The Den Of Geek interview: John Badham

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Director John Badham started his career in TV helming episodes of Rod Serling's Night Gallery, along with peers Steven Spielberg and Jeannot Szwarc. The huge success of Saturday Night Fever catapulted Badham to the 'A'-list of Hollywood directors in 1978, but he established his eclectic touch by immediately re-making Dracula. His subsequent career was hall-marked by his interest in making different types of movies, but he remains loved by geeks world-wide for defining a huge part of geek culture in 1982's WarGames, and for introducing the world to soft-hearted robot soldier Johnny 5 in 1985's Short Circuit.

Two years ago Badham co-wrote (with Craig Modderno) the very funny I'll Be In My Trailer, which outlines the challenges a director faces when dealing with actors on a movie set. It's an illuminating read for professionals and outsiders alike…

In the last few years that *I'll Be In My Trailer* has been on the market, what kind of feedback have you had?

Well I've had lots and lots from students -- I teach at Chapman University as a professor at the directing department. I get tremendously good feedback from my students and from other faculties, because there's something very immediate about things we talk about in the book. What I didn't want to make was another kind of dry theoretical book on directing, but rather get to the real nuts and bolts of a 'here's what you're encountering while you're in the *trenches*' kind of thing. And that's what they appreciate, because they're more 'hands-on', and the theory becomes apparent.

What's the most obvious mistake that first-time directors make?

They're generally afraid to talk to actors. Unless you've grown up in the theatre, where you gained experience talking with actors and probably being an actor yourself, actors speak a different language; they're working on emotions, and it's hard to get through to those emotions. Directors are people who love the technical equipment; they love the cameras and the lights and the sound and the film stock and all the cool stuff, and when it comes down to the actors they figure 'Well, they just show up and do it'. And so the actors complain to me 'Nobody ever talks to us, nobody ever tells us what we're doing'. It helps, because even though they could be Richard Dreyfus or Tom Cruise, they need some feedback; they *worked* on this and they're kind of doing it for your pleasure.

It sounds like the director is an interface between the community of geeks and the community of raw-nerved, emotional actors, who are probably a more social bunch…

Yes - there you are!

So is the problem one of getting the 'geeks' to open up?

You're right - it's like you're speaking two languages on the set: you have a crew behind you that you speak mandarin Chinese to, and then you have this crew in front of the set that you speak ancient Persian to, and you're flipping back and forth and back and forth…and you have to keep those languages separate because they don't understand what you're talking about.

Is part of the problem that the crew are not allowed to give the actors feedback?

Well you never want the crew to give feedback unless it's just spontaneous joy, like "Wow! That was great!" or something, because you're trying to keep [*actors*] focused on a single path. Even though you and I are standing together and see the same performance and we both give comments to the actors that are saying exactly the same thing, just the fact that we word it a little differently will throw an actor. Just certain adjectives, certain words…and so everything I say to an actor has been very carefully phrased to try and bring out the positive in what he's doing, and how to adjust what he's doing to make it even better, and not focus on the negative. That's tricky to do. It's very tricky for *me* to do…

Do you think it would be a good idea for the actors and the crew to swap roles making a film together a week before production begins?

Oh sure! That would be fun. A lot of times, when I was directing at drama school, everybody did everything; so the actor would be up there running the follow-spot, and the stage technician would be dragged into acting -- and oh boy, you sure appreciated everybody's work.

Does your experience make it easier to get an honest moment on film? Are you able to draw the right responses based on the same situation that came up that came up in 1978, for example?

I do think I'm in danger of being prideful here, in that I'm better at it than I was in 1978 or 88 or even 1998; just actively teaching it to other directors has helped me communicate better -- the big thing is making the actor feel like he can screw up; feel like we're here to let him try and do what he feels like he wants to do, and then give him a little feedback and help.

When the meter's running at $6000 a minute, it must be hard to relax..?

You can never say the meter is running at $6000 a minute. You can never look at your watch, never let them see you sweat. You could be dying inside; you could see the sun setting in the west and you're about to go into quadruple overtime and you've got to stay calm, and say 'Well, what would happen if we try this? Let's try *this*...' And keep it really calm, because nobody can be creative if they're tense - that is just impossible. Stanislavsky used to say to an actor, 'Here, do this meaningful soliloquy from *Hamlet*, but go over there to the grand piano and pick up the corner of it first. Now talk!'. To make the point that under tension you need to be totally relaxed. An experienced actor knows how to do that because they've done it before. But even so, even James Garner or Anne Bancroft - who care deeply about what they do - need that encouragement.

Is a book about dealing with Hollywood executives the logical follow-up to *Trailer*?

It would take a greater insight into human psychology than I possess. Dare I say that there you are encountering the deepest inmates of the asylum - the ones that should be locked up for life. These executives…they all have Alzheimer's, and they're only about one thing: themselves. So it's a very dangerous river Styx to cross.

Do you think that's changed much in 30 years?

No! But I liked it better with the old executives, the Harry Coens, Samuel Goldwyn's, the Louis B. Meyer's -- showmen. They really appreciated what audiences like. The new executives are bean-counters. All they know is 'We had a great weekend with *The Dark Knight*. They don't have any belief in something other than box office figures, and that's very hard to deal with.

John Carpenter told us he thinks movies are too commoditised now - that the opening of the film isn't the big event that it used to be.

No question. No question about it, for many reasons, one of which is the easy availability of almost any kind of media you could want, coming up on your cell phone. It's all been trivialised. It's not a big event. This is why I think Warner Bros were so smart by somehow managing to keep *Dark Knight* under wraps until the last second, and even then they only beat it by two days. Two days! It gives it a sense of mystery, makes it something you want to see. The minute you make it instantly available, people devalue it, it's not worth anything at all.

Do actors and directors now feel comfortable switching between Hollywood and TV because the standards of TV material have generally risen?

Well there's definitely better material, but it's hard to find good material for films that anyone will actually finance. The good material out there is kind of lying fallow because the studios won't touch it, and good television places like HBO have their pick of the crop.

Why won't the studios touch it?

It's not that it costs too much to make - usually these things don't cost much at all. [*studios*] don't see them as a franchise; that's the buzz word, as you know, the franchise - which means that if we make one *Spiderman*, then we can make 20 *Spiderman* movies. Now if we make one like *Whose Life Is It Anyway* or even an action movie like *The French Connection*, there may be no franchise; so they go 'That's a one-off. We don't want a one-off'…

But this is the old television attitude from 20 or 30 years ago?

That's right. Just the same idea, and isn't it interesting that a lot of television series are being brought back because they are existing franchises that you can capitalise on?

The majority of directors have always had to try to make their movies within a bankable film genre, so in that sense has much really changed?

You're right, if these great cartoon things are hot, that's what's going on. And you think 'Well, I think I can do something with that, and try to make it, because that's the only opportunity that I have'.

Do you miss the 70s - the age of the auteur film-maker?

Hard to know. We look at those pictures and my jaw certainly does drop when I go 'Oh my gosh, look at that, look at all those movies'. I'm proud to have had two or three movies in those years, and even then I can recall that they were difficult to get made.

You're beloved by fans of sci-fi and horror, even though those genres constitute only a small part of your output. Does that bother you?

I guess I'm a smorgasbord kind of guy. I respect and admire - and have always admired - Hitchcock, the kind of films that he made…but could I make an entire oeuvre of those kind of films? I don't think so. I think I would be really miserable, just doing 'another' horror movie. So I love the challenge of being able to move around. *Wargames*, for example - when I took on *Wargames* I could not boot up the computer! I didn't know what booting up the computer was - I thought it was maybe when you got sick of it and you kicked it out the door! Now I know way more about computers than any human being should know.

But the fact that I got to learn so much in the process is one of the joys of directing. With *Saturday Night Fever*, I'd been to dance classes that my mother had sent me too, but did I know about disco? No. I wound up inventing a couple of dances for the movie, which were adaptations of what I learned at 10 years old. It is dancing I said all the heavens sake this is just the foxtrot to a different beat. And people went fox-*what*? I said never mind, never mind. We did, one day we invented the disco tango hustle - that's one of the famous dances in the movie, with a boy and girl doing a tango, and we had to invent that out of necessity because the choreographer didn't show up to work that day -- he decided he would take in a fashion show instead.

Lucky you're a dancer.

My sister was the real dancer, ballet trained dancer. We all got to fooling around, and then Travolta got into it and the next thing you know, we have this dance. The choreographer came back and we went 'Look what we made, na-na-na'…

Do you often get something better than you would normally in such circumstances?

I think so. I think the danger of the high-budget film is that your mind gets lazy, and you think 'Oh well, we'll just throw money at it'. I find my mind works better when I'm going 'Oh my God, how am I going to do this? God, got no money!'. And you make up something, and then you're very proud of this kind of invented thing.

When you arrive at project with a lot of history such as *Point Of No Return [The Assassin]*, is it a struggle to claim your vision for it from the expectations of others?

It sure is. But it's certainly an obligation, I think, to the filmmaker, to see what can we do afresh, and ask 'Why are we doing it?' There we were doing it because the film *Nikita* is subtitled in French, and Americans do not like to go and see subtitled movies, so we have an opportunity here to go to work and reinvent the story in American terms. We brought elements into it like the woman listening to Nina Simone, and the whole musical aspect of reinventing it, and doing the best we could without trying to destroy what Besson had done so brilliantly in his original. The French cinema people were just furious with me! Going to France, I have to have bodyguards because they're so angry. And I say to them, 'Go talk to Besson, because he didn't blame us when we gave him $1,500,000 for the rights!' He seemed to take it quite happily. In fact he was going to make the movie himself. He was going to direct the American version, and one day - like myself - he woke up and said 'Wait a minute - I *did* this story! What am I doing? Let Badham do it, since he wants to do it so desperately'…

The only film that I'm aware that you would return to was *Another Stakeout*…?

It was.

What quality drew you back to the material?

Well, one of the other two films that I've had sequels to was *Saturday Night Fever*, and I just could not abide the script on it, and I made it clear to Robert Stigwood that I didn't like it. I *loved* the original script; I virtually shot the first draft with just some quick editing. This one, I said 'I just don't understand this character anymore. I don't get it'. But Stigwood said he loved it. So that went away. In *Short Circuit*, I loved the character and had created so much of that. But the studio wouldn't wait four weeks for me to finish *Stakeout* before they wanted to go, and they said 'No no no, we have to have it out in February or March' - or whenever; they had to have it out, and I'm finishing *Stakeout* and I said 'Guys, I just can't walk away from a movie that's still dubbing' and so on. So they went ahead.

And then *Another Stakeout* came along and it was delightful fun, and everyone just jumped on the bandwagon and said 'Let's do it again' and we just had a good time, a really good laugh making the movie.

Of course there are sequels to *Short Circuit* and *Wargames*…

We hear they're going straight to DVD. Interestingly enough, they never called me. I only hear about it from someone like yourself, or my daughter who keeps track of this stuff. So I said 'Fine, all right'. God bless them, I hope it's a success, I hope it works.

Is it still the case that your Shot Master storyboarding program is only available to members of the Directors Guild?

Well, technically yes and no. I've made it available for a couple of years to the Directors Guild, and now I make it available to anybody who calls me and asks me about it, and I just send it to my public folder and they're able to get it for free. It works great on Windows, and it was written for Macintosh. But it only works on system 9 Macintosh, and system 9, as you know, you have to have a bamboo computer to run it!

Do you treat storyboards as a rough statement of intent, or as how you wish it would all turn out?

I treat them as a rough statement of intent. Where they're most valuable is with action sequences, where you want to shoot just as much as you need and not more and not less, and you know you need these particular shots. So they're a good guide for everybody on the crew to have, and the way I use Shot Master is this: as we're going around to locations, I'm shooting pictures of the locations, and then I'm storing them as a basis for a quick storyboard. Now I can show it to the cameraman and say 'See this house? We're going to be shooting at this angle and the actors will roughly be like this'…and he can plan, and I can plan. It makes me do my homework. One of the features of Shot Master that is less evident is that you have to write down boring director-type things like what is this character trying to do in this scene, and what's the point of the scene…? That's the stuff that if you don't understand, you can't direct the movie.

What do you think of CGI as a tool?

I think it's a wonderful tool when you need it. When you're just using it to show off I think it gets discounted, because people go 'That's just computers'. You know and I know just how hard it is to do that stuff in the computer, and just how many artists it takes, and just how bloody expensive it is. And interestingly enough, like Rodney Dangerfield, it gets no respect, because it's 'just computers'. So when people can do things practically and you say 'This guy did his own stunts' or 'This is the real thing', people's admiration goes up tremendously, because they kind of appreciate that 'My God, he flipped that car in the real world!'.

Do you as a viewer feel like that?

Of course! I think, isn't it interesting how in *The Hulk*, for example, they've made this character look so real. And then I turn around and I say 'How come they can't make Bill Hurt's hair-piece look like it's not a hair-piece? $140 million fucking dollars, and it looks like a goddam hairpiece! They're only paying attention to the Hulk, and something as simple as a lace wig is sticking out there like a pimple on his nose...or as my vulgar friend Jimmy Wood would say, like a dog-penis stapled to his head..”