

THE OFFICIAL MAKING OF

# BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA™



TARA BENNETT & PAUL TERRY    FOREWORD BY JOHN CARPENTER    AFTERWORD BY KURT RUSSELL











THE OFFICIAL MAKING OF

**BIG TROUBLE**  
**IN**  
**LITTLE**  
**CHINA**™

The title 'BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA' is rendered in a bold, yellow, 3D-style font with red outlines. The words are arranged in four lines: 'BIG TROUBLE' on the top line, 'IN' in a smaller font on the second line, 'LITTLE' on the third line, and 'CHINA' on the fourth line. The letters have a slight gradient and shadow. Two blue, smoke-like or mist-like effects swirl around the bottom of the text, one on the left and one on the right.

TARA BENNETT & PAUL TERRY  
FOREWORD BY JOHN CARPENTER  
AFTERWORD BY KURT RUSSELL

**BOOM!**  
STUDIOS

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For BOOM! Studios  
Associate Editor Alex Galer  
Editor Dafna Pleban

This book is dedicated to another fedora aficionado and John Carpenter fan, Joel Rickenbach, who left this world far too early. Shake the pillars of Heaven for us, dear friend.

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FOREWORD BY

# JOHN CARPENTER

When *Big Trouble in Little China* came out, it tanked. Audiences weren't ready for it. But I had been a fan of kung fu films for a long time, so when I read the script, it had that charm to it, and an innocence. When I gave the studio the finished film, they were in shock because they wanted *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with an Asian theme. It wasn't what I made. But I love the movie.

Looking at *Big Trouble in Little China* 30 years later, it's clear that the detail and imagination that went into this movie came from a love of Chinese martial arts fantasies. It's jam-packed with stuff. Chinese mysticism, comedy, monsters, and lots and lots of action. It was the first American-made kung fu movie with real kung fu.

Nowadays, people bring up *Big Trouble* all the time. And still to this day, it's one of my proudest moments as a director. I just hope that, when you're reading this book, you get a sense of the spirit and the fun we had making this movie. Because that's what it was all about, it was just fun. And it's good to remember there's a little bit of Jack Burton in all of us.



John Carpenter  
April 2016



OPPOSITE: Director John Carpenter  
on set  
RIGHT: Carpenter prepares a shot



# ORIGINS

5

1

FADE IN:

EXT. ~~THE~~ HIGHWAY 101 - DAY

... and it's raining like hell around Eureka California, one hundred <sup>and two</sup> miles south of the Oregon border.

~~They~~ <sup>who</sup> Travellers' advisories <sup>are</sup> in effect, <sup>but there's always those</sup> people ignore them, either because they have to be somewhere yesterday, or because they're just down-and-out reckless. ~~and they~~ <sup>they</sup> They're driving that big ~~trailer~~ floating schme Peterbilt through this particular monsoon is a little bit of both, late and reckless, powerhousing his ~~trailer~~ <sup>of LIVE PIGS</sup> right ~~into~~ out into the theater, the screen suddenly all title...

BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA <sup>cargo</sup>

INT. ~~THE~~ PETERBILT TRAILER - DAY

PIGS squealing and bouncing and getting <sup>in</sup> rained on as TITLES COMMENCE.

3

JACK (CONT'D)

at that big sucker

The eye asks if you've paid your dues. You look right back and remember what your good buddy Jack Buster always says at times like that: "Have you paid your dues, Jack?"

"So, sir. I've just charged 'em."

EXT. HIGHWAY 101 - DAY

~~Head~~ <sup>Head</sup> Ghostly head lights glowing, ~~blazing~~ <sup>blazing</sup> SLAMMING BY CAMERA, Jack's massive ten-wheeler, kicking up so much WATER the screen turns a hazy wash... and WE DISSOLVE THROUGH TO...

Let's put it on the table: *Big Trouble in Little China* is maybe one of the most weirdly wonderful riffs on a fish out of water tale ever committed to contemporary cinema. Everything about it defies expectations, from its 'hero,' Jack Burton, remaining defiantly behind the curve for its duration, to its epic kung fu action sequences dove-tailing into an ancient sorcerer with green-eyed woman problems. Yet 30 years after its 1986 release, audiences the world over still adore John Carpenter's funky slice of Eastern-infused madness.

So exactly how does a movie like *Big Trouble in Little China* come to be?

As with every cinematic endeavor, it all starts with an idea. In this case, it was in the early '80s that friends, and fledgling writers, Gary Goldman & David Z. Weinstein were looking to collaborate on an original screenplay. At the time, Goldman remembers, "I'd discovered the genre of the Asian mystical martial arts movies." In particular, *The Butterfly Murders* by Tsui Hark knocked his creative socks off. "The visuals that were being put on the screen didn't exist in the West. I thought, 'If you take this and bring it to an American audience, give it a Hollywood-style plot structure, but also keep it Chinese, it could really blow people's minds.'" Meanwhile, Weinstein was fascinated by the Tong Wars, which occurred in 19th century San Francisco, Chinatown, as well as sharing Goldman's love of classic westerns. "The Tongs were highly organized secret societies," Goldman explains. "They were important in the politics of China. When the communities came over to America, new groups started here, or they started up branches. I thought, 'In 1880-1900 San Francisco this is really happening *and* there were a lot of cowboys around,' so we started to research that with Chinese mysticism, ghost stories, and folklore." From that was born *Lotus*, their Western/Chinese mysticism screenplay. It featured a cowboy named Wiley Prescott, who befriends a Chinese railroad worker named Sun, who needs to collect his imminently-

arriving Chinese fiancée, Lotus, at San Francisco's docks. An evil sorcerer named Lo Pan enters separating Sun from his fiancée, and Prescott from his beloved horse. From there the story delves into the mystical realm.

The writers remember their agent thought it was a sellable script, but requested an immediate title change. Weinstein explains, "We spent half a day brainstorming titles. And then Gary said, 'How about *Chinatown Gun*?' Then, it just came to my mind and I said, 'How about *Big Trouble in Little China*?' 20th Century Fox optioned the renamed script in 1982 from the pair, but was unhappy with elements of the story. As is typical, the studio sent the script out to several other writers for alternative pitches, which is when writer W. D. Richter entered the process.

Known in Hollywood as the Academy Award nominated screenwriter of *Brubaker* (1980) and the director of *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension* (1984), Richter says, at that point in his career, he was often approached for, and did, re-writes for studios. Upon reading the original *Big Trouble* script, his immediate instinct was to rework it as a contemporary story.

"I really did believe that it was a mistake to try to get a 'double remove' on the audience," Richter says of a glaring issue he had with the script. "You're asking them to go to a period western, get used to all those little eccentric realities, and *then* go one step further into a yet more exotic world. I thought, 'Why bother?' It's a pretty funny planet we live on, so why don't we start there and then go into this strange netherworld."

At his Fox re-pitch meeting, Richter remembers thinking that his

**"The script does have that break-neck feel. It was written [long-hand] with a great personal energy."**

W.D. RICHTER

OPPOSITE: Writer W.D. Richter's handwritten script pages from his adaptation screenplay



TOP LEFT: Script supervisor Sandy King busy between shots  
TOP RIGHT: Cinematographer Dean Cundey on the Chinatown set



approach might flop if the studio's intent was really to make a Western. "But Fox's [president] Larry Gordon and [producer] Paul Monash got very excited about turning it on its head," Richter says. "They hired me to try to do that."

Richter retained the basic spine of Goldman and Weinstein's script, along with several of the original core Chinese characters like Lo Pan. Others, such as Sun and Lotus were renamed to Wang Chi and Miao Yin respectively, and contemporized for the modern story.

However, Richter's decision to change the tone of the piece by writing it with a far lighter touch is what really distanced it from the original. "I told Fox it was gonna be a comedy, because there didn't seem to be any point to write it absolutely straight," Richter explains. "Jack Burton came into existence because I proposed he was driving a tractor-trailer truck into San Francisco all alone in the middle of the night."

And so it was that cowboy Prescott was transformed from a serious cow-poke into an irreverent pig trader, who doesn't shut up.

Today, Richter admits that he was most nervous about serving the Asian elements of the story well. "I didn't really know anything about Chinese lore, demons, and mystical worlds. I was going to have to learn that, and write the script. It can take a month or two to immerse yourself in all those cultures, but I remember I had a ridiculously short period of time to do both."

Detailing his process at the time, Richter explains, "I used to write long-hand, and I can remember having books all around my chair that I read in the evenings and put little marks in. I gleaned juicy facts and strange demons," he smiles. "I wanted it to be as authentic as possible, but I did have to mash things together in order to make it work as a narrative. In retrospect, over the decades, I've been nervous that maybe *Big Trouble* is vulnerable to criticism that it's a white boy's take on a very complex belief system, but I didn't make up a lot of stuff for that reason. If it's substantial enough that it still passes muster, that's very satisfying. That was our intent. We never wanted to do that awful Charlie Chan thing." Having read his final draft again recently, Richter assesses, "The script does have that break-neck feel. It was written with a great personal energy because I didn't really know what was going to happen. I didn't have time to figure that out. You just hope you can resolve it quickly and that you can make it work. If you can come out of it in the end with it all making sense, there's something good in that because you're in the audience's seat all the time. You really don't know what's next around the corner." Richter says his re-draft was accepted by Fox as the direction they wanted to pursue, and they shopped it around to directors for their interest.

"I didn't know this movie was originally a Western when I first got it," director John Carpenter reveals. "It was an offer from 20th Century Fox. Essentially, what they wanted was an *Indiana Jones*-type movie.



I read it and just had to do it. You have to do any movie that's named *Big Trouble in Little China*," he laughs. "It had *everything* in it that I wanted to do, so I signed aboard and said, 'Let's go!'"

"I remember getting the phone call saying John Carpenter wanted to do it, and that he'd like to meet up. That made me very happy," Richter says fondly. As it turns out, Richter and Carpenter were friends from back when they attended USC at the same time. "We met and had a trip down film-school memory lane," Richter says of their initial meeting about the script. "Then he said, 'I have notes.' That's the moment a writer thinks, 'Please don't deconstruct the whole script in 20 minutes,'" he laughs. "But John wasn't that way at all. He had a lot of good thoughts that could build on what was already there. I may have tweaked the script a little more, but it couldn't have been much as I don't have that painful memory of rewriting and rewriting." On the final script, Richter is credited with an "adapted by" title per arbitration, but to this day he considers, it as "one of the most effortless things I've been a part of. It really was a rare experience."

With his theatrical directorial credits in the double-digits by 1985, *Big Trouble in Little China* finally provided Carpenter a vehicle that would allow him to put his own stamp on a genre he'd fallen in love with at film school – Asian martial arts films.

"Back in 1973 in the United States, there was a big deal over *Five Fingers of Death*, which was the first martial arts movie that had made

it to our shores," Carpenter relates. "It was delightful. It wasn't just that the kung fu was fun, there was a sense of innocence to the Chinese cinema. It was strange, yet bloody and violent *and* innocent at the same time, plus with a 'what is this exactly?' vibe about it. Then the U.S. market was flooded with kung fu movies."

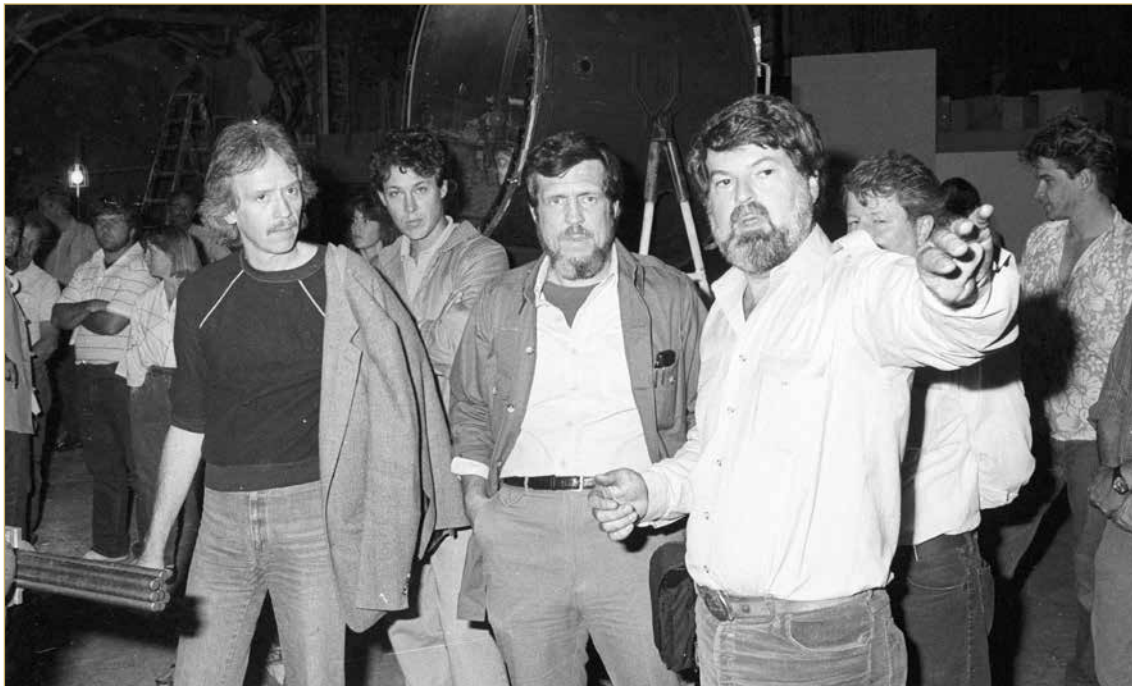
"Some of them were outrageously fabulous," he continues. "There was *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967). It was just an actor with his arm tied behind his back. That was it. He would get up and run on two fingers in fast motion. There was the *Master of the Flying Guillotine* (1976), which was just unbelievable. Some guy would throw this thing, it would land around your neck and then cut your head off. They were ridiculous but they were so much fun."

With Richter's "high-energy" script, as the right blueprint to capture that same fun tone, Carpenter assembled his circle of collaborators who would help realize his vision, and continue the fun vibe behind-the-scenes.

For producer and first assistant director, Carpenter brought Larry J. Franco onto the film for their seventh collaboration. "I'd been working with John since we did the TV movie called *Elvis* (1979)," Franco explains. "From that point on, I've been with John the whole time through *Escape From New York* (1981), *The Thing* (1982), *Christine* (1983), and *Starman* (1984). *Big Trouble in Little China* was the last studio movie that we did."

TOP LEFT: Screenwriter W.D. Richter on the set of *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension* (1984)

TOP RIGHT: Costume designer April Ferry on the set of *Rome* in its second season



TOP LEFT: Director John Carpenter, visual effects producer Richard Edlund and cinematographer Dean Cundey discussing a sequence  
TOP RIGHT: Production designer John J. Lloyd



Franco admits he was taken with the project as soon as Carpenter slipped him the screenplay. “The script was fantastic to begin with. *All* of the jokes were great. It was really funny. And I mean, really, *really* funny. Everyone who was working on the movie understood what it was.”

20th Century Fox set a July 3, 1986 release date for *Big Trouble in Little China* giving Carpenter and Franco 10-weeks of pre-production and a budget just north of \$20 million, their biggest at the time together. “When they decide to make the movie, they want to make it *now* because the release date has been set. It feels like you’ve got a gun to your head,” Franco explains with candor. “So basically, John and I divided the work. John was the creative force behind all of the movies and I was the nuts and bolts who kept it all together. I got involved creatively through John, other than the day-to-day operations of producing the movie.”

With principle photography set for fall of 1985 primarily at the Fox Studios back lot in Los Angeles, Carpenter continued to pull in trusted friends. Tommy Lee Wallace, production designer, co-editor, and actor for *Halloween* (1978) and *The Fog* (1980), was approached to serve as second unit director. “I was delighted, and said, ‘Yes,’ right away, even before looking at the script,” Wallace remembers. “When I finally did read it, I was very amused.”

More than anything, Wallace says he was thrilled that a kung fu film had finally landed on his friend’s lap. “John was always wild about fight movies, and, incidentally, about professional wrestling, long before that. During my first couple years in Los Angeles, we haunted the movie houses downtown, watching whatever kung fu flicks were playing there at the time. When *Big Trouble* came along, it was great to see John finally get a chance to vamp on this love of his, with a good script, among friends, in a setting that allowed his quirky sense of humor to take center stage.”

With Carpenter intending to model *Big Trouble* on the scale and scope of Chinese martial arts actioners, the director turned to Academy Award-nominated cinematographer Dean Cundey, who understood his visual style and shorthand having shot four of his previous films, *Halloween* (1978), *The Fog* (1980), *Escape from New York* (1981) and *The Thing* (1982). One of the most prolific and important cinematographers of that era, Cundey’s eye for color and action is core to the timeless quality of films like *Romancing the Stone* (1984), *Back to the Future* (1985), and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988). After four years of working on separate films, Cundey remembers Carpenter’s pitch clearly to this day. “It was very interesting because we hadn’t worked together for a while, and it was an intriguing offer from John,” he teases.



As it turns out, Cundey says he agreed to do the film while flying over Santa Barbara. “He and I were interested in flying helicopters. He took lessons before I did because he could afford it. I started getting my private pilot’s license. One day I got a call from John. He said, ‘Hey, you want to go for a flight?’ I met him at Burbank and we flew up the coast and he let me fly the helicopter. We landed in Santa Barbara, had lunch and he mentioned he was doing [*Big Trouble*]. Then we flew back and we did some landings and stuff. At some point, he said, ‘So anyway, would you be interested in shooting it?’ I said, ‘Of course I would.’ It sounded fascinating. With a title like *Big Trouble in Little China*, you knew it was going to be interesting. Then we just took off from there with prepping and consulting on design work.”

Carpenter hired their *The Thing* production designer, John J. Lloyd, and together they developed how they would light and shoot the ornate sets they would be constructing on the Fox lot. “Carpenter and I were always very much fans of the very wide 2.35 aspect ratio,” Cundey details. “John, of course, understood that that aspect ratio was part of the visual storytelling and could be used for it. I think that’s because John knows how to use it, and I’m a big fan of using it as a way of filling the screen with stuff that the audience either has to see, or should feel. [2.35] made sense with the martial arts because so much of that is leaping and swinging. It’s lateral movement, and the lateral

“I read it and just had to do it. You have to do any movie that’s named *Big Trouble in Little China*.”

JOHN CARPENTER

space on the screen becomes really a valuable tool.”

The last key visual component was developing the color palette of the film. Using Richter’s visual cues in the script, Carpenter says, “We figured out the color aesthetic that we wanted, of which green and red were both big.” To fill in the specifics and bring the details into focus, the director says he relied on Lloyd, and a new collaborator to the fold, costume designer, April Ferry.

Larry Franco recommended Ferry to Carpenter because of her costuming ingenuity and resourcefulness. Ferry at the time started as a costumer and then costume supervised on films like *The Big Chill* (1983) and *Irreconcilable Differences* (1984). “*Big Trouble* was actually April’s first [title] as a costume designer,” Franco reveals. “She always thanks me for that, but I knew April back in the day when I was first assistant director on *The Rose* (1979), and she was the set costumer.”

Ferry was able to take the script and from it, design and produce the vast range of costuming needs, from Jack’s signature contemporary look to Lo Pan’s various era iterations, and everything in between.

TOP: Carpenter, Edlund and producer Larry J. Franco at work