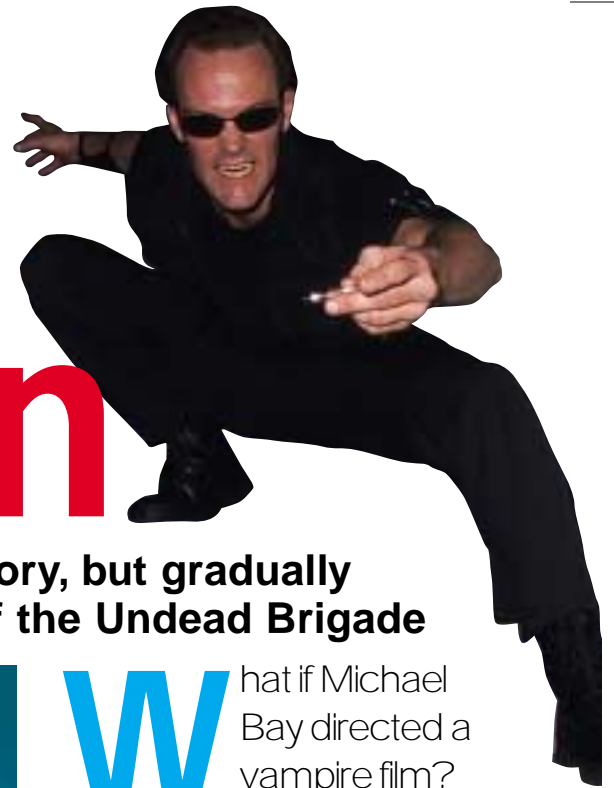


Vampire Evolution



Dark Commandos began as a tragic love story, but gradually transformed into the kick-ass adventures of the Undead Brigade



Comic Book Spin-Off:
This artwork was done for the cover of issue #1 of the *Dark Commandos* comic, which can be found at www.darkcommandos.com.

What if Michael Bay directed a vampire film?

If the director of such films as *Bad Boys*, *The Rock*, *Armageddon* and *Pearl Harbor* did choose to turn his focus to the undead, the resulting film would undoubtedly be along the lines of something like "Vampire Marines" – a team of young, good-looking, kick-ass vampires working on assignment for the U.S. government.

At least that's the conclusion that Tom Sanders and Edward Gross came to when they turned that particular question over in their minds and created *Dark Commandos*, the live-action Internet series that can be found at www.darkcommandos.com. The show, airing in three-to-six minute installments, chronicles the adventures of the Undead Brigade as they take on the missions that no one else can handle.

"The idea of a team of vampire commandos was originally Ed's," says Sanders, "and I have to tell you, when I first heard it, I had my doubts. Ed's always been into vampires, but I honestly felt that the genre had been beaten to death. But we started tinkering with it and, as usually happens when he and I start writing something, sending scenes and drafts back and forth, fleshing out the characters and developing a storyline. We both got excited about the material and pretty soon it was all either of us were thinking about."

Dark Commandos began existence as a script called *Millennium Rising*. That story told the tale of New York Detective David Manning and his struggle against a blood cult headed by one Timothy Jenson, whose ultimate plan was to trigger a war between humanity and his vampire army. Additionally, Manning had to deal with the return of his late wife – a victim of *Millennium Rising* – who has returned as a vampire and who conceivably holds the ultimate clue on how to stop Jenson.

"We really saw it as a tragic love story set against the backdrop of an epic struggle for the survival of the human race," says Gross with a smile.

"Granted we were aiming high."

Things were progressing well, until the aforementioned references to Michael Bay and Vampire Marines entered the picture. At that moment, *Dark Commandos* was born. Manning's story was temporarily shelved (to be resurrected later in the show's run) and a group of all new characters were introduced instead.

GIVING BIRTH TO THE UNDEAD BRIGADE

Dark Commandos in its current form on the Internet stars Justin Neal Thompson as team leader Non Agememnon Gage, who is over 500 years old. Transformed during the Crusades, he served the vampire

who turned him for several years, until the man's unrelenting brutality caused him to flee. Non survived on the run for the next several centuries, until an unexpected meeting with his progenitor resulted in Non being forcefully buried in Austria in the mid 1800s, where he was left – presumably forever. During World War II, however, the forces of the Third Reich discovered his amazingly preserved body and brought him to Hitler's top secret "Theosophic

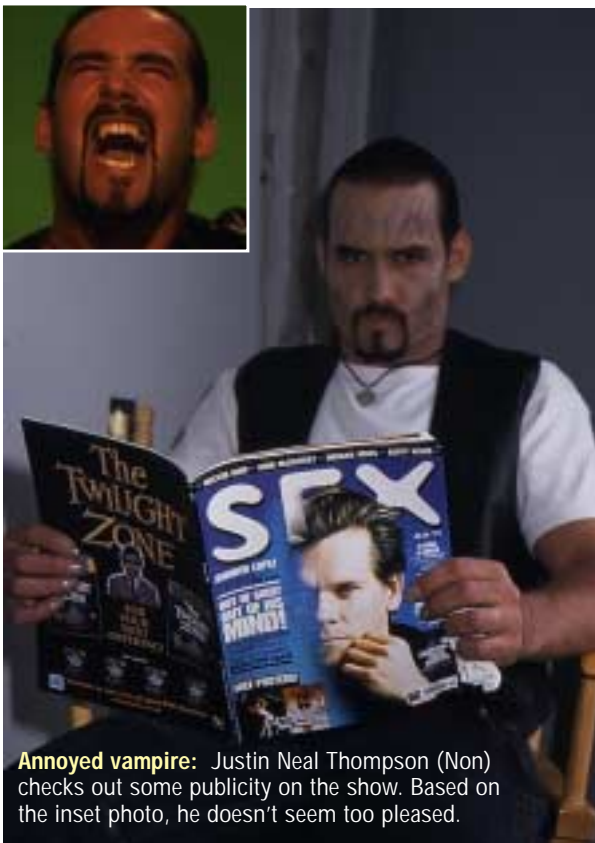
ening to contemplate.

Dreyfuss, second-in-command, is played by Bradley Upton. Turned during the Spanish-American War, Dreyfuss was actually on a suicide bid when he was attacked by a female vampire, suddenly finding himself cursed with eternal life. After years of self-imposed isolation, he emerged as a soldier of fortune, hiring out his skills mostly to Third World countries with little regard for his employer's stance. He never revealed to them what he was; they knew him only as an efficient covert leader and killer. It was in this capacity that he crossed paths with Non several times and was eventually persuaded to join the DC in the 1970s. Of the *Commandos*, Dreyfuss is the most resigned to what he is, wasting no energy debating the morality of killing to live.

Christopher Boicelli is cast as Ed "The Kid" Torin.

Chronologically, Ed is about 50, but physically (and some would say emotionally) he's in his 20s. His father was a friend of Non's and when Ed was dying in a Vietnam POW camp, Non went in and saved him the only way he knew how – by turning Ed into a vampire. The Kid desperately tries to hold on to his youthfulness. He embraces whatever is trendy at the moment, but it's a kind of desperate clinging rather than a real exuberance. Feeling he was cheated out of his youth, first by Vietnam and then by Non's life-saving "cure," Ed has a soft spot for children, particularly the abused. While his youthful idealism makes him a spirited fighter, it also leaves his emotions raw and his impulse control lacking. At the same time, in many ways Ed embraces what he is, and approaches vampirism as something of a super hero gig, serving as Robin to Non's Batman.

Amber Phillips is Sue Janic, the newest Commando. In her mid '20s, Sue is a top CIA agent who is persuaded by someone high up in mili-



Annoyed vampire: Justin Neal Thompson (Non) checks out some publicity on the show. Based on the inset photo, he doesn't seem too pleased.

Research" facility, where his blood was sampled by Nazi scientists who hoped to use it to create an undead army. Their experiments produced several hideous false starts, but Hitler's vision remained unrealized when American *Commandos* "rescued" Non, effectively drafting him into service. Despite what he is, Non remains a spiritual man who continues to practice his Catholic faith (a point emphasized in episode five). On the one hand, Non would love nothing more than final death, but in the back of his mind is the fear that he would be denied entrance into Heaven. The alternative is too fright-

tary intelligence to join the Undead Brigade. In Sue the audience witnesses the deconstruction of a human soul and its rebirth into the unnatural state of vampirism. Sue at first embraces this journey, as it seems to offer a path to the enlightenment she has long sought, but the transformation ultimately takes her to places darker than she could have ever imagined. Even as Non privately searches for his own redemption, Sue plunges headlong in the opposite direction, prodded along by Ed's well-meaning, but ill-advised companionship. In many ways, Sue's journey will be the audience's into this bizarre world of the undead.

"What's cool about *Dark Commandos*," says Sanders, who also serves as the show's director, editor and special effects supervisor, "is that although on the surface it is very much a comic book concept, with larger than life heroes and villains and lots of fantastic elements, within that there are fully-realized characters dealing with all kinds of very human, dramatic themes. You have to remember, every one of our vampire characters was at one time a mortal human being, and that part of them is still there, lurking inside, hungering for the life they've left behind. Each character deals with that basic conflict in a different way."

Generally speaking, notes Gross, vampires have been portrayed as soulless killers who seem to take great pleasure in the horror that they inflict upon their victims. "Certainly every once in a while we're presented with a sympathetic vampire," he says, "whether it be Jonathan Frid as Barnabas Collins on *Dark Shadows*, Geraint Wyn Davies as Nick Knight in *Forever Knight* or, of course, David Boreanaz as Angel, but usually they don't get too hung up on the morality of their actions. We're hoping to take a slightly different approach in this show. While we're not going to have Non, for example, collapse in a corner and bemoan his actions, he'll nonetheless pause to reflect on the morality of what he's done. It's important to remember that this is a guy who, in the back of his mind, fears

final death because he's absolutely convinced that, in the end, there's a one-way ticket to Hell with his name on it."

Sanders looks to the original *Star Trek* as a dramatic model in the sense of using the world of vampirism as a means of addressing some of society and humanity's problems. "We're able to look at very human issues," he explains. "Things like morality, love, religion, death, youth, beauty, obsession, ego, and we make these things as compelling and as powerful as we want, and yet remain approachable by dealing with these subjects in the context of larger than life characters and situations."



Michael J. McPhillips as Non's spiritual confidante, Father Paul.

IN PRODUCTION

Filming of the first eight episodes took place in mid-October of 2000, with Sanders leading cast and crew through four grueling – yet satisfying – days of production. The total budget for these episodes was \$15,000, which is fairly impressive when considering that episode two features an all-out chase as members of the DC attempt to rescue the kidnapped daughter of the Vice President of the United States.

"*Dark Commandos* was designed from the beginning with computer graphics in mind," Sanders explains.

"Nearly every shot includes some form of CG element, whether it's a virtual set, a graphic overlay or some kind of digital image manipulation. You could describe *DC* as the inverse of *Roger Rabbit*. In that film, animated characters inhabited the real world of our universe. In *DC*, flesh and blood 'human' characters inhabit a computer-generated fantasy world. While that sounds expensive, it's actually the most affordable way we can tell the story we want to tell. Some of the sets we've designed were budgeted at upwards of \$100,000 if we were to build them in physical space. On the computer it's only the artist's time. Plus, it frees the artist to be as creative as he can be, so it's a better experience for everyone involved.

"We were blessed to be supported by a dedicated and talented crew," he continues. "Our cinematographer, Bodo Holst, for example, brought to the production not only a talented creative eye and a resilient spirit, but a team of hard-working technicians who helped us squeeze everything we could out of every dollar. One of my most gratifying discoveries was our new makeup designer, Katt Phillips. She and her team, including Claire A. Nach and sculptor Dominika Waclawiak, threw themselves into *Dark Commandos* and helped us realize a very cool and distinctive look for our vampires. It's one of the aspects of the show I'm most proud of."

Another surprising aspect of the production for the show's creators was the speed at which the four cast members virtually became the *Dark Commandos*.

"Every time Tom has completed post-production on an episode," notes Gross, "I've been absolutely amazed at how this cast has encapsulated their characters. I watch their performances and I listen to the dialogue coming out of their mouths, and I'm truly amazed at the way they've managed to capture the nuances of what we intended. With every episode I feel like a kid on Christmas morning."

"The actors have become insepa-

nable from their characters,” adds Sanders. “The personalities and presence of Bradley Upton and Chris Boicelli have already inspired aspects of their respective storylines. And Amber Phillips has been quietly working behind the scenes to prepare her character, Sue Janic, for her initiation into the team, which gets underway in episode six. The supporting cast is interesting, too. Timothy Jenson, Non’s enemy and a growing threat as the storyline develops, is played by a versatile actor named Garrett Lambert, who immediately took to the character and wanted to know everything Ed and I could provide him about his background. Since we have spent the better part of a year developing these characters’ backstories, it’s very gratifying when the cast takes the initiative to integrate that information into their portrayals. Finding the right actor to portray Non’s spiritual mentor, Father Paul, proved an elusive goal, until we realized that the man for the job was already among us: Michael J. McPhillips, who is also an associate producer on the show, auditioned for the role of the Padre and it turned out to be a perfect fit.”

Technically speaking, *Dark Commandos* is a fairly sophisticated attempt for the Internet, and was, at the time, ahead of the curve of independent online entertainment.

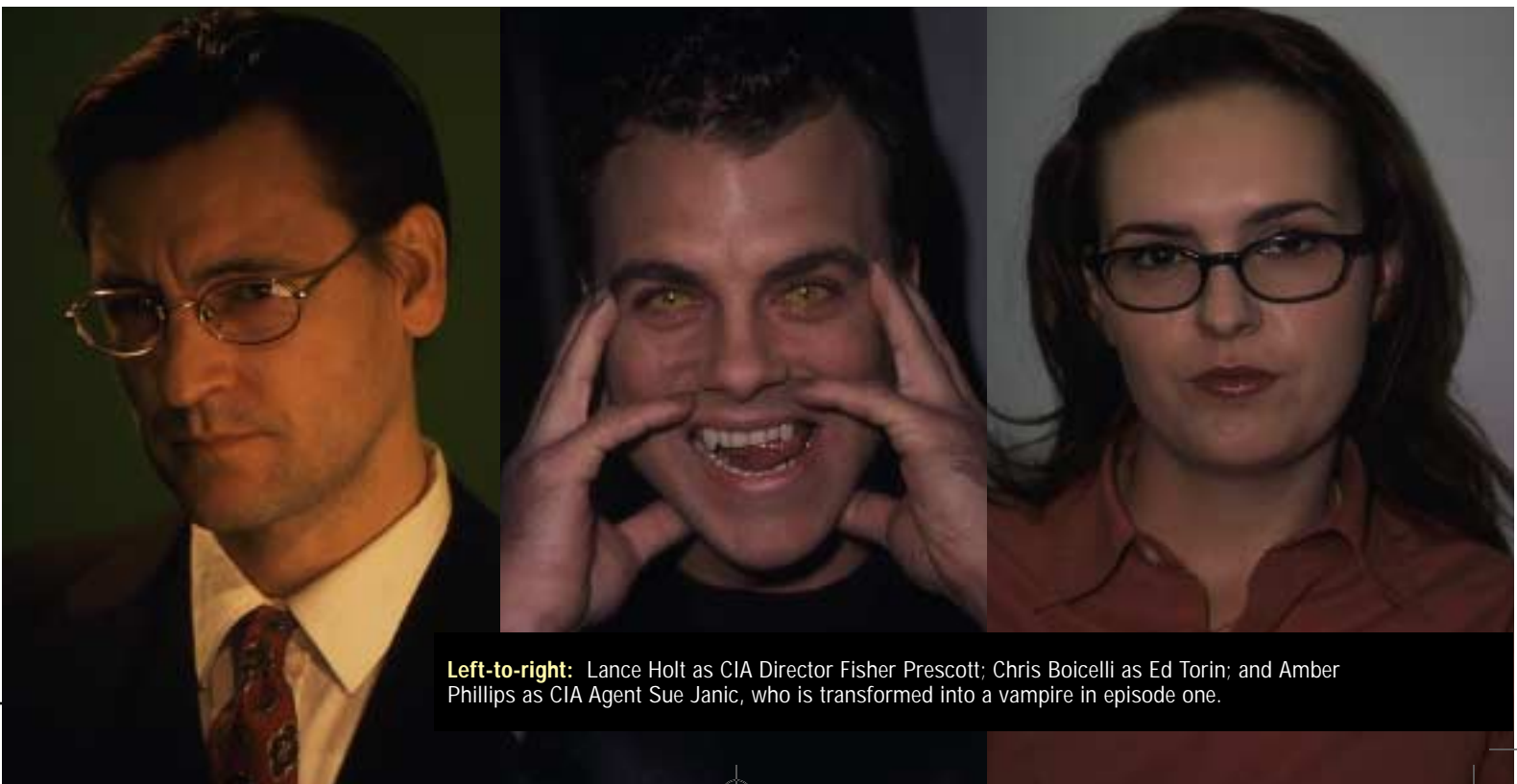
“We’re ahead of the curve partly because we have no money,” says Sanders. “In a couple of years, maybe less, as bandwidth on the Internet opens up, the big guns – the Hollywood movie studios and TV networks – are going to invade this market with big stars, big budgets and marketing muscle that’ll just be impossible to compete with – unless you’ve already got a strong foothold. We knew that if we were going to take a shot at this, we had to take it now, money or no money. Ed and I have been banging our heads against Hollywood’s doors for ten years. Spec scripts, meetings, agents, options, even a sale here and there. But as they say, ‘In Hollywood you can die of encouragement.’ Trouble is, we enjoyed the creative process so much, we pretty much had to keep writing if only for its own sake. And then this thing called the Internet came along and we started thinking maybe we didn’t have to depend on Hollywood to ‘discover’ us after all.”

Particularly gratifying to the duo is the fact that the audience is gradually discovering the show thanks largely to increasing mentions on a number of sites. “The coolest thing,” says Gross, “is that we came across a fan site devoted to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and – check it out –

Dark Commandos. Now *that* blew our mind.”

Although, relatively speaking, *Dark Commandos* is in the early stages of its run, the show has given birth to a number of spin-offs. First there is the original novel *Blood Sanction*, written by Jon Merz; an original comic book series, the first issue of which is previewed on the website; an anthology of original fiction that is development, a DVD version of the first group of episodes – collectively known as “The Pilot” – which have been edited together and includes additional footage; and, perhaps most exciting of all, a live action British spinoff series currently in pre-production in association with www.superteam.biz. All of which ties into one particular thought that struck Sanders during production.

“What was really amazing to me,” he says, “was being surrounded by a group of people for whom *Dark Commandos* had become an entity in its own right – greater than merely an idea created and shared by Ed and myself. Creative and technical crew members invested themselves in the project in a personal way, and when they expressed their belief in *Dark Commandos*, it suddenly seemed to take on a life of its own. That was an extremely gratifying experience.”



Left-to-right: Lance Holt as CIA Director Fisher Prescott; Chris Boicelli as Ed Torin; and Amber Phillips as CIA Agent Sue Janic, who is transformed into a vampire in episode one.