



THE EVIL FAMILY BUSINESS

Bruce Campbell and Friends Bring Horror Back from the Dead

BY DAVID CROW



Left: Bruce Campbell with his chainsaw at the ready.

Above: Pablo Bolivar (Ray Santiago) and Ash Williams (Bruce Campbell) after a grisly encounter with a Deadite.

Images: Starz Entertainment

BRUCE CAMPBELL DOES NOT CARE MUCH FOR TORTURE PORN.

He made that point explicit, highlighted, and then underscored with a chainsaw both times we spoke this summer.

"I'm very glad we're out of that sort of shitty filmmaking stage," Campbell says with a pause during a phone interview. "Now, we're going back, I think, to horror that's a little more genuine." Campbell should know. He's at the forefront of a cult revival for the style he helped revolutionize alongside Sam Raimi and Rob Tapert in a Tennessee cabin, oh so many moons ago. Only this time, the revolution is going to be televised—and aired weekly on Starz, no less.

Noting that there is little talent required for churning stomachs, Campbell thinks audiences are ready for "good old-fashioned pumping blood," and the kind of filmmaking ingenuity that relies on building suspense and jumps, as opposed to shock and disgust. Plus, a few well-placed puns and punchlines never hurt either.

"[The series] is a counterbalance to anybody who isn't really interested in grim horror or unremittingly dark horror," Campbell continues. "If you're interested in little rays of sunshine in your horror, we're the show for you."

That blood and sunshine of which Campbell speaks is *Ash vs. Evil Dead*, the unlikely but welcome resurrection of cinema's most beloved

"video nasty" legacy. It's been 36 years since Campbell, Raimi, and Tapert first went to that cabin in the woods, but fans demanded to see more of Campbell's big screen alter-ego; the loudmouthed and vainglorious Ashley Williams has persisted from *Evil Dead II* (1987) to *Army of Darkness* (1992), and now into the 21st century.

"We did a remake a couple years ago to try and placate fans, but they wanted more," the actor muses about *Ash vs. Evil Dead's* genesis. "They wanted Sam to direct, they wanted me to be Ash, and so with television the way it is now... we thought, 'What the hell? Let's do it as TV!'"

For Campbell, there might have never been a more fitting venue or format for his fourth *Evil Dead* adventure. As a performer, he professes to love the speed and expediency of a television schedule that allows him to both shoot a death scene and pay his taxes before lunch. It is also the medium where he has built an eclectic on-and-off career, playing cowboys, American Revolution superheroes, and perhaps most memorably, retired spook and braggart Sam Axe on USA's *Burn Notice*. Indeed, it is the melding of that legacy with his even more iconic movie one that has created such strong potential for hype and excitement right out of the gate. It's also the kind of potential that Starz is ready to bet on all the way to the presumed cult glories that come with boomsticks and gallons of blood.

When I first met Campbell during July's San Diego Comic-Con for a roundtable interview, he immediately came across as a thoughtful and gracious man, quick to punctuate interviews with a quip but otherwise remaining a deliberate and straightforward professional. Yet the moment Campbell takes the stage of a convention floor filled with a thousand fans and a half-dozen cosplayers dressed as his big (and now



Lucy Lawless as Ruby Knowby is on the hunt for Ash and the Book of the Dead.
Image: Starz Entertainment

small) screen hero, his persona becomes as loud as his adorned, tacky red suit. Hype the crowd with the kind of mania usually reserved for the “King” himself (a role Campbell also played in *Bubba Ho-Tep*), the cult star’s chin holds similar sway over his fiefdom as those fabled hips commanded another. Once he turns on his trademark Ash Williams bravado and grade school charm, Campbell can dominate a room with or without the chainsaw.

It is just as much the selling point of *Ash vs. Evil Dead* as the prospect of Deadite zombies doing nasty things with nasty tree limbs to soon-to-be nasty corpses.

“Bruce is such a virtuoso performer,” Lucy Lawless marvels about her *Ash* co-star after watching him battle his own possessed hand in *Evil Dead II*. “That was unbelievable. He’s Buster Keaton in blood.”

Lawless, a television icon in her own right following *Xena: Warrior Princess*, has nothing but respect for Campbell, whom she has considered a friend and a colleague for years.

“We are like two comrades from the trenches, who really see a completely different side,” she says. “We see [the industry] through a completely different prism from a lot of people, and we see a lot of humor

where others haven’t seen it.”

Perhaps that is a major reason why Lawless has now officially joined the *Evil Dead* family. Cast in the role of Ruby Knowby, daughter to the original *Evil Dead*’s hapless Professor Knowby who first read from the Book of the Dead while in his austere fruit cellar, Lawless is entering a franchise that she already has an evolving history with.

Recalling the first time she watched *The Evil Dead* on video when she was 17-years-old, Lawless can still vividly recollect her then-boyfriend telling her it was a classic. “After the first five minutes, I got up in a fit of feminist angst and stomped off, leaving my boyfriend and his buddies to endure the rest,” she recalls with a knowing smile at the impending irony. “I said the people who made this movie are sick misogynistic assholes, and they should be in prison! And 12 years later, I was married to one of them. It’s the ultimate never say never.”

Indeed, *Ash vs. Evil Dead* has become something of a reunion for almost all involved. In 1998, Lawless married Rob Tapert, the producer on all three *Evil Dead* films and executive producer of *Ash vs. Evil Dead*. And Tapert has been friends with Campbell and Raimi (who go back to childhood) since rooming with Raimi’s brother, Ivan, at Michigan

State University. And incidentally, Ivan Raimi helped Sam with the screenplays for all three *Evil Dead* films, earning a co-credit on *Army of Darkness*, which featured one of the many cameos of brother Ted Raimi, who appeared throughout the series. While Ted Raimi is not in the first season of *Ash vs. Evil Dead*, both Campbell and Lawless are adamant about getting him on the set of a possible season two, with Lawless in particular hoping that he will soon be slathered in Deadite makeup; she insists that of all these franchise veterans, only Ted can withstand more prosthetic pain.

“[*Evil Dead*] has been part of our life for 20 years,” Lawless said with the faintest hint of pride during our first sit down in San Diego. “So, it’s kind of a family business.” She would elaborate during a follow-up interview that whenever she and Rob visit Sam Raimi while away from their New Zealand home, it is something of a communal gathering.

“Sam is like Uncle Sam in L.A. We all go visit him, and he cooks massive barbecue, and we have a bunch of children running around in the backyard. But as a director he is so loved; he’s a very interesting director [because] he plays every role. You can sit him down and he’ll inhabit the role opposite you, and then with the other actors, he’ll be playing my role. It’s how he feels out the comedy dialogue.”

This might be true of all his players’ experience, but he is also a director who is infamous for acutely focusing on Bruce Campbell for physical punishment on the set, both while he is in character and when he is out of it. In particular, Campbell remembers with equal measures of nostalgia and discomfort a time on the set of *Army of Darkness* when he was strapped into a visual effects rig and could not move as Sam Raimi surprised him from behind with a two-by-four to the ankle. “Are you ready for this!?” he kept shouting while Campbell wrenched in pain.

Apparently, not much has changed in this playfully extreme version of motivation. “Only he’s a better filmmaker now,” Campbell remarks. “So, he can torment me in more sophisticated ways. But I’m a clever little actor now, so I can duck around that sometimes, too.”

Lawless, who has never been the target of such precise direction by Raimi, is amused by his Campbell-specific process, suggesting that this is the real heart and appeal of the *Evil Dead* franchise: “People want to see Bruce being treated badly.” It is also likely something that returns to the original brand of stunningly off-color humor and horror that made *The Evil Dead* such a visceral experience for her first viewing, and which remains a facet of *Ash vs. Evil Dead*.

When I sat down with Sam and Ivan Raimi for a roundtable interview in July, Ivan Raimi suggested that they intended to maintain the horror of the first film and the tone and tenor of Ash’s trash-talking vanity from the sequels. Similarly, Campbell says the series is basically the “companionship and amalgam of the movies.” Campbell even states that they went to Starz with an edict for marketing: don’t advertise this like it’s the next *The Walking Dead*. For the actor, this meant from the beginning that Ash would be the sum total of laughter and gore that was accumulated during the three previous films, with only a few new accessories to go

along with the bad one-liners, like dentures, a girdle, and a mysterious new weapon.

“Ash has become more set in his ways [and more] stubborn,” says Sam Raimi, who also directed the first episode of *Ash vs. Evil Dead*. “Believe it or not, he’s a little more ignorant and even less open to new ideas.” Yet, despite loving to pile the blood and bizarre onto this protagonist, Raimi also spoke about Ash Williams and his new role in the TV series with occasional eloquence, and even reluctant admiration.

“I think as dumb as Ash is, for some reason in [the minds of Ivan and me], and as written of in *The Book of the Dead*, his destiny is somehow all bound up with the Necronomicon. And I think it’s because on a bigger scale, there’s a battle between the spirits of the Good Lord above and who knows what, but there is a contest going on between evil and good. And it’s playing out through representation of the average man, which is Ash. I think if evil can defeat him at any time or place, then it will be again time for evil to walk and rule the Earth. And if the average man is strong, if he’s strong of heart and spirit, and soul, it will again be time for that evil to sleep for 10,000 or so years... I don’t think any of us know this, and I don’t think it’s brought out, but I think that’s what’s probably happening below the surface.” Raimi takes a momentary pause while his brother Ivan begins to chuckle in preparation for the punchline.

“But I wish we had better representation for mankind than him, but unfortunately he’s been chosen for some reason.” Ivan then causes his brother to also break earnestness by adding, “You play the cards you’re dealt.”

As with Ash himself, it seems likely that the monkey’s paw of self-righteousness and blood-drenched perversity are totally intact for *Ash vs. Evil Dead*. In fact, this tonal whiplash remains the best point-of-entry into the show and overall universe’s sense of humor.

This definitely held true for Lawless’ understanding of Ruby Knowby and her character beats.

Despite being Samuel Gerard to Ash’s Richard Kimble in this story, chasing the protagonist down for his idiotic tendencies to read from the Book of the Dead, Lawless’ straight-man character gets into just as many gonzo scenarios as Ash. This includes eventually succumbing to Ash’s lothario ways for a love scene that Lawless describes as “just wrong,” as well as making out with a 10-year-old boy who has been possessed by the soul of her character’s dead lover. That sequence presented an awkward and legitimate ethical dilemma for Lawless.

However for the actress, there was a specific moment where who her character was and exactly what kind of tone this horror-comedy series evokes clicked into place. Lawless distinctly recalls with a laugh the very scene she was shooting with Jill Marie Jones, who portrays law enforcement agent and fellow Deadite slayer Amanda Fisher.

“There was a scene where it started to crystallize for me what my role was,” Lawless recalls. She was sitting next to Jones while filming in a car “and my character kind of hits on her. It was so funny. I saw it on the playback, and it was like ‘Bam, now I get it.’”

One imagines that this epiphany, not to mention the ethical dilemmas, will likewise be a common occurrence when viewers tune in to the first episode of *Ash vs. Evil Dead* on Halloween night. ☹

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