

War of the robots

By  Daniel Dercksen

9 Apr 2015

In the entertaining and explosive British sci-fi adventure *Robot Overlords* a group of teenagers battle an invading force of deadly robots who have taken over the Earth.

Perhaps it was all the Steven Spielberg films he had watched as a child in the 1980s, but when British writer-director Jon Wright had a particularly vivid dream about not being able to leave his house for fear of attack from robots one night, he knew he had found the plot for his next movie.

"I woke up one morning having dreamt the first two minutes of the film," says Wright. "It was a father and son playing a cat-and-mouse game with Nerf guns in a house. They threw open the curtains, revealing a massive robot that leaned in and threatened to annihilate them. They dropped their weapons immediately and I woke up and thought, 'That's good!'"



Wright assumed his dream was a pastiche of scenes absorbed from watching other films, but the more people he began to tell, the more the Belfast-born filmmaker was convinced a robot invasion film about humans trapped in their own homes by an extraordinary and sinister occupying force, was an original storyline.

At the time of his dream, Wright was putting the finishing touches to his second feature, *Grabbers*, a well-received comedy monster film that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and went on to win five audience awards at top international film festivals and was released by Sony Pictures UK and IFC Films in the US in 2012.

Trapped in their homes

In Wright's *Robot Overlords* a group of teenagers, headed by Sean (Callan McAuliffe), Alex (Ella Hunt), Nathan (James Tarpey), and young Connor (Milo Parker), who have been trapped in their homes for three years, discover a way of evading the deadly robots that monitor their every move, and they grab it gleefully and head off in search of Sean's missing father.

Mark Stay, an actor, playwright and screenwriter, who had previously written a few scripts with Wright, came on board to co-write the screenplay. "Mark is extremely talented," says Wright. "He's a very collaborative spirit and loves to work with people. I'm the same."

"We work really well together," Stay agrees.

"I ploughed ahead with the script and Jon came in and tidied up after me. We would occasionally have weekends where we would work intensively. I like working with other writers. A lot of writing is about problem solving and a little bit of psychology as well. Two heads are always better than one when it comes to that."

Working together on the script also meant that, at every stage, Wright and Stay could talk through the fantastical elements of the sci-fi story and ensure they were at least partly grounded in a believable reality.

"We wanted to keep the characters as real as possible so everyone could relate to them," Stay explains. "We did not want any of them to make an unrealistic decision. We would constantly ask ourselves, 'Would I do that? Would my kids do that?'"



Real British teenagers

It was very important to Wright, Tempest and Stay that the characters of Robot Overlords were authentic, that the teenagers behaved like real British teenagers. It is not surprising to discover that Wright and Stay are inspired by the Hollywood films of their 1980s childhoods, particularly Steven Spielberg's *The Goonies*, as well as by Rob Reiner's bittersweet coming-of-age classic *Stand By Me* and George Lucas' original *Star Wars* trilogy. They used these as markers in particular for casting.

"The children in those films spoke to each other like real kids did," Wright explains. "They used playground slang and there was something a bit rough around the edges about it. They were not special kids. They were neither especially poor nor especially rich. They felt like average kids in an average world to whom something extraordinary happens. There was a spirit and a heart in those movies that I feel is missing in our contemporary blockbuster world. The blockbusters all seem to have become a bit cold, serious and dour. I wanted our kids to feel like the kids I remember from the playground: to insult each other and be neither overly respectful nor too romantic."

The filmmakers felt they knew these kids. "They are based on us when we were kids and our own children," says Stay.

"Sci-fi is essentially a 'what if?' What if we were confined to our homes? What would that do to us? What would that do to a teenage child? We knew exactly where they would go when they first escaped. We knew the kind of alleyways they would be running down, the kind of woodland they would be running through."

"Why should all robot invasions happen in small-town America?"

Robot Overlords is set in a fictional British seaside town rather than a futuristic, dystopian metropolis. "You don't, typically, see robots in a small seaside town," smiles Wright. "Our heroes are average in the best sense of the word. The place where they live is the kind of town a lot of people will recognise as the kind of town they live in."

"Why should all robot invasions happen in small-town America?" adds Tempest. "If robots ever did invade, most people's experience of such an extraordinary circumstance would probably be in a really normal environment like our seaside town. We can all recognise elements of our own lives in the film."

"The notion of people being contained within their houses by an occupying robot force felt fresh and different," says Wright. "The unconscious very kindly presented me with a gift and I accepted it. It has never happened to me before or since."

If you are looking for escaping into a futuristic world where man versus machine, Robot Overlords is an action-packed adventure with lots of thrills.

Read more about Robot Overlords and other new films opening this week at www.writingstudio.co.za

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za

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