

Los Angeles Times

‘RoboCop’: Joel Kinnaman, José Padilha get political with sci-fi reboot

Jan. 31, 2014 | 11:34 a.m.

Joel Kinnaman plays the lead in "RoboCop." (MGM / Columbia Pictures) 1 / 14

Early on a recent evening on the edge of Beverly Hills, Brazilian filmmaker José Padilha was breaking into song. Seated in the ballroom of a luxury hotel with Swedish actor Joel Kinnaman, the star of his new \$120-million reboot of “RoboCop,” the director was feeling mirthful about the looming release of his first Hollywood production, which arrives in a hail of CG action and automatic weapons fire just before Valentine’s Day.

Padilha made a name for himself with his 2002 documentary “Bus 174,” which chronicled a gruesome hijacking in Rio de Janeiro, and a pair of ultra-violent action movies — “Elite Squad,” about a Rio special-forces unit, won the Golden Bear award at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival; its sequel, “Elite Squad: The Enemy Within,” ranks as one of the highest-grossing Brazilian films in history.



“RoboCop” director José Padilha, photographed in Beverly Hills in 2011. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

“RoboCop,” a retelling of the 1987 sci-fi satire about a Detroit police officer who’s transformed into a sentient law enforcement machine, stands to introduce both Padilha and Kinnaman to millions more moviegoers. But the director, looking like an intellectual radical in an olive green skull cap and sneakers, acknowledged that his approach to the futuristic story might surprise some viewers. Padilha saw the film as an opportunity to make a thinking man’s action movie, a vehicle through which to comment on such hot-button political issues as the morality of drone warfare and American military incursions in the Middle East.

In the movie’s opening sequence, Samuel L. Jackson’s conservative TV commentator, Pat Novak, uses his broadcast to tout the repeal of a law designed to keep robot soldiers off American streets. To support his position, he shows a satellite feed from a newly secured Tehran where citizens must willingly submit to random retinal scans by OmniCorp’s armed and battle-ready ED-209 and EM-208 models. Noncompliance is grounds for execution.

“This movie is not the regular superhero Hollywood movie. It just ain’t,” said Padilha, 46. “I want to take the idea that I see being embodied in the original ‘RoboCop,’ that the automation of violence opens the door to fascism.”

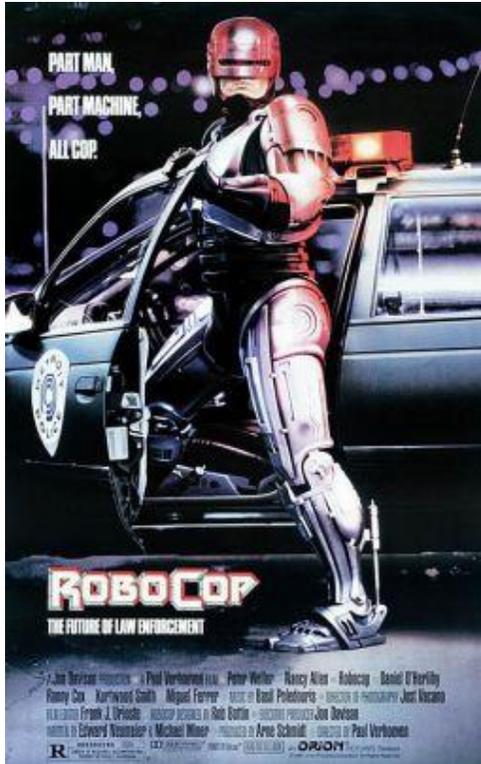
So just how exactly did he manage to get that idea into a big-budget studio action movie?

“I fought the law, and the law won,” the Rio native sang. “In our case, the law lost.”

The groundbreaking original

Often, the passing of time can burnish the reputation of science-fiction and horror films, but in the case of “RoboCop,” the original was hailed as groundbreaking upon its release. Directed by Dutch filmmaker Paul Verhoeven from a script by Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner, the picture starred Peter Weller as Alex Murphy, a cop slain by drug dealers who is reborn inside the suit of a cyborg in dystopian Detroit and quickly begins to rid the city’s streets of crime, inspiring dissension in the ranks of the police force.

Amid the instability, RoboCop starts to remember aspects of his life as Murphy and before long uncovers the sinister aims of Omni Consumer Products, the monolithic company that created him.



A movie poster for 1987's "RoboCop." (Orion Pictures)

Pairing wild social satire and coal black humor with copious amounts of graphic violence and state-of-the-art stop motion special effects, "RoboCop" arrived near the end of the Reagan era as an audacious, R-rated indictment of corporate greed and corruption (Roger Ebert described it as a "thriller with a difference"). It was nominated for Academy Awards for its editing and sound, and it won a special achievement Oscar for its sound-effects editing.

"RoboCop's" success sparked two less-well-received sequels from other directors (the last of which was released in 1993 and saw actor Robert Burke replace Weller), and the film launched Verhoeven down a path of crafting gleefully subversive sci-fi movies such as "Total Recall" and "Starship Troopers," though more recently he's returned to making dramatic films in the Netherlands.

In the years since its release, Verhoeven's "RoboCop" has grown in esteem. Criterion Collection issued its own edition of the movie, which is routinely cited as one of the best action films ever made. The idea of remaking it surfaced some years back; in 2008 Darren Aronofsky, worried about the stability of rights holder MGM, abandoned his attempt at a new "RoboCop" after penning a screenplay for the film.

Padilha first seriously pondered a "RoboCop" remake during a 2011 meeting with MGM executives about other projects the newly relaunched production entity had in the pipeline. The Brazilian had noticed a poster for Verhoeven's original movie, and by the end of the session he'd pitched his concept for modernizing the story.



Joel Kinnaman portrays the titular character — a part-man, part-robot law enforcement officer — in “RoboCop.” (Kerry Hayes / MGM / Columbia Pictures)

“I remember that every single film they presented to me, I instantly knew I didn’t want to make it,” Padilha said. “I’m listening, and I’m [thinking] ‘RoboCop,’ that’s what I’m going to do. I have an idea for that.’ So at the end of the meeting ... I pitched the idea. Two days later, I got a call from my agent, saying, ‘I don’t know what you did, but they want to do “RoboCop” with you.’ It was a good thing that it came into being this way instead of it being a studio already having an idea about what they want to make from the get-go. It was the filmmaker saying, ‘Let’s make this, and here’s my idea for it.’”

Padilha hired screenwriter Joshua Zetumer and flew him to Brazil, where they spent about four weeks crafting the outline for the script. “It was really good,” the voluble filmmaker said. “It was like developing ‘Elite Squad’ — in my office where I write my scripts, with my board, with my cards, everyone speaking Portuguese around me except Josh. It kind of set the tone.”

The remake’s vision

Padilha’s “RoboCop” is set in the Detroit of 2028. Murphy is ferreting out dirty cops in his squad when he is nearly killed in a car bomb explosion. His wife, Clara (Abbie Cornish), gives OmniCorp permission to put what’s left of Murphy’s body into the RoboCop suit to save her husband’s life. Conveniently for the company, the crusading hero arrives at the right time to help sway public opinion in favor of repealing the Dreyfuss Act, a law that prevents OmniCorp from deploying robotic soldiers to keep the peace in American cities.



Joel Kinnaman as Alex Murphy and Abbie Cornish as Clara Murphy in Columbia Pictures' "Robocop." In the film, Kinnaman's character becomes the titular part-man, part-machine law enforcement robot. (MGM / Columbia Pictures)

With the assistance of Gary Oldman's scientist, Dr. Norton, Murphy struggles to come to terms with the reality of his weaponized body, but as he's deployed to fight crime on the streets of Detroit, his humanity begins to override his programming, requiring OmniCorp and its chief executive, Raymond Sellars (Michael Keaton), to resort to increasingly extreme tactics to keep him under control.

Impossibly lean, with a fondness for e-cigarettes, the 34-year-old Kinnaman said he was initially resistant to the idea of starring as Alex Murphy. As a fan of the original film, he expected that a new version might not have the same teeth. But the actor, best known to American audiences as twitchy Det. Stephen Holder in the TV crime drama "The Killing," was swayed by what the ambitious Brazilian aimed to achieve.

"I'd seen his films, and they all had a very strong social and political point of view, and he had a visual style that was both gritty and poetic, and the acting was top notch," Kinnaman said. "He told me the vision of this story that he wanted to tell using the concept of 'RoboCop' and why he felt that it was such a smart concept to bring in today. I was amazed by it. The only thing that was a little suspect about it, I was wondering, 'How the hell was he going to get a studio to do this movie?'"

“There is a reason why you can pull that off with RoboCop and you cannot pull that off with other superheroes, there’s a specific reason that has to do with the hero himself,” Padilha responded. “The standard model for a superhero movie is you get a character that the audience wants to be like. Kids want to be Iron Man. Who doesn’t? He gets all the girls, he’s smart as hell, has fun and puts on this suit, and he kicks ass.

“Spider-Man jumps around, Batman has the batmobile. He can be Batman and he can stop being Batman. And those screenplays — some are great, some are not — but they are all about creating iconic scenes and getting a very charismatic actor and getting kids to go with the character. No one wants to be RoboCop, not even Alex Murphy.”



Joel Kinnaman, left, and Gary Oldman star in “Robocop.” (MGM / Columbia Pictures)

RoboCop wears two distinct suits, a silver model that’s intended to reference the original design, and a sleek black outfit that’s less bulky and more modern and is in keeping with the new film’s slick visual style. But neither was particularly comfortable for the actor to wear during the Toronto shoot.

“It was a bitch to put it on. It was so hot and uncomfortable, but it became an integral part of the performance,” Kinnaman said. “It fed my imagination — I didn’t expect that the suit would do that. The awkwardness that I would feel in the suit led my imagination to what Alex Murphy would feel. At the same time that he becomes very powerful and almost invincible in this suit, he’s also very, very vulnerable. He feels naked.”

Set for a Feb. 12 opening, the PG-13-rated film appears poised to collect roughly \$40 million in its first five days at the box office; it will get a high-profile Super Bowl pregame broadcast spotlight on Sunday.



Samuel L. Jackson plays conservative media mogul Pat Novak in “RoboCop.” (Kerry Hayes / MGM / Columbia Pictures)

If “RoboCop” is a hit, it could launch a franchise for MGM, which enjoyed modest success last year with a new version of the horror film “Carrie,” and distributor Sony. Kinnaman is under contract, meaning he would most likely return as Alex Murphy; Padilha’s potential involvement in a sequel is less clear.

MGM’s motion picture group president, Jonathan Glickman, said he and Padilha had not discussed plans for a follow-up, should there be one, but he praised the director’s tireless “commitment to his vision.”

“We did support that initial vision from the first meeting we had with him. It was his point of view that we backed,” Glickman said. “The westerns of the ’50s were very much about the times in that era, and the horror films of that era were very much about the times, but they don’t wear their politics or their messaging on their sleeve, and I don’t think this film does either. It’s just working within a world that is very current and modern in terms of the issues we are facing, but does it within a straight-ahead narrative.”

For Kinnaman, the movie’s contemporary resonance is key.

“For the action to have any value, you have to build these characters so there’s actually something at stake,” Kinnaman said. “Mindless action movies become like cartoons for me. That’s why this was inspiring. It had a value.”

– Gina McIntyre | [@LATHeroComplex](#)