

Doug Jones: 'Star Trek Discovery' lives up to its name in futuristic season 3

Q&A with actor behind Saru – and iconic characters The Gentleman, Abe Sapien & Silver Surfer

What does a “Star Trek” series do after the ship’s crew has defeated both the greatest external enemy (the Klingons) and the greatest internal enemy (Control)? It jumps 930 years into the future, where “Discovery” is poised to blow the minds of fans in season three (Thursdays on CBS All Access).

In a phone interview Wednesday, Doug Jones, the actor who plays Kelpien Cmdr. Saru, said, “So much can happen. ... When you jump through a wormhole and you go into another era like that, we’re going to live up to our show’s name: ‘Discovery.’ We have a lot to discover in season three.”

First and foremost, of course, is when and how Cmdr. Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green) will reconnect with her Starship Discovery crewmates.

The artificial intelligence Control, though designed to aid Federation Star Fleet officers, went all “Terminator” Skynet in season two, as it sought to eliminate all sentient life.

Having used the Red Angel suit to take the sphere data (think: Google of the universe) far, far, far away from Control, Burnham initially finds herself alone – but on an inhabited world. (Score!)

Saru and the rest of the Discovery crew opted to follow Burnham into the future – leaving behind their friends and family to forge a new path. They’re also without a captain, as Christopher Pike returned to his own ship, Enterprise, at season two’s conclusion.

So, 930 years into the future, “First of all, we need to find our home with the Federation that we belong to. Are

Behind the Screens



With Joshua Maloni

Doug Jones as “Saru” on the CBS All Access series “Star Trek: Discovery.” (Photo by James Dimmock/CBS © 2020 CBS Interactive. All rights reserved.)

they still there; are they up and running? If so, what condition are they in? We have all that to find out when we get to the future,” Jones said. “We also have the captain’s chair, which is – you know, our captain’s chair on Starship Discovery has been a musical captain’s chair (laughs). Many different people have had put their butts in it over these first two seasons, for sure. And mine is in there right now, as acting captain, because I was first

officer.

“But it was kind of like a hint, hint, wink, wink, nudge, nudge alluded to that Burnham, Michael Burnham, and Saru would discuss the captain’s chair later. ‘Let’s get through this mission; let’s get all this data out to the future – where it’s safer – and then we can talk about filling the captain’s chair and how that’s to be done.’ That has yet to be discovered in season three, as well, early on.

“But we need to find out. Like, does the Federation want to assign us a captain that knows the future better than we do, or are we self-governing to decide among ourselves? All yet to be discovered.”

“Star Trek Discovery” helped launch CBS All Access, and its weekly offerings have been among the best in the storied “Star Trek” franchises.

Jones, of course, has brought his own unique combination of acting, contortionism and puppeteering to the character of Saru. He has become a legendary figure in pop culture over the past two decades, portraying the creepy Gentleman on the game-changing “Hush” episode of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”; Abe Sapien, the underwater conscious and sidekick to Hellboy in the two original Ron Perlman films; the slick, menacing, no-messing-around Silver Surfer in the original “Fantastic Four” sequel; and working with Oscar-winning director Guillermo del Toro as Amphibian Man in “The Shape of Water” and Fauno/Pale Man in “Pan’s Labyrinth.”

BTS caught up with Jones for this Q&A on the eve of a new season of “Star Trek: Discovery.”

Q: So, I can’t tell you how excited I am not just to have new television, first and foremost, but to have a show come back that I hold in such high regard. I’m pretty excited about it, as I’m sure you are as well.

Doug Jones: Oh gosh, yes. I think you hit the nail on the head there with excited to have some new television. I think we’ve all binged everything that’s out there these last six, seven months. So, to have some new programming on is great. I’m very tickled pink that people, like you – thank you – are excited to have us come back with the new season.

Q: One of the biggest things that I’m curious about, as far as you and your career goes, tell me a little bit about the makeup chair routine; because, obviously, for these roles, you’re spending hours and hours in makeup and preparation. So, is there music? Is there television? Is there books? What is the standard makeup chair routine for you?

Doug Jones: Well, when you become something that’s not human, normally you’re looking at anywhere between three to six hours, maybe; sometimes more. The process for Saru on “Discovery” is mercifully shorter than that. They have it down to two hours now. That’s practically like doing beauty makeup with hair and makeup for anyone else.

But I would say that the makeup process takes weeks before that, because the pre-molding and sculpting and painting of those pieces that go on me, that artistry takes place long before it ever gets to me. Then, once they apply it to me, that’s down to two hours.

But our two hours is spent joking, laughing, talking. My makeup artists are like the people that are with me the most all day. They’re constantly touching up – constantly. You know, fixing and monitoring their work on me. The makeup trailer is full of music, full of banter back and forth. It depends on the time of day, too. At 4 in the morning, not so lively.

Q: You’ve become sort of the go-to guy in this very particular niche. Whether we’re talking about Abe Sapien, or The Gentleman, or the Silver Surfer – now Saru. You really are that guy. I’m wondering, what do you like about these roles? I would think – I know journalism requires a certain degree of, I think, ego to be successful; and I would think that the same would be true with being an actor – with being a successful actor. And I think that part of that would be the actor wanting to show his face on screen. But you are behind these very elaborate costumes. And yet, as I said, you’ve had a lot of success in this field. So, what continues to be appealing to you about these types of roles?

Doug Jones: These types of roles kind of find me. I never went looking to play monsters and creatures under heavy makeup. It was just kind of a niche that found me and then kept coming back for me – and with referrals from the creature effects people out there that create these books – which I’m ever grateful for.

So, at first, when I was a younger actor, I was kind of like, “Hey, doesn’t anyone want to recognize me in public? Darn; shoot.” Now it’s like what a blessing. I can go to a Starbucks and nobody knows who the heck I am – and that’s great.

Now, as more high-profile jobs are out there, like “The Shape of Water” when it did its Oscar run, and with all of the press that “Star Trek: Discovery” gets, my face is in a lot of interviews; a lot of behind-the-scenes things; and people are able to marry my face with all the characters I’ve played now. But it did take a little bit of digging and a little bit of true fandom to get there. So, if somebody does recognize me in public, it’s someone who I know is a fan, and has been following me for a while.

Q: You talk about interaction with fans and more people getting to know you – and your face, specifically. As you go from a “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” as you go to all the things you’ve done with Guillermo, as you go to Silver Surfer and “Hellboy,” there’s certain levels of fandom – and I think there’s levels of intensity with fandom – and you’ve probably reached the highest one now with “Star Trek.” “Star Trek” fans are very passionate, very intelligent, very hardcore, and I’m wondering what did you sort of realize about these different levels of fandom – and what do you like about the “Star Trek” fans in particular?

Doug Jones: Right. I have dealt with fandom on all levels. You know, having a career that I’ve thrown the net wide over a lot of science fiction, horror, fantasy, comic books genres. So, I’ve dealt with Marvel fans, DC fans, the horror fans, “Buffy” fans, and science fiction fans of all sorts. But the “Star Trek” fans, in particular, have a certain sense of ownership of the franchise, and a certain sense of family, that all those other fandoms don’t quite have all the way there yet.

The “Star Trek” fans are – you know, when I first got cast in season one, before the show had even aired yet, I kind of felt like I was the unwelcome new family member that had to prove myself. And that came with a big responsibility. And I’m glad for it. I’m glad that the fans of “Star Trek” are so particular, and are so protective of this franchise that they have grown to love and revere over the years. That gives me – I want to have that same reverence for the franchise – and it’s because of them; that stays forefront of my mind.

Q: You know, I went back and I watched season two, and early on, I’m thinking to myself I probably should have seen the Burnham twist. But the storyline is so compelling, and the action is so intense, that you sort of get distracted – in the very best way, I think, maybe from something like that; and maybe that’s why it wasn’t so obvious until later in the season. But, you know, the characters are so well developed, they’re so 3-D – like I said, the storylines are compelling week in and week out. That’s sort of the way I see it as a critic, but how do you see it as an actor? What do you like about the writing and what the creative team brings to each script?

Doug Jones: Yeah, no, everything you just said. I do find that each character is an onion with many layers to peel back and find out things about. Light and fluffy is not us (laughs).

They delve into each one of us – psychologically, emotionally – to levels that a lot of television may not reach, and I’m really, really proud and happy to be a part of that product that the writers give us every week.

And the action you mentioned, too. This is probably the most cinematic and movie-quality-like “Star Trek” in any of the franchise. I think the budgets and the special effects – both visual effects and practical effects – and the sets and the costumes – I mean, just everything is so incredibly movie-quality. It just makes it all next level. It makes it all next level, which I’m really, really happy to be a part of.

Q: You have been a working, successful actor for some 35 years now. But, if I’m not mistaken, I think this is maybe just the second time you’ve been on a TV show where you’ve had a third season. So, coming into a character now for the third season, how does that differ from coming into it for the first season, the second season? What are the advantages of having the opportunity to play a character now into a third season?

Doug Jones: Well, as my character, Saru, you met with threat ganglia and he lived in fear. Doug Jones lived in fear season one, as well (laughs).

You know, going into a new show like that – especially one that bears the name “Star Trek,” is so intimidating and so terrifying, and you just hope and pray you get it right.

Now, you know, season three, by that time, it’s like, “OK, I know Saru.” He’s in my heart. We feed off of each other. We help each other through the day. I’m very close with Saru, and I get him – and he gets me (laughs), and we have a great relationship. As kooky as that sounds.

That’s the biggest thing is just the comfort level and the confidence that I have now. And Saru, my character, lost his threat ganglia and he’s got more confidence and is more fearless now, as well; so, we’ve grown together.



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