

Sean Gunn, Pete Davidson, Mayling Ng, Joel Kinnaman, Jai Courtney, Nathan Fillion, writer/director James Gunn, Margot Robbie, Flula Borg, and Michael Rooker share a laugh on the set of *The Suicide Squad*.



squad goals



BY DAVID CROW

A COUPLE OF DAYS. That's how long director James Gunn had to wait before Warner Bros. and DC came calling in 2018. Up until that moment, it'd been a pretty turbulent July. The iconoclastic filmmaker who made audiences cry over a talking tree in *Guardians of the Galaxy* was just fired by Disney—temporarily as it turns out—and his name was being besmirched on social media. Yet less than 72 hours after that dismissal, WB was making him an offer that could change the face of DC superhero movies forever.

"It happened immediately," Gunn says with a hint of lingering chagrin. "We started talking about what the project would be. The first thing that was brought up was Superman, but I didn't know if I wanted to do that."

So the studio suggested a once-in-a-lifetime alternative: make whatever you want. Gunn was free to adapt "anybody out of the DC catalogue." Somehow though, with an entire gleaming multiverse at his disposal, Gunn only had eyes for the filthiest D-listers this side of Krypton. He only wanted to make *The Suicide Squad*.

The team of supervillain rejects has of course been adapted before, with David Ayer's critically divisive *Suicide Squad* coming out in 2016. The earlier movie was a hit too, grossing more than \$700 million and triggering a small bout of jealousy in Gunn, who even then thought that was the only DC property he ever wanted to do. But the film left something to be desired for many fans and critics.

To be clear, there are things Gunn absolutely loves about Ayer's movie. How could he not, when he incorporated so many of the 2016 film's cast into his own? In Gunn's mind, Margot Robbie was born to play Harley Quinn, which he hopes to only further highlight by bringing out her "true lunacy" in the new movie. Viola Davis' Amanda Waller, meanwhile, was the first character he decided to put in his own film. But Gunn is unambiguous on one point: his *The Suicide Squad* is going to be its own 31 flavors of weird.

THE SUICIDE SQUAD IS THE WILDEST, WEIRDEST, MOST R-RATED DC MOVIE EVER. JAMES GUNN, MARGOT ROBBIE, IDRIS ELBA, JOHN CENA, AND JOEL KINNAMAN TELL US ALL ABOUT IT.



“It wasn’t something to contrast the first movie,” Gunn says. “It wasn’t about going through a checklist of this is good, this is bad, this works, this doesn’t... but the concept that John Ostrander started with in the comics, that these are B-grade, shitty superheroes who are considered disposable by the US government and are sent out on these black-ops missions, where they probably won’t make it but who gives a shit because they’re pieces-of-shit prisoners without many skills?”

That is the movie Gunn wanted to make. And he did so with R-rated glee.

Engineered as a standalone epic that might (or might not) be a sequel to the 2016 movie, Gunn’s *The Suicide Squad* (coming to theaters and HBO Max on Aug. 6) is, in essence, meant to be a spiritual continuation of comic book writer Ostrander’s seminal 1980s run. Davis’ Waller is still the government’s shady lady pulling the strings and recruiting incarcerated sad sacks to do the wetwork law

“HE’S A GIANT, CERULEAN BLUE STARFISH, BUT HE’S ALSO FUCKING TERRIFYING.”

enforcement won’t; her point man on the ground remains Rick Flag (Joel Kinnaman), a straight arrow surrounded by coerced supervillains, including familiar faces like Robbie’s delightfully demented Harley, and new ones like Idris Elba’s Bloodsport.

The genre Gunn and his cohorts compare this to is war movies, but who they’re going to war against isn’t exactly clear. With that said, a trailer revealed a DC comics deep cut, with the villainous alien, Starro, running amok at kaiju-size.

“Starro is hilarious because he’s ridiculous. He’s a giant, cerulean blue starfish, but he’s also fucking terrifying,” Gunn says. “When I was

a kid I thought that was the scariest thing of all time... and I think that exemplifies what this movie is: it is ridiculous and it’s also terrifying, and serious. So he works really well as the villain of the movie—as one of the villains, actually.”

Ironically, the real antagonists of *The Suicide Squad* might simply be the flick’s main characters, and Gunn is using the motley crew to unleash his distinctive voice. With an absurdly large cast to pick from, the director has carte blanche from WB to kill any character he wants, and to embrace any level of weirdness. And unlike the 2016 film, or his previous Guardians movies, *The Suicide Squad*

King Shark, *Ratcatcher 2* (Daniela Melchior), *Bloodsport* (Idris Elba), Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie), and Polka-Dot Man (David Dastmalchian) find themselves staring down something big.



is a big budget superhero flick with an R-rating. A first for Gunn.

"Most of my movies have been R-rated," Gunn laughs when we mention this. He is, after all, a filmmaker who cut his teeth at indie grindhouse outfit Troma Entertainment, and has a history with tongue-in-cheek horror movies like *Slither*. But whether it's making an R-rated *Suicide Squad* movie or a PG-13 *Guardians* picture, it's all the same to him: telling the biggest-ass version of a campfire yarn.

"This is simply a little bit of a higher age bracket," he explains, "and my audience is a little bit different. They can see a shark tearing someone in half, they can see a penis. It doesn't matter." Even so, there remains a sense of human connection among a number of broken *Squad* members. And those without that vulnerability still allow the storyteller to broaden the moral spectrum he's playing with.

"I think you know from the beginning of the first *Guardians* that

most likely, in his heart, Peter Quill is good, Gamora is good, Rocket is good, Drax is good." But with the *Suicide Squad*, "some are not good people. They're bad people. It's less sentimental in that way. King Shark is much less sentimental than Groot."

Some of these bad people will die in presumably horrible ways. Not that Gunn is killing his darlings lightly.

"The first thing I had to do was ignore the potential blowback from killing a character," Gunn says. Instead he focused on following the natural progression of the story, and each character's arc. "I'm just the servant of the story, so whatever the story says is what I'm going to do, no matter what the repercussions are for anything. I believe in the truth of the story. I believe that there was a story out there that needed to be told that I don't have any control over."

Perhaps ceding that control is the greatest advantage he's discovered from making a gross, foul-mouthed superhero movie exactly to his liking.

"I wanted to do the things that other spectacle films haven't been able to do," Gunn says, "which is really take my time and investigate these characters, get to know them, focus on the character aspects, focus on who they were, and deal with time in a different way than it's been dealt with in these movies."

Gunn is thus able to let his movie breathe in a way that's unusual for the superhero genre, but is in line with the more adult-oriented filmmaking he loved as a child. *The Suicide Squad* may be a war movie, but for Gunn it's a specific type of throwback. Quick to name *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Great Escape*, he becomes audibly excited when discussing those 1960s "war-caper" films from his youth. Recapturing that aesthetic is as much the appeal of the movie as honoring the comics. He even refers to Elba's *Bloodsport* as his Steve McQueen.

"He's the unsentimental portrayal of a 1960s action hero but without the moral repercussions of those characters," says Gunn. Also, he notes, *Bloodsport* is the guy who shot Superman with a kryptonite bullet. "How cool

is that? And also, what a dick!" When contrasted with Robbie's Harley Quinn, Gunn even likens the pair's energy to Abbott and Costello, only now Costello might kill you with a bat.

But then, each of the *Squad* members represent their own genre. They also each leave the door open for further exploration. Hence Gunn's next project is still not *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, but rather an HBO Max show starring one of the nastiest pieces of work in the squad: John Cena's *Peacemaker*.

Describing the jingoistic flag-waver as if Marvel's Captain America took a really far-right turn, Gunn saw *Peacemaker* as the perfect jumping off point when HBO approached him about doing a series.

"I think that the actual inspiration for *Peacemaker* was the shitty 1970s Captain America TV shows that I loved when I was a child," Gunn says. "*Peacemaker* exemplifies a lot of things about society that are going on politically, and what people's beliefs are about America and the world."

Exploring this week-to-week with Cena—an actor whose range Gunn believes audiences have only seen a fraction of—is irresistible. In fact, *Peacemaker* might mark another turning point in Gunn's career.

"I love doing *Peacemaker*. I could see just making TV shows after *Guardians 3*. It's a possibility," he says. Three years since Gunn's one very bad week, the possibilities now seem limitless. ●



**JAMES GUNN
ON SAVANT:
"I LOVE HUMILIATING
MICHAEL ROOKER IN
HIS LONG WHITE WIG.
[LAUGHS]."**