

Parade

Van Helsing's Aleks Paunovic: *Julius* Thirsts for Power and Blood

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By **STEPHANIE STEPHENS**



Aleks Paunovic talks in detail about playing a vampire on Syfy's 'Van Helsing.' (Dennys Ilic)

No one would argue that **Aleks Paunovic** is one “don’t-mess-with-me” vampire in Syfy’s new offering, *Van Helsing*. Per the network, the show “is set in the near future, where vampires have risen and taken control. Vanessa Van Helsing is humanity’s last hope, as her unique blood composition gives her the ability to turn vampires human. With this secret weapon, Vanessa becomes a prime target for the vampires.”

A Canadian, Aleks, 47, plays one of those vampires, Julius, and he looks convincingly real when doing it. A former rock band member, Aleks got an acting job after his first audition and left the tunes behind for the big and small screens. We’ve seen him in films with **Anthony Hopkins** and **Martin Sheen**, and especially memorably with **Ashton Kutcher**, **Michelle Pfeiffer** and **Kathy Bates** in *Personal Effects*. He may be best known for his “specialty,” other sci-fi TV shows such as *iZombie*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Supernatural* and *Smallville*.

Yes, Aleks sure looks convincing as a vampire but that’s the “exterior” Aleks. He’s a sensitive guy—really—as you’ll learn when you meet him here.



'Julius' (Aleks Paunovic) is ready for action on Syfy's 'Van Helsing.'

We know that *Van Helsing* will not be the first show or movie about vampires. But why is it the best one, besides the fact that you are in it?

First, I had worked with executive producer **Simon Barry** of the multi-award-winning Canadian sci-fi series, *Continuum*. I'm also such a fan of creator **Neil LaBute's** work and of the way he brings humility and humanity to his writing. Even though he hasn't done sci-fi before, he just knows character development so well. Everything just comes together in a perfect marriage.

So a woman is going to be humanity's last hope: What do you *guys* in the cast think about that plot line?

I love it. **Kelly Overton** as Vanessa Van Helsing is so believable and really pulls off this role, due in part to her strong physical presence on screen. I was really excited when I signed on, and everyone and everything fell into place. It was “gravy,” because the people who created this really know what they’re doing.

As Julius, you have your own brood on the show. You are a leader. What else should we know about the “real Julius”?

Julius comes from a very visceral place. He wants his own power—he’s thirsty for that and for blood—and likes to be a leader. That gets him moving. He’s not a long-term thinker, but wants to gather all his own marbles before things get tougher.

We don’t know how long this vampire takeover is going to last—maybe a long time. He knows he can sustain if he’s smart, but he wants to take as much as he can now.

Your brood's vampires don't have fangs or claws, but can speak and coordinate with other vampires. These are a different kind of vampire indeed. Why would we want to hang out with them at a cocktail party?

My "ferals" are like that and they operate more on instinct. They behave so they can get their food, and I find them their food sources. I control them, and if they don't follow me, they're finished. That's that.

Will we see lots of vampires killed in the show? That's not too fun for people who are squeamish. Do vampires really die most easily by decapitation and destroying the heart?

The way this show goes about it is really different. I personally think you need to see that to understand for yourself. A lot of it is insinuated. The team wrote a very dark show, on purpose, not to "gross us out" better than another show, but to accurately portray a post-apocalyptic civil war.

It's said that vampires really don't experience sex "like the rest of us." Can you elucidate with a G rating for us?

We haven't been on those journeys yet, but they'll be in Season 2 if and when. Vampires don't have a

conscience. There's nothing there like good feelings and bad. They go forward strictly on the thirst of their next meal, worrying about how to get it, and who's helping them get it.

And about that no-sun thing: In *Van Helsing* as in other vampire tales, you really don't like sun either, do you? How do you keep the orange ball in the sky at bay?

We have to stay in the dark. The filter of this thick cloud, formed by the volcanic eruption, has given us a new life. Things are flipped and switched around, with humans hiding from us. Now we can feed constantly and not just at night. There are still so many ways for us to die because the sun is so bright when it's out. We still get torched when sun breaks. We feed on drug addicts and rats to make it through to the next day.

You were playing in your metal rock band in Winnipeg when you were discovered. Ever wish you were still doing music full time? Still play?

I loved my band days. I've done it, I know what it feels like, and I can always call upon it. Yes, I still play. I have great memories, but I wouldn't trade what's going on now.

You were also a Canadian champion boxer before that 1999 Pan American Games accident corrupted your shoulder. How do you box now?

I still love boxing and training, but can't compete the way I used to compete. The fire is definitely still there, and I love to spar. I have great friends, who are fighters in the industry. There's nothing like it, and I do work out this way. The fear of getting punched in the face makes you work extra hard.

What else do you do for exercise, Aleks?

My trainer puts me through the sled workout! I also do hill sprints, battle ropes and weights. I'm into a quick, super-efficient workout to get it over with and be at my peak, making my heart really perform and making me burn calories the rest of the day. I like to work out in the morning.

What do you eat? I mean, you cannot just drink blood all the time.

That's true, I do need to mix it up a bit. Ha! That's why I like sushi! I'm a huge fan of fish and I love chicken, especially a Greek salad with chicken. I try to eat so I can stay on point with my training.

How do you work out to take care of your brain and your emotional health? Yours is not an easy business...

I'm glad you asked. I do some work for the Canadian Red Cross and its anti-bullying campaign in Winnipeg—yes, I was bullied when I was younger. I have also done a lot of personal development work that helps me thrive and have a more joyful life due to Executive Success Programs. This has worked well for me personally, but the bottom line is that if this isn't your thing, find something that is that can help you develop your inner being and your spirituality.

We all have a schematic that we grew up with. I can react to something differently than you can. It doesn't mean that reaction is reality. Whatever my deficiencies are, I want to work at them. I scare myself a little bit and go a little deeper, and it helps me in my work and enhances my vulnerability. I know I am getting there, while at the same time, I know I am living a joyful life and I want to share that.

Nothing around us can be that bad if we have the right people surrounding us with their beauty and vulnerability. I learn from everybody every day. I think that mind-body exercises are the biggest key.

Any other new projects you want to share?

I have several new projects, but am *really* excited about *War for the Planet of the Apes*, starring **Woody Harrelson**, coming out next summer—July 14, 2017, in fact.

[About the film: *Entertainment Weekly* reported Oct. 1 that “Caesar and his apes are forced into a deadly conflict with an army of humans led by a ruthless Colonel...Caesar and the Colonel are pitted against each other in an epic battle that will determine the fate of both their species and the future of the planet.”] It was six months of hard work. And no, I can’t say my character’s name but I can’t wait for people to see it. It’s one of the best experiences I’ve had, working for so many talented people.

This year, I executive produced and starred in *Ganji*, directed by **Ben Ratner**. It’s a short film about boxing, love and friendship. It was inspired by us meeting with Mohammed Ali in 2009. It debuted at the Vancouver International Film Festival, which happens to be going on right now through Oct. 14.

See him take a bite out of Friday night TV in *Van Helsing* on Syfy at 10 p.m. ET.