

Interview: Alex Proyas, Director of 'Knowing' With Nicolas Cage, Rose Byrne

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CHICAGO – “I want to make movies that touch people in unique ways and affect people in unique ways. And, you know, that’s what I’ve tried to do with this film.”

“[Knowing](#) [6]” director [Alex Proyas](#) [2] has defied categorization throughout his career. Sure, all of his movies are what could be called “dark” and there’s a sci-fi edge to most of them but there’s such a variety of scope in his films. From the massive budget of a film like “[I, Robot](#) [9]” to a more personal project like “[Garage Days](#) [10]” to the beloved cult flicks “[The Crow](#) [11]” and “[Dark City](#) [12]”. His newest work is “Knowing,” starring [Nicolas Cage](#) [7] and [Rose Byrne](#) [8], opening on Friday, March 20th, 2009.

Proyas recently sat down for a conference call to talk about his new blockbuster film, why he chose to write it, the trend of disaster-driven films, the spiritual side of his work, casting Nicolas Cage, and much more.



Director Alex Proyas on the set of *Knowing*, a Summit Entertainment release.

Image credit: Summit/Vince Valitutti

Getting an Oscar-winning actor in Nicolas Cage and a rising star like “[Damages](#) [13]”’s Rose Byrne for your film instantly raises its profile. Proyas revealed that he had always wanted to work with Cage and that they almost had several times in the past but schedules couldn’t be worked out. Nick reportedly read the script for “Knowing” and loved it, making this the perfect match.

“I think [Nick is] an incredibly versatile actor,” says Proyas. “That’s really why I’m such a fan of his work because he’s always different. He really embraces his characters and runs with them. And this is no different in that respect. I mean he’s created a very strong character, I think. And it’s not about Nick Cage, it’s about the character. And that’s really important I think. It’s an incredibly important thing for a director to know also that your leading actor understands what you’re trying to do in terms of the movie and is a collaborator with you. And we’re telling a story together which I think Nick was so great at.

“From a very early point when he first read the script he embraced this story and he really made it his own. He really felt it spoke to him as an individual. Just as I felt. We felt compelled to tell the story together and I think that really shows in the movie.”

"With Rose Byrne, Rosie is someone that I've known a very long time. We're quite good friends and we've - because we both come from Sydney in Australia so we've known each other for awhile now. And she's, again, someone that I've wanted to work with. And, you know, the character seemed perfect for her. And I was delighted that she was also available."

Proyas wrote "Knowing," something he likes doing because it makes him a deeper part of the process. "I like going into a movie with something that I feel is as well crafted as we can make it," Proyas said. "And that's often a result of ripping it apart and putting it back together again repeatedly. Because it's much easier to work stuff out at the script stage obviously than in the cutting room when you realize you've got, you know, structural problems or character issues or whatever can come up at that stage."



Director Alex Proyas on the set of *Knowing*, a Summit Entertainment release.

Image credit: Summit/Vince Valitutti

"So I get as involved as I possibly can. I mean, the process is always different every film. Some projects I initiate, others I come in at a later stage, like in the case of *Knowing*, and rewrite substantially. So it really every time is different. But I do certainly like to have as much involvement with the script as possible. I like to have as much involvement with every aspect of the movie process really. I think I wanted to have a sort of unique voice and it's got to come from someone so it might as well be me."

"*Knowing*" is about past and future tragedies and disasters. Naturally, the subject of 9/11 came up pretty quickly, but Proyas says that this script was written before those tragic events occurred.

But "*Knowing*" does follow a post-9/11 trend of disaster-driven movies, something that Proyas is keenly aware of with this project. He says, "I think when people live in uncertain times I guess it's something that we dwell upon and there's obviously something. We all know what the current potential doom scenarios are for our civilization. And I think everyone's genuinely concerned and movies are a reflection of that - a way of analyzing the situation in whatever dramatic form and helping us perhaps find a solution. Or at worse, prepare ourselves. So I think it really is a sign of the times."

Science fiction cinema has come a long way in just the time that Proyas has been making movies. The technology of special effects improves with each project. With "*Knowing*," it was the first time that Proyas shot a movie digitally. He had always tested the latest digital cameras but always went back to film.

"In this instance, I used a camera called a red camera which I was really impressed with it at an early stage. And that was a bit learning curve for me and for my entire crew but a really wonderfully exciting one. And we're very pleased with the results. So that definitely felt like I was back in film school for awhile. But in terms of the visual effects usually it's something that you can just build upon each time. There was certainly a major shift in the way we could do things if we used back when the effects became digitally based. But beyond that it's been a slow process. On every film there are moments when I go, "Oh, you can do that? Really? Wow, I didn't know that." It's usually a good thing. It usually means you can do something quicker and easier."



DP Simon Dugan (center left) and director Alex Proyas (center right) on the set of *Knowing*, a Summit Entertainment release.

Image credit: Summit/Vince Valitutti

The work of Proyas has been compared to Philip K. Dick, someone that he admires and loves, but not someone he consciously thought of with “*Knowing*” or even with “*Dark City*”. He openly admits that Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein and many more have inspired him as much as Dick, even if Philip is “always eternally inspirational to me.”

As for movies he admired, “I was a big fan of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The original *Star Trek* I used to watch in reruns quite a lot. So yeah, there was a bit of stuff around that stage. But, you know, I was also obviously into other types of movies because it was just not a very prevalent genre.”

With the tough economic times we face, filmmakers may have a harder time getting their films made but Proyas has words of advice - “Film equipment is becoming cheaper and more easy - more accessible to everybody. The red camera that I was talking about earlier they are actually developing, and I believe it’s going to be released very soon, a sort of, you know, a kind of domestic version of their camera which is a 3K camera which is something beyond what professional films are actually shot at these days anyway, which will be available for a few thousand dollars. And anyone will hopefully be able to afford to buy and make their own films. So I feel like that’s a great thing for young film makers right now.”

The story of a man with the knowledge of impending world disasters could be seen as a cautionary tale, but don’t expect a deep environment message. “*Knowing*” does have a spiritual side however. “For me, the movie is a spiritual question on the part of Nicholas Cage’s character,” Alex says. “He starts off believing that the universe is a meaningless place that functions on the basis of randomness and chaos and comes to realize that perhaps there is meaning to his life on earth. And that, to me, is a deeply spiritual aspect of the film.

“And, you know, it takes a very unexpected path to tell its story and again I feel like in current movie making where often you can see what’s going to happen. In the first ten minutes you know how it’s going to end. What I found refreshing about *Knowing* from when I first got involved with it is there is a course that it takes that I really believe will take people by surprise and take them to a hopefully very satisfying conclusion both dramatically and philosophically”



Nicolas Cage and Rose Byrne star in *Knowing*, a Summit Entertainment release.

Image credit: Summit/Vince Valitutti

Don't worry. Proyas himself doesn't believe in any of the end-of-the-world prophecies. As he says, "Prophecies come and go and we play with that in the movie. Nick's character being - he's a man of science in the film so he's the last guy who's going to jump on the prophecy bandwagon. And the numbers have to work pretty damn hard to convince him that something really is going on.

"He's not the guy who immediately starts to cry wolf. He's very analytical and he goes, "Okay, so if there's a piece of paper with all these numbers on it maybe someone has played some sort of a sick joke or maybe there's some other explanation. So he'll do everything to undermine the system and try and poke holes in it before he eventually has to admit to himself and to others that there truly is something going on. I think the rational mind tends to do that. The explanation for anything that seems inexplicable is always the most obvious thing. Go to that first and work through all those things before you have to admit to yourself there's something bigger going on, you know?"

What's Proyas doing next? He revealed that he's working on a project called "Dracula Year Zero" about the origins of the Dracula legend but he didn't reveal anything else about it.

But before then, Alex Proyas takes a minute to reflect on what he's taken away from *Knowing*. "Every movie you make makes an impact on you, particularly when you're trying to make movies that are meaningful to you as a person," Proyas says.

"You know, the movie's not just about entertaining an audience. I hope we can do that but it is about - it's a quest, you know, the characters are on a quest for meaning, as I've said before. And to a certain extent I think that's what I'm on a quest on and I think a lot of us are to understand the whys and wherefores of this life and the world we live in, you know."

"So I feel like it is part of that. We're lucky as film makers in that we can create worlds and we can then live in them for a period of time. And they start to feel very real to you when you're on the set, even when you've got crews and cameras and lots of stuff."

"You have to inhabit that world as a reality to a certain extent, just as an actor has to live in the skin of their character. We do that as directors in order to live in the skin of our - the reality that we've created because it's going to make it better if we do that. So it's kind of like, I suppose you could say one's method acting, the other one's method director, you know."

"And whether or not any of that rubs off on you as an individual as you come out the other end, yeah, probably. I guess it has to. But, you know, as a film maker it's an ongoing process from film-to-film"

See what rubs off on you from "Knowing" when it opens in theaters on March 20th, 2009. Come back on the 20th for the official HollywoodChicago.com review.

 [Check out a 22-image gallery of images from "Knowing".](#) [14]

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