

JAY WOELFEL
MIND OVER MONEY

By John Thonen
4/15/99

One of those battling in the low budget trenches is Jay Woelfel, whose 1988 debut film, *Beyond Dream's Door*, was praised here (Cinefantastique Magazine) for its style and imagination. Most recently Woelfel has completed the sci-fi action film *Iron Thunder* and the horror tale *Unseen*, both of which feature recognizable performers along with miniature, digital and make-up effects, at a bargain price of \$100,000 a piece.

Since *Dream's Door*, Jay has worked chiefly as an editor and writer with occasional low budget directing forays, "9 day wonders, he tells "working with a 3 man crew." There was also time served in pre-production hell at Charlie Band's Full Moon Studios and a two year stint creating the Academy Award winning Interactive Documentary TITANIC: AN INTERACTIVE EXPLORATION for Phillips CD I system.

Over the years Jay had struck up a relationships with low budget producer David Sterling. Sterling recalled how they met. "When I first decided to produce, I used to run fake ads in "Dramalog" looking for directors for movie projects that didn't exist. I was looking for people just getting started, but who had the talent and drive to make it happen. Jay was one of the best."

In 1997 Sterling's video post-production company was hired (and then subsequently hired Woelfel to act as editor) to create trailers for a group of low budget film financiers with a pool of money to produce direct-to-video product. Realizing that the moneymen weren't satisfied with the quality of their shot on video product (most of them directed and produced by Donald G. Jackson), Sterling convinced them that he and Woelfel could make better movies, shot in 16mm, for the same budgets. The financiers liked the idea and a deal was quickly struck. Sterling pointed out that, "With these little movies, the more discussion there is, the less likely it is to happen. If you're doing a 50 million dollar film, you need time to think about it, but at these budgets, you either like it or you move on."

The financiers wanted a pair of films and Jay quickly assembled brief treatments for them. Woelfel had become friends with a resourceful production designer named Hunter Cressall who had shown Jay some home movies from his youth, featuring impressive force perspective miniatures. The footage had given Jay the idea for *Iron Thunder*, a science fiction movie about futuristic tank warfare, a concept he describes as "*Das Tank*." Woelfel tells that Cressall once told him *Iron Thunder* was the perfect low budget movie because "almost all the action is miniatures, which don't involve actors, and the dramatic stuff takes place in one set, the inside of the tanks." With a laugh, Jay added, "It's really a movie about people sitting in chairs."

Along with *Iron Thunder*, Jay also pitched *Unseen*, which he describes as "*Predator* meets *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*," a concept his frequent cinematographer, Scott Spears, was developing. Sterling and the moneymen liked both ideas.

While Jay labored on the *Iron Thunder* script, Sterling had a propitious encounter at a sci-fi convention. He tells that, "Richard (*Battlestar Galactica*) Hatch was there. "I learned that he had a great reputation as a very likable, easy to work with guy. He's a good actor, with some recognition in sci-fi and he hasn't been overused in a slew of low budget films. He seemed like a good bet."

Hatch, who has spent most of the last decade as a motivational speaker and acting teacher, tackled the *Iron Thunder* role of Col. Nelson, a veteran soldier, now the subject of a military experiment to allow a tank pilot and his vehicle to directly interface. Previous experiments have resulted in problems and Nelson's stint as a guinea pig turns out to be no exception. The career-warrior snaps, thinking he is trapped behind

enemy lines, he sets out towards Las Vegas in a fully armed tank capable of leveling the city. Woelfel recalled that, "I had envisioned Richard for the hero role; commander of the pursuit tank, but he wanted the Nelson part. I don't think he had been acting much and I think he found it fresh and exciting to dip into those parts of himself that he hasn't used in a while. I was very lucky. He's unspoiled, almost without ego. He liked the idea, the character, and I think he liked me. I think those things had as much to do with it as anything, because it sure wasn't the money we were paying him."

Meanwhile, production designer, Cressall tackled the problem of creating the *Iron Thunder* tank by building a full size shell that could be mounted on a trailer to allow it to move. Jay then suggested the shell be painted two different colors so one side could represent Iron Thunder and the other side stand in for the pursuit tank. Cressall also supplied the miniature tanks, which were motorized; about 2 ½ feet long and weighed about 40 lbs. They were built with the assistance of Gary Young (*Army of Darkness*, *Titanic*) and Jack Edjorian. Cressall explained that, "Those two guys pulled off a miracle given the time and the money we had to spend." Of his work on *Iron Thunder* Cressall told that, "I fabricated nearly all the props, built and dressed the sets, built the miniature buildings and a helicopter. To say it was a little beyond the normal scope of my job is a gross understatement, and we did it for about the same money as you have in the cushions of your sofa."

Iron Thunder's production took place over 12 days in December of '97; Woelfel recalled that, "The characters do a lot of griping about the desert heat, but it was really, monstrously cold. One of the actors hated these headphones he had to wear, but he learned to love them they kind of functioned like ear muffs." Despite the weather, the production maintained a feverish pace. Jay recalled, "I think our peak day was 15 script pages, about 65 setups, though it's hard to tell for certain" he laughed, "since we couldn't afford a script supervisor." Producer Sterling explained that everyone had to pull double, or triple duty to meet the pace. "I'm a producer, but I'm also a P.A., and the caterer, sometimes. I've even been an actor. About the only time I'm not on set doing something is if I'm out hustling money."

Filmed nearly back-to-back with *Iron Thunder* was Scott Spears' script *Unseen*. Spears had been inspired by 1964's *Sound of Horror*, a Spanish film about an invisible dinosaur. While he thought the film dreadful, he felt an invisible monster was something even a low budget film could achieve. Woelfel was pleasantly surprised when Richard Hatch chose to return and Jay also managed to talk his neighbor, Tim, (*Trancers*) Thomerson into working on the films. While the popular character actor is seldom without work, Thomerson was happy to devote a few days in the San Bernadino Mountains. "Jay's a movie nut, and I am too. I love 'em all. We've spent some time around the apartment pool talking about them and I ended up liking the guy. He's quiet, but commanding on the set, and he knows what he wants. There's no bullshit. I like that."

While Spears' concept was a budget saver, both he and Woelfel realized they couldn't cheat the audience forever, so the creature is gradually revealed as the story unfolds. To help realize the beast's visualization CGI would be added in post-production. To give the cast something to tangible to work against during filming, Woelfel brought in makeup effects artist Greg Feiler, who was recommended by Woelfel's friend Kenneth J. (*Evil Spawn*, *Puppet Master*) Hall. "This was his first paying job" told Jay "and he did great. I didn't think we could afford a full size monster, but he did it." Thomerson describes the beast as "a great big badger-thing" while the director likens it to a "big bug, about the height of a dog." Opposing views, but then who wouldn't be confused about the appearance of an invisible creature?

Unseen's storyline involves a group of anthropologists who stumble on a Native American treasure guarded by the visually-challenged title beast. Hatch plays the villain, while Thomerson turned in a 2 ½ days work in the role of Chuck McNeil. Asked about the character, Thomerson launched into a brief song, "Ranger Chuck, he's a lonely man, lives out in the woods, eats lots of Spam. Ranger Chuck, oh Ranger Chuck, he's Ranger Chuck." He then adds, "I decided he was this ranger/cowboy/intellectual/Thomas McGuane type. So when you see him, just note that he'd read Proust and Balzac before the monster lopped his head off."

Unlike major productions which often rush through post-production in order to start generating income to offset their enormous costs, Sterling and Woelfel's efforts move at a slower pace. Months may pass

between one phase of post-productions and the next. While production has been completed on the films since early '98, the marketing of *Iron Thunder* didn't begin until the Spring of '99, with *Unseen* still in post- production at the time. While Woelfel chomps at the bit for his chance at a larger budget, he does admit there are some advantages to life in the low budget trenches. "The financiers said they wanted a sci-fi action film with a little nudity, and some kind of a name. They told us what our budget was and then left us alone. We really had total creative control within the limits of our money. That's a real rarity at any budget level today."

POSTSCRIPT: The above-mentioned long periods of post-production were part of what spurred me to form my own production company with Johnnie J. Young who had done much of the actual producing work on both these films. And finally on a lighter note, I came up with the Ranger Chuck song on set and Tim Thomerson and I would sing it to get into the mood, so to speak, when filming his scenes. As a present after filming was over Tim gave me a gift-wrapped can of SPAM. I ate it, well I had to it was a gift, and kept the can which I have to this day.