

For Brandon

(#133, JUNE 1994)

As this is being written (March 2, 1994), it was a year ago today that we, the intrepid cast and crew of *THE CROW*, were freezing our tits off, night-shooting in Wilmington, North Carolina, one month into principal photography on a 54-day schedule and counting.

About two weeks later, we came under siege by a legion of journalists and documentarians — everybody from *ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT* to *MTV* to *Fangoria*'s own Randy Palmer. In the wake of *THE CROW*'s release this May 13, you're bound to read a lot of what was said a year ago, and here's hoping it doesn't sound too stupid at this late date. It's futile to expect anything but pocket compassion and yellow journalism from the sensationalist press (especially the coprophagic vampires at *Entertainment Weekly*, who routinely twist quotations to fit questions they've already answered in their own tiny minds).

More important questions trouble me. Such as: In a world where robust powerhouses like Brandon Lee and Steve James can get clipped, what chance do we groundlings have?

Last year, on location at Ideal Cement (previously tarted up as Koopa Square for *SUPER MARIO BROS.*), we all thought we had learned a new definition for stress. Long commutes, longer hours, pyro and gunfire on a set which was chilly, dank, wet, cold and suffused with concrete dust that caused several nosebleeds and respiratory casualties among the crew. You had to trudge up 96 steps to reach the Top Dollar HQ set on the fifth floor, then walk *down* those same steps to get to a functioning restroom. For several days, we had to wrangle over 200 extras (for the Club Trash scenes) while being pestered by completion bondsmen. A lot of it was not what you'd call smile-making.

Blissfully ignorant, we were then, of *real* stress.

But what emerged in the dailies was brilliant, from the cold, aggressive set-design by Alex McDowell, to the calculated absence of blues

and greens from the lighting scheme (courtesy of cinematographer Dariusz Wolski), to the fight choreography by Lee and Jeff Imada — all realized according to the visionary ring-mastery of director Alex Proyas.

Alex and I had been trying to find something to like about Wilmington since the beginning of December 1992. That previous May I had gone to Australia to rewrite a yet-to-be-filmed monster comedy titled *DIAL M* with Alex, in the company of his madmen at Meaningful Eye Contact in Sydney. Now we were billeted in scenic Wrightsville Beach, in a hideously “decorated” house (nautical chintz, pastels and wooden ducks, not to mention a stone dog named Alphonse) with a Powerbook at each end of the upstairs living room and a boombox between us, blasting everything from Ice T to Nine Inch Nails to the soundtrack to *1492: CONQUEST OF PARADISE*, as we hammered away on revisions, new treatments, new beat sheets (sometimes on a daily basis) and new script pages by the dozens. We worked seven days a week right up to the start date of shooting. During the Exmas/New Year’s “break,” we continued working in LA.

The first day of principal photography was February 1, 1993, which just happened to be Brandon’s 28th birthday. He got a beautiful, painted *CROW* cake and a shitload of HagenDazs, none of which he partook since he was fighting to keep his weight down to the barest, leanest muscular minimum. He asked me to work out with him on the day I got food poisoning from one of Wilmington’s finer eateries — a karmic joke that hailed back to the time Brandon vomited shaving cream all over my shoes as a gag, during a story conference months earlier at Alex’s house in West Hollywood.

To get him back, I showed him the X-rated video for Trent Reznor’s “Happiness in Slavery.” He sat through it agape, then exclaimed with glee, “That’s *really* fucked up!”

By the time I’d moved to the Wilmington Hilton, Brandon was ensconced at a castellated bed-and-breakfast manse called the Grey-stone Inn, where Jennifer Jason Leigh sicced the manager on us one night because we were making too much noise shooting pool. We burned a lot of midnight oil in Brandon’s weird suite on the top floor, once staying up till dawn to watch *SPARTACUS* on cable; Brandon had never before seen Peter Ustinov and thought he would be great to play Gideon, *THE CROW*’s seedy pawnbroker.

One night in January, I got a call from the Barbary Coast, a watering hole on Front Street, the main drag in Wilmington. It was Brandon, requiring immediate fiscal rescue for his pinball and beer tab. When I ponied up, the barkeep waved my money away because Eliza Hutton had mentioned she and Brandon were to be married in April. “Free for the newlyweds,” the barkeep said, wishing them well.

That one still hurts to remember.

After shooting was underway, the hardcore *CROW* team was summoned for a meeting in Alex’s Carolco office. The rest of the *CROW* maze was deserted and dark, it being Sunday, our so-called single “day off” from our six-day schedule. It was me, Alex plus assistant, Brandon and co-producer Cotty Chubb (who had more to do with the final form of *THE CROW*’s story than any other production entity, after us). Outside, it was pissing down buckets of rain. Inside, it was equally gray and bleak; Brandon spent most of the meeting hunkered down in a corner of the office, thoroughly depressed from living inside the skin of the Eric Draven character. He rang me up at the hotel later, insisting on diversion, which usually meant pool. The staff of Break Time sensed this (or something) and let us shoot eight-ball until nearly an hour after closing. A guy at an adjacent table sniffed that we were “film people” of some stripe, and asked what we did. Brandon said he was a grip; I claimed propmaster. Then Brandon asked the question he’d been asking a lot of total strangers lately :

“If you died, and had the chance to come back for two days, would you tell the people you loved? Or would you spare them the pain?”

Our new pal, who had already comped us a couple of beers, seemed utterly swoggled. Maybe the question was too-too cosmic for him. I’d never thought about it, really. Considering the friends of mine who have died, I said, ultimately, that I thought I’d tell them. When friends die, you always punish yourself with this lingering need for just a moment or two extra, to unburden yourself, or square accounts, or simply make sure they know you loved them. There are a couple of scenes in *THE CROW* that reflect this emotion. If friends or loved ones are to be yanked in an untimely way from your grasp, it’s better to have a chance to say goodbye. Or farewell.

We stayed up past sunrise that night, because neither of us could sleep. We camped out in a candlelit room at Brandon’s rented house, playing Tom Waits CDs and drinking Southern Comfort and talking

caving vs. mountain climbing. We'd planned to go cave crawling once *THE CROW* was done. Brandon told me a story about his frequent visits to his father's grave in Seattle. He'd go just to sit quietly and commune with the stone. Tourists seeking Bruce Lee's final resting place would inevitably traipse along and ask Brandon to move, so they could shoot photographs.

Another, earlier time — again at the Greystone — Brandon and I went poking around the suite and discovered, inside a closet, a *second* closet hidden away behind the racks, like a secret panel. “This is what Eric needs,” he said. “A secret room.” This was the genesis of a scene in which Eric tricks Shelly, his fiancée, into climbing up to their bathroom attic, where he has laid an ambush consisting of many glowing candles and her new engagement ring. That attic was to be the repository of Eric's art, containing everything from the fallout of his aborted wedding to the fundamentals of his *CROW* getup and remnants to key memories of his band, Hangman's Joke. Stashed up there, the stuff would have escaped the notice of the squatters and thieves who have passed through Eric's abandoned and condemned loft in the year since his murder. A piece of this scene remains in the finished film (as a flashback, during a scene in which Eric sorts through the pawned rings at Gideon's), but at the time, the “secret room” insight helped us localize the emotional core of the movie we were making. It was a breakthrough, the kind nobody would ever know about; just part of the scripting process. If there is a secret room for *THE CROW*, it is my hope that the story we're telling amidst all our fast-cutting, rock 'n' roll fury is one with a genuine heart, something that can make Brandon's legacy to us resonate more strongly than just another martial-arts or action flick. Brandon felt strongly about designing his fight scenes to be very different from the usual kung-fu showcase; in fact, there are maybe two martial arts-style blows thrown in the entire movie. He lobbied just as passionately to secure the role of Eric Draven for himself, and his dedication to it seethes through every scene.

He sensed it was a breakthrough part for him, a chance to stretch as an actor. You can see it in his face, his eyes, his expressions.

We can't bring Brandon back, but we can bring him to life on the screen, and in doing so, perhaps keep him alive in the hearts of those who did not have the honor and pleasure of knowing him. I still miss him, every day.

Is *THE CROW* a good movie? A successful film? I think so, but I'm so close to the project that I haven't felt equipped to judge for a long time now.

That's *your* job.



This installment was held back until THE CROW went into general release. The German edition of this issue (dated November) featured a Brandon Lee cover (a full-cover version of the photo which appears in the upper left of the American issue, which toplined a shot from THE STAND miniseries).

This is also the point at which I almost terminated the column outright. It was too hard-won. And as you can probably tell, some of the columns which followed were strictly by rote, to meet deadlines, and almost got cut from this book — such as the following installment, written during the last thirty seconds of fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour and desperately based, almost in its entirety, on an interview that was then over a year old.