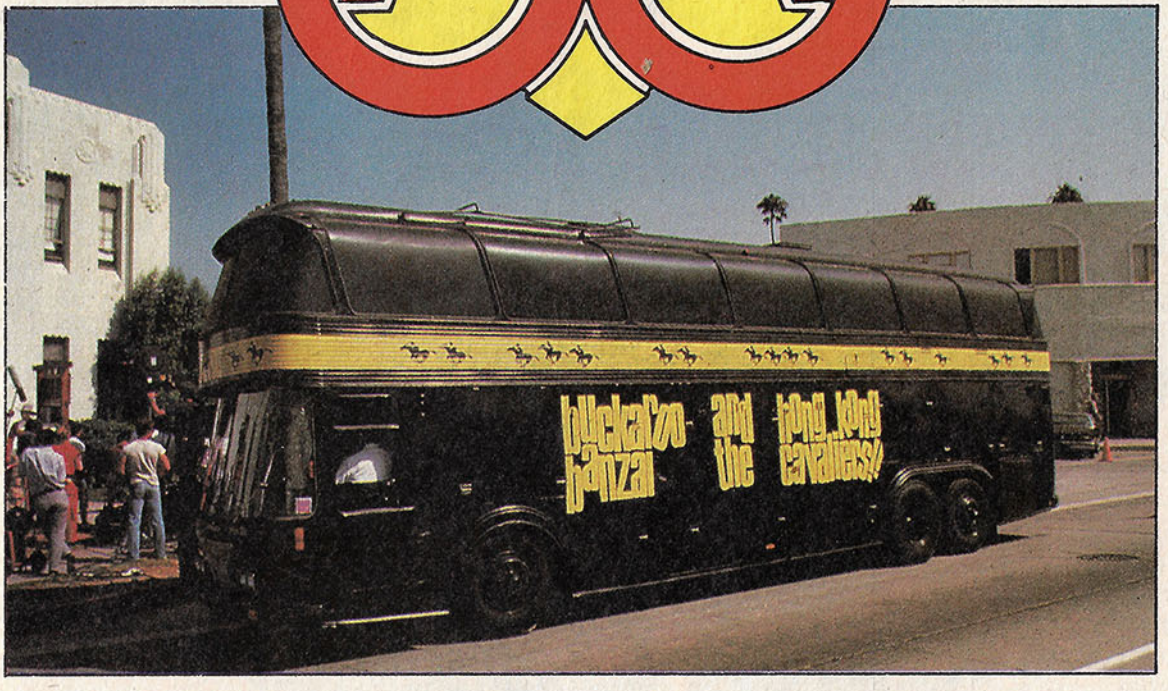
AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR OF

# BUCKAROO BANZAI

## W.D. RICHTER

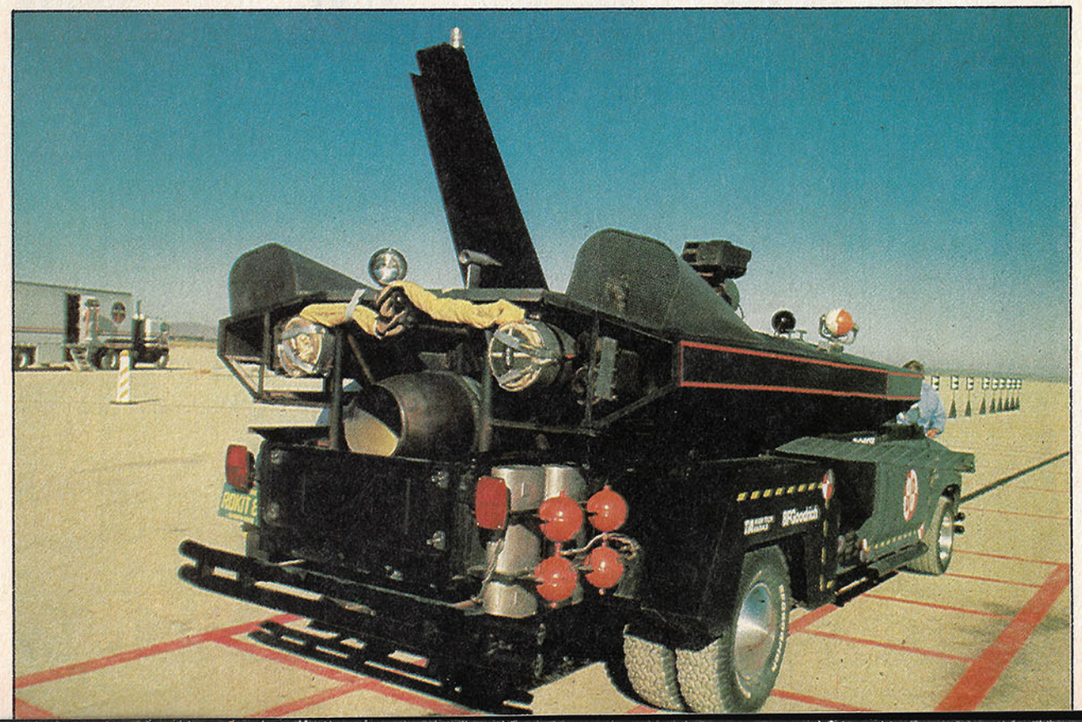
by JAMES BURNS

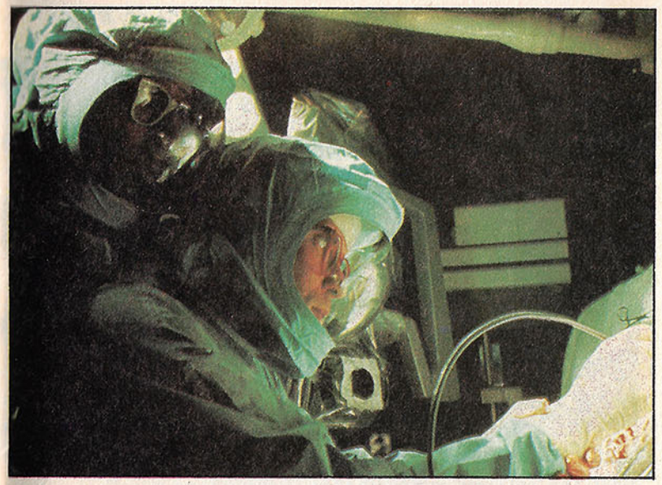




The interior of the blockhouse, Professor Hikita anxiously analyzes telemetric information from the Jet Car.

Buckaroo Banzai's pioneering wheeled vehicle, the land sound barrier-breaking Jet Car.





After Doctor Zwibel (left) suffers from a moment of indecision during a still experimental surgical technique, Doctor Banzai is called in and leads the medical team through a critical point of the neurosurgical procedure.



At the Blockhouse, Senator Cunningham confers with the President on the status of the Jet Car test. General Catburd and Secretary of Defense McKinley look on.

–"Don't short-sell your own world," advises W.D. Richter, the director/producer of *Buckaroo Banzai*. "Moviegoers *don't* have to flee from reality in order to be entertained. Our film speculates that there are things right around us that are as weird and exciting as *anything* you might find in another galaxy."

*Buckaroo Banzai*, created and written by Earl Mac Rauch, promises to be one of the strangest amalgams of science fiction and heroic adventure ever attempted. To enable audiences to be drawn into that saga, Richter figured that they'd have to believe that its events, despite their oddness, could actually happen (a key to the dramatic success of *any* kind of fantasy endeavor). Resultingly, the director surmised that *Buckaroo Banzai*'s production design would be crucial. To help lend the film credence, Richter wanted *Buckaroo Banzai*'s milieu to be as realistic as its wild plot would allow.

"Since the real world appears ramshackle — because people constantly repair whatever's around them — the film has a purposely unpolished look," Richter says, "That reaffirms the idea behind Buckaroo's character: he's a man who puts things together from odd places, using all the different disciplines that he's dabbling in. The Jet Car, for example, looks like it was built by someone with a good idea, rather than a million dollars: you can see its welds and paint chips. Buckaroo's approach is simple: Take a tool meant for his Jet Car, and figure out a way to use it in neuro-surgery.

"Lizardo and his colleagues have also reshaped their portion of our world," continues Richter, "but while trying to remain inconspicuous. What the aliens *think* wouldn't be noticeable to 'regular earthlings', however, is some of the bizarrest stuff imaginable. We tried to infuse the Lectroids' scenes with a sense of culture, to forge a mythical civilization."

Aiding Richter's fabrication of *Buckaroo Banzai* was production designer Michael Riva, whose previous experience included *Bad Boys*, *Brubaker*, and *Ordinary People*.

"To achieve an environment that would not only appear fantastic, but have a basis in reality," Richter comments, "Mike did a lot of research in medicine, physics, electromagnetism, mathematics . . . He really enjoyed remaking a messy world. Mike has a great dramatic sense,

and incredible powers of observation, which — in addition to wonderfully realizing the script — actually inspired Earl Mac Rauch to devise even more unusual concepts."

One of the productions's toughest tasks was deciding how the Lectroids would be physically rendered.

"At the least, we wanted to make sure that they weren't just guys in jumpsuits from outer space," says Richter. "The Lectroids' clothing, while disguised as humans, is actually a bit more normal than their surroundings, since they've had to blend in with society. John Parker and the 'good' Lectroids have a warrior-like demeanor, but in an elegant, not fierce, fashion. Part of their costumes were derived from African tribal markings. Michael consulted Russian histories for the Lectroids at Yoyodyne, to give them a baggy-suited, Moscow bureaucrat sort of image. Our goal was to have the Lectroids' 'everyday' appearance reinforce the film's intended aura of reality. You've *seen* people like John Bigbooté on line at the bank, or getting the tires on their cars changed. Maybe *they're* Lectroids too . . .

"We based the Lectroids' *alien* form," Richter adds, "on a Canadian anthropologist's extrapolation of what the dinosaurs may have evolved into, had they survived. We modified the scientist's concept, because doing it fully would have required prosthetics that immobilized the performers wearing them. The outfits we wound up with are scarey-looking, but the Lectroids *aren't* purely fright figures; they should also amuse you. In many ways, *Buckaroo Banzai* is a funny film."

The actors who star as the Lectroids in their human mode also portray the creatures' true, reptilian selves. To create the Lectroids' alien visages, the film employed latex appliances ("about twelve separate pieces" per alien). According to Richter, each actor's makeup was unique, having been built up over casts taken of their faces.

"Using the appliances was far better than the option of having the actors wear anonymous, pullover masks," the director says. "Although the masks would have been far less time-consuming, the makeup allowed personality to show through."

Further adherence to Richter's overall scheme included shooting 90% of the film on location, in such seemingly unlikely places as a gutted Firestone Tire and Rubber factory, Armco Steel, warehouses, and an operating facility of the Department of Water and Power.

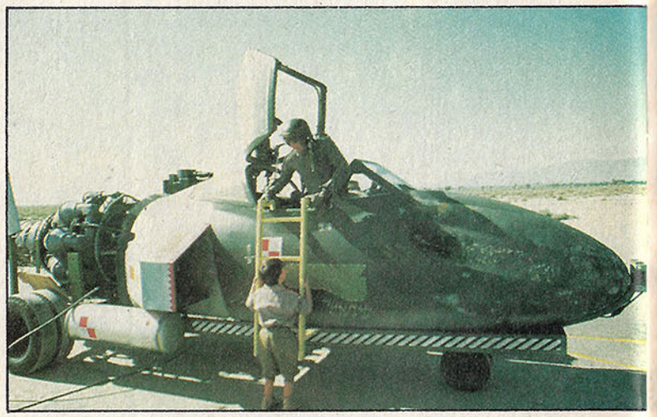
"I needed something on film that would be startlingly different," Richter says. "The locations were terrific: basements dripping with grease, huge chambers with generators in them, strange pipes hanging down from the ceilings . . . Another advantage to shooting on location was that since we had a relatively small budget for this kind of film (roughly $12 million), we were enabled to make a little look like a lot. I hope that *Buckaroo Banzai*'s audience *will know* that they aren't merely watching sets. It could make them think, 'Wow, this story *could really* be happening someplace.' "

To lens the Lectroids' 8th Dimension, "an organic universe," Richter tapped another "location," but one never before available to filmmakers.

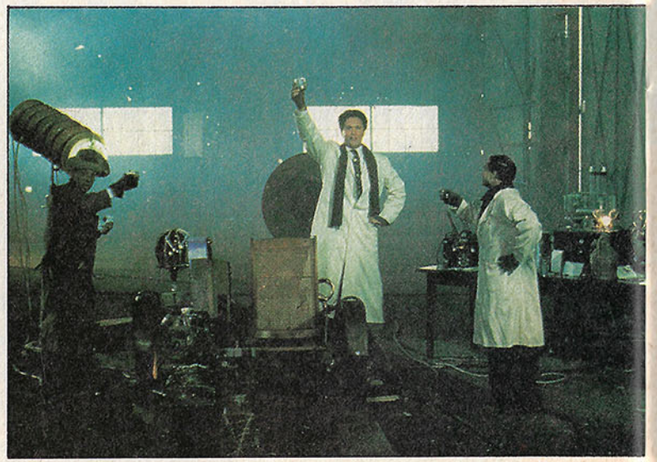
"If you've seen a photo of a cell taken by an electron microscope," Richter says, "you'll have an idea of what we've featured. What's new is that Green Light, a small special effects house, found a way to — photographically — *move through* a cell, by using a motion control system (the type of device ordinarily used to film miniatures in standard special effects situations, like a battle in outer space). Once you're within a cell — be it of bacteria-rotted cheese or even a piece of paper — it looks amazing."

Most of *Buckaroo Banzai*'s shooting plans were hatched during a three-month preproduction phase. Joining Michael Riva on Richter's staff were such other behind-the-scenes luminaries as visual effects supervisor Michael Fink (*War Games*, *One From the Heart*), cinematographer Fred Koenekamp (an Academy Award-winner for *The Towering Inferno*), costume designer Agnes Rodgers (*Return of the Jedi*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), and set decorator Linda Descenna (an Oscar nominee for *Blade Runner* and *Star Trek — The Motion Picture*). *Buckaroo Banzai* also boasts the contributions of three men *previously* familiar to fantasy fans: make-up whiz Tom Burman (*Cat People*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), miniature-model masters Greg Jein (*V*, *1941*, *Close Encounters*) and Mark Stetson (*Ghostbusters*, *Star Trek — TMP*).

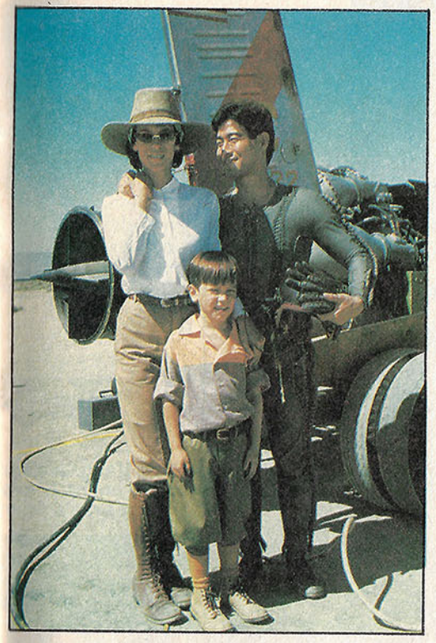
"Virtually every aspect of *Buckaroo Banzai* was open to influence from whomever on the movie had a good idea," Richter reveals. "Delegating authority — always a secret to good



**1950: The 'cold war' prototype of the modern Jet Car. Young Buckaroo assists his father.**

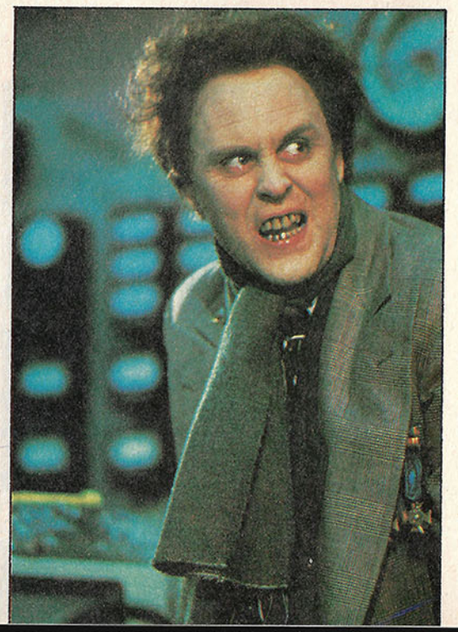


**1938: A pastoral scene of gentlemen scientists raising a glass in salute to the mysteries about to be unraveled. In attendance at the site of the gravity catapult experiment, are Sir Alan Motley, Doctor Emilio Lizardo and Professor Toichi Hikita.**



**A snapshot from the 50's, Doctor Sandra Banzai, Doctor Masada Banzai and their son, Buckaroo.**

**The thoroughly insane John Whorfin, still known to the world at large as Dr. Lizardo.**



directing — was especially important on this picture, because we only had twelve weeks in which to shoot it. I had to trust the technical people to do their work properly, because once on the set, all I had time for was handling the film's performances and action. Anything else on my part — like making sure that a light was twice as bright for some obscure reason — would have been self-indulgent.

"I originally thought of the crew we hired," Richter details, "by consulting lists I'd made through the past several years of people whom I'd one day like to work with. They, in turn, put me on to other talented production personnel. The final group — or 'Team Banzai' as we called ourselves — did a great job, and were incredibly happy not to be suffering through the average movie experience. There was a marvelous conspiracy to make something truly unusual."

Prior to *Buckaroo Banzai*, Richter had served in the film industry for over a decade, as a screenwriter. His involvement with this project, however, can be traced back to before he was even *interested* in a movie career.

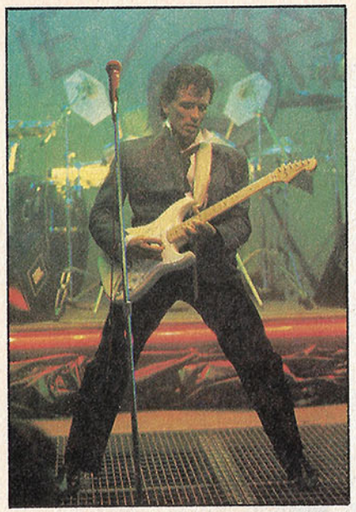
During the late '60s, Richter gained a degree in literature from Dartmouth College, and upon graduation traveled across the country with his wife Susan to attend the University of Southern California's film school. Soon after completing USC's courses, Richter began getting work, including 1973's *Slither* (his first original screenplay to see production).

A year later, Richter and his wife read a review of *Dirty Pictures From the Prom*, a debut novel by another Dartmouth grad, in their alumni association's newsletter. Richter bought the book, liked it, and decided to send its creator a fan letter.

*Dirty Pictures From the Prom*'s author was *Earl Mac Rauch*.

Richter recalls, "I wrote, 'I think you're a terrific writer. If you're not happy doing what you're doing, maybe you'd like to come to Hollywood and try movies, because there really aren't that many good writers out here.' It turned out that, after Dartmouth, Mac had dropped out of law school, and was selling finance contracts for mobile homes in Texas. He took me up on my offer."

At one of Rauch's first dinners with the Richters, "He told us about *Buckaroo Banzai*. Even though Mac's plot and characters were just in a beginning, sketchy phase, Susan and I were



**Buckaroo Banzai, lead guitarist of . . .**



**. . . the Hong Kong Cavalier laying down some hot rock 'n ro at Artie's Arter**

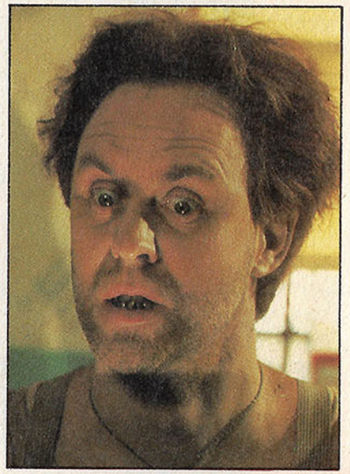
**A morose Penny Priddy takes in the music, but cannot enjoy it.**





**The Studio / Computer Room of the Banzai Institute.**

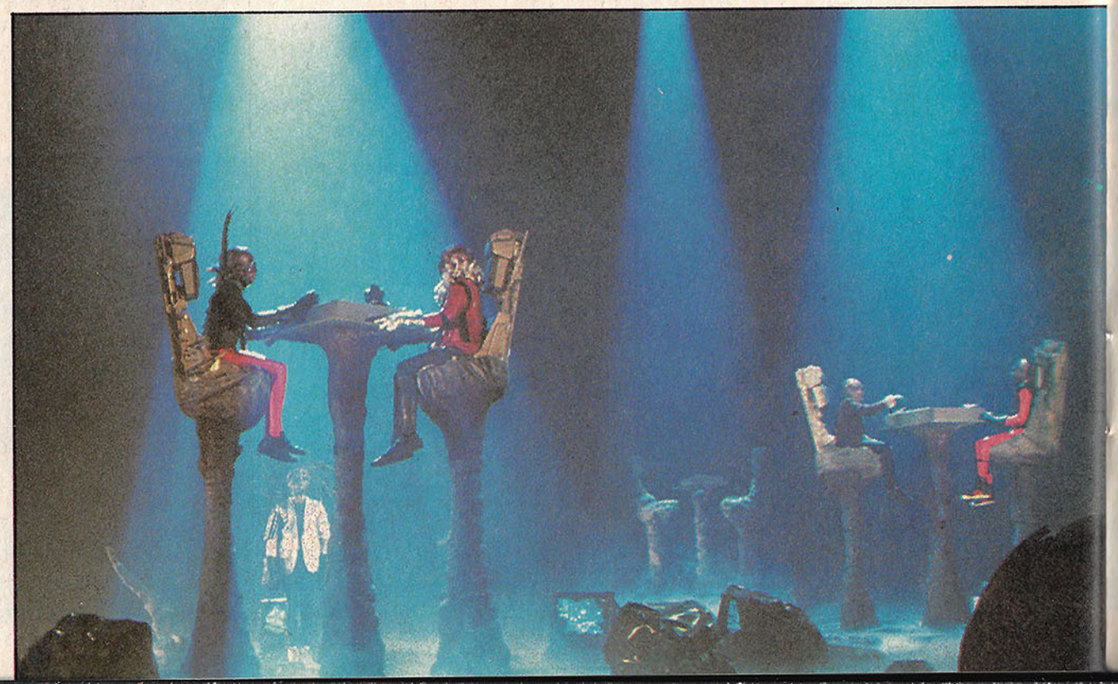
**John Whorfin receiving a piece of bad news.**





**An ignominous crash landing in New Jersey: an alien thermopod is shot down by duck hunters.**

**Aboard the alien spacecraft, orbiting overhead, high commanders decide what course of action to pursue.**



**A wary Buckaroo treads softly behind the alien landing site and makes a startling discovery.**



immediately attracted to *Buckaroo*'s irreverence, and the concept of a multi-talented hero who's always off on an unlikely adventure. We decided to subsidize a *Buckaroo Banzai* screenplay. I didn't know if I would direct it back then, though. I wasn't sure of *what* the project's future would be anyway. As strange as *Buckaroo Banzai* may seem today, ten years ago, it would have been impossible to explain to a studio how it could be successfully shot and marketed. I realized that funding Mac might just be an exercise in buying a very expensive story that I wanted to read, but my other, perhaps even more important impetus, was that I wanted to help him get started in the movie business."

Consequently, with the Richters' input, Rauch wrote *several Buckaroo Banzai* adventures.

"Mac would get thirty or forty pages into a script, abandon its storyline, and start a new one," Richter says. "The plots involved several different nemeses from our present film, including the infamous Hanoi Xan, Boss of the World Crime League . . . Many of the characters, like Perfect Tommy and Rawhide, weren't created until later drafts. Members of the Hong Kong Cavaliers that Mac did include, as well as other roles, were eliminated or developed differently. Buckaroo, for instance, wasn't always half-Japanese.

"Mac just thought that the film was too outrageous to *ever* be sold," Richter explains. "He never showed those partial scripts to a studio, and let his inspirations carry him wherever they led. And, though Mac is a brilliant writer, he's also a bit unorganized. If I hadn't kept copies of his various *Buckaroo* storylines, they'd have been lost."

Despite Rauch's occasional carelessness ("He once sold a car with his only copy of an original screenplay under the seat," the director notes), Richter's gambit eventually panned out. After a short while in Los Angeles, Rauch started receiving screen assignments regularly, including Martin Scorcese's *New York, New York* and, more recently, *A Stranger is Watching*.

Richter was also kept busy, penning such movies as Phillip Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* remake, *Dracula* (the Frank Langella version), and *Brubaker* (an Oscar nomination). By 1980, his credits were strong enough to prompt Hollywood to give him a chance to direct. So that he wouldn't "soley be a

director for hire" and could cultivate his own projects, Richter formed a production company, with Neil Canton (a former assistant to Peter Bogdonavich and Walter Hill).

The first film the duo elected to pursue was *Buckaroo Banzai*. They asked Rauch to write a treatment — a synopsis of a screenplay — since he still hadn't thoroughly concluded a *Buckaroo* adventure. The premise would then be used by Canton and Richter to "shop the project around," in hopes of securing backing.

"The synopsis Mac came up with," Richter discloses, "*wasn't* selected from the scripts he had already written. Lizardo and the other aliens appeared *as* Mac wrote the treatment. At that stage, the Lectroids were barely described, referred to only as something like 'red ants.' A treatment is *often* shaped merely as a film's barest kind of launching point. In fact, Mac's original title for the story was *Lepers From Saturn . . .*"

When Rauch finished the treatment, Canton approached veteran producer Sidney Beckerman, for whom he had once worked as a vice-president of production. Beckerman (who would become *Buckaroo*'s executive producer), offered to arrange a meeting for Canton and Richter with David Begelman, then head of MGM. The studio ultimately agreed to finance the picture's "development" — namely, the creation of a screenplay. Although the script would have to be based on the treatment, Rauch's earlier ideas eventually proved to be equally invaluable.

"Much of the film's detailed character histories emanate from those other, unfinished screenplays," Richter relates. "I mean, at one point, the story of how Buckaroo met and married *Peggy* Priddy, who was then murdered by Hanoi Xan, was the framework for the *entire* movie. Almost all of Mac's initial drafts were drawn on, giving us a wonderful web of background material."

Shortly after Begelman gave *Buckaroo* a go-ahead, he left MGM, and the studio subsequently dropped it from their roster. The project remained in limbo, until Begelman again bought it, this time as head of Sherwood Productions, an independent firm. When Sherwood enlisted Twentieth Century Fox to distribute the film, Richter was given a firm start date — after over eight years of preparation — for the shooting of *Buckaroo Banzai*.

**The ill-fated conference that was to be a turning point in mankind's science.**



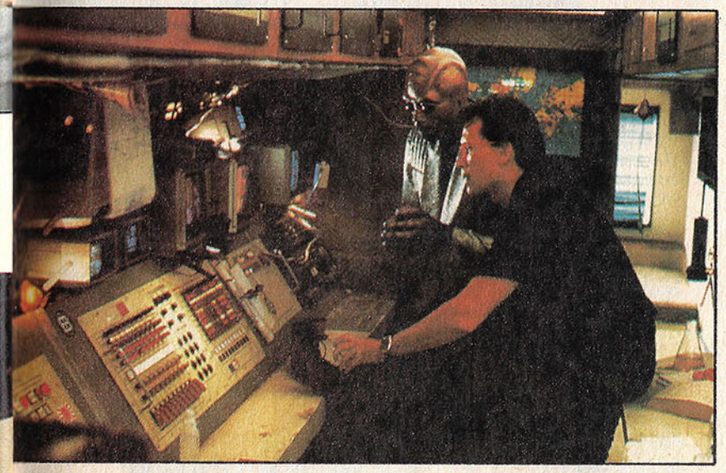
**While New Jersey (the former Dr. Zwibel) renders aid to a fallen comrade, Penny cries out bitterly against moral turpitude.**



**The evil alien elite: John O'Conner, John Whorfin and John Bigbooté.**



**Aboard World Watch One, John Parker and Buckaroo Banzai deal with a startling turn of events.**



**In the rear of the World Watch bus, Buckaroo struggles to maintain inner serenity by practicing the art of iaido, or the quick draw of a samurai sword.**



Once production commenced, Richter had to ensure that his directorial style would adequately translate Rauch's carefully crafted tale to celluloid. One element of *Buckaroo Banzai* that threatened to take the edge off the film's excitement was its aforementioned humor. If audiences perceived the movie as a comedy, it would be difficult for them to take *Buckaroo*'s "dangerous situations" seriously, thereby eliminating much of the picture's suspense potential.

"I think that *Buckaroo* is an adventure *laced* with humor," Richter opines. "At the same time, though, there's probably never a moment in the picture totally without some whimsical slant. We *wanted* to have humor in the film, but never allow the laughs to get silly. Once an adventure film reaches the point where it's consistently winking at the audience, it usually becomes ludicrous. To help prevent that, we went with actors who instinctively played their roles straight. That way, whatever humor was inherent in the material would be brought out naturally, *enhancing* the film's thrills."

Featured in the lineup Richter chose are John Lithgow (*Terms of Endearment*, *Twilight Zone — The Movie*) as Dr. Lizardo; Christopher Lloyd (*Star Trek III*, *Taxi*) as John Bigbooté; Jeff Goldblum (*The Right Stuff*, *The Big Chill*) as New Jersey; Ellen Barkin (*Tender Mercies*, *Diner*) as Penny Priddy; Jamie Lee Curtis (*Trading Places*, *Halloween*) in a cameo as Buckaroo's mother; and a group of lesser known performers whom, Richter says, "are extremely talented. You haven't heard the last of them."

The picture's toughest role to cast, naturally, was that of its title character.

"We needed an actor," says Richter, "who could both look heroic with grease all over his face, and project the kind of intelligence you would associate with a neurosurgeon and inventor. He also had to be able to physically, as well as mentally, act his way through a role. We looked for a Buckaroo in New York, since I figured that an actor with experience on stage or from small films would be able to *completely* interact with props."

After Richter screened numerous candidates for the part, he finally selected Peter Weller. Weller's origins as a "serious" theatre performer (the New York Shakespeare Festival's Tony Award-winning *Sticks and Bones*, *Streamers*) and his work in such films as *Shoot the Moon* and *Just Tell Me What You Want*,

added up to exactly what the director had been searching for.

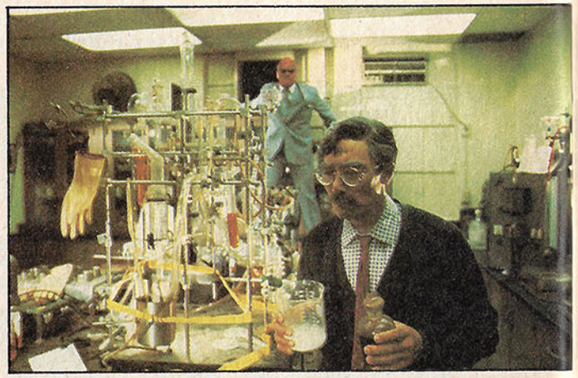
"Peter, and the rest of the cast, had a difficult job in that, to a certain extent, they were playing archetypes," Richter states. "Like the production people, they went *beyond* genre conventions and created something truly unique and engaging. With Peter, there was the bonus that he already knew how to twirl a sixgun (he had been a fast-draw artist in high school), manipulate a sword, play musical instruments, *and* sing. It would have been foolish for me to expect that the actor playing Buckaroo have those aptitudes, but it was great that we didn't have to fake them."

Despite the picture's quixotic tone, Richter claims that its fight sequences aren't stylized.

"This isn't *Billy Jack*. Buckaroo actually fights the way you or I would. If suddenly jumped by three guys, he simply does his best to get out alive. Buckaroo may not be a karate champ, but he gets the job done."

Action, of course, is only one component of *Buckaroo Banzai*. Clearly, the picture is a virtual cornucopia of themes that, Richter feels, film-fans will find fascinating. That diversity, however, could work *against* the film *as a whole*, making *Buckaroo Banzai* emerge as an indecipherable hodgepodge.

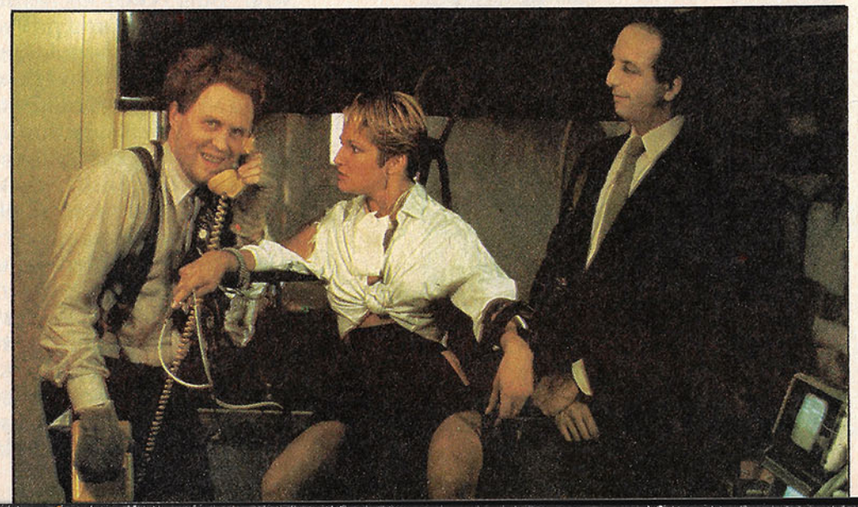
**In the Institute's basement laboratory, a preoccupied Professor Hikita is stalked by an alien evil-doer.**



**Penny nervously steals through the underground labyrinth of the basement, on the lookout for alien intruders.**



**A captured Penny recoils from a gloating John Whorfin.**



**The beautiful messenger of doom, John Emdall, appears in Buckaroo's study to address the Hong Kong Cavaliers.**



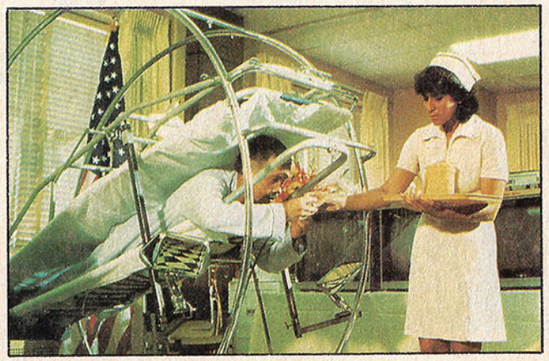
**The lead 'point' of the rescue team: Casper Lindley, Reno, Buckaroo, and Perfect Tommy.**



"We tried to avoid a general lack of clarity by zeroing in on story logic," Richter says. "Yet, a certain amount of disorder could *benefit* the picture, by further fleshing out its sense of weirdness. After all, *Buckaroo Banzai is* a movie *about* confusion. 'How can Buckaroo possibly sort out all of the problems being thrown at him?' The *real* danger is that the character's confusion could pour over to the audience. Unless they stay up to speed with the movie, viewers could really get lost: not because the story doesn't make sense, but because they haven't been able to assimilate it. For better or for worse, *Buckaroo Banzai* really comes at you full steam."

It was *Buckaroo Banzai*'s complexity that originally made Hollywood hesitant to back it. Richter readily admits that one of Fox's motivations in distributing *Buckaroo Banzai* is the possiblity it provides to duplicate a *Star Wars*-type phenomenon.

Richter confides that he wouldn't be adverse to making another *Buckaroo Banzai* movie, and perhaps even more than one, as long as the conditions surrounding its production were the same as on the present film: essentially, "the cooperation and enthusiasm of everyone" involved. He also points out, however, that "nobody would be interested" in additional *Buckaroo* films, unless the first is popular.



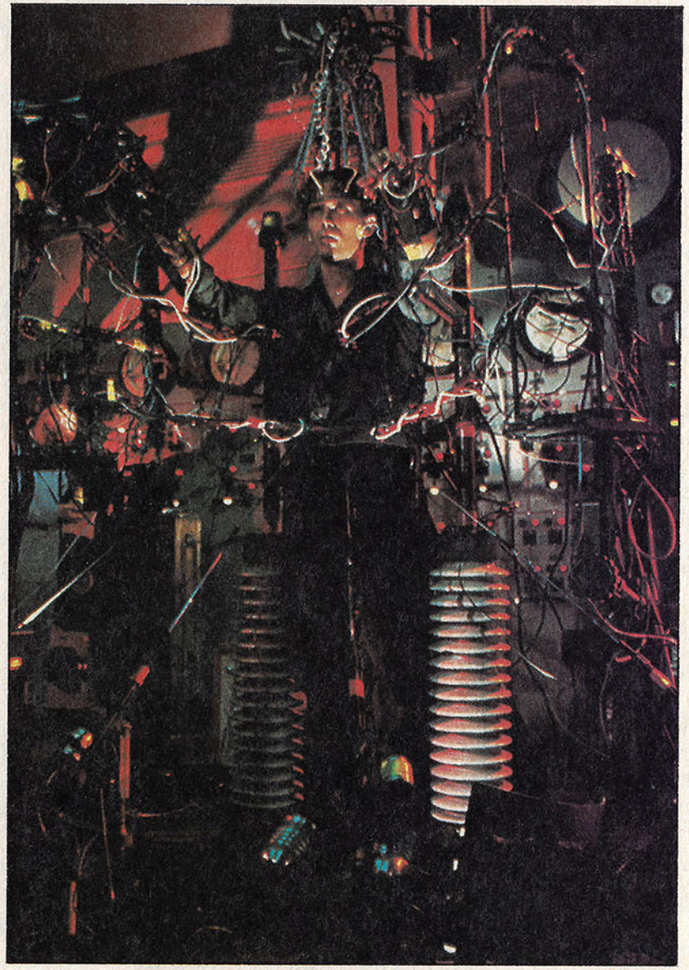
**President Widmark, caught at an awkward moment, contemplates the end of the world as we know it.**



**At the heavily government-contracted Yoyodyne Facility, John Whorfin exhorts a crowd of his alien henchmen to follow him.**

**The mad John Whorfin.**





**To save Penny Priddy, Buckaroo willingly steps into the diabolical Shock Tower.**

**Reno dispatches a Red Lectroid.**



"*If* we make any more *Buckaroos*," Richter avers, "they won't be sequels in the standard sense. They'll be new adventures, rather than merely follow-ups. You could get some good clues about what a 'next film" would entail by reading Mac's *Buckaroo Banzai* novel (available from Simon and Schuster). It's a miraculous piece of writing, that really goes into detail on the Hong Kong Cavaliers: who they are, how they originally came together, and the experiences they've had. You'd meet Johnny 'The Red' Beaumont, 'Brains' Brameyer, and discover that Pecos — who's mentioned in *this* film — is a *woman*, and that she's got something going with Reno. The *total scope* of the picture, though, would depend on what shape the world's in when we make it. Since the world will certainly be different in a couple of years, any sequel would be different from the current movie because it will reflect — even if only in some weird way — that altered society. By then, Buckaroo could be the guy with orange hair."

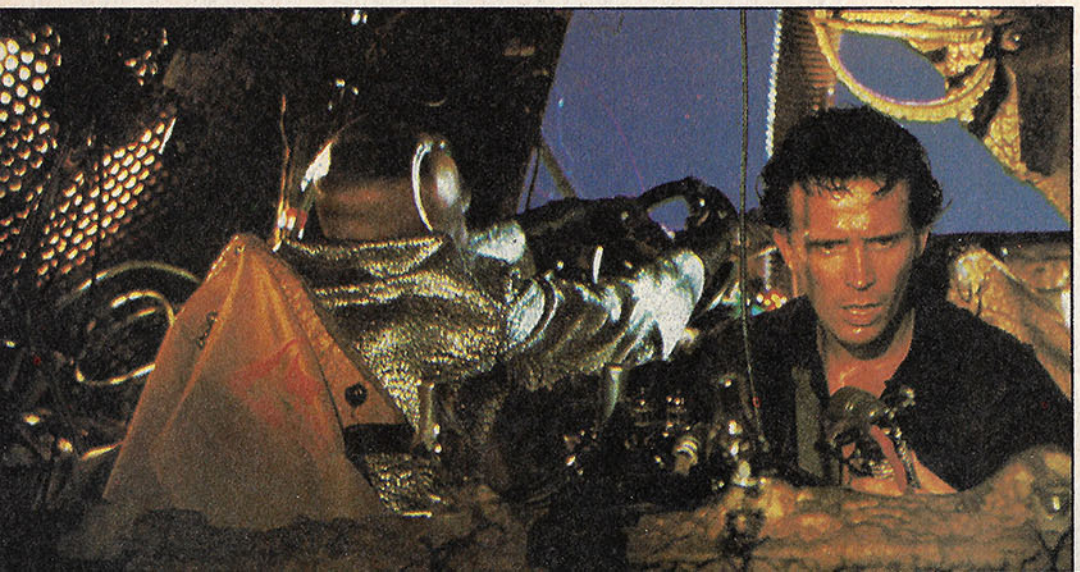
Richter pauses a moment, before concluding, "All of this talk about sequels and money is getting ahead of ourselves. I didn't get into films to become a millionaire. I started writing, and now directing, because *I like movies*. We tried to make a picture that would be entertaining and thought provoking. If we've succeeded in giving audiences a good time for a couple of hours, that's reward enough in itself."



**Aboard John Whorfin's escape ship that was unknowingly paid for by American taxpayers, the alien elite prepare to escape the attacking Blue Blazers.**



**Scooter Lindley, a Blue Blazer Irregular, calmly regards the overthruster while cradling his sawed-off carbine.**



**Buckaroo Banzai and John Parker prepare to do battle with John Whorfin's escape ship. Hanging in the balance: the fate of the Earth.**