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FIRST LIGHT JASON STONE



SXSW FILM INTERVIEW: JASON STONE ON HIS SCI-FI BREAKOUT 'FIRST LIGHT'

With only two features under his belt—2014's *The Calling* and now *First Light*, which premiered this weekend at SXSW—he's already established himself as a filmmaker who can work on wildly different scales for both storytelling and scope. Having cut his teeth on several acclaimed short films, including *Jay and Seth Versus the Apocalypse*, later expanded into the star-studded *This Is the End*, Stone has proven himself to be a director producing fascinating work that offers something unique to filmgoers.

I was able to have a short chat with Stone in the hectic days before SXSW kicked off, and we discussed *First Light*, his latest film, and his growth as a filmmaker. Having nurtured his passion project for some years, he finally gets to let it be seen by a wider audience, but that doesn't seem to phase him. Rather, like the film itself, he seems filled with hope and optimism about what the future has in store. If *First Light* has anything to say about it, chances are that future will be bright indeed.

First Light is the first feature that you've both written and directed. Was there a reason you chose to do that? Was this a particularly important project to you?

It's sort of been in my head for a long time, even before I made [*The Calling*]. It's something that started as a dream, strangely. That wasn't the story I ended up making, but it sort of set the stage for it. Over the course of the years that happened after that, I kind of kept it up because I knew there was something in there that I really wanted to get after. When I linked up with Chris [Ferguson] and Brian [Kavanaugh-Jones], the producers, I was pitching them sort of a broad version of what I had thought about for about six months or a year before that. They seemed to like the idea, so when I explored it and expanded it into the screenplay, I

was sort of obsessed with that world, and going after a story that tried to get at the idea of what happened like 5,000 years ago when human beings saw lights in the sky and called it angels or god or something like that. If we saw the same phenomena today, we would just call it UFOs or aliens. That was sort of the bedrock of what I was trying to get at.

Do you think it was easier or more difficult to put it all together knowing that you would be writing and directing?

I wouldn't call myself a writer/director exclusively. I really enjoy working on projects with collaborators. Everything I've done up until this movie had been something that I'd either written with someone else or was directing a script that was written entirely by somebody else that I was working on adapting to translate it to the screen. I think it was definitely a more daunting challenge because you don't have that second set of eyes in that same way that you get when you're working with a writer directly. When I'm on set as the writer/director, I have to check myself to make sure I'm getting everything I'm after. But it also gives you the flexibility and the freedom to do what I'm trying to get at emotionally and what I'm trying to get at narratively. It was a great experience all around. The people I was working with were great.

[...]

Watching the movie, there's this clear Spielbergian influence. Almost immediately, you can get a sort of Close Encounters vibe, and there's even a little bit of E.T. Were these conscious influences? Were there any other influences that you were working from?

It's funny, E.T. came up after I had written the script. It was brought while we were shooting The Scene because it became obvious that that's what I was channeling. I didn't deliberately set out to do a riff on that, although I'm obviously very influenced, as you can tell from the aesthetics and the feel of the movie. Those early 80s and late 70s films like Close Encounters and E.T. those are icons from my childhood. Obviously they had some impact on me. Just a curiosity of what could be out there when you look up at the stars. I've been obsessed with that even before I saw those movies and when I saw those movies it cemented that into my brain.

The references others saw were Cocoon and Upstream Color. I've actually never seen Cocoon and now I want to see it. Starman was another reference that someone told me. Brian, my producer, mentioned it when he read the script. I had actually not seen Starman either, and I got nervous when I watched it because I was like, Oh this does kind of feel in a similar vein. But I felt like it was far enough in the past and quite a different approach to the whole thing, to why things were happening the way they were. What the purpose of the story was. This was different enough that I didn't get too stoooped by it.

We all bring our past film experiences and past emotional experiences to the table. Definitely, Spielberg's filmmaking is an influence.

Both of these kids, the main characters in First Light feel very real and well developed. One thing I kept wondering while watching the movie was if you had drawn these from own experiences. Where they based on anything that you grew up with or people that you knew?

Sean, Theo's character, is actually influenced by the kid who played basically himself in my short film I did as a graduate thesis while I was at film school, Tender as Hellfire. I did an open casting call in this town called Porterville, California, which is a small, agriculture town about two and half hours north of LA.

I got to meet these two kids Sean, being the younger of the two, and Chris, who is the older brother. Chris, the older one, was the first kid to walk through the door for the open casting call. No acting experience. Sean was the last person to walk through the door, also no acting experience. I cast them both in the short opposite John Hawkes and they did a terrific job. They were really just so at ease in front of the camera. Just really interesting to watch without feeling like they were trying to put it on. I loved that.

I got to know them while making the movie, and I was developing *First Light* into a screenplay, I kept kicking back to that. In some ways, *First Light* was sort of an amalgamation of that dream I mentioned earlier and an expansion of this short, about a brother relationship that goes off the rails because it gets out of hand. But there was no science fiction element to that story. But the characters themselves, of trying to like get through adolescence while also dealing with pretty difficult circumstances at home and in school—I'm not going to go into any specifics of the kids themselves, because that's their story to tell—but I hung out with them a lot and they told me a lot about their own experiences and struggles and what they wanted to do with their lives and how they fought through that. I tried to entrench that in the movie as much as I could because I thought it was really honest. It felt real and authentic in what I was trying to do.

Just to take that to one step further, the underlying idea of what I was trying to do, thematically and with the characters, the Sean character, the kid who's sort of adrift with having to take care of everything himself—he's looking after his younger brother, his grandmother who should be looking after him but can't—he's sort of stuck with this responsibility way beyond his years. He's almost drowning. Even though he's getting by day to day, he's just trying to survive. The idea of what Alex brings to that, he's this nurturing kid who's trying to take care of his family but is also dealing with the normal shit of adolescence, but when Alex has her encounter and pulls him in, the journey that they go on together is really him realizing that even though he might not have parents or adults who can look out for him, she ends up becoming part of his life in that way. Her as this sort of alien character becomes this person who can look out for him in a way. Shows him that there is something out there that can help. It might not come in the most conventional way, but it's still there.

One thing I really loved about *First Light* was how—and there are a few major exceptions aside from this—but in recent years, science fiction has trended more towards, like, the big and huge and epic. As a storyteller, what advantages are there to using sci-fi to create these more intimate stories, like *First Light*?

For me, science fiction always plays best as allegory. It allows you to go big with the ideas of the story, gives you this big large canvas to play with. I find it really works when the larger story resonates with the smaller story. Like what I said about having somebody to look out for you and knowing that there's hope if you believe that there's something out there. You can see it as a religious thing, or you can see it as a science fiction thing, but just having this kind of belief that there's something else out there, I wanted to have that bounce back and forth between that tiny story between Sean and Alex just as kids, as teenagers, and also in the larger story of having first contact with humanity. Sean's experience is sort of a one-on-one thing with Alex, but really the larger story is humanity is having this moment of realizing we're not alone. That's been explored in plenty of stories of alien encounters, but I wanted to play that optimistically and using the science fiction to expand the intimate story.

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