EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Take Some Semblance of Control

Drew Van Acker stars in and produces the sci-fi thriller ORION, about an amnesiac astronaut who returns to Earth as the sole survivor of a doomed mission. He talks about the script he'd have flown to South Africa to fight for, his two Hail Mary moments, journaling in character, and the conversation he hopes you have on the drive home.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Drew Van Acker has spent much of the last several years doing something a lot of working actors only talk about: turning down things that would come easier in order to make the stories he actually wants to tell. *Orion* is one of the results. The sci-fi thriller, directed by Jaco Bouwer (*Gaia*) from a script by Anne Vithayathil, opened in limited theaters October 2 and arrives on VOD today, November 3. Van Acker stars as Apollo, and he is also one of the film's producers, alongside Sunil Perkash, Elle Army and Scott Army.

The setup is lean and unnerving. After a catastrophic mission leaves his crew dead and his memory shattered, an astronaut returns to Earth with no idea what went wrong. To uncover the truth, he has to rely on a space agency interrogator he isn't sure he can trust, and as his fractured memories come back, the two race to piece together what happened and what may have come back with him. Andrew McCarthy and Debby Ryan co-star, with Karin Ann, Theodora Miranne, Natalia Lesz, Daniel Bisla and Vayda Cronin rounding out the cast.

Paul Salfen caught up with Van Acker over Zoom during the film's press day on Thursday, October 29. Salfen had just come from another junket and made it with minutes to spare, and he opened with a simple reaction: "Man, this movie is a trip."

"DO I WANT TO TURN THE PAGE?"

Salfen guessed that when a project like this lands in front of you, the reaction has to be "I gotta do this." Van Acker said yes, though in this case the path was a little different, because he was there before it was a finished script. "I helped kind of develop it," he said. "It was different for me because I was a producer on it."

He described the test he applies to any script, and the moment the first draft passed it. "I don't know how other actors work, but for me, I try to simplify things," he said. "It's like, do I like turning the page? Do I want to turn the page? Do I want to know where this story is going, or this character? And so that was absolutely what this was."

He credited the writer's touch with character. "It's such a beautiful way of giving characters a voice, that it was really exciting to see Apollo's journey," he said, "and how the crux of this story is told through subtext, and it's through the character's eyes, which is what we wanted from the beginning."

Then he made it plain how much he wanted the part. "This was something that I have always said, if it had come across my desk as an actor, I would have fought tooth and nail for this," he said. "I would have showed up to Jaco's door. I would have flown to South Africa to try and convince him to let me be a part of this. So yeah, I'm very blessed."

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TAKING THE REINS

Salfen pointed out what a good place that is to be: no door to knock on, no fight required. Van Acker agreed, and said producing was something he had wanted for a long time. "I think especially as an actor, I've always wanted to produce," he said. "I'm very lucky that I'm able to do that."

For him it is about more than credits. "There's something about taking your career in your own hands and just taking the reins a little bit," he said, "because things fluctuate so much in this industry. So it's nice to be able to be like, look, I'm going to take some semblance of control here and try and make something happen."

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A GUERRILLA UNIT IN UPSTATE NEW YORK

Everyone grows up thinking being in a movie would be the coolest thing in the world, Salfen said, and it doesn't always turn out to be fun. This one looked like it was. "I have a lot of fun doing this. I love doing what I do," Van Acker said. "I can only speak for myself, but think about it: at the end of the day, it is a lot of work, and I take it very seriously. But at the end of the day, it's really fun to use your imagination."

He sees that as part of what keeps him going. "I feel like it keeps you young a little bit, because as we get older, we lose that play," he said. "We lose that fun, we lose that imaginative way of thinking. And so as an actor, at the end of the day, if you simplify it, it's a lot of imagination. You've got to remember how to play. You've got to remember how to use your imagination."

He also gave a picture of how he and his co-star work. "Andrew is someone who likes to joke around and have fun on set," he said of McCarthy, "and then he's one of those talented actors who can just drop right into a very dramatic performance. For me, I like to use headphones and kind of zone out a little bit, and just kind of remember where my character's at."

The production itself was small and scrappy. "We had kind of a guerrilla unit, everybody all hands on deck," he said. "Very hot, in the middle of summer in upstate New York. So we all kind of shared in the air conditioning breaking for a day or two, and we went through it together. So yeah, it was good."

Salfen offered the obvious silver lining: what a blessing to play all day and get paid for it. "It could be worse, right?" Van Acker laughed.

> *"You've got to remember how to play. You've got to remember how to use your imagination." — Drew Van Acker*

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

Plenty of people look at a career like Van Acker's and want one of their own, so Salfen asked what advice he would give them. Van Acker said it was something he has been thinking about lately, after conversations with younger actors and friends. He boiled it down to two things.

"One, just never give up," he said. "Not on yourself, not on your dream, not on your goals, your ambitions, on anything. And then two, learn not to take everything personally. I think that's the biggest thing, because when I was younger, I would take things personally. If you don't get an audition, you kind of take it personally, or if you get told no, or this wasn't the right look, or it wasn't the right size, or the character, whatever it is. You don't take it personally, because at the end of the day, there are so many factors that go into booking a role."

Producing has made that clearer to him. "Being a producer, you see that even more," he said. "When you're behind the audition camera, on the other side of that table, you realize that not always the best actor gets the part, or not always the best performance gets the part. There's a lot of business on this side of it. And so you can't take it personally. Just keep going. Don't take it personally. Know that you have confidence in what you're doing, and you'll find your way. I think that's kind of the biggest thing."

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TWO HAIL MARYS

Salfen's co-host is Dallas Cowboys great and Pro Football Hall of Famer Drew Pearson, who caught the original Hail Mary, and Salfen likes to ask guests about theirs: the moment in a life or career when you just have to go for it and it works out. Van Acker said he has had two.

The first was leaving home behind. "It was just taking the risk of giving up a lot to come out to L.A.," he said. "First I was in New York. Leaving school to go up to New York to kind of see what this whole acting thing was. I'd always done drama and acting classes as a kid, but I never really knew that you could be a professional actor, from small towns, you know? And so giving up a lot and taking a big risk to move to New York City, I think that was one. And then combining that with the journey to L.A., going out there alone, and almost just closing my eyes and taking a swing. I got very lucky early on, so that was nice, but it was very scary."

The second came later, over roughly the last six or seven years, when he began passing on other projects to focus on producing and on independent film, "stories that I want to tell and stories that I want to be a part of," he said, scripts he would "bang down someone's door to be a part of."

He pointed to Matt Damon as an example. "I think Matt Damon talked about that early in his career," he said. "He saw that a lot of the scripts he really, really wanted were going to other actors. So for me, it was the same thing. You get so close to a lot of huge projects, or a lot of great projects, and you're like, you know what? At some point I said I wanted to be a producer, and I said I wanted to produce not just for my own vehicle, just to further my career, but also to be a part of the stories that I want to be a part of. And you just don't get that luxury unless you take it into your own hands and become a producer of sorts."

"So that was probably my second Hail Mary," he said, "just going, hey, I'm going to take another risk here, and I'm going to take less money, and I'm going to give up some of these projects that might come easier for me, and take a shot. So yeah, I probably had two Hail Marys in my career. Let's see if this one pans out."

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"YOU'RE COMPLETE"

Mindset comes up a lot on Salfen's show, so he asked what keeps Van Acker focused, on set and off. "That's a good question," Van Acker said. "I think for me, I've gotten to a place in my life where I need a lot more peace, and I need a lot more quiet and silence and reflectiveness. I journal a lot. I meditate. I spend time alone, just because I feel like it's important to always check in with yourself."

"Our minds can be our best friend, or they can be our worst enemy," he went on. "So it's always making sure, even on the bad days, whether you're spiritual, whether you believe in God, whether you don't, whether you're from a science background, it doesn't really matter. It's really just having a connection to self and understanding yourself, and understanding that there's always room to grow and you can always improve on certain things, but also that you're complete. You don't have to prove yourself to anybody. You don't need anybody's approval."

That is harder for actors, he said, and it ties back to his advice. "Don't tie your identity to being an actor," he said. "For me, I don't identify as an actor. I identify as a person, as a human being. Therefore it allows me to take rejection a little better, because you're going to have a lot of rejection in this industry. So always checking in and having a little bit of self-awareness kind of helps keep you grounded."

It feeds the work, too. "It helps me understand my characters more," he said, "because as you get older, I approach the characters from that perspective: how self-aware can a character be?" Then he added, with a laugh, "I try to pride myself on being somewhat self-aware, but it's usually the people who say they are that absolutely aren't."

Journaling, he said, is the habit that ties it together. "I journal a lot, and I think that kind of helps me get my thoughts out," he said. "On set and off, I think it really helps. I do a lot of journaling as the character, too."

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THE DRIVE HOME

Salfen closed by saying that *Orion* is entertaining, but that it also gives you a lot to think about. Beyond "that was really fun to watch," what did Van Acker hope people would talk about?

"I think what I hope people talk about is that car ride home, that drive-home conversation that we all have with whoever your movie partner is," he said. "Watching it a second time: Did you notice the little tics? Did you notice the cues? Did you notice the lie before you knew the lie? Did you notice the story kind of unfolding?"

That is the part of moviegoing he loves most. "Somebody's truth can be completely different from the person sitting next to you," he said, "and what I love about movies is that they are subjective. One person can have a completely different view of what they just watched, and another person can have a totally different view, but it doesn't mean one is right. A lot of times we fight for that, and we tie ourselves to: my view is correct, it's got to be correct, or else who am I? And so that's where I think a lot of the problems lie."

"Understanding that your truth can be completely different from somebody else's," he said, "they can both be right, and they can both exist simultaneously. I feel like that's kind of the crux of it. It's the conversation I want people to have on the drive home."

> *"Did you notice the lie before you knew the lie?" — Drew Van Acker*

Salfen told him he was sure they would, and promised to tell everybody to go check it out. "Dude, Paul, that was really great," Van Acker said. "I appreciate it. Thank you so much."

FIND *ORION*

Directed by: Jaco Bouwer

Written by: Anne Vithayathil

Starring: Drew Van Acker, Andrew McCarthy, Debby Ryan, with Karin Ann, Theodora Miranne, Natalia Lesz, Daniel Bisla and Vayda Cronin

Produced by: Sunil Perkash, Drew Van Acker, Elle Army, Scott Army

Distributor: Blue Harbor Entertainment · **Production company:** East of Infinity

Run time: 96 minutes · **Genre:** Sci-fi thriller

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Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.