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"I've always wanted to shrink": 'Van Helsing' star Aleks Paunovic on being 'big' and Julius's return to humanity in Season 3

By Alakananda Bandyopadhyay 18 Sep 2018

Aleks plays the role of a vampire, Julius on SyFy's hit series Van Helsing, and apart from that he has also indulged in productions, music and boxing.



He might be a sexy, buff vampire on screen in the hit show Van Helsing, but in real life, Aleks Paunovic is just your regular dude with a love for all things creative, and of course - food. Striking such a fine balance between the kind of person he is in real life and the roles he portrays

on screen - Aleks seems to have mastered the art of playing the intimidating big guy even though in real life the idea of violence and fights is something that he stays far away from.

And now, on the brink of the release of Van Helsing's upcoming season 3, which hits the network on October 5, 2018, at 9 pm ET, Aleks spills the beans on being the 'big dude' in the industry, and his go-to methods for adapting to such intense, violence plots onscreen. Here are some excerpts of his conversation with Meaww.

You've starred in quite unique movies with massive cult following, how has that affected your career as opposed to commercial films?

I love the idea of independent films. For me, they are such a creative breaching point for a lot of actors. And it helped me a lot of the times, commercial and big budget films - especially when I started out in my career - because I'm 6 foot and quite a big dude, they would only cast me to be big. So I didn't get a big chance to spread my wings. But the indie community lets me do that. I get to show what I've always wanted to do and that I'm more than my size. It helps me tell a story from the vessel that I've created with the work that I've done with some amazing acting coaches and just working on my instrument in general. And trying to understand who I am is such a big part of being an actor - leaving the ego at home and being vulnerable and finding out the tools in your toolbox - it's hard to have that in a big budget idea, mostly because they have a certain aspect of how they cast. So when they look at indie films, they go "Oh, this big guy can do such an amazing job" - which helped me not look past the bigness, I looked at it. So it's changed my career by allowing me to do the craft that I wanna do!



When not playing Julius on the SyFy network's hit fantasy show, Paunovic has also acted in War

for the Planet of the Apes and has indulged in projects with the likes of with Keanu Reeves, Laura Dern, and Liam Neeson. Credit: Aaron RT Smedley

Since your mention getting perceived a certain way because of your size - would you say it has proven to be a challenging aspect for you in the industry?

It's an interesting subject. I've had a lot of people go - "You know, I'd rather be big than small." But for me, as an actor, to get into my instrument - I've always wanted to shrink. I've always wanted to be smaller. I didn't want to bring attention to my size because I wanted to just act. But then there's the other end of it where I get more work because of my size, but it's not the kinda work that I wanna do. So I needed to really own my body because I realized - and a very talented acting instructor pointed it out to me - that I was apologizing for my size. And I didn't realize that I was slumping or my shoulders were shrinking and to me, that was such a revelation. He told me that I'd be seen as the big guy, just insecure, whereas I should be seen as the big guy being emotional and in his scene, own his body. Because you don't see the body when it has ownership; you just see the scene. But when you apologize for it, that's all others will see. It's almost like driving by a car wreck: you don't wanna look at it, but you can't help looking at it. So it's been challenging, but it's definitely not the cream of the crop.

So would you say because of your size, you were typecasted as the violent guy, or the goon, in your initial phase in the industry?

Yeah, definitely. And I understand because you know, everybody has a typecast. Like Tom Cruise is typecast to be THAT character. You don't seem him play anything he wants; he's definitely not that intimidating guy - so if the scene says he's trying to throw me out of the club - that's not gonna work. So for me too, definitely - like the bouncer roles in the club, or the goon roles all of this stuff. But I had to move past it and make it very uncomfortable for myself - to put myself in a position to be able to tell the stories that I've always wanted to tell. And that's the thing that really empowers me. But I've also had to learn the idea of instead of hating the typecast, I had to make friends with it. Like okay, you're gonna cast me as the bouncer or the goon, but I'm not going to play the bad guy - I'm going to make the scene interesting for me, so the role looks interesting to you enough to make you look beyond the one-dimensional bad guy. But also - I don't look at the bad guy as the bad guy. I look at him and act it out with a lot of love - like somebody is willing to go that much farther than the other person. So when the lines come out - it could be just as intimidating as the director wanted - but so much more colorful.

But with such well thought out methods - would you say acting was always on the cards for you? How did you come to be in this profession?

It's interesting because I grew up in an eastern-European family: very loud, very expressive. My brother was very academic, but me - I love telling stories, making people laugh and having them interested in what I was saying. So I started playing music, together with friends back in high school. Writing, playing concerts all over in Canada - that was me. Telling stories through music was my thing. But at one concert somebody saw me playing and asked if I would love to audition for a movie and I said yeah, I'd like to try anything that's creative. But when I got the job, I was absolutely blown away that this was another venue for me to tell stories and communicate.



"Telling stories through music was my thing. But at one concert somebody saw me playing and asked if I would love to audition for a movie and I said yeah, I'd like to try anything that's creative." Credit: Aaron RT Smedley

And how did your love for boxing come to be?

I love the idea of boxing, but not fighting. For me, it's never about hurting the other person and that's big because I come from a family of three generations of boxers. So for me, there's nothing more challenging and pushing yourself to the next level when you have somebody across from you - the same size and trains just as hard as you - and now we're going to figure it out and see who can come out on top. But it's never with anger; so that was another place where I could get creative. There are boxers who love to hit hard and knock people out but that's not for me. I love to figure it out - to express in a way that was not intended just for violence. Mohammed Ali did it and it was never about how vicious he was.

But at the same time, you have done typically intense, violent roles on *Van Helsing* and so on. So for someone who doesn't want to be about violence, is there a go-to method you adapt prepping for roles like these?

I do have a method and it took me a while to get it to the point where it was authentic, and honestly, I consider it a secret. (laughs) I don't really tell people where I get that from, but it definitely comes from a sense of protection. So I use a source of a couple of really important people in my life, and I play these roles thinking what I would do to protect them. So I would use the dialogue and the scene that may have nothing to do with that, but I implement and take it to the next level because it's so visceral and so close to me. Like the lengths I would go to, to protect my newborn baby. So it's never a sense of anger in my heart, no matter how violent the role. I don't need to find something I hate to perform an intimidating role.

And with *Van Helsing*'s season 3 coming out in less than a month, what can fans expect in terms of the plot and Aleks' character, Julius? Are there any twists that fans should watch out for?

I'm so excited for the world to see what we did with season 3. There are so many twists and turns, and Julius is in the mix of it all. You'll get to see a couple of relationships that you haven't seen Julius in before, and you'll see his growth into being human again and how he navigates it.

Do these heavy performance action roles require you to make fitness an indispensable part of your personality?

It's definitely side-by-side. If I, as an actor, want to tell a story, it requires fully embodying the personality, not just the words coming out of my mouth. I have to be in control of my whole vessel. So being physically fit and challenging myself physically and getting my whole body moving - to the place where I can feel the soreness all over - to know that my full body is working is something I need to personally connect with.



"If I, as an actor, want to tell a story, it requires fully embodying the personality, not just the words coming out of my mouth. I have to be in control of my whole vessel." Credit: Aaron RT Smedley

So what's your secret fitness mantra? Do you follow a special diet or fitness regime to stay in such great shape?

Honestly, I don't think anybody fails as much as I do at following a diet and fitness. I fail all the time, but I do not punish myself for it I try to keep getting back on track. I'm definitely not someone that does seven days a week of a strict diet. I love to eat and have some drinks, and as much as I love to work out, I don't do it religiously. I like pushing myself and even though I've been boxing all my life, I have a trainer. That's the best money I've spent in my life - having someone be there with me and push me along the way. Also support in the community keeps me

moving. So I'm definitely not preaching a diet or fitness regime that's not my life. What I will say is that you're going to and definitely will fail - but what matters is don't punish yourself by not enjoying your life.

But do you see staying in shape at the utmost priority or a prerequisite for an actor?

I can't see how it wouldn't be a priority. Once you get into a fitness regime, how can it not be better for you!? So when people don't work out, I don't think they feel really good about that. Even if it's just a walk, or climbing up some stairs - you might get tired, but afterward, you're like "Oh my god, that felt great!" So I can't see it not helping your instrument when your instrument is your body. I think it's a necessity. For others, it might be different though, but for me, that's how it works.

Actor, fitness enthusiast, and also a horror movie producer - could you please elaborate a little on what the experience of producing a movie like? How was it different from acting?

I love the idea of creating jobs and creating an environment where everyone can get together. I was filming Van Helsing and somebody had the idea of making a vampire movie - so they took it to the next level and all of a sudden, there are 250 people working on something together - creating jobs. And that to me is so attractive, 'cause not only I get to tell a story I wanna tell, but being there from the beginning to the end is a wonderful idea to me. Having this great grasp on how we can tell the story and being the leader of it - I love it!

And any upcoming projects that your fans could look forward to - or some that you yourself are thrilled about?

We have season 3 of Van Helsing coming out. I also started a new show called 'Snowpiercer'. And a couple others that aren't final yet, so as an actor I feel very excited about that! And I'm also in development with two drama TV series and one reality show about music, so my creative juices are really flowing so I'm quite excited about the next year and a half to see how this all pans out. And that's the biggest thing I love - being in development of all of it. They may never make it to the screen, but the journey of making it happen and getting excited every day about an idea for this and that is what keeps me driven. The rest is all an amazing bonus!