

# Business is sum of many parts

**Richard Verrier**

Jason Collins is proudly showing off body parts.

Strewn on a table in a warehouse are two bloody hearts with cords sticking out, an open chest cavity, a hand with a severed finger, a necrotic liver and a bag stuffed with what looks like skin tissue. Nearby, a man is sopping blood from a stomach with a gash in it.

This isn't the lair of a serial killer. It's the workshop of Autonomous F/X, a company that specialises in "forensic effects" – creating synthetic body parts and corpses for the medical dramas and police shows that each year amp up the gory details of human anatomy.

The silicone stomach with the gash is hooked up to an air compressor and spews blood and guts. It was made for a recent episode of Spike TV's *1,000 Ways to Die* (a show that dramatises bizarre ways people meet their doom).

"It makes a big mess," Collins, co-owner of Autonomous F/X, says of the stomach contraption. "I feel sorry for the camera crew."

In an era of digital effects and green-screen technology, many physical-effects houses have struggled to survive. But Collins and his partner, Elvis Jones, have carved out a profitable niche, thanks to a demand for ever-more realistic forensic effects.

The company works on low-budget horror movies, but its meat and potatoes are locally produced television dramas, such as *Law & Order: Los Angeles*, *Rizzoli & Isles* and the recently cancelled *Undercovers*.

Collins, 35, a film school graduate and self-taught make-up effects artist, developed a fascination for fake corpses and body parts as a child when his father took him to see *An American Werewolf in London*.

"I was terrified of the werewolf," Collins says. "I wanted to

understand how they made it." Collins spent several years at effects companies KNB Effects Group and Almost Human, where he worked with Jones on the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* before the pair decided to go out on their own in 2005.

One of their first clients was *House*, now in its seventh season. Prop master Tyler Patton says the company's tapeworms, human hearts and other props are so realistic that the actors sometimes react to them as if they've just arrived fresh from the morgue.

"The beating heart was a big hit because it looked so real," Patton says. "The effects are so graphic it's sometimes shocking. We're pretty used to it, but the actors sometimes get a little queasy."

The parts are made of foam or silicone, using moulds that are cast on actors' faces or limbs. The moulds are made of a seaweed-based material called alginate – the same stuff that dentists use for teeth impressions – and wrapped mummy-like with bandages around the face or body of the actors. Drying takes about 10 or 15 minutes.

"It's a bit like a car dealership," says Jones, sitting next to a bust of a man from the 2007 horror film *Timber Falls* whose jaw was blown off by a shotgun. "We pretty much have a mould for every body part."

To accurately depict the stages of decomposition, Collins and Jones consult medical textbooks and photos of actual murder victims supplied by detectives. They make fake blood from a corn-syrup recipe that is a "house secret".

There is plenty of work to keep him busy, especially from shows such as *1000 Ways to Die*.

"We have two or three deaths a week," Collins says. "It's a challenge to see what they come up with."

McClatchy-Tribune



Jason Collins with some of Autonomous F/X's creations. Photo: MCT



Sarah Michelle Gellar played Buffy in the long-running television series

Buffy the Vampire Slayer returns to the big screen, much to the chagrin of the hit show's creator, writes **Andrew Pulver**

ENTERTAINMENT

# Fangs for nothing

It was the story the fans have long been waiting for: the return of Buffy, feminist icon and slayer of vampires – and this time on the big screen.

Take that, *Twilight*! But any good cheer was quickly drowned out earlier this week as it emerged that Warner Brothers was planning to make its film version of the cult series without Joss Whedon, the show's creator – and, it appears, without any of the cast of the long-running television series.

Whedon is furious. "This is a sad, sad reflection on our times, when people must feed off the carcasses of beloved stories from their youths – just because they can't think of an original idea of their own," he says. "I always hoped that *Buffy* would live on even after my death. But, you know, after."

The writer of the new screen adaptation is Whit Anderson, a relatively unknown actor with only a smattering of screen credits, the most high profile being a small role in the Jim Carrey vehicle *Yes Man*.

"I was the same age as Buffy, and it was so rare to have a female lead character on TV in those days, who was strong and capable and smart but also allowed to be feminine," he says.

Whedon appears to have fallen victim to Buffy's unusual history.

Starring Sarah Michelle Gellar, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* became a phenomenon when it premiered in 1997. It ran for more than 140 episodes over seven series, charting the life of an ordinary teenage girl who happens to kill vampires and other monsters by night. The show hit upon a mix of ordinary teenage angst, humour and gore that earned it a devoted fan base.

Whedon used the series to explore increasingly off-the-wall story ideas – including the episode entitled *Once More, With Feeling*, in which the cast sang almost every line of dialogue.

But *Buffy* had originally seen the light of day five years earlier, in a feature film script, which Whedon had sold to the director-producer team Fran and Kaz Kuzui. The first *Buffy* film emerged in 1992, with Kristy Swanson as the eponymous vampire killer alongside Luke Perry and Rutger Hauer, but scored only moderate returns. Whedon is known to have been less than happy with the film. After he was approached to turn the concept into a television series, the Kuzuis acted as hands-off executive producers alongside him. It was very much Whedon's show, but the Kuzuis retained their rights.

Last year, no doubt motivated by the continuing success of teen

vampire films – notably the *Twilight* series, the Kuzuis announced they hoped to revive the Buffy character.

No casting details have yet been announced, but one of the producers, Charles Roven, hints that Buffy will be an older character this time. "This is not your high school Buffy. She'll be just as witty, tough, and sexy as we all remember her to be," he says.

Whedon is cynical about the likelihood of teen-vampire overkill: "But seriously, are vampires even popular anymore?" However, he is also realistic about the way the movie business operates.

In an e-mail to the entertainment website E! Online, he writes: "Obviously, I have strong, mixed emotions about something like this ... I don't love the idea of my creation in other hands, but I'm well aware that many more hands than mine went into making that show what it was ... I can't wish people who are passionate about my little myth ill."

"I can, however, take this time to announce that I'm making a *Batman* movie. Because there's a franchise that truly needs updating. So look for *The Dark Knight Rises* *Way Earlier Than That Other One* and *Also More Cheaply And In Toronto*, rebooting into a theatre near you."

The new film's producers may

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Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy* TV series

have reason to fear anger among *Buffy* fans. The power of the community was demonstrated after Whedon's 2002 sci-fi series *Firefly* was dropped after only 11 episodes by its parent network, Fox.

After a campaign to save the show, *Firefly* fans persuaded another studio, Universal, to put a feature film, *Serenity*, into production.

This same vociferous online community has been registering its outrage at plans to produce a new *Buffy* film, among them the showbiz blogger Perez Hilton. "We are not liking this," he says. "Without creator Joss Whedon or the original cast, we're afraid this has failure written all over it. It's going to have to be pretty spectacular if it's going to impress us."

Mike Goodridge, the editor of the trade paper *Screen International*, feels it is too soon to write it off.

"Charles Roven is pretty cool. He's the man that made the *Batman* movies with Chris Nolan, so he knows what he's doing – and lots of people were against that at the time."

"Remember, *Buffy* was nothing as a movie, and the audiences are very different – Warner know that people have an appetite for revamps. I think it's a great idea."

Guardian News & Media

# Wok on the wild side at Chengdu's 'fly' restaurants

• CONTINUED FROM C5

native and academic Wang Jingjing eats three or four lunches a week at his favourite *cangying guanzi*, a no-name, six-table eatery at the end of an alley lined with sagging single-storey brick dwellings in the increasingly upmarket Yulin district.

"Why should I eat elsewhere? This girl is so talented!" he says, gesturing towards a young woman working two woks at the restaurant's entrance, while her sister takes orders and a male assistant plucks fresh vegetables, sliced meats and tofu from plastic baskets arranged on a two-metre-high shelf. As his colleagues grab a table and place their orders – blanched bitter melon dressed with sesame oil and a smidgen of salt, *yuxiang* eggplant, *mapo dofu* pungent with yellow bean paste and pickled chillis – Wang says he visits another fly restaurant closer to his home at weekends.

"We go to these places to eat real home-style Sichuan food. Everyone has their favourite," he says.

For the visitor lacking connections, sampling the *jiachang cai* (home-style food) served at a good *cangying guanzi* is the next best thing to being invited by a local for a home-cooked meal. Finding

one to call your own is a simple matter of venturing off the city's busy boulevards and into its quieter neighbourhoods – and following your nose.

During a recent Chengdu sojourn I became a regular at a fly restaurant near my hotel. One morning, as I was exploring the back lanes off Renmin South Road, the "pop-pop" of ingredients hitting hot oil and the scent of black vinegar lured me to a low-slung brick structure fronted by tables set beneath an outstretched plastic tarp.



Fly restaurants such as Zhang Jie Chao Cai (left) are Chengdu favourites, serving simple yet delicious fare (right)

I peeked behind half-open weathered timber doors to find a sturdy man wearing shorts, T-shirt and plastic sandals, a white paper cook's hat balanced on his head, leaning into flames climbing from a gas-fired wok.

He moved effortlessly between the burner, shelves of ingredients and bowls of sauces, seasonings, flours, chopped herbs and pickles arranged on a table. Working steadily, he turned out dish after gorgeous dish. When his wife returned from running a delivery to

a private house up the lane I ordered *la rou* (a Sichuanese cured speciality of pork belly smoked over pine boughs and air-dried) two ways: stir-fried with leeks and cooked with corn and edamame (soya beans).

Despite their simplicity – neither dish was seasoned with anything other than salt – both preparations wowed me. In the cook's capable hands the sweetness of the corn and the fresh grassiness of the edamame shone through, despite the fatty pork's rich smokiness; paired with silky leek greens, the *la rou*'s texture

came to the fore. Accompanying the dishes was a rustic portion of rice flecked with bits of cornmeal. It was a meal that earned my repeat patronage over the next 10 days, sometimes at noon and back again for dinner.

Zhang Lingcheng and his wife opened the restaurant – Elder Sister Zhang's Stir-fried Dishes – more than 15 years ago and they do a brisk business every day, closing just two weeks a year for Lunar New Year. Zhang says he learned to cook by watching his father, who wasn't in the restaurant business. He figures his repertoire extends to 70 dishes, putting him on par with cooks in Chengdu's more upmarket restaurant kitchens.

Much of the restaurant's clientele lives or works in the neighbourhood, but some customers, like a well-dressed family who arrived in their own car during dinner one evening, make the trip in from the suburbs to dine at Zhang's table.

Despite their restaurant's popularity, Zhang and his wife are modest about their talents (she cooks, too, when he leaves to top up supplies). "We don't cook anything special, just common, home-style food," he says. "Chengdu has hundreds of *cangying guanzi* just like this one."



## Choice dishes right up your alley

Expect to pay less than 30 yuan (HK\$35) for a meal for two (excluding beer) at most fly restaurants. Most have their ingredients on display, making it easy for non-Chinese speakers to point at what they'd like to eat. These places are open from lunch through to dinner, except where noted.

### Zhang Jie Chao Cai (Elder Sister Zhang's Stir-fried Dishes)

Don't miss the *la rou* dishes, such as *yumi huangdou chao la rou* (stir-fried with corn and edamame) and *suan cai chao la rou*. Also delicious are *yuxiang rouxi* (made with pickled chillis and pickled ginger), *doufu gan* (dried and pressed beancurd stir-fried with chillis and Sichuan peppercorn), and the humble *fanqie jidan* (stir-fried tomato and eggs).

**Where to find it:** 5 Jiu Si Xiang (off Renmin Zhong Lu, just south of Yang Shi Jie)

The talented female cook at the no-name alley fly restaurant in Yulin district makes an especially nice *mapo dofu*, with extra-fragrant pickled chillis; *liangban kugua* (bitter melon and red bell pepper "salad" dressed with sesame oil); and *ganchao jiding* ("dry-fried" chicken with chillis and Chinese celery).

**Where to find it:** Yulin Er Xiang (between Yulin Yi Xiang and Yulin San Xiang, which are both to be found off Yulin Dong Lu)

### Nan Nan Xiao Chi Dian (Nan Nan Snack Shop)

Here, simple dishes such as *liangban san si* (shredded cucumber, chayote and bean thread vermicelli in a tart-spicy dressing topped with peanuts) *suancai rou pian* (pork slices stir-fried with pickled greens) and *fanqie jidan tang* (tomato and egg soup) draw students and teachers from the nearby Sichuan Conservatory of Music.

**Where to find it:** Minzhu Road, off First Ring Road South, Section 1 (entrance to road is marked by Sichuan Music Conservatory Hotel)

### San Gu Noodles (San Gu Mian)

Since a recent renovation this place might almost be considered upscale, but a plastic tarp roof keeps it firmly planted in the "fly restaurant" category. Try the *qingjiao niurou si* (beef slivers with green peppers), *gong bao jiding* (chicken with peanuts and chillis), and *guo kui* (griddled flat breads stuffed with meat seasoned with chillis and Sichuan peppercorn).

**Where to find it:** 15 First Ring Road South, Section 2

A roadside stack of steamers marks the location of this no-name fly restaurant specialising in steamed dishes such as *mizheng zhu rou* (pork coated in seasoned ground rice) and egg custard with chopped pork.

**Where to find it:** Donghua Zhong Street. Mornings/afternoons only