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# RICHTER SCALE

by Michael Sragow

To judge from offbeat comedies such as *Slither* and *All Night Long* and the sci-fi hit *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a W.D. Richter script is apt to be full of everyday situations that are blown up and wacked out until they resemble Claes Oldenburg's giant electric socket or his big mesh baseball bat. To judge from *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai* — sure to be a cult sensation — any movie directed by W. D. Richter is likely to have the same combination of manic invention and "found art." Maybe his bifurcated sensibility owes something to a youth spent in a small, gray Connecticut city and its baroque film theaters.

When Richter was growing up, he thought of the movies as an improbable dream. He  
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# Richter

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lived in New Britain, the "Hardware Capital of the World . . . a typical New England industrial town, all asphalt and concrete," and he haunted the local movie houses: "The Palace, the Strand, and the Embassy — they had the old triangular marquees hanging out over the sidewalk. We kids would all just go on Saturdays. It was a big adventure when you could finally go yourself on the bus to the movies. We'd sneak into Brigitte Bardot movies, like *A Woman like Satan*. Or was it *A Woman like Satin*? I didn't know how to pronounce it then so I still don't know the title." More often than not he went with his mother, or his Polish grandmother, who took moviegoing as one of those inalienable American rights: "My only problem was that my choices were limited: I remember seeing Doris Day's *Working My Way Through College* twice."

Even when he began to get serious about his future, a career in movies seemed beyond his reach: "There was no way for a kid of my age and background, growing up on the East Coast, to think of getting into film at that time." Only when Richter was majoring in English at Dartmouth did he hear about film schools, and it was a "revelation." So after graduation, Richter and his high-school sweetheart Susan (an elementary-education major at Skidmore), decided to take a chance: they would move to Los Angeles and she would support them while he studied film at USC. It was a step in the right direction, but only a step. The school

"had limited contact with Hollywood. And there were a lot of people scrambling for not enough equipment. And we grad students, who had traveled great distances, were thrown into classes with undergraduates who weren't serious about it — often just airheads walking around collecting credits. But at least we got to handle film."

Richter never received his MA, because his professor, Arthur Knight, never read his thesis screenplay: "In a sense, it was a good initiation into the movie business." He did find work as a studio story analyst, and he managed to get one of his scripts to director Irvin Kershner, who hired Richter to assist him at the time he was wooing Marlon Brando for *Dirty Harry* (with a Terrence Malick screenplay — Warner Bros. executives changed the project around when Clint Eastwood became available). Soon afterward, though, Richter's own writing career caught fire. He sold a funky comedy called *Slither*; directed by Howard Zieff, it won critical praise and a cult. Then he wrote two movies he'd prefer to forget: Peter Hyams's *Peeper* ("I honestly like Hyams, but his thinking is so far removed from my thinking that we are not even on the same planet") and Peter Bogdanovich's *Nickelodeon* ("the first and last time I would ever cowrite with anybody"). Richter kept getting work, including such prestigious projects as the John Badham/Frank Langella *Dracula*, but he didn't come up with a combined financial and critical success until he collaborated with director Phil Kaufman on the 1978 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. And working with Kaufman helped clarify his ideas on what a director/writer relationship should be: "I was always on the set or available to Phil whenever he needed me. The storytelling process is a mutual responsibility for the writer and director. You're going to be constantly confronted with changing situations, whether it's from an actor or a production design problem, so it's good to have both of you around to bounce ideas off each other."

The big movies kept coming in, notably the Robert Redford film *Brubaker*. But a number of disruptions began to steer Richter toward directing. It seemed that his projects went through perilous sea changes in production — sometimes for the good, but more often to the detriment of his writing. *Brubaker* went through two directors. *All Night Long*'s gifted director, Jean-Claude Tramont, replaced both his cinematographer and his female lead in midstream. *The Pursuit of D.B. Cooper* wore out half a dozen writers and directors, and Richter's draft was scrapped. Then he wrote an adaptation of *The Ninja* for his old friend Kershner: the odd case of a "go" project reverting to a mere development deal. Richter felt a need to get more control over his work, and he realized that he'd kick himself if he turned 50 without ever having tried directing. So he formed a production company with Neil Canton, who persuaded him that the hottest property he had in his trunk was a bizarre fantasy he'd commissioned from Earl Mac Rauch called *Buckaroo Banzai*. When I interviewed Richter at his home near Boston, the movie was about to open in its first engagements, marking the end of a decade-long struggle.

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**Q:** Herman Mankiewicz is supposed to have written Ben Hecht in the '20s that in Hollywood, "the money's great and the competition's idiots." Is that really what you wrote Earl Mac Rauch to bring him to Hollywood?

**A:** That's what I said, honest to God. I'd read his second novel, *Arkansas Adios*, and it really made me laugh. You know the scene where the boy's supposed to clean the dishes and he gets Cartoon Dog to lick them till they're spotless? That's the essential Mac Rauch. I saw that he was another Dartmouth guy, and I wrote, "If you're not happy doing what you're doing, you should come out here and make some money, because there are very few people who can write out here." And Mac came into our life. We were living around MacArthur Park — it was very scary then, there was a lot of violence going on, people walking around with guns — he seemed to enjoy the tumult. He took instantly to the East Side of LA. For one thing, he speaks dialects. He can walk into a Spanish bar and talk to a Guatemalan and convince the guy that he's a Nicaraguan. I've seen him look like a salesman, but he also loves rock and

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roll, so he's had orange hair, green hair, totally short hair. I never know what the guy's going to look like.

There's a lot of Buckaroo in him without any pretense of it, because when I think of Buckaroo I think of a fragmented guy going in a million directions at once. I'll tell you a typical Mac Rauch story. His third novel, *The Jazz Age in East Texas*, has never been published. I think Little, Brown bought it and were ready to publish it, but Mac said, "Let me rewrite it." They said okay but only gave him three months. He went away and rewrote it for three years and never got happy with it. They were ready to go into publication with the first manuscript, but they finally asked for their advance back and he got into litigation with them and I have no idea how it was resolved. It seems he puts no value on his stuff because he knows he can do it again or do it differently. I got him a typist so at least there's always a copy of his work somewhere around. But the guy's been an inspiration in a lot of ways. He'd laugh at that, but whenever I think this world is too conventional, I just look at Mac, and there's a blessing walking around there.

**Q:** *I know you commissioned the Buckaroo Banzai script. When did you first hear of Buckaroo Banzai's character?*

**A:** Mac would come in when we were having dinner and sit down. He'd say he had his guitar in his car and wanted to play a couple of new songs. He'd have this guitar in a case of crushed orange velvet. He'd sing his crazy songs. Then he'd say, "You know what I was thinking about?" And he'd just tell it to you, in fragments. At the time, Buckaroo didn't have all his attributes. Mac would say he's a country-and-western singer, or something else, or both. If I said to him he could only be a neurosurgeon, Mac would have found a way to make it interesting. What I liked was just the madness of it, and the premise that there would be this guy with his roots in pulp fiction who would not be an obnoxious

superhero. The characters Mac hinted at sounded hysterical. And Susan and I were in instant agreement that if we could get Mac to put some of this stuff on paper, it would be fun to read. So we commissioned him. He was advancing his career in fits and starts — he wrote the original script for *New York, New York* — and simultaneously worked on *Buckaroo Banzai*. We'd see 30 pages, 40 pages, 60, 80, new characters, new plots, things would drop out — like the Hong Kong Cavaliers — and I'd tell him to put them back in. It evolved into something. It evolved into 300 pages, then it was distilled into a treatment that we thought we could show the studios, called *Lepers from Saturn*. I got him to change it to *Lizards from Saturn*. That got us the money to develop the final screenplay, which was nothing like *Lepers from Saturn*. Elements of sci-fi went in and out of it. The version he called *The Strange Case of Mr. Cigars* was about a plot to kill all the world leaders at a peace conference with exploding cigars, and it also had a three-story robot functioning in the plot; there were guys up in the head working it with big levers, and Buckaroo scaled it and got inside it and made it crash like King Kong on the city. Mac would have a screenplay where all the bad guys were called William. They weren't from another planet, but they were all named William. He understood that looked funny on the page, and when people looked at the screenplay — well, you knew that had to stop them.

**Q:** *Buckaroo's "Blue Blaze Irregulars" reminded me of Captain Midnight's secret squadrons.*

**A:** They're right out of that. But the real inspiration behind a lot of the outrageous stuff is this insane Gene Autry Western. There was a period, a magical period, when they were doing Westerns with outer-space themes. There's a Gene Autry Western where beneath his ranch is a civilization of these aliens who ride around on horseback and on their heads were ordinary pails. We were supposed to think they were hats, but they were ordinary pails. Mack saw this thing and told me about it. We watched for it and taped it. The way these dusty sidekicks find this ancient

civilization is they trip on a wire, they pick the wire up, and they pull it across the ranch; it's coming right out of the dust, and it leads down to a subterranean cavern where there are guys with big robes and pails on their heads. Gene Autry got his buddies to help beat this alien invasion back and that was the beginning of the Blue Blaze Irregulars. The idea that there's always a group of friends that you can call on when something comes down from outer space and we'll fight them together, guys.

Of course, that stuff may influence me no more than an article I read in the newspaper about a meteorite that came through somebody's dining room and bounced into their living room while they were watching television. Next week, the Smithsonian wants to buy it from them and they own it because it hit their house. That's the quintessential Buckaroo situation and that's in the real world.

**Q:** *How does Buckaroo fit in with the rest of your work?*

**A:** I tell you what for me is the common theme. I love the strange underbelly of this world. I think you can find it in broad daylight or you can find it in the middle of the night. And I'm against the kind of world where people cower, where they're afraid of this person or that person. And though I don't advocate throwing chairs out windows the way Gene Hackman did in *All Night Long*, that's a form of gesture that's important. There is a line we had to cut from *Buckaroo Banzai*: Jeff Goldblum shouts, "Thus far and no farther will we be pushed!" then takes his bandanna off and throws it. That line was just too far over the edge. But there is a feeling in these characters of people who will be pushed no farther, who will stop and say that's ridiculous, I refuse to be part of this world. □