

'Sarah Connor Chronicles': 'T3' Rebooted

No Arnold Schwarzenegger! No writers! No problem!

A franchise is reborn with the launch of Fox's "Terminator" series. The cyborg's latest mission: To save all of mankind. Or at least the TV season.

By Benjamin Svetkey

There are lots of breakables on the set of Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles. Doors made of paper-thin balsa, cement walls that crumble like peanut brittle, windows that shatter with a tap. When you're filming a show about unstoppable killer robots from the future — even made-for-TV ones that don't speak with an Austrian accent — it pays not to get too emotionally attached to the scenery. "Terminators don't have a lot of finesse," notes 26-year-old Summer Glau, who stars as a teenage cyborg on Fox's new series based on the movies that made Arnold Schwarzenegger a superstar. (No, he won't "be back" for the TV show.) "There's not a lot of technique to the way they fight. They destroy whatever is in their way. They kill whatever they see."

Viewers are hoping Terminators can be saviors as well, for the wasteland these machines now roam is not a post-apocalyptic future but the current writers' strike. It's hasta la vista for favorites like Desperate Housewives, Heroes, CSI, and 24 — the show that was supposed to act as a Monday-night companion for Sarah Connor (premiering Jan. 13) before the walkout in November put those plans in cryogenic freeze. But as we've seen so many times before, there's no stopping these big metal guys: Writers had already turned in nine of the 13 scripts ordered for Sarah Connor's first season by the time the strike rolled around — enough dialogue to keep fresh episodes in circulation until March 3.

It is not only the fate of a network and millions of content-starved viewers at stake. The show's creators hope that a successful run of Sarah Connor will help the launch of another round of Terminator movies (Terminator Salvation: The Future Begins is slated to arrive in theaters in 2009). But as Sarah Connor herself knows all too well, you have to succeed in the present to ensure the future. Picking up the plotline from the first two Terminator movies, the TV installment will carry on with the story of a mother and son on the run from automaton assassins sent by a sentient computer — Skynet — trying to wipe out humankind. "It takes place just after the second Terminator movie," explains 20-year-old Thomas Dekker, who plays young John Connor, savior-of-mankind-in-training. "It's a continuation of Eddie Furlong's character — we sort of ignore Nick Stahl's in T3 — only he's in a darker, more mature place now. He's time-traveled [to 2007] and has this Terminator helping him and he's struggling with how he feels about her. She's a Terminator, but she's a Terminator that looks — let's face it — like Summer Glau."

He's also got a mom who looks like Lena Headey. Taking over for Linda Hamilton is the 34-year-old British actress best known to American moviegoers as Queen Gorgo in the Grecian action flick 300. "I saw the first Terminator movie on television when I was a teenager — it scared the hell out of me — but I hadn't seen the second until Thomas got me to watch it with him," she confesses. "But I'm not doing a carbon copy of Linda Hamilton's performance. You can't do the same sort of performance for a TV show that you would in a movie — it'd be boring." Although, she adds, "we did do one flashback to a scene in T2 when the character is in a mental hospital. That was fun. That was my favorite so far."

Today, on a sunny afternoon in November, inside a soundstage in Burbank, they're not shooting anything nearly so interesting. Nobody smashes through a plate glass window or tears a car door off its hinges, and there's no sign of any bad Terminators at all. Instead, Glau (who's done sci-fi before, playing River Tam in Joss Whedon's Firefly/Serenity) and Dekker (who has a sci-fi credit too, as Zach on Heroes) perform a scene in which their characters meet between classes in a hallway at their high school.

Not exactly an adrenaline ride. After they finish, Dekker steps outside to talk about "the vibe" of the show. "It's got a lot of influences," he says. "There's *The Fugitive*, with the characters being chased and hunted every week. But there's also *Twin Peaks*, with new developments every episode about how one thing is connected to something else. We're all trying to solve this mystery."

You don't have to be a self-aware supercomputer to spot the obvious temporal paradox in all of the above. In 2003's *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, it was revealed that Sarah Connor had died of leukemia. Also, at the end of T3, civilization ends in a nuclear holocaust. But pay no attention to such minor metaphysical technicalities (although Connor's cancer will be addressed in episode 2). "This show completely diverges from the T3 timeline," explains consulting producer James Middleton, waving away the contradictions. "We're not trying to mesh the mythology of the movies with the mythology of the TV show. In T2 there's a famous line: 'There's no fate but what we make for ourselves.' So what we've done in the pilot is make a new fate for Sarah by giving her an escape hatch in the form of a time machine that brings her to [2007]. Essentially, this show is our version of T3."

Middleton says the idea for the series came to him while he was working on that first version of T3 as a senior exec at C2 Pictures, the company that made Schwarzenegger's last hurrah as an android action hero (and that's also producing *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*). "After T3 came out, I started to miss Sarah," he says. "I kept thinking, How could we bring her back? Animation? Another movie? But a TV show seemed like the best way to tell her story. How this woman lives day to day while facing threats from the future and being chased by law enforcement and trying to raise a son. You need a TV show to tell that sort of story."

You also need writers: people like Josh Friedman (the guy Steven Spielberg hired to co-write his 2005 adaptation of *War of the Worlds*) and veteran showrunner John Wirth (*The District*, *Ghost Whisperer*). On the set at the moment, though, the canvas chairs reserved for those people remain empty, along with several others. Their former occupants are not far away; in fact, you can wave to some of them as you pass the picket line while driving through the studio gates. "One day the writers just weren't on the set anymore," Headey says, describing the impact of the strike. "Nobody turned up. It's been pretty confusing without them. I find myself lost without Josh — he's the one who knows all the timelines and all the secrets. When you have a question, he's the guy you go to." Adds Glau, "It was hard enough when the writers weren't striking — we were always asking them to come to the set to answer questions. But now the writers are completely absent. It's been an adjustment."

The strike hasn't required many adjustments to that new *Terminator* movie — a script has been ready for two years — although a lawsuit filed by the producers over distribution rights did hold things up for a while (MGM had been claiming it had contractual first crack at distributing, though now Warner Bros. will end up distributing; nobody is commenting on the deal that has presumably been worked out). In any case, the movie now seems ready to start filming in April. The idea, Middleton says, would be to set the plot shortly after Skynet had annihilated most of mankind, in that postapocalyptic future the previous movies (and now TV series) only hint at — you know, gleaming robot feet marching over mountains of human skulls. In this version of the *Terminator* timeline, Christian Bale will star as an older John Connor and McG (*Charlie's Angels*) will be behind the camera directing. If all goes according to plan, the accelerated production should wrap before June, just in time to miss the actors' strike that may be looming next summer.

If there is one upside to the current strike, it's that the lack of original on-air competition should help *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* pop on the schedule this winter. Other than a handful of other new series (ABC's *Cashmere Mafia*, NBC's *Lipstick Jungle*) and returning

shows (Lost, Medium, Jericho), the broadcast airwaves will be mostly clear of scripted fare these next few months. "That's sort of like saying, 'You're the prettiest girl in the bar,'" sniffs Headey. "But yeah, that's true. The show probably will get noticed more."

Back on the set in Burbank, an evil Terminator has finally materialized and is looking for John Connor. As fate would have it, the robot just misses the boy as he marches stiffly through the high school hallway. He's not at all like that older, more familiar Cyberdyne T-800 model. For one thing, he's wearing a business suit, not a leather motorcycle jacket and dark shades. For another, he speaks with a decidedly American accent. "The challenging part about playing a Terminator," says Garret Dillahunt (Deadwood), the actor chasing Sarah and John Connor in this episode, "is learning to divert all your energy from your face. You watch Schwarzenegger do it in the movies and you realize how much time he must have worked on it. It's not as easy as it seems." Especially when you have the weight of both a franchise and a strike-saddled network on your cybernetic shoulders.

From Entertainment Weekly's website:

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