

Warrior Monk!

They said it'd only last five years. Well, guess what... *Babylon 5* is back with another TV movie. Alex Zahara shares his experiences of getting into the Minbari mindset...

ALTHOUGH he has been working in the profession only a short time, actor Alex Zahara has already made a name for himself, especially with fans of TV SciFi. The fair-haired, ebullient Canadian has guest starred on such shows as **Dark Angel**, **Millennium**, **First Wave**, **The Immortal**, **The Outer Limits**, **Andromeda** and **Stargate SG-1**. His latest out-of-this-world gig is the made-for-TV movie **Babylon 5: The Legend of the Rangers**. The actor plays Dulann, a member of the Minbari race and first officer aboard the starship Liandra.

According to Zahara, he did his best to get into the Minbari mindset prior to auditioning for the role.

"I was so excited," enthuses the actor. "In fact, I still get goosebumps just thinking about it. My agent faxed me the sides for the part on a Friday afternoon. A good friend of mine, Stephen Park, came over and he worked with me on the material for the entire weekend to get ready for my audition on Tuesday. In the end we must have approached it from at least 50 different angles!" laughs Zahara.

"Luckily, one of Stephen's

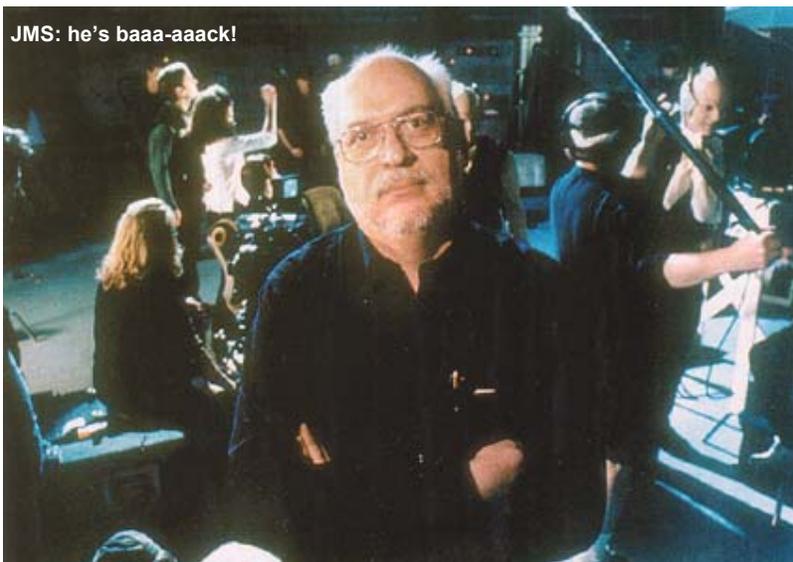


Alex Zahara: in the Park with the Rangers

friends, Kevin, is a huge **Babylon 5** fan. I wanted to make certain I was on the right track insofar as the Minbari and the Rangers were concerned, so I phoned Kevin and asked him to tell me all he could. He loaned me tapes and, in between learning lines, I sat down and watched them as well as going on the Internet to look up whatever I could about the show."

Doing his homework paid off for the actor, as he was hired for the role. However, Zahara later discovered that he had an ally at the audition. "One day I happened to be talking with Joe [J Michael Straczynski, **Babylon 5** creator]. He told me, 'I knew you were the one I wanted to play Dulann in the first 15 seconds of the audition. There was nobody before or after who came close.' I thought, 'Wow, what a great confidence booster for an actor.'"

Fans of **Babylon 5** are familiar with the Minbari and know that they have played



JMS: he's baaa-aaack!

Dulann and Captain David Martel
(Dylan Neal) join forces



a crucial role in the Babylon Project and in the success of the Rangers in the Shadow War. The race is advanced both technologically and spiritually and is divided into three castes - religious, warrior and worker. They have a strict code of honour and no Minbari has killed another in over one thousand years. The Minbari believe in reincarnation, view love as a force unto itself and enjoy a good laugh. Zahara took all this into consideration when fleshing out his character of Dulann.

"I think of Dulann as a warrior monk," says the actor. "He has that quiet core or an inner calm and stillness, almost like a Buddhist monk, you know? It's only through calmness and stillness that you can achieve clarity of thought and action. When you go into battle you must be completely focused. That's

'They have a strict code of honour and no Minbari has killed another in over one thousand years'

picks up the story of the legendary Ranger fleet

what I find interesting about Dulann. He's so focused in everything that he does. He really strives for that. At the same time, he's not willing to accept the status quo. Dulann believes there's something more to life than what he and his race have come to know. The character's angst about Minbar, his homeland, is reflected in the movie and via the other characters, in particular G'Kar [Andreas Katsulas], the Narn ambassador. When I first read the script I thought, Jeez, he really feels strongly about a variety of issues. So Dulann is a very passionate character who shares a deep sense of friendship, trust and loyalty with his friend, Captain David Martel [Dylan Neal], and the rest of the Liandra crew."

The Legend of the Rangers

as they work to restore order to hundreds of civilizations devastated by the Shadow War. The Liandra, under the command of Captain Martel, is assigned to escort and protect a diplomatic mission. Another ship, the Valen, is transporting a group of ambassadors, including G'Kar, to a top-secret meeting to discuss a new threat to the Interstellar Alliance of planets. When an unknown force attacks the Valen, the diplomats are evacuated to the Liandra. Martel and his crew must now face down this as yet unknown but formidable enemy.

"Shooting this film was a pleasure, and that was true from the get-go," notes Zahara. "On the first day, when I did the read-through with Dylan, Myriam Sirois [who plays weapons specialist Sarah

Sarah Cantrell], and the rest of the cast, there was an immediate bonding. I felt as if we were old friends getting together to work on this project. It was the same feeling with the crew. They were really amazing. A lot was asked of them and they delivered every single time.

"Our director Mike Vejar [who also directed the **Babylon 5** TV movies **In the Beginning** and **A Call to Arms**] was great too. Not only does he know how to work with the crew when it comes to all the technical stuff, but also how to deal with the actors. For instance, Mike won't tell you, 'Do it this way.' Instead, he might suggest, 'What about this aspect of the character? Why don't we try to bring some of that out in your performance?' He helped foster the creative atmosphere that we had right from the start."

When it comes to favourite scenes in the film, Zahara is quick to reply. "I have two," he says. "There's the welcoming ceremony, which is pretty cool, and then there's a scene later on with Martel and Dulann. The captain has just had a disagreement with Tannier [Todd Sandomirsky] -the two of them don't get along very well. He explains to Dulann what happened and then goes on to say, 'Maybe I didn't handle things properly. What do you think?'"

"As any good first officer would have done in his shoes, Dulann doesn't say to his captain, 'This is what you should have done.' In fact, he tells him, 'You know what, this is what the crew and I need from you. How you handle everything else is up to you.' In



Martin Wood directs a Unas in *Stargate SG-1*



The crew of the starship Liandra

"I got to act alongside Andreas Katsulas. Just watching him at work is a gift. It's like having DaVinci come in and paint beside you"

real life when someone asks for advice, we tend to listen and sympathize but we can't make up their minds for them. It's up to them to figure things out for themselves. Dulann may be very loyal, giving and caring, but he's not about to tell Martel what to do. I think that pretty much sums up what my character is all about.

"Of course, any time I got to act alongside Andreas Katsulas was a treat," continues the actor. "Just watching him at work is a gift. It's like having Da Vinci come in and paint beside you as opposed to telling you how to paint. Andreas always found something special to do with each of the characters. There's a scene in which Dulann is defending David in front of the Grey Council, and G'Kar comes in and backs up my character's position. He walks over to Dulann and gives him a little wink. I don't know if that will make it into the final cut, and

I don't care. For him to even do that, it not only filled my character up, it filled me up. If Dulann is fired up inside then that's going to come across on the screen, and that's the important thing, to me anyway."

When he was a child, Zahara used to entertain family and friends with sock puppet performances. The actor was also into competitive swimming and eventually traded in his socks for a pair of swimming trunks when he became a lifeguard. He spent 15 years in the job, during which time he also performed in community theatre and friends' amateur videos. "It reached a point where I needed a change," says Zahara. "I'd planned to travel across Europe for a year and figure out what my next move would be. A month-and-a-half into my trip while lying on a beach in Greece I decided to go to film school."

Just before work began on **The Legend of the Rangers**, Zahara guest starred for the fourth time on **Stargate SG-1**. He portrayed a Unas in the fifth season story, *Beast of Burden*. "Knock wood, I've never had a single negative experience on **Stargate**," he says. "In the first episode I did [*Spirits*], I played a shape-shifting alien. That called for a four-and-a-half hour make-up job. I remember it being really hot in the studio, especially under a latex mask. During one of the takes I was lying on a gurney and I fell asleep. Luckily, Amanda Tapping [Major Samantha Carter] heard me snoring through my make-up and woke me up!"

Zahara recently appeared in the A&E Network movie **Walking Shadow**, and has a role in the soon-to-be-released feature film **The Stick Up**. Depending on how good the ratings are for **The Legend of the Rangers**, it may be picked up as a series. "If it is, I'm there," he says.

Steven Eramo