

Of Coming Home, an Embarrassment of Riches ... and, maybe, a Guy in a Kilt

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I was completely thrilled when I learned at the SERENITY press screening three weeks ago that Joss Whedon would be coming over for interviews and that, sure, I could get one. I didn't get the one-on-one I'd hoped for, but to make up for that, I received a phone call a couple of days before the interview that I was expected to interview Nathan Fillion and Summer Glau as well. Expected. Well, too bad, really. 'g' And that was the first round. Nathan and Summer getting up from the table they were sitting at, to shake hands with the four of us and ask for our names, sitting down again, and then Nathan melted the ice with this little standup act, asking Summer, what was it really like working with a talented actor like Nathan Fillion. At which point she pretended to have never heard of him. Giggles all around, and then we set to, well, it was fun, but it also was work after all. Also, in a nutshell, Summer is very, well, I guess the word is sweet, with a mischievous sense of humor and an awesome strength for such a petite person, and Nathan single-handedly manages to be disconcerting (maybe because he's so much taller than I'd envisioned/remembered him 'g') and completely reassuring at the same time.

Q: I told Nathan that I'd watched FIREFLY on DVD – immediate interruption: How'd you find out about it? I told him that folks on CompuServe had recommended it. So how did you get hold of it? Ordered it through amazon. Did you like it? Very, very, very much. Well, I'm glad to hear that – and as I got nearer to the last disc, there was this growing sense of mixed sadness and incredulity that this was supposed to be it. What had it been like for him?

Nathan (Heartfelt): “Oh, geeze. You know, we didn't get cancelled because we were doing a bad show. I was still telling everyone to hang in there, that we were doing a great job, that yeah, we were being the underdogs, but everything would be all right, when that very same day, we got cancelled. I really didn't see it coming. And I was not done with Malcolm Reynolds.”

(Oh. Did I mention that he went out of his way to make sure that Summer got her say as well?)

Summer: “I really thought this was magic. Part of me couldn't believe that it was going to end. But everything happens for a reason, and now here we are, and it's bigger and more beautiful.”

Q: (sort of): Jane Espensen writes in her anthology FINDING SERENITY (which, and I kid you not, you'll find right with the other self-help titles on amazon) that FIREFLY pretty much became a way of life for everyone involved?

Nathan: “FIREFLY encompassed my life. It became my life. For a time, I had no other life except FIREFLY, but I didn't feel like I was missing something. And now this movie is affirming my idea that we were doing something right.”

Summer: “Yes, it was like coming home. I'd never let go of the idea of coming back.”

Q: So, now what?

Nathan (who does have a thing or two in common with Mal after all): “Now this picture will make 200 million Dollars, mostly thanks to the German fan base, who will see it repeatedly, again and again and drag along all their friends, and then we'll make three more – which sounds strange for a trilogy, because it's four ...”

Q: Was it difficult getting back into that role?

Nathan: "Not at all, because we'd kept hanging out together. What was strange was seeing Summer coming out of a trailer dressed as River, or Jewel as Kaylee, so that was a reunion. I missed the characters so much, I really missed them. It was good seeing them. Also, the show was about learning about the characters. With SERENITY, we hit the ground running. All the homework had been done, and we were ready, eager and waiting."

Q: Would you compare the character of Mal to Han Solo?

Nathan: "He's like Han Solo minus the charm. If Han Solo had been kicked around by the Empire a bit more, he'd have been more like Mal. Mal gets his ass kicked and kicked and kicked, and that's what I like about him, he won't lay down."

Q: Speaking of a reunion, you'll have to live without two of the characters in the sequels.

Nathan: "Are you going to spoil this for people? [Insert collective NO!!!] Joss Whedon serves the narrative; he serves the story. If you're saying that this group of people are willing to lay down their lives for this idea, and then nobody dies, what's the sense? Unless there's a sacrifice, unless somebody lays down their life, it means nothing."

Summer: "It was so hard, because as friends we got to love the characters, but I think it makes the movie so much more powerful."

Speaking of friends – Nathan: "I have a very close circle of friends. You want to get in, you have to wait for someone to die." To Summer: "You're on the inside, you don't have to kill anybody." Summer, without even blinking: "I know how."

Q: Do you think some of the fans take SERENITY too seriously?

Summer: "We're incredibly attached to those characters. You do have to put your whole heart into it as actors, we love it all the way. We don't take ourselves too seriously as actors, but we take the movie seriously. And we surely can't criticize the fans for their intense love, because we wouldn't be here without them."

Nathan: "And then, in the states there are all those fans that wear those goofy Jayne hats. These are fans that don't take themselves seriously."

Q: (to Summer, who pretty much did all her stunt work herself, no strings – or wires – attached): You've worked as a ballet dancer before. Did you always want to become an actress, or was that an accident?

Summer: "When I started dancing, I had a gift for it. Not until I got injured did I think of switching. When I first came to L.A. I didn't tell anybody that I was a dancer because I was afraid they'd think that I was a dancer pretending to become an actress. Then this role of a ballerina [in the ANGEL episode "Waiting in the Wings"] came up, and that was it, and then I started working with Joss – and here I am." At which point the publicist came in, asking, "are you fine?" Which obviously is PR speak for, "are you finished yet, because if not, too bad".

Nathan (with the blankest of looks): "Are we ...?"

And so we got herded to the next room, where a very jet-lagged, very brave Joss Whedon was waiting for us. Still able to crack jokes, though.

Q: Was it difficult to get the actors back to do this film?

Joss: "Yes, I pretty much had to blackmail them. That was easy, though, because they're all murderers ... Well, we'd always been in touch, and I'd promised everyone I'd do everything to make this possible, so this was a group effort from beginning to end ... and some blackmail ..."

Q: There's a SERENITY comic book as well?

Joss: "Well, it contains the bridges from the show to the movie, and it was supposed to be for the die-hard fans. But I cannot stress enough, you don't have to see the show to see the movie ... and they're all murderers ..."

Q: You've done comic books before, on Buffy, and the X-Men, and your next project on the big screen is going to be a comic book adaptation as well. What's the fascination with comic books as a storytelling format?

Joss: "I grew up reading comic books, and I have a love for them that is unquenchable, and they absolutely affect the way that I tell stories and the way I shoot, they affect my visual style as well as my writing [at which point it's six in the afternoon, and church bells start ringing outside], and there I might stop, but then I think, oh, it's not TV, there can be bells ... They are more or less the mythology of our age. The closest thing that we have to a genuine myth in this century is Batman. Kids don't believe in Santa Claus anymore, but they still believe in Batman. It's no longer being marginalized, that's why there's so much interest, why I get to do all this stuff and why they let me make Wonder Woman, which is really exciting – but for me, that's just the language I speak; I've always loved, loved, loved comic books, ever since they were 20 cents an issue, what are they, three dollars now? I'm very old ..."

Q: Nathan Fillion told us that this movie was going to make 200 million dollars and that there were going to be three more?

Joss: "That Nate. This movie will make hundreds of dollars ... Well, it's still early, and that's classic for this particular project [switching voice to DRAMA tone], it's been NOTHING BUT A BATTLE for five years. [whispers] God. I hate this movie ... It all depends on how it does in the coming weeks. Fact is, I love this movie, and I've gotten a very good response from people, and we're waiting for the second weekend, not for it to blow you away, but to stay strong, not the 50% drop-off that the blockbusters have. You know, I've got enough closure making this movie, I will live either way – as long as I don't actually end up costing Universal money, which would make me feel guilty, because they were willing to take a chance with this (and, you know, since this is a Sci-Fi movie, it cannot possibly win an Oscar), I will be happy. But if I get to make sequels, I'll be happier, because [mystery man voice] I've got some cool ideas about Book's backstory."

Q: (See, Pam? I did ask. And I really love this answer.): So, how could you kill those two characters, and how are you going to bring them back?

Joss: "I would say the answer to the first one is, blithely, and the answer to the second one is, legitimately."

Q: This movie doesn't look like a blown-up TV series, it has the look of a real feature film. What was the difference in making the two?

Joss: "There are two things. The main difference is in fact money, and we were able to do some things that we wouldn't have been able to do on TV. The other thing, which is much more important, is Jack Green. David Boyd for the show was extraordinarily

talented, but Jack Green ... is Jack Green. He can take two lights where other people take 35, he can move faster than a lot of DPs work in TV, and at the same time he's the jolliest man I've ever met. Bringing that energy is also very important, because the DP runs the crew, and so with the star and the director, he's one of the triangle of energy. Those three people are the most important for keeping the energy solid, so between him and Nathan they could offset the fact that I'm a total prick. Jack made things look extraordinary. I can't say enough about this man."

Q: So, will you use him again on Wonder Woman?

Joss: "I absolutely intend to use him again, but I can't say on what. Wonder Woman is going to be a huge studio thing that's going to have a lot of powerful voices in it, so SERENITY is a step up, and Wonder Woman is another step up in terms of power, the power I actually have."

Q: What was the difference for you, as a storyteller, between (presumably) having all the time in the world on TV and having to pack it all into a two-hour movie?

Joss: "Oh, yeah. There were some differences, but I can't remember what they are ... It was really, really, really difficult for me, because the problem was the embarrassment of riches that I had, the problem was that I had so many interesting people that I couldn't find the time to do all the things that I wanted to do. I had to create a real shorthand for who everybody was and how they felt about each other, and that's tough. There are a few things that fell by the wayside from the show. The relationship between Kaylee and Inara was gorgeous on the show, and they never speak to each other in the film. I had Inara put a hand on Kaylee's shoulder during a fight, so you could remember they were friends. Simon and Jayne were hilarious on the show; here they're almost polite to each other. What's good about the embarrassment of riches is that it gives the movie more texture; everybody in this movie has a reason for being there, it's full of life and the energy of humanity, and that's sort of what it's about. And so, ultimately, the thing that was the most difficult was the most glorious as well."

Q: Didn't this shortage of time sometimes also force you to do very powerful things, like the exchange between Mal and Zoe while they're putting the ship back together, and he asks her if "she" will fly?

Joss: "Did Nathan tell you about that? No? Well, Nathan is extremely meticulous and very, very bright, and he always thinks about his character. Then Gina and I are talking about that scene, and she says Zoe is not talking about the ship, we're talking about me, and he says, 'WHAT? What? Really? Oh my God, I totally missed that.' It went completely over his head, and we laughed at that, That's Nathan. [lowers voice] Murderer. That's something that would be in any of my work. Don't wear it on your sleeve, keep it hidden, keep it within the confines of the way they would relate."

Q: So, why the faible for characters with special gifts?

Joss: "Because I've read way too many comic books. The thing is, SERENITY in a way is a way to get away from that fantasy element, and yet there's River, who is not unlike Buffy, in terms of being a superhero and a preternaturally good fighter, and she has a superpower, she's actually psychic. That's a real Sci-Fi element. You could look at this whole group as a group of superheroes. Wash is an incredible pilot; Kaylee really is a genius mechanic, everybody has got something that makes them a little bit extraordinary, and I think that's ultimately why people dig on this stuff so hard – well, maybe I should speak English because you have to translate this – I think why people like the stories so much, these characters who are so flawed and so human and so down-to-earth are still heroes, they're bigger than life, they're a little bit cooler, a little bit

funnier, even the dumb ones, and that confluence of the mundane and the heroic is the center of all my work. It's basically saying, you guys are heroes. Because all I'm ever saying is, life is really hard, and you get through it as a decent, active human being, and you're a pretty awesome hero, man. And that's something that people like to hear."

Q: Do you let your actors influence the story?

Joss: "What do you think I'm going to say? I'll let them do a line. Nathan, in this picture, where he says, 'faster, faster, FASTER would be better', and I said, why do I even write this stuff, you can just do it. But, no. I never let them make any suggestions. Actually, sometimes I do, because it's fun, for then I can say, actually, the studio insists that I write it. You know, this is my job, it's to figure out what they're going to do. It is collaboration, it becomes that if you're paying attention. On a TV show you eventually have to start listening to the actors. What are they good at, what are they like? If you know them, that's going to bleed into it, and if you look at something like Buffy, Giles got hipper, Willow got sexier – everybody started being cooperative themselves because you listen to them. So with SERENITY, we'd work-shopped the characters for fifteen episodes, so I knew what they were interested in, what they were bringing to the party. But when it comes to writing the story, if someone came up with an idea that's usable, it's not that I wouldn't use it, it's that I'd be shy to do it. Jewel always said, I want to be pregnant in the sequel, and Gina's already said, I probably will be pregnant, and Jayne wants to wear a kilt, he really does, and God bless him, why not?"

Q: Would you ever consider going back to TV, developing a new show from scratch?

Joss: "I have ideas for shows, and I'd love to. I adore television. I would like to become so powerful that, when I go back, they let me stay for at least one season."