THE PANTHER PICTURES DOUBLE BILL:

Now available on Blu Ray!

An Overview by Brian Trenchard-Smith

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The 1980’s and 90’s were the heyday of VHS. Movies that in the previous decade played as double bills in drive in theatres and downtown grindhouses were now available at your local video store, offering a level of violence and nudity that was not allowed on broadcast television. Now in the comfort of your living room you could slip a cassette into the video player, and enjoy your favorite drive in fodder.

Martial arts movies were a staple of the lucrative VHS market, at which DAY OF THE PANTHER and sequel STRIKE OF THE PANTHER were aimed. These movies were the brainchild of stuntman and writer and aspiring director Peter West and his wife at the time producer Judith West. The pictures were to be shot back to back in Peter’s home town of Perth, West Australia, on 16mm then blown up to 35mm for delivery to the few buyes buyers who wanted theatrical release. Offering 35 mm delivery as well as a video master helped disguise the 16mm origins, a low budget indicator that could result in low ball offers. The plan was to deliver two fight packed movies that looked like US $1M productions, but make them for AUD 500K each. With production in Australian dollars and international sales in US dollars, the currency exchange rate in 1987 could add 12% to an incoming revenue. The plan was to make a star of Perth martial artist Ed Stazak playing secret agent Jason Blade, and kick off a 5 movie franchise.

The budget was raised entirely from private investors. No government funds were involved. He insisted on the appointment of an experienced producer to oversee the enterprise and appointed Damien Parer, whose many credits included my 1985 movie DEAD END DRIVE IN, in which Peter West had acted and performed stunts.

Production commenced in March 1987. Four days into the shoot, I received a call from Damien Parer. Would

I be able to travel to Perth in West Australia immediately

and take over two low budget martial arts movies being

shot back-to-back in twenty days each? the investors were unhappy with the footage and wanted the first-time writer/director replaced. From this troubled start began one of my most enjoyable shoots—the Panther pictures.

I had read the scripts overnight and again on the flight. The stories of both movies followed a familiar formula.

Part 1: Martial arts expert and undercover cop Jason

Blade goes after a criminal gang, responsible for the death of his partner. He puts the crime boss and his chief enforcer behind bars.

Part 2: When the enforcer escapes from jail, kidnaps the hero’s girlfriend and threatens to blow up the city, our hero goes back into action.

I arrived in midmorning due to the time difference. Damien screened some of the previous four days’ footage. We assessed what 4 days of shooting had produced.

Eddie Stazak, playing hero Jason Blade, was not a trained actor. He was a formidable martial artist, who could also sing and play the accordion. He had charisma when in action, but his persona in dialogue scenes was flat. He was not well served by the script which was full of awkward cliched dialogue without being fun. Damien Parer could do nothing with these issues till there was a change of leadership. The one fight scene shot so far demonstrated that both Eddie and his fight choreographer Jim Richards, who also played his chief opponent, were really talented martial arts actors. A good fight movie could still be bult around them but we had to lift the level of the material. All the other scenes shot so far involved the heroine and villain, who in our view were woeful. We decided to recast them and throw away all that had been shot so far. We would rewrite the scripts, adding significant new characters and a backstory explaining the otherwise unexplained secret society of ‘Panthers’.

At the same time, shooting had to continue. We could not afford to lose another day. Damien had a new writer Michael Brindley on board within hours. I got on the phone to find a new leading lady. I called Nicole Kidman, my BMX Bandits star. She thanked me but said her new agent told her not to accept any more low budget movies. Next morning, I started a 2-day chase/fight sequence that would not be impacted by the proposed changes to the scripts. Then on the weekend I would fly back to Sydney and find a new leading lady. I would choose Paris Jefferson, a beautiful drama student whose dancing expertise had been featured in music videos. The scripts were already short, A dance montage in each movie might appeal to the target audience. I chose not to cleanse the scripts of dated sexism, preferring to underscore it with humor.

I have taken over a number of movies before or during shooting. When an out-of-towner takes over from a home town boy, there are issues of loyalty and resentment

that have to be handled with sensitivity. I told the crew I had considerable sympathy for my predecessor, who had done some great stunt driving for me on Dead End Drive In, but the show must go on, and I needed all their help. My philosophy is for everyone to share my love for the nuts and bolts of the work, and to have fun in the process. No crew functions at their best in an atmosphere of blame. So I try to find humor in routine mishaps and delays. You’ve got to get everyone as enthusiastic about the project as you are, particularly your star. Eddie was like a deer caught in the headlights, and I mean that kindly. His hopes for a successful launch to his career seemed dashed when the director got fired, and I had to build those hopes back up again. Luckily Eddie grew to believe in what I was doing, and was eventually pleased with the result.

We had a very productive first day, got some good action, and finished on time. They were my crew thereafter. Damien Parer created a similar atmosphere in the production office, which had to deal with a daily-

changing schedule. We were stepping into the abyss. Rewriting, recasting eight roles, and choosing new

locations while continuing to shoot two movies with interwoven schedules is not the normal recipe for success, but Damien always radiated a firm confidence and bonhomie that was contagious. Every call sheet had Panther jokes on it. Appreciation for services above and beyond the call were acknowledged. There was almost a cheerful wartime camaraderie in the office. Damien was able to persuade the investors to come up with more money to replace the lost shooting days, and add two guest stars, John Stanton and Rowena Wallace, to the marquee, both well known TV names.

We created the character of Anderson (John Stanton) who initiated Jason Blade into the crime fighting society of the Panthers. He became the father of Blade’s partner Linda (Linda Megier) who is killed in the opening sequence. The character of Gemma became Anderson’s niece, who would inevitably hook up with Jason Blade. We were then able to use John Stanton, as a narrator, providing Panther backstory, and giving the narrative some spine and direction, which the original script didn’t have. Without the Hong Kong backstory, (shot in Perth’s Chinatown plus some stock shots) creaky and hokey though it is, the film would have made even less sense. I gave Rowena Wallace, a popular soap opera star an opportunity to play a tough SWAT team commander. Stanton and Wallace’s names on the credits would ensure a sale to Australian television, and indeed the Nine Network bought it a few years later. Well regarded stage actor Michael Carman blessed us with an amusing Snidely Whiplash villain. I would inject humor wherever possible. The brothel fight sequence in Strike of the Panther is a good example.

The shoot galloped along, each day cherry-picking scenes from both evolving scripts, while staying at least a day behind the ongoing rewrite. One day I arrived at a location I had not seen, needing to find other locations for a chase, to work with supporting actors I hadn’t met, to shoot a scene that still lacked credibility on the page. By the day’s end, I was able to persuade the owners of a nearby apartment block to let our stunt actors climb up the balconies. There’s no adrenalin rush quite like directorial theater sports.

One complication was a shortage of trained martial arts stuntmen in Perth. Fighting for the camera requires selling the blows rather than inflicting them. There’s an art to making unarmed combat convincing yet safe. Eddie and Jim understood the dynamics for fighting for the camera and how to cheat the punches; the ability to snap your face to the left just at the right moment as the fist is swinging past the chin. Add the right sound effect, it looks like the fist made contact. There were eight fight scenes in the first film and nine in the second. That’s a lot of fist-fodder for Eddie Staszak, but we could afford only three experienced stunt fighters who could handle complex choreography. They would be backed up by recruits from local martial arts clubs. But the key opponents across seventeen fights had to be played by three guys. Solution: disguises!

In the first fight against stunt player Linda Megier they wore Halloween-style Pig Mask, Geezer Mask, and Skull Mask.

This concealed the beards they had grown during prep

for their next appearance as New Thugs. Then they shaved their beards and dyed their hair to become fresh faced victims of the flying fists and feet of Jason Blade. By the time we arrived at Strike of The Panther’s climactic battle in the power station, the only option left was—Hockey Masked Ninjas!

In one multiple combat, I had to add a similarly disguised Jim Richards to increase the numbers of assailants. He then changed costume and resumed his role as the evil Baxter for his final duel with Jason Blade. Eddie had a catlike grace in the fight scenes. Jim’s choreography was inventive and the equal of any Chuck Norris movie of the 80s. Together they delivered the goods for the core martial arts audience. On

the first day of the sound mix I discovered that the soundtrack of the fights contained only sound effects,

impacts, without an accompanying *grunt and groan* track, vocal reactions that bring the combat to life, part of the Kung Fu genre’s DNA. So all the male yells and groans in the finished pictures are provided by yours truly. As each fight came up in the sound mix, I would lay down a track for each fighter. AGH! EURR! EEK! Great fun. The studio receptionist volunteered to do the female tracks. She channeled her inner Zena, and performed with gusto.

I wanted the fights tough but not unpleasantly so. Characters bleed but they bleed politely. I was sensitive

to the recent “video nasties” controversy in the UK and finetuned the violence accordingly. The British

Board of Film Censors gave both pictures an ‘18’ rating. *Day of the Panther* passed uncut. *Strike* suffered 4 cuts.

* At 1 hour 2 mins: as black figure in mask jumps onto rooftop remove sight of his throwing star and subsequent shot of the star embedded in man's face.
* At 1 hour 6 mins: after close-up of woman with short black hair holding rifle remove shot of man in black with white mask twirling chainsticks.
* At 1 hour 6½ mins: after hero has run man through with sword remove subsequent close-up of man twirling two butterfly knives.
* At 1 hour 11 ⅓: in sequence after shot of woman binding arm, remove all sight of chainsticks as hero battles two figures in black and subsequent shot of hero using chainsticks in battle which follows.

In 1988 martial arts violence generally earned the ‘18’ certificate in the UK, The cuts for *Strike* seem consistent with BBFC Secretary James Ferman’s personal mission to keep certain types of weaponry out of films in an attempt to reduce copycat behaviour. Nunchucks, or chainsticks, first popularized by Bruce Lee, were always firmly in his sights (a gag involving a twirling string of sausages in the first *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990) film had been cut, and the family comedy *A Very Brady Sequel* (1995) skipped cinemas altogether because of a problematic scene involving nunchucks.

Guild Home Video brought Eddie Stazak and Jim Richards to the UK for a publicity tour and fight demonstrations, which ensured a lot of exposure for the VHS releases. This was peak *Neighbors* and *Home and Away* TV fandom time, when the Brits were keen on all things Aussie. The *Liverpool Echo* describing Eddie and Jim as, “The new dynamic duo of martial arts movies,”[[1]](#endnote-1) noting for their readers that they are both thirty and single. “Fast-moving thriller” said the *Dundee Courier* “there’s enough action to ensure steady rental business.” *Variety*, in the US, said the “Fight scenes, staged by thesps Stazak and Richards, are effective and Jefferson makes a beautiful redheaded leading lady.”

Paris Jefferson would go on to a solid acting career that continues to this day in UK and Canada. Eddward Stazak would make one more little seen movie with Jim Richards (Black Neon). He became a devout Christian and quit show business and martial arts. He still plays the accordion.

The Panther Pictures sold well to the home video market across the world. It’s interesting to compare the way different countries styled their artwork.

I’m proud of the Panther Pictures, an 80s time capsule brimming with cliches, stereotypes, and dated

genre tropes to celebrate and satirize. There’s something about campy fun that seems to travel well between

generations. At Portland’s Hollywood Theater I was gratified to watch an audience of nearly 300 cinema

geeks chortle and occasionally howl with laughter. I hope you have the same experience.

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1. “Licence to Thrill,” *Liverpool Echo*, 5 August 1988 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)