

NEW LOOK, MORE PAGES, FULL COLOUR

IMPACT

FROM ACTION CINEMA TO CULT TELEVISION

stargate - sg1

michelle yeoh

prodigal son

twenty four

insomnia

signs



October 2002
issue 130
£3.25

**FREE
DVD**

see inside
for details



ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD

how the hi-def
desperadoes are
reshaping the
action genre

KODAK EPT 5037

KODAK EPT 5037



CHINA BEAT



While most people would consider *The Matrix* to be the first Hong Kong/Hollywood crossover with its use of Yuen Woo-ping and his stunt-team to train the main cast and choreograph the film's action, they'd be wrong. Since the late 1980s American writer/producer Keith Strandberg has been pioneering the use of Hong Kong action in American movies, ever since he wrote the script for a little movie known as *No Retreat No Surrender*, produced by Ng See-yuen and Seasonal Films which launched the career of Jean Claude Van Damme. Subsequent films have included *Raging Thunder* with Cynthia Rothrock, *King Of The Kickboxers*, *American Shaolin*, *Superfights* and *Bloodmoon*. Actor and *China Beat* writer Anthony Dawe caught up with Keith for the following interview.



Anthony Dawe: Keith, you're pretty well known as a producer/screen writer these days, could you tell us how you first got involved with the film industry?

Keith Strandberg: I had originally wanted to be a fighter or stuntman in action movies, but in front of the camera. I was living in Taiwan at the time, teaching English and studying Chinese, and training in the martial arts. I got my black belt in Isshinryu Karate in 1979, and I was living in Taiwan in 1980. I sent my picture around to the Hong Kong studios, wanting to be a fighter. That didn't go anywhere, so later, when I started to get a reputation as a martial arts writer, I decided to try writing action movie scripts. I figured I could easily write as poorly as most of the action movies at the time.

I was making ends meet by selling freelance articles and guiding groups of Americans through China. On one trip to China, I had a layover in Hong Kong, and I just started calling Hong Kong studios to talk with them about combining American stories and actors with Hong Kong action. No one was interested except Ng See Yuen, president of Seasonal Films. We spent a great deal of time together and when I left Hong Kong, he told me that when he did an American action movie. I was the guy who would write it. A year later, he called me and we went on to do *No Retreat No Surrender*.

No Retreat, No Surrender was a smash hit back in the 1980s, jump starting the martial arts action boom in the West and launching the career of Jean Claude Van Damme. When you were making the film did you have any idea of the effect it would have on the industry? And why do you think the various sequels never really lived up to the first film's success?

Sequels rarely do as well as the original, for a number of reasons. In our case, the sequels to *No Retreat, No Surrender* were not really sequels, they were movies with the *No Retreat, No Surrender* name slapped on. We didn't have the same actors, the same characters, the same situations, they were completely different movies, but the distributors thought that they could make more money by using the *No Retreat, No Surrender* name. Can you imagine if you went to the sequel of *Die Hard* and Bruce Willis wasn't in it, it wasn't about a cop and it didn't have anything to do with the original?

As for the success of the original, no one had any idea it would do so well. It really spawned the explosion of low budget action that followed. It's now a classic, which is strange to me, because we were just trying to make a good movie that people would like to watch. I've had people come up to me and tell me it's their favourite movie of all time, and ask me for my autograph! We must have done something right, because it really started the careers of many people: mine, Jean Claude Van Damme, Kurt McKinney, Yuen Kwai (Corey Yuen) and more.

I've worked with actors and fighters who know *No Retreat, No Surrender* by heart, and can quote whole passages of dialogue to me. I don't even remember the dialogue.

You've worked with some incredible names in the action-cinema genre including Gary Daniels, Keith Cooke, Jee

KEITH STRANBERG

"A good martial arts actor has to have it all - great fighting skills, good presence, a good look and the ability to act. It's not enough to just throw a good sidekick, you have to be able to act convincingly. I would suggest that any would-be action star take acting classes as well as martial arts classes..."

Claude Van Damme and so many others. Who are your favourite martial arts actors?

My favourite action actors, with whom I have worked, in no particular order include Chuck Jeffreys, Keith Vitali, Gary Daniels, Keith Cooke, Billy Blanks, Kurt McKinney, Joe Hess and Cliff Lenderman. These guys are friends of mine, which I treasure more than anything.

As well as writing the original screenplays, you also served as one of the

producers on several of the films, including *Bloodmoon* and *King of The Kickboxers*. Will you be making more martial arts movies in the future or do you think the genre has gone into decline?

I think the time is coming for a resurrection of the action genre. The pendulum has swung so far in the direction of wirework and over the top fights, with people doing techniques that are impossible without the use of wires or digital enhancement, the time might be right for a return to the classic martial arts film. I am working on a couple of ideas right now, which I hope to turn into classic action features in the near future.

The ideas for both *Superfights* and *Bloodmoon* were very interesting and something of a departure for the normal martial arts movie. Where did the ideas for these movies come from?

The idea for *Super Fights* came out of the popularity of the Ultimate Fighting Championships as well as professional wrestling. I wanted to combine the two and see where it would go. I liked the idea of a new guy coming in, thinking it was all-straight up, and then slowly getting corrupted. Then, the purity of the martial arts saves him.

As for *Bloodmoon*, I tried to take a straight serial killer story and add a martial arts twist. What would happen if a serial killer was picking only the strongest and killing them? How would the police solve the case?

These two ideas were less than fully realized, just because of the nature of film making. It's all about compromise. Every time I write a script, it's perfect in my head, then it might lose a little bit when it gets onto the paper, then compromises are made during the casting process, the budget impacts what we can do so compromises are made there, and then when we go to film it, the process is compromised further by logistics, limitations and more.

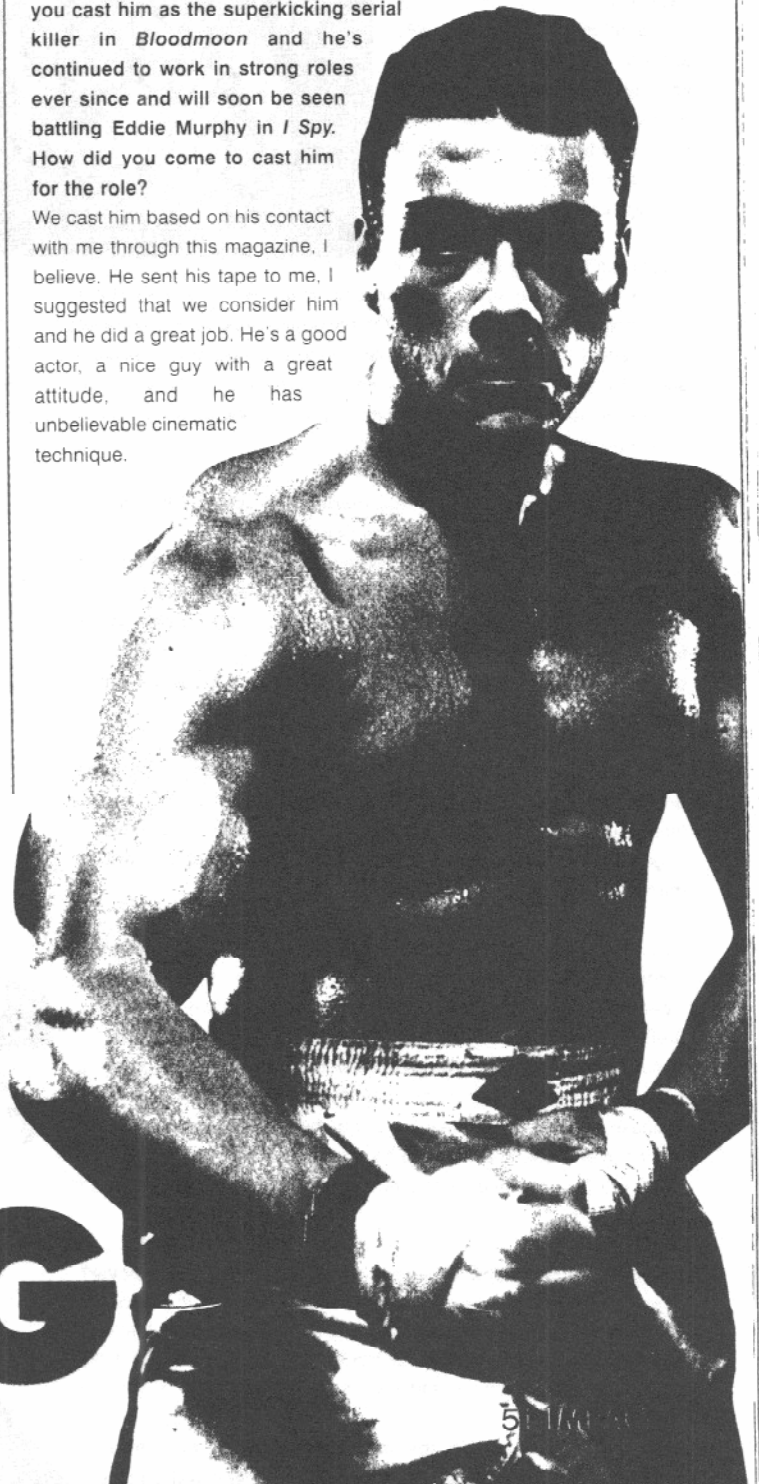
You've worked extensively with martial arts actors as opposed to actors who've learnt a little bit of martial arts for a movie. How do you find working with martial arts actors as opposed to actor martial artists? How did you find working with the UK's own Gary Daniels on *Bloodmoon*?

I loved working with Gary Daniels. He is a great actor and one of my good friends. He has a great look, is always a professional, and he has a real appreciation for the martial arts. He is a true martial artist, and he communicates that on screen. No fancy posing for him - he's the real deal. I actually prefer to work with real martial artists, like Gary, Chuck Jeffreys, Keith Vitali, Billy Blanks, Keith Cooke - they are 'jun' or 'lords' in the Chinese sense of the word - ethical, moral, trustworthy people who aren't afraid to work hard. Actors, on the other hand, who learn a little martial arts, are way more difficult to work with. They complain, they aren't willing to suffer for their art.

I would work with Gary again in a heartbeat. He has a built-in draw and he has the ability to transcend the genre. He just needs the right vehicle.

You gave Darren Shahlavi a strong start when you cast him as the superkicking serial killer in *Bloodmoon* and he's continued to work in strong roles ever since and will soon be seen battling Eddie Murphy in *I Spy*. How did you come to cast him for the role?

We cast him based on his contact with me through this magazine. I believe. He sent his tape to me, I suggested that we consider him and he did a great job. He's a good actor, a nice guy with a great attitude, and he has unbelievable cinematic technique.

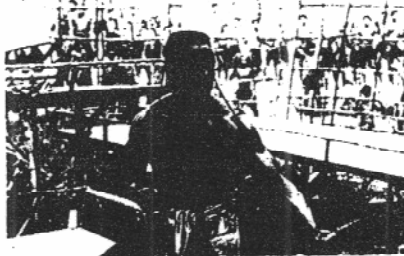


DBERG

CHINA BEAT

What do you think the Hong Kong Film industry is like in comparison to the American Industry?

Hong Kong is a unique mixture of professionalism and cutting corners. Hong Kong action film making is so focused on the quality of the action that the acting and the storytelling often takes a back seat. American film making is sometimes the other way around - they place more importance on the story and less on the action. I have been trying to place equal emphasis on both throughout my career, with varying success.



I really like the Hong Kong way of filming, but I value story, dialogue and character more than Hong Kong film makers traditionally do. On my dream project, I would have an American director to concentrate on story, dialogue and visuals, and a Hong Kong action director like Yuen Kwai or Tony Leung to handle the action, with my supervision so that nothing too over the top is incorporated into the fighting.

What do you think makes a good martial arts actor? Who do you think we should keep an eye on as future stars?

There are many up and coming fighters, and I help train them at the Action Film Camp I run with Keith Vitali and Michael DePasquale Jr. in upstate New York every summer. One of the rising stars is Scott Adkins from the UK. The actor/fighter/choreographer who is poised to break out is Chuck Jeffreys. He did the action on *Blade*, and he is a star in the making.

A good martial arts actor has to have it all - great fighting skills, good presence, a good look and the ability to act. It's not enough to just throw a good sidekick, you have to be able to act convincingly. I would suggest that any would-be action star take acting classes as well as martial arts classes.

I'd love to do an action fighting seminar in the UK, to help aspiring martial arts actors break into the genre. We run the seminars over a weekend, Friday through Sunday, and by the time we are done, pretty much everyone is trained to get a role. In fact, I would say about 200 people who have graduated from my action film camp have gone on to work in martial arts films. I've hired a lot of them, because they know what they are doing, they can sell a reaction, they can hit their mark, and they will do a good job without complaining. That's really what is needed to break into action film, or any kind of film for that matter.

Do you have any plans to shoot a non-martial arts action movie?
I have done thrillers, documentaries, commercials and much more. I have several award winning scripts currently in development that have nothing to do with the martial arts, however my heart is still with action movies. It's where I got my start and where I will always do some work.

With the martial arts in the media so much at present what projects / movies have you got in mind next and will you do another *No Retreat, No Surrender*?

I don't think I'll do another *No Retreat, No Surrender*, though

at one point when every movie we made was being called *No Retreat, No Surrender* I thought about doing a movie called *No Retreat No Surrender Never Again*. I have several projects in development, including a combination action/comedy/spoof, an action horror project and a traditional martial arts project.

What do you think of the success of films like *The Matrix* and the amount of special effects enhancement being used now to enhance the action?

I think I can do better without the special effects. Those *Matrix*-style special effects are so expensive, and all they really do is hide the fact that the actors aren't real martial artists. Give me real martial artists and real techniques every time, and I think movies will come back to reality in the near future...

If you wish to contact Keith Strandberg or get further information on the man and his various projects, log onto: www.ontheset.com/strandberg.html

Anthony Dawe is a UK based martial arts actor. He's set to appear in the forthcoming feature *Shades of Myth*, from the team at www.katahjime.com. For further information log onto www.anthonydawe.8k.com

Top: Billy Blanks in *King Of Kickboxers*

Centre: Superfights

Right: Billy Blanks in a publicity shot for *King Of Kickboxers*

