

REEL LIFE

BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

One of the most common questions I get is, "How do I become an action star?" If I knew that I wouldn't be writing this column. The better question is, "How do I break into action movies?" It's not as impossible as you might think, but it's still tough. The good news is that action movies need tons of fighters to get beaten up on screen. That means lots of opportunity.

For *Bloodmoon*, which we filmed in Wilmington, NC, we used more than 50 "thugs." Remember the fighters in *Enter the Dragon*? There were hundreds of them on Han's island, and they all had to have some kind of martial training (though if you watch closely, some of them don't have much!). Jackie Chan was one of the stunt fighters in *Enter the*

bodies, are familiar with being precise in spacing and control, can do what they are told, and are used to the hard work required on a film set. Having said that, I have run up against martial artists who have been extremely inflexible when it came to performing certain techniques, and that is always a huge mistake. One fighter once said to me, "We don't do that in my style." I tried to explain to him that this was a movie, not his style, but I eventually had to replace him. Another fighter tried to change the techniques that the

BREAKING INTO ACTION MOVIES

action director was giving him, suggesting that other techniques would be "better" - needless to say, the fighter was gone after lunch.

In addition to martial arts training, fighters should get some acting training. That doesn't mean that you should pack your bags and move to L.A., it means you should find an acting program where you live, and sign up. Even the fighters in a movie have to make appropriate expressions, and may be given a line or two. Learn beforehand how to do this, be prepared, and you'll be given more to do with each job.

Search out fighting for the screen training, as well. You may be the best there is at performing kata or free sparring, but neither one of those automatically makes you a good screen fighter. Some of the best competitors have been horrible screen fighters, because it's so much different. You aren't performing a kata, and you aren't trying to score points. You are doing a fight scene that requires adjustments all the time, hitting your marks, and reacting realistically.

It's All in the Reaction:

The biggest part of becoming a fighter is learning to do the reactions. Usually, the thugs we hire are there to

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Martial artists in film include (left to right): Douglas Wang, Tadashi Yamashita, Gerald Okamura, Jeff Imada, Bill Ryusaki and James Lew.

Dragon, and today's hottest action director, Corey Yuen (*Romeo Must Die*, and *Lethal Weapon 4*) was a stunt fighter on Bruce Lee's *Chinese Connection*. So, it's possible to start as a fighter and go on to bigger and better things.

Get the Training

Sure, there are guys who don't have much martial arts training who have made it as action stars (David Carradine comes to mind), but if you have training you are a step above the rest. When we are casting for a movie, and looking for fighters, we look for martial artists. Trained martial artists have control over their

MAIN EVENTS

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DECEMBER 9TH

HAPKIDO DOUBLE IMPACT SEMINAR. With grandmaster John Pelligrini. In Milwaukee, Wis. Covered will be empty-hand techniques. Contact Just For Kicks, 2342 S. 32nd St., Milwaukee, WI 53215; (414) 321-7657; kicbox@aol.com

DECEMBER 9TH-10TH

DR. YANG, JWING-MING SEMINARS. In Venice, Fla. Covered will include tiger claw qigong and taiji push hands. Contact Brian Ahern at (941) 426-5519.

DECEMBER 10TH

W. HOCK HOCHHEIM'S extreme hand, stick, knife, and gun close-quarter combat seminar. Manhattan, N.Y. Contact Hector Chevere at (201) 313-5788, Hock at (706) 866-2656 or HocksCQC.com

DECEMBER 23RD

BLADEMASTER John McCurry in North Long Beach, Calif., covering cobra/python silat combat scenarios, ground grappling with a blade, lock flows and strategies. Contact John McCurry at (562) 602-0313.

JANUARY 13TH-14TH

DR. YANG JWING MING FLORIDA SEMINARS. In Hollywood, Fla. Covered will be white crane qigong, tai chi coiling qigong and tai chi applications. Contact Lewis Paleias at (954) 925-8743 or cloud_chi@aol.com

JANUARY 23RD

ONE-TOUCH KO POWER SEMINAR. With Richard Clear at the Carrollwood School in Tampa, Fla. Contact Clear's Silat of Florida at (813) 936-8855.

JANUARY 24TH

ONE-TOUCH KO POWER SEMINAR. With Richard Clear in Brandon, Fla. Contact Clear's Silat of Florida at (813) 655-5800.

JANUARY 25TH

ONE-TOUCH KO POWER SEMINAR. With Richard Clear at the South Tampa School. Contact Clear's Silat of Florida at (813) 835-5098.

MAY 5TH-6TH

RICHARD BUSTILLO SEMINAR. In Baltimore, Md. Covered will be boxing and Thai boxing, Jun Fan jeet kune do, wrestling/jiu-jitsu and Filipino kali and eskrima. Contact David Lumsden at (410) 675-1835, Kevin Lumsden at (410) 549-4829 or JKDofMD@aol.com

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get hit, not to do much hitting. Unfortunately, most martial artists are good at the hitting part, but when it comes to the receiving end, really "selling" a punch to their face or stomach, they aren't so good. Martial artists are taught not to show emotion, and not to grimace or show pain when they are hurt - which is the exact opposite of what we need in a film. That takes some retraining, and it's better to get that training somewhere else, because there isn't any time to do it on a film set.

Make Contacts:

Keep your eyes open for any casting calls, and anything film related in your area. Be willing to work for nothing at the start of your career to gain the experience. Very rarely does someone step out of obscurity and become a huge star - even the "overnight" successes have toiled for years in bit parts and small roles, and they have made the most of their opportunities.

Be a Pleasure to Work With:

Making movies is really hard work. It can sometimes be 20 hour days (or more), with incredible pressure to get things done. If you have a good attitude, do your job well, and are fun to work with, you're almost guaranteed to work again. The work is too demanding to be miserable.

There is no one prescription for breaking into action movies. You have to find your own road, but the better prepared you are, in terms of training and knowledge, the greater your chance of success will be. Good luck.

Keith W. Strandberg is currently in production on his latest movie, a thriller that he wrote, is producing, and will co-direct.

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REEL LIFE

BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

Violence is in the news these days. With the rash of violent school incidents, people are taking a hard look at action movies and examining the connection between violence in the media and these violent events. Now I can see a tenuous connection of some ultra-violent movies to violent incidents, but I don't think that people who are otherwise peaceful will suddenly become violent because they



watched *National Born Killers*, *Reservoir Dogs* or *The Godfather*. A wire has to already be loose in their heads to make that jump. There have been several cases where murderers have cited action movies or rock music as inspiration for what they did, but you have to think that these people would committed their crimes even if they hadn't watched a movie, listened to a song, or watched a news report.

If we are going to censure movies and songs because of the possible reaction of twisted people, our society is in trouble. To point at action movies as the cause of violence in schools, for example, is simplifying the problem way too much. Maybe one particular violent sequence might strike a chord with someone, but if that chord is already there, something else created it. You could also argue that for these unbalanced people, a seemingly innocuous image might also trigger an action – do we start censoring art shows because of the effect certain photographs might have? The responsibility has to be with the people, not the images. If an image of a flower triggers a man to go on a shooting spree, do you blame the flower? No, you rightly blame the killer.

MARTIAL ARTS MOVIE VIOLENCE

Having said this, I'd like to make a case that martial arts movie violence isn't the type of action most media pundits point to when they talk about the problem of violent movies. After all, no matter how much one admires Jackie Chan's lightning-fast hands or Jean Claude Van Damme's spinning hook kick, you can't just step outside the theater and do these techniques. They take years of training, blood, sweat, and tears.

Secondly, people in the audience intuitively know that martial arts fights don't just break out on the street, so there is a certain degree of fantasy here. They've probably never seen a real hand-to-hand karate or kung-fu fight, much less been in one (in 25 years of training, I never have).

The heroes of most martial arts movies are good people who are striving to accomplish a good goal. No media critic has ever claimed that a Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan movie triggered school violence. Sure, *Power Rangers* was blamed for elementary and day care injuries, but there was never an intent by these kids to do harm, they were just acting out the parts. A generation before, the injuries came from kids trying to be Superman, and jumping off the roof with blankets tied like capes.

Most martial arts movies present some aspect of the benefits of the martial arts. It may be meditation sequences or a training montage, but the audience learns that the hero has gone through some sacrifices to get where they are – there is a philosophy behind these sacrifices – unlike a movie where guns are the attraction. After all, to quote from *Enter the Dragon*, "Any bloody fool



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THE IMPACT OF THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

Low budget action movies are dying and have been for years. Salvation, the hero on the horizon which may just resuscitate the genre is none other than *The Blair Witch Project*.

After years and years of high-flying success, where almost any movie with furious fights and stunts could get a decent distribution deal, things have changed drastically. Now, unless you have an expensive star or two, or something radically different from everything else on the market, chances of even securing a video or cable deal are two: slim and none. Why? Supply and demand.

When the demand was there, with people wanting to watch action movies, producers and production companies went crazy making movie after movie. This rush to produce resulted in some very poor-quality films. The reaction to these "schlock" films was that audiences boycotted almost every low-budget action film, no matter who made it or how good it was. When the demand started to disappear, the producers didn't automatically stop making these movies. There is currently a glut on the market, and the general feeling is that nobody wants to watch this drek anymore. Add to that the entire anti-violence movement and you have a difficult situation for action films. People are staying away in droves, and the industry is really hurting.

Now, producers are starting to wake up and smell the decay, and are limiting the number of movies they make and changing their approach a little bit. There are still low-budget movies getting made, but the market is still very difficult. Soon there will be very few low-budget action movies, as producers are moving on to more lucrative genres (horror, thriller, et cetera). The pipeline will all but dry up, and things will stay that way for a year or two. Then the demand will come back and producers will start making low-budget action again.

The glimmer of hope for the action genre lies in another genre altogether with the success of *The Blair Witch Project*. Sure, there has been a lot of discussion about the movie, and the backlash is very strong right now, but if you look beyond the hype and examine the movie for what is was (not what it was sold as), it holds out great hope for all independent movies. It wasn't the scariest movie ever made, nor was it a

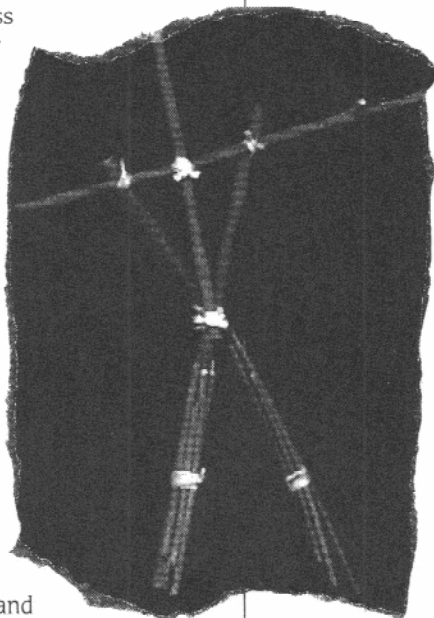
groundbreaking piece of film making. It was, however, a well-made movie that was produced for a budget less than the catering costs of most low-budget movies. Using accessible formats (High-8 video and

16mm film), the filmmakers set out to make their movie, and they did. They had a vision and they realized it. And my hat is off to them.

What does that mean for independent film? Given the technology currently available (digital video, desktop editing suites, et cetera), it's possible for anyone with a good idea and some guts to put their talent where their mouths are and make a movie. Sure, there are going to be tons of horrible movies as a result, but at the same time it means that truly creative people who aren't keyed into the Hollywood system, or even the low-budget action scene, can make a movie and that movie can stand on its own. Now the artists who feel misunderstood by Hollywood can make their own movie and let it compete with the rest of the fare that Hollywood spits out.

This will also give a whole new generation of aspiring filmmakers the wherewithal and opportunity to learn and hone the craft of telling a film story. Now, I teach in the film department of Towson University (in Maryland), and there is great benefit to formal film school training. For those who can't swing film school, with today's tools they can do their experimenting on their own, using state-of-the-art equipment, for a very reasonable cost. Truly, anyone with a good idea and the will to see it get made, can be a moviemaker.

The Blair Witch Project has also shown that people will watch something that presents a good story in a different way, in spite of the production values. *The Blair Witch Project* wasn't high quality in terms of production, but people overlooked that because they were intrigued by the story. Filmmakers shouldn't think that they can make a movie that is the same old story and people will watch it, despite the low production values. *The Blair Witch Project* does seem to herald a new focus on story, and a willingness by the audience at large to ignore shaky production value and the absence of stars. Whether you know it or not, that's a good thing. And it may mean a renaissance for action films. ☯



BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

HONG KONG'S HOLLYWOOD INVASION

Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat, John Woo, Yuen Kuai, Tsui Hark, Michelle Yeoh, Yuen Woo Ping, Jet Li, Sammo Hung.

What do all of the above have in common?

They are part of the Hong Kong invasion of Hollywood. All of the above actors and directors have made successful American movies (in the case of Sammo Hung, a very popular TV show, *Martial Law*). They are all enormously successful in Hong Kong and have made the leap to America and are thriving here.

Why did they leave Hong Kong?

Well, according to the people I spoke with in Hong Kong while I was there recently, the Hong Kong film industry is dying. Ng See Yuen, an acclaimed and award winning director and producer, as well as the founder and Chairman of the Hong Kong Director's Guild, blames it on piracy. Not piracy of the high seas, but the unlawful copying of movies and selling them on the street.

While in Hong Kong, I saw *Shakespeare in Love* and *Saving Private Ryan* well before they had finished their first screening. Pirated VCDs of both movies (a video format very popular in Asia) were already selling in the shops on the street. That's amazing and it is killing the film industry.

"Something has to be done," says Mr. Ng, who recently organized and led a march of over 2,000 movie industry people (Jackie Chan was one of the leaders as well) to protest movie piracy and demanding that something be done about it. "Right now, enforcement of the copyright laws is limited to the customs service, and they don't have the manpower to make a dent in the problem. We want it to become a law enforcement matter," Ng says.

When you add the general Asian economic downturn to the video piracy situation, you have a disastrous situation in Hong Kong for movie makers and movie talent. "Nobody is making any movies," says Hong Kong-based rising action star Kim-Maree Penn. "I'm going to Australia to shoot a new TV series, and have done some Hong Kong movies, but the amount of filming has been dramatically cut. I really don't know what's going to happen."

Hong Kong film industry giants like Ng See Yuen, who was the man who put Jackie Chan on the map with the films *Drunken Master* and *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow*, will continue to make films, but the majority of companies are struggling and turning to other ventures in the short term.

Penn, for example, runs a very successful body-

guard business when she's not filming, and recently she's been working to expand that venture.

She has done bodyguard work for pretty much every celebrity who has gone to Hong Kong over the last three or four years. Many of her bodyguards are movie fighters and stuntmen.

"I hire the guys who I've worked with on movies," Penn says. "They are tough, they can fight if it gets dirty, and they are good people. Heaven knows they need the work right now, and when I start producing movies, I'll turn to them and cash in some favors." Spoken like a true producer, Ms. Penn.

The malaise in Hong Kong is one of the reasons so many veteran Hong Kong film types have set their sights on America. Ng See Yuen was the first producer to come to America, with 1985's *No Retreat No Surrender*, the movie which started Jean-Claude Van Damme's career. John Woo was the first director to make the jump, and he has become a staple in the Hollywood directors circle. Jackie Chan was one of the first actors to hit it big (other than Bruce Lee, of course) with the hit *Rumble in the Bronx*. His first made-in-America-for-America picture, *Rush Hour*, was successful beyond anyone's wildest dreams and cemented Jackie as a force to be reckoned with in Hollywood.

I had met Jackie long ago, while



BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?

Hero: according to Webster's dictionary, a hero is "illustrious warrior; one greatly regarded for achievements or qualities; chief man in a poem, play or story; demigod."

I'm a sucker for heroes.

But in today's supercharged, fast-paced world, most people don't have time for heroes. If a hero somehow appears, people quickly go out of their way to expose their feet of clay.

It's an interesting paradox. Our society too quickly anoints people with heroic stature, yet at the same time relishes tearing those heroes down. People are human and have human frailties, so it might not make a great deal of sense to put them on the hero pedestal.

That's why we have movies.

Movies can present heroes in such a way that they never let us down, while at the same time they show us what is possible — what we can aspire to.

Who was your first martial arts hero? Mine was Bruce Lee.

I know now that he had problems just like you and I do, but when he was up on the silver screen, fighting Khan and the hordes of evil doers in *Enter the Dragon*, he was a shining example of everything that was right with the martial arts. I put his poster up in my training area in the basement and he was the inspiration for doing that final set of kicks or another round of stretches.

I didn't wonder what he was really like as a person; I was enthralled by the characters he portrayed — everymen that were transformed into heroes bigger than themselves. People who righted wrongs, and avenged the downtrodden. Have today's movies changed much?

I think they have and they have changed for the worse.

Take a look at Mel Gibson's newest movie, *Payback*, which has the tagline of "Get ready to root for the bad guy." It's a very creative tagline and I'm sure the movie is entertaining, but it seems like today's heroes have become anti-heroes. *Blade*. Wesley Snipes' very successful and well made movie, is not about a hero in the traditional sense of the word. *Blade* is an anti-hero, who does good, but goes about it in a way that could be construed as evil.



Look at the heroes of twenty years ago: Superman, the Lone Ranger, Tarzan, Bruce Lee, Robin Hood and others. All true blue, all walking the straight and narrow.

You could make an argument that today's "heroes" are more complex, more fitting for a time when the President of the United States is called a liar and a cheat — and very few people disagree.

Heroes should be larger than life, paragons of virtue and all that is right in the world. I don't think heroes should succumb to temptations that others, you and I among them, might feel. I don't think sadism and dark violence has a place in heroes. Batman, Superman, Spiderman and other comic book heroes should, in my opinion, be keepers of the light.

Sure, the world isn't black and white, it's made up of all shades of gray. But, at the same time, that doesn't mean that we should have shades of gray as our goals. If we have role models in the movies and other forms of entertainment that show us the heroes who are virtuous, who choose to do good and not do evil, those are positive role models. It might have very little to do with reality, but who ever said that movies and entertainment needs to have anything to do with

reality?

I yearn for the days when the heroes of movies were admirable men and women, people that kids would want to be like. Nowadays, more kids want to be like the WWF wrestlers they see on TV: mean-spirited, vulgar, violent cretins. One wrestler, who for years had labored as a righteous good guy, just recently reinvented himself as a bad guy and has become one of the most popular wrestlers in the world. And that's a crying shame.

People, especially kids, want to root for the bad guys today, and that's a trend that has to stop.

Martial arts training is what taught me to root for the good guys and to want to become a good guy or at least a better person. My sensei, Wayne Welling, taught the martial arts like a religion — we had the skills, so we had certain duties. If faced with injustice or a life-threatening situation, we had a duty to act, to do something about it.

My training in the martial arts made me look for the heroes in my ordinary life, whether they were on the

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