

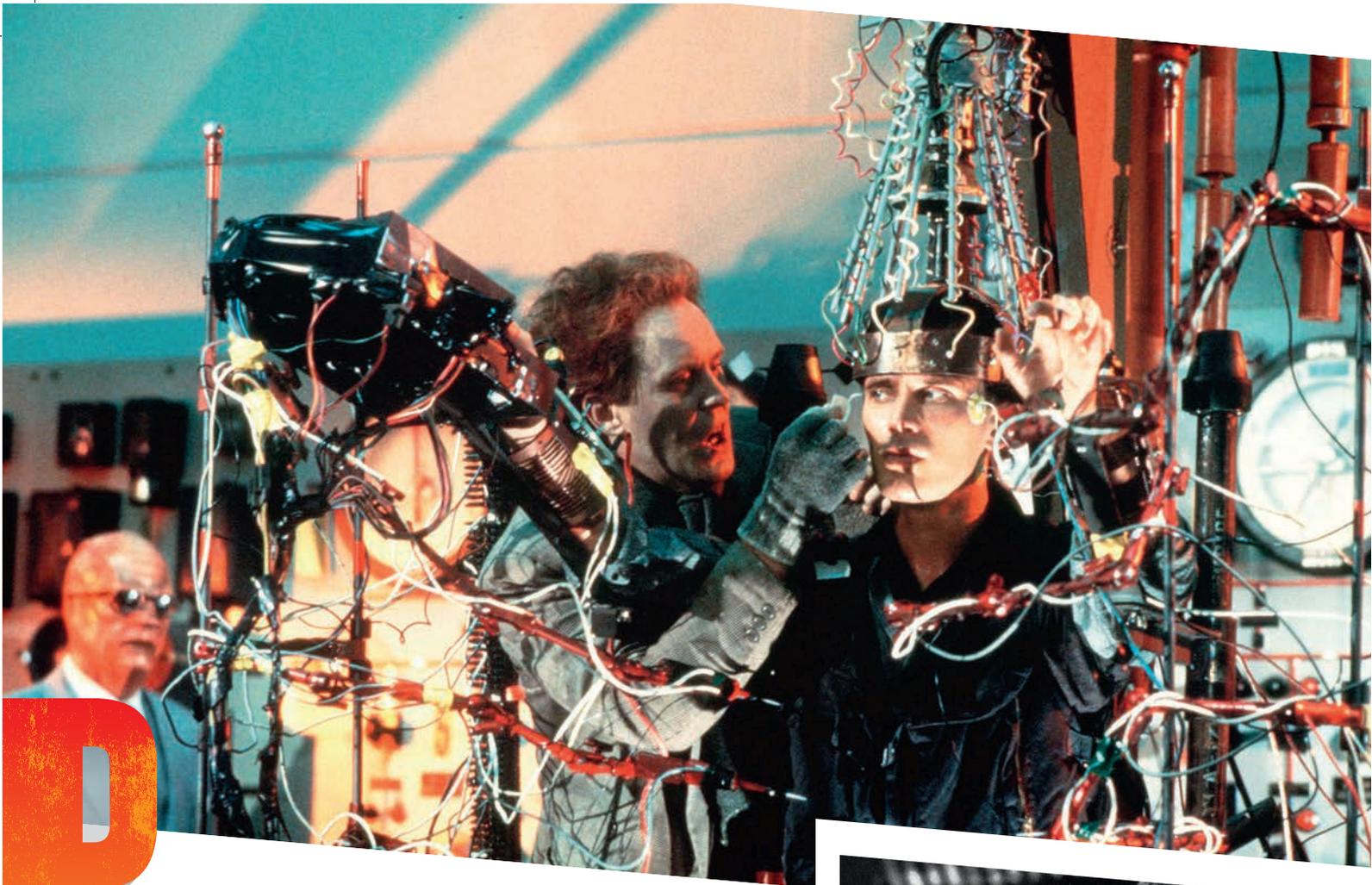
ORAL
HISTORY

“I THOUGHT WE’D MADE

IN 1984, A BONKERS SCREENPLAY DREW A STELLAR CAST FOR SCI-FI
THE ADVENTURES OF BUCKAROO BANZAI ACROSS THE 8TH DIMENSION.
KEY CAST AND CREW DETAIL THE BEHIND-THE-SCENES INSANITY OF
WHAT MAY VERY WELL BE THE GREATEST CULT FILM OF ALL TIME...

WORDS JAMES JENNINGS

THE NEXT STAR WARS™



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ITCHING A MOVIE WHOSE MAIN PROTAGONIST IS a physicist, neurosurgeon, test pilot and rock musician — complete with his own band/vigilante gang called The Hong Kong Cavaliers — was never going to be an easy sell to audiences. Nor was the fact they battled ‘interdimensional Red Lectroids from Planet 10’, a race that for some inexplicable reason all had the first name ‘John’. Nor was a tone that shifted from philosophical sci-fi to adventure to comedy — often all within the same scene. Defying its confusing premise, the meddling of a mad, mercurial executive producer and box office failure, *The Adventures Of Buckaroo Banzai Across The 8th Dimension* has gone on to become an unlikely cult hit that boasts such high profile fans as Joss Whedon, Wes Anderson and Kevin Smith. Having just celebrated its 30th anniversary, *Empire* tracked down director W.D. Richter, screenwriter Earl Mac Rauch and cast members including Peter Weller and Christopher Lloyd to uncover the story behind Dr. Banzai’s bumpy jet-car ride toward immortality...

THE BIRTH OF BUCKAROO

W.D. Richter (Director): I was friends with Mac [Earl Mac Rauch, *Buckaroo Banzai screenwriter*]. He started developing this story that he described as being like an old movie serial action adventure. Back then the character was called ‘Buckaroo Bandy’, who was a cowboy. Mac’s always changing things, so it became ‘Buckaroo Banzai’. He apologised and said “Nah, it’s stupid I’m going to get rid of it,” and I said “Don’t, that name is great!” Next thing, Buckaroo has a gang called ‘The Hong Kong Cavaliers’. It’s a long, crazy evolution. There were about five false start scripts.

Earl Mac Rauch (Screenwriter): Not only were they half-finished, they were half-hearted. I think it’s accurate to say that I am better at creating universes than writing scripts. I have a lot of trouble focusing, much less sitting still for more than a few minutes. Lately, I have gotten my hands on a neighbour’s Adderall, which seems to help.

Richter: We had an opportunity to present it to a producer, Sidney Beckerman, and his crony David Begelman [the film’s *Executive Producer*]. I think they misread it



Top: Buckaroo Banzai (Peter Weller) is tortured at the hands of Dr. Emilio Lizardo (John Lithgow), a human possessed by an alien known as Lord John Whorfin. See how many Styrofoam cups you can spot.

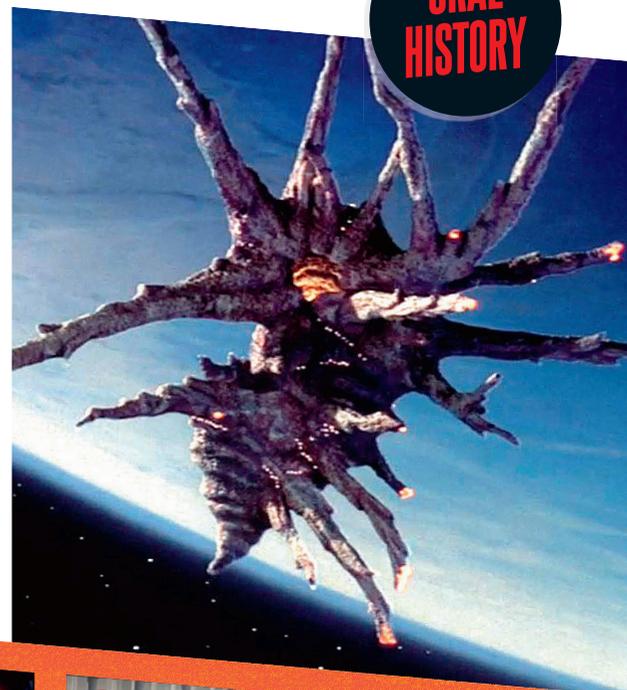
Above: Director W.D. Richter jokes around with Lithgow on set.

as an Indiana Jones-style adventure, and I don’t know why but they asked me to direct it. We could not believe they didn’t throw us out of the room. We made a wish list up of actors we wanted and got a yes from all of them in less than two weeks. It was a miracle really... the movie shouldn’t exist by normal Hollywood standards.

Peter Weller (Buckaroo Banzai): When I first read the script I laughed my ass off, and I had no idea what it was about. Maybe I still don’t know what it’s about. I mean is it about a guy who’s trying to do social good? Is it about the adventure of other dimensions? Is it about brain surgery? I don’t know. It’s the wildest thing I’ve ever read. There’s a bit where the President of the United States is having a haemorrhoid removed! It’s insane. 1

John Lithgow* (Dr. Emilio Lizardo/Lord John Whorfin): I was completely bewildered by the script and I really didn’t

“THE FILM SHOULDN’T EXIST BY HOLLYWOOD STANDARDS.” W.D. RICHTER



want to do it — it was way too out there for me. But I met with Richter and Mac, and they were so enthusiastic that they sold me on it in no time at all. The minute I met them I thought, “These guys are going to be so much fun to work with.”

Clancy Brown (Rawhide, Hong Kong Cavalier): Peter was very much Buckaroo Banzai. He was kind of a polymath to begin with — a musician, an actor, and a scholar. He was a smart guy and a sweet man and really gentle with me, who was an absolute rookie at making movies.

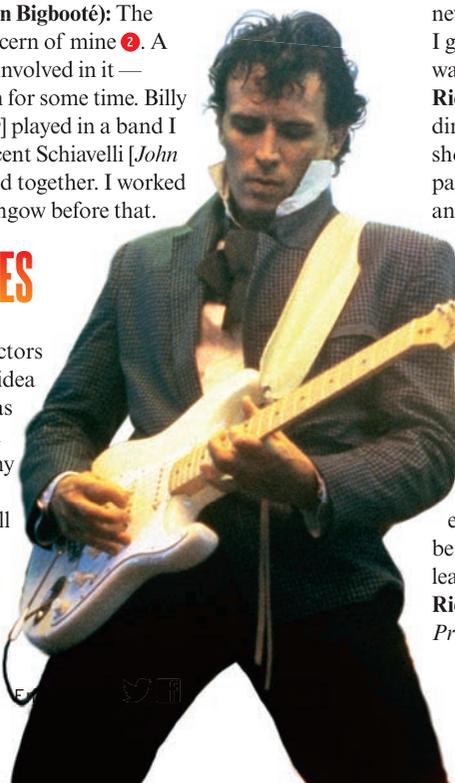
Christopher Lloyd (John Bigfoot): The make-up was a big concern of mine **2**. A lot of my friends were involved in it — Peter Weller, I’d known for some time. Billy Vera [*Pinky Carruthers*] played in a band I was familiar with. Vincent Schiavelli [*John O’Connor*], we’d worked together. I worked in a play with John Lithgow before that.

BUCKAROO LIVES

Brown: It was a pretty spectacular group of actors in retrospect. I had no idea at the time, I mean I was fresh out, I was 24, just walking around with my mouth hanging open, wondering what the hell was going on.

Weller: A number of influences went into how I approached

Clockwise, from top: Buckaroo treats Rawhide (Clancy Brown) gently while New Jersey (Jeff Goldblum) looks on; a Lectoroid spaceship, modelled after a seashell; Buckaroo busts Penny (Ellen Barkin) from jail; Lectoroids three; the Prez and his haemorrhoids. **Below:** Buckaroo rocks.



playing Buckaroo. I thought here’s this half-Japanese character who’s Adam Ant when playing the guitar, but with Jacques Cousteau’s scientific mind and the insight and curiosity of [filmmaker] Elia Kazan, who had this great understanding of human nature.

Lithgow: My dialect coach was an Italian tailor in the costume department, and he had this fantastic accent. All I did was go down and get him to record my part! He’d never coached any dialect in his life — and I got him a credit as my dialect coach! It was the high point of his career...

Richter: Mac would sometimes add stage directions to the script while we were shooting, so the script became about seven pages longer. Begelman came to the set and was convinced we’d added scenes, and said ‘If you go a day over schedule, you will forfeit your salary’ — even if the problem was out of my hands, like a mechanical failure or weather. I decided not to tell the cast because I thought they just don’t need to know this, they need to focus on the movie.

Rauch: Richter always encouraged me to visit the set, and I would drop in every other day or so. The cast seemed to be a relatively collegial, convivial group, at least from my perspective.

Richter: One day Ellen Barkin [*Penny Priddy*] and Peter weren’t getting along,

and we were doing a jail scene **3**. We only rented it for one day, and they were really, really being problematic and I saw the day slipping away so I took them aside and said ‘Look, I’ve got to tell you this really ghastly story but you can’t be the reason why we go a day behind schedule’, because [*the producers*] would shut the movie down, they were that crazy. It was a galvanising thing and they suddenly just bonded, and the other actors were let in on it by them, and it became this holy mission to make the film.

Rauch: I enjoyed the nightclub scene, because I’m an old rocker and high-energy stage performer myself.

Richter: At the time everyone was chasing *Blade Runner* cinematographer, Jordan Cronenweth, and we got him. Begelman wanted to meet him, and his opening remark was “This isn’t going to look anything like *Blade Runner*, is it?” It’s like talking to a great artist and asking “You’re not going to do another one of those fucking masterpieces, are you?!” Anyway, they conspired to screw up his dailies and Begelman said Jordan had to go or he’d shut the movie down. It was such a horrid, horrid working environment.

Weller: Jordan is a genius — his idea of colour and mood was a one off, and they let him go, which is sad because if you see that nightclub scene, it’s so beautifully >

* ALL OF JOHN LITHGOW'S COMMENTS ARE TRANSCRIBED FROM A 2011 NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL TALK WATCH IT AT [HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=0LjKerI5M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LjKerI5M)

photographed. I was really upset.

Rauch: I recall a production meeting when a visibly irritated Begelman stormed in, demanding to know if our aim was to make a box office hit or a cult film. We all looked at each other, and I think it was pretty much unanimous that we wanted to make a cult movie that would perform badly and yet live on to develop a cult-like following over decades to come. So we all held hands and prayed about it, and Begelman, not a religious man, said he was firing Jordan, since we didn't need an elite cinematographer to make a cult film [Jordan was replaced by Fred Koenekamp]. Now Begelman's gone and here we are 30 years later... the power of prayer.

Weller: Rauch is a one off. He'd drive around in this Dodge pick-up truck with a golden retriever in the back and would wear green camouflage pants and he had a buzz cut. So he looked like a redneck, yet he's a MIT grad, and sort of a scientific, engineering genius — this contradiction with a sophisticated, diabolically black sense of humour.

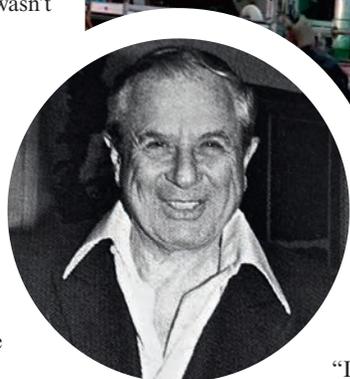
Lithgow: Half-way through I thought we had made something huge. I thought this was gonna be *Star Wars* size. I thought it was gonna blow everyone's minds.

Lloyd: We had some extraordinary sets — a Firestone tyre factory, this very dank, oily, greasy place. The alien makeup wasn't easy — it had to cover the whole face including the eyelids and lips. It was uncomfortable. It took longer to put on than the *Star Trek* makeup [Lloyd played a Klingon in *Star Trek III: The Search For Spock*, also out in 1984]. It was just in every little crevice.

Richter: The movie almost got shut down because of a few scenes where Buckaroo wears red glasses

④. One day Begelman summoned me and said "Heroes don't wear red glasses. Is he going to wear them in every scene?", and I said no. He then said "Okay, if you put them in again I'm shutting this movie down". At one point he was convinced we did and told me the movie was done.

Lithgow: We were laughing ourselves silly all the time. There's a moment in the film where Chris Lloyd is giving me the finger ⑤. But if you look at me, you see I'm grabbing my helmet and kissing it to hide the fact I'm laughing my ass off.



Top: The nightclub, lit by *Blade Runner* cinematographer Jordan Croneweth.

Middle: A spaceship at the Firestone factory.

Top inset: Screenwriter Earl Mac Rauch.

Bottom inset: Executive Producer, the late David Begelman.

Lloyd: That moment with Lithgow was just such a far out scene. Many times over the years I'll walk by somebody on the street who will yell "It's Boo-TAY, Boo-TAY!"

Weller: The scene where I'm being taunted by Lithgow with Lloyd eating Doritos behind me? I laughed so hard I think they had to do like sixteen takes of my close-up. I almost had to ask that Lithgow and Lloyd leave the set, because I could not get through it.

Brown: I was kind of Jeff Goldblum's [*New Jersey*] foil because he's a world class scene stealer. He would pull me into these little vignettes that he would make up for himself in the background, and stupidly I would play along and he'd end up stealing the scene with some simple action.

Richter: At one point we were convinced Begelman hated the film so much that he stopped watching dailies, so we'd do things like put Styrofoam cups on a machine near Weller's head. We thought Begelman would go nuts, like "What's with the fuckin' Styrofoam cups?" Or "What's with the fuckin' watermelon in a vice?" ⑥ I thought if they don't call and say "We're shutting the movie down", then we know they're not watching dailies. We never heard from them. So it was sort of the watermelon test, the canary in the mine shaft.

"WHAT IS IT?"

Weller: The New York premiere of the movie is the night I met Madonna. She came up to me and said, "Hey, you get any of that gum you're chewing?" So I gave her a stick of gum and chatted her up.

Lloyd: I remember Peter and I went to see it with some others. I thought the way it was edited obscured the story a little bit.

Lithgow: I saw the movie in a big empty screening room with my wife and son. I

"MARKETING ASKED ME 'CAN YOU TELL US WHAT THE MOVIE IS?'" PETER WELLER



was thrilled and still thought we'd made the next *Star Wars*. I'm such an optimist! **Richter:** Begelman had convinced himself he was getting a *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, even though he'd read the script. He didn't know how to distribute it. When he killed himself [Begelman shot himself in 1995 at age 73] it seemed somehow appropriate, that all that madness we couldn't understand would end that way. **Weller:** I was disappointed by how the movie did — I thought it was magical and was gonna be a hit. Marketing actually brought me in and asked, "Can you tell us what this movie is?" They asked me! "Is this sci-fi? Adventure? Comedy?" I didn't quite know what to tell them. **Brown:** I was disappointed that it didn't do as well as it could have because they signed us on to do sequels. I was really hoping to spend the rest of my career with that group. **Weller:** Maybe it was too sophisticated, but you could say that its sophistication, its hipness, is what made it a classic. **Rauch:** The box office reception didn't bother me, since a cult film requires oxygen to grow. If interest in the film had been huge, only to abate quickly, we probably wouldn't be having this conversation. **Richter:** It could've been so much better. I don't think the audience feels deprived because they don't know what it could have been but it would have been exhilarating, especially if we kept Jordan on as cinematographer. When we lost him we lost a major creative force on the movie.

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES

Richter: It's weird — I'm constantly reminded that people really like it. So we've accepted it, but I don't understand it. It's astounding that it has had this long life. **Lloyd:** I go to a lot of conventions, and so many people wanna talk about *Buckaroo*. It is a bizarre story, but the film had a lot of truth that held up, as strange as it was. **Brown:** It's dated in ways that nobody can help — the hairdos and clothes. But I think because it was so extreme in those choices that it kind of transcends that temporal moment and lives beyond its timeframe. I don't think I've ever been in a movie where everybody liked the characters so much. **Richter:** Its popularity was incremental. A fan club sprang up, and later fan websites, and at some point you realise, "It's not going to vanish." I think the movie lit a fire under some people. How wonderful is that? It's a really good feeling. **Weller:** Once I ran into this packed New York bar called 'Perfect Tommy' [a character in the film] that had all this *Buckaroo* memorabilia inside. Then the DVD came out and sold well, and people started asking about a sequel [*The movie ends with the title card 'Watch for the next Buckaroo Banzai adventure: Buckaroo Banzai Against The World Crime League'*]. I realised it was becoming bigger than a typical cult film — people from all walks of life come up and tell me they love it.

Clockwise, from top: The flamboyantly dressed Black Lectroids (Red Lectroids being the bad guys, right? Right.); Jeff Goldblum wants to know why the watermelon is there; Lithgow loses it as Christopher Lloyd gives him the finger; Buckaroo in the red glasses which threatened production.

Lithgow: Over the years people will come up and tell me what their favourite movie of mine is, but the coolest ones always say *Buckaroo*. I wish I had a nickel for every time I've been asked to say, "Laugh-a while you can, Monkeyboy!" **Richter:** A sequel is almost impossible. I have a hard time keeping track of who has the rights, which Begelman sold off in weird deals. A TV show almost got made a few times, but there are just too many gaps in the paperwork. But that's Begelman — he didn't keep records, and we were basically funded by a bunch of crooks. **Brown:** I think it would be fun to get us all together at some point and say "30 years later..." Get the Hong Kong Cavaliers back together. The Eagles had a reunion... **Rauch:** I am surprised and baffled by the film's longevity, but, then again, that was our plan all along. I continue to hold out hope [for a sequel]. Hollywood is a strange planet full of people who are simultaneously incredibly brilliant and incredibly stupid. You just never know which multiple personality might roll out of bed with a bold idea on any given day. So will *Buckaroo* return? Maybe. Like Jesus, he'll be pissed.

BANZAI ROCK!
Use the free *viewa* app to scan the page and see the Hong Kong Cavaliers rock!

THE ADVENTURES OF BUCKAROO BANZAI ACROSS THE 8TH DIMENSION IS OUT NOW ON DVD AND BLU-RAY.