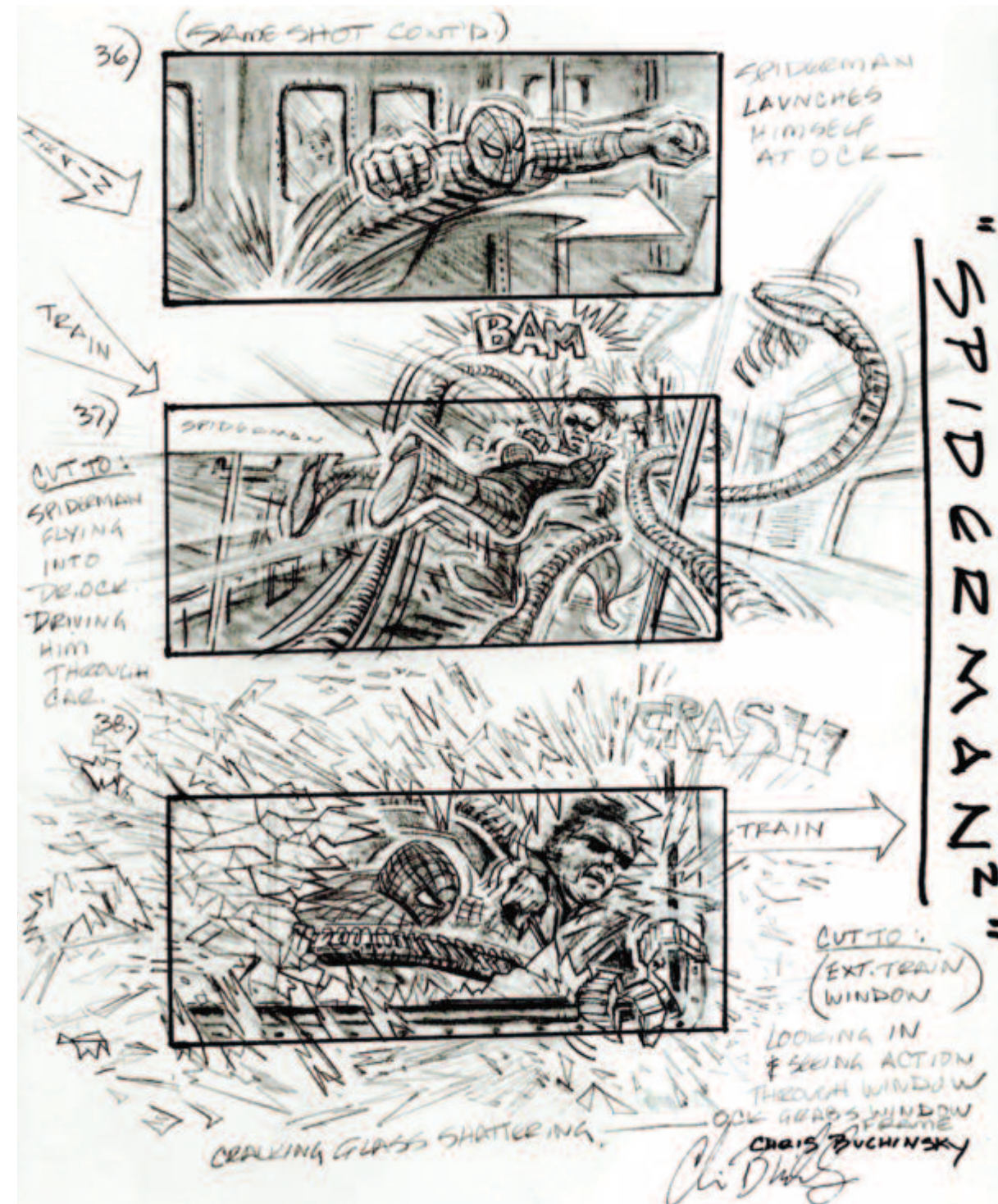


STORYBOARDING

A storyboard can identify potentially costly issues long before they occur, and without one even Hollywood can get it wrong. A witness to many wayward and successful productions is veteran storyboard artist **Chris Buchinsky**. He spoke with **Sean Samuels** about what it's really like to work for the big studios and why drawings may be all you need to save your film.

Have you ever watched a movie and thought, "This doesn't make any sense"? Have you said to yourself, "The storyline is flawed – parts of the film must be missing"? If so, you've probably blamed the storytelling and you'd be right. If you believed this to be the fault of the writer or the editor, however, you'd be wrong. Most likely the story leapt off the script and in the cutting room the editor worked brilliantly to inject whatever pace, energy, passion, drama, tension etc the film required.

No, the responsibility for its irksome lack of coherence rests solely with the director and the producer; both of whom most likely failed to storyboard the piece early enough in the film making process – if at all. A strong and convincing visual narrative is vital to the success of any movie, and with so



much at stake these days at the box office, it is surprising that this costly mistake is ever made. But for storyboard artist Chris Buchinsky, it is one he has seen made all too often.

Considered to be the blueprint for any film, in an ideal world the storyboard is created long before filming commences. This helps the entire crew to visualise scenes as seen through the eyes of the director and identify any potential problems before they occur. Great directors swear by them. Inexperienced ones do not, and if a producer working with a first-time director knows what is good for their production, it is Buchinsky they turn to for help.

"I often get calls from producers at two in the morning saying, 'Can you help me out? I've got a first-time director and we're in trouble.' If I agree to help, the very next morning I'll be in an office with the director, who's usually a young kid. He's got people asking him if he needs anything and gophers running around after him. For me this is like teaching film class on the job, with me walking the director, who has not directed one frame of film ever before in his life, through the process, so that he can come away with a great movie."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Buchinsky will also be called upon when a shoot is nearing completion and the often unstoppable creative force of the director meets the immovable budget of the producer. "This happened with Joel Schumacher, who I loved working with, for the film *Dying Young* starring Julia Roberts," says Buchinsky. "Joel wouldn't discuss scenes any more with the on-set producer, so they needed me to come in, sit down with Joel and pound out storyboards so they knew where their money was going. I then went on to work with Joel on *Batman Forever*."

In years gone by, storyboard artists were thought of as the guardians of continuity – films are shot out of sequence and the boards they create are an invaluable way of checking that everything matches up. This role soon evolved into storytelling when studios realised what a great tool boards were and how much money could be saved simply by planning every shot ahead of time. This was especially true when special effects became a substantial feature in productions.

"I once got a call a few years back from a friend

of mine, David Lowery, who is now the storyboard artist for Steven Spielberg. They had been drawing boards for a whole year for a movie they were planning, that's how important drawings are to Spielberg. So if your film is not planned out on boards, drawn and redrawn like he does, then your film is not going to look like one of his films and God help you if you are opening the same weekend as him."

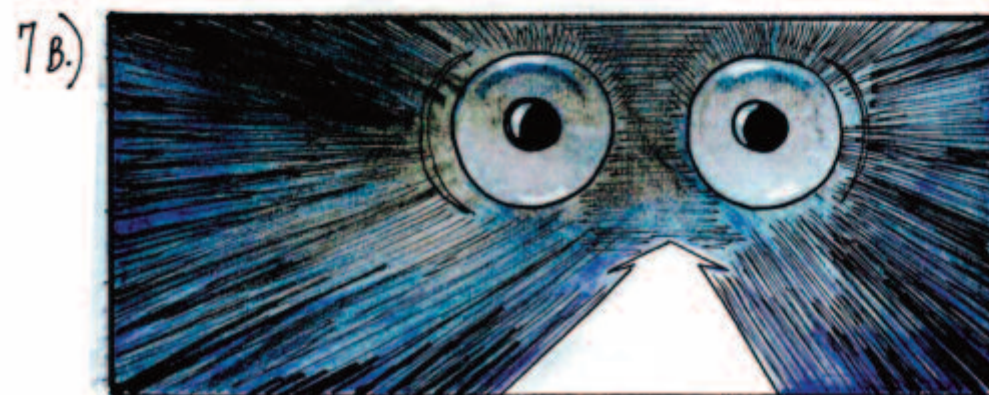
With this level of regard shown by a director as successful as Steven Spielberg, it is incredible to think that there are directors who pay storyboards little or no attention. It is also curious that not so long ago, the trend in Hollywood was to use pre-viz artists instead of storyboard artists.

Believing this to be a time-saving exercise, studios hired computer operators to generate moving previews for directors incapable of reading storyboards. "Producers wanted to see things move because they had directors that couldn't relay in their minds from storyboard frame to storyboard frame what the piece was going to look like," says Buchinsky. "But the problem was these operators were being asked to be film makers and very few had that type of experience." Recounting the times when he would be placed in a room with no windows with a computer operator, Buchinsky remembers fondly how he would race these operators to produce boards for the director.

"Nothing is faster than a pencil. They also come with this great editing tool on the other end, called an eraser. I can knock out a scene in 10 minutes with one of these and if the director doesn't like it I can change it and have it back to them five minutes later. It's crazy really because it takes just minutes to get a concept down on paper and can save everybody millions of dollars in the long run."

Although not as widespread as it should be, the input storyboard artists can offer is regaining favour with directors and studios alike and Buchinsky is seeing a renewed respect for the work he and countless other artists do.

"Last year Martin Campbell, the director of *Green Lantern*, asked me to do storyboards for the film's post effects. We went frame by frame on that project because he wanted me to do storyboards for the pre-viz department and it became routine that they had to wait for me. I became their best friend, their

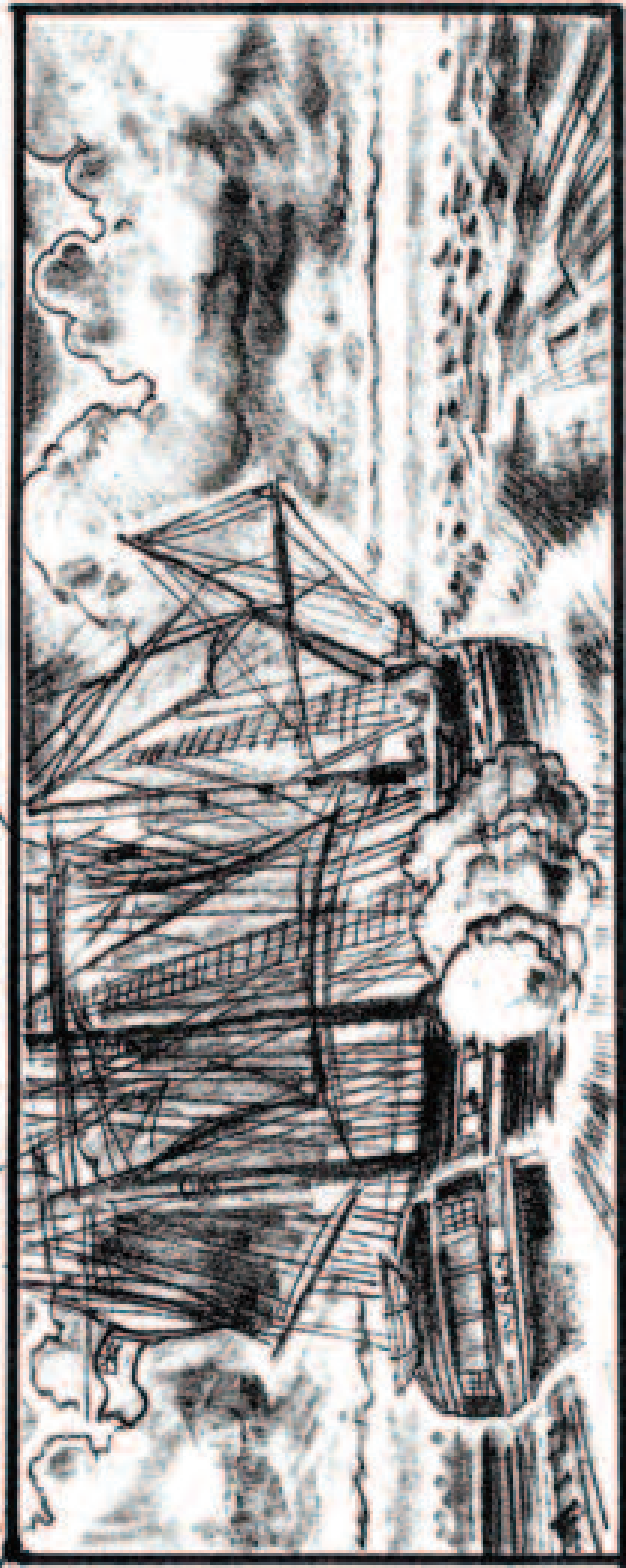


.. I Robot ..

Chris Buchinsky
STORY ILLUSTRATOR CHRIS BUCHINSKY

"MASTER & COMMANDER"

(SAME SHOT CONT'D.)



CUT TO: DOWN ANGLE SURPRISE CANNON FIRE



CUT TO: DIRECT HIT BLOWING HOLES IN ACHERON'S STEEL



CHRISTOPHER BUCHINSKY

best tool. Now the studios are realising that they can't turn pre-viz artists loose with a script. What they thought was going to take over storyboarding now needs storyboards more than ever.

"A lot of the time directors are cool," he adds. "They understand what I am up against, but as pressure mounts and budgets are cut, people change right before your eyes. Jobs are on the line and they freak out so I see it as my role to build up their confidence. From my background in film I can say, 'Do this with this camera. Pick it up with this crane shot.' But there is a protocol you have to follow. You can't upstage directors."

Finding the right place in the hierarchy of a crew is just as, if not even more, demanding than the storyboard work itself as Buchinsky is the first to admit, "Storyboard artists really are low on the food chain." He is also quick to recall a disparaging comment made to him by Academy Award-winning cinematographer, Haskell Wexler. [*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) and *Mulholland Falls* (1990)] "I am doing this movie with Billy Crystal called *61**. I've got my head down drawing every day. I was wallpapering this office frame by frame with what this movie was going to look like. It was a big office that I needed to share with the DP, which was Haskell Wexler. One afternoon he comes into the office, doesn't say a word and just meanders around with a grin on his face nodding. Now a lot of cinematographers don't want storyboard artists to call out their shots. This puts storyboard artists between them and the director, which they don't like. So he's looking at my work without saying a word to me or even acknowledging me until finally he says, 'You know, you're just therapy for the director.'"

It takes a thick skin to weather the challenges of the film industry. Seen as a lifeline by one person, storyboard artists are often perceived to be a hindrance by others, which as demeaning as it sounds is nothing compared to the injustice Buchinsky has felt in the past when he has not been credited for his work. Working as an illustrator for *The Washington Post*, he would see his by-line every day on the front page. But since moving into \$200m movies he has not received a credit for more than half of the 90 productions he has storyboarded on.

"Working on movies is like working on a pirate

ship. There are mutinies. People are thrown off and new people brought on. It usually starts out that you are the director's best friend. You're going to save him money, save his ass and make him look like a rock star. But then, when they have most of the boards, and you have them up to speed and they've got their self-confidence, they don't need you any more. Then they barely even remember to put your name on the movie. As productions roll on, you realise they are looking for ways to save money. More than once I've been walking down a hallway when a producer has stopped and asked, 'Chris, are you still on this production?' Then later on that afternoon I've been told that I'm no longer needed. Now I walk down the hall wearing sunglasses and a baseball hat and try not to be seen."

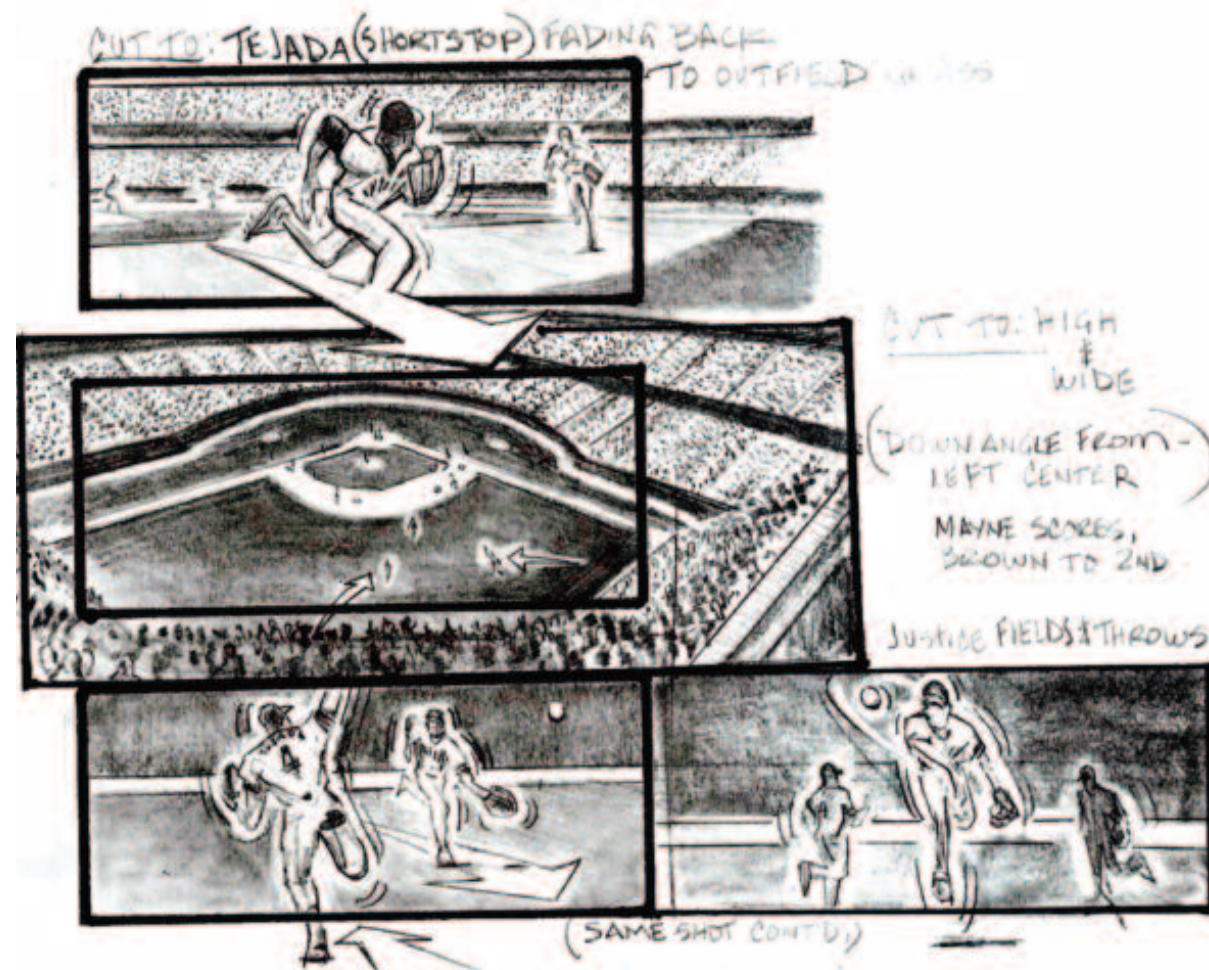
The need to keep within budget is nothing new, but it does seem odd that Buchinsky has been asked to drop his fee or leave before the boards are complete when there is so much money being thrown around. Take the time a Canadian financier decided he wanted storyboards for a project and asked him to draw the whole movie – or, in other words, to ghost direct it.

"After meeting with this guy, the first thing I said we needed to do was scout directions. He says, 'Okay', gives me the tail number of his plane and tells me to meet him at the airport. When I go out there I'm thinking I'm getting on a Cessna or something like that. I arrive to a 737 with a crew waiting for me exclusively in this beautiful private terminal at LAX. There's a black stretch limo parked in the shade of the tail of this plane so it doesn't heat up. At the back of the plane is a line of four crew members waiting to greet me and load my bags. The pilots were the crew for Bill Clinton on Air Force One for eight years. That's how much money this guy had."

Ghost directing is not uncommon for Buchinsky. On many occasions he has taken a completed script and drawn it out from start to finish, only to find his ideas have been used without any correction and without so much as a 'thank you' in the credits.

A particularly dark episode came when James L. Brooks, the producer and creator of *The Simpsons*, asked Buchinsky to work on a film he was making. At the time of the call Buchinsky was in an intensive care unit with his daughter. She had been hit by car,

"MONEYBALL"



had died in front of him and then brought back to life. Having fallen into a coma, Buchinsky did not know if she would live or die.

"I was living in a chair when I picked up a message on my answer machine that was the phone call you wait your whole life for, 'James L Brooks would like to see you in his office Monday morning.' So after not sleeping for three days I raced over to the office building. I don't know what I must have looked like. I walked into his huge office with a fireplace and Academy Awards everywhere for

Terms of Endearment, pictures of him and Jack Nicholson – I mean, it's the Lord's office. All these producers get up off these couches because they have just been having this meeting about me and he hands me my ring binder of samples and says, 'This is really nice.' Then he hands me a script and says, 'See what you can do with this.'

"At the time it was called *Old Friends*, but they would get rid of that and call it *As Good as It Gets*. I drew that movie on the floor of the intensive care unit at UCLA, listening to machines breathing for

(SCENE 169 - CONT'D.)

19.) SAME SHOT

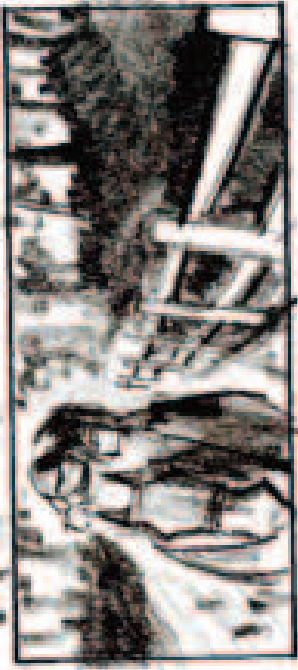


(CONT.
SAME SHOT)

SLOW-BURN
ALONG FENCE

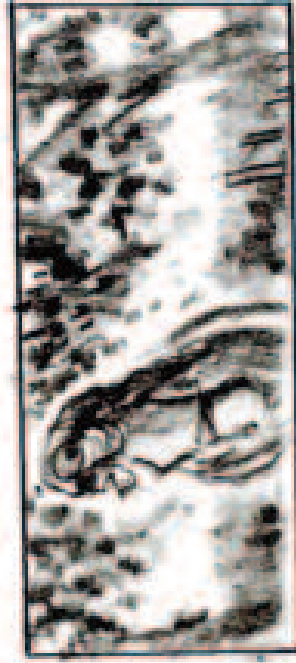
Plt 15
Gully

Cut to:



Camera moving
Horse & rider
Down
Country road

20.)



(SAME SHOT
CONT'D.)

21.)



Cut to: Red

SINGLE

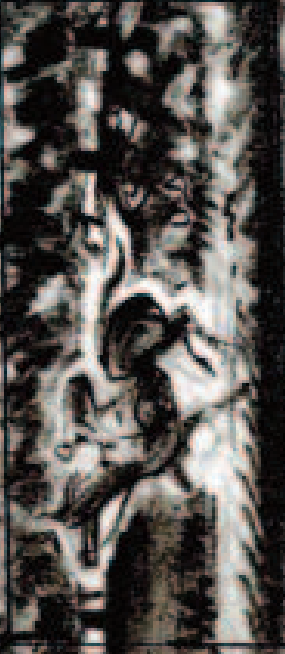
CMON POPS.

LEMMIE SEE WHAT
YOU GOT. "QUICKS
TWICE & VIGES
WITH HIS HANDS

22.)



23.)



"SEABISCUIT"

my daughter. She is fine now, but how do you not take that personally?"

With all of this in mind, I ask him why he continues to work in this field. "I simply enjoy the work because it is a truly creative outlet. Nowhere else in the movie process is that creative," he replies. "A lot of times if the director says, 'Here's how I see this scene', I'll draw it his way and then in the middle of the night I'll draw it my way and present it as an optional take for the scene. A lot of times from then on the director will say, 'From now on show me what you've got', and I end up drawing the entire movie."

With an award-winning background in film making, Buchinsky is a creative voice worth listening to. He has worked with some of Hollywood's best directors and helped to launch the careers of many more. He is a three-time international CLIO Award winner and is currently in the middle of shooting a documentary on the stars of rodeo's PBR World Championship. Yet for all this experience, it is the time he spent with his uncle, the actor Charles Bronson that informed his attitude towards the business the most.

"When I was five years old I used to sit on Uncle Charlie's lap and he would teach me how to draw. He was my first art teacher and my first film teacher really. He would also take me on set and introduce me to everyone. I remember seeing Robert De Niro learning to play the saxophone for *New York, New York* (1977), and going into the model shop where they were sewing the hair onto this huge hydraulic hand for *King Kong* (1976). As an actor he was such a perfectionist. He would rehearse just putting down a glass, over and over, to find the right angle, the apex of the move, everything about the action he was making. Directors and producers just loved to watch him."

Over the course of a career that has lasted 22 years, Buchinsky has created storyboards for big productions including *Total Recall*, *Spider-Man 2* and *I, Robot*. He has also had the opportunity to work with several like-minded directors who value the contribution a good storyboard artist can make to a production.

"There are many directors that I really like working with. Martin Campbell is one. [*Green Lantern*, *Casino Royale* and *The Edge of Darkness*

– both the 1985 mini TV series and 2010 film version starring Mel Gibson] He is a cerebral director and had me draw one frame at a time for *Green Lantern*. Another director I enjoyed working with was Todd Philips. [*The Hangover*, *Starsky and Hutch* (2004) and *Due Date*] They brought me in on *Starsky and Hutch* to help out. Todd had \$64m for that film, as well as Owen Wilson and Ben Stiller in his viewfinder. It was his first feature, but he had a good style. He knew what he wanted and let everything the studio tried to hand him as a young, first-time director, roll right off his back. He just did it with a smile and didn't let the business bother him.

"My favourite director to work with is Peter Weir. [*The Way Back*, *Gallipoli* and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*] I call him Sir Peter because I think he is royalty for Australia. I worked with him on *Master and Commander* and that was just brilliant. He had me down on my knees on board a ship at a 45° angle pitch, saying, 'This angle. See this angle right here. This is what I want.' Then he would take me into the screening room for the dailies, sit right next to me and always ask my opinion. He's well-seasoned, but he really is a master at storytelling. I think artists, film makers, writers, only get better with age.

"If you are considering becoming a storyboard artist then learn how to draw. If you want to be a great storyboard artist learn to be a film maker as well. Only then will you have the skills needed to walk on to a production, take a script and draw it out as needed by the director. You will be equipped to work with a crew, but also be prepared for rejection and be ready to take a back seat to those less creative than you. Remember, your input is needed, but not always wanted. Manage all of these demands and you will enjoy a long and successful career."

For those film makers reading this who are still willing to take the chance of not storyboarding their next project, Buchinsky only has this to say: "If you are that short-sighted a director or producer that you are not using boards, I can only shrug my shoulders and say, 'Good luck!' When you are in post you will be wishing that you had. In this business you have to make the movie long before you make the movie."

You can find out more about Chris Buchinsky at www.imdb.com

