

INTERVIEW WITH KURT RUSSELL
BY WHITNEY SCOTT BAIN

Back in the 80s, I had the good fortune to work on three John Carpenter films; two of them starred Kurt Russell.

Not only was Kurt a pleasure to work with, he's a genuinely nice guy.

In this rare interview, Kurt talks about working for Disney, his baseball years and gives us the inside info on *Escape From New York*.

STARBURST- You started out working for Walt Disney as a child actor.

KURT RUSSELL- Mr. Disney was a wonderful man. I was in the *Adventures of Jamie McPherson* series. When I got the job, I was in Little League baseball and I was focused on wanting to become a professional ball player one day. We had a really good team. They were all really good. We went on to the championship. My father and I met with a man named, Mr. Anderson, who talked and acted like the same character from the *Matrix*. He said it would be impossible for me to play baseball and act because of the shooting conflict, so I decided that I'd rather play baseball than act. Little did I know that Mr. Disney had listened to the whole conversation in the other room on speaker and quickly had a talk with Mr. Anderson. When my father and I were walking down the hall ready to leave, Mr. Anderson came running up to us and made me a deal where I could have game days off during filming. Mr. Disney and I would sometimes have lunch and he'd ask me what I thought about certain rides and attractions he had planned for the amusement park. He'd listen to this nine-year-old kid to see what worked and what didn't using me as a sounding board.

SB- You did become a professional baseball player for awhile.

KR- I worked my way up through the years and got to play professionally. I was a second baseman. Those days ended when I got hurt at 22. I fell back on acting because I figured that I needed another career to earn a living.

SB- Snake Plissken has become an iconic character throughout the years. He resonates and echoes with people.

KR- Once in awhile you get the opportunity to play a really great character where you get to make it completely yours. Avco Embassy, the studio that produced *Escape* originally wanted Charlie Bronson to play the part because there were a lot of action heroes at the time like Clint Eastwood and Bronson that were making those types of films. John fought for me for that role.

SB- When MGM acquired the rights to Escape they able to find all the cut footage including your back story with Fresno Bob and the master credit card robbery except for the scene where you see the Indians roasting the headless cat on a spit in the World Trade Center, you tangle with them briefly and make your escape with them chasing after you. I know it's out there somewhere because I remember seeing it as a dirty dupe (black and white 35mm work footage.) on the Moviola at New World. Why do you think they cut those scenes?

KR- The studio thought it was too long and cut them, but in a way it worked to our advantage. No one had ever done an opening sequence where this guy gets off a bus in handcuffs with this bad boy, f-you attitude. It set the mood for the film right away.

SB- Not too many people know that Tom Atkins' character, Rehme, was named after the head of Avco Embassy, Bob Rehme who later on became a very successful producer. Warren Oates had originally been selected to play Brain, but had taken ill and recommended Harry Dean Stanton for the part. Adrian Barbeau;, John's wife at the time, always liked to knit during set ups. Most people think it's Jamie Lee Curtis narrating the opening sequence and the voice in the security area where we see Snake walking down the hall, but in actuality it was the late, Debra Hill. The whole cast was a great ensemble of players and such a pleasure to work with.

KR- Lee Van Cleef, Ernie Borgnine, Harry Dean, Tommy, Adrian, Issac Hayes, Donald Pleasance, Season Hubley; who I was married to at the time. I remember when my son was born and I had the duties of feeding him at night. Sometimes I'd get home from the set too tired to change, still in my wardrobe and here I am feeding my son with a baby bottle. Kind of a congruous look for Snake.

Issac Hayes and I would get up early and work out together, I'd call him up in the morning and he already had a deep voice, but answer in the deepest baritone you'd ever hear. (imitates Issac.) "Yeahhh....ohhhhkay..." then hang up. He was a really great guy.

SB- We were at Roger Corman's New World Pictures hired by Avco to do the effects. I was a production assistant at the time, most notably known as a P.A. or piss ant as they called us because we did all the dirty jobs and got pissed on by everyone even when we did a good job. Still, I got to work on the construction of Manhattan that consisted of cardboard shoeboxes and blocks of wood, Xeroxed pictures of buildings that we pasted on and shaded them in with pens, pencils and white tape. All of that was destroyed after the production was over, but I did manage to save the top of the Woolworth building which you see for a brief moment when Air Force One is about to crash. We shot the effects in 70mm then brought it back down to 35mm, so it had this really great depth of field look to it. Most people think it was Jim Cameron who did the mattes. He did do one where it was a glass matte composite where the prisoners are flagging down the helicopters, but it was Jena Holman who was this incredible matte artist that drew the background landscape of Manhattan and the World Trade Center when we had the miniature Gulfire pushed off the top. Sadly, she passed away a few years ago. She was a very nice woman. There were a lot of talented people there that went on to do exceptional work in the film business that worked on Escape. It was like a big family. I remember when we were shooting inserts on the New World back lot for the Gulfire cockpit which was a part of a plastic helicopter windshield that I pulled out of the junkyard we called Keltonville because this one guy, Roger Kelton had organized the mess that was back there and it was a mess. We covered it with dubatine (black cloth.), I dug up a helicopter joystick and Dean Cundey lit it with a couple of lights with gels over them, Cundey had the .357 in a May Company department store paper bag that we were making jokes about that May Company got into the firearms business. Then there was the Station 19 block that was constructed for the close ups we used. Years later we used that as a paint shed at Corman's. Afterwards, I remember you went home still in your wardrobe and John took Dean and I buying us cheeseburgers at a place called the Oar House which doesn't exist anymore. That was the best shoot I ever worked on. You kept the original wardrobe too.

KR- Yes. John and I figured that we'd make a sequel one day and 17 years later we did. I could still fit into Snake's wardrobe, but John decided that since Escape From L.A. was another story, Snake needed a new outfit. So, I ended up giving away the pants and shirt to my son's friends, but I kept the jacket.

SB- Speaking of original wardrobe, how did that come about?

KR- When John was trying to sell Avco on Escape From New York we talked about what Snake would wear. I got some green army fatigues, combat boots, a black t-shirt and we took some promotional photos. It didn't look right. Something was missing. So, I went and got some black and white fatigues, and a pair of motorcycle boots with golf cleats I added. I thought Snake would look great with an eye patch, but the studio didn't want it. John fought for the idea and we won out.

I remember when we were in St. Louis and it was in a bad part of town. They had a big fire there awhile back and it was deserted and desolate looking especially at night. No one was down there except the occasional drunk or group of gangs. It was a rough part of town.

When we broke one night to set up another scene, I decided to take a walk. I went around the corner and saw these four rough looking guys staring at me. Here I am dressed as Snake, carrying a machine gun, a .357 and a knife looking back at them when they quietly walked away. I couldn't wait to get back to John and tell him; hey, this character's going to work!

SB- John and Alan Howarth's score added to the film's quality.

KR- It's one of my favorite scores ever.

SB- You and John work seamlessly together the way John Wayne and John Ford or Howard Hawks did which John is a big admirer of Hawks and John's films have this special rhythm and cadence to them.

KR- John is like a big brother to me. He was always open to making a film better. When we did Escape From L.A. there were a lot of questionable moments in that film that reflect on today's society. John wanted to point out how we were slowly losing our freedoms and that Snake's life is like a loop. Think about it. Try lighting up a cigarette in Santa Monica where you live.

SB- That's true. They passed a law where you can't smoke at the beach, public property and if you live in an apartment building you can only smoke inside your home. Then you had to sign a paper whether-or-not you smoked. If you said you did, fine, but if you said you didn't and a friend came over and lit up that would be grounds for eviction driving up the cost of the rental unit for the next person.

KR- That's right.

SB- Totalitarianism at its best. I wonder when we're going to be goosestepping to Falco music next? On a lighter note, there's been the on again, off again rumor of remaking *Escape From New York*. I mean, why? The movie stands on its own merit and still holds up.

KR- Remakes should only be made if the movie is extremely flawed or originally miscast. There seems to be no originality anymore. First of all, the actors they had in mind were from Scotland, Wales, England and Australia. Snake needs to be played by a young man and an American. He's an American war hero. He gets into a ring to fight a guy twice his size with a baseball bat. How more American can you get?

SB- Speaking of that; you did your own stunt work with Ox Baker during that scene.

KR- Dick Warlock, who was my stand in and stunt coordinator on *Escape* got a big baseball knot on his forehead from Ox during rehearsal so it was impossible for him to do the scene. Ox was a professional wrestler and he accidentally killed his best friend in the ring, so you could say I was a little apprehensive to do this. Ox and I had rehearsed several times and he really got into it using his full weight on the swings and I was taking everything I got from him. I had to tap him a few times in the groin with my bat telling him that this is pretend. He got the message.

Then it was my turn to get even in the scene where I drive the nail bat into the back of his skull. There was this wooden block placed on the back of his head with a nail sticking out of it and I had to hit it just right. I told him not to flinch or I could miss. During the first few takes, he did flinch. So, I reassured him that I'd get it on the next take so we could get the scene over with. He calmed down, I brought the bat down on the nail perfectly and John got the shot.

SB- What's the story on Snake's voice?

KR- Ahh, the old wives tale...I was trying to find Snake's voice before we were filming and John said to me, we just got Lee Van Cleef to play Bob Hauk. I thought, hey, since Clint Eastwood did all those films with him and made him a star, it could work for me. So, I worked on Snake's version of Eastwood. He's quieter than Eastwood, sometimes so quiet, you barely hear what he says.

SB- You were originally in the lead role in Ladyhawk.

KR- I thought it would be fun to shoot a film in Italy for a few weeks and then go home. Goldie, my wife, said that I'd be there for several months and I didn't believe her. When I got there, I see wardrobe and the character has to wear tights. I don't wear tights. That's not for me. On top of that, production got held up because of strikes and political problems. I went to Dick Donner; the director and told him that this was a mistake taking this role and I was sorry, so I recommended Rutger Hauer and said he'd be perfect for the part and I could get him. Dick said, "Really? You think?" I didn't know Rutger. I never even met him. So, while everything was being negotiated, Goldie flew over and we spent two weeks in the hotel room before we went home.

SB- Who are your favorite actors?

KR- Actors are amazing to me. I really don't have a favorite one. I'm amazed at what they do. I love all movies as an audience. I have a great time working in this business.