

INTERVIEWS

DOUG DREXLER: The Evolution of an Artist



Doug Drexler is an artist who has worn many hats. In his thirty-year career in film and television he has worked as a make-up artist, a scenic artist, a technical consultant, a visual effects supervisor and more! His seemingly effortless evolutions have created an enviable career. No one else in the *Star Trek* universe has worked in so many diverse roles.

Drexler shared his thoughts on his career and *Star Trek* with me.

SCOTT: How did you get started in Hollywood?

DOUG: Dick Smith started me in the business thirty years ago. There are, in fact, very few effects makeup artists that he did not give their start to. Dick always had time for everyone. He was generous to a fault, and excited by anyone who showed passion and determination. My passion and determination earned me a place as one of those fortunate enough to have worked along side him out of the famous basement lab in Larchmont, New York—along with a small handful of amazing guys who made up the core group of Dick's crew. I have to smile. At the Dick Smith Motion Picture Academy tribute a year ago, there were top-notch guys who gushed on stage about just getting to do a life cast with Dick. Whoever planned the event missed the opportunity of getting the New York contingent on stage together, five of whom were present at the ceremony. We were the guys who lived the challenges, the terror, and the exhilaration of working with the master.

SCOTT: More than anyone who has worked on *Star Trek*, your career has constantly evolved: from makeup artist to art director to CGI supervisor. That shows an amazing ability to adapt and master new expertise. How has your career path been able to evolve as it has?

DOUG: Let's see... makeup, scenic art, graphic designer, illustrator, VFX artist, art direction, and currently CG supervisor. As my father might say, here is a guy who can't hold a job! Hollywood is the biggest toy store in the world; how can you only play with the toys in one department? For me, it's hard to imagine staying put for an entire career. I figure I still have time for a few more careers in the film business! How has my career path been able to evolve as it has? It has always seemed to me that anyone in the biz who wanted to could move sideways as much as they wanted to. In most businesses, departments are compartmentalized. In the film business, it's the opposite, especially if you are connected to the stage in some way. You meet everyone. I think that if you are artistic, you have something to offer just about any department

INTERVIEWS

in production. It boils down to what your level of interest is in exploring other facets. Hollywood has been one big Whitman Sampler for me, and baby I've got chocolate all over my face!

SCOTE: Working on *Dick Tracy*, for which you won an Oscar, must have been great training for doing make-up on *Star Trek*. Is that why you got the job?

DOUG: I worked in makeup for ten years before coming to *Star Trek*. I think Mike Westmore would have hired me even if *Tracy* never happened. We vibrated at the same frequency, and enjoyed one another immensely, but yes, *Tracy* has been a great help. The Oscar is a sort of multi-national passport in the biz. It carries a sort of sight unseen respect for anyone who is fortunate enough to have one.

SCOTE: Many people who begin their careers in film, don't transition to work on TV. There can be a bit of a stigma about that. You, however, did make the move and seem to have thrived! You've collected Emmy Awards for your television work to go with your film Oscar. Do you



not buy into the dichotomy of Film vs. TV that exists in Hollywood?



DOUG: I greatly prefer television over motion pictures. I love the family unit that develops, and I like working regularly! Motion pictures are nomadic. You change management, where you go to work, and your workmates, every 3-6 months as you go from job to job. By the time you become a well-oiled machine it's over. Don't get me wrong, I've loved my career in features, but television can be a much more stable environment. Besides, it's all evolving into one big thing anyway, with the Internet being where you go for your entertainment.

INTERVIEWS

DOUG DREXLER: *The Evolution of an Artist, cont.*



SCOTT: Anyone who knows you knows that you are a true fan of science fiction. You got the chance to appear in *Star Trek* as a background player and wear a Starfleet uniform (twice). As a fan, can you tell us about those experiences?

DOUG: As a fan, it's about as cool as it gets. You've got to be in great shape to wear one of those TNG jumpsuits, it's almost like being naked in front of all of your friends. They show everything. I remember before each scene, the famously mischievous Jonathan Frakes always called for a "Johnson Check." I'm proud to say that the wardrobe department decided that I didn't need a corset or padding. I was in the TNG episode "Transfigurations" where I was used as a "bridge" to move the camera across Ten Forward, so I got some quality screen time. I was on my way to Disney World for the Hollywood-style opening of *Dick Tracy* when the episode aired. The technicians at the MGM-Disney Studio taped it for me and played it back in the control room on a dozen screens. That's livin'!

SCOTT: How do your on-screen Trek experiences compare with the experiences you've had working behind the scenes?

DOUG: I grew up idolizing the behind the scenes folk on *The Original Series* thanks to Stephen (Whitfield) Poe's *The Making of Star*

Trek book. That's where I wanted to be from the time I was 13 years old. For me, working behind the scenes was my real dream come true. Nothing beats that. Of course my cameos on *Star Trek* were a lark, while working behind the scenes is often like combat... all or nothing... do or die.

SCOTT: You are a huge fan of *You are a huge fan of Star Trek: The Original Series (TOS)* and especially the design sense that went into it. Is it fair to say that Matt Jefferies is a hero of sorts to you? What made TOS and his work great?

DOUG: Matt is a hero to me. I wanted to be Matt Jefferies, unquestionably. Of course I have a lot of nostalgic love for the TOS designs, but it goes well beyond that. I've found that



INTERVIEWS

science fiction design is the most fragile of all. It can, and often does, look dated in just a few years. The Enterprise, the bridge, landing party equipment still look fresh. That's just plain crazy. Why did it work and why did it last? Well, Matt was not only a designer, but he was a flight engineer in the Army Air Corps during WWII. That had a profound effect on the art direction in *Star Trek*. It has a foundation in reality, mixed in with a knack for sexy design. The real feat was doing it with no time and no money. That's television, and that's what makes television addicting to work on.

SCOTT: When they decided to do "Trials and Tribble-ations" on DS9 what were you responsible for in recreating the TOS Enterprise?

DOUG: We had an art director on DS9, but I don't think that anyone would argue that I art directed that particular episode. I had been training for that show since September 1966, and had collected a huge library of reference material. It may seem hard to imagine at this point, but you couldn't just jump on the In-

ternet, hit a few keys and find an avalanche of reference. Between me, Mike Okuda, and Denise Okuda, we formed the TOS brain-trust. We knew every inch of those designs. It certainly shows. So I had my hand in everything on that one, and did it with great joy. I drew up diagrams for set pieces, worked with the set designers as they drew up their blueprints, and stood by the construction crew as the sets came together. I even painstakingly recreated all of the blinky panels on the Bridge. It was a high watermark for me, and I want to once again say thanks to Mike Okuda for hiring me into the art department.

SCOTT: Of all the follow up series to TOS, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* seems to have the most passionate fan base. While most *Trek* fans these days cut their teeth on TNG, DS9 seems to have a very enduring legacy. Many fans will state that DS9 is simply the best written of the *Star Trek* series. What is your take on what made DS9 special?

DOUG: It's because DS9 was the one series where the inmates took control of the show. Voyager happened while DS9 was in mid-

stride, taking the magnifying glass off of *Deep Space*. That freed DS9 up to go its own unique direction. Ira Behr, Ron Moore and the writers suddenly had the keys to the space station. You can see the freshness of DS9 take off when Voyager started up.

SCOTT: After *Star Trek*, you went to work on *Battlestar Galactica*, making another evolutionary jump into CGI. How did that happen?



INTERVIEWS

DOUG DREXLER: *The Evolution of an Artist, cont.*



22

DOUG: My CGI career actually began while I was still on DS9. I was experimenting with it in the art department. I knew that DS9 wasn't going to last forever, and Voyager was fully crewed. I had a plan to make a jump into the VFX department. After all, I knew those guys from my years on the show, and had pitched in and helped them numerous times when they were in a jam. It seemed like a good bet. Newtek, who makes Light Wave 3D (LW), was a fan of *Star Trek*, and had given Mike

Okuda a free copy of their program. Every time I hung with Mike in his office I would pick up the box and study it while we chatted. One day I asked Mike if he would mind if I cracked it open. That was the start of another career. DS9 VFX supervisor Gary Hutzel was a frequent visitor to the art department. The first time I met him, I knew I liked him. Aside from being talented, he was funny, and there is nothing better than funny. When I jumped to the art department at the start of DS9, I

got to know Gary a whole lot better. The *Star Trek* Art Department in those days worked hand in glove with VFX. We made it our business to be a resource for them. Gary knew that if his budget didn't cover a model of Star Fleet Command in San Francisco, we would make one for him out of bird feeders and CD racks. One day Gary happened by while I was noodling in LW, and a light went off in his head. He and I built a couple of CG models for the show together. I remember saying

INTERVIEWS

that I hoped we got a chance to do this again. I remember Gary saying to be careful what I wished for. Little did I know! So Gary moved on from *Trek* after DS9. My plan came together, and I was hired by Foundation Imaging to work on the *Voyager* VFX team. I was there for two years soaking up knowledge, and making friends with some amazing guys. One day, good Herman Zimmerman, production designer on the new *Trek* series, *Enterprise*, called. Would I would like to return to the art department, bring my newly acquired 3D skills with me, and work with him on restyling the *Enterprise*? Does the bear make big potty in the woods?

Over the six years that Gary went off on his own, he regularly checked in with me to see if I was available. I was fortunate to be working, but I was sad to say no. By the time that *Enterprise* was canceled, I had been working on *Star Trek* for 17 years. A gig like that in this town is a more amazing anomaly than anything the *Enterprise* ever ran into. I remember driving home from Paramount a little grim. Maybe I was at the end of my string of amazingly good luck. When I got home there

was a message from Gary. "I heard about *Enterprise*. That's too bad...but you know what? Every cloud has a silver lining." And that was it, and I was piped aboard the *Galactica*, and it's been a wonderful experience. The big bonus is working with Gary.

SCOTE: Tell us about your WW II Aviation project. Your home has gone from having a huge *Star Trek* memorabilia collection to a huge WW II B-17 bomber collection. How did you get interested in this and what are you doing with it?

DOUG: My father served in Europe, and my uncle in the Pacific. Dad was ground crew with the 78th Fighter Group out of Duxford, England. The fighters out of Duxford supported the 8th Air Force's high altitude precision bombing efforts over the Nazi Third Reich. It's a gripping story. In the fall of 1944, as Allied armies enlarged their grip on Fortress Europe and aimed their guns at the heartland of Nazi Germany, an alien kind of war called high altitude strategic bombing was being waged by the Army Air Forces—naive wide-eyed boys, who faced fear, alienation and

routine catastrophe. Their goal was not to win the war, but to fly the thirty-five missions they must complete to "graduate" from being shot at almost daily, and go back to the United States. The magic number of zero is all that these men wanted out of a life of freezing at five miles up, dodging enemy fighters, flak, fire, fear, and fatigue. Two-thirds could expect to die in combat or be captured by the enemy. Indeed, 26,000 of them never returned. It's my dream to webisode some of these amazing stories.

SCOTE: Finally, if you were to own just one *Star Trek* prop or costume, what would it be and why?

DOUG: The typewriter Roddenberry wrote the original *Star Trek* treatment on. It changed my life.

