



impact/interview



The UK's own Jesse Johnson has worked as a stuntman or second unit director on all manner of major motion pictures including, most recently, *Mission Impossible 3* and Robert Zemeckis' upcoming *Beowulf*, but his true passion behind the camera is as a writer/director of his own projects. Johnson's feature debut was *The Honourable* starring world class martial artist Dominique Vandenberg who would later star in *Fighters*, the movie that really introduced both of them to a bigger audience. Johnson has recently wrapped production on *The Last Sentinel* (starring Don Wilson and reviewed last issue), the sci-fi thriller *Alien Agent* with Mark Dacascos, and is currently wrapping the dark thriller *The Butcher*. Impact's Eastern Editor Mike Leeder brings us the first of a two part interview with Jesse Johnson.

Impact: Jesse, how did you first get involved with both the martial arts and movie making and who were some of your early influences?

Jesse Johnson: The English are an island race created from barbarians and to fight is in our blood, as refined and enlightened as we may appear on the one hand, the English have just as diligently, throughout history, perfected the art of warfare and killing. We have that great dichotomy. (Laughing.) Enter *The Dragon* was the first and most pivotal martial arts movie for me, it still is - not from a directing standpoint - in that respect it's pedestrian, but Bruce Lee exploded from the screen in every scene he was in. I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker after



seeing *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* - I just hired Vernon Wells last week - it was a thrill for me. I wore out my copies of the Sergio Leone westerns re-watching them as a teen.

You've worked extensively as a stuntman and second unit director, before making the move to director, do you feel that has served as a good training ground for you?

Jesse Johnson: Every day on a movie that I wasn't directing fueled me to write and motivated me. I watched a lot of things I disagreed with and saw a few moments that truly floored me with the skill of an individual technician or director. Stunt work is obviously an incredible way to become familiar with the fundamentals of action choreography or special effects, and working in bigger budget pictures allowed me the unique opportunity to watch world class technicians at work, you pick up skills this way and learn a great deal. You might learn about dealing with actors a little too, calming their fears and suggesting ideas to them. There are facets of stunt work that are great for learning to direct and other things, though, which you cannot prepare for. A stuntman goes to work when he's called, heads home at wrap, directing is a life commitment, they own you, you're useless to the world until that film is delivered. I sometimes worked three or four jobs a week as a stunt man, and then went climbing or motor-cycling in my off time, that all ended when I quit wearing pads for a living.

There is really no half measure to becoming a director, you must be completely consumed with it, it must take precedence over everything else and you must be prepared to go to war to get your film made (and not get paid for most of it), that's the part most people aren't prepared for. Unless you have a trust fund, or are independently wealthy it is a terrifying expedition into the unknown, with no assurances or emergency exits. The single most

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JESSE JOHNSON:
PROBABLY THE GREATEST
BRITISH ACTION MOVIE
DIRECTOR IN THE
WORLD?

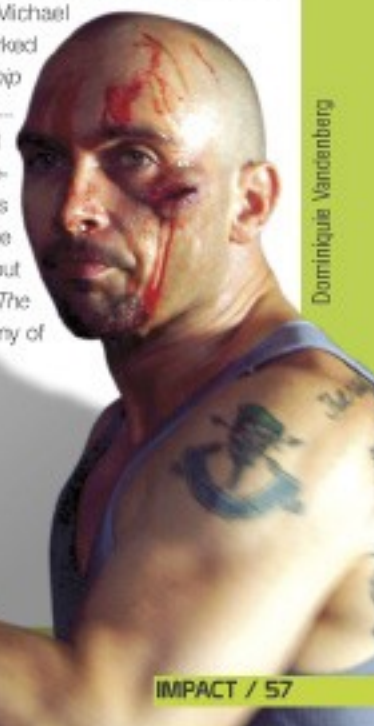
"If you are going to compete with the studio films you must fight them on a battlefield they are not prepared to visit - nowadays that is 'political correctness.'"



important thing to do is never forget how incredibly bloody lucky I am to be in the position of being paid to do this. I still try to treat every camera set up like it was my last.

The first time we heard of you was when an early issue of Total Film reported on your short film *Death Row: The Tournament*. The project seemed like you and Dominique Vandenberg's take on the whole *Running Man* sub-genre - was this project originally planned as a showcase or promo reel to be expanded into a feature?

Jesse Johnson: I developed it as a short, for me the story was intriguing as a ten minute subject and really packed a punch. I never intended for it to be a feature length project. *Death Row: The Tournament* really says it all fairly succinctly. I hoped it would show people I could do something cinematic, with a three act structure that looked professional in every respect. The overt violent action and slightly political twist were things that have always appealed to me. I like to make films that you can watch as entertainment, but that also, hopefully, resonate with enough cerebral depth that, should you wish to peel back the layers, there's a structure there too. That the characters are believable and the situations authentic - that the antagonist and the protagonist have their reasons for their actions - not that you're expected to believe that they just wear a black or white hat. Michael Ironside, who I'd previously worked with on *Totai Recall* and *Starship Troopers* was in that first short, he's also in *The Butcher*. We shot his scene last week, he's awesome, so cool! He's sometimes gotten a bad rap for some of the lower budgeted films he's done, but people forget he was in *Top Gun*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Scanners* and many of the best Verhoeven pictures.



Dominique Vandenberg

JESSE JOHNSON INTERVIEWED
ACTION MAN!



Now the short starred your longtime partner in film, Dominique Vandenberg who's been a French Foreign Legionnaire, a Thai boxer, a Cage fighter, a bodyguard, an actor and so much more. How did the two of you come together?

Dominique played a small role in *Mortal Kombat*, a film that I was an assistant director on. I had just completed a 'Promo trailer' (two minutes of footage edited to look like excerpts from a complete movie) for an action movie that I was showing to anyone who would stand still for two minutes, he saw it and we started planning our world domination.

Dominique's experiences in the Foreign Legion were the stuff of legend to me, he was and still is, a great inspiration to me, as well as a dear friend. He has lived the kind of life most of us can only imagine and what is special about Dom as you know, Mike, is that he still lives his life by the code of honour instilled into him in Calvi. If you give your word, that is enough. As I've watched Dominique grow more successful the only changes have been that he leaves bigger tips for waiters and gives \$100 bills to pan handlers. My daughters love him because he always buys huge presents, a rare breed indeed...

Your first full length feature was *The Honorable*. How did this project come about, what was the hardest part of making the film and what do you think of the finished product?

My short film was very successful, so Dom and I figured we'd double the schedule and make a feature film. We put up the \$80K and it was an extremely problematic process. The short was ten minutes and we doubled the length of the shoot but intended to make 90 minutes - the maths was off from the start. I like the legion flashbacks and some of the photography but we made an error with that



film, we didn't deliver enough action. I vowed never to make that mistake again!

I am also 'blue collar' by nature. I like to see stars, I don't care much for a film full of unknowns. I am a whore I know, but I love working with recognizable talent. I should have killed myself trying to get names into that film - anyone! I knew people, I should have pooled them and begged them and camped on their front lawn - I have done that since and it works! I do not watch the film now, I'm proud of it and glad of it for its lessons but had't opt

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Top left & right: Dominique in action in scenes from *Pit Fighter*. Lower left: Jesse and daughter with Steven Bauer. Below: Jesse checking a shot.



BRUTALITY
OLD BOY HAS ONE OF THE BEST FIGHT SCENES IN ANY MOVIE...



back, but insult or push him too far and, well, you'll discover he's old fashioned in that respect, too.

ted me a profit it would have been an expensive film school.

Now you really made a name for yourself with the dark classic *Pit Fighter*, a movie that really pulled no punches. What was the genesis of the film?

After the butt kicking I received on *The Honorable*, then getting pounded around a bit in the development world, working with (what I thought were) well written intelligent dramas that everyone liked but no one would finance, I decided to create a film that was not remotely ambiguous in what it was. I wanted to make an unadulterated and unrepentant B-movie that delivered exactly what it promised without aspirations of intellect or false marketing. I remembered *Diller Kilar* from my youth, or 'I spit on your Grave' films that were able to garner attention, not because of their budget or cast or schedule (or quality, unfortunately), but because they shocked and enraged people, most of whom would never see the movie of course...

If you are going to compete with the studio films you must fight them on a battlefield they are not prepared to visit - nowadays that is political correctness. The studios have a mandate to water their films down, to appeal to as many audiences as possible, to dilute whatever kernel of truth their product may possess. In this country (USA) there is an incredibly strong religious element too... very powerful in regard to studio distribution and silently governing studio output. A little like the Pope during the Renaissance.

You had a pretty limited shooting schedule and budget but managed to really deliver an incredible amount for the time and money, including, if I am right, a couple of days of shooting that you and Dom financed yourselves. What can you tell us about the shooting of the film?

It was a short schedule, but I had story-boarded and pitched this film for a year before we made it. I had acted the film out in a hundred different offices and knew it intimately. I had drawn costume and character sketches and photographed locations - even shot demos of the fight scenes. When we wrapped shooting on day thirteen of a fifteen day schedule, we were informed the money was done too... so Dom and I, (mainly Dom) financed a few days worth of pick up shots - little things - a trip to Mexico to get exteriors that ended up being punishing... Tjuana, do not go there with a film camera, ever! The financiers of the picture had some scheme going where they could use off-shore money by filming on an island in the British Caribbean for nine days, it was all pretty funny... The four days at Universal had to be scammed and on the down low. The producers who optioned my film panicked when they saw the movie without sound effects and fired everyone - tried to re-cut the movie - got bored and basically deserted the film, taking their names off. I snuck back into the edit room, finished the work, (albeit without ever retrieving a lot of the excised footage) and showed the film. When the producers saw the finished film they were so shocked, they paid \$16K (a tremendous amount for the film) to re-title their credits at the beginning. I would have laughed if I didn't know exactly how much that \$16K could have helped us during the shoot... Yeah well, the film turned out OK considering... and had a phenomenal musical score.

How do you find working with Dominique as an actor? He has a real presence about him in addition to his physical skills...

I love working with him, he's totally professional and hardcore. He never stops trying and has upped his acting game in the last few years. It's good watching him develop. He used to be a bit of a hellraiser at the weekends, but he's curbed that back now. Dom will give you the shirt off his

The action in *Pit Fighter* is very brutal. Was that something you really wanted to emphasize? Do you find that a lot of producers at times want over-stylized action or very 'Hong Kong' styled martial arts?

I'm not really into the high-flying wire-work fights. It's pretty and well choreographed, but so are musicals and, to me, it's more of an aesthetic experience than a visceral one. There is a great pagantry in Chinese culture - I remember the Chinese New Years in London, watching it all transpire... This operatic out-look has carried into their motion pictures and is representative of a great nation's heritage, at once exciting, vibrant and beautiful. Do I want to make those movies? No. *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger* were exciting and original stories, wonderfully told. Most western audiences had never seen the dance style of fighting and it was fresh and different... I have been around too many violent and situations, seen a little of the underbelly of society - searched it out as someone who wants to write authentically in this field. There is a thrill for me, watching action, and it doesn't come from choreographed flying and standing on sword tips... that's pure fantasy and of little interest to me as anything other than a technical study of the film techniques and equipment used.

Now *Ong Bak*, for example, has some fine fight scenes but I got lost in between, while *Old Boy* has one of the best fight scenes in any movie I've seen in a long time. I loved it... re-watched it four or five times in fact...

In the second part of the *Impact* interview with Jesse Johnson, we discuss the brutality of the action in *Pit Fighter*, working with Dan Wilson and Katee Sackhoff on *The Last Sentinel*, *Alien Agents* with Mark Dacascos and Johnson's latest project, the dark thriller *The Butcher*.

MIKE LEEDER