

On Set Interview: Frank Spotnitz on The X-Files!



Written by Stephanie Sanchez

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Earlier this year, the IESB visited the set of the Untitled X-Files Sequel in Vancouver. Along with a group of journalists, we toured the set, talked with director Chris Carter, stars David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson and we also had the great opportunity to talk with Frank Spotnitz, producer, writer and brain (along with Carter) behind the X-Files.

Spotnitz gave our entire group a tour around the set, being very coy about certain details and questions. Along the way, we were able to ask about coming back to this franchise, reviving the characters and more!

Read the walk-and-talk below!

Q: How psyched are you to be back?

FS: I have to say I really didn't think it was going to happen, after all of these years...negotiations...working on the story. I really sort of thought this wasn't going to happen. And it's been a dream. It's been fantastic. Working on the script was a joy. Being with David [Duchovny] and Gillian [Anderson] again has been a joy. A lot of the crew are people who we worked with on The X-Files in Vancouver and all the Chris Carter series shot here like "Millennium," "Harsh Realm" and "The Lone Gunman." Some of the people come up from Los Angeles. So, it's like a family coming together again. And you rarely get to do that in this business so it's really nice.

Q: What was the impetus to get it going again? Why now?

FS: Well, you know, they approached us to do this movie well before the series ended. 2001, actually, was when an executive first came and said they wanted to do another movie and at that time we were still doing the series. The series ended and it took some time and then we started negotiations. I think my deal has been done since '02 or '03, that long. Then negotiating David and Gillian and Chris took a very long time and then there was a lawsuit and everything stopped. Then the lawsuit got resolved, I think it was late last year...

Q: Lawsuit about what?

FS: It was [between] Chris and the studio and honestly I don't know precisely what it was, I think it was about money as these things usually are but it got settled and once that happened things started happening very quickly.

Q: When The X-Files show hit, it sort of captured the national zeitgeist. Has time passed The X-Files by or does The X-Files still have something to say about what is going on in the country in a different way?

FS: Well, I mean, I guess I'll leave that to you guys to decide whether time has passed us by. I feel like...we felt like we very much had something to say. I think when you see the movie, you'll see there is nothing cynical about it. It's very much comes from the heart and from who these characters are and I think that's part of why it is such a pleasure to do. We were freed of the complications and the machinery of the plot, the ongoing plot, which had gotten quite complicated after nine years. We didn't really have to service a lot of that and so we could just tell a really good, scary, stand-alone story and go deeper into the characters of Mulder and Scully and their relationship than you really can in a weekly series. So, we felt like we had a really good story to tell.

Q: Is it nice to be back doing an X-Files [in Vancouver]?

FS: It's great. We loved our crew in Los Angeles, [we] loved doing the show in Los Angeles, but, Vancouver is where we began and where we built our success. And it was very hard to leave Vancouver, so it's been a joy for us come back here and work with our old friends and be in the city again, which we love. There is a lot here that lends itself naturally to The X-Files, but especially to this story. And we wrote it, sort of, expecting to come back to Vancouver, taking advantage of what we knew was here.

Q: Was it a creative decision or a financial decision to shoot here [in Vancouver]?

FS: It was really creative and emotional, I would say. Financial incentives still exist, but it's not nearly what it used to be what with the weak US dollar. When we were writing it, we weren't cognizant of that. It was really about... we had the desire to come back to Vancouver to make the movie.

Q: What are you guys thinking about doing with the title?

FS: I'm sure X-Files will be in the title.

Q: A subtitle?

FS: I think it will be something like that. We haven't figured that out to be honest.

Q: Did you have a working title for the script when you were writing it?

FS: We have an idea for what'd we like the title to be, but we haven't discussed it with the studio yet.

Q: You were aiming for a pretty global scale in the first film. This film sounds more intimate, is that true?

FS: It is, it's more...it's scary, intimate, creepy, and then, most importantly, focused on the characters, the relationship, who they are - what it means to be Mulder, what it means to be Scully - six years on. And I think that's what really makes the film have legitimacy. It's really dealing with the truth of the characters at this point in their lives.

The tour of the set ended there. But, we were able to sit down with Spotnitz to pick his brain a bit more later in the day. The interview continues below,

Q: It's been a long time since you or Chris have written the characters. How quickly did they come back to you? Was it easy or was it hard? Were you able to find them right away?

FS: I was surprised how easy it was...surprised how alive they still were in our imaginations. I think, pretty quickly, we arrived at what they would be doing at this point in their lives and what's happened to them in the last six years and then, I was talking to somebody about this the other day, it's like, you know, for eight years I wrote and produced this show and I spent so many hours of my life thinking about Mulder and Scully, really as many hours as I spent thinking about real people in my life, and so in some sense they're very real to me, and they came right back!



Q: What's at stake for The X-Files?

FS: I think any time you do something creative you are putting your good name forward... your reputation, so you want to feel like you're doing something you're proud of. That was very important to us because we *do* feel there is a lot to be proud of in The X-Files so we wanted to move forward knowing we had a real story to tell and a reason to tell it and I think we found that. So I think we all feel, speaking for David, Gillian, Chris and me, probably what this movie is from what we're doing. Beyond that, there's the question, is it commercial successful, will it draw a big audience? And if that happens, then you have the ability to do more.

Q: Who, in your mind, is the audience for the film? Are you making this for The X-Files fan, are you trying to open it up enough so that non X-Files people can come in? What is the balance?

FS: This is the one thing this film has in common with the first film, it's really designed for more than one audience. We wanted to reward people who watched the show and who remember it, but, we'd like nothing better than to introduce The X-Files to a new generation, people who were too young to watch the show when it was on originally and people who never checked it out the first time around.

Q: Was this the script when you guys were originally going to do it closer to 2004? Is this the script you guys thought you'd do next or has it changed? Was it your idea, was it Chris's idea? How has the story evolved?

FS: I think it was 2002 or early 2003 when Chris and I met for a couple weeks to figure out what the X-File is that we would tell in this movie and that has not changed. The X-File is the same X-File. But then it got tabled for all those years and so when we came back, we didn't go back to our story notes. We just kept the basic idea and built the story from scratch all over again because, honestly, emotionally where we are after all this time, where the characters should be, changed so much. And that's so

much of what the movie is, it's about their relationship, where they are, who they are as people at this point in their lives. So we really couldn't have done that earlier. So that part of the story remained, but the rest of it was done this year.

Q: As far as the series is concerned, are you satisfied with sort of the way the series itself ended or do you see it all as an opportunity to maybe provide some closure or just to do some things you didn't have the opportunity to do at the time?

FS: You know, you'd like everything you do to be sort of novelistic and [have] a perfect construction to it, you know, beginning, middle and an end. But in television, that's not possible, at least, it wasn't possible for us. We thought we were going to do 5 years and then it became 7 years and then it became 9 years. I don't know how many people know, but the last 3 years of the show we had to write and shoot the finale not knowing if it was the end of the series. So, you know, it was sort of jumping forward those last 3 years. So it was as perfect as we could make it under those circumstances, under the constraints of commercial television. Perfect...as we knew how to do it, so I feel good about everything we did that was possible. But, I don't look at this as getting closure because I think we did sort of close that chapter as best as we could when the series ended. I just think these are great characters...these are great stories...and there is something else to say or something new to say or it wouldn't be very interesting for us.

Q: What sort of challenges are there in making this story more cinematic as opposed to [episodic]?

FS: Well it's interesting because the show always tried to be cinematic every week and we always thought in terms of pictures and telling stories in pictures. And the first movie we really did think a lot of how we could take of the bigger canvas and money and all that. And honestly, that was less of a concern this time around. This is a more intimate film. It's more, as I've said, centered on the characters so *it is* cinematic. It does have a lot of creepy, disturbing images as you'd expect.

Q: Was this an idea you had for the series or was this always an idea you wanted for the big screen?

FS: I think the reason this X-File appealed to us is because it was not anything that had happened in the series. It was challenging, I have to say, after 202 hours to find something that wasn't done. That isn't to say there aren't elements... there are in any supernatural thriller, there's going to be elements that you can say, "Well this is sort of like that, this is sort of like that." But the fundamental idea is different than anything done in the show. But what we also wanted was an X-File that, however fractured, it could serve as a mirror to Mulder and Scully. And we were looking for a case that could expose things about them. And that's what this story is about.



Q: Are there things in this film that set it up for a sequel or is this a self-contained story?

FS: It's a self-contained story and if this were the end of The X-Files, it would be just fine. You're not going to be left like, you know, it's not like Empire Strikes Back, you know, what's next? But it certainly leaves open the possibility of more films.

Q: If the franchise continues, will it run into that 2012 date at the series' finale?

FS: Yeah, I've thought about that too and I hope we have that problem to deal with. (laughter)

Q: Will we see an alien invasion movie with Mulder and Scully?

FS: Anything's possible. (laughter)

Q: Would this movie be very different if there had not been a writer's strike?

FS: No, it wouldn't. We rushed to finish the last set of revisions on the script, but I gotta say they were pretty minor. But we did, we turned in revisions like an hour before the strike began. But nothing has come in the months we were filming during the strike where we felt like, "Damn, I wish the strike wasn't on, we could change it." We really shot it pretty much to match it.

Q: What have you been up to since the show ended? What else is in the works?

FS: There are a number of other projects [Chris Carter] and I want to do that we haven't announced yet. But there are other things we'd like to do. We did write a script together that has not been made. It was an adaptation of book called "Philosophical Investigation." Then I did "Robbery Homicide Division" with Michael Mann for CBS. I did a reimagining of "Night Stalker" for ABC. And I've been writing feature scripts on my own, as well.

Q: Do you have another TV show?

FS: I just produced a pilot called Samurai Girl that ABC Family is going, I think it's being announced today.

Q: Is that animated?

FS: No it's live action. It's sort of like a graphic novel. It's got a lot of martial arts in it.

Q: Can you describe your working relationship with Chris [Carter]?

FS: I have to say, from the very beginning, we just had a really unusual connection, a creative connection. We spent a lot of hours just talking about life and from talking about life and ideas we'll come up with stories or things we want to talk about and that's what happened with this movie. We spent days just talking before we even tackled how we were going to tackle the story. And the ideas we talked about on the very first day we met over coffee at Pete's in Brentwood, California, ended up being the heart of what this film is because both of us want...we're like teenage boys in a way...we want that super popcorn experience of being entertained and grossed out and freaked out and we want that really visceral entertainment experience The X-Files is capable of providing. Then, we also want it to be about something and to have an idea. That's what makes all of that worth experiencing. And so, that's part of the fun collaborating with him is that we enjoy talking about these ideas and finding ways to make them entertaining.

Q: How will this film separate itself from the glut of supernatural-thrillers and horror films on the market today?

FS: I have to say, honestly, we really didn't look at where X-Files fits or versus Hills Have Eyes or Saw or any other of the sort of scary or horror films that are out there. We just really approached it on its own terms, thinking this is what, these are who these characters are, these are the types of stories they do and how can we make this the best, the most intense, movie it can be.



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