

Apocalypse now: It's the end of the world as Vancouver's Aleks Paunovic knows it

Van Helsing star slays in indie film Freaks

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Aleks Paunovic adds another post-apocalyptic, dystopian vision to his resume — *Freaks*, the critically acclaimed independent feature film from Vancouver filmmakers Zach Lipovsky and Adam B. Stein.

In the event of an apocalypse, Aleks Paunovic has a clear advantage over the rest of us.

It's not just a size advantage — Paunovic towers above the majority of his fellow actors at 6'5" — or the fact that the Vancouver-based actor and producer grew up in a boxing ring in Winnipeg's North End neighbourhood and knows how to handle himself in rough-and-tumble situations.

Paunovic's advantage in an apocalypse stems from the fact he's played out multiple apocalyptic scenarios in an array of screen projects, including SyFy's post-apocalyptic vampire series *Van Helsing*, the CW's *The 100* and TBS's upcoming series *Snowpiercer*.

For the most part, Paunovic's characters survive to live another day — and if they don't survive, they wreak enough havoc before they go to make sure they're not easily forgotten.

"I've done a lot of post-apocalyptic stuff, and when I see stuff in the news, like what's going on in Hong Kong right now, there's a parallel for me in thinking, 'If shit went sideways, I think I've got this on point,'" he says. "Working on post-apocalyptic shows, there's a little bit of a spark in my head of, 'Oh, this is great, I love this scene, and I would probably do this in real life.'"

Paunovic added to his apocalypse and dystopia survival kit when he worked on *Freaks*, the critically acclaimed independent feature film from Vancouver filmmakers Zach Lipovsky and Adam B. Stein.

Freaks — which premiered at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival before playing to sold-out crowds at the 2018 Vancouver International Film Festival — opens in theatres nationwide Sept. 13.

The film follows a young girl named Chloe (portrayed by phenomenal child actress Lexy Kolker) whose dad (*Lords of Dogtown*'s Emile Hirsch) is keeping her locked down at home so no one from the world outside can hurt her. The film also stars Bruce Dern and Amanda Crew.

Freaks is a long-fuse sci-fi mystery that unspools over several increasingly satisfying acts. Spoilers are toxic. Buy a ticket, support a locally produced film and enjoy the ride.

But what I can tell you is that *Freaks* brilliantly mines the paranoia and angst of our present-day f***ed-up world without hitting anyone over the head with it.

"I definitely think what's going on in the real world enhances the story," says Paunovic. "I feel like when you watch this movie it puts the magnifying glass on, and you really see how ugly this kind of thing is. I think it brings a lot of awareness to how people react, and what are they actually reacting to."

That's an oblique answer, but perfectly acceptable given our commitment to remaining spoiler-free. Paunovic is just as coy when discussing the fourth season of *Van Helsing*, which returns to SyFy later this fall.

Van Helsing is a post-apocalyptic thriller serial set in a world overrun by vampires. Kelly Overton stars as Vanessa, the ass-kicking descendent of the famed vampire hunter whose blood has the power to turn vampires human again.

Paunovic plays Julius, a bloodsucker turned enhanced human who is at his most terrifying when you ask him for *Van Helsing* spoilers. But Paunovic will disclose that the show is as strong as ever, despite the fact that original showrunner, Neil LaBute, recently passed the showrunning torch to longtime writer and producer Jonathan Lloyd Walker.

“It’s easy to lean into this change,” says Paunovic. “Jonathan’s always been a phenomenal writer and contributor on set, but now with him calling the shots and really wanting the show to go to a new level, he’s bringing new passion and energy to the set.”

Van Helsing fans can expect a whole lotta “more” this season, according to Paunovic: more fights, more ass-kicking and more female bad-assery, thanks in part to Tricia Helfer (*Battlestar Galactica*), who joins the cast as Dracula.

As for the story arcs, “everything gets a lot deeper,” says Paunovic. “We get into the spiral cone of what *Van Helsing* is all about. This is a year of revelations.”

Oh, and *Van Helsing* gets bigger, too, with the addition of former WWE champion Big Show. “It was such a gift for us on the show to have him come in and play with us,” says Paunovic. “He made me look like a hobbit. He’s seven-feet tall. I felt so wee.”

Freaks opens nationwide Sept. 13. *Van Helsing* returns to SyFy later this fall.