

Playing the Part: Casting the Leading Lady
Originally published on the Ragnarok Publications Blog
July 2015

Where else to begin a story about writers and their chatter of craft than at a bar? Dinks are sloshed. Wings are slurped. The jukebox is loaded. And the conversation turns to my upcoming debut novel release (*The Spider in the Laurel*, Ragnarok Publications). They dig into me about process. Cover art. Contract. Characters.

The question on the table is: If I could choose the actors, who would play the male and female leads in a Hollywood production?

Interesting. It's a conversation that has come up before with other groups of friends. The standbys are there. Charlie Hunnam or Joseph Gordon-Levitt for the guy. Kate Beckinsale for the girl.

"Which one," I ask, "should we do first?"

MacKenzie, the consensus is. The female lead. Late twenties. Born in Scotland. Raised in America. A bit of a soldier-monk. Bad-ass to the core.

"I'm thinking Kate Beckinsale," I say, charging out of the gate with my go-to.

"What about Starbuck," one friend says, "you know Sack-off whatever her name is?"

"Too buff," I say. "Think more like Milla Jovovitch."

"Who?"

"*Fifth Element*."

"Right, the chick with the band-aid outfit," the same friend says.

"How about Kiera Knightly," comes another suggestion.

I try putting Queen Guinevere and Elizabeth Swann together in MacKenzie's black, hooded sweater. It doesn't work.

"Buffy," is the next candidate.

Right after is, "Ooh, that *Orphan Black* girl, the one who plays all the girls."

Then it's rapid fire: Buffy, Uma Thurman, Xena, Scarlett Jo, Emily Blunt, Princess Leia. Marilyn Monroe.

"No," I say. "She's more..."

But they're firing them at me now, like explosions in a Michael Bay film. I zone out. I can't let them distract me. I'm on to someone. It's right there. A face. Television. A co-star. Jack Bauer.

"Rene Walker," I shout.

Everyone stares. Not just my group. The whole bar. I gulp my beverage. I crack my neck to the side. I explain. "Jack Bauer's girlfriend on *24*. For like two seasons. Totally her."

But something's a little off.

She's a little too... what? I can't see it. There's a song on the juke box distracting me. Something from the 90s confused about whether it's punk or alternative. I look across the room. There she is, staring me in the eyes. MacKenzie. On an album cover. Garbage. Shirley Manson is my MacKenzie.

Before I can make the announcement – quieter this time; I learned my lesson – someone says, "Hey, what about Zoe Saldana?"

The question stops us all. It's like they're waiting for me to announce the winning lottery numbers. Finally, one of the women in the group speaks up. I

"I thought you said she's Scottish," she says.

More silence. It feels like a long time. A shameful long time.

Why can't MacKenzie be black? Latino? Middle-Eastern? Who the Hell says Scottish women are only lily-white? Did I really write a character so flat that red hair and freckles are immutable, defining traits? Can they not be found on people who aren't of Euro-descent?

Zoe Saldana would make an Earth-shattering MacKenzie.

The conversation moves on to a debate about racial equality in literature. But I'm still in my novel. I'm thinking now about the male lead. Rafael Ward. He's got a slightly darker complexion. Dark eyes. Dark hair. He's part Indiana Jones. Part Jason Bourne. He'd haunted. Hunted by his past. He loves ancient history. It allows him to try to forget his own.

But Zoe Saldana as MacKenize is an epiphany. Forget black and white. Forget age. Forget height and weight and hairstyle. These are accessories for our characters. Not their souls. What if the best Rafael Ward isn't a male actor at all? The Mackenzie-actress candidates swipe through my mind like an iPhone gallery. They're not right. I'm missing something to make this work.

Then I get it. Sketches as first. Then scenes. Followed by full cinematic displays.

Sigourney Weaver, the perfect halves of Ripley and Dana Barrett.

Carrie-Ann Moss. Katee Sackhoff. Angelina Jolie. Not *Tomb Raider*. *Hackers*.

Marilyn Monroe. Not the ditzy screen persona. The lost Norma Jean, lonely and afraid, seeking any voice in the dark that August night in Brentwood.

Each of them is more Rafael Ward, I think, than Hunnam or Gordon-Levitt. Something zealous they bring to the screen which no male actor I can name can match.

So give me *The Spider in the Laurel* starring Zoe Saldana and Ripley or Starbuck or Trinity or whoever. Just don't let Michael Bay touch it and I'll sleep happy. And drinks are on me at the premier.