT EVER — NOBODY'S GOING TO BELIEVE IT'S PRACTICAL!"), ANTAL IS EXHAUSTED. HE PICKS AT BRUNCH ON THE

terrace of the Austin Four Seasons, contemplating the long publicity tour ahead, taking strength from the reaction of the SXSW crowd the night before. "I'm ruined; I have so many new grey hairs. But spiritually I felt something last night. To finally have a little love come back, that meant a lot."

The finish line is in sight. But first that love has to power the director through post-production. "We're getting into a bit I'm really looking forward to — the sounds. My editor, Dan Zimmerman — who I call DJ Dan — is coming up with all these crazy electronic distortion noises, like a computer dying. And the vocalisations of the Predators themselves..." He looks around the terrace, at all the bleary-eyed breakfasters sipping juice, and smiles. "Right now, if we were to play those sounds, all these people would become uncomfortable right away. It's like the lightsaber in *Star Wars*. The Predator is embedded in our psyche."

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**Predators is out on July 8 and will be reviewed in a future issue.**