Interview: Visiting the ‘Dollhouse’ With Creator Joss Whedon

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CHICAGO – Almost twelve years ago, a little show called “Buffy the Vampire Slayer [4]” premiered in mid-season on The WB and a cult was officially born. Over a decade later, creator Joss Whedon [15] brings his latest mid-season vision, “Dollhouse [19]” with Eliza Dushku [7] to FOX this Friday, February 13th, 2009 and he recently sat down for a press conference to give readers a sneak peek.

Most of the fans excited about “Dollhouse” already know about the show’s pre-broadcast reputation as something of a problem child for FOX. Last summer, it was announced that the planned pilot, “Echo,” would no longer be the first episode and that the show was being reworked. The massive online following for the creator of “Buffy,” “Angel [2],” and “Firefly [9]” started getting a little nervous.

Whedon now says that it just took some time to find the show, but that nothing he could say would stop the rumors. As he says now, “If you say there’s nothing to panic about, somebody says, ‘He said the word panic.’”

Joss recognizes that the internet buzz comes from a good place. “Ultimately, the support is very sweet, and the fact that people care and they want to see the show get a chance. That’s important to me too, because it really is a show that finds itself as it goes along, but, at the end of the day, my biggest concern is that I give them something worth panicking over.”

Eliza Dushku as Echo.
Photo credit: Isabella Vosmikova/FOX

Eliza Dushku stars in “Dollhouse” (watch for the HollywoodChicago.com review this Friday) as Echo, a member of a group of people who regularly have their personalities replaced so they can be hired for particular jobs. The show co-stars Tahmoh Penikett of “Battlestar Galactica [20],” Dichen Lachman, Fran Kranz, Enver Gjokaj, Olivia Williams, Harry Lennix, and another Whedon-verse veteran, Amy Acker.

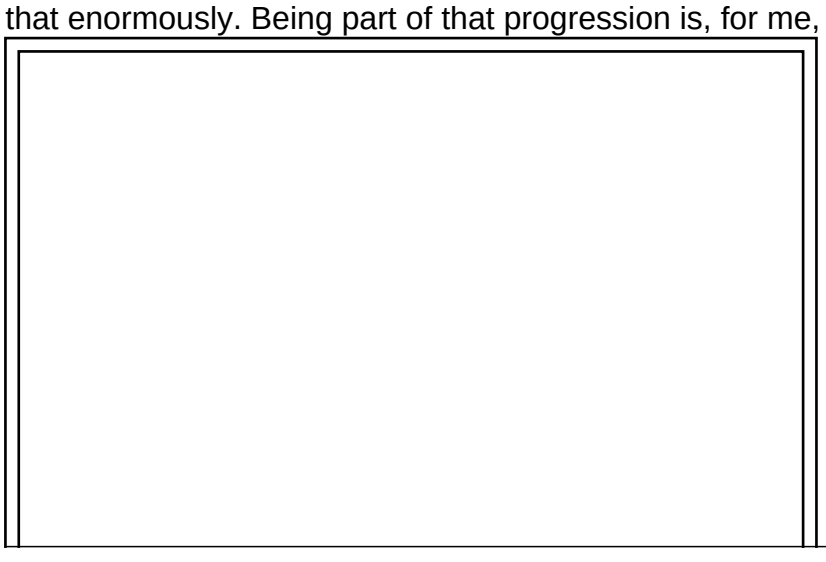
Whedon is very frank and honest about the fact that it took a while to find what “Dollhouse” would be, but he implies that the re-done pilot was not as big a deal as some fans may have considered it to be - “It wasn’t so much a question of reworking what the show was as it was a question of reworking how we get into it. There were definitely some differences of opinion about what was going on and what we were going to stress in the show, but mostly it was about how do we bring the audience in and the mandate was very much once they had seen the pilot.”

Eliza Dushku as Echo.
Photo credit: Isabella Vosmikova/FOX

“Firefly,” “Angel,” and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” gave Joss Whedon a chance to show his excellent sense of humor, but he’s already stated that “Dollhouse” will feature more earnestness and less tongue-in-cheek humor. While there is some comedy in the series, it doesn’t have the inherent silliness of “Buffy” and “Firefly,” according to Whedon. As he says, “This has to be a little bit more grounded in order for it to play, or it would become campy, and with vampires and spaceships and horses, we had more leeway to be a little less realistic in how we plotted things. But humor is a part of the show all over the place, because we have really funny actors, and these situations do become absurd, and besides, we would get really bored if we didn’t.”

The inception of “Dollhouse” reportedly started from a lunch between Whedon and Dushku about all the possible roles Eliza could play in one show. But there’s more to it than just that conevrsation. As Whedon says, “I’m very interested in concepts of identity - what is our own, what’s socialized, can people actually change, what do we expect from each other, how much do we use each other and manipulate each other, and what would we do if we had this kind of power over each other? And in this, our increasingly virtual world, self-definition has become a very amorphous concept, so it just felt what was on my mind. I don’t mean it felt timely like I was trolling the papers looking for something timely. It’s just been something I think about a lot.”

Eliza Dushku seems like a perfect fit for “Echo” in “Dollhouse” and Whedon clearly thinks she was the best actress for the job. As he said to us, “Eliza is, apart from being, in my opinion, as great a star as I have ever known, she has a genuinely powerful electric and luminous quality that I’ve rarely seen. She’s also a really solid person. She’s a good friend. She’s a feminist. She’s an activist. She’s interested in the people around her. She has a lot of different things going on, and I’ve watched her over the years, as a friend, try to take control of her career, and try to get the roles that weren’t available to her, and protect the ethos and the message of what it was that she was doing, and I respect that enormously. Being part of that progression is, for me, one of the greatest benefits of this show.”



Eliza Dushku as Echo.
Photo credit: Isabella Vosmikova/FOX

Friday nights may not seem like the best fit for “Dollhouse,” but Joss Whedon has a different take on the situation, noting how lowered ratings expectation on the night may give the show more of a chance to build a fan base. And he’s happy to be paired with “Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles”. “I think Terminator is a remarkably good show, and the kind of show that makes sense to be paired with Dollhouse, so I feel great about that, plus I get to see all these posters with Summer and Eliza together and that’s just too cool,” Whedon says.

“Ultimately, this is a show where people will hopefully become intrigued and then hang in, that really builds, so it needs the 13 weeks, and it needs the 13 weeks of people paying attention, but not so much attention that it gets burned out in the glare of the spotlight. I’ve always worked best under the radar. Most of my shows people have come to after they stopped airing, but I would like to buck that trend, and at the same time, it is part of how I work that you stay with it and it grows on you and it becomes family, and the Friday night is a much better place for that to actually happen.”

Of course, some fun “Buffy”-related questions came up for Mr. Whedon, who acknowledged that Faith (Dushku’s character from “Buffy”) would beat Echo’s in a fight, “unless of course Echo had been imprinted with Faith’s personality, which is I’m going to call it a tie.”

Whedon also jokingly revealed that he’s “not planning a Dollhouse musical just yet,” a reference to one of the most beloved “Buffy” episodes.

Joss Whedon also has a movie coming up, the highly anticipated “Cabin in the Woods,” which he has called a “game-changer” and clearly thinks very highly of - “Ultimately, it’s my take on the classic horror movie, which means that it is a classic horror movie, but we also have something specific to say about it, and we have a different way of saying it than we’ve seen before. I think after it, everyone will love it so much that there will be no more need for movies. That’s how it’s going to be. People will just want to watch that movie over and over again, and they won’t make other ones.”

Whedon has also spearheaded comic book series and he’s not leaving that behind for “Dollhouse,” revealing that a season nine of “Buffy” is in the works and that they’ve talked about doing more “Serenity” comics and even started talks with Dark Horse about potential “Cabin” tie-ins. Don’t expect a “Dollhouse” comic though because it “is very simply the least visually oriented of all of these in a genre way, and therefore, lends itself the least to being a comic.”

As for the long-rumored movie based on the “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” show? Sorry, fans. He’s brutal:

“There’s not going to be one. I think that’s pretty much it. Nobody has ever broached the subject from the studio side. I think everybody is busy working, so I think that it probably won’t happen. That’s my guess. I never know. The landscape changes constantly, but until somebody who has millions and billions of dollars asks me that question, the answer is pretty much the same.”

‘Dollhouse,’ which airs on FOX, stars Eliza Dushku, Tahmoh Penikett, Enver Gjokaj, Dichen Lachman, Fran Kranz, Olivia Williams, Harry Lennix, and Amy Acker. The show premieres on Friday, February 13th, 2009 at 8PM CST.

By BRIAN TALLERICO [22]
Content Director
HollywoodChicago.com
brian@hollywoodchicago.com [21]

[21]

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