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INTERVIEW

Alex Robinson

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By Justin Davis March 2, 2011

For more than 15 years, **Alex Robinson** has been a major player in independent comic circles, winning accolades and awards (while also losing some of the latter, as per his self-effacing **biography**) with his honest humor, low-key energy, and believable characterization. Along the way, he's refined those characteristics considerably: While his name-making graphic novel, **Box Office Poison**, meanders through the lives of its cast for 600-plus pages, his most recent, **Too Cool To Be Forgotten**, tells a tight coming-of-age story—with a time-travel plot. With the collected *Box Office Poison* celebrating its 10th anniversary, and Robinson coming to Austin as a featured guest of **Staple! The Independent Media Expo**, *The A.V. Club* spoke to Robinson about looking back on his life, possible cinematic adaptations of his work, and (ahem) penises.

The A.V. Club: Much of your work involves some form of nostalgia—what draws you to that device?

Alex Robinson: I look back on so much of my life with regret, that I constantly live with one eye looking back over my shoulder. Evaluating decisions I made with, “Oh, that was stupid. You shouldn’t have done that.” It’s just kind of my natural way. And I am a history buff.

AVC: Are you rewriting your personal history or just building from it?

AR: I wouldn’t say rewriting. Maybe on some level, being a writer is an attempt to control that

thought of, “I make so many mistakes in real life, so the creations I do, I can have their story.” Then again, they make their mistakes and have regrets too, so it doesn’t really work out. It doesn’t work out for any of us.

AVC: Your books regularly have large ensemble casts. How do you maintain each character’s distinct voice and personality throughout the story?

AR: I like working with a lot of different characters, because it stops me from getting bored with any one particular character. When I did *Too Cool*, that was one main character, and that was a lot harder to do. I had no subplots I could rely on. I had no other things. It’s like the way you keep your friends distinct. Your various friends all have their various stories that you’re able to keep track of in your head. You don’t get them mixed up. It’s the same kind of skills. You have to make your characters as real as you can in your head, so that you don’t have any trouble keeping track of their stories. Make them real so it’s as easy to keep track of them as it is to keep track of your friends in real life.

AVC: Other than *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, there’s a noticeable absence of indie comic books making the jump to the big screen. Why do you think this is? And would you want any of your works adapted?

AR: I would love to have a movie made from any of my books. *Too Cool* has gotten the farthest in terms of a producer who’s interested. Even at this stage, it’s still a long shot as to whether or not it’ll get made. Superhero movies are action movies, and action movies generally have good box office [returns]. And books like mine, which are a bunch of people sitting around talking and expressing themselves—those movies generally aren’t big moneymakers, regardless if they’re from a graphic novel or an original screenplay. I’m surprised there’s not more television adaptation, because it seems like some things would be better suited to TV shows. People sitting around talking is what people generally do on TV, whereas movies are big explosions and CGI robots. I’m also afraid of making any of my ideas into a TV show or a video game or action figures or anything.

AVC: Much of your work has some graphic content—

AR: You mean like nudity.

AVC: Well, nudity and sex. If your work did go to TV, it would have to be HBO or even AMC.

AR: I would be willing to cut back on some of the nudity. Maybe only have one penis per episode. I’d be willing to compromise on that regard. Maybe they could make it Cinemax, “Graphic novels after dark.”

AVC: *Too Cool*, with its time travel elements, was a dip into a genre outside of slice-of-life, as was your barbarian girl story, *Lower Regions*. Do you want to explore

more genres, or do you go wherever your mind takes you?

AR: It's not a conscious thing. It's whatever story grabs me at the time. I also did an adaptation of a children's book [L. Frank Baum's *A Kidnapped Santa Claus*]. I'm up for doing any kind of genre. I did a story for Marvel for their *Strange Tales* anthology. Even the "dreaded superheroes," I'm willing to tackle if I think it's interesting.

AVC: Which Marvel heroes did you work with?

AR: I did a *Fantastic Four* story.

AVC: Did you choose *Fantastic Four*, or did Marvel come to you with that?

AR: They came to me, said they were interested in me doing a story, and had me pitch them some ideas. They liked the *FF* one the best. A friend of mine pointed out, though, that the story takes place when Reed Richards, Doctor Doom, and Ben Grimm were all in college, so I don't even have any superhero things in it. I got a chance to do superheroes, and I fell back on a bunch of people sitting around talking about their feelings. Maybe no matter what, I can't shake that inclination.

AVC: Would you say that it was a *Box Office Poison* version of the *FF*?

AR: Yeah, I think any number of my previous characters could have easily fit into that story. Those are the kind of stories I find interesting. Fight scenes get boring. You know Doctor Doom isn't going to win, and you know the Human Torch is going to come back to life eventually. You have a bit more complexity with human relationships.