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IMPACT

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In the second part of our exclusive in-depth interview with Isaac Florentine, he discusses his work on such projects as *WMAC Masters*, *Power Rangers* and *Savate*.

isaac florentine

renaissance man

Your next movie was the stylish spaghetti Eastern Western known variously as *Savate/The Fighter* starring Olivier Gruner, Ashly Lawrence from *Hellraiser*, Marc Singer and R Lee Emery. What was the genesis of the film?

I'd originally come up with the idea about three years before we made the film. I had met a producer and given him the script to look at, he'd optioned it but a year passed before he called me and said that he was ready to make the film, I was working on *Power Rangers* at the time. I was very excited until I met the producer and his lawyer, they explained that they merely wanted to buy the script from me and replace me with a more experienced director. I was very upset and told them that I had developed that script as a project for myself as director and stormed out of their office. The next day they called me and told me to get ready for pre-production. I informed the *Power Rangers* producers that I would have to leave so I could make the film and then it was their turn to be angry with me! Haim Saban called me at home and asked me to stay on the show but I had made up my mind to leave. Of course I did come back to the show later on.

They brought in Jeff Pruitt, who was working with Koichi at the time, to replace me on the show. Back then Jeff was one of the few Western action co-coordinators who understood Hong Kong style action, you have to remember that back then, before *Matrix*, we were looked at almost like there was something wrong with us for wanting to shoot action the Eastern way as opposed to the Hollywood standard.

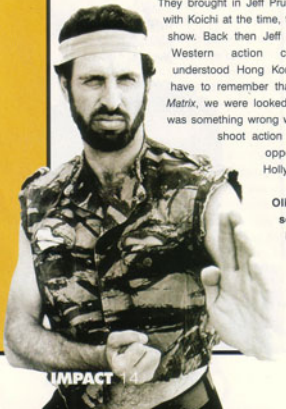
Olivier Gruner is something of an interesting performer, he is such a capable martial artist but very rarely gets to let loose on screen, a few

people have told me that he doesn't like to get involved in complex choreography? Is this true, how did you find working with him?

Olivier is a very good guy, he has this very macho image and although he tries to hide it, he's a very sensitive fellow. He's a hard worker and a thinker. He'd made three films before we started on *Savate* and had become used to the American way of shooting action, with masters and coverage. He wanted his fights to be short, sharp, powerful and realistic while I was pushing for more spectacular fight scenes, especially after I saw how good his martial arts ability is. He has trained with the best of the best, he studied with Jean Pierre LAVORATO, the legendary Dominique Vallera in France and with Benny Urquidez at the Jet Centre in Los Angeles. I think it took a bit of time to gain each other's trust but once we got to know each other we got along very well.

The film also saw you working with Koichi Sakamoto of Alpha Stunts fame. Was he assisting with the choreography or there just as a stunt performer? I also see the film features several performers who would later play roles in *WMAC Masters*, how much input did you have over the casting of the supporting players as well as the main cast?

I had first met Koichi when I was working on *Power Rangers*, he came in with Jeff Pruitt and we just hit it off from the beginning. I had a great stunt-team working with me on *Power Rangers* and I brought them with me onto my other projects. I think I mentioned previously what Paul Smith had told me, that 'making a movie is like going to war, so you should go to war with your friends by your sides', and I really relate to that. I tend to work with the same people again and again. I've worked with the same editor, Irit Raz, on six films, composer Steve Edwards on five films and Koichi and Alpha Stunts again and again. When I first met Koichi he was pretty much on his own in America, they hadn't really formed Alpha Stunts yet. Koichi is in the film himself and the other fighters include Eric Betts and Hien Nguyen who would join me on *WMAC Masters*, along with Richard Brandon and Bridget 'Baby Doll' Riley. It was during the casting of the show that I started learning about distribution from Mark Damon who was producing the film for MDP, it was interesting to see the film from the point of view of the producer/distributor.





Most viewers probably recognized Marc Singer from *V* or *Beast Master*, where he got to display a hint of his martial arts background. How did you find working with him as the villain of the piece?

I really wanted to make a spaghetti western, Marc understood that and I think he enjoyed creating a villain that was a little over the top in the grandiose style of those films. (One of my favourite spaghetti westerns of the 1960's was called *The Big Gun Down* and I based Marc's character a little on one of the Austrian villains from that film. A lot of readers might not have seen the film but I think they'd be quite familiar with the films score by Ennio Morricone, it's a wonderful piece of music and turns up alongside John Liu in the classic *Secret Rivets*). We were all having a good time working on the film, especially during the big finale in the church and both Olivier and Marc were giving 110% during the fight scene. Marc was taking a lot of knocks and bangs without complaint, getting slammed and spun into the walls and hauling the church pews around.

One thing that impresses me about your films is that even if they are relatively low budget films they look like real films, you give them a sense of being a much bigger production. How important do you think this is and do you find it frustrating that a lot of the time people expect martial arts films to be poorly shot and directed? Do you find it to be a struggle to overcome this prejudice?

Wow! That's a pretty complex issue but let me thank you for the compliment and as for making my films look like real films well I think the reasons for that are:

a) I really love filmmaking, especially the action movie genre so I treat every project from film or TV the same way. I put all my heart and soul into it as if it was going to be the last thing I ever made! I'm not kidding!

b) I'm a very big believer in pre-production and preparation. I already have the film shot in my mind before we start filming, so I am already on the look out for locations that match my vision. I also break down



“...making a movie is a lot like falling in love. In the beginning one side might be more enthusiastic than the other, but the enthusiasm of one can be contagious and spread to everybody, just like love! Am I making sense here? I love my crew and I think they know it...”



every scene in the script into as much detail as I can for action scenes and dramatic ones. That way I know what I need and even more importantly, I know what I don't need!

c) I drive everybody crazy on the film but because I care about what I'm doing, I might shout and scream but I never insult people, so I think most people know that it's because I'm passionate about what I'm doing. I try to get the cast and crew to bond, so we're all working together and willing to give it our best. When I was at film school, I was told that making a movie is a lot like falling in love. In the beginning one side might be more enthusiastic than the other but the enthusiasm of one can be contagious and spread to everybody, just like love! Am I making sense here? I love my crew and I think they know it and I try to be more than simply technical with the cast. I will talk to them during prep about their characters, motivation and what I want from them.

d) I also believe that understanding the camera is a very key issue, especially when it comes to action filmmaking. Knowing exactly where you want to put the camera and what lenses you're going to use are very important. I also pay a lot of attention to the pacing, something I think I learned from both studying kate's and playing the guitar for many years, I apply my sense of pacing or rhythm to staging a shot and the speed of camera movement in a scene.

e) I'm not a dictator! I will listen to advice and ideas from those I'm working with, I really believe that filmmaking is a team effort and will make my decisions after taking all the aspects into account.

f) I also understand the production side of things and see it as my

ally unlike a lot of directors who see the producers and the production side as their enemy.

g) I do not simply cover the scenes, I direct them!

h) I also feel that it's important to show impact during action. I'm not a fan of very high falls where the stunt performer disappears out of frame before hitting the ground and the audience knows that he just landed in an enormous crash bag. I prefer to show a fall that isn't as high but shows the stuntman hitting the ground, it's much more cinematic, more exciting and a lot safer too. We hide the mat on the floor and pad the stunt performer but to the audience it looks that much more painful and realistic.

i) Safety first!! I will avoid shooting anything that I feel is too dangerous or unsafe. We're only making a movie, it doesn't mean that people should get hurt. Also if people know they are safe they can react much more spectacularly knowing they are safe and achieve better results, which is what we're after, right?

j) It's important that there is a human element during the action scenes, that way it's not only about the action but there is also an emotional content that draws the audience into what they're seeing. Now after I've said all this, you might think at least there will be some recognition as a reward for what I'm doing but to be honest until about three years ago I was convinced that I was making these films just for myself! Here in Hollywood, 'straight to video' sounds like a disease, worse than Malaria or SARS!! Then one day Koichi Sakamoto tells me that there is a review of *Bridge of Dragons* in a magazine called *Impact*. Since then, I've discovered that yes, there are people out there watching my films and people have respect towards 'B' films in the action martial arts movie genre. It kind of reminds me of the B-movies that Hollywood was making in the 1930's and 40's that nobody in Hollywood really thought of as anything worthwhile until the late 1950's when the French began calling them 'film noir' and showing appreciation to them, which led to their rediscovery by Hollywood too. I think that there is a parallel here, that our genre is appreciated more overseas than it is in America.

It was around this time that you made the move into TV with the show *WMAC Masters*. I caught up with this show when it got a brief airing with selected episodes turning up on late night HK TV.





What can you tell us about the development of this show and how involved were you in its development and pre-production?

I met the producers Norman Grossfeld and Kathy Borland back in 1994 when I was working on *Power Rangers*, they were shopping the pilot around and a lot of people who saw it recommended that they should meet with me. I met them and, while they were obviously intelligent and friendly, when I saw the pilot I could see a lot of problems. I was a little hesitant at first to tell them what was wrong but they insisted that I tell them so I explained to them that the American way of shooting action wasn't right, especially for martial arts action like they were trying to highlight. They seemed to understand what I said and told me that they would call me to talk to me further about the show. On the same day I got the go ahead for *Savate*, so I left *Rangers* and started prepping on the film. A week later, the producers called me and said they were in LA and wanted to talk to me about working with them on changing the shows direction. I told them I would love to be involved but was going to be tied up with *Savate* for a few months. By the time I had finished the shoot, they were back and had a whole batch of new conceptual artwork and ideas for the direction they wanted the show to go in. I was really impressed, Norman and Kathy had created a great creative team that really pushed everybody in the same direction.

The show featured a very large cast of players and performers, was it hard trying to find things for all of them to do each week? How much of the characters attributes came from the actors themselves? For a half hour weekly show aimed at children/teenagers the series featured an incredible amount of high quality martial arts action. How hard was it to supply not only the requisite amount of action each week and keep within the guidelines of the show?

We shot the majority of the show on the Universal backlot in Florida, it was hard going because for the first five to six weeks we were shooting all the exterior

fight scenes at night because of the tourists in the daytime. It was a very draining experience, trying to come up with so many fight scenes and keep each one of them fresh and all the while your body clock is messed up because of the weird hours we were keeping and then we had four weeks of shooting all the dramatic scenes and wraparounds. I think what kept us going was the immense creativity of both Norman Grossfeld and Kathy Borland as well as the other directors, the legendary Pat Johnson in the first season and Yuji Noguechi in the second one. I learned a lot about getting the best performances both action and acting wise, to listen to their ideas and then to put what I thought was right and appropriate for the show and then also tweak it to the imaginary camera positions that were coming to my head as soon as we started to put it together during rehearsals. I am a big believer in teamwork, as long as there is order and it's not spinning out of control. By the end of those rehearsals the scene was already done, so the next day all we had to do was shoot it.

I really believed that this show would be the biggest hit since or even bigger than *Power Rangers*, I even turned down another show that I thought wouldn't work at all. That other show was *Xena* and while that became a runaway success, even outdoing its parent show *Hercules* in the ratings, *WMAC Masters* just never really took off and I'm not entirely sure why. I think that it was a show ahead of its time, after two seasons it came to an end which was a pity, I've just heard that Fox TV will be airing the show again in a revamped format this year, so maybe now it will make a name for itself. The production company, 4 Kids Productions, wanted to sell toys, our show was catching teenagers who weren't really into toys, so they moved onto another project a little something called *Pokemon* that became a phenom!

Impact's exclusive interview with Isaac Florentine concludes next month.

Far Left: The *Power Rangers* brought together the unbeatable combination of Isaac and the Alpha Stunt team.

Bottom Left: The *WMAC Masters* is an often overlooked gem which Fox may be re-showing later this year.

Left: Isaac takes flight.

Below: Isaac Florentine, renaissance man.

