After making a splash among the new wave of French horror filmmakers, FRONTIER(S)' Xavier Gens returns to grim territory with THE DIVIDE, making its U.S. premiere at SXSW this Sunday. What promises to be a tight and often claustrophobic tale of survival employs a wide ensemble that perhaps most excitingly includes genre veteran Michael Biehn. The TERMINATOR and PLANET TERROR star spoke with Fango about his experience making THE DIVIDE (for which we also got an exclusive photo you can see below).

FANGORIA: What's THE DIVIDE about, and who you play in the film?

MICHAEL BIEHN: It's basically the story of a group of people, I think there's seven or eight of us, who get into a bomb shelter when there's a nuclear event. I play the guy who basically built this shelter in the bottom of an apartment building; he's a 9/11 survivor and paranoid, and had built it because he was sure there was worse to come. He planned on kind of living in it by himself, but when the event goes off up above, five or six of his tenants and some friends make it into his shelter with him. So he's kind of pissed off that they got in there, and he's sealed up the door—he's worried about radiation and so forth. These people are living in this bomb shelter and day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, it starts wearing on everybody.

Then there comes a point where some people get contact from outside, and we try to figure out what's going on, and send somebody out. Some guys come in hazmat suits and seal us into our own bomb shelter, sealed into this tomb. Food starts running low, the water's running low. It just gets really ugly really fast, and it's psychologically just a brutal movie. It's as psychologically intense a movie as I've seen since REQUIEM FOR A DREAM.

It's dark, really dark, with a lot of great, great performances. Milo Ventimiglia, he's really good in it. And there's a kid, Michael Eklund [pictured right], who's just brilliant in the movie. It's really kind of an actor's piece. There's a lot that goes on down there with the hazmat people. People start turning on each other, so there's a lot of violence, but it's beautifully, beautifully lit and shot. And that's what kind of cool about it—that it's gorgeous to look at, but at it's core it's really the darkest of the dark, and it's really kind of hard to watch from a psychological standpoint.

We also had Courtney B. Vance. He's an old pro. Rosanna Arquette does a great job—she and I have been working on and off for 30 years—and Lauren [German] is really good in it also. She's kind of a lead; the movie sort of takes place from her perspective, and there are all these crazy people surrounding her.

FANG: Was it a grueling shoot? Being that it was mostly one location, did you shoot in sequence?

BIEHN: We did shoot in sequence. It's the only time—and I've been acting now for close to 40 years—that I've ever shot a movie that way. As people started dying, they began disappearing from set.

FANG: When you're shooting in sequence with something like this, I can only imagine it really helps you get into the mood and atmosphere and depravity and ugliness of it all. What happens when you finish the film? Does it stay with you a bit?

BIEHN: I don't know any actors who, you know, really take their characters off the set. You can take somebody like Michael Eklund or Milo, and they're just sitting around talking about the day's work and where we're going to go for dinner. Mike would be a little here and there, but I'll tell you, he and Ivan [Gonzalez], who's very good too, all of them started losing weight. From the beginning of the movie through the six-week period of shooting, everybody lost, like, 20 pounds. And everyone's beards grew out. We had nutritionists on set.

[POSSIBLE SPOILER ALERT] There's a radiation leak, and some people are more exposed to it than others, and they start getting the effects; it begins affecting their skin and their minds,

and you kind of sit back after a while thinking, "Wow, that's heavy, man." That's humanity, you know? You can make a choice to be a good guy or a bad guy. And what would you do under the circumstances? Would you survive or help somebody else survive? If you had a can of beans, would you share them?

I mean, I have secrets down there that they need to get from me, and there's some force that takes place and people who have been killed. The bodies are in there, so they need to be taken care of, chopped up and turned out in the septic tank and stuff. It's seriously brutal. I don't know that I've ever seen a movie like this before. Xavier likes classical music, and I have a feeling the movie will be orchestrated that way, and like I said, its beautifully shot. Ross Dinerstein produced it and was smart, because he Xavier hired a new writer—there was an original script by Karl Mueller, and Eron [Sheean] came in to rewrite it. What they had Eron do was sit down with all the actors and talk to us about what was going on inside the characters' minds and what their conflicts might be. So all of us kind of had an opportunity to shape our roles in a way that I've always done.

Usually, directors are too frightened or the people who make the movie won't let actors do that, but this just kept pushing further and further and further. You take me and Rosanna and Mike Eklund, who basically had a character who was thin air, and gave this brilliant performance. [We were] coming up with ideas, hoping they made it into the final cut. It's just bizarre, but there's a beauty to it.

FANG: Gens' first feature FRONTIER(S) was also terribly bloody and grim throughout. What's it like working with a director who keeps coming back to these really gritty places?

BIEHN: That's the thing about a lot of these directors. Xavier, you couldn't imagine a sweeter,

more fun, more mischievous person around. He's the last person where you would think these things would come out of his mind. It reminds me a little bit of David Lynch. When you talk to David, you can't imagine someone who thought up BLUE VELVET, and it's interesting. Obviously, there's something in him that enjoys this, but there's nowhere near the kind of gratuitous violence of FRONTIER(S) in THE DIVIDE. There's a little bit, a little bit. But it's a much more sophisticated movie than FRONTIER(S). Which, by the way, I love—up until the very end.

I've always had a little bit of trouble watching the SAW movies, the HOSTEL movies, HALLOWEEN—the last one was very violent. I even told Xavier, I just don't see a purpose to it once you've shown it once or twice. There are many people out there who love that kind of stuff; that's kind of why I did [the currently playing] BEREAVEMENT. I got offered the part and it was good money, though it just wasn't the type of movie I feel good about doing. But I've done all genres of movies and I think, "Who am I, as an actor, to make choices about what genres I like?" There's obviously a large group of people out there who love watching SAW, HOSTEL and something like Robert Rodriguez's stuff. That's a little cartoonish, so I did [PLANET TERROR], but this movie is not really like that. It reminds me more of a TAXI DRIVER type of movie; it sets a mood that's scary and dark, and you know something is going to happen. And then it does, and that's the end of it. It's really nasty, but that happens in spurts. It's not a continuous gorefest at all.

FANGORIA: You recently directed the horror film THE VICTIM (see previous story here). What can we expect from that, and how did you apply your views about onscreen violence to that film?

BIEHN: When I decided to make that movie, I was doing Xavier's. I wanted to make something kind of like the grindhouse flicks that Robert Rodriguez turned me on to—that idea of doing a low-budget exploitation movie. So I said to myself, "Well, what can I do to make a movie that is exploitable?" I figured, I'm not really into that kind of violence; I needed sexuality, and I believe we pushed those boundaries in our movie. There are dirty cops, there's a lot of sex, there are drugs, there's even a little bit of action. I torture a guy at one point, but I didn't shoot it in a way where you see it, like in HALLOWEEN and stuff. I torture him in a way that you would see in an old-time movie. Toward the end, there are shots where [makeup FX artist] Rob Hall was nice enough to help me out, and it's a little gory, but it's really a thriller. It's not a horror movie in any sense of the word.

It's on a lot of those sites, and I think we originally gave the impression we were making a horror movie because we wanted magazines like FANGORIA and everyone else to know about it. So

we suggested that it was a little gorier than it turned out to be. There was stuff we were going to work in there, where it was a little bloodier, but I just don't like graphic violence in films. I like violence in TAXI DRIVER, there's nothing wrong with that, but when it's people hanging upside down by their Achilles heels and being gutted, I just don't get it. So our movie is not that at all. It's a thriller that basically relies on performances and suspense.

Jennifer Blanc, who produced the movie for me, is my girlfriend, and is also in THE DIVIDE as my wife. I have a dream, a sort of flashback that she's in, and there are some pictures of her around. In THE VICTIM, she's a character who uses her sexuality to survive. It's the story of a couple of strippers, partying with a couple of cops—one is a narc—and her friend is there because she wants to get some free cocaine, which they supply her with. Jennifer goes along just to be a support system, and she hooks up with one of the cops and the other girl hooks up with the cop she gets the cocaine from, and things kind of go sideways.

Jennifer then starts running from them, and ends up at my cabin door. This was all shot out in the middle of nowhere; it's supposed to be in Arizona. She comes banging at my door, crying, "Let me in, they're trying to kill me." I'm kind of blocking out society, because I have my own problems in society and did a stint in jail for manslaughter, and basically I'm trying to turn my life around—studying the Dalai Lama, the Bible, doing miracles and all that kind of thing—and she winds up at my cabin. I've come all the way out here to get away from this stuff, but it ends up at my doorstep. She uses her sexuality throughout the movie, which is kind of the theme—how women use their sexuality to manipulate men, and how weak men are. That's an overriding kind of theme in exploitation movies—how dumb men are when it comes to sexuality, and how good women are when it comes to using that to get what they want.

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