

Scripting an Indonesian Monster: The John Penney Interview

Xavier Mendik

John Penney is a long-time collaborator with Brian Yuzna, as well as an award -winning screenwriter and director in his own right. While a number of Penney's early works (such as *The Power* [1984] and *The Kindred* [1987]) explore established supernatural themes surrounding dead and inanimate characters, later screenwriting entries (such as *Contagion* [2000]) also demonstrate the writer's interest in emotional and moral ambiguities, by focusing on a scientist who has previously sentenced his own family to death by unwittingly infecting them with a biological bug. Such is the emotional and moral matrix which governed Penney's screenplay for



Return of the Living Dead III, one of his most successful collaborations with Brian Yuzna. The film focused on a protagonist's attempt to use

military-grade weapons to reanimate a girlfriend killed in a motorbike accident and the subsequent romantic and physiological consequences of her reanimation. Comparable ambiguities surrounding mortality and desire further governed John Penney's acclaimed directorial debut: *Hellgate* (a.k.a. *Shadows*, 2011), which featured John Hurt trapped between two planes of reality as he mourns the loss of his wife and son during a trip to Thailand. In the following interview John Penney discusses his prior collaborations with Brian Yuzna across a range of different international environments and his views on how a film like *Amphibious* can successfully combine both Indonesian and Western cultural and cinematic influences.

Xavier Mendik (XM): You have been a long-term collaborator of Brian Yuzna, what do you feel is distinctive about his vision of international horror?

John Penney (PM): Brian always seems to bring in some kind of big theme or idea. This expands his films past the kind of "chamber piece" size that a lot of horror tends to gravitate toward. These larger ideas open his films up, and allow them to connect across cultures. *Amphibious* was a prime example of this. It was Brian's idea to weave the supernatural and spiritual side to Tamal's story and his/her primal connection to the creature. Without this side of the story, it would play much more as a conventional "creature feature."

XM: You have mainly worked with Yuzna, in the US and Europe, what interested you about working with him in Indonesia?

PM: I was in pre-production on a film I was directing (*Hellgate*) when Brian sent me the original script for *Amphibious*. My film took place in Thailand and I was already working with eastern themes and cultures. I had spent some time in Bali and Jakarta many years earlier but it was my conversations with Brian that opened my eyes to the storytelling and cultural traditions of Indonesia. Of course, the basics of storytelling feel universal to me and it's really a matter of understanding the cultural filters through which to tell them.

XM: How did the project *Amphibious* come about?

PM: Brian sent me a finished script that he felt that wasn't quite gelling the way it should. I reviewed the script and offered him some thoughts. We went back and forth through email and I pitched a solution to some

of the issues I felt were pulling the structure apart. Eventually, Brian asked me if I would be interested in taking a stab at re-writing it myself. By then, I was invested in the world and premise and jumped at the chance.

XM: Were you aware of the rich tradition of fantastical storytelling that existed in Indonesian culture?

PM: Brian had been immersed in the culture for a while and when we started discussing the life on a Jermal and the different characters and belief systems, the entire world opened up to me. It was always in the context of the story we were telling. I find that a really great way to feel a different culture is through their art and myths.

XM: You co-write the film with the Thai writer Somtow Papinian and I wonder you feel successfully you feel these international writing perspectives came together?

PM: The original script I was given had a lot of the atmosphere and feeling that would be very hard for a Westerner to invent without a lot of exposure to Indonesian culture. My contribution was to look at it as a story that needed a clear structure, character motivation, and through-line. After I wrote *Return of the Living Dead 3*, I was brought to Japan to adapt *Devil Man*, from the Go Nagai graphic novels. It was a real revelation. They had given the books to a number of “Hollywood” screenwriters who had spun a very Judeo-Christian sensibility into the idea of what a “devil” means. I took a very different approach. I looked at it purely in terms of mythological archetypes. When I eventually sat down with Go Nagai in Tokyo, we bonded over our mutual love of Joseph Campbell. It all clicked. The story tropes and archetypes are very cross-cultural as long as you can get to the root of them.

XM: Many Indonesian horror films were not originally penned in English and were later dubbed for export. Did writing for a multinational cast present any challenges for you?

PM: I did very little changes to the Indonesian kids on the Jermal. Most of that was in the script that Brian gave me. I focused on making the story of the Western man (Jack) and woman (Skylar) merge with the story on the Jermal. Basically it was giving Skylar the motivation to get back to the Jermal to save Tamal and the kids and that this was being driven by

the loss of her own daughter. Once these bigger pieces were in place, it informed Tamal's story, Skylar being trapped on the Jermal and the need for Jack to come to her rescue in the third act. I think it was a plus to have the western characters of Skylar and Jack as a way to look into the Indonesian culture. I think it makes the film accessible to a larger international audience without bending it away from what is uniquely Indonesian.

XM: Do you feel you managed to capture Indonesian myths and traditions with the story?

PM: Brian was the key to this. The first draft I did played pretty straight ahead as a creature feature. The third act was a big battle on the sinking Jermal, much like one of my all-time favorites, *Jaws*. Brian realized that we would be trying to compete with big studio budgets when it came to this kind of action spectacle and it all felt rather generic. Brian pushed to make it more specific to the Indonesian myths and traditions. He pushed the spiritual connection between Tamal and the Creature. This is the kind of "big" idea that Brian brings in so successfully. It made the ending much more contained visually but it also opened it up much more thematically and spiritually and in turn made it uniquely Indonesian.

XM: Many theorists have noted that Indonesian culture tends to restrict an emphasis on emotion and individuality. Did this present any challenges from a screenplay perspective?

PM: It didn't come into play for me. I think our advantage on that front was the inclusion of the Western characters.

XM: Other projects you have completed with Yuzna (such as *The Return of the Living Dead III*) have often emphasized aspects of excessive female sexuality. How did you negotiate these interests within Indonesia's more restrictive gender codes?

PM: At the core of *Amphibious* is female sexuality. Or more specifically, it is female fertility. It is what drives the Creature to inseminate Tamal. Avoiding restrictive gender codes in this case wasn't an issue. We were using a big metaphor. You can see this as a creature feature, but if you really look at it . . . It's quintessential Brian Yuzna.

XM: Ironically, *Amphibious* was not widely screened in Indonesia, and some have disputed its status as a “national” horror film. Do you see *Amphibious* as an example of Indonesian horror cinema?

PM: This story could only be told the way it was because it takes place in Indonesia. It’s not just the physical setting; it’s the characters, the Jermal, the atmosphere and the mythology. I think Brian very successfully tapped into the Indonesian tropes.

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