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IMPACT

FROM ACTION CINEMA TO CULT TELEVISION

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This month Hong Kong: Hollywood takes a look at one of our favourite American action movie directors, Isaac Florentine. He's the man responsible for a number of *Impact's* favourite HK styled Hollywood productions, including *US Seals 2*, *Special Forces*, *Cold Harvest*, *Savate*, *WMAC Masters* and *Power Rangers*. He's worked with Gary Daniels, Michael Worth, Shannon Lee, Scott Adkins, Dolph Lundgren, Antonio Sabato and many others. In this multi-part interview we sit down with him for a most informative and in-depth chat...

isaac florentine

renaissance man

Impact: Isaac, thanks for taking the time to talk with us. Can you provide a little background information about yourself so we can understand more about the man behind the movies?

Isaac Florentine: I was born in Israel, in Tel Aviv. My parents were Jewish Greek survivors of the holocaust who came to Israel shortly after World War Two and began their lives anew. My elder brother and I grew up in a pretty cosmopolitan atmosphere, most of the Greek Jews spoke a Spanish dialect, called Ladino, as well as French and then at school we spoke Hebrew. Israel was a real melting pot of multi-cultural newcomers at that time, and I think it really broadened my mind and helped me to be very eclectic and open to a wide range of influences.

Which began first: your love for movies or martial arts?

My love of films came from my mother and my brother. During the late '60s and early '70s, I watched American, Italian, French, every

kind of film. When I was ten I saw Sergio

Leone's classic *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*, and was hooked on films

from then. I first heard about martial arts in about 1967, when I read that you could kill a man with a single

blow and about the same time James Bond *You Only Live Twice* was released. The martial arts sequences

for the film had been co-ordinated by the legendary Don Draeger and featured

real life Karate practitioners performing some pretty

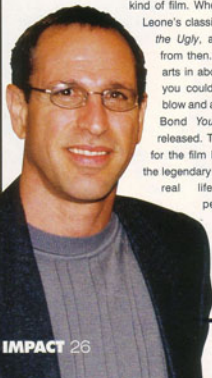
amazing feats. I went back and saw the film

four more times and tried to absorb what I

saw. I was interested in the martial arts by now

and a few years later the Tokyo Circus came through Israel and featured a Karate demo which got me excited again. Shortly afterwards, a Dojo opened nearby. I wanted to train but had a couple of obstacles to overcome. My parents were against it as they thought it was too violent but my constant nagging finally overcame that, then when they gave me permission I was told by the Dojo that I was too young! Back then Karate training was really tough, so I started studying Judo and eventually moved onto Karate, starting with Kyokushinkai. A little later the Dojo switched to Shito Ryu under Hiroshi Koriyama, then in 1975 a high ranking Shito Ryu Karateka visited us and changed the way we looked at the martial arts. His name was Tamas Weber, he was a former French Foreign Legion officer who believed in efficiency in close combat. In 1976 we changed instructors and were taught a blend of Goju Kai and the Japanese version of Muay Thai.

Shortly afterwards I was drafted to do my three years mandatory military service in the IDF, where I was stationed in Haifa and continued my martial arts training, and in 1979 I received my First Dan from Tamas Weber. At that time, there were only a handful of Black belts in the country and we all knew each other. I began working as an instructor during my time in the Army and, after leaving, I was able to open my first Dojo at a major sports association building. I was given a hall that had last been used by the Israeli Olympic Weightlifting team who had been killed by terrorists during the 1972 Munich Olympics. This was to be my main Dojo until I left for America ten years down the road. During my time in Israel I was involved in all aspects of Karate, from teaching, training, advising Israel's only martial arts magazine and sitting on the board of the Israeli Karate Federation. When I came to America I stopped teaching but have never given up my training. I really believe in its goal and purpose. According to Gichin Funakoshi "The ultimate aim of Karate lies not in victory or defeat but in the perfection of character of its participants". I never really looked at Karate as a sport, I was more interested in its efficiency and history. I do not put real Karate in my films, I think it's too boring and I do not





put 'flashy' movie fighting into my Karate training. I try my best to keep them separate. I think this has helped me with films, I know what's real and what's not. I know that a film is entertainment.

When did you first start to combine your martial arts with movie making?

At first I didn't really think you could combine martial arts with film as a real genre. I saw *The Mechanic* with Charles Bronson and it's a great film. It features a scene with Tak Kubota in it. Then I saw *Billy Jack* with Tom Laughlin and I still had reservations. I had also seen a few Chinese martial arts movies but found them too unrealistic with people flying through the air. It wasn't until my Sensei recommended I watch a film called *Fist of Fury/The Chinese Connection*, that everything changed. I can remember it like it was yesterday. Seeing Bruce Lee in action changed the way I looked at everything, Karate, my life and my goals. In October 1973, just before the Yom Kippur war, *Enter The Dragon* was released, and like so many others I tried hard to imitate Bruce. I was a Green belt back then, copying his stances, his techniques and combinations. I even made my first film on an 8mm camera with a tea trolley as a camera dolly. I realised filmmaking was hard but rewarding and we made another.

When I went to film school at Tel Aviv University, I was regarded as the Black Sheep. Everybody considered martial arts and action films to be junk. They were all trying to be the next Ingmar Bergman or Fellini, and here was I running a Karate school and professing my love for commercial films. Once we had an assignment to write about the ten best films we'd ever seen, while everyone else was listing *Citizen Kane* and so on, my list contained *The Good, The Bad & The Ugly*, *Goldfinger* and *Enter The Dragon*.

The professor who set the assignment called me out to read my list and I went up prepared to die like a man for my choices in front of

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the other students. Afterwards, he complimented me on my honesty and for the way I had structured my work.

In the second year only ten percent of the students were accepted into production studies, making films not just talking about them. I had made several 8mm films during the first year and, action or not, they were considered cinematic enough and I was accepted to be part of the production course. At this point people began to judge me according to my character and my work and when I went on to win prizes with the first Israeli action movie *Farewell Terminator*, the Bohemians were truly proud of me and considered me one of their own.

Who were some of your early martial arts heroes?

My Karate heroes would include Mas Oyama, Bill Wallace, Dominique Vallera and Chuck Norris for their fighting techniques, but also Norris for his positive and inspiring personality. I also had high regard for Yoshinao Nanbu, for his style, traditional in spirit but eclectic and geared for fighting while retaining elegance and a variety of kicking techniques. I used to think of him as the European Bruce Lee.

When it comes to films, I have to admit that I would watch Hong Kong movies and steal the techniques for use in the dojo, so I preferred films that had reality-based techniques. I was a big fan of John Liu, he had wonderful kicks and a great look, I used to call him the Chinese Allan Delon. I admired Yasuki Kurata's look and especially his sidekick. I also admired Richard Norton who I first saw in *Force Five*. I truly feel he never received the recognition he deserved.

Of course Bruce Lee was one of my biggest influences and no matter how much or what people have said about him, it will never be enough. He was a truly unique individual and his tremendous

contributions to both martial arts and martial arts movie making is beyond any words. He affected the world like a stone being thrown into a pond causing a ripple effect. First martial arts, then movies and then pop culture. He was the first third world hero! He was the reason that martial arts became such a worldwide phenomena. If not for Bruce Lee I don't think I would be doing what I'm doing, I don't think many people would be doing the things they are doing, that there would be no *Impact* magazine. Bruce Lee's contribution to pop culture was his impact on the world.

The first of your films to garner attention was the wonderfully named *Farewell Terminator* which won a number of awards at various film festivals. What can you tell us about it?

Farewell Terminator was my final project as a film student at Tel Aviv University. I had co-written the script with a fellow student who was also a Black Belt, we got the go ahead from the University but needed more funding. The ministry of Education & Culture gave grants to films so I camouflaged the script as I knew they wouldn't support an action film. The script they saw was very innocent, a line here and there that says 'they fight', when in reality I knew that fight might last two minutes on screen. I went to Jerusalem to meet the ministry and very quickly it became apparent that they wouldn't support me, they considered action films to be junk. Luckily one of my professors asked the committee to look at some of my previous work before making a final decision. They eventually agreed to support me. So I had \$6000 and the University equipment to make my film.

The film is a post apocalyptic actioner, and combines elements from the various genres I liked, spaghetti westerns, martial arts, *film noir* etc. It was shot mostly with a Bolex, which is a little 16mm camera with a spring that limits your shot to a maximum twenty-six seconds. I used students from my dojo along with three professional theatre actors but I was looking for a Lee Van Cleef kind of actor to play the villain and they needed to be able to fight. In the end I had to play the role myself. I felt very self-conscious in front of the camera, some people can act, I don't think I can. It took me nearly two years to complete the movie as we had a very irregular shooting schedule.

When we finally showed the film to the Committee, they weren't very happy but it was too late. The film was complete and with a running time of twenty-eight minutes I submitted it to a festival. Most of the films were pseudo-intellectual or overly artistic and by chance mine was shown last at the point where the audience and the judges needed a break from the depressing dramas they had been watching. So on comes this martial arts flick that doesn't really take itself too seriously, and they loved it! I still didn't think it would win anything, so had told my wife that she should go sight-seeing with her brother, who was visiting from America, rather than attend. Five days later they announced the winners of the festival at the prestigious Tel Aviv museum, to my surprise the film took home awards in five categories (including Best Director and Best editing) as well as the first prize.

The Israeli film industry isn't very big so even a film like mine winning awards received a lot of exposure. I appeared on TV to talk about the film and, while some people accused my film of having political messages in it, I just told them that all I'd wanted was to make an

action film. The Ministry of Education also announced to everybody that they were proud to have assisted in the production of such a film. The film was screened regularly in Tel Aviv and it was interesting to judge the reactions of people to a 'home produced' action film like this, and nice to have people tell me that I'd beaten the establishment by directing an action film. I think it was the first and possibly the last action film to be made in Israel. Years later, when I watched the film again, I saw how amateurish and bad it was, it seems almost laughable but that was where it all began.

How long did it take you to get your first opportunities in Hollywood?

Despite the success of *Farewell*, things weren't really moving in the direction I wanted them to go. Everybody considered the film to have been a fluke and I realised that I wouldn't have the opportunity to make more action films in Israel. I was still teaching Karate and, while I loved the training and still do, I was tired of the teaching and the politics and bickering that was the Israeli Karate Association. I was becoming a Karate bureaucrat and that wasn't what I wanted to be. I felt that I'd reached my limit with Karate and wanted to try making films in America. Now these were 'B' films, not 'A' films I was talking about making, even though it was a dream, it was still based on reality. My wife thought I was a little crazy for wanting to make the move, and it was also going to be a big upheaval for her, she had come here from America as a student and fell in love with the country and stayed, here I was asking her to move back. Eventually she agreed and at the end of 1988 we moved out to California, which was a major culture shock for both of us. The first two years were very tough as I had to learn the way to do things in America. I had to learn the way the industry works. While I'd made a film, I hadn't really worked in the industry before.

Before I left Israel, an Israeli film distributor had given me the number of the actor Paul Smith (*Midnight Express*, *Red Sonja*, *Dune*). The moment my wife and I met with Paul and his wife, he took us in and did everything he could to help me. He introduced me to a number of producers and most of them had the same reaction, "You never did a feature in your life. You're a foreigner, what makes you think that you can make American movies?" My reaction to this was that action films transcend any racial or ethnic boundary and it made me even more determined to make it. So I started work from the bottom as a PA on some low budget movies. Paul introduced me to one producer named Ronnie Hadar who became a close friend. He saw my short film, had faith in me and helped me on the way to achieving my goals. On my second film with him he let me be the fight choreographer and second unit director.

The first film of yours I ever saw was *Desert Hawk/Desert Kickboxer*, which starred former *Superboy* John Haymes Newton. It's an interesting film, incorporating a lot of martial arts action and philosophy with Native American mysticism. How did you develop this project?

I'd been trying to be a director for two years and realised I needed the right script. I had been working on this idea based on the first man to popularize *Savate* in the 19th Century. He'd been in Mexico in the late 1800s and I thought it would make a very interesting project. I actually managed to hire a writer to work with me on a script. At the time it was very hard to sell the idea of a western, especially with me as director, so I put the script on the shelf. After reading an article about an Indian tracker who worked for the US Customs Department I worked with another friend on the script and it became *Desert Hawk*.

I also did some work with Panther Videos, about ten tapes that gave

me something else with my name on the credits to show people. At the same time I got an introduction to Menahem Golan and his partner Ami Artzi. Menahem saw *Farewell Terminator* and liked it and he's always been somebody prepared to give chances. When I gave him the script for *Desert Hawk* he said I could direct it if I brought a name actor to the project. I suggested Paul Smith and Menahem agreed but only gave me a minuscule budget and a 16-day shooting schedule. HBO liked what they saw and bought the rights for the film. Unfortunately they changed its name to *Desert Kickboxer*.

Your two main actors were Haymes Newton and Michael Foley who played the villain. How did you find them to work with?

John had trained in Kyokushinkai for a few years and trained very hard to bring up his skill level prior to filming. He worked very hard on this film with the schedule we had, which impressed me, as did his humbleness. I had met Michael on another low budget film that was never completed, I thought he had a great look and the right moves for a villain. Gary Daniels also tried out for the role, but I feel he has the same qualities as Chuck Norris in that he's a good guy, and you get that feeling from him, so he just wouldn't come across as a bad guy. Michael, with his steel blue eyes, square jaw and that ironic smile, could really come across as a bad guy.

He worked with me as fight choreographer on the film. We faced a few hurdles and there was no time for really complicated fight scenes so we went simple but powerful. John wasn't really used to screen fighting but he tried his best and Michael did a lot of the flashy stuff, including reactions to make John look better. Our biggest hurdle was the lack of an experienced director, namely me! The choreography was quite easy for me because Isaac the martial artist could communicate very easily with Isaac the director but I wasn't 100% happy. I fell into the trap of shooting according to the way the American industry expects you to shoot fights, when I should have followed my instincts. Something I would like to talk about later.





You were the fight choreographer for *American Cyborg: Steel Warrior* with Joe Lara and Britkicker John Ryan before moving onto TV with the launch of *Power Rangers*. How did you get involved in these projects?

American Cyborg was fun. Boaz Davidson, the director, is one of the funniest people in the world, he's so sharp. It was sometimes hard to work because we were laughing so much. We shot the film in Israel too, so it was nice to be paid to go home and interesting to see how limiting it was to just be fight choreographer after directing even a small film. I wanted to direct more films, not just be the choreographer. Joe Lara was a pleasure to work with and John Ryan, who played the Cyborg, is a true gentleman and a superb martial artist too.

As for *Power Rangers*, Ronnie Hadar was producing the pilot for the show while I was in talks to do another movie, only for it to fall through at the last moment. Saban had got the green light to do the show by now and asked me to be involved, but I didn't really want to work in TV at the time.

Ronnie sent me to Cannes to head a live action demo team to promote the series, upon my return they talked to me again about working on the show. There had been talk of bringing in a team from Japan to handle the action and drama but Ronnie and another producer, Jonathan Tzacher, suggested that I could do the job as I was both a film-maker and a martial artist and Saban trusted their judgment.

Looking at the footage it was very obvious, the Japanese footage was stylish and covered the fights subjectively, while the American

footage was 'American' style and tried to be too realistic. The fight choreographer they hired was good but hadn't been given any control over the editing or camerawork so his action wasn't coming across. I shot a test fight and Saban liked what they saw. The show hadn't aired yet, so we were given pretty much *carte blanche* to do what we wanted actionwise. Jonathan encouraged me to try new things and it was a very exciting period, choreographing and shooting everyday, trying to emulate Hong Kong style action long before anybody else in Hollywood seemed to know what it was. This was 1993, six years before *The Matrix*. This experience gave me a lot of mileage as a director and knowledge about how to shoot and choreograph action. As they say, "Knowledge is power!"

After a season and a half I left to shoot *Savate* with Oliver Gruner, but I came back to serve as the main director for the series while Koichi Sakamoto and Alpha Stunts handled the action. This is how I met Yuji Noguchi, who I've continued to work with on a number of projects. I stayed with *Power Rangers*, directing between six to ten episodes a season from 1993-2001, about seventy episodes in total. I think the show has been one of the best kept secrets on TV, adults never really caught onto it and dismissed it as a children's show but for myself, Koichi and Yuji it was the best training ground for us. Where else could you get a script a few days before shooting, and shoot a twenty four minute episode that combined action, comedy, drama, and SFX? It gave us all an opportunity to experiment, to learn how to work fast and what worked and what didn't. The experience we gained from this show has been a big plus for all of us. I look at *Power Rangers* as the equivalent of a film-making dojo, we tried out and perfected new techniques before taking them out into competition (the feature film market) where we scored with the techniques we'd learned on TV.

In the second part of this interview, Isaac discusses working with fan favourites Oliver Gruner on *Eastern-Western Savate*, the post apocalyptic spaghetti western that is *Cold Harvest*, Shannon Lee, *US Seals 2* and much more. Only in *Impact*.

MIKE LEEDER

