

# Austin American-Statesman

COMMENTARY

## **Hanks: As victims bite the dust, 'Snakes' fans bond**

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When my mother was 6, she was bitten by a rattlesnake. The Boy Scout next door tied a tourniquet around her ankle and whisked her to a Houston emergency room. Sixty-odd years later, she still has a faint rattlesnake scar.

Quite understandably, my mother developed a lifelong hatred of snakes. She has spent my entire life trying to instill the same fear in me, without much success.

Sitting in the front row of the opening-night screening of "Snakes on a Plane" at the Alamo Drafthouse South, watching the rattlesnake wrangling preshow, I wondered if I ought to have listened to my mother. With a rattler gyrating above my head, I was developing an inkling of the fear that my mother had long been trying to instill.

Fear of snakes can be traced back to the time when humans lived in closer proximity to nature. In those days, we lived in small communities. The position of tribal chief was determined by a contest of strength or by a proven ability in hunting hyena, hedgehog or heffalump.

Though much has changed in the past millennia, we still look for strong leadership in times of adversity. This leadership is exactly what actor Samuel L. Jackson provides in "Snakes."

Jackson plays federal agent Nelville Flynn, who is transporting a surfer-dude witness from Hawaii to L.A. so said dude can testify against a crime lord. To waylay the witness, the conniving criminal fills a sky liner with snakes.

While most of us get on and off planes without saying boo to fellow passengers, poisonous snakes slithering around the main cabin tend to bring people together. Clutching each other in terror.

As soon as Jackson catches on to the catastrophe in coach, he assumes leadership of the newly formed tribe at 35,000 feet.

Eerily, Jackson's leadership role was recreated in the lobby at the Alamo's "Snakes" premiere. There were several people who had gathered up a posse to do battle with fear. Many were from the tribe of Internet, subgroup blogosphere. While their enthusiasm would doubtless have horrified my snake-bitten mother, many in their tribe had been anticipating "Snakes" for at least a year.

Among those stoked for "Snakes" were friends and fellow Baylor film students David Cranor, 21, and Joel Korpi, 22. They had persuaded several folks to drive in from

Waco for the event.

Equally excited about the film was Ryan Murphy, 24, who had gathered 15 people for the premiere, an event that coincided with his birthday celebration. In honor of "snake day," Murphy's girlfriend, Dina Kushner, 24, had made him pink and green snake cakes and an airplane cake.

Among those leading others into "Snakes" was my pal Thomas Mahler, 27, who had enticed five people into the movie's first screening. Mahler is a former chief, er, director, of my own Haunted Trails tribe. (Haunted Trails is an all-volunteer Halloween haunted house at Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve.)

Director Quentin Tarantino was also there. He was accompanied by a gaggle of gorgeous gals from "Grind House," the double-feature he's directing with Robert Rodriguez. "Sounds like a cool movie," Tarantino said, standing in the Alamo lobby before the film.

Like many people, I had been led to the screening by someone else. My manicurist brought me. I met Jill when Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Bush's ranch in Crawford in 2001. My neighbor, then having a liaison with a White House correspondent, had procured a "Putin pedicure" to please her paramour. When I needed glam toes — and what woman doesn't during our eternal summer — I went to Jill. Jill later told me her brother-in-law is David Ellis, director of "Snakes."

At the Draffhouse premiere, members of Jill's family were busy raising 738 bucks for the Austin Humane Society. They were shilling special director-signed "Snakes" posters from a lobby table. Hanging out behind their table was like being an honorary member of the director's personal tribe.

No one from the director's tribe braved the "Snakes on a Day" 24-hour endure-a-thon of back-to-back "Snakes" screenings. Conceived by local improv-comedian Shannon McCormick, 35, the event was a fund-raiser for [Venomousreptiles.org](http://Venomousreptiles.org). All 13 participants made it through. The group bonded.

"By the end of it, it was a real community," said René Pinnell, 23. Pinnell and girlfriend Claire Huie, 28, filmed the event for a documentary.

"Snakes," bringing tribes together since last weekend.

My mother won't be joining any "Snakes" tribes.