
BIG TROUBLE
IN
LITTLE
CHINA

DIRECTED BY JOHN CARPENTER
WRITTEN BY GARY GOLDMAN DAVID Z. WEINSTEIN
ADAPTATION BY W.D. RICHTER
PRODUCED BY LARRY J. FRANCO
MUSIC BY JOHN CARPENTER IN ASSOCIATION WITH ALAN HOWARTH
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DEAN CUNDEY A.S.C.
VISUAL EFFECTS BY RICHARD EDLUND

KURT RUSSELL AS JACK BURTON
KIM CATTRALL AS GRACIE LAW
DENNIS DUN AS WANG CHI
JAMES HONG AS DAVID LO PAN
VICTOR WONG AS EGG SHEN
KATE BURTON AS MARGO
DONALD LI AS EDDIE LEE

BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA

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IT'S ALL IN THE REFLEXES

EAST MEETS WEST IN BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA, JOHN CARPENTERS CANNY RE-INVENTION OF WUXIA

BY JOHN KENNETH MUIR

Historically-speaking, maverick film director John Carpenter has often boasted an uneasy relationship with Hollywood, and mainstream box office success. From 1976 to 1982, the heyday of Carpenter films such as *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), *The Fog* (1980) and *Escape from New York* (1981), the talent's star ascended, and it appeared he could do no wrong.

But after *The Thing's* (1982) inexplicable financial and critical failure in 'The Summer of *E.T.*' - a span during which one venomous critic termed the auteur a "*pornographer of violence*" - everything changed for Carpenter. A man who had once noted he would have been happy directing Westerns in the studio system of the 1940s and 1950s found that the studios had lost confidence in him.

Immediately following *The Thing's* out-of-proportion negative reception, Carpenter thus re-trenched as an artist. He focused his attention on mainstream, audience-friendly cinematic fare, including the adaptation of Stephen King's novel *Christine* (1983), and the friendly-alien movie *Starman* (1984) starring Jeff Bridges.

When it became plain, however, that *Starman* had achieved both box-office success and audience approbation, Carpenter again sought to…*experiment.* He stretched his creative muscles by taking the helm of an unconventional, forward-looking, and genre-shattering film: *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986).

Written by Gary Goldman, David Z. Weinstein, and W.D. Richter, *Big Trouble* was deliberately constructed as an ode to a niche format: the Chinese Kung-Fu movie. In particular, Carpenter had come away from a screening of Tsui Hark's *Zu Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983) feeling very impressed. Carpenter described the action-packed film as both "nuts" and the Chinese equivalent of *Star Wars* (1977).

Armed with his biggest budget yet, an amount reported in the genre press as between $19 and $25 million - with $2 million devoted exclusively to visual effects - Carpenter endeavored to translate and thus popularize eastern-styled action movie set-pieces for the west. To this end, Carpenter orchestrated one of the most elaborate, sustained action sequences ever lensed on film, one featuring roughly sixty players, including Kung-Fu expert James Lew. Even today, *Big Trouble in Little China's* alley fight sequence thrills in terms of pace and stunts, and impresses with its visual complexity. The scene also anticipates films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) in terms of its special effects techniques.

Released in America for the Independence Day weekend in 1986 - largely in hopes of beating Eddie Murphy's similarly-themed *The Golden Child* (1986) to theatres - *Big Trouble in Little China* met with surprising audience indifference and bad reviews, save for a few hold-outs, such as *Time's* Richard Corliss. Corliss aptly described the stunning film, starring Carpenter regular Kurt Russell, as a "master's thesis that moves."

After *Big Trouble in Little China's* failure at the box office, Carpenter again faced a period of creative re-entrenchment, and signed a deal with Alive Films to direct low-budget genre films. This deal gave birth to *Prince of Darkness* (1987) and *They Live* (1988) in the short run. But as John Carpenter moved on to a new phase in his career, a funny thing happened.

Even though Hollywood termed *Big Trouble in Little China* an expensive flop, the film's reputation as a cult movie began to grow following its release on the secondary market of VHS. A new audience 'discovered' *Big Trouble in Little China*, and fell in love with its staccato dialogue, Russell's humorous hero, Jack Burton, Kim Cattrall's romantic foil, Gracie Law, and the electrifying action.

Today, with over 25 years of hindsight and critical re-appraisals, *Big Trouble in Little China's* reputation as another Carpenter classic is assured. The 1986 film possesses two incredible virtues beyond humour and exhilarating action. In the first case, it is illuminating to consider Carpenter's martial arts fantasy film in terms of the format known as 'Wu-xia,' or 'Wuxia,' And in the second case, the 1986 Carpenter film thrives as a commentary on American conceits of heroism in a new age.

In tales of the Wuxia type, a young hero survives and overcomes a horrible tragedy early in his life, undertakes a heroic quest, and ultimately emerges as a great fighter and an adult, all while maintaining a strict code of honourable behavior. To state the matter

broadly, Wuxia is the Chinese equivalent of the Joseph Campbell, western-based heroic journey. It's a rite-of-passage tale, and one that heavily features a romantic component.

Big Trouble in Little China knowingly lines up with several facets of the established Wuxia formula, but here's the rub: It does so *if, and only if*, the viewer considers Wang Chi (Dennis Dun) to be the film's prime heroic figure. Wang loses his bride-to-be, undertakes the dangerous quest to rescue her, and becomes, during the course of the film, an authentic hero. Each time he fights, Wang grows stronger until, by film's end, he is actually an equal to Lo Pan's invincible minions, the Storms. Although not top-billed, Dun's character, Wang, is the man in the film who undergoes metamorphosis, or more aptly, transcendence.

The very quality that lends *Big Trouble in Little China* such unusual texture as both a Wuxia and as action film involves the primary 'buddy' relationship. Wang, the capable hero, the man on the quest and boasting all the expected heroic capabilities, is actually but a sidekick or second fiddle to the star, the bumbling, accident-prone Jack Burton. Thus, in a very funny and subversive way, *Big Trouble in Little China* mocks and teases long-standing Hollywood assumptions that America and Americans must always stand tall at the centre of the cinematic action, and must always play the lone hero. Carpenter's film suggests there's another tradition to respect too.

Perhaps Carpenter's intentional borrowing and re-invention of the Chinese Wuxia format and characteristics renders *Big Trouble in Little China* a pastiche of sorts, but that acknowledgment of form subtracts nothing from the film's virtues. George Lucas raided the film oeuvre of Akira Kurosawa to create *Star Wars*, and in a similar fashion Carpenter here pays tribute to Eastern-produced martial arts fantasies and their unique style of heroic storytelling.

Over and over, then, *Big Trouble in Little China* invites audiences to view its 'hero' Burton in distinctly funny, and non-traditional, or unconventional terms. Jack faces the implacable bad guys with bright red lipstick marring his visage, to provide one example. Far from striking fear in the heart of his enemies, Jack's climactic battle cry actually renders only himself unconscious, to name another. At one point in the film, Jack also misses his intended target with a knife throw, and on several occasions this 'hero' expresses fear and uncertainty about the creatures and world around him. In some fashion, Jack Burton is much like a child countenancing the 'real' world for the first time, both afraid and ignorant, and yet also, importantly, trying to learn the ropes.


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In spite of this somewhat non-heroic categorisation, Jack Burton is undeniably persistent and loyal and yes, even brave. Therefore, one gets the impression that, when held in contrast to the film's Asian characters, Carpenter's depiction of Jack charts an intriguing new global dynamic.

Specifically, in *Big Trouble in Little China*, American might and bravery joins with Asian moral complexity for a great victory against Evil. Jack is a big and strong American, grounded in stereotypical Western concepts of heroism, whereas the Asians are more introspective and ambivalent.

In other words, Jack seems to dwell mainly on the *surface* of reality; reality as his limited imagination weighs it. This quality enables him to see clearly right and wrong, good and evil. By comparison, the Chinese characters dwell in a more inconclusive, complicated self-doubting state; one where modernity requires them to eschew the spiritual beliefs they know in their hearts to be true.

In terms of the film's characters, the Americans in *Big Trouble in Little China* are defined basically by what they look like and what they say. Jack is a muscle-bound, athletic truck driver and looks every bit the traditional Hollywood hero. Gracie Law is a beautiful lawyer and simultaneously a walking parody of the old Hollywood film cliché: the lady crusader. "I'm always poking my nose where it doesn't belong," she enthuses at one juncture, effectively defining her own purpose within the narrative. Both Jack and Gracie boast an exaggerated sense of self-importance too. At one point, Jack blusters into a room and says, flat-out, "Don't worry, I'm here."

The eastern characters are presented differently. On the surface, Egg Shen (Victor Wong) appears to be a little old man and bus driver, but in reality he is a powerful sorcerer. Wang Chi is a skinny, diminutive man who works in his uncle's Chinese restaurant, and yet is actually a warrior of superb skills. The Chinese characters possess layers of self-awareness, modesty, and contradiction that Jack and Gracie do not. This description extends to Lo-Pan, an immortal ghost given to fits of pique.

Kurt Russell does a mean John Wayne (1907 – 1979) impersonation as Jack, and that choice underlines the film's approach to heroism. When one considers Wayne, one imagines the idealised American hero, a man from a time when 'men were men' and when morality was deemed black and white. But Wayne-esque Jack Burton drives his truck into an alleyway in Chinatown here, and all bets are off. Suddenly, he's asked to

countenance an ethnically-diverse world where all the truths he holds dear about the nature of the universe may no longer apply.

Certainty is harder to come by.

And if John Wayne had met the moral ambiguity of the late 1970s or 1980s, perhaps he'd be Jack Burton.

The front-and-centre placement of the anachronistic John Wayne character in a fantasy about foreign mythology and spirituality is the very thing that makes *Big Trouble in Little China* more than an average adventure film, and renders it a social critique on the United States' shifting position in a globalised world. In the 1980s, when it looked like the east (particularly Japan) was rising to eclipse America in terms of innovation and technology, along comes *Big Trouble in Little China* - with tongue-in-cheek – to critique our place in the new world order.

"*I'm feeling a little like an outsider here*," says Jack.

"*You are*," is the reply from the Chinese.

But then, as they must readily admit, the Chinese protagonists *need* Jack. Their destiny rests in his 'capable hands.' He is the one they require - with his black and white views of the world - to bring 'order out of chaos.' Jack has much catching-up to do, learning Chinese lore and mysticism, but in the final analysis, who ultimately takes out Lo Pan?

When Jack saves the day (because he was born ready, remember...), he does so, literally, with time-worn reflexes. Lo Pan tosses a knife at him, and Jack instinctively tosses it back, with fatal results. When Jack then states "it's all in the reflexes" this is a deliberate comment on America too. Its reflex - *its instinct* - is to act heroically, even if it doesn't always think a problem through before jumping in. America may have to play catch up, like Jack, but when big trouble rears its head, the world counts on the U.S. to act.

Moving with breathtaking speed and with ample humor, *Big Trouble in Little China* is much smarter than it often gets credit for. This Carpenter film takes the long-standing cliché of American Exceptionalism and simultaneously questions and re-affirms it for the Age of Globalism. But if the delightful, one-of-a-kind Jack Burton - warts and all - is an insult to traditional American images of strength and power as some film scholars insist, then, to quote the great man himself, "Go ahead…insult me."

Because when the "chips are down," the world can count on Jack Burton…and John Carpenter to boot. The director's cinematic re-invention of the long-standing Wuxia form is so adroit, so fast-moving, so unrelentingly smart that he makes it all seem effortless…like it's all in the reflexes indeed.

John Kenneth Muir is the award-winning author of The Films of John Carpenter, Horror Films of the 1970s, Horror Films of the 1980s, Horror Films of the 1990s *and* Horror Films FAQ. *He blogs daily at http:/reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com.*

PRODUCTION DESIGN FOR BIG TROUBLE

BY LES PAUL ROBLEY

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Working closely with Boss Films in conceptualizing special effects for *Big Trouble* was John Lloyd, a production designer with over 1,500 TV and feature credits to his name. From his first job as art director on TV's *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* to his most recent, *Clue*, Lloyd has been in charge of designing "the stuff that dreams are made of" for 38 years.

Lloyd's job was to provide a visual translation of the sometimes nebulous terms the screenwriter puts down on paper. For instance, in *Big Trouble*, how does one define and give character to such vaporous descriptions as "green glow" or "wild man?"

Often his caliber of work in interpreting these phrases directly determines the accuracy and appropriateness of mood or atmosphere in the finished piece. As a result, his architectural, decorative and cinematic savvy must be all-inclusive - from the most minute costume detail to working knowledge of the grandest "*Star Wars*-ian" special effect.

"What you try to do first is stop and analyze the problem," explained Lloyd. "Simply put, you take the script and design the general look of the film by storyboarding each sequence and by supplying larger, more detailed illustrations of critical scenes. The next thing you do is take these designs and consult with the director to see how he feels about them. From there you go to the applicable department (i.e., costume, special effects) and see whether or not they can do it. If there are any compromises, you go back to the drawing board and work them out amongst the three groups. Of course, once the final decision is made, anything can happen to prevent it working, and in this business it usually does."

During the early phases of production, Lloyd termed the experience a “nightmare” because there were so many things to do and not much time to do them in. “There wasn’t much prep time for some reason or another and people were in a panic from the first day of shooting in October,” he recalled.

For exterior scenes Lloyd relied on much of what was already available at 20th Century-Fox. The rest of the sets were built on five sound stages, one of them housing a complete Chinese street to facilitate the inclusion of mechanical effects. Edlund described the sets as some of the best to come out of Hollywood in a long while, favorably comparing them to ones in England where building capabilities are much stronger. As a testament to their realism, only a few miniatures and matte paintings were incorporated by Boss, unusual for an effects-laden film of this caliber. Many of the underground scenes didn’t need to rely on vanishing points receding to infinity as is the case with the traditional matte shot.

But some shots did require the illusion of forced perspective hallways as a means of achieving extra depth. Fifty door guards lining a torchlit corridor were actually photographic reproductions of statues sculpted by Kim Jones of The Creature Shop. The guards were based on research provided by John Carpenter and looked very authentic in the face and shoulders. Face masks were molded from fiberglass with painted chin cups so the mouths would look like statues. Western Costume provided the suits of armor, and foam rubber neck braces were made to resemble metal. The photos were successively reduced in size for the last 20 feet of the set.

Another forced perspective in-camera effect involved a scene in which Kurt Russell goes careening down a 1000-foot ramp backwards in a wheelchair. Lloyd designed the set at an angle rather than tilt the ramp to make the sequence safer to execute.

Forced perspective shots are designed to be photographed from one point on the stage. The camera needn’t be locked off, but must still be placed near the center of the viewing angle so as not to violate vanishing point perspective and reveal the trick. Actors are seldom placed in the forced perspective area unless they are to appear smaller or larger than normal. When the two door guard statues came to life, a cut was made so that they make their entrance from a different viewing angle.

One of the most difficult sequences to film involved the Hall of the Upside Down Sinners. After plummeting underwater in an elevator, Russell and his party must swim past five drowned cadavers shackled upside down, in order to escape the warriors that are chasing them. Lloyd designed an underwater torture chamber inside a small tank. The set took three days to build, with bars over the windows and shafts of light pouring through.

According to Steve Johnson of The Creature Shop, the biggest problem was in trying to figure out the staging of the sequence since the set wasn't completed until the last minute. "We weren't finished with the zombies until the night before, as is usually the case, so we eventually had to rig the thing underwater," he explained. "We had to spend two days working underwater and couldn't 'fathom' how we were going to effectively communicate for that length of time."

Craig Caton and Eric Fiedler tested polyfoam latex in chlorine and no ill effects seemed to occur. In fact, the corpses actually looked more horribly bloated after the two days of shooting. The rigging crew used scuba tanks on the floor attached with hoses and regulators. No problems of decompression sickness (bends) occurred from breathing long hours of compressed air due to the shallow depth at which they worked.

In art director George Jenson's original storyboard concept, one of the corpses was supposed to grab Russell as he swims by. "At first they're just undulating; you don't know if it's the current or whether they're alive," said Johnson. "They ended up cutting the sequence down. One of the cadavers swings toward Russell *a la Poltergeist*, and out of its mouth comes these weird creatures called waterdogs (undeveloped salamanders!) We stuck rubbery air tubes in the cadaver's mouth and shot out air bubbles just as these things swim out. One of the little devils squeezed its way through a tiny hole in the corpse's cheek. It looked really disgusting.

"But we were real nice to them - didn't kill any of them. I kept recycling them, allowing them only two takes each, what with all the chlorine in the water."

After a while, the production moved like clockwork. Lloyd said: "It was difficult, though certainly not the hardest set I ever worked on. I'd rate it an eight or nine in terms of difficulty. It was one of those films that initially is tough to get off the ground, but once rolling it becomes relatively straightforward."

Lloyd also collaborated closely with practical effects man Joe Unsinn, who worked on *Cocoon* and Irwin Alien's TV *Alice in Wonderland*. "You have to design the effects visually before somebody else can make them work," he advised. "If you don't design them properly, you're in big trouble (pardon the expression). That's one thing people never seem to realize - that most effects come through art departments."

Lloyd's accomplishments took several weeks to put up, and only a few days to knock down. Such is the transitory lot of the Hollywood set. Does it bother him to see his momentary pride and joy so quickly and uncaringly dismantled by stage hands?

"It really doesn't bother me," he confessed. "The set is a fleeting thing. It goes up quickly, and then it's gone. But it exists forever on film . . . at least longer than I will."

Les Paul Robley writes regularly for **American Cinematographer.**


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ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Big Trouble in Little China was remastered in High Definition by Twentieth Century Fox. This was supplied to Arrow Video via Hollywood Classics and every effort was made to ensure that the highest quality material was made available for this Blu-ray.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by: Francesco Simeoni
Production Assistant: Louise Buckler
QC: Michael Brooke, Anthony Nield
Proofing: Ewan Cant, Anthony Nield
Authoring: David Mackenzie
Subtitling: IBF Digital
Artist: Jay Shaw
Design: Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

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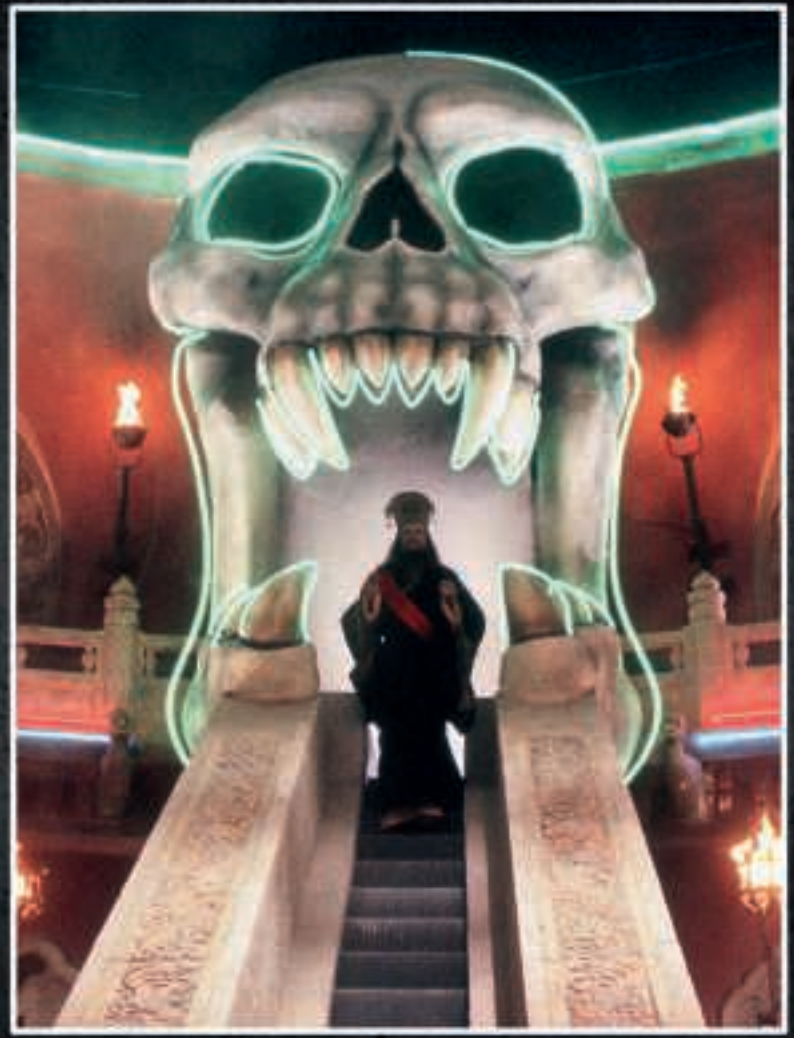

ARROW VIDEO

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