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**Paul Thies:** 45 years ago, a crew began working on a film with a modest budget under the helm of a director making only his second picture and starring a cast of very talented and accomplished actors who were yet largely unknown. The filmmakers themselves acknowledge it was by all accounts a B-Movie but by virtue of emotionally compelling performances, a well-crafted story, and visuals that were out of this world, they created a stunning experience that literally exploded into a lasting cultural phenomenon. Hello, I'm your host, Paul Thies.

On this episode of *If/When*, it was my privilege to sit down with two of the legendary cast members of that singular film, Tom Skerritt who played the role of Captain Dallas, and Veronica Cartwright, who played the Ship's Navigator Lambert. They shared their memories of shooting *Alien* back in 1978 under the direction of Sir Ridley Scott, working with an amazing casting crew to create what has become widely regarded as one of the greatest science fiction films in history. Their performances alongside those of Yaphet Kotto, Ian Holm, John Hurt, Harry Dean Stanton, and Sigourney Weaver provided a rich and very human context that amplified the intensity, fear, and emotional impact of the movie.

It was a great thrill, personally, to be able to spend this time with Tom and Veronica and I hope you enjoy the discussion that follows. Tom and Veronica, thank you so much. It's a real pleasure to be able to sit down with both of you and talk about what I think is one of the greatest films in film history. It's definitely one of my favorites, and of course, that is *Alien*. I'm very delighted to speak with both of you and to be able to understand more about the performances that y'all delivered and really just anchored the film and I think really made it special and why it still stands the test of time its authenticity. Thank you both so much for joining me today.

**Tom Skerritt:** It's our pleasure and my pleasure.

**Paul:** Let me start and ask you a little bit about the genesis of the characters Captain Dallas and Lambert. I've read the shooting version of the script and it's very to the point, it's very short on exposition. There's not a lot of character detail. Then also, I believe it was one of the commemorative documentaries. They said that Ridley Scott really didn't provide y'all with a lot of character direction during filming intentionally to keep you uncertain and on edge, I think, to try to heighten that mood. You and your castmates were left to create your characters' personas. What were the inspirations you drew upon for your characters? Tom, let me start with you. Where did Captain Dallas come from?

**Tom:** From a script that I read in a hotel in Minneapolis and it just said, *Alien*. They've been making an offer and there was nothing else about it except \$2 million budget. I really questioned whether I want to do this for \$2 million. It could be another, I can't remember to this day that the worst director ever. [chuckles] If you're going to be doing a \$2 million film with that script, you'd have to hang the rocket ships with a string and give it away. [chuckles] I just question it. One of the producers says, "Look at this film and I won't talk about it." I looked at something called the do list. Now I had no idea who Ridley Scott was. He was a creative graphics guy, and this is his do list was this first movie.

Five minutes into it I said, I got to work with that guy. I don't care about anything else. Everything's going to work out. The budget went up to \$10 million and I went to England. That's where it all started for me to work in going to Ridley's office and I saw this group of wonderful actors, most of all, Veronica, who I felt was the best thing in the film and away we went. I remember we got two pages into reading, remember that, Veronica, two pages into reading the script and cast and all that. He starts saying I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that. He starts explaining the whole movie. He says this, "I'm going to do *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*."

Then he says, "The less you see the bad guy, the more frightened you become," and that was it. Then some guy came in and said, "We need you on the set." That was the end of it. I thought at the time, I don't know if you remember Veronica, we were all just sitting with our mouths open having just met one another. I remember thinking, "Okay." As the captain, I think I said something like, "Since I'm the captain of the ship, I guess I should say something to you all, and I'm wondering if we're going to be the ingredients for this movie as I put it." What it turned out we were, but I think we all just started to laugh and say, "How are you doing?" That's really how--

**Veronica Cartwright:** What was interesting is John Finch was playing the part that John Hurt ended up playing. Our first cast meeting was with John Finch and we started shooting which he started in the engine room. There was tons. Ridley loved smoke and in those days, that was the smoke they made out of beeswax and they would just pump it in. John Finch had just apparently gotten out of the hospital from having pneumonia and he was back in that night because there was so much smoke. The next day John Hurt shows up and I thought to myself, we look like clones of each other. We both had the same color skin.

He had the same haircut because Ridley had had me cut all my hair off, which was an all-day process of torture and [chuckles] I just thought, "Oh my gosh." There were obstacles thrown at us right from the very beginning. We just learned to bounce off of each other. You had to listen in this movie because if you didn't listen to the other person, it's in a weird way like doing a stage play. If you don't listen then you're just left out there to hang. I think Ridley got people that were really established and really good at what they did, good character actors, but we weren't known in a sense. We were people that you could say there's Meryl Streep or something like that.

We were all really good at listening to each other and we ended up forming our characters just by bouncing off of each other, I think.

**Paul:** I'd seen in previous interviews and then, Tom, I think you talked about the impulse nature of the performance and, Veronica, we were talking and you mentioned that kitchen table give and take. How much of your performances would you say were impulse driven? You were saying Yaphet would do something or Harry Dean would do something, just react to it. Then how much of it was maybe thought out beforehand? Tom, I love that scene where you're investigating the acid and you want Harry Dean's pin, and you're like, "Give me your pin. You're like, "Come on, come on."

It's this understated comedy but how much of it was impulse driven versus y'all worked it out beforehand, I'm going to do this, and then you do that. How would you characterize how that all came about?

**Tom:** You don't think about it. I had never, as an actor, ever really predetermined what I was going to do.

**Veronica:** Me neither.

**Tom:** A lot of what you really do is just respond to the other person like you do in theater. You get the lines down and you go. If you don't have the instincts, the impulses that come out of the instincts, you look like an actor. I never really wanted to look like an actor in anything. It was a lot of what other people like Veronica, who I said earlier, gave the performance that I admired because she had to go all over the place and she was representing the fear that all of us were trying to deny. I was just taken by the way she works.

That's all impulse. I'm sure I'm speaking for you, but we don't work by thinking about it. If you think about it, it's like going to the *Mona Lisa* and saying, "Why is this the greatest painting ever?" She's got a little smile on her face. It's never been in a painting ever before. The questions that people ask when they look at it and say, "What is that little smile? Where's she from?" The question marks is always what you give people. What else is [unintelligible 00:10:38]? Don't they see what's happening behind them? It's for the audience to just wonder why they're behaving the way they're behaving.

**Veronica:** That was so well put, Tom.

[laughter]

**Veronica:** It's true. Like that kitchen scene when Yaphet and I-- I don't know. I got a special bond with Yaphet. He was just a sweetheart and he and I just got along. In my mind, there was always-- They had had a relationship at some point, which was so strange when the Cameron movie came out, which was 13 years after ours. Somebody put a sticker in the back saying that I was transgender.

How do you feel about being a transgender? I didn't play it as a transgender person. That was Cameron's idea. I had always thought that I'd had a relationship with Yaphet and he and I would play off of each other. There was always these little things that were going on. I don't know. It just seemed totally real. We would've lunch together and we just became totally comfortable with each other. That, I think, came out in the movie. He, in a weird way, became protective of me.

I think that's what makes the end work when he-- He's trying to protect me from what is going to happen. I think all of that came out of just working together. Nobody was acting. We were all listening. Ridley's directions, they weren't driven as from an actor's point of view. It was all visceral. The same way he would always be looking at the way things were. When I had to slap Sigourney when we come back and I have to slap her across the face, it was written in the script that I slapped her across the face because I'm pissed off. Every time I went to slap Sigourney, she would duck it.

My direction was, "Would you just get her this time?" I thought, "Oh, okay." I go like that. She ducks it and I backhanded her. She went into it and tears instantly came to her eyes and she was pissed off which was perfect for that moment of what it had to be. Ridley had a weird instinct of things like that. I don't know. Did you ever have

those things with Ridley where he just-- It was reactionary, not like this is what you're thinking about or anything like that. He trusted us all to have that. If it was to be something like that, which just seemed like a bold move that I would make. He got the characters to do things like that.

**Paul:** Let me ask you this, and I think you probably touched on it a little bit, but I just want to unpack it a little bit. Were you conscious of playing against science fiction film tropes such as the intrepid commander or the damsel in distress and that sort of thing? For me, I think it's like-- Dallas's death scene is so pivotal.

For me, that's actually where I think the narrative pivots because when you look at classic films like *The Thing from Another World* or whatnot, it's always the cool and in-control commander. Nothing's ever going to get him. He's going to get through. He is going to save the day. In *Alien*, suddenly halfway through the film, we lose our captain who's the voice of authority, and then suddenly all bets are off. Anything goes at this point.

In your performances, were you conscious of maybe playing against those well-heeled, well-trod tropes and trying to do something different? Or was it again, maybe more organic and impulse-driven just, "I'm just reacting to the other actors and to the situation?"

**Veronica:** I can't consciously think of anything that was-- No, we were just characters. We were these people on the ship. We were doing our jobs. I didn't think of anything, pre-think of anything, or think of it as being a science fiction. We all got to see Bolaji first when we were coming in because they were making his suit to him. We had a sense that there was something that was ominous going on, but I didn't think of it, "Oh, this is a big science fiction movie."

Everything was so awesome anyway. Everything was so big and going through those caves and across the damn desert that was really a desert and carrying John Hurt because we couldn't have a puppet in there. It had to be John, and so sweat and tears and all those anxieties and anger of walking across and not being able to breathe in that damn bubble we had on our head. All of those things were--Nothing was planned. It just was coming out of organic, I guess, which was cool. [chuckles]

**Tom:** That's like working in the theater. You just simply can't [unintelligible 00:16:30] you're just putting a block right in front of you.

**Veronica:** Absolutely.

**Tom:** [unintelligible 00:16:35] cannot act. I never learned to be an actor.

[chuckling]

**Tom:** I just went around, walking around following Ridley everywhere he went. I just wanted to learn more. I had learned a lot from Hal Ashby and from Bob Altman who I'd worked with earlier. Just following these guys around to really look at things and really absorb it all, see how it's shot, what lens you use, what lights are being used.

All of this and you see what Ridley was doing in the background, had smoke going across the screen. The first time I'd ever seen anything like that. It was just the

marvel of working with this guy, and then [unintelligible 00:17:19] the rest of this gang and the ship and also having, coincidentally [unintelligible 00:17:25] before I knew who else was going to be in it.

A woman survives, a woman wins, a woman takes it on, the strength of women, are what this was all about. She's somehow [unintelligible 00:17:40] that walks out of this thing and becomes the actress and several things that follow. They were not the alien, but they were called as such because of the success of it and what it said and what it didn't say. I just love that idea of these two women in this group of men and what was going on.

Was there anything going on with some suggestion, the screenplay that my character was having a little fling with the other lady. At the time, I thought, "I don't know if that really works story-wise in terms of the pace." At the end of the film, when she's running around trying to get the cat before the thing explodes, I thought what a great thing to do because what I was concerned about was they had me at the end stuck on a wall, being absorbed by an egg and she's trying to figure out how to save me and I just say, "Hit me with a blow torch." Which she finally did. See, that would just break the whole flow.

She's running around looking around and she's got to stop and say, "Oh, hi there, Captain." I'm saying, "Nevermind, I have indigestion, zap me." She said, "You got it, baby." And she zapped me. That would've been just not the pace. That's what Ridley always got was about the rhythm. Tap your feet always with rhythm. When you watch a movie, if it doesn't have rhythm, it ain't got an audience.

**Paul:** I mentioned this to Veronica earlier. I think it's really poignant that your two characters' deaths are the two deaths that are not shown in the movie. I know that they put out the "director's version" where they put the cocoon scene in, but it actually works better, the theatrical version, because to me anyway, it's more terrifying. We don't know what happened to Captain Dallas.

The creature snatched him in the shaft and we never see him again. It's like, "Who knows what happened?" It's the same thing with Lambert. We hear those terrible screams and things going on on the audio, but that's worse than being shown what happened to Yaphet or Harry Dean or whatever.

**Tom:** Whatever happens in anything, a piece of art, whatever it is, you can't give it all to an audience. A story is only as interesting as what you don't tell them on the way.

I was reading a book, Cormac McCarthy's one hell of a writer. There's horrible stuff that he's writing about but it's so sweet the way he's writing it. That's true of anything. Whatever we do visually with audio added in talking movies is what you don't do ultimately in any story that's being told. Don't give it away, just make it go. What happened with *Alien* wasn't enough. Really, all we saw was she kicked it out.

**Paul:** I may be alone in this, but at least this fan, I wish they had stopped with your movie because I feel they've done everything they can to try to milk the franchise and try to explain this and explain that. It messes with it. It's like, "Just leave well enough alone." I know that it's Hollywood and they can't leave well enough alone.

**Veronica:** I like the second one but when they started putting more and more aliens in, it just started to become ridiculous. I think that took away from the other movies. Frankly, I agree with you. What was so frightening about the other thing, and you didn't know what was going to happen. You thought it had gotten expelled. At least you remember Tom and I. Remember the scene when you're up in the tunnel, up and going, trying to find the alien and where it is and I have that box and I'm down there with Yaphet and you were up in there?

Tom and I had to go into a sound studio and watch that whole thing, how it'd been cut together. Then we had to recreate that entire thing. It was really hard to do that, but at the same time, I thought it was an interesting way to do it. The two of us were standing next to each other watching the screen and recreating what we'd done on the set. It was really a trippy day, I must say.

**Paul:** Were you recreating it, the audio, you mean?

**Veronica:** All the audio, yes. We had to stand next to each other. I'm saying, "Dallas," and Tom's talking. We were just literally standing next to each other because they had edited it. Somehow, I guess, we went in and it was all ADR, watching the screen and recreating it. It was really a trip, I must say, but nobody knows that we didn't do that on the stage.

**Paul:** Let me ask you this. It was a very complex movie. There was just a lot of challenges getting it done and a lot of physical challenges. I mean, these stories about the spacesuits didn't have air holes and the smelting pots with all the smoke and everything and it's exhausting and it's tough. I'm sure there are probably moments where people didn't all get along or weren't maybe as courteous as they could have been and personalities and things like that.

Before *Alien*, you both had very successful careers. At the time, despite *Star Wars*, most '70s science fiction films were-- It wasn't the industry that it is now, where they're just so big and it just makes so much money. We talked about this, that you're signing up for what was at that point a B movie. I know that the budget got ramped up, and Ridley, obviously, is a very extraordinarily talented director but there's no sure things here. My question for y'all is, was there ever a point in the shoot, perhaps when things were arduous or chaotic, where you were thinking, "I may have made a mistake saying yes to this movie?" If so, what helped you work through that and persevere through it?

**Tom:** From my standpoint, absolutely no. It was just going to be very early on, I think, from reading it and seeing this guy directing it, and then this cast, and this wonderful Veronica person who gave this wonderful performance and really held it back. That was a choice to watch. Everybody else was playing what they played but it was pretty straightforward. Everybody looked wonderful, never minding all that stuff. We were terrific, he was terrific, the lighting was his. Everything he did was his. He was an artist. He's an artist, a true artist. He was painting this as he went along.

I don't know if I'm really answering your question, but I have no doubt about that. That was going to be a classic. I remember having a conversation with Yaphet Kotto about two weeks in this. I said, "You know this is going to be a classic, don't you?" He says, "Hell yes, man." There was no doubt in my mind because I--

In the '70s, which is the best decade for movies of the 20th century, I happened to stumble on the best directors ever, William Hal Ashby and Altman, and now Ridley. I said, "How did I get to be so fortunate?" My whole approach was never about do they-- I don't have that kind of ego that gets into this stuff. I can't answer questions that you would give me because I don't think that way. It was about just simply the joy of being able to do this, working with people like this. When I'm learning all the time, every time it was about films that possibly I was just writing about one of the worst films I ever did, which was done in Africa and Brazil. It was just terrifyingly terrible, awful.

The director was the advert screenwriter. I had forgotten about this until recently because I was writing a memo. To be with this group of people, this class of actors, for me was a reward, as much as anything. First of all with this director, who I said five minutes into looking at Dallas, I said, I want to work with him. I didn't know anyone else was cast yet. There's no doubt. If you've got a director like that, you go with it. If you don't like the writing, he'll make it work. He just made it work, and we were all there for him.

**Paul:** Wow. Veronica, for you, was it pretty much the same thing? You knew it was going to be a classic and there was no question, whatever it takes.

**Veronica:** I had no idea it was going to be a classic movie. It was rewarding in the sense of working with really great people. It was really a tough shoot, I thought. I thought it was very hard. I didn't know that it would end up being as big as it was. As Tom said, it was a B movie. That's what we thought we were there. It was a great group of people, so let's just cross our fingers. We weren't going to put up with having no air holes in our spacesuits and having it be the hottest summer they'd had in a century. All of it had to be worth something, [chuckles] so it was nice then.

It was very weird they didn't throw a premiere. There was really no premiere. I went and saw it at the Egyptian Theater, and I stood in line to go see it, just so I could see what it was like being an audience.

**Tom:** I believed in the director, totally in the director and the cast. That was all that was necessary. I knew this was going to be a classic because you were there. You were there. Don't get too [crosstalk].

**Veronica:** That's awfully sweet.

**Tom:** Don't get too into it.

**Veronica:** [laughs] I didn't know it was going to be a classic, but I guess [crosstalk].

**Tom:** It was meant to be what it was and you were the pie.

**Paul:** I was looking this up. You started principal photography in early July 1978. Just 45 years ago you started filming this. I know you see it's a classic and you know it's a classic but are you surprised by its endurance and about how everything, this whole cottage industry bloomed around it. In fact, they're making another *Alien* film I think for next year.

**Tom:** No doubt, because they're running on tires. The tires wore out a long time ago, so they just keep-- I have a very long because I scattered myself out to be listened to what executives talked about. In those days, they talked about films that would be well enough to get revenue from your audience. There would be good stories, well told. You had the one who's going to tell is going to be the director, ultimately. We have to figure, we are pages in a book. the actors are. I don't mean to marginalize it but we are.

The painter is guys, the good directors, if they don't know how to paint, we have to take over. We didn't have, all I remember was a lot of the laughing. One of the things I learned very early on when I was one of the main characters in the movie was to let's just not get our egos in a way, guys. Let's just blend together and be a football team, all solid defensive and offensive line. Got a great quarterback, we got everything we need. Let's all do this together. *Mash* was one of those. Altman was one of those directors.

Then when we did that, I just found a lot of reason-- When we did *Alien*, I just saw a lot of reason to laugh and the way we approach things. One actor was who wanted to-- I won't say which one but after lunch, he wanted to get himself all fired up and he's doing everything he possibly can to get fired up. I'm standing in back of two English crewmen, all of them very much gentlemen and he's going, "Yes, we're brilliant."

He stops and he looks at these guys, "Hey, man, why are you guys just sitting around when your hands are on your ass, nuts don't say anything. Come on, get up." Then he turns around and goes, he says, "I'm done. I'm ready. Let's shoot it." There's this long silence. One guy looks at the other, and I'll never forget this. I'm kind of wondering, I'm smiling like this, but he got out of control every now and then.

One English guy looks at the other and says, "Isn't it grand being English?" I just fell apart. That was one of my great memories of *Alien* was that moment of an actor who really has to work himself up and get hostile and everything else, take it on into the scene, and have the Englishman to round it up.

[laughter]

**Tom:** Bless his heart, he was such a sweetheart, thank God.

**Interviewer:** Tom and Veronica, I want to thank you both so much for spending this time with me and revisiting *Alien*. It's a much-loved classic and it's amazing. It has stood the test of time. It's just remarkable. It literally is one of those instances of they don't make them like they used to. A large, huge part of that is the performances you both gave. Thank you both so much for your time today.

**Veronica:** Thank you.

**Tom:** You're very welcome. My pleasure.

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