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Interview with Nathan Fillion and Summer Glau

By Dietmar Dath

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In science-fiction movies and television, there's a kind of interface between acting and set design – using equipment, moving through spaces – which is handled exceptionally well in “Firefly” and “Serenity”. Did you put a lot of energy into that?

NF: Yeah. The idea is to make everything that we do, especially the extraordinary, seem ordinary. And we do it by handling these things like you're using a key-card instead of a key: just do it, it's not a big deal.

SG: We were helped by the sets themselves, they're built like rooms, they're complete. We spent a lot of time there, we didn't even want to go back to our trailers.

In understand the ship was reconstructed completely.

NF: Yes, they had to build it again because they'd torn it down. There's only two pieces that survived from the original show, one was the red button from the episode “Out of Gas”, Alan Tudyk stole that, and actually I have the catalyzer from “Out of Gas”...

The thing that you dragged across the ship and almost died for.

NF: And the other was one of the doors, one of those big sliding doors.

They seemed so much more real than all those automatically moving doors on the "Enterprise". (To SG) The first time I saw you performing for Joss Whedon, it started with twisting, turning, flexing, twirling and it ended with this intense dialogue, your face in close-up and all kinds of grief going on. He does tend to demand a lot of the women, both athletically and thespically, does he not?

SG: I think he believes in women. I did not do this dance before, he asked me if I could do it. I never danced this – Giselle is one of the greatest, most famous ballets of all time, which only the best of the best get to do, so it was an honor. He loves the ballet – actually, he added scenes as we went along. Usually, there's barely any dance in an episode like that, even in movies, even if they're about dancing, you don't get to see a lot of that. But he added more dancing. Even after finishing the episode, I came back and we filmed some extra dancing.

(to NF) As for you...

NF: Now, my dancing...

(laughter)

NF: Sorry 'bout that.

Well, there's some choreographed moments, when Mal organizes things and people, when he gets stuff in gear, where the camera is moving very rapidly, doing the dancing, circling you, moving in pretty

wild ways. Are you at any of these moments aware of where it is, relative to you? Do you think about it all?

NF: Well, you see it out of the corner of your eye. That was one of the great things about having the series behind us, because in the series, Allen Easton was the man with the hand-held camera, and we were a team. So he'd be filming you, and if you can't see him, he would either reach out with his leg or reach out with his hand, and he'd pull you into where it was you needed to be. And I remember when we were working on "Serenity", there was that good cameraman, and we were having a problem at one point, the camera was behind me and I couldn't see. And he didn't know what to say because he didn't want to say "It's Nathan's fault", and there was nothing he could really do about it. And I turn around and say: "Is this my fault? It's completely my fault, isn't it?" And I said: "Grab me, pull me there, that's the way we did it on the show, you pull me where I need to be." Oh, OK. It's completely a team effort.

(to SG) Now River is different from anyone the average person ever gets to meet, let alone to be, yet you probably invest her with at least some little traits of your own, don't you?

SG: I knew what I wanted her to be like, I felt close to her. When I started auditioning as an actress, I didn't know how they would see me. But I always seem to do better at the more damaged, strange girls. I never got called back to play the popular cheerleader but the drug addict I get, the strange crazy girls I do very well at. And with River, she kind of reminded me of how I was when I was a teenager. One can relate to that awkwardness, the isolation.

(to NF) Mal and Caleb – Joss Whedon chooses you to inspire people in

good and bad ways. Did you invest these characters with any traits of your own?

NF: You know, I have an over-developed sense of vengeance. But Mal has had a very hard life, and my life's been very easy. I enjoy playing him because he's a departure from myself. Playing Caleb was brilliant, because while he was evil, he thought he was the good guy. And he was so pleasant. There was just something about him, he was so misguided.

He had the black heart in the right place.

NF: I'll use that. Consider that stolen.

And Mal has that very strong sense of right and wrong...

NF: Yes, well, it's very practical. He knows what needs to be done. He's a very day-to-day kind of guy. If we get through this day, we'll worry about tomorrow.

So it was interesting to set him against this idealist, who thinks from the top down.

NF: Exactly. That was the thing, here's this believer, played with such purity by Chiwetel Ejiofor, and there's Malcolm Reynolds who's lost his belief, yet there's something inside him, and so he's taking in these two fugitives...

And that's not pragmatic at all.

NF: It's the only hint that we get that there's still something inside

him, otherwise he's just too busy pushing people away. Malcolm in the series – we were made to make him funnier, lighter, friendlier. The network's choice was to have him be more likable. In the film we were able to make him as he was originally intended to be, a very dark and very angry, broken man. And ironically enough, people really like him when he's dark.

And it makes the other moments much stronger where he's alone.

SG: That's my favourite moment, where he's off and he stands there alone, such a hard picture.

How much of "Firefly" not as a story but as a series is reflected in "Serenity"? Things like "you can't stop the signal", that sounds like a comment on what the network did, one of the more obvious ones of the not-so-much-hidden meanings...

NF: Yeah, well the metaphor is there that can't be ignored. It's like the analogy between the fans and the browncoats, it's too perfect, it's too great. I love it, and I think they love it, too.

All these characters, they come from this one man, are extensions of himself...

NF: Mal is as cool as Joss has always wanted to be. And River... is... like... the little girl that Joss has always wanted to be.

(laughter)

NF: He once told me, there was this character he wrote and the cha-

racter just went on and on and he had to go back over it and say: I don't remember writing this. This character was really speaking to him. That must have been an amazing experience, having these people speak with their own voice.

SG: The way he writes is a big help if you're acting.

Not wanting to leave your trailer or this show: was there more of a sense of community there than on other productions?

NF: From every job I've done, I've had at least one friend, someone I wanted to keep close to. From "Firefly" and "Serenity", I have about twenty people, and I think that speaks really highly of what Joss has accomplished. My favourite scenes were those in the kitchen.

Which brings me to River, since she's sort of excluded from all of this by design. Except for talking to Simon, she's pretty isolated. Was that very hard, to play a person that's connected to the others only in the sense that the actor is connected to the other actors, but the person is not?

SG: To be honest, I was very new at that and there were always things, I didn't know what a marking was and what to do to be in the frame the right way, and the others were really nice about it...

NF: We judged you. Very quietly.

SG: And Sean, he was a big help – of course, he was the only one I ever spoke to, I mean I was in other scenes...

The other people you just stabbed.

NF: (laughs)

SG: Well, but I needed their approval.

A given season's character arc seems to have been revealed very gradually even to actors, from what I hear you were invited to figure out where your characters were coming from while not knowing where they would be going. Was there anything in what they call a show's "Bible", or...?

SG: River was a very mysterious character anyway. But it's hard to play a girl who was tortured not knowing how she was tortured and for what. Also that she did not really have a family background, a backstory that you really know, except for her brother who is everything. It lends itself to empathy, but it is difficult to figure out how to communicate. But as far as what comes next is concerned, Joss didn't tell us anything.

NF: He tells me.

So how will the third movie end?

NF: Well, you see, when Captain River... Sorry. Well, no, up until "Our Mrs. Reynolds", I didn't know where Mal came from, I thought that he was pretty well-educated, I didn't know how, but that's what I decided. So now I learn he was raised on a ranch, and at that point, the character completely changed for me. As far as a Bible is concerned, well, when Jesus was born, that part of the Bible was not very thick.

SG: (laughs).

NF: There was a lot to learn, and we had to learn to trust each other as actors. By the time we got to the film, we hit the ground running. There was no confusion as to who we were, what our relations were, how we dealt with each other.

From what I read, it wasn't very difficult to get you back on board.

NF: Actually, I was up for a pilot that I turned down. I just rolled the dice.

SG: It was the same with me, I went somewhere to do a thing, I worked hard, they liked me, and I went back and I went back and they finally gave me that part, and we didn't know what would happen with the movie. And it was really hard, but when I heard that *Serenity* was going to get made, I said bye-bye there and I went.

NF: We were having fun, we are living a dream.

SG: And nobody else was going to play our characters. They would have to die first. We loved the way they were written – how often do you feel that you could hear one isolated line from a movie and you'd know who said it?

So what are your next projects, personally speaking?

SG: I just did a science-fiction comedy called "Mammoth".

NF: I did a Movie called "Slither". It's very slimy. It's an alien

invasion/zombie movie set in a small town in South Carolina. I play the town's chief of police who is very lazy and has nothing to do, until this invasion happens.

Sounds awkward for you. Which is okay, I suppose, coming from Whedon's work, where there's a lot of these uncomfortable moments that turn into something really beautiful.

NF: The thing about this cast is: we have no pride. We tease each other incessantly, everything is a joke, except when it comes to the love for doing this. Joss creates a great atmosphere where you can put yourself at risk, where you can take those chances and gamble.