



ROAD TRAIN: HORROR IN THE OUTBACK

Director DEAN FRANCIS puts his own dark, twisted spin on the Australian horror genre with the whiteknuckle death ride that is *ROAD TRAIN*. BY ERIN FREE

"The very premise of *Road Train* – kids stranded in the middle of nowhere – could only really work in Australia," says director Dean Francis. "The outback is so vast, and you're sometimes hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest town. It's easier to perish in the Australian outback than it is in America." After helming a number of short films, Francis tells a grim, foreboding tale of middle-of-nowhere terror with *Road Train*, which follows four teenagers being menaced by a giant, malevolent truck on the stark, deserted roads that pierce the Australian outback. Already picked up in the US through a new, multi-platform distribution system initiated by famous horror movie magazine *Fangoria*, *Road Train* stars exciting up-and-coming Australian actors Xavier Samuel (*The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*) and AFI nominee Sophie Lowe (*Beautiful Kate, Blessed*), as well as Bob Morley (*Home And Away*) and *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*'s Georgina Haig. "One of my key influences was *The Shining*," Francis replies when FILMINK asks if he had any particular cinematic touchstones while shooting *Road Train*. "Stanley Kubrick's use of the moving camera in that picture creates extraordinary suspense, and there's a constant sense of a malevolent force, which you never see, but you certainly feel the presence of. I was also influenced by *The Hitcher*, in terms of a visual style and very bold use of camera moves, and also by Alexandra Aja's wonderful remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*, because it so perfectly captures the innate terror of the environment

and uses voyeuristic camera angles so effectively."

A veteran short feature filmmaker, Francis found an unconventional way of fighting the butterflies that slammed around his stomach just prior to the shoot. "I kept reminding myself that the total duration of all the short films that I had directed was at least two features' worth," he laughs. "The challenge was mainly staying focused on the core priorities for the duration of the shoot. I'd never done a film with this many stunts, but that became one of the most enjoyable and creative parts of the process."

Another challenge for Francis was shooting in the remote Flinders Ranges, which has ironically been experiencing something of a filmmaking flood recently, with Glendyn Ivin's *Last Ride* and Rachel Ward's *Beautiful Kate* both filming there. "It's a cliché, but South Australia can be a creepy place," Francis smiles. "In fact, people only once removed from the crew were indeed attacked by random psychopaths while we were up there shooting! The natural beauty of the place is breathtaking though; it's a perfectly cinematic setting."

Combined with the natural grandeur of the film's shooting locations, Francis' on-the-money casting choices of Xavier Samuel and Sophie Lowe have undeniably given *Road Train* an enviable leg-up. "When Xavier Samuel auditioned, his star potential was written all over him," the director enthuses. "When he told us that he was trying out for *Twilight*, we knew straight away that he'd be the perfect young vampire. He's such a disciplined actor. He has a



drive to get it right, and he really knows how to work the camera. Sophie Lowe was also unknown when I cast her, but I'd heard very good things about her. She puts so much of herself into her work, and has a fantastic ability to recall her own emotions to deliver chillingly truthful work. Bob Morley and Georgina Haig are incredible too. The cast and I really became like family, and we're all very close friends. I was so grateful for their support, because working in the freezing cold desert on a low budget film for five weeks is pretty challenging stuff! I'm sure that we'll see these guys on screens for many years to come!"

Road Train will be released in late 2010. ■