

Interview: Karl Urban Offers His Verdict as ‘Judge Dredd’

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CHICAGO – The talented New Zealand actor named Karl Urban has had a pretty decent run in some recent blockbusters – does the “Lord of the Rings” Trilogy and “Star Trek” ring a bell? He breaks out in the title role of the upcoming action flick “Dredd 3D,” portraying legendary comic book character Judge Dredd.

Simply unforgettable as Dr. Leonard “Bones” McCoy in the recently rebooted “Star Trek,” Urban has carved out a niche as a chameleon-like actor, able to manufacture the essence of each role and make it his own. In his latest turn as the formidable Judge Dredd, Urban is a sheer taciturn force of nature, meting out justice in a world destroyed by its own hubris. The unique and highly stylistic film is prime viewing for the 3D movie medium.



Partners in Justice: Olivia Thirlby (Anderson) and Karl Urban (Dredd) in ‘Dredd 3D’

Photo credit: Lionsgate

Urban was born in Wellington, New Zealand, and started his career in the show business system there. After breaking through in Hollywood with the horror film “Ghost Ship” (2002), he went on to portray Eomer in the second and third films of the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy, and has had prominent parts in “RED” (2010) and “Priest” (2011). He will reprise his role as Dr. McCoy in the upcoming “Star Trek: Into Darkness.”

Karl Urban sat down recently with HollywoodChicago.com, relating his interpretation of Judge Dredd and the path to stardom from his modest New Zealand roots.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve been a fan of the Judge Dredd comics series before you got this role. What did you want to communicate about this icon beyond the script handed to you?

Karl Urban What was important to me was defining the man, the human aspect. I thought it would be a mistake to go in and just play the icon. I had to find out what humanized Dredd. He’s not a superhero, he’s just a man – albeit a cloned man – but a man with an extraordinary skill set. He’s highly trained, and goes into situations where other people would run in the opposite direction. So it was important to me in the

process of humanizing him to find out things – like what his sense of humor was like. Where could we inject that dry, laconic wit? The wariness of the character was very important, that’s human, and the fact that he deals with the shit day in and day out.

I also sought his compassion. He’s been trained to keep his emotions in check. I wanted to find the point in the script where that struggle to contain those emotions shows a crack. To me that’s interesting. Finally, the relationship with his partner is humanizing. Dredd sees the world in a very black and white way, so in the course of this film his opinion about her changes. To me, that’s a very human thing. I responded to the fact that Dredd could put his ego aside, and do the right thing by her.

HollywoodChicago.com: Of course, the comic creators gave you an instant imprint of the Judge and the society he lives in. What do you think of their predicting-the-future skills given the nature of our society today?

Urban: I just think it would be horrific if this vision of the future were to come to pass. Dredd is set in a world where democracy has essentially failed, there has been millions of deaths during a global nuclear war and society is sheltered in mega-cities. Even as the Judges are totalitarian, they can barely maintain order. There is no optimism, and the film dares to be sad. ‘Blade Runner’ does that as well, there is a sadness and soulfulness about it. Both films are looking at the state of humanity.

HollywoodChicago.com: The elements of cinematic style are a big part of Judge Dredd. What element of style do you enjoy most in Director Pete Travis’s vision, and how do you think it marries to the narrative situation of Judge Dredd?

Urban: The stylistic element I enjoyed the most was the cinematography, with an artistic stamp by our Director of Photography Anthony Dod Mantle, who won an Oscar for ‘Slumdog Millionaire.’ His style is incredible and elevates the material. It’s a graphic film, but as it’s treated here it’s quite extraordinary. It is reflective of the dangerous environment in which Dredd operates, and that becomes the reality for him. This film dares to do what others don’t – take you out of the moment. There will be a scene that is quite graphic, and suddenly you’re lost in the beauty of the moment. The audiences are finding that really enjoyable.

HollywoodChicago.com: I’m going to ask you the same question I asked Sean Astin. If J R R Tolkien were to suddenly appear before us, what question or comment would you narrate to him, in regard to your relationship with the legend of his works?

Urban: I would ask him if he was happy with the film adaptations.



Dammit, He’s a Doctor: Karl Urban as ‘Bones’ McCoy in ‘Star Trek’
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: When you were developing the character of Bones McCoy, what was the key to making it your own, at the same time honoring the great DeForrest Kelley interpretation?

Urban: I grew up watching ‘Star Trek.’ If I wasn’t the one playing Bones, it would have been important to me to go into that cinema, watch that movie and have that character be identifiable as McCoy. So it was a process of osmosis, really. It was really feeling the character, feeling the DeForrest Kelley stamp on the character and making sure that there was a strong connection. At the same time, also finding a balance in presenting how a younger version of that character would be.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since the acting and production team has successfully re-booted the Star Trek legend, what elements of the love and hope that fans admire so much will continue to find a presence in the upcoming ‘Star Trek: In Darkness’?

Urban: The thing about ‘Star Trek’ is that it was always a character driven entity. We tuned in every week to see how those characters got

along. They didn’t always necessarily agree with each other, but how they overcame those differences to defeat an adversary is why we tuned in. I think the new film is going to deliver that in spades.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did the early days in the world of New Zealand show business prepare you for the evolution of your career?



Karl Urban in Chicago, Sept. 12th, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Urban: The New Zealand industry is myopic, so consequently as an actor you get experience in all kinds of mediums. That preparation, that versatility gives you an opportunity to learn a lot in a short space of time. By constantly switching from film to television to stage to radio, you pick up lessons in all those mediums.

My philosophy was if I wasn’t working I was going to pay to work. A boxer doesn’t come out of the corner of the ring with the first punch in six months, he’s constantly training. I approach acting in the same way. When the opportunity presented itself I wanted to be ready. I believed in proactivity. I believe in being prepared.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who else are you an admirer of, either fictional or real, that you would love to get an opportunity to portray?

Urban: I would like to play Rob Hall, the New Zealand mountaineer who gave his life on Mount Everest after sticking with his disabled client. I don’t have it in development, but I think it’s an amazing story.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you came from humble roots in New Zealand, what do you think of the machinations of big time show business, and the crap associated with it? Are you surprised about how surreal it is?

Urban: I live a pretty low key existence, I want to raise my kids and live in New Zealand. It keeps me grounded. What is important to me is to keep this in the forefront in my mind. On the other hand, I’m enjoying the moment. It’s fun to be in a big movie that both audiences and critics love. It’s important to take a beat and enjoy it.

HollywoodChicago.com: What trait or traits do you think a New Zealander possess that make them a citizen of the world?

Urban: To begin with, New Zealanders are isolated. We feel an innate desire to explore. Kiwis call it the big ‘OE,’ the Overseas Experience. Quite often, after or before University, Kiwis will go out and explore. They then bring back a wealth of cultural knowledge and experience. The culture absorbs that experience, and we continue to grow through that.

“Dredd 3D” opens everywhere on September 21st. See local listings for 3D theater locations. Featuring Karl Urban, Olivia Thirby, Rachel Wood, Lena Headey and Wood Harris. Screenplay by Alex Garland. Directed by Pete Travis. Rated “R”



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