

# REFUGEE OF THE APOCALYPSE:

## Being an Extra on ‘Z Nation’

By Michelle M. Pillow

It is no secret to my readers that one of my lifelong dreams is to be a zombie extra in a horror film. It’s been featured on my author bio for years in hopes that the Universe would take note and make the dream come true. I’m ready, too. I’ve been practicing each morning when I’m pre-coffee, groaning incoherent words, and stumbling around on stiff legs. All that’s missing is the makeup artist.

One of the cool perks of my job are the people I meet along the way – readers, other authors, and industry professionals – and the random adventures those meetings bring forth. Recently, audiobook narrator Rebecca Cook gave me and a few members of my family the opportunity to be an extra on Syfy channel’s *Z Nation*. Rebecca is the voice for my *Divinity Warriors* series, *Lords of the Abyss* series, and *Dragon Lords: The Reluctant Lord* audiobooks. She also happens to work for *Z Nation*, which is filmed in Spokane, Washington.

### Watch the Show. I Mean, You’re Here Reading So You Already Like the Paranormal.

*Z Nation* is not just another zombie show. If you haven’t given it a try, just hop onto Netflix or Hulu and start binging on Season 1. I was hooked on the premise in the very first episode, and they only get better. It’s also available for purchase on Amazon.com, YouTube, Google Play, iTunes, and Xbox.

When I first sat down to watch it, I thought it was going to be another version of AMC’s *The Walking Dead*, which I love. It’s not. Yes, there are elements that all post-apocalypse storylines must tackle – food, shelter, emotional upheavals, and astronomical losses. Mainly, it all comes down to surviving in a desolate world, facing



Michelle Pillow (pictured above at center) takes a moment on the set of *Z Nation* to pose with zombie extras. Michelle recently played a zombie apocalypse refugee on Season 3 of the Syfy hit show.

human and non-human threats, as society slowly breaks down in the chaos of a horrific aftermath.

The question is not just how does a single person survive, but how does humanity survive, and can it even bounce back to what it once was? What makes the *Z Nation* story unique is how the characters handle those challenges.

Season 1 takes place three years post-apocalypse. A group of survivors are charged with escorting a pre-apocalyptic, non-violent felon turned compulsory governmental test subject across country to a laboratory in California. Tests included strapping prisoners down, giving them an experimental serum, and letting zombies munch family dinner style.

Only one survived, and the possible cure to humanity's survival lies within the blood of a convict, Murphy (portrayed by Keith Allan). I'm sure you can imagine the set of ethics that would come into play here. Keith does a great job balancing the narcissistically bent behavior of Murphy with moments of hope.

Another element to the show is Citizen Z (Actor DJ Qualls), a stranded NSA agent with access to the last bits of our electronic footprints. He can see everything from his remote Artic outpost, as he tracks the main group of survivors and tries to help them complete their mission. While he faces the insanity of isolation and loneliness, he is the comforting voice on the radio that the last remaining humans hear. Although it would have been awesome, we did not meet DJ on set that day. It's OK. He's busy keeping an eye on the world, after all.

I don't want to give too much more of the plot away. I hate when people spoil things for me. But I will give you these not-so-subtle hints: nuclear meltdowns, an adorable puppy, strong females who can kick some zombie backside, odd romance with even stranger outcomes, and a doctor whose professional training amounts to sitcom reruns.

### **Z Nation Is Currently in its Third Season**

A refugee is born, or saved, or um ... on the menu?

Hopefully, I've convinced you to give *Z Nation* a try, because if you do, you'll be able to see my awesome breakout role as Michelle Refugee in Season 3. OK, so I didn't officially get a name, or lines, but I did make up my own backstory that will have nothing to do with the show's premise. That said, let me point out that I'm an integral part to the plot. Or, at least the background scenery. Hey, I carried unlit torches. Without me, the refugees wouldn't have had future light.

All jokes aside, being an extra on a paranormal show was a wonderfully fun experience. I might not have been the zombie I always dreamed of, but I like to think that my character has a future on somebody's menu. She's a pre-zombie.



**Michelle Pillow (pictured above at left) poses with "The Murphy" (portrayed by Keith Allan) -- pictured above at right -- on the set of Syfy's *Z Nation*. The TV series follows a group of survivors as they cross the country with a possible cure for the zombie apocalypse. The holder of the cure, a zombie-human hybrid named Murphy, may not be so cooperative.**

### **It's a Cool Job, But Still a Job ... Who Am I Kidding? It Rocked!**

Our day started with a 10 a.m. call time, which is where we began the long process of paperwork, wardrobe, and makeup. They had our measurements before we arrived and wardrobe was already set aside. Here's a little insider Hollywood magic secret — the clothes don't smell as bad as they look. Michelle Refugee had a fondness for the 1990's Seattle grunge movement, and by the amount of bloodstains on her clothes had seen a little zombie action. I like to think of her as a clandestine badass ... who unfortunately hadn't seen a bath in a while.



**Z Nation extra Michelle Pillow (pictured above) played a refugee during the zombie apocalypse. Her wardrobe was reminiscent of the 1990's Seattle grunge movement, and by the amount of bloodstains on her clothes had seen a little zombie action.**

The life of an extra seems to be a lot of hurry-up-and-wait. I didn't mind it one bit. Our holding area was filled with fellow actors, from zombies, to specialty cast, to us poor refugees. It's fun watching scary zombies eat snacks and drink water from straws for fear their special effects makeup will get ruined.

I don't know how it normally is on shows, but the *Z Nation* family cultivated a friendly, positive atmosphere. I didn't run into one egomaniac. They made sure we were fed, watered, and that sunblock was liberally applied at all times — the weather was in the 90s (°F) that day. They shuttled us by old school bus back and forth between the first holding area and the set/second holding area. I have to wonder if the residents of Spokane are used to seeing zombies drive by during the day.

In the makeup trailer, the stars of the show are prepped right next to the extras. I'm sure this was more thrilling for us than it was for them. While we were slathered with dirt and the glossy sheen of the unclean, characters like Murphy, 10k (actor Nat Zang), Doc (actor Russell Hodgkinson), and Addy (actress Anastasia Baranova)

were being carefully groomed for their starring roles. Though I didn't have a chance to meet her specifically, a special thank you to the very kindhearted Anastasia who helped to make my daughter's birthday extra special.

Roberta (actress Kellita Smith) and Escorpion (actor Emilio Rivera, yeah, the one from *Sons of Anarchy!*) were also spotted working that day. Don't worry, my name dropping is almost over. But you have to admit, that's freaking cool.

### Happy Birthday, Zombie-Style

The trip to Spokane was part of my daughter's birthday present this year. Once the staff found out, they were amazing in helping us to celebrate. One insider told me that they absolutely love birthdays on set. I can see the truth in that. Liz McCracken and Chelsea Frazier (makeup artists) were phenomenal with the celebrating. Liz made sure we had a chance to meet Keith Allan (aka Murphy) during the shoot.

Upon meeting, Keith is nothing like his character, and was pleasant to be around — not like what you'd expect one of the top actors on the show to be like during a busy shoot. He took the time for pictures and to chat about the show and our trip to Spokane. If you watch the show, you see the evolution of his "look" throughout the season. Those aren't tricks of the camera. The special effects makeup artists hand paint that every morning before a shoot.

To top off the celebration, zombies behind a cage sang a very spooky rendition of the birthday song while gurgling their desire to eat us.

### And ... Background!

"Background!" is the call extras wait for. It's our signal to start moving. Zombies began zombie-ing, refugees begin surviving, and the specialty extras begin ... well, you should watch Season 3 to find out what they're doing.

We shot several scenes that day, so hopefully one if not all make the cut and you'll be able to see me helping the world survive the zombie attacks in a few episodes.

### Our Workday Wrapped Just Before 10 PM

Psst! *Z Nation* crew ... if you want Michelle Refugee to come back to save the day (or just carry more torches), give her a call. She's ready!

A special thank you to all of the cast and crew of *Z Nation* for a very memorable day!

*To learn more about Z Nation, visit <http://www.syfy.com/znation>. To learn more about NY Times Bestselling author Michelle M. Pillow, visit <http://MichellePillow.com>. To learn more about the audiobooks performed by Rebecca Cook visit <http://rebeccaacook.wixsite.com/rebeccaacook>.*

# 'Z Nation' Crew Interview: Juan A. Mas, Director

**Q: What advice do you have for someone wanting to be a director?**

**Juan:** Never stop trying, learning, and growing as an artist. Put as much effort into developing and strengthening your people skills.

**Q: What is it like working on an awesome television show like *Z Nation*?**

**Juan:** The tight budget makes us be more resourceful and still be extremely creative.

**Q: How feasible is a zombie apocalypse?**

**Juan:** With the recent election, I think it might be possible.

**Q: So, the apocalypse happens ... Are you the first to get eaten, or are you a survivor?**

**Juan:** Survivor ... learned too many tricks from the show.

**Q: Say you survive, how?**

**Juan:** Wow that is good question. I'd be somewhere between a loner and group. I would help

a group get settled, be safe, but like our show's season ends, I would then move on to somewhere else. Kinda think the trick to survival is moving around a lot.

**Q: What are your top three post-apocalyptic concerns?**

**Juan:** Lack of water, breathable air, and no Jameson whiskey.

**Q: What is your post-apocalyptic weapon of choice?**

**Juan:** The Z whacker with added ice pic in one end.

**Q: Which *Z Nation* character do you identify with the most?**

**Juan:** I think Doc. I am just trying to survive and still be a good person.

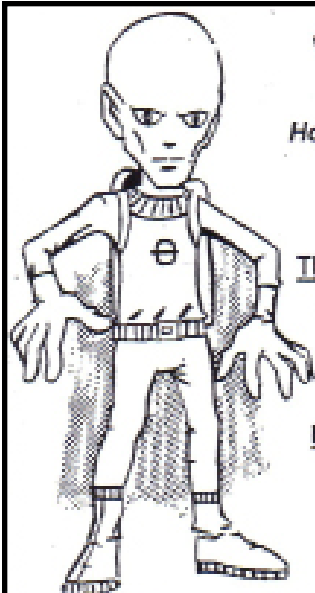
**Q: Do you have any projects you'd like to share with our readers?**

**Juan:** The Spokane Film Project: <http://spokanefilmproject.com/> and the 50 Hour Slam:

<https://50hourslam.com/>. ♦



*Z Nation* director Juan A. Mas poses with actors on the set.



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## 'Z Nation' Crew Interview: Rebecca Cook, Wardrobe Supervisor, Season 1; Assistant Accountant, Seasons 2 and 3

**Q: Advice to others hoping for a career like yours?**

**Rebecca:** If you are just starting out, I think getting an education is important — whether it's college or a trade school, having some classes under your belt is a great way to get a taste for the business and to meet people you can network with for the rest of your life.

Participating in local film competitions is a great way to network with local filmmakers. Volunteering on small projects can also be good way to try things out. Many people start in another career and move into filmmaking, too, through other trade skills, like catering, electricians, painters, construction workers — we need all kinds of skills in this industry.

**Q: What's it like working on an awesome television show like Z Nation?**

**Rebecca:** It's never boring! The show is low budget, so we are constantly having to get creative with how to do things. We are lucky to have a very resourceful crew and directors who always find a way to make it work.

The show has a lot of camp and fun, and we feel that as part of the crew. It's also been fascinating how the fans have found us. I have friends from all over the world who found me on Facebook because they are fans of the show. Sci-fi fans are the best!

**Q: How feasible is a zombie apocalypse?**

**Rebecca:** Very. Even the CDC has a plan in place. I mean, if it's on TV, it must be true, right?

**Q: So, the apocalypse happens ... Are you the first to get eaten, or are you a survivor?**

**Rebecca:** I think I'd really like to just get eaten early. I'm not made for the apocalypse. But, honestly, I have this niggling feeling I would somehow survive longer than anyone, especially I, would expect.

I have weird luck like that. Hopefully, I will never have to find out! I don't think I want to live in a world without flushing toilets.



**Pictured above: Z Nation crew member Rebecca Cook on set.**

**Q: Say you survive, how?**

**Rebecca:** I am totally an unwilling leader who surrounds themselves with people smarter than me. I am charismatic and I have a good head in a crisis, so I could be a leader.

I'm not as ass-kicking as Roberta Warren, but I can drop a good threat when called for.

**Q: What are your top three post-apocalyptic concerns?**

**Rebecca:** 1. Toilet paper; 2. Staying vegetarian; and 3. Keeping my cat alive.

**Q: What is your post-apocalyptic weapon of choice?**

**Rebecca:** Z Whacker! It never runs out of ammo.

**Q: Which Z Nation character do you identify with the most?**

**Rebecca:** Doc, I think. He's a good guy who is just trying to survive and keep his humanity. I would hope I'd remain as kind as he still is.

Plus, I like to serve up a good one liner when the mood hits.

You can learn more about Rebecca at <https://www.facebook.com/rebeccacookvo/>. ♦

# 'Z Nation' Crew Interview: Timothy Jones, Production Assistant

**Q: What is your role on *Z Nation's* crew, and how did you get started in that field? What advice do you have for others hoping to become a production intern?**

**Timothy:** I was an office intern turned production assistant. Really, all the advice I can give for those looking for production internships is to just email people, email people a lot. For about a month, all I did was email different companies practically begging for a chance to intern for them.

And then I would re-email them, and re-email them, and re-email them until somebody responded. Eventually, I got a response from the folks at *Z Nation*, and they interviewed me and offered me the position.

**Q: What's it like working on an awesome television show like *Z Nation*?**

**Timothy:** It was amazing! I learned so much every day. Working on set or working in the office, the rigors of production taught me a ton! And the people there were hilarious and so welcoming to me.

The cast and crew were so easy to work with and talk to, and they were so patient with a bright-eyed college student who asked so many questions.

**Q: How feasible is a zombie apocalypse?**

**Timothy:** Wait! The apocalypse hasn't already happened? Uhhhh ... I should probably come out of this bunker then ... and apologize to my neighbors for making a bunker in their front yard.

**Q: So, the apocalypse happens ... Are you the first to get eaten or a survivor?**

**Timothy:** I would love to say that I would be the first to run to the mountains and create a castle of steel filled with supplies and sniper nests, but most likely I would trip over my own feet and get eaten almost immediately.

**Q: Say you survive, how?**

**Timothy:** I would definitely try to save as many people as I could and bring them somewhere far from the cities and create a nice new colony. Live together. Die alone. Am I right?

**Q: What are your top three post-apocalyptic concerns?**



**Pictured above: *Z Nation* crew member Timothy Jones.**

**Timothy:** Number one has to be getting the Internet up and running so I can snap the whole process of re-creating society. I mean how are all two of my followers going to feel when I stop posting just because there is an apocalypse happening?

I'm just kidding. Number one is trying to create a safe place somewhere away from the chaos, two would be establishing sustainable ways to get food and water, and three is getting the Internet up.

**Q: What is your post-apocalyptic weapon of choice?**

**Timothy:** I would say a lightsaber ... or a chainsaw. Oh no! A lightsaber chainsaw! Yeah ... that's the one.

**Q: Which *Z Nation* character do you identify with the most?**

**Timothy:** I would probably say Warren. I don't know what it is, but the challenge of leading such a strange group of people through the Z-littered world is just intriguing.

But in reality I am most like Citizen Z ... because I spend most of my time alone ... in front of a computer screen ... in a perpetual state of extreme whiteness.

You can connect with Timothy online at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/timothy-jones-0a277711a>. ♦

## 'Z Nation' Crew Interview: Chelsea Frazier, Hairstylist

**Q: What is your role on *Z Nation's* crew, and how did you get started in that field? Do you have advice for others hoping for a career on set?**

**Chelsea:** I'm a hairstylist on the *Z Nation* crew. I got started in hairdressing after earning a bachelor's degree in studio art, art history, and French. I was looking for a trade that would allow me to work part time while amassing my portfolio for graduate school, and I discovered that I had a facility for doing hair and make-up in film.

I started out pretty much working on my friends, talking to them about what they do, and basically looking for avenues to collaborate on art projects. The only advice I can give to those hoping to work as a hairdresser in the film industry is to go with the flow as best as possible, take solace in that you cannot change the weather, and be kind to everyone to the best of your ability.

**Q: What's it like working on an awesome television show like *Z Nation*?**

**Chelsea:** The schedule was pretty grueling — normally we'd work about 14-hour days, five days a week for roughly six months. In the beginning, everyone was really cheerful and excited, by the middle we've all settled into our jobs and it's business as usual, and by the end I think everyone was ready to make up for two months of lost sleep.

**Q: How feasible is a zombie apocalypse?**

**Chelsea:** What I find most fascinating about life on Earth is the multiplicity of organisms and the myriad ways we influence, coexist, and control each other. In the era of pandemic outbreaks, Malaria, Mad-Cow Disease, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease seem scary enough.

I recently heard about *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, which is a parasitic fungus that infects ants and seizes control of their tiny ant brain, inducing the ant to bite. I've seen it called "zombie ant fungus" (do you remember the *Fungus Zombies* earlier in Season 3!?). There's no evidence of infection between these ants and humans yet, and I actually don't believe that a zombie apocalypse will come from any epidemic disease. Rather it will be an anti-intellectual dark age during which people will fail to ask questions about the motives of those who govern them, fail to see each other as kin, and begin to systematically take each other out by means of reducing their access to necessary resources.

We will fear each other and see our neighbors as "other,"



Pictured above: *Z Nation* crew member Chelsea Frazier on set.

denying them help when they need it most. The only infectious element of this zombie-apocalypse is unexplored ideas, passed down generationally. Alas, we're already living it.

**Q: So, the apocalypse happens ... Are you the first to get eaten or a survivor?**

**Chelsea:** Everyone thinks they'll be a survivor! This includes me!

**Q: Say you survive, how?**

**Chelsea:** I'm such a hippie! I would survive in a communal group that would take in loners and reinforce the idea that they're not alone, share what resources we do have, and work together in a dynamic that would allow everyone to play to their strengths for the majority of the time.

It would be a nonviolent and nomadic group, using whatever energy the zombies projected at us to turn back

on them so they would reap the consequences of their own actions, leaving when it's unsafe, and storing caches of food and blankets in ideal resting places.

I think my role would be to record our story in drawings and letters and to observe the patterns of the zombies to learn best how to avoid them. I'm sure some other survivor groups would consider us to be zealots!

**Q: What are your top three post-apocalyptic concerns?**

**Chelsea:** My top three post-apocalyptic concerns would be securing a means of obtaining safe drinking water, maintaining trust within the group, and teaching nonviolent self-defense tactics.

**Q: What is your post-apocalyptic weapon of choice?**

**Chelsea:** The aikido jo! That's the wooden stick people use to defend themselves in that particular martial art, but it's brilliant because we can find sticks anywhere and modify them to better suit our needs as we familiarize ourselves with the zombie apocalypse.

**Q: Which Z Nation character do you identify with the most?**

**Chelsea:** I definitely identify most with Doc. He's definitely a group person: There's no "me against the world" in his process. He genuinely cares about the safety of his friends during the most dangerous times while still managing to indulge in some seriously wicked wordplay (when hiking with friends I like to bring popsicle-stick jokes, puns, and entrail mix).

He's a good problem-solver with some mad critical thinking skills, so he can almost always get himself out of a gory situation when he does get caught out on his own.

*You can get a glimpse into Chelsea's adventures on Z Nation on*

*Instagram @chelsqueeee.*

*Also check out her blog of zombie drawings at <http://thedeaddydoodler.blogspot.com/>. ♦*



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