

## **Action Film Making Master Class**

Hello. My name is Keith W. Strandberg, and I am a screenwriter and producer of martial arts/action movies. So that you know what I have worked on, here is a list of the movies (with their U.S. distributors in parentheses) I have worked on:

"No Retreat No Surrender": Writer, AD (US: New World, 1986)

"No Retreat No Surrender II": Writer (US: Shapiro Glickenhau, 1989)

"Fatal Bet": Writer (Distributor: Win Film Co., 1989)

"No Retreat No Surrender III: Blood Brothers": Writer, Co-Producer (US Distributor: Imperial Entertainment, 1990)

"The King of the Kickboxers": Writer, Producer (US: Imperial Entertainment, 1991)

"American Shaolin": Writer, Producer (US: Academy Entertainment, 1993)

"SuperFights": Writer, Producer (US: HBO, 1996; American Home Ent., 1997)

"Bloodmoon": Writer, Producer (US: HBO World Premiere, 1997; BMG Video, 1997)

"American Dragons": Writer (US: Motion Picture Corp., 1997)

### **HOW I GOT MY START:**

I started out my career writing articles for martial arts magazines. The first martial art article I sold was back in 1981 for what was then called KICK ILLUSTRATED, and it was called "Reminiscence"--I still have the story, though now it is framed and hangs in my office. I went on from there and

worked regularly for all the magazines popular then: INSIDE KUNG FU, BLACK BELT, KARATE ILLUSTRATED, OFFICIAL KARATE, AMERICAN KARATE, COMBAT KARATE and many, many others. I still write regularly for several international magazines (TOP KICK, BUDO, COMBAT, etc.), and I am a contributing editor to KARATE INTERNATIONAL ("Facts, Rumors, Lies and Half Truths from Hollywood").

After that start with KICK, I expanded my horizons and started selling regularly to "mainstream" magazines. Soon, I was able to begin writing full time. It was a struggle at first, but I kept at it, throwing the rejection slips away and railing at the Gods when my stories and articles wouldn't sell.

After a few years, the rejection slips became fewer and farther in between, and the checks started coming pretty regularly.

That's when I started thinking movies.

Well, actually, I had been thinking movies for some time, but I knew I had to do something about it. When I was living and studying Chinese in Tainan, Taiwan, the Republic of China, I had

mailed my picture to several studios in Hong Kong, thinking that I could get work in front of the camera, being a black belt martial artist and fluent in Chinese.

They didn't want me. I doubt I would have been very good at it, but I thought it was worth a shot.

Hong Kong

Then, when I was directing tour groups of Americans through mainland China, I decided to contact the studios again, this time as a writer. I had established sort of reputation as a martial arts writer by this time (1984), and I still thought that my background, combined with my fluency in Chinese, would be worthwhile to a company.

Wrong, again. I called every studio in Hong Kong, and they all hung up on me. Persistent (I'm nothing if I'm not persistent!), I kept calling, now shifting to the independent producers.

### **Seasonal Film Corporation**

Luckily, I had done a little research, which told me that the President of Seasonal Film Corp., Ng See Yuen, was from Shanghai. I knew that if I could get to him, I could speak to him in Mandarin Chinese, not the Cantonese dialect that most Hong Kong Chinese speak (which I didn't then, and still only speak a smattering of now). So, I dialed Seasonal Film, and braced myself for the inevitable hang up. And, sure enough, even though I had gotten through to Mr. Ng, he was just about ready to hang up on me, telling me that he wasn't interested and had no time.

Before he could hang up, however, I switched into fluent Chinese, and that caught his interest. He ended up inviting me over to his office, screening several pieces of old and new movies for me, and we talked for almost 2 hours.

By the time I left the Seasonal offices, Mr. Ng and I had a handshake deal that if Seasonal ever decided to do movies for the American audience, I would be the one to write the screenplay.

Then, I went back to the US, got a job as a Karate instructor and program manager at a local sports complex, and didn't hear from Seasonal Film or Mr. Ng.

I sent a few letters, made a few overseas calls, but it looked like the idea of getting involved in the movies was going to die stillborn.

Until one day when I was working at the sports complex, and I got a call from Mr. Ng. I got on the line, heard his voice and heard what he was saying: "Come to Hong Kong. We're going to do the US movie, and you're going to write it!"

With the limitless understanding and support of my wife, Carol, I quit my job and headed for Hong Kong, notebook in hand. When I

got there, we immediately went to work writing an outline of the story, and then I went back home to write the script.

I remember quite clearly my meeting with Seasonal before I left to come home and write the script. Mr. Ng knew I was a writer, but still he asked me if I knew how to write a script. I said sure, no problem. He gave me a couple of sample scripts to look through, anyway, but I assured him that I was a pro--and that there was nothing to worry about.

On the plane ride home, I panicked. I didn't know how to write a script. I had never SEEN a script before he handed me the sample ones. I had seen plenty of movies, sure, but could I write one? Who knew?

### **My First Script**

Before I sat down at the typewriter (this was before widespread word processors and personal computers, remember), I told myself the same thing I said before writing my first article for KICK: "You can do this! And, you can do it equally as poorly as everybody else out there!"

I wrote that script, and even though the first draft of the script was more of a novel than a script (it was about 200 pages long!), we went on to make the movie from that script, and it was hugely successful.

That movie was "No Retreat No Surrender" (NRNS), the film that launched the career of Jean Claude Van Damme and started a resurgence of interest in martial arts films.

NRNS is no great masterpiece (in fact, if we could make it again now, I think we could make it a very good, mainstream movie), but it captured people's imagination. It got a widespread theatrical release, and played all over the country. I still have people come up to me to tell me that NRNS is their favorite movie of all time. I find that hard to believe, but it makes me feel good all the same.

When I go back and read that script, I shake my head at how naive I was. Luckily, I was also one of the assistant directors on the set every day, so I saw the changes that had to be made, and I quickly understood why some things worked and some things certainly and undeniably didn't. It was excellent and unparalleled on-the-job training, and it was probably the best thing that could have happened to me.

### **My Reasons for Writing This Book:**

I'm writing this book to share the experiences I've had over the years writing and producing martial arts movies. Hopefully, the insight I can give you into the process will do several things:

- determine if the martial arts movie industry is for you
- give you a realistic picture of what the industry is and what it demands from the people in it
- let you know what to expect

-entertain you at the same time

Though I am a writer first, I have also become a producer--in order to protect the integrity of my work. I had a bad experience with my second film, "No Retreat No Surrender II: Raging Thunder": it was filmed in Thailand, and I did not go on location for that one. I stayed home, and when I saw the finished film, I knew I was in trouble. I was so disappointed in the changes the producer, Roy Horan, had made to the script, I seriously considered requesting to have my name removed from the picture.

More about that later.

So, to make sure that the story and the characters end up the way I envisioned them (more about the writer's vision later, too), I decided that I would have to be on set for every movie. And, from NRNS 3 on, I've been there for almost every shot, and certainly for every line of dialogue.

As a producer, I've also done pretty much everything that goes into the making of a movie, from emptying the trash cans to choosing the leading lady (and, I'll tell you, the latter beats the former hands down!). I'll let you know everything you need to know to get started in the martial arts film business, and then some.

It's a tough business, but it's not without its rewards. And, I don't mean just money. The money is pretty good, though not steady by any means, but the real reward is the sense of accomplishment that comes from having made a quality piece of entertainment. I'm proud of all the films I've done (some more than others), and I'm proud of the fact that I am always trying to come up with something new and something different.

I hope you can benefit from my experience in film-making.

Enjoy!