

## BLACK SKY

An hour north of Detroit, Michigan, another tranquil summer day ambles by on Oakland University's tidy campus. School's out, and aside from the occasional faculty member, campus is deserted.

Then past a freshly cut lawn, a disaster appears.

Smashed cars, broken glass, an overturned weather van, trash, and felled trees litter the parking lot. The disarray permeates everything except a tank-like Tornado Intercept Vehicle, known by its initials T.I.V. and nicknamed Titus, which is designed to withstand the very elements that laid waste to the scene before it.

Amongst the wreckage, British actor Richard Armitage (*The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*) and his American co-stars Sarah Wayne Callies (TV's *Walking Dead*) and Matt Walsh (*The Hangover*) struggle to flip right-side-up the fallen weather van. An unannounced tornado has just ripped through a car dealership, destroying not just the sedans and coups, but the characters' peace-of-mind. For on the set of *Black Sky*, the new disaster epic directed by Steven Quale, few besides Titus are prepared for the chaotic, destructive power of the winds. In fact, the utter unpredictability of tornados, in part, drew director Steven Quale to the movie.

"It's not creatures, it's not horror, it's not science fiction," explains Quale. "It's Mother Nature in its raw form and it can be beautiful and it can be horrific at the same time."

Using a draw cable, Titus – with the actors' help – assists in righting the tornado's wrongs. With a jerk, the weather van gets yanked back onto all four wheels. But as this scene from *Black Sky* illustrates, while we humans can rebuild and get back on our feet, we cannot avoid nature's arbitrary wrath.

With a background in 3D and special effects, Quale would seem the perfect fit to capture the random and mesmerizing terror of twisters. He recently directed *Final Destination 5* and used the franchise's latest installment to navigate how Death could be evaded, just not duped. In *Black Sky*, the director ups the ante by showing that people must fear not just Death, but also Mother Nature.

Comments Quale: “The tornado is one of the starring characters in the movie. In some ways, it’s the leading character. That’s been my motto on this whole film. Let’s not make it over-the-top Hollywood action, but make it feel like you were just there and you happened to have a camera and recorded the raw power of these storms.”

In order to stay true to the expansive look of the American Midwest, where *Black Sky* unfolds, the production chose to shoot in Michigan, which closely resembles Tornado Alley USA. Canada with its mountains or Southern California with its sunshine was out of the question.

“We chose Michigan because it’s a beautiful state,” says Quale. “It’s very flat and also very close to what Oklahoma and Nebraska look like.”

Though Quale’s goal is always for his work to feel real, it isn’t always based in reality. Before *Final Destination 5*, Quale cut his teeth as the Special Effects Supervisor on James Cameron’s *Avatar* and as the Second Unit Director of *Titanic*. Quale’s touch on those films made selecting him an easy choice to direct *Black Sky* for producer Todd Garner.

“I was fascinated by Steven,” says Garner. “When I heard about Steven and where he comes from, with his Jim Cameron experience, and his ability to tell a story without getting lost in the visual effects, I was drawn to him for this particular film.”

For his part, Quale hopes *Black Sky* lures audiences as much for its awe-inspiring effects as for its compelling human drama. That drama arrives like a one-two punch when a tornado tears through a high school graduation ceremony in America’s Tornado Alley. Vice Principal, teacher, coach and father of two, Gary Morris, played by Armitage, forms a quick bond with Sarah Wayne Callies’s Alison Stone, when in a snap moment Gary saves her from one of the tornados.

“One of the keys to the character is that he’s a math teacher and football coach,” says Armitage. “So I worked backwards from what he’d be required to do. He’s kind of a sporty guy, but he’s no hero. An extreme event like this becomes about a normal guy, an everyman, having to effectively run into a burning building or dive into water to save a kid. You don’t know if you can do it until that moment presents itself.”

For Sarah Wayne Callies, who has acted on the acclaimed TV series *Walking Dead* and *Prison Break*, the idea of mixing action with developed, meaty characters made *Black Sky* an enticing project.

“It struck me, this interaction between Alison and Gary,” admits Wayne Callies. “Their story is the story about the ways in which strangers can become incredibly intimate with one another during a crisis.”

A self-described “freak for research,” Wayne Callies plunged into the role of meteorologist and climatologist Alison Stone by studying with a university professor specializing in climate change and tornados.

“My parents are professors,” she adds. “I never really show up on a set until I’ve read at least 1000 pages and watched 200 movies.”

Yet no amount of research would prepare the actress for the production’s effects.

“I’ve never faced a 100-mile-an-hour fan before,” she confesses. “It took me off my feet. Rain machines are new for me. My hair hasn’t been dry in three weeks.”

Alison Stone’s methodical, research-driven personality helps to tether some of the more impulsive instincts of her partner Pete. Played by comedian Matt Walsh, Pete’s situation in *Black Sky* is anything but funny. As the foreman of a storm-chasing unit and the driver of Titus, Pete stakes his entire career and reputation on capturing the eye of the storm, or as the script calls it, “the shot that only God can see.”

Observes Walsh: “Pete’s lost his funding because he has never panned out to get *that* shot. So he’s very desperate. His motivation is to save his business and save his life.”

*Black Sky* is Walsh’s first disaster movie and, as the comedian tells, it’s been a positive experience.

“I am a big fan of seeing action films,” Walsh points out. He calls Quale “kind of a mad genius. He knows what he wants, which is all you want in a director. He’s been a joy to work with.”

With his background in standup – Walsh co-founded the Upright Citizen’s Brigade – *Black Sky* provides him with the chance to do the sorts of things most action stars take for granted: playing with awesome cars.

Back at the wreckage, Walsh mans his Tornado Intercept Vehicle Titus in order to help the fallen weather van get back on all four wheels. And that's not Titus's only trick. Built specifically by a Detroit auto specialist for the film, Titus comes outfitted with bulletproof windows and grappling claws that keep it grounded during 170-mile-an-hour winds.

"I've done stunts before, but never a massive sized movie like this," Walsh adds. "Just yesterday we had to run through rain, fire, 200-mile-an-hour fans. And it's cold. I've never done anything on this scale, it is pretty amazing."

In addition to being able to withstand the tornados' physical punishment, Pete's Titus must film all that punishment, too. As a storm chaser, lives depend on its durability.

"The Titus itself has something like 24 cameras. Every angle is always active," Walsh describes. "Every camera is justified."

Installing so many cameras on the storm chasing crew's Titus has as much to do with verisimilitude as with the technical practicalities of *Black Sky's* cinematography. Shot in an innovative "found footage" format, where each character's point-of-view essentially acts as another camera angle, the movie seeks to stay grounded and feel as real as possible. Producer Todd Garner introduced the found footage element to the film due to its ability to suck audiences into the action.

With "found footage," Garner explains, "You are drawn into the movie experience in a different way. It feels like you *are* the camera. You're drawn into the movie through your eye."

On set and throughout the film, cameras appear everywhere. Along with the 24 cameras hooked up to Titus, *Black Sky* includes footage shot on everything from mobile phones and video recorders to grainy security cameras to SteadiCams.

"The camera department on this movie is incredible because we're using everything," adds Garner. "HD, digital cameras, small flip cameras, every format, every lens. It's been quite a challenge. Steven has been really focused on making it look as real as possible."

For a director like Steven Quale, who insists his films be both visually stunning but also realistic, the found footage genre appealed to his artistic sensibilities.

“What attracted me to this film is the fact that it shows the reality of what’s going on,” Quale says. “I’ve always loved movies that are grounded in reality.”

Characters must sometimes act not with a co-star, but with a camera posing as a co-star. And even for actors with thick resumes like Richard Armitage, the experience is not without hurdles.

“Every time you’re working for a particular camera, it could be my son or a storm chaser,” says Armitage. “It’s very much more about being caught on camera rather than presenting your performance on camera, which is a new area for me. It makes it more thrilling to work. It feels much more real. Everything is on a handheld, on shoulder or on a SteadiCam. It feels more immediate, at times documentary. It puts you in a kind of naturalism with the character.”

Co-star Nathan Kress (*iCarly*), who portrays Armitage’s youngest son, Trey, agrees: “It’s an exciting way of shooting things. It’s been a little bit of a challenge, but it’s something new and something I have to get used to. But I love it, it’s been an amazing experience so far.”

Editing all those camera angles provides the production with an almost limitless amount of perspectives from which to tell *Black Sky*. But even with fewer cameras, the postproduction process, admits Quale, will be extensive. All the tornados – and as everyone involved in the film assures, there will be an abundance of them – will be created in postproduction. Though Quale discloses that there are, “hundreds and hundreds of effects shots,” the production stays true to the found footage look of the film and, “looks absolutely realistic.”

The director remarks: “We’re doing a big movie that involves lots of logistics and lots of equipment. The challenging thing on this film is trying to get all the camera operators and actors to react to the giant tornados that aren’t there.”

Cynics like to joke that filmmaking can essentially be reduced to troubleshooting an endless stream of problems. That may be true. And as a big production with complex effects and a perfectionist director, *Black Sky*, like all movies, is bound to have its fair share of issues. Yet one area with very few hiccups, according to director Steven Quale, is the acting.

“Its really fun to concentrate and get amazing performances with a lot of young talent,” observes Quale.

Indeed, *Black Sky*'s cast includes many fresh faces to help the audience identify with the characters. Arlen Escarpeta (*Final Destination 5*) plays Darryl and Jeremy Sumpter (TV's *Friday Night Lights*) plays Jacob, two cameramen in a storm-chasing outfit. Newcomers Alycia Debnam Carey and Max Deacon play Caitlin and Perry respectively, star-crossed lovers caught up in the tornado. Stuntman-turned-actor Lee Whittaker plays Lukas, an assistant on the storm chasing crew.

“The teenagers are amazing as are the very experienced actors. Richard Armitage, who's our lead, is just amazing. Sara, who did the *Walking Dead* and *Prison Break*,” is great, concludes Quale. “Having both those actors who are that good just makes my job easy. It's fantastic.”

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