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KICKS



AT THE

ACTION FILM CAMP

Take a beautiful, sexy, talented actress. Send her to an action film school and teach her to kick butt, do high falls, shoot guns, throw knives, and blow things up. Sounds like the perfect combination for a great action movie, right?

Jasi Cotton Lanier went to the Karate International Action Film Camp, held at the beautiful Storm King School, Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York. The weekend camp is run by some of the action industry's most accomplished professionals: writer/director/producer Keith W. Strandberg, producer/publisher Michael DePasquale, Jr., and producer/actor Keith Vitali. They started the camps ten years ago to train people to use in their own movies, and over 125 people who have been through the camps have ended up on the silver screen!

"I was frustrated with the fighters I was hiring to be in my movies," says Strandberg, who helped start the careers of Jean Claude Van Damme, Cynthia Rothrock, Billy Blanks, and many others. "I'd hire great fighters, but once we got them on the set, they'd be unable to do what we asked them to do. Martial arts fighters are taught to hide their emotions, and we ask movie fighters to show

pain, to show their reactions, to be a little flamboyant, and I wasn't getting what I wanted. So, we started the camps to teach people how to fight for the camera, and now when I hire actors and fighters, I know what I'm getting. I'm hiring professionals who know how to sell a hit, who know how to hit a mark, who know how to comport themselves on a movie set, and who know how to act."

The three-day seminar offers solid, nuts- and-bolts information on how to break into the movies, and how to stay there once you are in. "You learn how to take a punch, how to show pain, how to audition, how to fire a gun and throw a knife," says Vitali. "It's all designed to give you an edge over the hundreds of other people who are looking to get the same role. If you can act and fight, you are that much more employable."

Experts in every category of action film production are brought in: fighting and stunts, guns and explosives, knives, high falls, acting, and more.

One of the real benefits of the three day-weekend is that the instructors and the students are together. "We are all here together for three days," says Shawn Patrick Flanagan, an actor and stuntman who started his career in film at one of these camps three years ago and has now been featured in five motion pictures, with more on the way. "It's great to be able to ask Keith Strandberg a question over lunch, or pull Joe Hess off to the side and see if I'm doing something right or wrong. The instructors are very approachable, and they tell us that the only dumb question is the one we don't ask."

Here, the guy who set himself on fire during the exhibition might just sit down next to you at dinner.

Just make sure he's not still smoking.

The Schedule:

The weekend is designed to teach people how to break into films by making them the most complete "product" possible. It's not enough to just be able to fight, jump into an air bag, or fire a gun convincingly, you have to learn how to put together your package (head-shot, resume, reel, etc.), how to do a cold reading, how to do a rehearsed audition, understand how to break down a script, and know how to behave once you get on the set. The different seminars all focus on avoiding the mistakes that the instructors have seen too often throughout their careers.

The beginners start with the basics. The first and most important basic for movie fighting is learning how to react in



There isn't a lot of time for rest and relaxation at the camps. As Strandberg is fond of saying, "You can sleep when you get home."

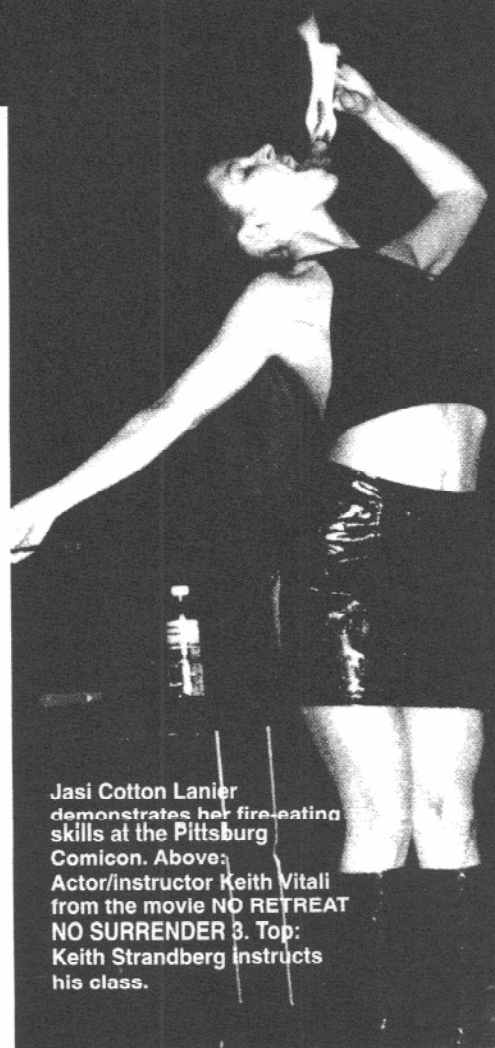
Saturday:

Breakfast is at 7:30 A.M., and the next action-fighting class led by Keith Vi-

a fight, and that's where Joe Hess comes in. Hess is a former Heavyweight World Champion in Karate, and he's become quite a force in movie stunts and fighting. Hess has appeared in hundreds of movies—he fought Kevin Costner in *THE BODYGUARD*, Kurt Russell in *CAPTAIN RON*, and Don Johnson in dozens of *MIA-MI VICE* episodes. It's up to Hess to make sure the students know how to sell a punch or a kick.

"If the lead actor throws a punch, and you don't react and make him look good, you're going to be out of job," Hess says between head snaps and body hits. "It's a total body thing—your head snaps, your shoulders follow, and your entire body, including your facial reactions, sells the punch."

After Hess's hour-and-a-half class, the students head off to Packaging and Production Realities class. This class is designed to show the students what they need—a head shot, a resume, and a videotape. Students are shown examples of quality head shots (glossy, black and white, clear, appealing), resumes (accurate and detailed information) and videos. After this class, the students are sent off to sleep, with visions of movie parts dancing in their heads.



Jasi Cotton Lanier demonstrates her fire-eating skills at the Pittsburgh Comicon. Above: Actor/instructor Keith Vitali from the movie *NO RETREAT NO SURRENDER 3*. Top: Keith Strandberg instructs his class.



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tali starts at 8:30. Vitali picks up where Hess left off. He drills the students on head snaps and body hits, because reactions are so critical when trying to get a job. Chances are, you aren't going to be hired to be the star, to be the one doing the hitting, so you have to be ready to take a hit.

Vitali introduces the theory of “hitting your mark,” and combinations are put together. On a movie set, Vitali points out, you'll be given a complicated routine to do, and you might only have a couple of minutes to get it down. “Making a mistake can mean injury to your partner,” Vitali stresses. “If you get the moves out of sequence, you might punch when she doesn't expect it, and you might really hurt her.”

The students listen. Vitali is not just another pretty face. He was a three-time Karate World Champion, is one of the top ten fighters of all time, and has fought on screen with some of the best—including Jackie Chan.

“You have to be in great shape,” Vitali says, recalling throwing one particular kicking combination forty-nine times in order to get in right. “In a competitive fight, you might be able to take a break, but when filming, you have to do it with full speed and power every single time,” Vitali says. “If you're not in great shape, that will take its toll.”

Next up after action fighting is the cold readings session, taught by professional actor Kurt McKinney, who was a regular on *THE GUIDING LIGHT* for more than a decade, and starred in the semi-

nal *NO RETREAT NO SURRENDER*. Cold readings are auditions where you are handed a part to play, and you have to perform without the luxury of rehearsal time. It's one of the hardest things to do in acting, but there is a technique to it.

McKinney presents that technique, then calls everyone up onto the stage, one by one, for a trial by fire. “It's important to get everyone up on stage and performing,” he says. “It's hard, but it's also an experience that brings everyone together. We are the only place that will give you feedback about your performance. In the real world, if you audition for a role, after you are done, you'll get a ‘Thank you’ and that's all. Here, we'll tell you what we thought, how you might improve things next time, and that feedback is invaluable.”

The comments and criticism may be worthwhile, but the actual cold reading is very hard to do. It takes guts and there's little glory. “It was great to get feedback from Kurt McKinney and the others, especially the producers who are doing the actual hiring,” says Roxanne Michaels. “I have not auditioned that much, because I have done so much work in independent film, and I got the jobs by word-of-mouth. It was great to get feedback from working professionals in the business.”

Right after lunch, the explosives guys go to work. Seems they had some bombs left over from the last movie they did, and they decide to blow them up for the group. The first two are gasoline bombs that send flames and dark smoke up forty feet into the air. The last bomb is set underneath a fifty gallon steel barrel, which is tethered to the ground by a cable.

“Effects is hot! Fire in the hole!” shouts explosives expert and stunt coordinator, Mike Jones. The explosion goes off, and the barrel goes up into the air in flames and smoke...and keeps going up, breaking the cable and soaring almost a hundred feet into the air!

It's exciting and cool, and underscores the message of this session: anything can happen, so be prepared.

Round Robin Stunts:

Next up is one of the most popular sessions of the weekend: a round robin rotation between high falls into an air bag, gun safety and shooting, and knife throwing. High falls are a chance to face your fears, and fly through the air. Beginners start at a

one-story fall, while the advanced group climbs up to two or three stories.

Gun safety starts gunmaster Joe Bonacci's talk, but the students want to know when they start shooting. It's easy for even the simplest gun situation to go south in a hurry, so Bonacci ignores the impatience from his students and stresses safety, checking and double checking, and proper firearm procedure. As a cautionary tale, he tells the tragic story of Brandon Lee's death—it was improper gun handling that resulted in the actor's death, and actors should know enough about gun safety to make sure all the checks and balances are in place.

“I've been on a movie set when the fighters were asked who has handled and fired a weapon before,” says actor/fight choreographer Ron Sucasotte, a camp veteran with more than ten films under his belt. “I had done it at the camps, so I knew how to handle myself. I got the job, and got even more work as the director and producer saw what I could do.”

Billy Shovan runs the knife rotation. Mild mannered and polite, Billy is deadly with a knife. He teaches the students to handle a knife convincingly, and shows them how to throw knives at a target so they imbed deeply, no easy feat.

After all that physical work, the next session is a good opportunity for the students to sit down and work their brain a bit. Strandberg, who wrote the textbook for the weekend, *Action Filmmaking Master Class*, and is also on the film faculty at Towson University, goes through how to break down a movie scene with them. The class discusses character motivation, conflict, the rules of screenwriting (enter a scene at the last possible moment, leave at the earliest possible moment and more).

After dinner, McKinney leads the students into the auditorium again for rehearsed auditions. Using scenes from Strandberg's movies and screenplays, the students take turns coming up in pairs to perform in front of the entire group. It's a daunting challenge, but most everyone is up for the task. “There's a tremendous amount of talent in this group,” says Vitali, a little amazed. “I'd be able to cast a movie just from this camp.”

In an atmosphere of support and friendship, everyone takes their turn up on stage as the session lasts long into the

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—Jason Cotton Lanier

night.

Sunday:

The last day of the three-day seminar starts early, with yet another action fighting class, this one focusing on falling, rolling, and other, more advanced skills.

"When we were outside, and we were doing repeated falls and repeated fight sequences, despite the fact I was in a lot of pain and was exhausted, I loved it," Roxanne Michaels says. "It was an adrenaline rush. I felt like a little kid. I liked the most painful parts."

After brunch, the students have some time to drill their routines for the upcoming action fighting competition. The students are charged to come up with a scene that showcases their acting ability, their fighting ability, and their creative talents, and then these scenes are performed on the stage and judged by all the instructors.

Winning the competition can be quite a feather in an actor's cap, and many winners have gone on to film roles right away. In fact, after one camp in Los Angeles, four students got hired as soon as the seminar was over!

The competition starts promptly at one o'clock, and groups of five or less come up onto the stage. The judges use scoring sheets to keep track of hits and misses, mistakes, creativity, and originality.

"I love the final competition, because it's like all these ugly ducklings, who came to us knowing nothing, have now become beautiful swans," says Vitali. "We see exactly what they have learned, and sometimes these guys amaze us."

The scenes are great, some funny, some poignant, some remarkable for their complexity and difficulty, some just plain bad.

It's a Wrap!:

After the competition, it's time for everyone to say goodbye. No tears are shed, but this group of over 100 talented people has become something of a family. Shared experiences forge a bond that is hard to sever.

"You get a bond with the other people," says Michaels. "It's a really supportive environment. You come in as strangers, and you feel like you know them when you leave. It's a nice feeling."

"There were some beautiful young girls, and we did a skit together. Any time I had some apprehension, they supported me, and they were as tough as anyone. During our skit, we were beating up two guys, and while rehearsing, we both clocked our partners. It was a solid, good hit. Another woman had gone to the previous camp, and it was cool to see someone who had been to a camp, and had already gotten jobs doing movies and working in the industry. It was great to see how someone could progress so quickly, and get jobs right away."

For more information on the next Action Fighting Camp, or on hosting your own camp, please call 800 573 8050, or visit the camp on the web at www.mawp.net/film/camp.htm. □

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