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LA TIMES HERO COMPLEX FILM FESTIVAL BRINGS BACK "INDEPENDENCE DAY"

By Dan Jacobs

Nearly 17 years after the film's initial release, the blockbuster film *Independence Day* burst into theaters with explosions and special effects as loud as special guest-Jeff Goldblum's bright orange pants!

As part of the LATimes' Hero Complex film festival, the movie which was originally released on July 3rd 1996, starring Will Smith, Bill Pullman, Jeff Goldblum and others as humanity's only hope

against an alien invasion that started on July 2nd, and would climax with an intergalactic fight on, you guessed it, the day of the film's titular holiday.

With nearly 150 audience members packed into the world-famous TCL Chinese Theater, (formerly Grauman's Chinese Theater), the film was screened and also featured Hero Complex's Gina McIntyre leading the audience in a Q & A session with the film's director and co-writer, Roland Emmerich, writer/producer Dean Devlin, Academy Award-winning visual effects supervisor Volker Engel, and the aforementioned Goldblum, who played the film's nebbish, reluctant hero, David Levinson. I've broken that Q & A down here by some of my favorite moments:

"It's Just Fun"

Emmerich noted that *Independence Day* had a budget of \$75 million. He said he was initially given this sum to film a prison break movie, but told the studio that for such a big price tag, he could make an alien invasion film. On the car ride home, he began to figure out what an alien movie would look like, what the language would be, and of course, plot and storylines (yes, summer action films do have them...in theory). Credit goes to the film's writers, Emmerich and Devlin, who successfully and believably made this a story of redemption for the film's main characters, and even for mankind itself.

Devlin, in response to an audience member's question, said the film was actually not an invasion movie, but a disaster movie. Though he didn't elaborate on the difference, one disaster that an audience member noted is common in Emmerich's films is that of the destruction of the White House. In *ID4*, as the film has been nicknamed, that occurred just seconds after the President and his team were able to escape. In Emmerich's upcoming film, *White House Down*, the President's home becomes under attack. When asked why so many of his films feature 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue being blown to smithereens, Emmerich simply laughed and said "it's just fun."

In a touch of irony, Bill Pullman, who played President Whitmore in the film, would go on to play the President again in the now-cancelled TV comedy *1600 Penn*, though that was a disaster just for NBC.

"The Impossible Enemy"

Devlin said *ID4* was written in just three weeks, and that the shooting script was very similar to what they'd initially created. He also said that they looked at other disaster movies, especially the 1975 film *Airport*, to see what those films had gotten right. One note they came away with was that those films took the time to develop the characters, so when the disaster struck, the audience would more greatly feel the drama of the situation and care more about the protagonists' survival. To ensure this would happen, *ID4* spent the entire first act establishing the characters' pasts. President Whitmore faced a media that criticized his leadership skills as having been left back in the Gulf War, where he fought as a pilot. Levinson was a computer/technical wiz whose career ambitions never matched his abilities. Captain Hiller, played by Will Smith, was an Air Force pilot whose application to NASA's astronaut program was rejected.

What drove Goldblum to the script was that the aliens were what he called "the impossible enemy." They seemed to have no weaknesses, they rendered useless our world's most technologically advanced weapons (the aliens even turned our own satellites against us), and for three-fourths of the film, no one understood the aliens' motivations.

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Goldblum said what attracted him to the part was the subtle humor and relationships in the film. His repartee with his on-screen ex-wife, Constance Spano, an advisor to the President whose actual role is left somewhat vague, had some sharp, dry dialogue, but his need to prove her wrong about him is partially what drove his character. Emmerich said that the film needed some lighter elements to it because the humor is what allows us to like the characters better, and often humanizes people we wouldn't normally be able to relate to.



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While the shooting schedule was about 70 days long, relatively fast for a summer blockbuster, the humor even occurred off-camera. Goldblum regaled a story of how improv was part of the filming process. When he and Smith were in the space craft towards the film's ending sequence, they found themselves reacting to a green screen alien. Making light of their situation, he said that when he was with Smith, "we fooled around in the ship."



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"Some Really Good Ideas"

In planning the release of the film, Emmerich said that they learned of another movie being shot at the same time, Tim Burton's alien invasion satire *Mars Attacks!* Emmerich felt that in order for *ID4* to be successful, the parody couldn't come out before the "mainstream" film. This led to choosing an early July release, with Burton's film coming out in August.

No Q & A session would be complete without someone asking whether there would be a sequel. While they rarely come out 17-plus years and counting after the first film, Devin noted that it's possible. He said that he and Roland have some really good ideas, and that they would love to do one. Audiences certainly seem to be ready for one.

At a test screening of *ID4* in Las Vegas, the audience went crazy for the film, and that was just when the title card was shown on screen. Devin laughed and said that the film broke at that point, and while it took a while to fix, the audience never once stopped cheering for the movie. Devin also took Goldblum to a sci-fi convention, and when the actor spoke to the crowd, Devin said you would have thought that The Beatles had taken the stage.

If they really are serious about making a sequel, and they really do have ideas, then there is only one final thought to consider: The first film made over \$300 million. The audience was there then, and judging by the interest at the screening, the audience, wasn't just wondering about a sequel. They seemed to be champing at the bit for one.

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