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In the final part of our exclusive in-depth interview with Isaac Florentine, he discusses his working with Dolph Lundgren on *Bridge Of Dragons* and bring us up to date with the background on *Impact* favourites *US SEALs 2* and *Special Forces*.

isaac florentine

renaissance man

Mike Leeder: Your next project was *Bridge Of Dragons*, starring Dolph Lundgren, Cary Tagawa and HK actress Rachel Shane/Valerie Chow. What was the genesis of this project?

Isaac Florentine: Yoram Barzilai had worked with Dolph on a film called *Sweepers*, Dolph had expressed his frustration and stated that he wanted to make his next film with an action director, and Yoram suggested me. We met with Dolph at his New York Office, and our mutual martial arts background broke the ice between us when I saw this photograph of Dolph at the Kyokushinkai Dojo in Stockholm. I had gone there in 1980 with my teacher Tamas Weber and when I told him I recognized a number of the people in the photograph by name, we hit it off. Dolph agreed to do the film but on one condition, that we shoot after he had taken his third Dan in Kyokushinkai. I was pretty happy with that news, as I knew Dolph would come to the film in peak physical condition and I decided to take full advantage of it.

I've always thought Dolph could have been and could have been a bigger star, how did you find working with him as both an action actor and a martial artist?

Dolph is a real gentleman. He's kind, easygoing and has a great sense of humour. He's also a very good Karateka and very intelligent. He brought his friend and Sensei Brian Fitkin to join us on the film, and the three of us used to train together a few times a week. Dolph gives a lot of respect to everybody he's working with, from the director to every member of the crew. I like working with this kind of person, as they become involved in the whole process of filmmaking, which should be regarded as a team effort.

The film also saw you combining martial arts action courtesy of Yuji and Alpha Stunts and some high-octane gunplay and stunt work. How much input do you have into the choreography? The fight on the poles, did that idea come from you or Yuji?

I had developed the idea for the pole fight as we were putting the script together, and we wanted to show Rachel Shane/Valerie Chow's character had her own fighting style. I wanted to add something that was more sophisticated and skilled than simply fighting, and the pole idea came to mind. Yuji and Tatsuro Koike, his assistant, came back to me with a detailed fight and I adjusted a few

little bits so we could keep it grounded in realism and fit it into the tight shooting schedule we had.

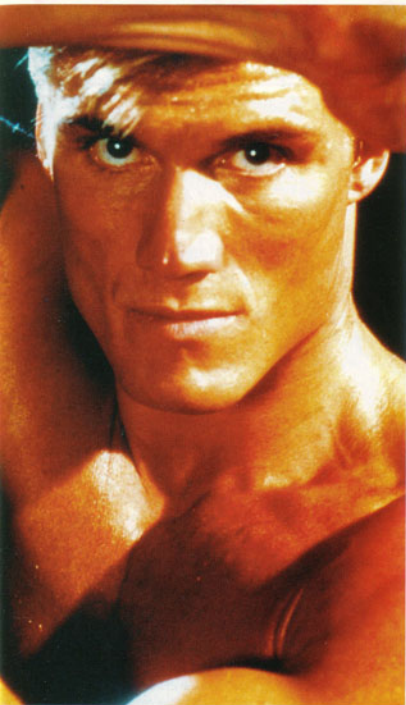
The film saw you filming behind the former Iron Curtain, how did you find shooting in Eastern Europe?

There's a Hebrew saying, 'others learned to shave over my beard', and that's what happened to me in Bulgaria. It was the first action film ever shot there, and the crew was used to the slow sedate Soviet way of filmmaking until we arrived. Now they've shot a lot of action films there and are fantastic but at the time it was tough. Certain job titles such as assistant director seemed brand new to them, we had promises of Army support that we weren't sure we would get until they turned up ten minutes before call time, not to mention an inexperienced six pyrotechnics team. After we wrapped we had some bad luck too, certain sections of the film were unusable and badly scratched as we had defective film stock, and so we had to reconstruct the movie in the editing, working around certain shots and scenes. We also discovered that our final epic crane shot of Dolph and Rachel kissing with a beautiful backdrop was unusable too, we'd been using the AVID system for editing instead of really seeing dailies and while it looked fine on the small screen, once it was blown up we could see there was a problem with light seeping into the magazine, and we had to try to salvage the scene by recutting and relooping dialogue. It was frustrating to say the least. But it was a good experience, and we laid the foundation for a number of other action movies shot there, and that helped us a great deal when we returned for *US Seals 2*.

What was the genesis of *US Seals 2*? Where did the idea for the 'no guns' concept come from?

The idea for the film was born in 1992 when we were shooting *American Cyborg*, I really liked the location we were using, an abandoned oil refinery and Boaz Davidson and myself came up with this idea of a place filled with gas that would ignite if anybody fired a gun. Several years later with Boaz as head of Creative Development at Nu Image, we decided it was time to put that idea into a film and we developed *US Seals 2*.

The film did very well on video in both the US and Europe despite, in my opinion, very bad marketing that tried to sell the films purely



as a guns and explosions movie. What is your opinion of the finished film?

The film did suffer because of the marketing; the generic cover tries to make it look like it's a realistic representation of SEAL operations, which is very misleading. I also feel that I made some mistakes with the film myself, I was trying for a real comic book feel in terms of camerawork and sound effects to push the envelope, and I think I might have gone a bit too far.

But there was enough action for the genre lovers to enjoy. I have to admit that Boaz Davidson really did some great efforts to change the film's name and to market it as what it really was, but even he could not change the marketing of the film. It was too late. The film was sold to Blockbuster Video even before I started shooting it and there was nothing he could do. This is the price you pay when the film you do is pre sold or even if is not pre sold, the buyer does with it as he pleases. It sometimes amazes me that some independent companies are 'ant!' when it comes to Martial arts film, when today even the studios understand that this genre is totally valid.

After *US Seals 2* was released, there was talk that you were going to be working with Van Damme on a film.

Jean Claude called my house one day in 2000 when I was doing *Power Rangers*. He told me that he saw all my films and he liked my work and wanted to do something together. The next day we met at his house and we hit it off instantly. He gave me a script called *Exile* to read. I liked the idea. It was a period piece and I had some ideas regarding it. Jean Claude loved them and we met with the writers at ICM but meanwhile he left to do *Replicant*, which was a good film. I left to do *US Seals 2*. Later on we hooked up again, he had an idea to do a film he wrote called *The Tower*, about an after life experience. Jean Claude introduced me to producer Dan Frisch who is a really great guy; I got involved in re-writing the script with Dan and the writer James Portolase. We made the script more fluid, kind of an after life version of Bruce Lee's *Game Of Death*. JC loved it and wanted to shoot it independently.

Unfortunately the finance never materialized and the project dissolved and JC went to make *Derailed* instead. Shortly after I got busy in developing *Special Forces*. These things tend to happen in the film business. The good thing to come from it was that Dan Frisch and I became real good friends and, who knows, Jean Claude and myself may still work together in future.

Your most recent film was *Special Forces* starring Marshall Teague and a mutual acquaintance named Scott Adkins. What was the genesis of this film?

After 9/11, Nu Image decided to make a few military movies entitled *American Heroes*. Boaz Davidson told me the titles of the films and asked me to choose one, I immediately chose *Special Forces* because I knew that there was more options available with that title. Boaz came up with a story line that took place in Afghanistan. I worked with the writer David White and two months later we had a draft. I was introduced to the producer Mike Flannigan, and we both went to scout locations in India. We saw a studio in



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Hydrabat and upon my return I actually tailored the script we had 100% to the locations in the studio. But as things happen in the business the deal with the Indian Studio never materialized and a day before leaving to India we lost our location. The next day we met at Nu Image with a person who represented the film studio of Vilnius, Lithuania. Two days later both Michael and I were on the way to Vilnius. However, we lost one week of pre-production, which was way too short anyway, and I had to change my script and tailor it to an Eastern European country and I altered the script to what we really had, this created a Domino Effect but it worked out pretty well.

The film serves as a fantastic introductory vehicle for Scott Adkins, how would you rate working with him as an actor and martial artist?

I received his demo tape at my office and Don Warrenner saw it first, he told me I should check it out. I put it on. It started with some body shots, and I liked the way he looked and his physique. Then, there was a sequence that was shot during his training and I was very impressed to see a person of his size and weight do what he did. All of that time I thought to myself, can he also act? Then came the acting scenes that were purely dramatic, mostly from BBC's *Doctors*, and I was blown away. That young man had it all, the look, the body, the techniques and the acting ability. Also, his pleasant personality came across. For the first time in my life I picked up and called someone I never even met, saw or heard of, and I told him that I would like very much to work with him given the right opportunity. Later when the idea for *Special Forces* was born I showed the tape to Boaz Davidson. Boaz, who studied cinema in England, was also impressed and a part was tailored in the film for Scott. Working with him for Yuji and I was a dream, I truly believe that given the right opportunity this young man can be not only a huge action star but a total mainstream star. Scott is serious about what he does, whether

it's brushing up on his excellent martial arts ability for the screen or working on his craft as a dramatic actor. I believe that Scott is a person who can bring back to the martial arts/action genre the human element integrity that was lost somewhere with all of the over use, and abuse, of CGI and wire work. And I would start by casting him as James Bond. Can you imagine a 007 that can move like him and do it for real? Wow!

This was also your second film with Marshall Teague, and I was really happy to see that in this film he was given a chance to stretch both his martial arts and dramatic muscles to good effect.

A few days into the shooting of *US Seals 2* Marshall dragged me to the side and told me that he really enjoy working with me, simply because I care about what I do, which is pretty much the same as he does. Marshall cares and gives 100% when he's working. His character in the film was tailored especially for him using everything he can give whether it's his knowledge in the military, whatever. Marshall was also the military consultant for the film, in martial arts, he's one of Chuck Norris's Black Belts and of course he's a strong screen presence. Marshall is such a pro. Once he make a choice as an actor his performance stays unaltered. I owe this movie to him.

The film's main villain is played by Eli Danker who is just incredible. How much of the character came from you and how much from him?

Eli is a pretty well known actor in Israel, and he's done a few American productions previously. I met him by chance when I stopped for two days in Israel on my way to India to scout for locations. After meeting him I knew that he was perfect for playing the villain. Now because he came from a theatrical background, he had a totally different approach to the way I saw the character. When he arrived in Vilnius, we talked a lot about the character and I think that what we got in the end is a

character that was combined from both our visions. It made him cruel yet brought some complexity to it.

The film also saw you reunited with Alpha Stunts hero Yuji, who provides you with a number of superb fight scenes.

Yuji and I, by now, work together in perfect harmony. One of the things I did in *Special Forces* was to divide a lot of the shoot to two units. Now the real trick in having two shooting units is that they have to match. Because both Yuji and I see almost eye to eye, the way to cover and direct action it elevated the film quality. There are scenes that were shot partially by him on one day and partially by me on a different day and they look smooth and seamless. The more films you do, the more experience you get and that gives you the confidence to trust and delegate to your colleagues.

You have proved time and time again with your films that you can deliver the goods in terms of action and drama, why aren't you making bigger movies?

Unfortunately, Hollywood is about perception. It's who you know, not what you know, and it's about what others think of you, or how they categorize you. What I've found is that because I do what are considered B movies, no one is really interested in seeing your work, or, they judge it objectively. This is the main obstacle I am facing. The ironic thing about it is that it's much more difficult to make a low budget movie look good because you don't have either the tools or the time. It is after all the pure magic of cinema, creating that illusion that what you see is actually bigger than what you really had to make it. A big movie with a decent budget is easier to make. You've got the time to do it properly.



Do you find it frustrating that Hollywood seems prepared to throw ridiculous budgets at MTV or commercial directors?

I read on the net a review to one of my films and one of the things it said was: "It amazes me that somebody like Florentine, who probably couldn't even get a parking space at Silver Pictures, can direct an action sequence that makes so called A-list directors look like failed film school dropouts." Do I get frustrated? Hell yeah!.. but this is Hollywood.

If you could make the ultimate Isaac Florentine movie, what would it be?

It would be a period piece with decent characters involved about a martial arts story. I actually have a treatment I wrote entitled *White Crane* about four generations in a martial arts family, and it is based on historical fact and real historical characters. It follows the story of martial arts in the 20th Century. How it was a killing art and with every generation became more and more diluted. I hope I'll be able to make it one day.

Any last message for our readers?

Impact is in my honest opinion, probably the only magazine that really understands the action genre, it is able to properly judge with authority, honesty and deep understanding the real value and quality of action films and treat them with the respect they deserve. I find the action genre to be the most common international cinematic phenomena, something that transcends cultural, racial and language barriers. Before I knew *Impact* existed, I thought that the films I made would never find an audience. After discovering *Impact* I tried to do better and better with every film, knowing there are people out there who, just like me, love this genre with a passion. If not for the action films I would never have become a filmmaker.

For further information about Isaac, go to www.isaacflorentine.com or Rising Sun Productions at www.risingsunproductions.ca