

PITCH BLACK

By Joe Fordham

"We were looking for a story that was about fear of the dark," producer Tom Engelman recalled, speaking from his office at Warner Roadshow Studios on Australia's Gold Coast where he filmed *PITCH BLACK*, a new science fiction thriller from Polygram, scheduled for release in the first quarter of 2000 from USA Films.

Written and directed by David Twohy (*THE ARRIVAL*), from a screenplay originated by Ken and Jim Wheat, *PITCH BLACK* began shooting August 19, 1998, after two years in development at Interscope Communications. Engelman brought in Twohy after their past association on the thriller *TERMINAL VELOCITY*. Coober Peedy, South Australia (Mad Max's stomping ground), was chosen to represent the main location, an arid planet blasted by three suns which set once in every 60 years. The story begins when a passenger spaceship crashlands on the planet. The survivors find giant alien bones, weird petrified vegetation, an abandoned settlement and no life—until darkness falls.

"It's first and foremost a scary movie," Engelman emphasized. "The fact that it is set on an alien planet and takes place in the future is important but not the fundamental reason for us making this movie. It's a movie about a group of people thrown together who must struggle to survive the most dangerous, most frightening night imaginable."

The survivors are comprised of an ensemble cast of largely unknown actors lead by Radha Mitchell (*HIGH ART*) as the sole surviving spaceship pilot, Cole Hauser (*GOOD WILL HUNTING*) as a hard-boiled cop, and Vin Diesel (*SAVING*

Screenwriter David Twohy directs his horror/sci-fi hybrid.



Twohy (l), writer and director of *THE ARRIVAL*, rehearses stranded space travelers Cole Hauser and Rhada Mitchell during filming in Australia

PRIVATE RYAN) as Hauser's convict charge, a murderer with eyes enhanced to see in the dark. Engelman compared the casting to the first *ALIEN* in that their aim was to create "a character thriller at the core of this scary visual effects movie."

Another referent, though more obscure, was the 1953 Henri Clouzot film *WAGES OF FEAR*, wherein four greasy down-and-outs cross a harsh and barren landscape ferrying a cargo of nitroglycerine which could blow at any minute. The explosives in *PITCH BLACK* are of the carnivorous alien variety, furnished by a team of digital and creature effects artists under the design aegis of Patrick Tatopoulos.

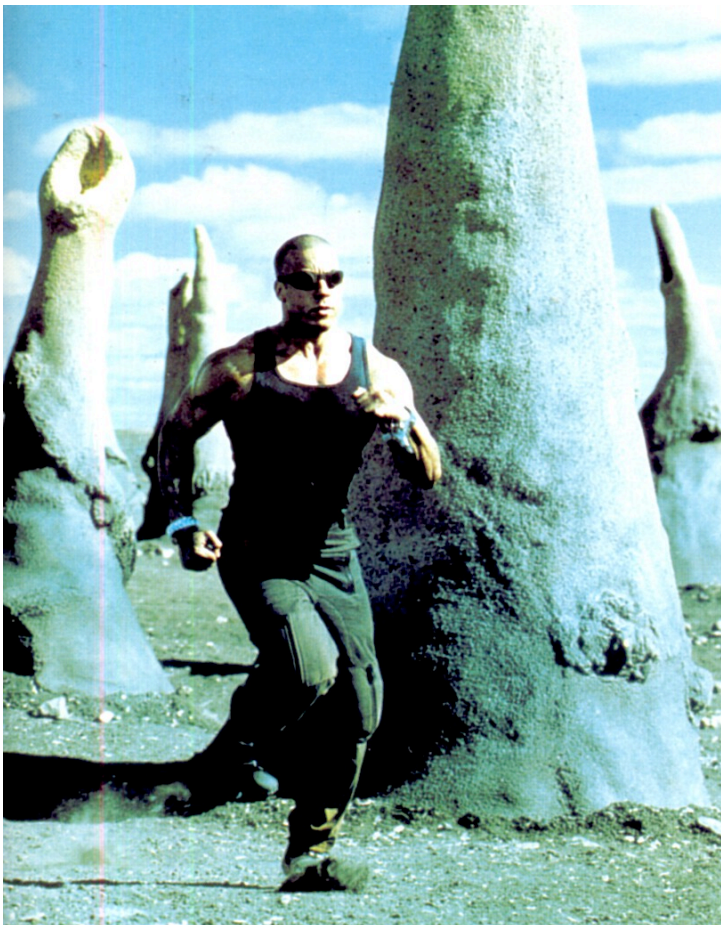
From December 1997 through September 1998, the creature design period had been an unusually long but rewarding process for Tatopoulos. "I got involved when I was actually still on *GODZILLA* when I met David Twohy for the first time. I got excited about the concept right away and produced two renderings of the basic creatures. I showed these to David and every time we talked I would go away and redesign and push it and push it, until he brought from me the ideal concept of ultimately designing something that surprises me as well. This time I've got something that goes beyond what I think I could have done on just my own."

All creature imagery has been labeled classified at this stage to preserve the mystery lurking in the dark, part of the challenge of creating "a pitch black movie." Suffice it to say 95% of the creature chores have been assigned to CGI, supervised by Peter Chiang (*THE BORROWERS*), with the remainder of the mechanical effects fabricated by local Australian creature maker John Cox from the Tatopoulos designs.

Engelman elaborated, "As the nocturnal world blooms to life, I think everyone will have a sense of the immensity of the challenge that these people are up against to survive. But you aren't going to be seeing a thousand bugs during daylight. It's all what you don't see, isn't it?"

Another point of reference to Ridley Scott's *ALIEN* perhaps? The 1979 classic also came up in conversation with Tatopoulos as an inspiration for himself and his director Twohy. "*ALIEN* is the perfect film where you can't tell the size of the creature, or even its shape. You saw aspects of the creature that looked like something else. I think we have that with *PITCH BLACK*, but it's a fine line to confuse the eye and still retain design integrity when you reveal the full creature. Without getting into detail, I believe we've created something that is not a monster, that feels like a natural living thing." Having said that, Tatopoulos was certain his creation would not elicit our sympathy. "No, it'll just look cool," he laughed. "These are evil little things that you just can't stop. You want to see them dead."

Even after all this careful preparation, at the time of writing in the final month of shooting, both Engelman and Tatopoulos indicated elements of creature design were very much in-process. Engelman commented, "We're finding the best



Vin Diesel as an interstellar escaped convict with eyes enhanced to see in the dark, on an arid planet with three suns that set only once every 60 years.

antagonist for our characters, if I can put it in that way, in terms of how our characters meet their demise. Some of these things are effecting design." A true example of the effects of digital filmmaking, where performance is adjusted in post-production. Tatopoulos concurred, "This project has been a design job," his studio manufacturing the nemesis, deciding in post-production "the way it acts, the way its musculature and the pattern of its body-changes in motion." According to Tatopoulos, the results have been more than up to scratch. "It has become almost like a friendship now because I consider my job done. If there's anything else to be done I do it because I want to do it. When I create a creature effect, I think I might as well finish every detail, it just makes me feel better. [He laughed.] It's my baby."

Shooting, however, was not without its problems, courtesy of the Australian winter. Engelman recalled the whole location shoot

seemed cursed. "We worked on sacred Aboriginal ground. Now we had a very respectful, reciprocal relationship with the Aboriginal community, but it did seem that there were a series of inexplicable weather conditions. The satellite picture for the next morning would read absolutely clear, we'd go out and it would be storming and raining and lightning, then we'd have the weather forecast sent to us again and it would be absolutely clear. We had 80 mph

"It's a fine line to confuse the eye and still retain design integrity," said creature designer Patrick Tatopoulos. "We've created a monster that feels like a natural thing."

winds where Mother Nature herself seemed to be turning upon us. Kind of an interesting mood for a scary movie."

Conditions for the cast were miserable. "It rained almost every day. It was almost snow condition temperatures. What's funny about it was we had people running about in stripped-down clothing with gel all spritzed with water, having to look like they were cooking in the sun and they were freezing in the cold and in the rain."

A headache indeed for director of photography David Egby. Veteran of *VIRUS* and *MAD MAX*, Egby proposed a solution to the weather problem which proved to be a unique and cost-saving method for generating alien skies. Engelman recalled, "We used a process called bleach bypass, which we kind of stumbled on when we were testing night photography to find the richest blacks. The way bleach bypass works is you skip the bleach bath when developing the film, leaving more silver in the negative, redistributing colors and bringing out the contrast. The end result was it gives us these really trippy daytime skies. But it's a risky process. You're effecting the negative, which we tend not to do in America because there's no going back.

David Egby really mastered this technique and we're really pleased with the results."

Ultimately, Engelman and Tatopoulos defer to David Twohy as their main source of inspiration and energy throughout the project. For Tatopoulos it was a rare meeting of minds, "David more than understands effects. He's an extremely clever man. Truly. I don't say that about everybody I work with, but David is fantastic. He will search until he finds what he wants. I think it was a new experience for me in that sense. My limits moved further. I'm a commercial artist, we all have our signature, if people come to you, you expect they're coming to you because something that you've done before, but ultimately there is also a human side to this relationship. We sat down together for hours and we really had a great time. It was fantastic. We understood each other. It took a long time, but we were always moving in a direction we felt more comfortable with. It was truly a great experience."

Engelman concluded, "David Twohy wrote a script that would stand on its own without any visual effects. His approach is not to depend upon visual effects and spectacle to tell his story. The story, the characters, the development, the issues of fear and anxiety and tension, all those things that go into the craft of story-telling are there, and the story stands by itself. The movie is charged with this ticking bomb as the lights our characters are carrying flicker out one by one. It allows for tremendous character conflict. It allows for great tension. You never know until you actually shoot a story if that's going to come to be, but I think he's got a really exciting thriller." □

Hauser's interstellar cargo ship, filming the 1:36 scale model at L.A.'s Hunter Gratzner Industries. USA Films opens the Polygram production nationwide in early 2000.



PITCH BLACK

By Joe Fordham

November 1998 was the month when director David Twohy and his editor, Rick Shaine, locked the two hundred shots that will deliver the visual effect jolts for Polygram/Interscope's new science fiction thriller, *PITCH BLACK*, which USA Films opened nationwide February 18. Once this task was completed, the digital compositing and computer generated imagery—supervised by British effects maestro Peter Chiang, from designs by Patrick GODZILLA Tatopoulos (see preview 31:10:6)—will be blended with live-action plates. After four months location shooting in the wilds of the Australian outback, Twohy was relaxed and happy to recount the journey that had brought him to this stage of production in his latest foray into the genre.

"What appealed to me most about the premise was that it could tap in so easily into our innate fear of the dark," he said. "You crash land on the planet that you believe has no night. No life and no night. Then you come to realize that there is one nightfall every 23 years on this planet and you have the unlucky coincidence of being there when that is about to happen. Then when night does fall you realize it's not a dead planet at all, it's rife with nocturnal life, and that nocturnal life happens to be inhospitable to humankind. It was a film that could be powered a lot by imagination, if the filmmakers so chose."

Twohy's background as screenwriter for both science fiction—*WATERWORLD*, *THE ARRIVAL*—and action-oriented drama—*G.I. JANE*, *THE FUGITIVE*—appealed to the studio. *PITCH BLACK* may have had the trappings of science fiction, but they wanted a horror film. "They made it very

Writer-director David Twohy on his sci-fi creature feature.



Twohy rehearses Vin Diesel, a convict with enhanced night vision, loosed on a planet that is plunged into darkness just once every twenty-three years.

clear that it had to [be horror], to make sense to them commercially. I heard their concerns early on and I built additional jumps into my early rewrites, but I think that's just smart marketing sense because I want people to see my film as well. I did that without sacrificing the other things I like about the script as well. The other human things.

"I realized that it was a great vehicle for exploring the basis of fear, why we fear the things we do; and for exploring who is really the hero of our piece. The curious thing is it's not who you expect. It's not one of those Bruce Willis movies where you clearly know he's the good guy,

you know he's going to prevail and you only stick around to find out how. It's not that at all. At the beginning, you think you know who the hero is, you think you know where your allegiances should lie, but then about half way through you start to wonder if in fact your allegiances aren't misplaced. Suddenly who you thought was the hero is not the hero, and someone you thought was the bad guy is not the bad guy. Suddenly, hopefully, everything is fresh and new and continues to be involving up until the very last moment."

Casting proved a major factor in Twohy's design, though budgetary factors triggered the

equation. "It was part of a plan that developed for us," Twohy confided. "The fact that Polygram would only spend a certain amount of money on a picture like this—they wanted low-twenties—given that budgetary range, you can't go out and get somebody of worldwide marquee value to power your movie. So we said to them, let's not try middle-echelon actors who have dubious marketing appeal anyway, [let's] just take that extra money and try to make a better movie. Let us cast with best available talent. Ultimately, Interscope, Tom and myself were able to prevail upon Polygram to do just that."

As *PITCH BLACK* took shape, the filmmakers continued to turn monetary constraints to their artistic advantage. The three leads in the ensemble cast, Radha Mitchell, Vin Diesel, Cole Hauser all impressed themselves on Twohy as valuable assets—"They are all good up-and-comers and any of them could break maybe with this film." The same approach was applied to production design (by Graham Walker of *MAD MAX II* and *MAD MAX III*)—"It's science fiction that doesn't try to impress with technology. We didn't have the money to compete with *LOST IN SPACE* or *STARSHIP TROOPERS*. Those were clean, techy looks at the future. We are not that. We are almost retro-tech, we are dirty, we are ugly, we are sloppy, we are hand-held. Hopefully more effective for it."

The Australian shoot was as demanding for Twohy as it was for the rest of his cast and crew. Twohy reflected on the ordeal, "Well, they do speak the same language—sort of," he laughed. "But they have world-class crews down there, and I had a very good d.p., David Egby.



Diesel becomes the unlikely savior for a crashed transport ship once nightfall comes, as the crew discovers the planet is not as uninhabited as it looks.

We were in the Australian outback, in their winter, which meant very, very short days. All of us were used to 14-hour filming days and suddenly we had eight hours. Since it was a planet where there's supposed to be no night, as soon as the sun was going down that was it."

Short days pushed them one week over schedule. Further complications arose over the evolution of the alien creatures, a process that continued even after principal photography had wrapped. "About 20% of our creature were practical shots, about 80% will be CG. Patrick [Tatopoulos] and I came up with a creature [design] that we were quite happy with. We fabricated that creature halfway through production and Polygram started to get cold feet, wondering if in fact the creature was scary enough. We looked at minor modifications that might help

allay their fears, even though I had no fears all along. Scary is such a subjective thing."

Twohy enthused at Tatopoulos' involvement, "Patrick helped us come up with some of the landscapes. One of the great shots from the movie is when our humans are out trekking they come to a valley filled with titanic, dinosaurian bones. He

Space transport captain Cole Hauser hunts Diesel until the PITCH BLACK of the planet's night turns the tables. USA Films opens the movie February 18.



“We didn’t have money to compete with STARSHIP TROOPERS,” said Twohy. “We are almost retro-tech, we are dirty, we are ugly, we are sloppy, we are hand-held.”

[designed] those creatures, what they once were. It turns out to be a killing field, which is the first tip-off that maybe we’re not alone on this planet.”

PITCH BLACK marks Twohy’s second theatrical feature as a director, although his genre credentials extend as far back as WARLOCK, his first produced screenplay. A California native, graduate of CSULB, Twohy remarked on his current association with science fiction, “I’m happy to work in the genre. I pursue it, as much as anything. I sucked up a lot of it as I was growing up, as a lot of us do, but I’m happy to work in the genre now as long as I can do it every other film. Whenever I go away and do a drama then come back and do science fiction, it feels like coming home.”

Twohy was non-committal when it came to predictions about the current science fiction boom. “I think a lot of the good science fiction concepts from the fifties have already been plundered or exploited as films. I actually turned one of my favorites into the first thing that I directed about six years ago. It was called THE GRAND TOUR, based on “Vintage Season” by Henry Kuttner. It was about a bunch of time-travelling tourists who

were on a tour of the great disasters of all time. A very interesting concept. I optioned the material, wrote a screenplay, filmed it and turned it into a Showtime original movie. It turned out fairly well, I thought. Jeff Daniels was in it—So I’ve gone that route myself; but if you look at classic science fiction a lot of it has been used.

“I think we’re going to have to start generating anew. Probably the breakthrough films [will be] those that start combining genres, like ALIENS because it was both an action film and a horror film and succeeded on both levels. We’re probably going to have to up the stakes by crossing genres and doing both well rather than both not well.” Which hopefully is where PITCH BLACK fits in.

Twohy stressed, “PITCH BLACK is a scary movie. That’s what it’ll be marketed as. But I think that once we get the people in theatres they’ll find a lot more than just that. In terms of the science fiction, in terms of the drama, in terms of the unpredictability of the story.

“The first goal of all filmmakers is that we should be entertaining and not boring; the second goal is they walk out of the theatre saying, ‘You know what? I didn’t know how it was going to end.’ So often I go into a movie theatre and, like a lot of us, I can call the end of the movie 15 minutes into it. If you know what the ending of a movie is, why the heck are you spending eight dollars, and why the heck are you sitting around for two hours? I always try to do the unexpected and I think this film has a lot of that.” □

More PITCH BLACK, on 58
Star Vin Diesel
Special Visual Effects

PITCH BLACK

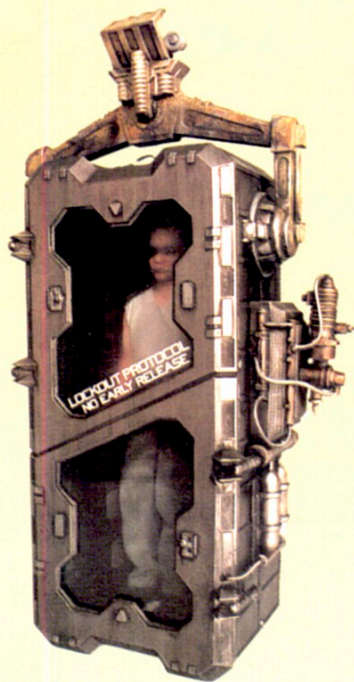
MINIATURE EFFECTS

The space freighter crash by Hunter-Gratzner.

By Joe Fordham

Ian Hunter and Matthew Gratzner were already Twohy alumni after creating miniature effects for *THE ARRIVAL* in 1995, their first year in production as Hunter-Gratzner Industries, Inc. Their eight-foot-high, 1/24th-scale Planetcore building and its resident unfolding space antenna have since been followed by bug-blasting weaponry for *MEN IN BLACK*; a

1:6 scale CryoLocker miniature with Vin Diesel puppet inside, for gripping interior shots of the crash action.



looming, 1/24th scale Arkham Asylum for *BATMAN AND ROBIN*; shiny, Bradburyian rocketships for *GATTACA*; grungy, high-tech space vehicles for *ALIEN RESURRECTION*; and untold havoc in *GODZILLA*, *ARMAGEDDON*, and *THE X-FILES MOVIE*. All this and more outlandish hardware for Will Smith—this time in a Jules Verne vein for *WILD, WILD WEST*—brought HGI back to David Twohy's employ in the summer of 1998, hired to realize the crash of a space freighter at the film's outset.

The design process began as always from the language of the script, but HGI were aware of genre precedents involved and strove to combine imagination and originality with a practical, believable approach. "Whenever Ian and I approach any script, we never reference other films," said Gratzner. "We always like to base our designs on something real, not on someone else's interpretation. David kept referring to this ship as part of a freight line, so we took a look at shipping docks, like San Pedro down here in California and around the east coast. We saw it's just container after container after container being picked up with a crane and loaded onto ships. We also thought of freight trains, with a caboose at the back and an engine in the front, then we took these theories and applied them to deep space."

The dirty, gritty approach



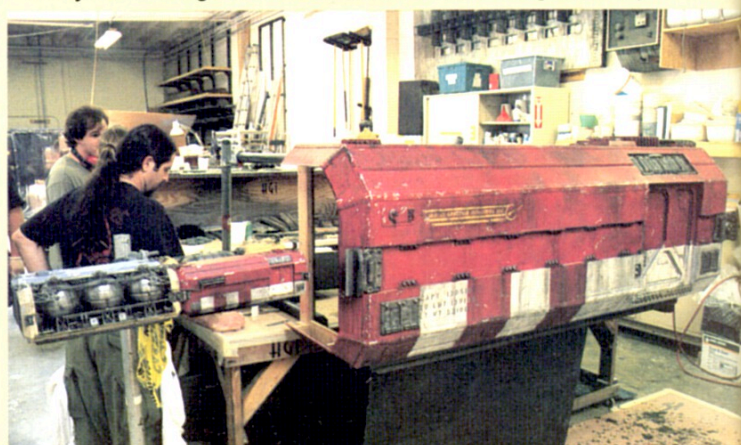
Assistant painter Laurah Grijalva details the 1:36 scale model of the space freighter, big scale effects on a small scale by Hunter-Gratzner Industries.

was also carried over to the ship's interior in the form of the cryo-locker design, an HGI concept which consciously departed from *ALIEN*'s gleaming, flower-petal sleep chamber in favor of a disturbing, utilitarian approach. "Imagine some company that does cryo-freezing and they just adapt them for cryo-travel," Gratzner proposed. "We decided they'd just fit rails to the inside of the containers and then take these coffin-like sarcophagus units, with big gauges, valves and hoses on

the outside, and then just hook them onto the rail, sliding them into the container, unfortunately a lot like sides of beef."

This nightmarishly practical approach to economy-class space travel also proved a means of intensifying the action and containing the effects budget. "David didn't want to show the crash from the outside because, frankly, to do a shot like that would have been quite costly, and they didn't really have the budget to do it," said Gratzner. "The flip side was David felt it's been seen a million times, so he decided to

1:36 scale and 1:6 scale miniatures of the freighter's cargo container section, side by side. Shooting the crash action in miniature was a budget necessity.



keep the action inside. We built a 1/6th scale interior cryo-locker set that featured all these cryo-lockers on rails. When the wall gets ripped out, debris goes flying and all the cryo-lockers start rolling down the rails and shooting out as well. The script just stated cryo-lockers start flying out of the containers, but that gave us the idea to have them on these huge great clamps sliding down the rails with all their cryo-hoses and lifelines getting severed. It was a pretty good shot."

Conceptual sketches were followed by an 18" mock-up of the main ship, roughed out in urethane foam, detailed and painted over a period of three days for the director and studio's approval in May '98. It was determined a nine-foot-long, 1/36th-scale model would be constructed to represent the full ship with 1/6th scale close-up sections; but before construction could begin Twohy had important news for HGI.

"David mentioned we had a production designer," Gratzner recalled, "a gentleman by the name of Grace Walker in Australia. I was very familiar with Grace's films, ROAD WARRIOR, BEYOND THUNDER-DOME, and I knew he was a very well-established, precedent-setting designer who has been copied all over, so I thought this was terrible—he was going to come in and hate everything! At our initial meeting I explained our concept, showed Grace our drawings and said I pictured the inside of the spaceship like a T-130 military cargo plane, a lot of wires, frame work and padding. I was talking a mile a minute. Well, he loved it! He told me it was what he'd pictured too, like a big cargo jet—I think he actually said a T-130—and that was my first and last nervous doubt on the show."

A constant interface continued between HGI and Walker's art department on location in Australia, with photographs and castings being despatched to Coober Peedy to aid construction of full scale set pieces upon which actors could scramble. "Grace built the front half of our ship buried in the sand and it was phenomenal," Gratzner recalled. "It matched our model exactly, almost to the bolt." □

VIN DIESEL

Rising star and sci-fi fan on his cross between Mad Max and the Terminator.

While the first member of Tom Hanks' PRIVATE RYAN rescue squad was being gunned down on screens across the States in the summer of 1998, Vin Diesel, the performer who brought Private Caparzo to life as his Hollywood debut, was pulling 14-hour days, light years away, on location in Coober Peedy, Australia, in his role as Riddick, the main male lead of PITCH BLACK. "It was tough," Diesel admitted. "I wish I could've been part of that premiere." But the RYAN adventure was undoubtedly one that Diesel valued—he referred to his time with Spielberg as "probably one of the most rewarding and validating experiences of my life"—and it has made the young New Yorker one of the hottest and distinctive new names in town.

Diesel earned his stripes in Hanks' platoon on the strengths of his self-produced 1994 short MULTIFACIAL. The 20-minute film caught Spielberg's eye after its appearance at Cannes in 1995. What attracted Diesel to PITCH BLACK was the script by David Twohy. "He was probably one of the best written characters that I've read in years," said Diesel. "The character arc was amazing. He was a prototype in many ways because he's like a Terminator, but he had elements of Hannibal Lecter, elements of a vampire, elements of an Elia Kazan-created character, all these different, wonderful dimensions. The story starts out where nobody trusts him and then at the end of the film this guy you've feared all along is perceived totally different."

Twohy's script kept Riddick's background deliberately sketchy, as it did with all the characters, yet what little it provided set the roots for his transformation and distinguished him from the group. "I don't have a fear of the dark," Diesel explained. "Actu-



Diesel as Riddick, a dangerous convict in cryosleep prior to the crash, wish fulfillment for a boy who wanted to be a superhero.

ally, Riddick is more comfortable in the dark. He's got nocturnal vision. He has spent so much time in prison that he is actually more intimidated by the sunlight. It's not as bad as Gollum in LORD OF THE RINGS but he's got that kind of Ring Wraith feel. He's a nocturnal beast. So when nighttime comes, that's when he shines.

"I did a lot of interesting things in creating Riddick's character. I studied the movement of Apex predators. He also wears protective goggles because his eyes are sensitive to light, so I had to rely on body language, the tone and pitch of my voice. What helped was I'd done an animated film called THE IRON GIANT, where I played the Giant. When you do a character in an animated film that's all you've got, your voice. You have to try to bring something out from inside and put that out there without using your eyes which are the actor's number one tool."

Other peculiarities of genre filmmaking were also new to Diesel, and initially daunting.

"Fighting creatures that are not there is something that you have to do to create these characters and tell the story. It was a little weird. I actually feared the idea of working with green screen more than I probably needed to. After the tenth take you forget the fact that you've got this green curtain hanging behind you and you can't move an inch out of the designated direction."

Technicalities aside, Diesel confessed this project was a boyhood dream come true. "I grew up with Moorcock and Tolkien. I was playing Dungeons and Dragons at 12 and religiously altering the game until we took it to a master's level. Literally, if you would've asked the five-year-old Vin Diesel what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would have said a superhero." Diesel gave his distinctive, big, cackling laugh. "That's what was so cool. I always wanted to be The Terminator. Riddick is the 1998 version of that Terminator character. The bad hero dude! He's Mad Max and Terminator!"

Speaking of his career ambitions, Diesel also referenced a couple of real-life heroes, "I think Nicolas Cage has a wonderful career. He's able to do THE ROCK and he's able to do LEAVING LAS VEGAS. I could probably end up filling that Arnold/Stallone void, but I'd like to compound that with dramatic pieces. That's what all my training has built up to." And in terms of his filmmaking pursuits, "I admire Mel Gibson's career. I'll be able to do a lot more directing when I'm older. Right now I have to use this window of opportunity and be strategic about my business to put people in seats. I still write and, god knows, I still direct, but the more immediate thing right now is the acting."

Joe Fordham