

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

How 'Jurassic World: Dominion' found new life in familiar faces

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June 10, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

For so many, the appeal of the Jurassic Park franchise isn't just the dangerous dinosaurs or near-death escapes. It's also the franchise's beloved humans who are still keeping audiences entertained nearly 30 years after the first film debuted. And they're why the sixth movie in the series is being hyped not for its jaw-snapping action, but for the return of its three original — and arguably most popular — characters.

"Jurassic World: Dominion," out Friday, reunites Drs. Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern), Alan Grant (Sam Neill) and Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum), whose roles in the 1993 blockbuster helped spawn generations of memes and prehistoric-themed action movies.

But it's been a journey to get here.

Originally a Steven Spielberg-directed film based on Michael Crichton's sci-fi novel of the same name, the cautionary tale about reviving dinosaurs for a theme park saw huge success, both critical and commercial. Two sequels followed over the next decade, though neither with half as good reviews. In 2015, Colin Trevorrow directed the first in the trilogy reboot, "Jurassic World," starring Chris Pratt as Owen Grady and Bryce Dallas Howard as Claire Dearing, a younger pair who represented the new generation of dinosaur advocates. The film gained back some of the franchise's admiration, but the second in that series (directed by J.A. Bayona) failed to gin up the same excitement.

Despite the franchise's influence outside moviedom — the films have also given rise to video games, board games, comic books, animated series, short films and, ironically, theme park rides in its image — "Dominion," again directed by Trevorrow, is attempting quite a feat: convincing us, beyond the dinosaurs, to fall back in love with why we were all there in the first place: that trio of doctors who managed to save the world (or an island, at least).

“There was real value in letting everyone know that the characters they loved when they were children are going to be okay,” says Trevorrow, who has co-written for all three new films. “When we care about these icons and we aren’t sure where or how they exist in the world that we’re presenting now, what their opinion [or] perspective on it is ... we bring them [back] to assure people that they’ve found a place of safety and contentment in their lives. That’s how we end most stories, and so I wanted to treat this as one long story from the very beginning.”

Though Goldblum starred as his chaos theorist mathematician Malcolm in the 1997 sequel “The Lost World” and made an appearance in 2018’s “Fallen Kingdom,” and Dern and Neill had brief cameos as paleobotanist Sattler and paleontologist Grant in “Jurassic Park III” in 2001, “Jurassic World: Dominion” is the first time all three are together on-screen again.

“I wasn’t interested in coming back and popping up for a couple of scenes,” says Neill, who was approached by Trevorrow in summer 2019 when the script was still a work in progress. He was assured by the director that the rejoining of the trio was going to be something much deeper than quick, nostalgic cameos.

Trevorrow and his screenwriting partner Emily Carmichael wanted Sattler, Grant and Malcolm’s presence in the film with Claire and Owen to be organic. The story, which takes place 30 years after the infamous opening of Jurassic Park, is centered on a new conservation- and science-focused park in development in Italy’s Dolomite Mountains as dinosaurs freely (and often dangerously) roam the Earth.

“I made a choice early on [to] make sure that Ellie was the engine of this story, or certainly one of the two parallel stories that are happening,” says Trevorrow of Dern’s paleobotanist character. “[Emily and I] first had conversations with geneticists to ask them what is a global crisis that could be a cause of tampering with genetic power that only a paleobotanist would notice. And that’s what’s in the movie.”

Indeed, the OG trio’s arc feels integral to the plot — even if it is peppered with a few “Jurassic Park” throwback moments such as Malcolm’s shirt buttons being undone too far, Grant’s beloved Indiana Jones-esque hat almost being lost to a hungry dinosaur, a Cretaceous creature chasing a Jeep and a scene in which Malcolm uses a stick of fire to lure a T. rex away from the group. But they stopped short at repeating actual lines — because humans don’t do that, says Trevorrow — and because the goal was never to have those callbacks come off as forced. The motivation for those like-for-like visuals was rather one of respect.

“It came from a place of recognizing how important these characters are in both this story and to us as an audience, and then building it with them,” says Trevorrow, who believes that his actors are authorities on their own characters more than a director ever could be. “It was a series of conversations with Laura and Sam and Jeff, asking them how their characters would feel about this new world. All of those choices were made as a collaboration.”

Malcolm is “still vibrantly involved in the cutting edge of science and mathematics,” says Goldblum, “and because of the events that we witnessed in ’93, I’ve been transformed and I’m older and wiser, but more than ever passionately involved in fighting the good fight — especially against factions and people who would use the accomplishments of science to their own ignorant ends. I think it’s very smart what Colin has done, how [Claire and Owen] happen to now come together [with us] because of their own passionate agenda that has unfolded hopefully in this logical and organic and exciting way.”

For Neill, playing Grant was like putting on an old shoe: “It’s comfortable and I know exactly what to do with the shoe.”

“I think there’s some emotional growth” with the character, he says, before laughing hard. “It strikes me as very funny when I say it out loud — this grizzled old guy finally wakes up to his own internal, emotional life.”

Despite the varying receptions to the Jurassic Park movies, Goldblum says he has never had anything but good associations with the franchise. Working with Spielberg in the first film was a life-changing and transformational event, he says, and so was working with Dern and Neill.

“[Laura and Sam] are the most beautiful people that you’d ever hope to meet,” says Goldblum. “And I’m telling you, just like the song says in ‘Wicked’: They left an imprint on my heart. I would be a different person had I never worked with them.”

And while “Jurassic World: Dominion” is the end of the Jurassic World portion of the trilogy, Trevorrow wouldn’t call the movie series extinct just yet.

“Perhaps there’ll be opportunities in the future” to bring the original characters back, Trevorrow says. “I don’t think this franchise is necessarily sailing into the sunset.”