



Zoë Bell: Will See You & Raze

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

While for the past decade Lords, Lorde and Conchords have hogged the headlines, another New Zealander has been quietly carving out her own slice of Hollywood history. Not content with the transition from stunts to starring role, Zoë Bell also took on the producing mantle for her critically-acclaimed gritty new thriller, *Raze*. And now she's got the bug...

"I came to the realisation that I really like telling stories, which I know sounds like such an obvious thing to say," she tells me over the phone from Los Angeles. "Whether it be gymnastics or acting, I've always been an entertainer, and I guess becoming a stuntwoman was just an extension of that." Zoë's big break of course, was as Lucy Lawless' stunt double in *Xena: Warrior Princess*. She later relocated to the US west coast where countless roles included Sharon Stone's other in *Catwoman* and filling in on the physical stuff for Uma Thurman in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*. Bell has since built a long-standing working relationship with the iconic director, and is widely touted as his 'go-to girl'.

You obviously have a strong bond with Tarantino. Do you run everything by him?

"I would love to. However, there's about a million others on the planet who wish to do the same. But of course, he's someone whose opinion is of paramount importance to me. It means the world to him when he knows I'm doing well."

*Has he seen *Raze*?*

"He went to see it recently – it's not uncommon to stumble across Quentin alone in a cinema – and he absolutely loved it. I saw him a week later and we had a celebratory drink."

Champagne?

"Vodka and Red Bull! He told me he wasn't going to rave on about my performance, because he wasn't surprised. He knew I always had it in me. That made me cry."

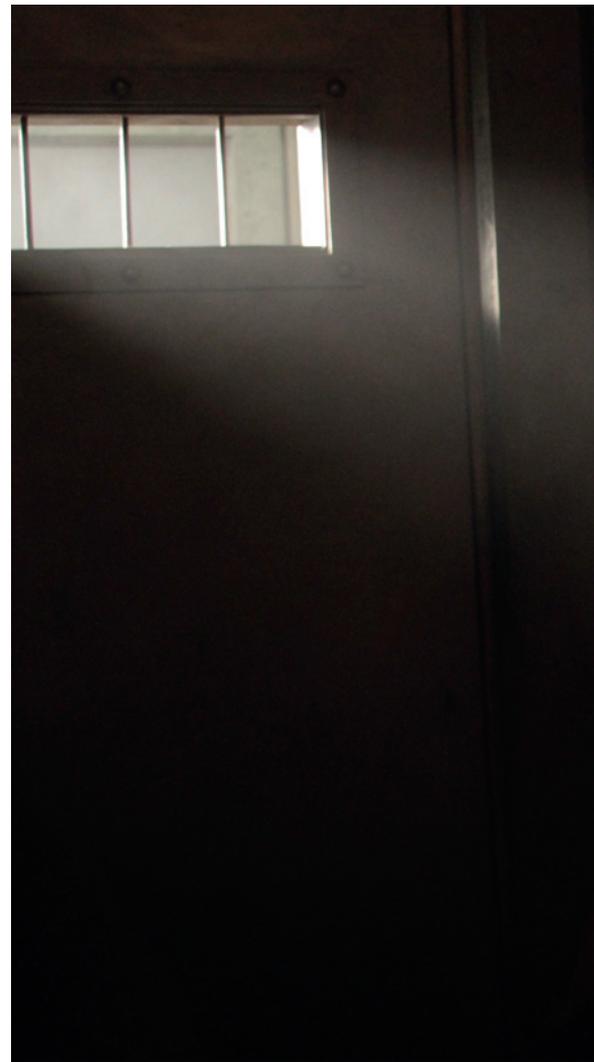
Speaking of crying, have you learnt to do so on cue? Have you taken acting classes?

"I've taken a few. I had a lot of catching up to do. What was difficult was becoming emotionally available in front

of people, allowing them to be inside my head. As a stuntwoman, I was trained to do the opposite. Crying requires me to get into a character that is in a certain situation, or listening to a song that reminds me of my family. Oh, and really bad commercials! Then I cry at the drop of a hat."

It must be immeasurable in terms of confidence, I mention, to have the support and belief of such an esteemed figure as Tarantino, especially when navigating uncharted territory. She tells me it is, but confidence is still something that must always be found within: "Insecurity is a powerful thing. If you're feeling it, it will destroy all praise. You can always find a way to devalue someone's opinion of you. I guess it goes both ways, too much self-confidence is just as dangerous."

I ask Zoë if it's difficult to keep an even keel, emotionally, in Los Angeles. "Yeah, sometimes. It's the culture of Hollywood and the nature of the industry. Not to say the place is all shallow and insidious, but the reason it is easy to become unbalanced is because the stuff that seeps in is innocuous, almost subliminal. People aren't always straight-up. They'll





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imply things. Things like, maybe your car isn’t flash enough or more people would want to hang out with you if you were slightly more famous. When it’s implied, it can begin to sound as though it’s your own voice in your head. Therein lays the danger. I do notice when I don’t get home enough. I need to reprioritise when I’ve been here too long.”

The most recent reminder that she’d been away too long, Zoë jokes, came when she spotted the New Zealand flag and for a split-second confused it with the Australian one. So does she think Kiwis should scrap the stars of the Southern Cross for the Silver Fern, as is currently being floated? “Yeah, I do. We have such a cool identity, it would be cool to have a flag that is undoubtedly our own.”

Zoë’s upbringing with her brother on Waiheke Island was blissful. Her folks were open and liberal, encouraging their daughter’s obsession with all things physical. Zoë tells me she “loved being up high” and “going really fast”. She watched Evil Knievel with relish, though grew up wanting to be a gymnast, “not to be a daredevil, risking life and limb.” She’s skydived and bungee-jumped but,

perhaps surprisingly, Zoë is not, she says, fearless: “The risks I take are hopefully well-calculated. From past experience I know what my body is and is not capable of. If I have a genuine fear that I may die, it’s a ‘no!’”

Raze, which has garnered rave reviews, including the *New York Times Critics’ Pick*, sees a group of women kidnapped and imprisoned in a dungeon. They are then forced to fight until the death. To some, it’s a tale of 21st century feminist empowerment, for others, a voyeuristic exploitation of the female form. “That’s been a really interesting aspect of the release,” says Bell. “We expected it to be polarising, but in terms of the violence. We weren’t expecting such an examination of the movie as a statement. We deliberately tried to remove any exploitative aspects, such as the sexuality of the women. They don’t wear make-up and there is no sex or innuendo. Interestingly, a lot of the people who have felt it exploitative or misogynistic have been men. But I’m not going to hate on anyone for their opinion. That’s why we make movies. It’s why art exists.”

And as for the feminist backing?

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How would you feel about becoming a voice for feminism?

“It has never been important for me to stand on a soapbox and preach. We just wanted to do something that had never been done before and the fact that it hadn’t, I think, is more of a statement than the fact that it now has. The nature of our existence and the way we raise our families says more than ‘speeches’. We should strive to be great individuals. Women are so cool, and I’m stoked to be one. I’d rather be a representation of feminism by the way I live my life and what I achieved than by the movies I make.”

Though, she admits with a giggle, beating up a few on-screen boys along the way, does help.