

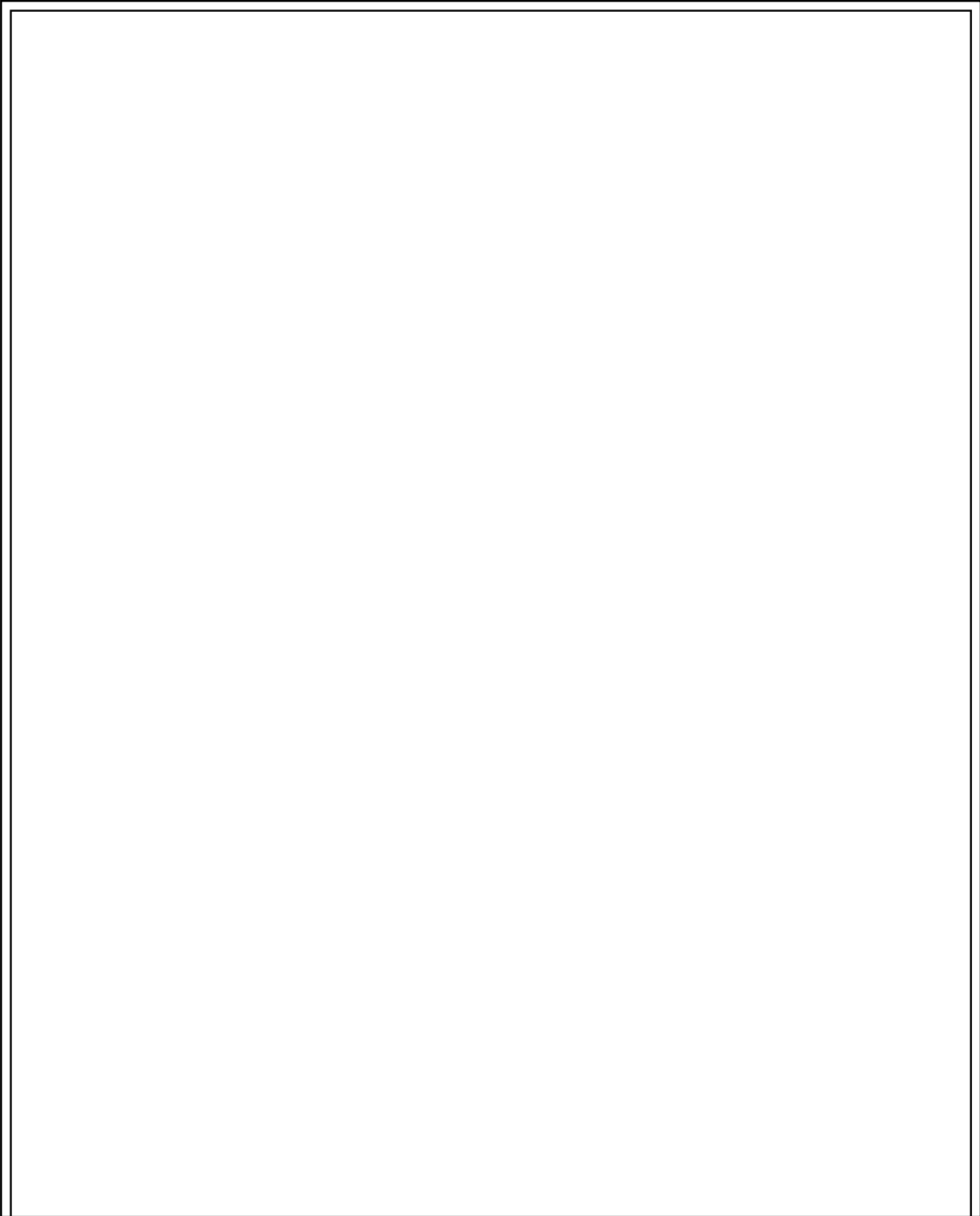
Interview: Robert Rodriguez, Alexa Vega Know ‘Machete Kills’

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CHICAGO – Director Robert Rodriguez continues his “grindhouse” cinematic ways with his latest film, “Machete Kills.” This sequel to 2010’s “Machete,” the film is a gleeful celebration of 1970s exploitation films, villains played by familiar celebrities and the indestructible hero named Machete, portrayed by Danny Trejo.

Director Robert Rodriguez is a venerable do-it-yourself filmmaker. He broke through twenty years ago with his 16mm film classic, “El Mariachi,” and has followed that debut with a series of stylish comic book films like “Desperado” (1995), “From Dusk Till Dawn” (1996) “Sin City” (2005) and the four “Spy Kids” movies. The character of Machete first appeared as a fake 1970s-style trailer in “Grindhouse” (2007), which also featured Rodriguez’s film “Planet Terror.” Another Sin City movie is scheduled for 2014, subtitled “A Dame to Kill For.”





Robert Rodriguez of ‘Machete Kills’ at the 2013 Wizard World Chicago Comic Con
Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Alexa Vega is a former child actor who came into the Robert Rodriguez universe portraying Carmen Cortez in the first “Spy Kids” (2001) film, and appeared in all three sequels. She is currently making the transition to more adult movie roles, and portrays an image busting character named Killjoy in “Machete Kills.” Rodriguez and Vega were introducing a screening of the film in Chicago on October 7th, and spoke to HollywoodChicago.com about that project and their careers.

HollywoodChicago.com: Robert, what techniques do you still use as a ‘do-it-yourself’ filmmaker, even as your profile and budgets have gotten bigger?

Robert Rodriguez: Relatively, the budgets aren’t that much bigger, we just fool people. [laughs] I’m still doing what I did, when I did ‘El Mariachi.’ I did this film with slightly bigger budget than the first ‘Machete,’ but with ten less days in the shooting schedule. We did this in 29 days, while the average action movie will go 100 days or more. We made it look better, with a bigger cast, with less money. We’re all doing ten jobs on the set, which is kind of fun, but it’s all because of budget and time.

HollywoodChicago.com: Given that Machete is a combination of 1970s badass heroes that you admired – and since this was one of the running gags in the film – what’s the first thing that Machete does not do?

Rodriguez: These rules started in this film, so the first rule is ‘Machete don’t text.’ Danny [Trejo] would call me all the time about making a Machete movie, and when I would pick up it would always be him on the line. Everyone else sends a text, Danny actually calls. When I protested, and told him to send me an email or a text, he’s simply said, ‘Machete don’t text.’ [laughs] I thought that was pretty funny, so I put that in the movie. That’s what started it. So it also started a running joke on the set, which added other ones – and the legend builds. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: So Alexa, you are pretty much grown up as Killjoy in ‘Machete Kills.’ What satisfied you about making the leap into another type of image, apart from your child acting days?

Alexa Vega: Killjoy was a strong character, which I like, but making the transition is hard. I’ve slowly been taking more adult roles – even in the last ‘Spy Kids’ movie, Carmen was grown up. I know people want to see the little girl they picture me as, but I’m 25 years old now and I figured if I’m going to make the transition, I want it to be with Robert. I trust what he does, and I know he’s going to make me look good. The role is fun, we don’t take ourselves seriously and she kicks ass.

HollywoodChicago.com: Robert, on that same theme, you take on a post-feminist view of woman who are sexual, but also kick ass. Does this gibe with the continued equality of women, both in society and the film industry?

Rodriguez: This is an exploitation film, and it’s done in a 1970s style, but I’ve updated it. I have to have strong female characters, even Alexa’s character in Spy Kids was strong. I also have five sisters. [laughs]

But even in those 1970s films, the women were strong, the most bad-ass women were in those exploitation films. I wanted to live up to that, and I cast intentionally with strong women like Amber Heard, Lady Gaga and Sonia Vergara. They bring the strength, and they bring the sexy. I underline and circle that strength.

HollywoodChicago.com: The character of Machete is part of the ‘unstoppable killing machine’ character that seems almost a staple of films these days. Why do you think the audience responds to this type of anti-hero, even though he’s a impossibility.

Rodriguez: That character exists in different forms – there is the Bruce Willis ‘Die Hard’ type, who always gets hurt, but still wins. That’s one model. There there is the super machines, the Terminators, the Machetes, who seem to be able to walk through fire and it becomes part of the myth and legend. That’s also fun.

When I’m creating that type, it’s fun just to think, ‘how badass can I make this character?’ Especially if he doesn’t think or say he’s badass. He’s just doing what he does. He’s sort of a vagrant until somebody pushes him. That’s Danny as Machete, they force him to go there. He’s a slightly different archetype, but so much fun to create.



All Grown Up: Alexa Vega as Killjoy in ‘Machete Kills’
Photo credit: Open Road Films (II)

HollywoodChicago.com: Alexa, you told me in previous interview you consider Robert a father figure. What he playing that role on the Machete set, deferring to you or protecting you?

Vega: I had to work very hard to convince Robert, and the crew I was very familiar with, that I could do this film. It was like having 60 parents on the set. [laughs] I called Robert and asked him to consider me for a ‘Sin City’-type role, because nobody was considering me for adult roles. He said, ‘Sin City? No way!’

Rodriguez: I laughed in her face. No way was I hiring her for that – me especially. I didn’t know know she was 25, I thought she was still 17. When did this happen? The math doesn’t work. [laughs] That floored me.

Vega: See what I mean? If I could prove to them on set that I could pull this off, America was no problem. So far, the responses have been great and positive, nothing negative so far.

HollywoodChicago.com: Robert, with the escalation of real gun violence in the U.S. and Mexico, do you foresee a day when the type of comic book gunplay that you do will fall out of favor, or does that escalation become reflection in movies with even more extreme gore and gun violence?

Rodriguez: I don't necessarily think the violence will get worse in movies, I think there has been more restraint. Mainly we had to be sensitive, with everything that has happened since our film was produced, on how we advertised it. I'm not for censorship on any level, but certainly when we advertise the film on TV we have to watch what we show to everybody, especially kids – same as you wouldn't show nudity. It's very strict and really locked down in these sensitive times.

HollywoodChicago.com: Now that ‘El Mariachi’ is twenty years old, what do you think about the current micro-budget film movement? Do you think it's a good thing for more people to have an opportunity to make a movie?

Rodriguez: Yes I do. When I think about twenty years ago, and having a great idea for a movie, it wasn't going to happen unless there was money at a certain amount, it started at 200,000 dollars at least. This was just to get the film seen anywhere. ‘El Mariachi’ was the beginning of the democratizing of film, because it was released by a major studio.

That 7000 dollar film I shot back then would cost 700 bucks today, because I would have shot it on digital. The expense was in buying the film and processing the film, which wouldn't be an expense today. With everybody being able to shoot a film, and even self-distribute on the internet, the focus becomes ‘who has the best story?’ ‘What ideas can connect with people?’ Everything has become more democratized. Before you may have had the greatest idea, but unless you had a really big wallet, you couldn't do it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Alexa, you've done a number of regular TV series in your career – like your 2009 ABC Family sitcom ‘Ruby & the Rockits.’ What did the process of doing the work on a TV series teach you about acting?

Vega: I don't know if they make you a better actor necessarily, but they're fun to do. Having a colorful career is something I always wanted, not restricting myself to any one thing. The question I get now is, ‘do you want to stick to action movies?’ The answer is no, I just want to do different things, like next maybe a romantic comedy.

Growth is trying different and new things. This character of Killjoy is something I'd never done before, and it forced me to take on a new level of confidence. I am confident, but I never really owned being a woman. It made me come out of my shell like that. It helps me to grow both in my career and personal life.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have four projects coming up. Is there anything that will give the audience yet another side of your image?



Robert Rodriguez, Alexa Vega in Chicago, October 7th, 2013
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Vega: I'm really excited about ‘Wicked Blood,’ it's like the TV show ‘Sons of Anarchy,’ but as a feature film. It's with Abigail Breslin, Sean Bean and James Purefoy. My character is extremely vulnerable, a small town girl who isn't particularly ambitious. She just wants to start a family, and just stay in her small town world. It was a really fun, different role.

HollywoodChicago.com: Robert, what was your first movie memory, in the sense of understand the power of film and how it can change your life?

Rodriguez: My mother would take me to the revival theater in San Antonio when I was a kid, and I remember seeing a double feature of Alfred Hitchcock, ‘Rebecca’ and ‘Spellbound.’ That Salvador Dali sequence in ‘Spellbound’ was mesmerizing, and I think it started me on the road to wanting to be a filmmaker – capturing the dream imagery. I actually dreamt about that sequence for years.

HollywoodChicago.com: Can you tell me something about Quentin Tarantino that the rest of the world doesn't know?

Rodriguez: I don't know about that. I think everybody knows about Quentin. [laughs]

Vega: That's funny, because when I was on the plane coming here, there was a guy who asked me if I was on the Machete publicity tour. The guy said, ‘Robert Rodriguez did that, right’ I said, ‘right.’ He then told me, ‘you know what we heard in film school – that Robert Rodriguez is a myth.’ I said, ‘what?’ And he said, ‘yeah, he doesn't exist.’

I said, ‘what do you mean, he doesn't exist? You've seen his pictures, with the iconic cowboy hat.’ He then said, ‘no, everyone thought he was an actor hired by Quentin Tarantino. That Quentin does all the films, and hired this dude to play Rodriguez.’ [laughs]

Rodriguez: I've never heard that one.

Vega: It was the weirdest thing I've ever heard.

HollywoodChicago.com: [Laughs] So no dirt on Quentin?

Rodriguez: No dirt, but people ask me this all the time. In my book ['Rebel Without a Crew'], I said that Quentin gave me some advice on writing, but I didn't say what that advice was. So since the book was published, people have asked me what the advice was.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was it?

Vega: It wasn't the key to the kingdom. [laughs] He told me whenever he finishes writing for the night, he stops midway through a thought or piece of dialogue. It becomes easier for him to pick it up the next day. He won't be starting from scratch. It's a good tip, but by leaving it out of the book it grew much bigger in legend. It was a cruel tease, and I didn't realize it.

“Machete Kills” opens everywhere on October 11th. Featuring Danny Trejo, Alexa Vega, Charlie Sheen, Mel Gibson, Antonio Banderas, Lady Gaga, Cuba Gooding Jr., Amber Heard and Sonia Vergara. Screenplay by Kyle Ward from a story by Robert Rodriguez and Marcel Rodriguez. Directed by Robert Rodriguez. Rated “R”



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