

# EXCELLENT

SPOILER  
ALERT!

Keanu plays Klaatu in a remake of sci-fi classic *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. Can Neo save the world, again? And can he save a \$100m blockbuster from fanboy wrath?

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

**P**ro\**pul*\*sive\, a. *Tending, or having power, to propel; driving on; urging. Examples: "[The] propulsive movement of the verse."* — Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Brit. poet-philosopher); "This film is a propulsive drama." — Scott Derrickson (American director, *The Day The Earth Stood Still*); "[20th Century Fox head] Tom Rothman told me he wanted to make a propulsive remake." — Keanu Reeves (Neo). One more, in case it hasn't sunk in: "They wanted to make it

more propulsive when I came onboard." — David Scarpa (screenwriter, *The Day The Earth Stood Still*).

And there you have it: after thumbing through their copy of *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 20th Century Fox had found their official, speak-and-repeat mantra for the studio's remake of the '50s sci-fi classic. Propulsive is not an adjective you've likely heard attributed to a massive Hollywood tentpole, but it's got an enigmatic ring to it and is undoubtedly being trotted out to convince all those pesky reboot sceptics that *The Day The Earth Stood Still* '08 has shed the shackles



# ADVENTURE ...OR BOGUS JOURNEY?

of its predecessor to become an urgent, modern event flick.

Brimming with Cold War anxiety and uncanny relevance, Robert Wise's 1951 original is considered sacrosanct in sci-fi circles. So why mess with it?

"I asked myself the same question," admits Reeves, bringing his A-list sheen to the role of alien emissary Klaatu. Never mind that the original film was draped in B-movie chintz and rife with rusty, talky storytelling. And never mind that Wise had taken his own liberties in adapting *Farewell To The Master*, the short story by Harry Bates that *Earth* was based on (in

which Gort is called Gnut, there's no busty temptress for Klaatu to bond with and the much-celebrated phrase "Klaatu barada nikto" was non-existent).

"It's surprising how many people have not seen the original, even cinephiles. It's not like *The Wizard Of Oz*, a movie that everybody has seen," argues Derrickson. "I'm like most people in that I don't have an overall feeling of blessing for the idea of remaking films, especially classics. But my feelings go on a case by case basis and when they approached me, I felt like I could see a really worthy remake that was faithful to the spirit of the original and that updated

the story for these times. That alone made it a reasonable film to remake."

"It's a movie that's very much of its time," argues Jennifer Connelly, cast as the scientist who gives Klaatu his invaluable lessons in human behaviour. "It's 57 years later so hopefully this version can speak to who we are now and how we live with each other and what we do to the Earth."

What still resonates from Wise's wise and beloved anti-war parable is the eerie mirror it holds up to humanity ("There must be security for all, or no one is secure," admonishes Klaatu). Which is why Fox has been making a concerted attempt to >>

# APOCALYPSE NOW

reinvent it for a new generation since the late '70s, when they hired Ray Bradbury to pen a draft. It took the studio another 30 years, however, to find the right creative team to drag Earth into the 21st Century. Somewhat surprisingly, that would be Derrickson – a 39-year-old director with several genre scripts (including Universal's planned remake of *The Birds*) and one iffy directing credit (*The Exorcism Of Emily Rose*) to his name – and writer David Scarpa, whose contribution to cinema is confined to *The Last Castle* script.

"Fox were so tapped out when they approached me that they didn't have any preconceptions about how to approach it," avows Scarpa, who got the offer while Hurricane Katrina was busy levelling New Orleans. "I'm sitting there on the phone with my agent and I'm looking at this God's-eye view of New Orleans on the front page of the *LA Times* and I'm thinking, 'This might resonate today, this idea that we've gotten to a place where we've screwed up so badly that this universal parent is going to smack us.'"

Not a moment too soon, this new *Earth* marks the return of Reeves as cinema's sci-fi saviour. Whereas in *The Matrix* and its sequels,

he became humankind's liberator, in *The Day The Earth Stood Still* he's a disapproving galaxial headmaster, come to Earth to warn us environmentally destructive earthlings that we'd better get our house in order or the universe's other civilisations aren't just going to put us over their knee and give us a spanking – they're going to wipe us off the face of our own planet. "Basically if you don't change your ways," explains Reeves of Klaatu's interplanetary mission, "you won't have to kill yourselves – I'll take care of it for you."

## KLAATU RELOADED

The idea to capitalise on Reeves' arguably alien-like countenance came from the actor's own manager (since the age of 16), Erwin Stoff, who's also a producer on the film. Fox had originally planned to mimic the original by casting a female star as Helen and finding a relative unknown to portray Klaatu (respectively, Patricia Neal and British stage thesp Michael Rennie in 1951). Unsurprisingly, Reeves took some convincing: "He knew what the potential pitfalls were. We spent hours in my yard talking it over," says Derrickson. "One time he came in and my four-year-old son was like, 'Hi Keanu!' I was like, 'Wow, he's really spending a lot of time over here.'"

There was a slight problem, though: "You can't have a spaceship land in Washington

DC and have Tom Cruise or Keanu Reeves walk out – people are gonna start cracking up," contends Scarpa, who says he "cooked up" the lie detector scene highlighted in the trailer to convince Keanu to commit. What walks out of the ship is an alien "much like aliens we've all seen in movies," says Scarpa. But when the alien is shot – adhering to the original film – it incubates into human form, cracking open to reveal Keanu.

Once on board and at his own suggestion, Reeves hunkered down in a "nasty little" conference room with both Derrickson and Scarpa for weeks, poring over the script line by line. "I didn't know what to expect getting into that," confesses the director, "but he turned out to be an insightful storyteller and, to my delight, he was completely unconcerned with accentuating his role. It was focused on the storytelling, which took on a linear muscularity. He brought real clarity to Klaatu's mission and thought processes."

Among various renovations, Connelly has been updated from a dating single mother to a brilliant microbiologist who helps Klaatu understand the human race (and bargains for our survival). The goofy kid has morphed into Helen's rebellious stepson (played by Jaden Smith), whose father was killed in Iraq, while the aliens now travel in spherical orbs rather than those hackneyed flying saucers.

**In action:**  
Scott Derrickson on set of *The Day The Earth Stood Still*.



**'YOU JUST BUY THAT KEANU'S AN ALIEN'** SCOTT DERRICKSON



Nuclear-armageddon goosebumps may no longer be the key issue afflicting the day, but this *Earth's* deeper theme is man's propensity to fuck it all up for himself – whether it be with violent aggression or polluting the planet through resource-wasting avarice. In the 2008 version, it's environmental – not atomic – catastrophe that Klaatu warns is endangering humans. "At one point, Keanu's character says to Professor Barnhardt [John Cleese], 'You treat the world as you treat each other,'" says Connelly. "And how is it that we treat the world and each other? Is it sustainable? Is it responsible? Is it ethical?"

"My character says that he's a friend of the Earth and he means just that," declares Reeves. "He's saying man's impact on the planet is getting to such a state that you have to change or it's going to disappear. You or the planet. He says, 'You guys are great, but you're not worth a planet.'"

Hmm, some friend... Klaatu is made of much sterner stuff this time round. "He's not as congenial as Michael Rennie's character!" admits Derrickson. To play the alien-bearer-of-bad-news, Reeves became very, very quiet. "I'm almost someone who's not conscious in all this," affirms Reeves. "I picture Klaatu as energy contained in a human body, so I was just very still and trying to be slightly sinister. It's like having



a secret. You think you're in control, you think you're empowered because I'm sitting here or I'm tied up, but it's an illusion."

"I don't think it's easy for him," observes Derrickson. "For some actors it's really natural and easy, but he has to be very focused at all times to do his best work. He didn't need a lot of input from me – he figured out on his own how to make the character work and how to communicate that he wasn't a natural-born human being without it becoming over-the-top or silly. One of the greatest successes of the film is that you just buy that Keanu's an alien. And that's to his credit."

## ROBOT WARS

What of Klaatu's indestructible enforcer, Gort? In the original, he's a silver, sphinx-

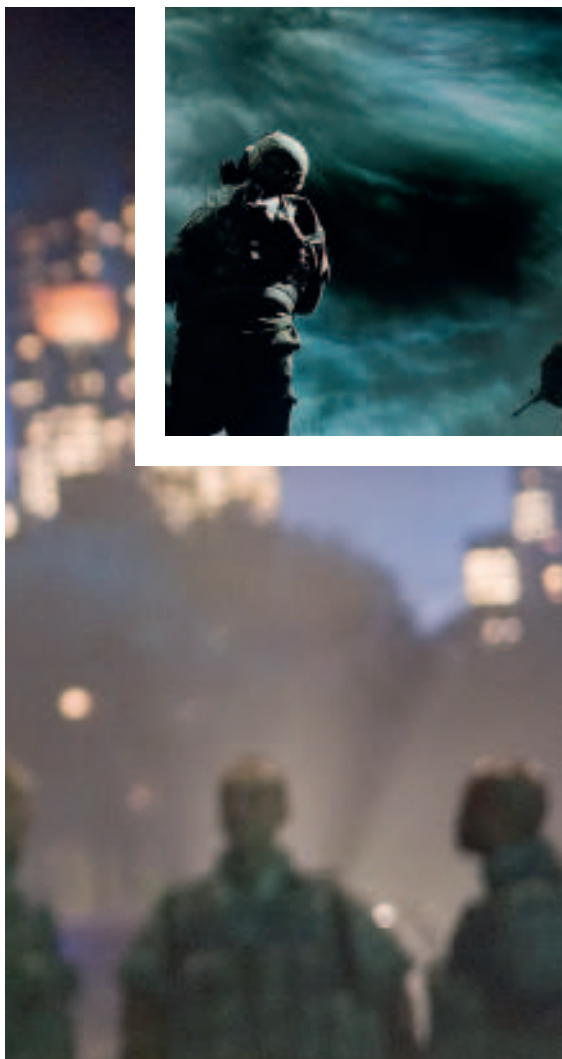
like interstellar cop, towering over humans at a whopping eight feet tall. But, as creepy and terrifying as he no doubt was to '50s moviegoers, that wasn't going to get the job done in 2008. But trying to work out the best way to manifest Gort for the new millennium is where Derrickson and Fox nearly came a cropper, particularly when a Scarpa draft that depicted the robot as a four-legged machine called Totem that stands upright after going on the rampage found its way online – and whipped a fair few fansites into an uproar of disgust.

Scarpa claims the leaked draft was 18 months out of date ("That was like Draft No 15 out of 40"), while Derrickson insists that, by that stage, he'd already determined that the original movie's conception of an anthropomorphic Gort was the way to go.

"I did not feel early on that faithfulness to the basic design of Gort was necessary, so I ventured way out there and spent a tremendous amount of time looking for other ideas to update," says Derrickson, who admits that the abstract death-machine concepts presented to him got increasingly wacko. "I started to feel like I was at the Museum of Modern Art, just looking at completely abstract, statuesque images. That was the point where I had to back up and say, 'We're losing our minds here.' I went back to the simple wisdom of this thing representing itself as this intractable, inscrutable human form. Had I found something I liked better, I would have gone with it. But I didn't."

It seems Fox did freak out a little at the frenzied web-geek reaction ("It became this *big* hysteria," says Scarpa), but Derrickson doesn't blame fanboy tyranny. "It's not annoying to me because I appreciate the passion of those guys and I'm not just saying that. If this is a film you've loved so much and you feel I'm treading on sacred ground, I respect that. There are films that I would feel that way about."

As for Gort's final onscreen incarnation, Derrickson is being cagey about everything – including his height, which will no doubt be a hell of a sight more elevated than 8ft tall. "That's a good speculation," he confirms. However, one titanic, menace-amplifying modification is Scarpa's disclosure that >>



# APOCALYPSE NOW

**'THERE'S FOOD FOR THOUGHT AND FOR THE EYES' KEANU REEVES**

their version of the celestial doomsday weapon is actually a hive of tiny, murderous nano-bots. "Gort breaks into pieces which then replicate and duplicate," he reveals. "They're a swarm; it's like a plague of locusts, to invoke a biblical reference."

## SIGN OF THE TIMES

The trailer shows these robotic locusts overwhelming New York's Giants Stadium, but otherwise seems to slot *Earth* into a moodier sci-fi bracket that's more *Close Encounters* than *Independence Day*. "It's personal stories on a big backdrop," agrees Reeves. "It's broadly appealing in the sense that there's food for thought, but also some for the eyes. But it's not *Transformers*."

Fox will be hoping that it's not *The Happening*, either. Apocalyptic anxiety is gripping the movies, mirroring the sense of precariousness bubbling through pop culture thanks to doom-and-gloom factors like global warming. But even M Night Shyamalan's eco-thriller wasn't box-office manna and he's a big brand name. What chance does Derrickson have?

Well, he's got more than the wind and shaking tree branches to put the scares up audiences. And he doesn't have a star trying to squeeze out more contorted expressions into one film than Meryl Streep in *Sophie's Choice*. But whether *Earth* '08 sticks with '51's bold ending and leaves the human race hanging in a sobering predicament – total annihilation or peace and harmony that's guaranteed by a vastly superior force (sound familiar?) – remains to be seen.

"It's just about the nature of humans," reckons Reeves. "Why do we always wait until our backs are against the wall? We have a choice now but humans need the circumstances to be so big before they act."



We're in that situation so we need to be thinking about, 'What are we gonna do differently here?' To live here and have water and air and food, peace, opportunity and all that good stuff."

Rest easy, Earth-lovers: also counting as "good stuff" is the fact that Klaatu's legendary, Gort-neutralising phrase will be uttered. "It was always a given that that was going to have to be in there in some form!" laughs Derrickson. "For me, I found that line to be the most iconic element of the original film – more iconic than Gort itself." Was that because the three words save our planet from the 'bot's laser-beam rage? "No," the director chuckles, "because I'm a big fan of *Army Of Darkness*..."

Ah, invoking the name of Sam Raimi. If that doesn't help soothe fevered fanboy-brows still sweating over a one-movie horror director being handed the keys to *Earth*, nothing will. Derrickson returns to the question of why people should be bothered about his version. "I wouldn't call it an action film, but it's a thriller and a sci-fi movie with all the bells and whistles people expect from a big event movie, rooted in a story that is more meaningful than you usually get." And in case you'd forgotten... "It is very propulsive." **TF**

**The Day The Earth Stood Still opens on 12 December and will be reviewed in a future issue of Total Film.**

## THEN AND NOW

Stuff going down in the '50s and '00s. Has the world changed that much?

### IT GIRLS

**'50s** Mazza gets her big break in 1950's *The Asphalt Jungle*. Flashbulbs pop and she sleeps with everyone... including a President.



**'00s** Angie Jolie plays Lara Croft in '01 and goes stratospheric. Flashbulbs pop and she sleeps with Brad, who, let's face it, is a better catch than that Dubya fellow.

### POP IDOLS

**'50s** Elvis leads the rock'n'roll revolution and stars in some dodgy films. Hadn't yet given in to burgers so he still had the ability to get parents in a twist.

**'00s** Snake-hipped Justin Timberlake's pop gives him world domination and he uses the platform to star in some pretty decent movies.



### WAR GAMES

**'50s** America wades into the Korean War and loses more than 25,600 troops in the process of making an arse of itself.

**'00s** America wades into the Middle East and loses several thousand troops (so far) in the process of making an arse of itself.

### HOME MOVIES

**'50s** Television threatens to destroy cinema attendances. Why pay to see *The Searchers* when you can get *The Cisco Kid* at home?



**'00s** Illegal downloads and pirate DVDs threaten to destroy cinema attendances. Why pay to see *There Will Be Blood* when you can get a tiny, blurry copy at home?

### DARK TIMES

**'50s** The H-bomb threatens and explodes into movies, fuelling the paranoia of film noir and the mutant bugs of sci-fi.

**'00s** The War On Terror haunts and infiltrates movies like *Iron Man*, *Cloverfield*, *The Dark Knight* and *The Mist*.

### YOUNG ONES

**'50s** Beatniks are everywhere you look. Hollywood is alert to juvenile delinquency in movies like *Rebel Without A Cause* and *The Wild One*.



**'00s** Eevil hoodies threaten civilised society with their knives and mobile phones. Films like *Adulthood*, *Them* and *Eden Lake* hold a cracked mirror up to our times...