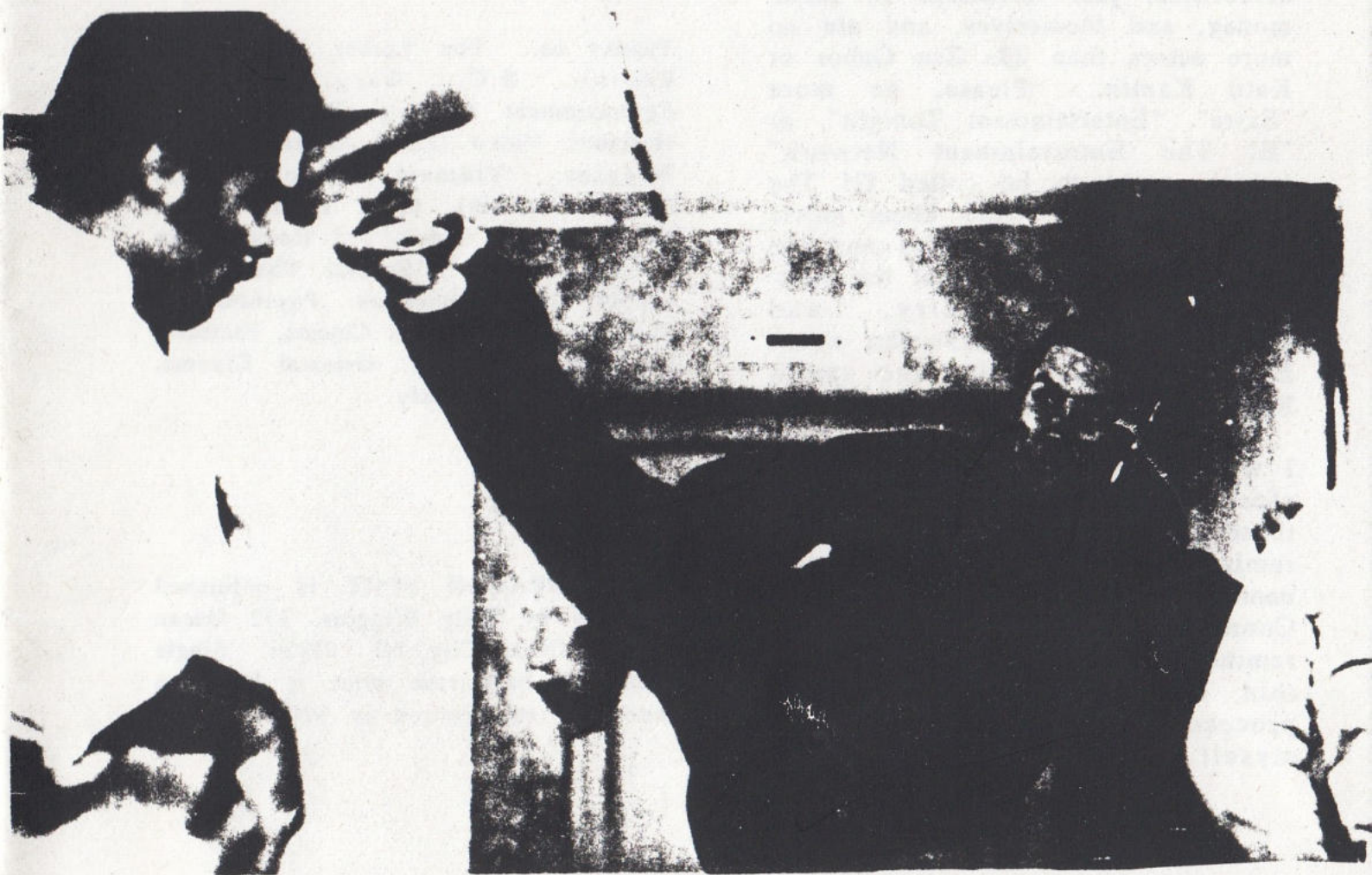


NUMBER 6
\$3.00

NINJA DRAGON FURY



Apollo Cook nails Ned Hourani in DOUBLE BLAST

NINJA DRAGON FURY

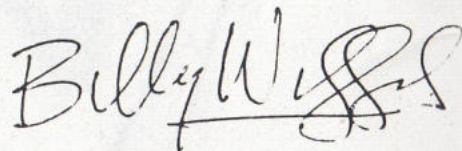
Issue 6 Spring 1995

Working under a stricter deadline than ever, I still manage to deliver this issue of NDF about one month behind schedule ... but alas, here it is in time for the inevitable summer blockbuster backlash. Is it just me or are you sick to death of these star-struck print and broadcast reports on "Hollywood" and its "stars"? I love movies, and obviously you do too, to support a zine like this one. But I just want to puke up bitter bile seeing Demi Moore, Julia Roberts, Michael Douglas, Winona Ryder, Brad Pitt, Ethan Hawke, Sharon Stone, Sylvester Stallone, Christian Slater, etc, etc, being fawned over *as if they are actors*. These people are celebrities, just interested in fame, money, and themselves, and are no more actors than Zsa Zsa Gabor or Kato Kaelin. Please, no more "Extra", "Entertainment Tonight", or "E! The Entertainment Network" (which ought to be called G! The Gossip Network). How about movie news actually about movies and the making of same, not about the stars' relationships, jewelry, and spending habits? Folks who watch E! probably also enjoy the annual Rolling Stone fashion photo layouts.

I'll put it in print: the first time I write a sentence about one of the aforementioned famous people in these pages, you may write and remind me to change the mag's name to M! The Martial Arts Movie Connection or something. (Also remind me to hire a little wafer-thin blonde starlet to host the proceedings, and then to kill myself.)

But enough about that. The direct-to-video martial arts pictures keep on coming, as if you hadn't noticed. The bulk of this issue (and what NDF reports on in general) remains these direct-to-vid or cable releases. This issue does however debut our cleverly named LETTERS section (name-change suggestions welcome); I give special thanks to those who take the time to drop me a line with their ramblings on the genre.

Thanks also to Rob Hauschild for his contributions to this issue. Read the fine print to see who else I'm indebted to this time around.



Billy Wiggins

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LETTERS

Vent thy spleen! It's official--NDF prints reader mail. Write to 332 Ocean Ave., Ocean City, NJ, 08226.

You asked for thoughts and opinions on NDF and the genre in general, here are some.

PUSHED TO THE LIMIT is Mimi Lesseos' first starring role, but not her first film. She was also in **THE AMERICAN ANGELS**, **BAPTISM OF BLOOD** (1989), for which she bared her butt in *Playboy* (Dec 1989) as promotion, and in **THE LAST RIDERS** (1991). She's been in other features since, but I think only one of them was a starring vehicle, probably **BEYOND FEAR** (1993). [*She was also in PM's FINAL IMPACT (1991).*]

TIGER CLAWS is probably the only movie with Cynthia Rothrock that I truly dislike (I seem to like everything else that she's been in), but some people might be intrigued by the idea that the villain named Chong (Bolo Yeung) apparently gets his powers from a Tiger God, thus he does the 5-mark scratch to a victim's face to kill. Such an interesting idea wasn't fully developed.

ANGELFIST is actually a remake of some of Cirio Santiago's earlier flicks, particularly **FIRECRACKER** (1981) with Jillian Kesner winding up only in panties for a number of karate battles and **TNT JACKSON** (1975) with Jeanne Bell in Jillian's role. [**ANGELFIST**] is heavy on showers, perhaps it's more for Melanie Moore fans.

LADY DRAGON 2 ... I don't agree that this is a bad movie, but it's of interest that the unrelated **LADY DRAGON** (1992) also had Cynthia's differently named character raped, in that case by Richard Norton (!!). Perhaps that's where they got the wild idea to pretend that this feature is a sequel.

I think both movies were made in Jakarta.

NEMESIS ... I can't help but think that they deliberately made this movie convoluted because they had visions of a Part 2. You're right, it's confusing. Mr. Pyun also borrowed from **ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK**, he has a bomb inside Alex Rain's heart that will go off in 3 days if he refuses to battle the Hammerheads.

SIDEKICKS ... I'm not much of a fan of either Chuck Norris or Joe Piscopo. The parodies don't work because they look too much like what they're parodying, which is ridiculous and not funny. On the plus side, at least the kid and the bully settle it by smashing bricks in a tournament. And honestly, Chuck has his own hair stylist? Make me a star! I don't even need a stylist to look like that.

I'm afraid I found **DRAGON: THE BRUCE LEE STORY** more successful at portraying Bruce Lee as a cartoon character than as a person, married to Linda the Superwoman (Lauren Holly as a blonde) so that he won't be a horny, whining nobody. I felt like I sat through a cleaned-up, briskly edited TV movie-of-the-week disguised as a theatrical feature. I also found it sad that Bruce's childhood and family weren't accurately portrayed, the other "for dramatic effect" bio-film inaccuracies would have been much more forgivable, after all, a number of Hong Kong movies about Bruce won't be mistaken for being documentaries. At least the action scenes were exciting, but I wanted more than that.

You'd probably groan if you haven't heard it a zillion times already, yes, there will be a fourth **Ninja Turtles** movie. They're promising a new look for the Turtles.

You asked for thoughts on other genre films, here are some.

BAD BLOOD (1994) ... Tibor Takacs was thought to be a rising star in directing horror movies [*he made THE GATE and THE GATE II*], instead he's now directing equally ridiculous MA movies, this one has wooden ol' Lorenzo Lamas, and it's amusing for all the wrong reasons. MISSION OF JUSTICE (1992) ... Jeff Wincott is a hot tempered ex-cop who joins some vigilantes under the eye of Brigitte Nielsen. Neither the hero nor the villainess are interesting, and the plot makes little sense. THE MAGIC KID (1993) ... As a contrast to the phony feel-goodiness of SIDEKICKS, here T.J. Roberts plays a young boy who goes about as The Young Ninja and can think of 10 ways to kill a person in one setting (toilet paper was used to kill one villain). The movie is ninja-obsessed.

Your readers might be interested to know that Worth Keeter and Terence [*BLOODFIST, RAGE AND HONOR*] Winkless direct a lot of the POWER RANGERS and V.R. TROOPERS episodes, the American scenes.

Charles Floyd Rhodes
Seattle, WA

It's good to see "NDF" still going strong. I think you've got the most unique martial arts movie fanzine bar none. I enjoy the Asian films the other zines cover, but I hate the way they denigrate domestic films and stars. I admit there are bad, even lousy, domestic productions, but not every film deserves to be despised. It has become reverse snobbery. The way people used to wrongly loathe Hong Kong films has changed to admirers of HK work loathing everything else.

Enough about that short-sightedness. I agree with you about Richard Norton. He deserves to

return to "A" level productions, where he ironically started from. (I guess you can call *THE OCTAGON* and *FORCE FIVE* grade "A" films.) How about a career retrospective on him? May favorite is Jeff Wincott, another fine fighter/actor. Have you seen *MARTIAL OUTLAW* and *MISSION OF JUSTICE*, both from Image? They are in my view, his best. *RED SUN RISING* from Armitraj also rates as Don "The Dragon" Wilson's best film. It has an interesting plot and a great villain in James Lew, who along with Matthias Hues is underrated as a bad guy.

In a previous NDF you stated you would cover some older releases. With the other zines starting to review the old chop-sockys, maybe you can review some of the overlooked past domestic gems like *THE CHALLENGE* or *THE YAKUZA*. Even old-time Hollywood, pre-Bruce Lee, included some martial arts influence. Spencer Tracy in *BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK* was the original one-arm boxer. Check out the WWII flick *BLOOD ON THE SUN* which has Jimmy Cagney and the villain in a jiu-jitsu battle. Even Gene Kelly studied the martial arts for his action roles. Watch him in *THE THREE MUSKETEERS* and tell me you don't see a Jackie Chan spirit in the duel sequences. (Can you tell I'm a film buff?)

Anyway keep NDF going its own way while the other zines step on each other's toes. Don't forget to keep reviewing Van Damme, Seagal, and other grade "A" films as well. The grade "A" action films always influence the "B's", so your opinion on those should be known.

Steve Ruiz
Colton, CA

VIDEO REVIEWS

DOUBLE BLAST

1993/PG/89min

Vidmark Entertainment

executive producer-Anjantre Hunt

producers-David Hunt, Chuck Williams, William Burr

associate producers - Vivian Villahermosa, Sara Rose

writer-Paul Joseph Gulino (story by Gulino, Paul Wolansky, Tim Spring)

director-Tim Spring

featuring-Dale "Apollo" Cook, Linda Blair, Joe Estevez, Robert Z'Dar, Ron Hall, Chuck Williams, Lorne Berfield, Crystal Summer, Ned Hourani, Crist Aguilar, John Barrett

Well, I guess I deserve this picture, as I pretty much asked for it in my review of Cook's TRIPLE IMPACT, back in NDF #5. Being that Cook is a seemingly natural comic actor, and the owner of a rubbery, Jackie Chan-like face, I suggested that it was more appropriate for him to do a crossover-comedy film rather than a straight actioner. A complaint I've had with Cook's previous pictures (TRIPLE IMPACT, AMERICAN KICKBOXER 2, BLOOD RING, etc.) is that he's just not gritty or intense enough to be an action

hero in the standard sense. Unlike Schwarzenegger or Willis, who can be jokey at times but still get down to business when necessary, Cook never seems comfortable going through the motions of your typical action pic.

So along comes DOUBLE BLAST, which is a PG-rated, family-oriented, kung fu comedy (I think this is the first PG film to grace these pages!). If you ever saw TRIPLE IMPACT you remember that the plot concerned Cook's attempts to recover a missing archaeological thing, trying to get a hold of it before some bad guys do, etc. Well, DOUBLE BLAST virtually remakes the TRIPLE IMPACT script, teaming Cook with two spunky preteen kids instead of a kickboxing buddy. The result is a *very* goofy but not altogether unappealing film; the kind that is great for your kid brothers or younger kids who are into the martial arts.

The missing archaeological "thing" in DOUBLE BLAST is a native American Utayo tablet, which contains some juicy secrets, and which can only be translated by Professor Whyte (Blair). A bad guy named Nadir (Estevez) and his posse want the tablet, so they attempt to kidnap the Professor, only to be caught in the act by the two nosy little ninjas (Summer, Berfield). The kids' father, pro

kickboxer Greg (Cook) gets wind of the kidnapping, tries to rescue the kids and the Professor, and gets captured himself.

After determining that there is Utayo treasure to be found in some mountain cave, Nadir and company head out to get same. With Greg, the kids, the Prof, and several henchmen in tow, Nadir sets off on his quest to get the treasure, hoping to deliver it to his boss, "Blade" (Hall). Following much Indiana Jones-style trekking thru boobytraps and the like, the group encounters the treasure and the baddies are kickboxed into submission.

Although the film is perfectly set up for his skills, "Apollo" Cook has little to do in the film. His character is pretty extraneous; Crystal Summer and Lorne Berfield as the two kids are the real stars. That stated, Cook manages to not embarrass himself, and is unimposing and likable in his role. A kung fu comedy with Cook as the true star would no doubt be better than this; I'm still waiting for such a film.

The aforementioned kids are both pretty comfortable in front of the camera. Summer is probably about 13 years old, and shows refreshingly little of the awkward self-consciousness you might associate with a girl of that age. Berfield plays the wacky kid

role without mugging sitcom-style, but still expressing the required cute wackiness. Included in the film's cornucopia o' villains is the stiff Ron Hall as the martial-arts-master, "Blade". Hall was Cook's stiff sidekick in *TRIPLE IMPACT*. Robert (MANIAC COP) Z'Dar does a Joe Pesci-HOME ALONE turn, playing a bumbling thug who falls on his butt a lot, and Joe Estevez (Martin Sheen's brother; Charlie and Emilio's uncle) is a riot as the crazed Nadir. Estevez resembles brother Martin so much that watching him in this role is like watching a psychotronic alternate world in which Martin Sheen acts in kung fu flicks. Beautiful.

And even if it makes me weird in the world's eyes, I'll say it: Linda Blair is a hottie. Even as far back as *EXORCIST II*, right through *HELL NIGHT*, *CHAINED HEAT*, even *REPOSSESSED*, she's had the goods, baby! Needless to say, in *DOUBLE BLAST* she's caught in a silly role, but is sexy anyway. You go, girl.

DOUBLE BLAST is not the all-out, career-makeover action comedy that "Apollo" Cook has in him, but it's not bad of its type. If *3 NINJAS KICK BACK* or *THE NEXT KARATE KID* are out, you might give this a whirl. Fans of Cook exclusively are advised, however, to wait for his next movie.

DEADLY TARGET

1994/R/90min

PM Home Video

producers - Joseph Merhi,
Richard Pepin

associate producer - Marta
Merrifield

writers-Michael January, James
Adelstein

director-Charla Driver


featuring-Gary Daniels, Ken
McLeod, Max Gail, Byron Mann,
Aki Aleong, Ron Yuan, Susan
Byun

You may have noticed that our culture is in the midst of a bizarre cool-is-mainstream phenomenon. By this I mean that attitudes, dress, speech, tastes in entertainment, etc. which were once only for the hip elite are now very commonplace. (For example, tattoos, or the music of Nine Inch Nails.) One of the most annoying offshoots of this trend is the antihero-as-hero in films. You could probably go back to MEATBALLS or some other Bill Murray-starring early-eighties fart film as a starting point for this, and trace it through the movies of Rodney Dangerfield, Eddie Murphy, and Schwarzenegger, and throw in SUDDEN IMPACT ("Go ahead punk ...") and the RAMBO films as well. Somewhere along the way, as our culture grew more flip, cynical, and extremely obsessed with not portraying

any emotion other than detached, wacked-out, aloof *coolness* (Ferris Beuller, anyone?), our movie heroes all turned into assholes. In the realm of modern action movies, the lawless, one-liner-spouting jerk is often presented for the audience to root for and identify with, from LETHAL WEAPON 3 all the way down to pictures like DEADLY TARGET.

Gary Daniels is the unlucky sod this time around, preening and shrugging through a non-story in his leather jacket, constantly wishing his uptight superiors would get off his case and let him just chill, or something. DEADLY TARGET (announced as PRIME TARGET) is a slick PM production which puts Daniels in the role of Charlie Prince, a Hong Kong cop (hence the British accent) coming to L.A. in order to capture a Chinese gangster. In what seems to be a simple setup, Prince and L.A. cop Jenson (McLeod) must storm the gangsters' hideout and take their man. Of course, things go terribly wrong, a confusing shootout ensues, and numerous police lives are lost.

Things continue in this vein throughout, with Daniels and McLeod doing everything their own way, and police chief Max Gail bursting blood vessels every time another police cruiser is demolished or an officer is shot full o' lead.



DEADLY TARGET

KEN McLEOD

MAX GALL

SUSAN BYRON

**A DANGEROUS
DRUG LORD**

**A RENEGADE
COP...**

**THE ULTIMATE
SHOWDOWN**

Susan Byun (who looks like an Asian LaToya Jackson) turns up in a superfluous role as Daniels' link to the Chinese underworld, and of course becomes the film's love interest.

Like so many of PM Entertainment's productions, DEADLY TARGET is a slick, urban action melodrama with able craftsmen behind the scenes, but unfortunately with no heart beating at its core. Why is the hero of the film a renegade, flippant jerk? Is it a lazy attempt to copy the popular film heroes of the day? Is Charla Driver (a frequent PM producer but rookie director) lacking in actor-handling skills? Or do we blame Daniels, the pic's star, for wanting to present himself as a cool macho dude?

I don't like knocking professionally-made genre films, simply because so many genre films are *n o t* competently made. But DEADLY TARGET is a royal waste of your time. It furthers the notion that movie heroes must break rules and be jerks to win you over, and does so perhaps only because "that's what all the other action films are doing". It's a boring, unengaging picture, with no heart and very little brain.

DEATH MATCH

1994/R/93min

Monarch Video

executive producers - Robert Nau, Kimberly Wick McClain

producer-Mike Meyer

writers-Curtis Gleaves, Bob Wyatt, Steve Tymon

director-Joe Coppoletta

featuring-Ian Jacklin, Martin Kove, Matthias Hues, Renee Ammann, Steven Leigh, Richard Lynch, Jorge Rivero, Benny Urquidez, Bob Wyatt, Nick Hill, Eric Lee, Carlos Palomino, Tony "The Viking" Halme, Deborah "Medusa" Micelli, Michelle "Mouse" Krasnoo

In a real eye-opening role, Ian Jacklin here presents himself as another in the series of martial artists wrongly typecast as villains early in their careers. Like Norris, Van Damme (in NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER), and more recently, Jerry Trimble, Jacklin appeared as a ruthless, sadistic heavy as he broke into films; like those stars he was stiff and clueless as a bad guy. In KICKBOXER III, Jacklin portrayed David Sloan's prime competitor, and in RING OF FIRE II, he was the hyper-emoting ruler of a wacky underground homeless empire. Both roles were broadly written, and therefore acted in a decidedly non-subtle manner. DEATH MATCH gives Jacklin a makeover of sorts, with a short,

neat haircut that really highlights the softness of his features (basically, he's a prettyboy); his character is not only the hero of the picture but is generally a good guy.

The story is reminiscent of co-star Martin Kove's recent *SHOOTFIGHTER*, but is neither overly complicated enough or overly *uncomplicated* enough to distract the viewer from the action-at-hand; things generally move at an easy-to-digest rate. The virtual galaxy of stars listed above each appear very briefly (making this feel a little like a kickboxing Robert Altman film), and it's a bit weird seeing a famous genre personality in each minor role. That's a tiny beef, though, as *DEATH MATCH*'s only real fault is its super-lethargic climax, which is shockingly unclimactic, given the competent build-up.

John (Jacklin) and Nick (Hill) are down-on-their-luck dockworkers in L.A., who quit their jobs after discovering that their boss, Han (Leigh), is really a gun-running crime lord. John wants to work somewhere honest; Nick is out for easy money. When Nick hears of underground kickboxing matches for cash headed by the rich and mysterious Mr. Landis (Kove), he's in, and he and John split up. John heads "up the coast" (?) looking for work and no sooner does he land a new

job, when he receives a cryptic message from Nick, desperate for help back in L.A.

With the help of a sexy newspaper obituary columnist (Ammann) and a spunky street urchin (Krasnoo), John realizes that Landis had something to do with Nick's strange disappearance, and proceeds to infiltrate the fighting ring to find out what happened. When John earns, then betrays, Landis' trust, the result is a big final showdown aboard an oil tanker.

Peppering this very unoriginal storyline are countless very unnecessary cameo bits, each completely superfluous to the plot. For the sake of completeness, here goes: Steven Leigh (usually Steven Vincent Leigh) as the crime lord who wants to either buy or sell guns (not sure) with Landis; Richard Lynch (*BAD DREAMS*, *PUPPET MASTER III*) as a rival mob boss that gets rubbed out by Landis; fight choreographer Eric Lee as a clerk in a fleabag hotel; Benny Urquidez as himself (!), providing John with some extra training; pro wrestler "Medusa" Micelli as a pitfighter; and Matthias Hues (prominently featured on the video box) as Landis' right-hand thug. Also appearing are the film's co-scripter, Bob Wyatt, in an inconsequential role; and fighters Dino Homsey

(BLOODFIST IV, DEADLY BET, OUT FOR BLOOD) and Marcus Aurelius (FULL CONTACT, RING OF FIRE III) as pitfighters.

The filmmakers had obvious access to name-brand acting talent, but apparently not so with writers: the three cooks in the screenwriting kitchen serve up a plot so derivative as to be numbing. I think that it is beyond obvious for me to write sniggering comments about this being *another* pitfight-to-the-death movie; I've written those things nine dozen times before in these pages. At the risk of asking too much from a humble little production (after all, the pic does exist for the fight scenes), heaven forbid they could come up with something new!

Alright, alright, as previously stated, DEATH MATCH is competent, and easy to watch, and the hero is an admirable one, and I could have recommended the film if it had maintained its pacing and energy level through the climax. Unfortunately, once Jacklin and crew confront the bad guys on that boat, it's like they're rushed through each shot to avoid going into overtime or something. What could have been a nicely staged, dramatic little final battle turns into an amateurish, poorly choreographed laughter. Without divulging too much, there is also an extremely

preposterous Jason-esque series of he's-not-really-dead multiple endings, also handled in ham-fisted fashion.

I will offer credit to Ian Jacklin for his resolute turn as a good-guy protagonist; he's a pleasant, welcome surprise in the first leading role I've seen him in. Hues is able (as usual) in his small role; Kove acts more spaced-out here than in SHOOTFIGHTER and TO BE THE BEST combined (that's a feat--he played a drunk in the latter); Leigh remains a charismatic class act. Others in the cast were not impressive or were not onscreen for very long. Watch this mainly for Jacklin's image turnaround and some tolerable action, but be forewarned of the film's limp conclusion and generally weary trappings.

HARD BOILED

1992/NR/126min

Fox Lorber/Orion Home Video
producers-Linda Kuk, Terence Chang

writer-Barry Wong; story by John Woo

director-John Woo

featuring-Chow Yun-Fat, Tony Leung, Teresa Mo, Philip Chan, Philip Kwok, Anthony Wong, Bowie Lam, Y. Yonemura

review by Rob Hauschild

The long-awaited American release of Hong Kong auteur

John Woo's **HARD BOILED** (alongside releases of his **A BETTER TOMORROW** and **BULLET IN THE HEAD**) has finally come. And while Woo's best movies deliver very little in the martial arts department, they are strung-together spectacles of masterfully staged, hyperkinetic, bullet-riddled action sequences that can, at the very least, be appreciated by martial arts fans for their precise and dance-like action staging, very similar to well-filmed martial arts scenes.

The only wide-release, big-screen exposure most Western fans have had to Woo's crafting was 1993's wasted Van Damme vehicle, **HARD TARGET** (Woo's second "karate" movie, the first being the 1973 chop-socky potboiler **YOUNG DRAGON**). **HARD TARGET** was dampened with a cliched plot, actors not suited for Woo's style of action, and its uncharismatic, split-happy star. Despite the doubled anticipation that Woo's American debut was a martial arts movie, **HARD TARGET** was soft on actual hand-to-hand fighting, moderate with Woo's trademark gunplay, and heavy on Van Damme taking up camera frames to spill out one-liners. Unfortunately, it didn't look or act like a John Woo movie.

Hollywood may have crimped John Woo's sometimes

sinister style, but **HARD BOILED** is his most Americanized Hong Kong movie to date. Perhaps made to show off what he can do with an all-out, suspend-your-disbelief American style action mess (and ensure himself a U.S. address in 1997), the movie has the bare bones structure of any direct-to-video mediocre machismo-fest, but is littered with Woo's revered slow motion mayhem, millions of bullets, and just enough larger-than life bravado characterization so that the movie is not only recognizable and enjoyable to Woo's diehard fans, but acceptable to a new and wider audience.

A band of gunrunners who have an arsenal stored in the basement of a hospital are tracked down by cop/jazz musician Tequila (Chow Yun-Fat), whose partner was killed by the gang. Tequila teams up with a soul-searching undercover cop (Tony Leung), who has infiltrated the gang, and together they take on the massive army of thugs. Aside from a few human moments in Leung's over-the-top performance, and Chow's convincing "average guy in not-so-average situation", which is practically a parody of the suave, cool characters he's played in other Woo movies, **HARD BOILED** is just a few short action and dialogue sequences that waste time until



HARD BOILED

CYNTHIA
ROTHROCK

She's No
Angel
Of
Mercy

GUARDIAN
ANGEL

IMPERIAL ENTERTAINMENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH ALAN B. BURSTEEN PRESENTS A
JOSEPH MERHI/RICHARD PEPIN PRODUCTION OF A RICHARD W. MUNCHKIN FILM
CYNTHIA ROTHROCK "GUARDIAN ANGEL"
STARRING DANIEL McVICAR LYDIE DENIER MARSHALL TEAGUE KEN McLEOD JOHN O'LEARY DALE JACOBY
CASTING BY ADRIANA MICHEL C.S.A. ORIGINAL SCORE BY BRUCE HANIFAN COSTUME DESIGNER LISA DYEHOUSE
PRODUCTION DESIGNER STEVE RAMOS FILM EDITOR JOHN HENSEL DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY GARRET GRIFFIN
CO-PRODUCERS PAUL MASLAK AND DON 'THE DRAGON' WILSON ASSOCIATE PRODUCER SCOTT McABOY
WRITTEN BY JACOBSEN HART PRODUCED BY RICHARD PEPIN AND JOSEPH MERHI
DIRECTED BY RICHARD W. MUNCHKIN
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the incredible 25-minute finale that's an explosion of bullets, broken glass, fire, blood, and babies.

So instead of dwelling on relationships, tough-guy bonding, or showing the "goodness in the gangsters" as he had done in his most successful outings, Woo pulls no punches to make one of the best senseless American action films right behind America's back. With shades of just about any post-1980 brain-dead U.S. action flick, some campy humor and the power to make viewers believe the absurd (something only Hong Kong movies can do as of late), *HARD BOILED* is both an example of how Hollywood product affects the Hong Kong movie industry, and how they chew it up and spit it right back at us ten times better. Hopefully Woo will serve as the scout for many other Hong Kong action directors, some better, some worse, than himself. Just hope those directors bring the *actors* along with them.

GUARDIAN ANGEL

1993/R/96min

Imperial Entertainment

producers - Richard Pepin,
Joseph Merhi

co-producers-Paul Maslak, Don
"The Dragon" Wilson

associate producer - Scott
McAboy

writer-Jacobsen Hart

director-Richard W. Munchkin

featuring - Cynthia Rothrock,
Daniel McVicar, Lydie Denier,
Marshall Teague, Ken McLeod,
John O'Leary, Dale Jacoby, Art
Camacho

I'll dish out a modicum of credit to this Rothrock vehicle for its rather fresh writing. The plot of *GUARDIAN ANGEL* is unique and a little quirky; things that don't normally make their way into the story of a kung fu flick are explored and touched on. The unusual levels that the film works in, coupled with the fact the hero and villain are both women, makes this what I'd call the action equivalent of an old-fashioned Women's Picture. (It's still just a B-picture, though, and does have its limitations, as you'll see.)

Screenwriter Jacobsen Hart (*CYBER TRACKER*) contrives a melodramatic tale centered around cop Christy McKay (Rothrock). McKay is set to be married to a macho policeman who is brutally murdered by a borderline-psycho counterfeiter, Nina (Denier). Nina goes to jail and McKay quits the force after this traumatic event (which is handled pretty well). The scene shifts to six months later, as Nina busts out of prison, going after rich guy Hobbs (McVicar), who may be

involved with her dirty dealings. Hobbs hires McKay to protect him from Nina, creating a neat symmetry to the story. As the pic comes to a close, you've got McKay's vendetta against Nina, Nina's thing against Hobbs, and you're really unsure of Hobbs' loyalties.

What makes the scripting fresh is the way the characters' motivations are handled. Really, just to have motivation is a big plus. McKay is shown to be a rather dependent person who cannot get up off her butt once the man she loved dies. Rothrock has a few good monologues about her character's ability to accomplish anything; these bits are not too maudlin and strike a nice tone. You really see the fire come back to McKay after she realizes it's her old foe Nina she's up against once again. The rich playboy Hobbs also displays some near-human reasons for being a callous ruffian, with his parents dying early, then him getting involved with the weird Nina. It's hard for him to warm up to people in general, and he leads a shallow, skirt-chasing existence because of it. I don't recall another action film which had two well-thought-out female characters, neither of which gets naked or killed. Hart seems to have tried hard to go beyond the cop-kills-

psycho level with his writing, and it's refreshing to see.

This picture was originally announced as BEYOND JUSTICE by PM in early '94. It, like CYBER TRACKER (1994) and RING OF FIRE (1991) was produced by PM Entertainment but released to video thru Imperial; I don't really know why this happens or what it means. Don Wilson (with his manager, Paul Maslak) is credited as a co-producer in the advertising but not onscreen. My man Richard Norton is listed as fight choreographer, the first time I've seen him listed in such a capacity. (Anyone know of any other Norton-choreographed flicks?) Unfortunately, I didn't really observe anything extraordinary about the film's fights. I guess if they were very *poorly* done I would have noticed, so we'll call it a plus if only because it's not a minus per se.

Cynthia Rothrock is well-served by appearing in movies like GUARDIAN ANGEL; it's a welcome break from the sorry likes of LADY DRAGON 2 or HONOR & GLORY. Here, she is one piece in a professional puzzle, as opposed to being the best thespian or film craftsman on the set (as she was on the latter pictures). When well-directed, Rothrock is fine, but she cannot carry a movie. Her clothes, however, are another matter. Somebody manages to

see to it that Cynthia sports a complete, fashionable new "outfit" as many times as possible throughout this and other Rothrock films. Even her grungy jeans - cap - teeshirt getups look like carefully crafted "ensembles" that some "designer" dreamed up. No matter; Rothrock cuts a fine figure regardless of the creativity level of her attire.

Other cast members of note are Dale Jacoby (who can seem like an ass even when he only has 3 lines like he does here) as Nina's bodyguard; frequent PM fight choreographer Art Camacho in a bit as a gang-banger; and the increasingly busy Ken McLeod as a brutish cop. McLeod is very good lately at flipping from hero to villain, and I continue to be impressed with his work. He's good enough to make me wonder if the arrogant, cocksure swagger he adopts in GUARDIAN ANGEL is the "real" Ken McLeod or what; perhaps he is simply of that rare class of kung fu film fighters that can act! The film's director also did PM's OUT FOR BLOOD, DEADLY BET, and RING OF FIRE I and II. Munchkin is an able if unintense director (with a bummer of a name).

Despite everything that's fresh and original (for this genre) in the film's writing, the one aspect of GUARDIAN ANGEL I cannot forgive is the

utter lack of conviction or intensity with which things are carried out. Like PM's DEADLY TARGET (q.v.) or MAXIMUM FORCE (1992), the promise of an intense, nail-biting build-up to a no-holds-barred finale is not kept. Maybe the talent is just not there to sustain a dramatic level of intensity (probably); or maybe the filmmakers are hedging their bets and trying to make the picture a something-for-everyone affair by maintaining a jokey, hip distance from the matters at hand (probably not). Whatever the explanation, GUARDIAN ANGEL stands as yet another well-intentioned B-action programmer that, when it comes right down to it, does not deliver the goods.

BLOODFIST V: HUMAN TARGET 1993/R/84min

New Horizons Video

executive producer - Roger Corman

producer-Mike Elliott

writer-Jeff Yonis

director-Jeff Yonis

featuring-Don "The Dragon" Wilson, Steve James, Denice Duff, Danny Lopez, Yuji Okumoto, Don Stark, Michael Yama, Ron Yuan

First of all, five is too many sequels, even if the films are all related. *Especially* if they're all related. Usually the endless-

sequel thing is associated with junky horror films like the Jason or Freddy flicks (at last count, nine movies for Jason, seven for Mr. Kreuger). "Legitimate" movie series rarely go beyond three films, and the ones that are good can be counted on one hand. (I'm thinking GODFATHER, STAR WARS ... any others?) The producers of good films know that sequels cheapen the legend of the original and are a sleazy way to lure in lazy moviegoers. Exploitation films, however, seem to wear their tenuous sequel status like a badge of honor ... why else would someone produce an EMMANUELLE 5, a CRITTERS 4 or a (gulp) BODY CHEMISTRY 3?? In the BLOODFIST series (yes, number 6 has already been made), the one link the films share is Don Wilson, playing a kickboxer. Not the *s a m e* kickboxer, but a kickboxer nevertheless. The pics have no other continuity than the BLOODFIST name and are no more a "series" than all the Steven Seagal movies. I guess Roger Corman, cynic that he is, believes that fans won't recognize The Dragon's photo on the video box, and need the BLOODFIST name to connect him with the other films he's done. (That's really not even necessary; witness the interchangeable, meaningless titles of Seagal's films.)

Regardless of the title, what really counts is the quality of the picture, and HUMAN TARGET (as I'll refer to it) is a good movie. Corman's Don Wilson pictures are usually the cream of the Concorde/New Horizons crop; no doubt Wilson is The Franchise in Corman's eyes, and Corman wants to keep it that way. The fights (choreographed by Art Camacho) are quick and exciting, and the direction and script of Jeff Yonis are very well done. The story (credited to Rob Kerchner) puts Wilson in his familiar "regular guy thrown into a crazy situation" routine, which works well for him. It's reminiscent of the Hitchcock/Jimmy Stewart films in that the hero is forced to not only find out what's going on and who he can trust, but to prove his own innocence at the same time.

Jim Stanton (Wilson) is in a hospital bed with a gunshot wound to the head, unable to remember anything, and when released in the custody of his wife (Duff), he is immediately thrust into a bizarre set of circumstances. Two Asian thugs (Yuan and Okumoto) try to kill him. His "wife" turns out to be a hooker named Candy, whose pimp (James) may not be all he seems. Clues about Stanton's life suggest that he's a rich high roller, possibly involved in illegal activity. Or

do some government agents just want him to *think* that? The thing Stanton's got that everybody wants turns out to be some plutonium, and people from every side tug at him and claim he's loyal to them only. Yonis' script piles it on thick, but effectively so; right up until the last shot we're still guessing about at least one person's loyalty.

Obviously I don't wish to give any of the film's secrets away, but suffice to say I was definitely impressed by the clever scripting. Stanton and Candy use some ingenious ways of figuring out things like his real address, or who his dirty connections are. Usually, movie characters don't think a step ahead of the viewer; rather, you're often inclined to wonder, "duh, why don't they just do the obvious thing". Here, the characters beat you to the punch, forcing you to think, "hey, that's just what I would have done". Wilson is especially fine in several scenes which require him to play someone's bluff. His character has to find out what a person knows about him, without revealing his own amnesia. Wilson's face steals these scenes, with a little smirk or furrowed brow when he knows he's got something.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Don Wilson has actually gotten better as an

actor as his career has progressed. Yeah, he's still pretty wooden, but his effort in, say, *FUTURE KICK* (1991) compared with this film is no match. His poise in non-fighting scenes has become much more graceful and less awkward. He's no doubt very comfortable in front of the camera by now, and it shows. (Can you say that about Dolph Lundgren?) See this issue's *RING OF FIRE III* review for more on Don Wilson (and more on sequels).

The late Steve James does a classy turn in his small role here, and gets a chance to mix it up with Wilson in a long, exciting fight scene. The good things I've read about James since his death last year may be clouding my judgement, but I'm very impressed with him as a screen presence. There are many actors (especially in action films) who just don't "get it" when it comes to their roles. By that I mean recognizing the limits of the genre you're working in, and aspiring to good work within the context, rather than trying to overreach, or simply maintaining your "cool" persona. James hits just the right note in *HUMAN TARGET*, as he almost always did. The film's advertising billed James beneath Don Stark, who plays an FBI guy in a tiny role, and beneath "IKBA World Kickboxing Champion" Danny

ROGER CORMAN PRESENTS
DON "THE DRAGON" WILSON
W.K.A. WORLD KICKBOXING CHAMPION

HUMAN TARGET

BLOODFIST V

"BLOODFIST V IS DON WILSON'S
GREATEST TRIUMPH!"

—DAVE CATER,
INSIDE KUNG-FU Magazine

NEW HORIZONS
HOME VIDEO

R

Lopez. Lopez is listed in the end credits as simply "security guard" (one of about a dozen), and I'll be damned if I know which one he is. Yuan and Okumoto are both excellent as the two high-profile Asian thugs. Yuan has done similar member-of-an-entourage roles in the past, and was featured as Michael Worth's Olympic kickboxing teammate in *TO BE THE BEST* (1993). Yuan is obviously a skilled fighter; he excels in his several fight scenes. Denice Duff could have been terrible as "The Hooker", but instead plays the role with a bit of humanity and is effective.

Jeff Yonis is probably another of those good young directors that Corman always seems to find. I don't know any of Yonis' other films, so if this is his debut, it's a fine one. His direction and (especially) his writing are tight, economical and intelligent. See, Corman can put together a good film from time to time, even in the kickboxing genre. And *HUMAN TARGET* is a very good kickboxing/action movie. If we could lose the roman numerals in the film's title, I'd be happier, but if Corman can deliver a good picture like this under the brand name heading of some other film, I'll take it.

TO THE DEATH

1991/R/89min

Cannon Video

executive producers - Fida Attieh, Sudhir Pragjee, Sanjeev Singh

producer-Anant Singh

associate producer - Helena Spring

writer-Greg Latter (story by Latter and Darrell James Roodt)

director-Darrell James Roodt

featuring-John Barrett, Michel Qissi, Robert Whitehead, Michele Bestbier, Norman Anstly, Greg Latter, Ted LePlat

Can former kickboxing champ Rick Quinn leave his beloved sport in peace (and in one piece)? Can his evil foe Denard lure him back into the ring for one last grudge match? Will the eccentric and wealthy Mr. LeBraque woo Denard and Quinn into his pitfight-for-cash underground world? Can a movie with these hoary plot elements (and a cheesy rap theme worthy of Vanilla Ice) be any good? No, no, yes, and yes. By the title alone, I was prepared to dis and dismiss *TO THE DEATH*, convinced that it was just another tired and uninspired endless-boring-fight-scene flick. Much to my chagrin, the film betrayed my expectations by using the above-listed plot touchstones rather well, proving that perhaps it's not a new idea that's necessary for success in a

picture like this, merely an old idea done competently.

The very handsomely sculpted John Barrett is kickboxing champ Rick Quinn who, as the picture begins, announces his retirement from the sport to a bunch of very interested media types. (Excuse me? When was the last time you saw any coverage of pro kickboxing on your local TV news?) Quinn's decision infuriates the intense Denard (Qissi), who feels he is owed a shot at the belt. When Quinn's wife turns up dead (a deed he thinks Denard is responsible for), Quinn hits the bottle and hits rock bottom, simultaneously.

The strangely effeminate Mr. LeBraque (Whitehead) rolls into Quinn's life at this point, waving a wad of easy cash for competing in some underground fights. LeBraque had tried unsuccessfully to lure Quinn into this gig at the height of Quinn's career; now, with no pride left and no cash either, Quinn says what the hell. The picture proceeds as Quinn slowly gets back into shape at the expansive, ultra-secure LeBraque compound, preparing for his first series of bouts. Quinn is told that he'll get a bigger bonus for each of four fights he wins in a single night. He is not, however, told that these fights will be ... TO THE DEATH! (It's great when you

can quote the film's title in the synopsis, isn't it?) The logistics of these death matches are actually pretty well handled: the fighters do not beat each other to death, like in some cliched films; what happens is when a guy gets knocked out and stays down, the referee shoots him in the temple. (The *referee*!) Barrett, for his part, plays these sequences very deftly. He lets on that his character is disgusted, shocked and scared; still, he knows that he got himself into this situation; and he's certainly not gonna leave without his money.

After the fights, Quinn comes to realize he's in very deep doo-doo, and is unable to leave the compound, and may very well never leave alive. Meanwhile, LeBraque is busy arranging the perverse, and somewhat obvious finale: a death match between Quinn and his arch-rival Denard. Only problem is, Quinn doesn't know who his opponent will be until he steps in the ring, and doesn't have too much say in who he will or won't fight anyway.

At the risk of being a spoilsport, I will report that the resolution of this setup (one of these guys will defeat the other, and the loser dies, right?) is refreshingly original and took me by complete surprise. Okay, it's not *that* original, but it sure was not what I expected to happen.

The fact that the film builds up to an exciting, unpredictable climax is commendable.

The fact that I enjoyed watching *TO THE DEATH* and can't really put my finger on why is a testament to the filmmakers' level of ability and professionalism. When a film keeps you interested in its story, no matter how hokey the story is, that means somebody's doing their job. When you start noticing things like the editing, the score, and the acting ability of the supporting cast, it's over. Chances are, a film with those drawbacks was made by glorified amateurs or hacks with no clue and no talent. In the realm of B - level action and martial arts movies, *watchability* is a very important thing, and really almost all that a viewer can ask for.

The film was made back in '91, in South Africa, no less, and I believe it got its U.S. video release by Cannon sometime in '93. Director Darrell Roodt also directed the Whoopi Goldberg film *SARAFINA!* (1992), and *PLACE OF WEeping* (1986), both apartheid dramas; so I'll venture a guess that he's a South African director. There are not many familiar faces in the cast, excepting Qissi and Barrett. Whitehead, playing the demented Dominique LeBraque, bugs his eyes out, purses his lips, and is a riot to

watch in action. His French-tinged voice may or may not be his own; it was definitely added in postproduction, by Whitehead himself or another actor, I don't know. Screenwriter Latter plays LeBraque's brother Roger in a delightfully weasely fashion; the blandly pretty Michele Bestbier is just there for show as Dominique's bored wife. Ted LePlat as Quinn's sportswriter buddy and Norman Anstly as Tony the Ref have small, thankless roles.

John Barrett was a co-star (with Keith Vitale) of *AMERICAN KICKBOXER 1* (1991), which I never saw; he also has a bit in "Apollo" Cook's *DOUBLE BLAST*, reviewed in this issue; and was the fight choreographer for *KICK OR DIE* (1987), reviewed in *NDF* #1. Beyond that, I don't know of any other Barrett film appearances, but his work in *TO THE DEATH* certainly shows him to be a very good actor. His rugged, handsome features and deep voice would seem to make him suited for daytime-drama or TV movie roles; he is one of the few genre actors that seems more like an actor than a martial artist. I will definitely have to check out "AK1" and any of his other films. As for Michel "Tong Po" Qissi (who was also the film's fight choreographer), this marks the first thing resembling a

speaking role I've seen him in. Denard is a one-note character, to be sure, and Qissi seems a bit limited in his range because of that. He is most impressive as a physical presence; making Denard a believably brutal, focused fighter. It is perhaps the physicality of Qissi's acting that enabled him to succeed in this role and as Tong Po twice; this may also be the reason he's not carrying movies in leading-man roles like his buddy Jean-Claude Van Damme. Nevertheless, I'd have to say I like, rather than dislike, Qissi as an actor.

And that's a fair way to describe this movie as well: although I didn't love it, I certainly didn't *dislike* it. If you catch TO THE DEATH on video or cable or whatever, expect not to be blown away by an unprecedented array of kickboxing pyrotechnics and unbelievable plot turns; just anticipate a highly watchable (if disposable) piece of B-action entertainment.

CYBORG COP

1993/R/97min

Vidmark Entertainment

executive producers - Avi Lerner, Trevor Short, Joanna Plafsky

producer-Danny Lerner

writer-Greg Latter

director-Sam Firstenberg

featuring-David Bradley, Todd Jensen, Alonna Shaw, John Rhys-Davies, Robert Whitehead, Rufus Swart, Ron Smerzak, Steven Leader

First of all, the guy is a cyborg DEA agent, not a cyborg cop, OK? And secondly, the star of the film is not the title character -- our buddy David Bradley's *brother* is, the mandroid referred to in the film's name. Actually, the title threw me off a little as the picture really is not what I expected. I was anticipating a high-tech, blue-light-soaked ROBOTERMINATORCOP-type of urban crime saga. What CYBORG COP really turns out to be is an odd mad doctor-RAMBO-Jimmy Cliff mixture, very cheaply executed, and with another lumpy "star" turn by David Bradley.

Bradley and director Firstenberg, the team responsible for BLOOD WARRIORS (1993), apparently headed to South Africa for its cheap locale and free scenery, having exhausted the resources of Indonesia in their last outing. There are a lot of British and French accents hanging about the film, and co-star Whitehead (who was the French LeBraque in the aforementioned TO THE DEATH) speaks with a lovely German lilt. The filmmakers were obviously in a hurry to get the

thing done, as most of the "special" effects (I use the term loosely) are post-production doctorings of the film on the quality level of a DARK STAR. The pacing and direction of some scenes are also very wanting, with just absolute amateurish results that seem unlikely coming from a veteran hack like Firstenberg. From the title right on down, CYBORG COP is a confused mess with very little to like.

Jack and Philip (Bradley and Jensen) were DEA-agent-partner-brothers a long time ago, until Jack fatally shot the psycho son of a wealthy man and was forced to quit the agency. Phil is still fighting the good fight though, and has to serve one more "routine mission" (which basically means "deadly mission" when a character in a movie says it), then it'll be time to settle down with his newly adopted son (Leader). The mission is some sort of seek-and-destroy thing on the tropical island of St. Keith (?), wherein a bunch of guys in a helicopter land in a jungle and storm a jungle fortress. Only problem is, it's a setup, and all Philip's buddies are killed, and Phil is left for dead.

Once Jack hears of this, it's off to sunny St. Keith to search for his brother and bring him back, dead or alive. An awkward meet-cute has Jack

run into an uppity reporter (Shaw), who happens to work for the man whose son Jack killed back in the day, and who thinks Jack is "up to something", and decides to follow him around engaging him in "cute" little bickering the whole time. After the film's MISSING IN ACTION II-esque opening, this abrupt shift into ROMANCING THE STONE territory is clumsy and disconcerting; one minute Jack is intense about finding his bro', the next he's playing screwball comedian to an ersatz Kathleen Turner.

John Rhys-Davies provides the plot's next twist as we are introduced to his jolly-but-sinister mad scientist character, Dr. Kessel. Kessel is building cyborgs to sell to evil governments for use as assassins; the military-trained mind and body of Philip seem perfect for his experiments. So far there is only one completed cyborg (Swart), a decidedly unimposing janitor-looking fellow. Apparently the doctor arranged the DEA setup in order to have fresh body parts to toy with.

After encountering a reggae band in a dive bar (filler alert!) and questioning the local morgue's wacky Rasta-mon attendant (local color alert!); Jack finally winds up confronting Dr. Kessel and his lone cyborg, along with the

newly-activated cyborg cop version of Philip; showdown ensues.

The frequent shifts in tone of this film are jarring and more than a little laughable; surprisingly, it's the RAMBO-styled jungle combat scenes which work the best. The opener, flashing back to Jack's career-ending murder, is hokey; Philip's thing with adopting the kid is contrived; his covert mission is the only point of the picture that made me sit up and take note. Some large-scale explosive effects are well-utilized (they look especially good in the context of the film's general cheapness), and the plenitude of rapid cuts, hand-to-hand fights and shootouts are also efficiently handled. Unfortunately, this is about a 10-minute sequence and the pic goes steadily downhill thereafter. Having Shaw's reporter character connected to Jack's former life is cheesy; their cutesy, annoying "flirting" is god-awful. The cyborg angle, which is what probably got Joe Renter to pick the movie off the shelf, is really ignored until the final third of the film; even then it's done in a lazy, couldn't-care-less manner. The supposedly metallic "cyborg" parts are obviously slip-on rubber sleeves; they bend like Ultraman's elbows. One lame effect has a guy sticking a live

wire into the cyborg's eye ... this is suggested by a badly superimposed "spark" obviously added at some later point. The hurry-it-up finale (when it finally comes) lamely attempts to tie up all of the various disparate elements into a 30-second wrap-up, attempting (again?) the multiple-ending Jason Voorhees thing.

The fact that David Bradley is not the Cyborg Cop is a cop-out but not a new one; Don Wilson was not the CYBER TRACKER; Billy Blanks was not the TC 2000 in each of those movies. Rather, the "star" is permitted to maintain his star persona by playing his usual heroic role, and the promise of the title is fulfilled by having the star *fight* a Cyber Tracker or whatever. Bradley, wearing the same cowboy boots, tight black jeans, and muscle tee as in every other movie, comes off as out-of-it as ever. I can't fault Bradley for being unprofessional; he can read his lines OK and doesn't trip over stuff. I don't think he's a bad actor, just a clueless one. As for the film's other participants, scripter Latter wrote TO THE DEATH; Avi Lerner was executive producer on Bradley's AMERICAN NINJA 3 and 4 outings. John Rhys-Davies is best known for his roles in RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK and its LAST CRUSADE

sequel. This is the first time I've seen Alonna Shaw, who is poor in a poorly written part; she also appears to have fake boobs.

CYBORG COP ultimately put me in the mood of FROM HELL IT CAME or ZOMBIE or some other cheap, tropical-island-set horror opus. It's pretty stupid, with an unappealing star, and features a wacky monster. Unless you are a genre completist or (gulp!) a David Bradley fanatic, I recommend you not bother with this one.

IMMORTAL COMBAT

1993/R/109min

A-Pix Entertainment

producer-Daniel A. Neira

writers-Daniel A. Neira, Robert Crabtree

director-Daniel A. Neira

featuring-Roddy Piper, Sonny "J.J." Chiba, Meg Foster, Tiny Lister, Woon, Kim Morgan Greene, Deron McBee

review by Rob Hauschild

Ex-pro wrestler Roddy Piper made a post-WWF B-movie name for himself in the sci-fi genre (THEY LIVE, HELL COMES TO FROGTOWN), and is now headlining in quickie action productions like BACK IN ACTION and this poorly made clunker. How well he's accepted by martial arts fans is

anybody's guess though, because he's not a martial artist. His fighting knack, although grand in a barroom-brawl sense, is missing any style and should delegate him to second billing status when teamed with a Billy Blanks or other trained, video-friendly martial artist. But Piper has a lot of cheesy charisma, is a memorable tough guy, and like it or not, gets the job done by acting his ass off in that blue-jeans-and-t-shirt sorta way. Piper's a welcome, unconventional change from the greased up, mugging pretty boys that clutter most mindless action movies.

IMMORTAL COMBAT teams Piper with legendary Japanese martial artist Sonny Chiba, now billed as Sonny "J.J." Chiba (his character is named J.J. in the movie). Chiba's own career spans four decades and includes hundreds of movies, the majority of them in the martial arts genre. Best known in America for starring in THE STREETFIGHTER, its sequels and others (usually playing a likeable, wisecracking villain) during the 1970's, Chiba's screen presence is by far that of one of the most nasty, dirty and controlled fighters you will ever bear witness to. He's still a star in Japan, and is obviously trying to spread his popularity back overseas. Incidentally, rumor has it Sonny won't even

talk about IMMORTAL COMBAT. And with just cause, because it's a choppy, sloppy, thrown-together embarrassment. The movie is technically competent enough so that its failure can't be blamed on money, acting talent, or locale, but on poor writing, directing and total creative laziness. A common formula, routine fight scenes and downright goofy plotting kill a concept that was three rewrites away from success.

Piper and Chiba star as two renegade cops hot on the trail of the people who killed one of their fellow officers and shot Chiba during a bust. Chiba stays in the states to heal while Piper's hunt leads him to a tropical island and a chemical corporation where some throwaway characters plot to create an army of indestructible karate zombies with a concoction whipped up using a local Mayan-like recipe. Chiba eventually joins the action for the last half-hour dressed like a ninja and carrying an arsenal of weapons and gadgets. Chiba has very slim fight time onscreen, and uses samurai swords and shuriekens in lieu of his limbs. He does prove, however, that he's as strong as ever at 60+ years in age, with some fluid tosses, tumbles, jumps, and manic swordplay. With even some average material (and if

he learns English), Chiba could quickly get on the comeback trail.

The movie has a somewhat decent premise, certainly a fresh concept for the genre, but the lousy execution of even the most basic fight sequences strikes out any hopes of seeing its potential. The viewer is never filled in on what's going on, and even the simplest characters are defined poorly. Sometimes the story is told in flashback, at other times characters have premonitions of future events, all with very little, if any, explanation. A concept that could have been a hit in the hands of the right creative team (preferably a throwback to old-fashioned mad-scientist pics with some explosive fighting and action), IMMORTAL COMBAT pans out as nothing more than a slow-paced, talk-filled bore that delivers very few fighting set pieces while concentrating on thin sub-plotting, flat jokes and countless scenes of characters wandering around the island setting.

It's a shame to see on of the genre's most prolific stars of the past, and one of its newer, not yet proven members reduced to such generic, career-freezing slop.

RING OF FIRE III: LION STRIKE

1994/R/91min

PM Home Video

producers - Richard Pepin,
Joseph Merhi

associate producer - Scott
McAboy

writer-Joseph John Barmettler
Jr. (story by Art Camacho and
Don Wilson)

director- Rick Jacobson

featuring-Don "The Dragon"
Wilson, Bobbie Phillips, Morgan
Hunter, C. Nelson Norris, Robert
Costanzo, John Del Regno, Tim
Baker, Art Camacho, Jonathan
Wilson

A nicely done, "A"-looking picture, the ridiculously titled RING OF FIRE III: LION STRIKE (I feel foolish just typing it!) boasts some very nice action setpieces but a real groaner of a story. Unlike the other Don Wilson movie reviewed this issue (BLOODFIST V), this film features a very unclever script, clumsy plotting, and characters who do things that would never happen in "real life". The story (by Wilson and fight choreographer Camacho) is ambitious, and it's hard to find fault in a circumstance like this: those involved probably tried hard to make the story timely, dramatic, topical, relevant, and exciting. The only problem is they may have aimed higher than their collective abilities could carry them. (Which raises a good point: Is a film a

success if it has low aspirations but nails them dead-on? Or must it try to transcend its genre, which only a tiny number of movies ever do?) The bottom line is, RING OF FIRE III has good ideas that are carried out in a ham-fisted, unsubtle way that makes them seem like bad ideas.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. As an action movie (which is no doubt how the film's creators would have it judged), this movie is pretty good. The big-scale stunts, chases and explosions all reek of good production values (i.e. money), Camacho's fight scenes are admirable and plentiful, and the action is photographed and edited crisply. Those of you watching for those aspects alone will want to snap this up without hesitation; however be aware that it's far from The Total Movie Experience.

The film does keep the continuity of the RING OF FIRE "series", as Wilson plays kung-fu doctor Johnny Wu in all three films; the clumsiness and inappropriateness of this film's title gives one pause: there is *no* fighting in any ring in the film (as there was in the first two); what they intended to conjure up with LION STRIKE is anyone's guess. (A while back, a PM staffer told me the pic was to be called just LION STRIKE; as they were keeping the Wu character but ditching

DON "THE DRAGON" WILSON

The Newest
Breed of Evil
is Born
in the
Ring of Fire

RING OF FIRE 3

HEAD STRIKE

the RING OF FIRE name; apparently that was incorrect or maybe they had a change of heart. They also must have had trouble deciding on a "3" or a "III" as I received promotional materials with the title written both ways. The title on the movie itself says "III".)

Johnny Wu is having a hard day at the emergency room with a bloody Mafia-boss-escape-attempt and a fight with some surly patients in the pic's first few minutes. In order to get some R & R, the doc heads up to his buddy's mountain cabin with son Bobby (Jonathan Wilson, The Dragon's real-life son) for some trout fishing. Along the way, the Doc assists an accident victim and winds up switching bags with him; the guy gets Wu's medical bag and Wu gets some stolen cash and a computer disk. The disk contains the distribution plans for the mob's proposed underground sale of Russian nuclear arms, apparently the coming trend in contraband. The mob boss (Costanzo) dispatches his head crony (the spastic Del Regno) along with a cold-blooded Russkie (Norris) to find Wu and get the disk back. Once all parties converge on the secluded cabin, Wu, along with curvy Kelly the park ranger (Phillips), decide to risk their lives and fight the goons to the death rather than just

give 'em the disk and be done with it.

When simplified, the plot seems pretty economical, but it's not: much emphasis is given to the forming of a "Global Mafia", and the sequences depicting an international organized crime summit are laughable -- five people are at the meeting. The American mobsters specifically all act like low-rent, PULP FICTION-type thugs; not super-powerful, arms-dealing brainiacs. Del Regno as Vinny the Wacky Hitman turns up the overacting juice about a million percent; and Costanzo's character is a big buffoon when it gets right down to it. C. Nelson Norris as "Boris", the icy-cold Russian Terminator, does a good turn and seems to be a good fighter, but is playing a very stereotypical character. As for Wilson's end of the story ... why doesn't he just GIVE THE DISK BACK the minute he knows they want it? No dad would jeopardize his son's life by engaging in a cat-and-mouse affair like the Doc does here. Plus, Wu sure kills a lot of people in cold blood for someone supposedly on the side of freedom and justice. Why not take a page from Wilson's other films and make his character unaware of why the mob's after him? Or make Wu a former CIA guy with a personal interest in keeping the

world nuke-free? As the film plays, you just don't buy the character's level of risk and involvement for something he has no stake in.

Jonathan Wilson is pretty unpolished as an actor; he winds up calling attention to himself and diminishing the sympathy we have for his character. As park ranger Kelly, Bobbie Phillips has the chance to kickbox some poachers, flirt with Dr. Wu, and befriend little Bobby. Phillips (TC 2000, BACK IN ACTION) makes the best of the part and is one of the film's assets. The curiously named C. Nelson Norris is the pic's other standout in his supporting role.

Jacobsen Hart, noted elsewhere as the writer of GUARDIAN ANGEL and others, is credited here with "Additional Dialogue"; he (with Paul G. Volk) also gets credit for "Additional Directing", whatever that means. Director Rick Jacobson was the fight choreographer on the first RING OF FIRE; he also directed FULL CONTACT and DRAGON FIRE.

I was intrigued to note that one Timothy Baker had a tiny role in the film in addition to serving as a stunt player. A collection of press releases disguised as a magazine called INSIDE KUNG-FU PRESENTS MARTIAL ARTS MOVIES '94 featured in its December '94 issue a gushing, glowing feature

on the making of LION STRIKE written by ... Timothy Baker. Mr. Baker probably just forgot to mention that he was *in* the film he was so anxious to hype. That bit of conflict-of-interest promotion ranks with Paul Maslak, Don Wilson's manager, providing a "critical" quote on the video box of BLACK BELT (which actually happened).

Cronyism aside, RING OF FIRE III does hold up as a well-directed, tight, exciting action picture. However, its pretensions at topicality, while respectable, are enough to set your eyes a-rollin'. Not enough for me to try and dissuade you from seeing the film though, as it is a better-than-average entry in the Don Wilson oeuvre.

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