

## Shauna MacDonald: Up With “THE DESCENT: PART 2”

Written by Samuel Zimmerman  
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In a genre that so heavily features leading ladies, strong heroines and final girls, we still haven't had many memorable ones as of late. Except, of course, THE DESCENT's Sarah Carter. Traumatized by the deaths of her husband and daughter, betrayed by her best friend, possibly a little mad and yet still mustering up the wherewithal to bash monster skulls, she was played with emotional depth and notable strength by Scottish actress Shauna MacDonald in Neil Marshall's original film, and returns to the caves in THE DESCENT: PART 2 (now out on DVD from Lionsgate).

A slightly different beast, PART 2 trades its predecessor's claustrophobia and tension in the dark for a higher level of ferocity and carnage, with its constant being MacDonald, still in the zone of essaying Carter. When the sequel was first announced, die-hard fans of the original were filled with trepidation, but none were more cautious than MacDonald herself, if only because it meant returning to such a dark and physically trying place. "I was a little bit nervous about it, because I knew what it entailed," she recalls. "They said, 'Shauna, Sarah's gone through this incredible journey and then she's got amnesia but she remembers some bits, and then you have to lose it again.'



"I was like, 'No, I have to go mad again?' They said, 'You kind of start a little bit mad, and then you go madder.' I knew it was going to be tricky and I just had to connect to the scenes, just go there and roll with them and not overthink them, cause it'll do your head in a bit if you overthink the emotion. I knew it was going to be a rollercoaster ride again, but luckily, they shot chronologically as they did the first film—which we had to do for the practicality of using the cave sets. But for actors, it's almost a gift when you get to shoot in sequence. You're able to

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keep track of where you're at emotionally with the character, and I knew they would probably be doing the same [on PART 2] because they tried to save money by reusing the sets. On the first film, I had terrible nightmares, so I knew what I was getting myself into. And I did have terrible nightmares again for six weeks.”

Despite the threat of horrific sleep patterns, MacDonald hopped back on board early on and kept close to the production, knowing how important it was to get right. “I wasn't officially a part of the development, but I was certainly approached by Jon [Harris, director] and Christian Colson, the producer, and they listened to me. Well, they let me talk, whether they listened or not I don't know; but they let me discuss it a lot and certainly, after we spoke, things changed in the script. Jon and I were definitely in contact about my problems with this and how we can top that. I was definitely involved in its development more than on any other film I've done, and also throughout the filming. But also, I had a relationship with Jon, because he had edited the first one. Professionally, we kind of knew what each other were about. We didn't have to get to know each other; I could just call him.”

What's surprising is that while MacDonald was keen on keeping the sequel true to the spirit of the original, she wasn't necessarily tied to making sure that film's more feminist elements remained. “It wasn't so important for me to keep the girl-power aspect,” she explains, “but it was for me to not lose any of Sarah's drive and will to live and the brutality and savagery she can get to. It wasn't so much about keeping the theme, or for me to kick ass—although that is always quite appealing.”

The actress who goes to such extreme places in both DESCENT films is actually quite cherry and sweet-natured, which can make one wonder how she was game for such a demanding role, especially with this follow-up's gore quotient turned to 11. “Yea, they've upped the blood for sure, but that reveals itself to you on set and it's quite humorous,” she says. “I love the effects. It's Paul Hyett and his crew—who are, oddly, all beautiful women. They're wonderful at their jobs, but it's quite funny; he would come on set, and his team of gorgeous girls would come and pour blood over things. You took a step back and watched all of this going on, and the guys just loved the blood. They'd always ask for more; Jon always wanted more.

“There's a scene where a Crawler gets stabbed in the neck by Rios [Krysten Cummings] above me and the blood's just gushing out. I believe we shot it twice, and the second time it was more and more blood, and by accident it got in my mouth. I sort of screamed and gargled it and was thinking, ‘Oh no, they can't use that now, they'll have to go again,’ but Jon came up at the end and said, ‘That was great! That was genius!’ And I was like, ‘That's just gross!’ It wasn't just that, but also the crushing of the skulls and the biting of the fingers, lots of ripping of necks. But I

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think you have to—if you’ve got a film about monsters that want to kill you, you have to crank it up a notch. I can’t watch it; I have to look through my fingers ’cause I’m quite sensitive to stuff like that.”

Aside from the gallons of blood, THE DESCENT: PART 2 also returns to Sarah’s emotionally complex journey when it is revealed that Juno (Natalie Mendoza) is actually still alive in the caves and fending off the Crawlers in a manner that’s all sorts of bad-ass. “I heard that I was attached to THE DESCENT: PART 2,” MacDonald recalls, “and I didn’t hear that any of the other girls were, and I thought that’s because they all got killed [in the first film]. Then when I heard that Natalie Mendoza was involved, I thought, ‘But she’s dead!’ But, ‘No, no, no, we didn’t see her die,’ and I thought, ‘Oh, that’s clever. We get to meet again, I’m so glad, excellent!’ I felt it was a great storytelling device that we meet underground, and what are we going to do? We needed to care about the journey; it couldn’t just be a fight to get out, and there had to be layers. It’s very complicated, Juno and Sarah’s relationship, what they do to each other and then ultimately for each other.”

What also became important for MacDonald was continuing the journey that was hindered by the edited finale in THE DESCENT’s U.S. cut. “I always thought that was a copout; I liked the [international version’s] bleak ending,” the actress says. “I don’t understand why they thought that America needed a different ending. How does that make sense? When you watch a film, you just accept it, and if it’s a bleak ending, you accept that. I do think it was a shame they decided not to keep it, because we actually shot a continuation of that [for the sequel]. In the original ending, they pan out and you see the rocks and what she thinks is a cake and her daughter. We shot a pan in on that with an actress playing my daughter, so if you ran the two films together, it would’ve been a seamless move from DESCENT to DESCENT: PART 2.

“But there’s a whole load of stuff we shot that they decided not to put in the film,” MacDonald continues. “Certainly in my mind—because I always remember films how I’ve read them, rather than how they’ve been cut together—it does start from the British ending. The original beginning of PART 2 had a whole explanation of how I get out of the caves; my daughter leads me, and I get washed out and almost drown and all this stuff that didn’t make the [final] film—which I believe is a shame. It would, I think, have helped the audience accept the fact that she escaped, because it was quite clever how they got me out. What’s all this about being disorientated underground, and then suddenly she’s out? I’m sure the hardcore fans are going, ‘Eh, excuse me, isn’t she lost underground?’

“We did all this stuntwork and underwater shooting and special effects bluescreen for my coming out of the cave. We should try and get ahold of that. What’s funny is that at FrightFest, I

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did all this press and talked about these scenes, and then the film rolled and I went, ‘Oh!’ But then again, you don’t need it; It’s just a bit of trivia, really. The film has all been put together, and that is the story and how you’ve got to accept it.”

Having taken a break since the filming of PART 2 for the birth of her second child, MacDonald is now starting to get back into the acting game, and while she’s immensely proud of the two DESCENT movies, her kids won’t necessarily get to watch their mother murder monsters anytime soon. “They’re never getting to see it,” she states. “My eldest daughter is named Jessie, which is the same name [as the young daughter who is killed in the first film] so she’s never viewing the film.”

Unfortunately, she’s secretive about other future plans, as her prospective projects are still in the pipeline and “I’m not allowed to talk about them,” laments the actress—who for the record, is not the same Shauna MacDonald who’s had roles in the sixth and upcoming seventh of another Lionsgate franchise, the SAW series. She does reassure, however, that she isn’t done with the macabre. “Oh no, horror is great—the parts you get to play, the whole spectrum of emotions and what you get to do physically, and horror actually lets the girls loose. Usually it’s the guys doing all this stuff, but then in horror, girls can do it too. We have babies, we can do anything.”

{comments on}