

STOP MOTION STUDIO? YEAH... MY KITCHEN!

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANIMATOR-DIRECTOR-PRODUCER-WRITER-DESIGNER-PAINTER-SCULPTOR-AND
THE GUY WHO MADE A SPACESHIP OUT OF A JUNKED VACUUM CLEANER

BRETT PIPER

BY KEVIN G. SHINNICK

SPFX: What first interested you in filmmaking?

BRETT PIPER: When I was a kid, I'm sure this will shock you, my favorite movie was King Kong. When Jack the Giant Killer came out, I was 9 years old and I got to go see it in the theater and it made a huge impact on me. I can remember building clay copies of the two-headed giant and trying to animate them. The funny thing is, when your a kid it looks great.

What was your first film?

A cheap little black and white vampire movie, but I couldn't raise all the money to finish it. I should have gotten myself a decent job, worked a couple of years, saved money, and made the movie. But I kept running around trying to get investors, which I'm not good at.

You need an agent.

Is there an agent whose interested in a client who's never had a hit?

There must be, there's a lot of films...

Yeah, I don't know how they do it. Look at Donald Farmer, how does he keep getting money to make movies. Who keeps giving it to him, don't they ever see his films?

After the vampire film, you tried another?

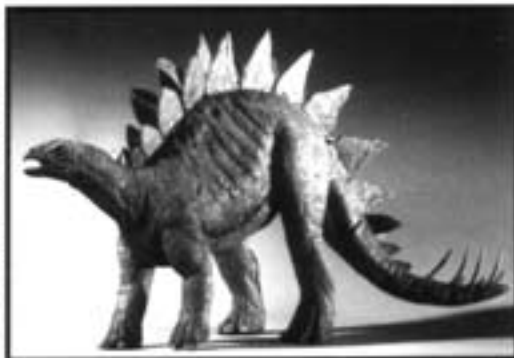
I never stopped. I was always doing storyboards, scripts, models and shooting test footage to take around. When I finally got some money, which was not a lot, my first feature was \$5,000 not counting what the actors were deferred. It was terrible because, your first time at bat, you've never played the game before and I didn't know what I was doing. I had to learn. My next one was much better.

That first one was *Mysterious Planet*?

Yes, the only copy I have is in Japanese but I still haven't looked at it.

How did you finally raise the money?

I walked in to a guy's office, who was an investment councilor in New Hampshire and said, I want to make a movie and I need money. He was interested, we went into his office, and it was a "good news/bad news" thing. I did get the money, although it took forever. Here's a guy who's dealing with clients who are worth millions and he gets 10 of them to put up \$500 apiece and it takes



MODEL STEGOSAURUS

about a year to put the deal together. For a \$5,000 investment we had a 35 page contract. The film was called *Mutant War* and it was released as *Mutant Men Want Pretty Women*. That's when Julia Roberts was big and you know how distributors think. Link it with any successful movie you can no matter how pathetic. We never had a contract, or anything in writing and you know what that means.

How were you able to support yourself?

Real life jobs. Mostly artwork of various kinds. I worked for 9 years at an amusement park doing everything including designing, laying out, and painting advertisements, signs, and buildings. I'd work on that all day and work on movies all night.

Getting back to *Mysterious Planet*...

It was a home movie, it really was. I shot with a Bolex I'd bought second-hand for \$125. The actors were all amateurs, one woman had done some regional theater down in the Boston area. But they all got



"GOOFY" FROM MUTANT WAR

paid and we went into profit.

Overseas sales?

Yeah, mostly package deals. The guy who sold it got a domestic deal for around \$20,000 which was 4 times what it cost. I made \$10,000.

You did effects, directed and wrote?

Yes, I didn't do the music and I didn't act, but I did everything else.

What type of effects?

It had stop-motion, a few glass paintings, a fair amount of miniature work and synthetic laser effects. The movie was shot on reversal film so I would sit down with a jewelers loop, a tiny brush and a bottle of bleach and bleach the emulsion off. People say you can scratch the film with a pin but that doesn't really work. With bleach you can actually shade it off and it's like retouching a negative.

Each frame?

Well, there aren't that many frames involved in laser effects. Sam Sherman at Independent International made me an offer for the film. We were up to \$35,000 for a movie that cost \$17,500 so we doubled our money. The company who was distributing *Planet of the Dinosaurs* was interested in it. They thought it would be a good companion film.

Your next film was *Battle for the Lost Planet*. This one had more special effects and a bigger budget.

Yeah, it did, it was \$60,000.

You did matte paintings again?

It was basically the same deal only a little more accomplished. Matte paintings, animation, miniatures and sets. I built 3 space ship interiors, 2 alien ships, an Earth ship, a forest, a tree and a garage.

Do you find a lot of egos involved in filmmaking?

I've never worked with big stars but I've noticed that, the more ego the less knowledge. It seems you can have the ego or the talent but you can't have both.

In your next film you had Cameron Mitchel.

He was a pussycat, I enjoyed working with him.

That was *Mutant War*?

Yeah, same budget, I never got paid for it.

The movie was finished, the distributor took it, waved good-bye and we never heard from them again and we had nothing on paper proving he ever owed us a nickel. The distributor in New York, Art Schweitzer from Cinevest was supposed to be paying for this thing. As far as I know he never put up a nickel and he's the one who's got the movie. They also did the cut.

It's not your original cut?

I did a rough cut, an assembly, and they took it and finished it in a week.

There was about 2 months work to do but Art wanted to take it to the American Film Market in a week. The people who did it, Rainbow Productions did a hell of a job. It stunk, but it was done in a week.

It was shot on 35mm?

It was the only thing I ever shot on 35.

Would you shoot in 35mm again?

I'm working on a film now with a decent budget, and we might get some kind of theatrical release, in which case we'll shoot in 35. Aside from that, no, never. You don't need it, 16mm looks just as good on video.

That's the basic market now, television and video.

Yeah, for this kind of thing.

After being burnt, you keep plugging on...

You keep hoping things will get better. I mean, my work is getting better. It's not great but it gets better every film. I've done two films where I really had no serious problems. One is out there under the title *A Nymphoid Barbarian In Dinosaur Hell*.

It was called *Dark Fortress* at one time?

Yes, that was the original title. It was originally a semi-medieval fantasy that got turned into a post-nuke thing.

By Troma.

Troma bought it finished, changed the title



DINO-BEETLE FROM A NYMPHOID BARBARIAN IN DINOSAUR HELL

and only added the prologue.

Most people know that film. It's the one shown on USA Network.

You know, it's not that bad. When I watched it again, I actually went back to check out an effect I did to kind of refresh my memory because I was doing something similar. It isn't a classic, but I was surprised in re-watching it that most of what I was trying to get on film pretty much got there. It's a little slow in parts...

The cast was not bad for local actors.

Yes, all local actors. Some of them pretty talented.

The things I really like are the dinosaurs.

Yeah, but there are no dinosaurs in it.

The creatures, the monsters, I keep calling them dinosaurs. How did you plan the effects shots?

Some of the special effects were in-camera matte shots.

Did you make any money on this film?

No, the fellow who played the villain was also the co-producer. He raised money for it. The day the movie finished, he sold his construction business and decided he was a film producer. Six months later he's broke, and can't make the mortgage payments.

Troma comes along and makes us a very bad offer but I didn't have the heart to tell the guy, I'm not signing the contract because it sucks. So in order for this man to recoup part of his investment, we sold the movie at a loss.

Where did you shoot *They Bite*?

Down in Florida.

Was this an original project of yours?

No, Bill Links who was the executive producer on *Deadtime Stories* finally ponied up the

money and told me he wanted a movie with fish monsters and tits, so I wrote him a movie with fish monsters and tits and when he read it he called me and said, "You didn't tell me it was going to be a comedy." I said, what the hell else do you expect when you tell me you want a movie with fish monsters and tits.

That would have been a better title!

Well, *They Bite*, of course, was a movie Dan O'Bannon was shopping around for years and Links just lifted

the title.

And you, of course, tossed a lot of references to *Humanoids From The Deep*.

Oh well, yeah, *Humanoids From the Deep*



was Link's model. That was the template we were supposed to be using on this film.

What was the budget?

It was the highest budget I had so far but a lot of it was wasted. It was supposed to cost \$100,000 and it ended up somewhere between \$120,000 and \$140,000.

Again you were directing and doing effects and...

And shooting, and sound, everything except the music and acting.

You got a lot of press coverage yet the film was picked up by a small distributor?

I was told by Links that within a couple of months, a fairly large video company offered him a quarter million dollars for it. He spent \$140,000 so he's doubled his money. But he held on to the movie for years, waiting for someone to give him a million for it and of course nobody did. Whatever interest there was, sort of petered out and he had to settle





**"THE GRASP" FROM
RETURN OF CAPTAIN SINBAD**

for whatever he could get.

Did you at least make money on this one?

I got paid, and technically I'm supposed to get 2%, but no, I did this for hire and it would have been OK but what should have been a 6 month job stretched on for 2 years.

I really enjoyed *The Return of Captain Sinbad*.

Yeah, that was almost literally a one man job because I didn't have any actors in that. I had voices for a day. That's the one I'm happiest with.

It reminded me a little of Rankin/Bass.

Not quite as slick as a Rankin/Bass but I think it has more texture to it. The sets are, if not more elaborate, maybe a little more realistic. I think *Sinbad*, by and large is a pretty good film.

I'm waiting for it to come out on video.

I just got a call about that last week. Unfortunately it's tied up with the *Dinosaur Babes* people. They're supposed to be marketing it.

You got Roddy McDowell to do the narration.

Yeah, he was very frank. He said, "You could probably get an actor just as good for \$100 but you can't get my name."



THE PIPER KITCHEN TABLE STUDIO

How was he to work with?

I never met him. I spoke with him two or three times on the phone and we agreed to terms and he suggested a sound recording studio convenient to his home. I just sent him the narration and he read it.

So he's never seen the film?

Not as far as I know. He was very good. He picked up a quick \$10,000 for half an hour's work.

\$10,000!

That's not really outrageous for a man in his position when you stop and think about what some people are getting for less work than that. He really sets the tone of the whole film.

When people see this I think they'll see how right he was for the project.

Oh, he's perfect and people recognize his voice, it was just ideal.

Do you create most of your effects at home?

All of my effects. Except when I had to shoot effects on 35mm because I don't have 35mm equipment.

What size are your

models?

I'm making them bigger now. The ones in *Nymphoid Barbarian* were relatively tiny, I'd say about 10 inches long. About the size of a dinosaur toy you'd buy in the store. The ones I've been making lately have been around twenty inches long.

Now, let's talk about *Dinosaur Babes*.

I offered it to Troma first. I called them up, talked to Lloyd Kaufman and said, "You know, I've got a house full of dinosaurs and you guys like movies with lots of babes, why don't we do a movie called *Dinosaur Babes*?" He said, "Great, can I rewrite the script?" and I said no. The deal was dead.

In retrospect, do you wish you went with Troma?

I have no complaints about Troma, to be honest with you, except they are tasteless people who don't have the slightest interest in making decent movies.

But other than that you can deal with them?

They're honest. They've never screwed me. Which is more that I can say for Take Two productions.



ANIMATION SETUP FOR DINOSAUR BABES



**SPACESHIP FOR DINOSAUR BABES
(ANYONE MISSING A VACUUM?)**



STOP-MOTION STEGOSAURUS FOR *DINOSAUR KID*

How did you get involved with Take Two productions?

Steve Williams, the production manager on *They Bite*, said "Let me nose around and see if I can find anybody who wants to put up some money." A short while later he called me back with the number of Take Two Productions, down near Miami. 3 weeks later we had a deal to do the movie. Handshake agreement basically, and he was saying we were going to the AFM and make a million dollars, and my cut would be several hundred thousand dollars. Everything was going great and 4 months later it was a disaster.

It recently came out on video.

We had an agreement. Take Two productions would take my name off the film because it's not my movie. I haven't even seen the thing. I was supposed to have complete, oral agreement only, creative control. As soon as they had all the footage they needed, they yanked the thing out from under me and finished it themselves. They basically took the raw footage and made the movie, so the movie you see is simply not mine.

Models were made just for the movie?

No, I had them laying around the house. The only one made for the movie was the giant mutant T-Rex head.

Did you do the casting?

No, the girl who played the lead is not an actress, but George thought she was cute and invited her to stay in his trailer during the shoot and she ended up being our lead.

There's also a space ship in this film.

Actually it's a vacuum cleaner. I walked into a used vacuum cleaner shop, picked one out of a junk pile, took it home and three hours later it was a space ship.

So you've had a problem with this film and it's taken out of your hands again.

Yeah, it's gone, history. Not only that but they stiffed me with the lab bills. Not big time, just whatever was left over when they

cut me loose.

And you still want to make another film?

I'm working on a couple films. One is called *Dinosaur Kid* and I've been trying to get it off the ground since before *Jurassic Park*. Of course, nobody wanted dinosaurs back then. I have some good leads now, but it's an expensive movie that's going to cost around a million dollars. The other one is called *Drainiac*, don't steal the title! It's about a

haunted house with a ghost in the plumbing. It's a \$35,000 movie I want to shoot locally by myself with amateurs.

Anything besides those two projects?

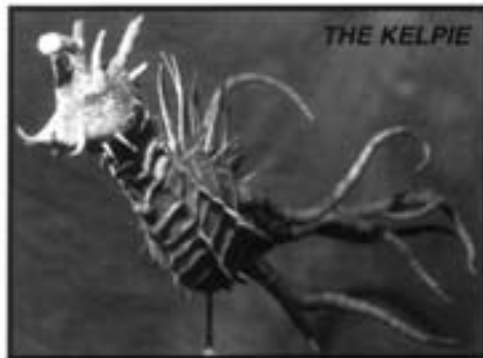
I'm working on a movie called *The Kelpie* with a guy in New Jersey, named Carl Morano. He's never actually made a film. He sent this script about a haunted lake with a weird creature in it. It's actually quite good.

What are your feelings on computer animation.

I'm sure it's good. What bothers me is the people who run this business don't think in terms of technique or art or anything. They think in terms of gimmicks and toys. And they also think in terms of trends, which means that for every new toy they have, they have to throw away an old one. You should keep the old techniques that still work and they don't understand this. I had to lie to people and tell them my work is computer animation, and the ironic thing is they don't know the difference. In fact, when I was trying to sell *Sinbad* to somebody they said, "It's stop-motion and nobody's doing that anymore, it's all computers now." At the time they were saying that *Nightmare Before Christmas* was the number one video and I pointed that out to them and they said, "Oh, that's different, that's all computers." They don't know, they have no clue. I still don't think computer animation looks more realistic than stop-motion it just looks realistic in a different way. I mean, yes it's smoother, but it doesn't have the weight and texture of a real animal. It looks like a big, fuzzy cartoon. What bothers me about computers is not that people want to use them, but that now computers are the only thing you are expected to use, which I think is stupid.

Do you think in Hollywood there is a future for stop-motion animation?

Yeah, because there are still people who



want to do it. Technology doesn't render old art forms obsolete, it just adds on to them and everybody realizes this but the money people.

It's just different tools and different techniques for each one.

I think so. It's like what Jim Danforth said about animation, "The thing about animation isn't that it's realistic, it's that it has style." and that's true. The older techniques aren't going away, that's the funny thing. They're on MTV, they're on Nickelodeon, they're being used in TV ads all the time. I mean, *Home Improvement* this week has got a Will Vinton clay animation scene in it. It is not going away because the public still likes it.

Any advice to give anyone who wants to get into filmmaking?

Don't! It's very hard and most of the time your not going to have fun.

Last words?

I've realized in the last few years I'm not a kid anymore, as I'm shlepping into middle age I realize that the bottom end of the business is where I belong. I wasn't cut out to go to Hollywood and make epics, I was cut out to go to obscure places and make movies for a hundred thousand dollars. That's where I'm comfortable. Well, OK I'm never comfortable, but that's where I belong. Thanks a lot. I've had a great time talking with you.



Kevin G. Shinnick is a writer/director/actor starring in many stage plays as well as classic motion pictures such as *The Regenerated Man* & *Vampire Vixens From Venus*. Kevin also writes for *Chiller Theatre* and his hobbies are collecting vintage movies and world peace.