



sikander

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SIKANDER 13, December 1986, is edited and published by Irwin Hirsh, at 2/416 Dandenong Rd, Caulfield North, Victoria 3161, AUSTRALIA. It is available for written and drawn contributions, a letter of comment, your fanzine in trade, Old Fanzines, or \$2. \$1 from the sale of every copy of this fanzine will be donated to GUFF. This fanzine supports the following Worldcon bids, and encourages you to do the same: The Netherlands in 1990, and Perth in 1994. Irwin Hirsh for GUFF
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CAPRICE
Irwin (Ed)

SKIFFY FAN You know, I finally, eventually, saw The Return of the Jedi. Only three years after its release, and given the money it has made for its producers I suspect there aren't many more who have taken so long to see the film. Like, seemingly, everyone else I loved Star Wars and upon its release I happily went along to see The Empire Strikes Back.

I can't say I was greatly impressed. A lot of things bug me about the film, notably the bits where Luke Skywalker was being coached, by Yoda, on the Force. Those scenes just fell flat. But largely I was plainly pissed-off with the ending, simply because there wasn't any. It is all very well for George Lucas to attempt to evoke the feeling of his childhood, where the Saturday afternoon matinee had a cartoon, a cliff-hanger serial, and a fantasy feature, but it is another thing to ask us to wait three years to have all those loose-ends tied up. I was quite insulted by this, so that by the time Jedi came out I just didn't care to see it. Until recently, that is. The Astor, a local 'change' cinema were showing Empire and Jedi as a double feature and Wendy and I went along to see them, paying an admission price which was less than that when Jedi was first released.

Having seen the two of them in this way convinces me that it is the only way to see Empire. Not that this makes Jedi a great film. Not by a long shot. I have great doubts about the first half hour of the film. The only good about that segment was that it tied up all those loose ends from Empire. Which is where it should've been, seeing as it had nothing to do with the rest of Jedi.

The main fault with that first half hour is that it was designed to satisfy the ego of a very rich man. Nothing else. It seems that the

only person in the whole universe who wasn't delighted with the 'cantina' sequence of Star Wars was George Lucas. He felt that the scene missed his vision by a wide mark, and decided to try again with Jabba the Hutt's menagerie. For someone who had previously displayed a highly efficient filmmakers mind Lucas had turned into someone who thought nothing about indulging himself to the tune of many millions of dollars. It is, after all, only when we leave Jabba that the story of Jedi gets going.

The 'cantina' sequence of Star Wars works simply because it didn't call attention to the amount of work that went into designing and building the aliens. The way the scene was shot was no different to that of a barroom scene in a Western. The camera stayed on the main characters and all we got were quick cutaways of the bars' denizens. At no time was the camera allowed to sit for too long on any of the extras in that scene. An admirable feature of Star Wars was that it wasn't showy about itself as a film.

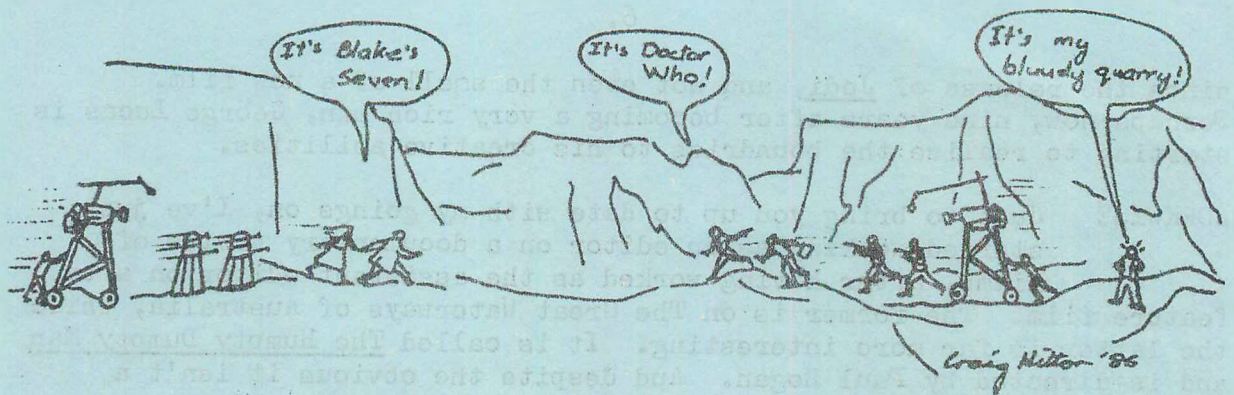
Contrast this to Jabba's menagerie, where the camera was allowed to rest for far too long on Jabba, the members of the band, and whatever else was there. If this was part of a simple straightforward no-special-effects film, there is no way that the editor would've allowed the shots to last for so long. But here was a scene designed to showcase Lucas's special effects division.

Not that it did such a good job. We saw enough of Jabba to know that it was a mediocre piece of work, and that the singer's movements were very stilted, and that... well, if the 'cantina' characters had masks which had faults we weren't given the time to find out.

As for the rest of Jedi, it isn't too different from Star Wars. If Lucas hadn't been involved in its production I'm sure he would've sued. Stripped of all the trimmings, Jedi has this storyline: the Empire has this huge space station, which gives them the power to destroy planets and otherwise control the universe. The good guys have to destroy this station and to do so they have to beat some enormous odds. And in Star Wars the Empire has this huge space station... well, you get the idea.

Beyond this, Jedi is a failure in its attempt to say something about the human condition. The meaningful, serious look he would give his companions, of the cry of anguish he gave when he discovered who his father is, doesn't make up for the fact that Luke Skywalker is a one-dimensional character, a homage to the one-dimensional characters of Lucas's film viewing past. And no amount of injecting the Force into the series would've changed that. Watching Luke coming to grips with the truth about his father and pondering the choice between the good side of the Force and the Dark Side, the whole thing struck me as being, not exactly trite, but definitely wrong.

In this context The Karate Kid is a film which compares quite favourably with Jedi. By no means a great film TKK is, nevertheless a highly



enjoyable one. Like Jedi, we know that our main character(s) will triumph over their adversaries. And like Jedi, the main character has to choose between the 'good' and 'bad' side of a religious, spiritual discipline. The Kid has to choose between learning karate so that he doesn't have to fight and learning karate so that he can bash up those who pick on him. Or rather, the choice is made for him - his teacher tells him he has to learn karate for the former reason; the Kid just has to come to realise that this is a honourable reason for learning the craft. And in that realisation comes some of the discipline of karate.

I don't know if the film gives an accurate picture of karate, or if it is a simplified, watered-down version, but I know that this whole aspect added to the enjoyment of the film. It provided for some character development, within the Kid himself and in his relationship with his teacher, and it was nicely carried throughout the film. Contrast this to the depiction of the Force in Jedi, which only happens in fits and starts, when the camera is on Luke. And even then... well... whoever heard of caricature development? And then there is the problem with the effect the Force has on the Jedi's triumph at the end of the film. Hans Solo and Leia, for instance, didn't get the Force, but they played important parts in destroying the Death Star II. Luke being there, with the Force, was not the difference between success and failure.

There is a good reason why the depiction of karate in TKK works as an integral part of the film, while the Force doesn't work in Jedi. One set of filmmakers made use of an already-existing religion/discipline, and they simply made use of what we already know to not bother with much explanation. The other set of filmmakers had to invent a religion/discipline and then had to go about explaining it to us. To successfully do such a thing while still maintain an even narrative flow requires a great skill; a skill which wasn't required in Star Wars and on recent evidence isn't possessed by Lucas.

Interestingly enough, The Karate Kid Part II has had its Melbourne release and seems to have gone the way of most sequels. I haven't seen it but the critics have: "It's okay, but is just a remake of the first film." I'll probably end up seeing it, which is more than I can say for the next Star Wars film. And not even at the Astor.

Then again, maybe it won't even get as far as the Astor. We were told there would be a new film every three years and here it is, three years

since the release of Jedi, and not even the smell of a new film. Perhaps now, nine years after becoming a very rich man, George Lucas is starting to realise the boundries to his creative abilities.

WORKWISE Just to bring you up to date with my goings on, I've just started working as an editor on a documentary series of films, after having worked as the assistant editor on a tv feature film. The former is on The Great Waterways of Australia, while the latter is far more interesting. It is called The Humpty Dumpty Man and is directed by Paul Hogan. And despite the obvious it isn't a childrens film and he isn't that Paul Hogan.

The film is a spy thriller intrigue and is worth watching. I had a feeling this would be so when I read the script. I made the mistake of starting to read the script late one night, when in bed. 30 pages in I was hooked and found I couldn't put the thing down. 160 pages later and well past my bedtime I stopped.

This Paul Hogan is the high brow sort. His graduation film at the Australian Film and Television School was a look at a young teenage boy who is infatuated with his babysitter, and won for Paul three non-feature Australian Film Institute Awards. I imagine I'll have that years awards ceremony blasted into my memory for quite some time. Wendy and I watched it while waiting for her parents to come home so we could tell them we were engaged. The longer we waited the more nervous we got, and the less we took note of what was happening on the teev. For a short while I was jolted out of this state of nerves by the sight of Joss Moorhouse on the small screen. Before she moved to Sydney to attend the AFTS Joss and I had gone to college together. She was at the ceremony accompanying Paul, her boyfriend. I'd been working in the film industry for about two months, didn't know a great many people, and didn't expect to spot anyone I knew. To see someone there was a nice feeling.

A strange thing about those new jobs is that even though I've been working for two years as a freelancer this is the first time that I've felt like one. For close to two years I'd gone from one project to another working for the same man, Ted Mason. I'd been his film editing assistant on a short documentary series, a tv mini-series, and two feature films; I'd been an assistant sound editor on one of the features, and with Ted as Post Production Supervisor I cut the film and sound on a short documentary. Then, with THDM, I was working with someone else.

That someone else was Murray Ferguson, who had come down from Sydney to cut his first feature. He has two years experience of editing shorts and commercials. I asked him how he felt about this, his big break. "I don't," he said, "I just look at it as three or four shorts. Or, even, 150 commercials, all strung together. This job is longer, but my basic aim is the same: do the best I can. The only difference is that a feature is more interesting to watch than a commercial, and that makes me proud to be working on one."

Working with Murray provided me with quite a contrast to that of working with Ted. Aside from the usual, a new person, new surroundings, etc, there is the difference in their experience. Ted has twenty years of editing behind him, and with that comes precise ways of doing things. When I asked Murray how he wants, say, film trims filed away I didn't get an immediate answer, something I could expect from Ted.

I can remember when I started working for Ted and realised just how little we were taught in college. I had to unlearn quite a few bad habits and learn the correct ways. At the same time I had to learn the particular ways that Ted wanted things done. I was consistently running to him, as something new came up.

There was one thing, though, which I never asked about. Editors need to have a large supply of pens, pencils, chinagraph pencils, and textas by their side, and Ted likes to wrap a length of masking tape around the top of each of his writing implements. I never thought much about this and just assumed that it was done to identify those pens as his.

One day Ted walked into my room just as I had put a chinagraph pencil down on my working bench. The pencil picked up on the momentum I had transferred to it and promptly rolled off the bench, stopping at Ted's feet. Ted, in turn, tut-tutted, picked up the pencil, and instead of handing it back to me went over to the tape dispenser and pulled off a length of masking tape, about 20cm long.

"This is what you do Irwin," he said as he started wrapping the tape carefully around the top of the pencil. As he did so he explained that the aim of this procedure is to provide a brake against the pencil rolling off the table. He wrapped the tape around the pencil so that there was a 1cm protrusion of tape coming away from the pencil, in much the same way that a branch sprouts out from a tree trunk.

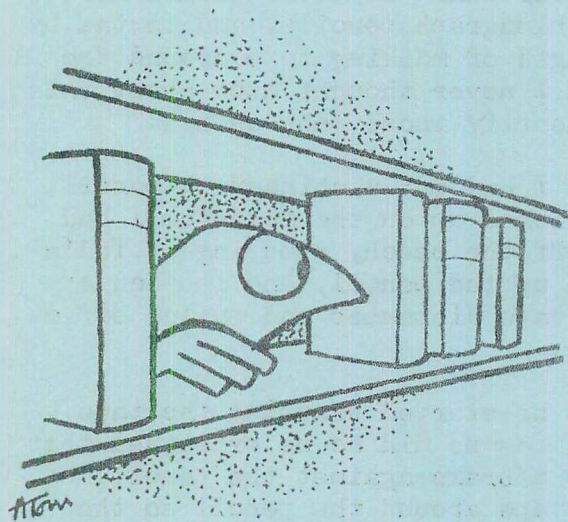
Ted then started dropping the pencil on the table, and proudly explained that unless you throw the pencil down it will always brake within easy reach. "Only one time in a million will it roll over the edge," he added, as I pondered the simplicity of it all. I had an immediate feeling of what it would've been like to have the inventor of the wheel explain it to you.

I mention this because I recently received a copy of Mainstream 11, Suzle and Jerry Kaufman's excellent fanzine. If you are like me, upon receiving a fanzine which is published to the schedule of Mainstream's you immediately dig out the previous issue to place the new issue's letter column in context. One of the articles in Mainstream 10 was by Stu Shiffman, and was on the art of hand-stencilling illos in fanzines. Among the accompanying illos was one showing Stu and his Tools of the Trade, with the relevant implements labelled. The label of the stylus described them as "not rolling off table," while Stu's bare feet are described as being "for picking up the Roscoe-less stylus that do roll off." If only Stu knew what he could do with a length of masking tape, I thought.

But, of course, fanzines are here for exchanging ideas. And now Stu's stylis should only roll off his workbench one time in a million.

AND WHILE I have your attention, could you please note my address. I moved here just over eighteen months ago. Announced it in all the newszines, and all that. But still some fanzines go to my old South Yarra address. And while my parents are pretty good about passing on my mail, any fanzine which goes there loses some of its charm. You know what I mean, the thrill of coming home from work to find some fannish mail... it's lost if my mail goes to my old address.

- Irwin Hirsh



the
letter
column

AT
LEAST
YOU
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IT

Lucy Huntzinger
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Thanks for a very charming essay on getting married. As a new minister in the Universal Life Church I am pleased to be able to perform wedding ceremonies. It means that some of my more Godless friends can have a "real" wedding without the spectre of orthodox religion disrupting their big day.

My first gig as a minister was at my housemates' wedding two months ago. It was terrific if I do say so myself. Not my part, although everyone professed to enjoy my performance, but the whole festive craziness of a backyard wedding. We were neither Greek, Italian nor Jewish but after the food was consumed the rooms were cleared and some wild jigging, stepping and country dancing took place far into the night. It was a great thing to see and I only wished that I had worn something more accomodating of dancing than a silk sari.

And Terry Floyd made a terrific Best Person!

Was most specially interested in Jack Herman's zine reviews. I can't say I completely agreed with his concluding statement (that only The

Notional surpasses a Good rating). I think that The Metaphysical Review is very good, and I'm not sure why he didn't think Silander better than good. But maybe I have low standards or something. I'm frequently surprised at others' declarations that there aren't any good US zines anymore and Britain is number one, etc etc. Sigh. Guess I'm just easily amused. You know, I've never seen any of my fanzines reviewed. Maybe there was one paragraph about Con Girls Digest 1 in the Texas SF Inquirer. Why do you suppose that is? I know people read 'em. I know that they talk about 'em. But I haven't got much mention in fanzines at all. It's kind of weird, huh?

Helen McNabb
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When Mike and I were married we cut the speeches down to the minimum. We had the reception in my parents garden, the food was all buffet, so the cake cutting ceremony was mercifully brief, my dad said words to the effect of "we hope they'll be happy," the best man ignored most of his notes, and we got back to the important business of eating, drinking and talking. We have attended some horrors though. At one the uncles and aunts started getting up for a say - it was dire! Mike has twice had to speak. Once when he was best man, he prepared it, learnt it with brief notes and was pretty good. The other time we were about to sit down to eat when the bride's father came up to us and said "As so many of the college friends are here it'd be nice if someone said a few words. You'll do it won't you Mike." and went off. Poor Mike was so nervous he couldn't eat, and it was worse because most of the speakers were either teachers or used to speaking in public and the standard was pretty high, poor Mike was green by the time his turn came. He didn't enjoy that wedding.

Harry Warner, Jr
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You reopened an old wound inadvertently with your remarks about wedding photography and the superiority of the documentary variety. For years I lugged a camera around with me on my reporting rounds and took photographs to accompany some of my news stories. Then came the day when a new managing editor took over, one who had been trained in big city journalism. One of the first things I turned over to him was a story and photograph resulting from a presentation ceremony of a large check from some organization for some charitable purpose. He looked horrified when he saw the photograph and accused me of taking it during the ceremony. This would never do, he warned. Newspapers shouldn't run photographs taken of the news as it occurs because only by setting up and posing the scene is it possible to show a news event properly. From then on I was forced to create fake news photos in the sense that they didn't show what had happened but rather something contrived that would perhaps leave a bit less waste space between people or include a pretty girl who had no real reason for being in the group. I lost my enthusiasm for newspaper photography from then on and a few years later managed to get rid of the photographic responsibilities altogether. It was basically the thing you wrote about: the artificiality of commercial wedding photography and the validity of the documentary type, and the remarkable preference some people have for the former.

Richard Faulder
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I was interested in your description of the atmosphere at Jewish weddings. Somehow, even after corresponding for a number of months with Sue Bursztynski, I hadn't gained the impression that there was a Jewish culture. A religious and racial heritage, yes, but not a cultural one. From watching Heritage on ABC-TV I rather gained the impression that the Jews had tended to adopt much of the culture of the country in which they were living, subject to the constraints of religious law. Not having come to the realisation that there was such a people as the Jews outside the pages of the Bible until I reached university, in effect I'm trying to fill in all the blanks in my knowledge about a people so obviously pivotal in the development of Western civilisation.

((There is such a thing as Jewish culture. It comes out in the dancing at weddings and in the Yiddish theatre (which still exists in some small way in Melbourne), for instance. The one I know has its roots in my Polish ancestry, would be different from that developed in the Palestine or African Jewish communities.))

Walt Wills
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It was nice to be present at your wedding, through your editorial, and thanks for inviting us. I hope the three-piece chesterfield suite we sent you by way of a wedding present arrived safely. The last we heard from it was a postcard from Istanbul, reading "Sofa, so good."

Norm Hollyn's letter was fascinating. Have you ever noticed how difficult other people's jobs seem? I noticed this when I was still working and every Monday all the department chiefs met to exchange notes; it used to make me feel guilty, until one day one of them asked me confidentially how on earth I coped with my can of worms.

Dave Collins
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U. . .

The cover surprises me. It must be the first piece of artwork by Shep that didn't grab me. Usually when I see a Shep cover I have to sit and stare at it taking in all the wonderful detail and humour, but this time the only reason I stared was because I couldn't believe I didn't like it. I'm not sure why this was. The drawing was up to Shep's usual high standard (though the bikes stabilisers look a little weak), so maybe the idea just didn't appeal to me. Still at least some good will come of it, I won't have to put up with him crowing because I have complimented his latest piece.

Mind you the bum did manage to grab me with his GUFF illo - some days it doesn't pay to look past the cover of a fanzine. And I'm surprised at Harry Bell - I thought we all dressed like that.

With one American and three Brits supplying the artwork for the whole issue it makes me wonder where all the Aussie fanartists are.

Brad Foster
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Knock-out cover from Shep, both for the weird idea and the beautiful execution and detail in the final work. And kudos again to Shep for his toon on page 8, brilliant idea with all sorts of interpretations!

My god, I feel like I should go paint Mike Glicksohn's house or something for him. What an ego-blast from his letter! Boy, now if I could only get him into position as an art director somewhere and then beat on his door. I blush with happy embarrassment.

Michael Hailstone
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One thing that annoyed me was that Jack Herman and you - or maybe it was just you; as the editor you must take the can - got the name of my fanzine wrong. It is the Matalan Rave, with no p anywhere. Whatever you or Jack might think of it, I think I'm entitled at least to have it called by its right name.

One thing really sticks in my craw - and this whinge is aimed generally rather than at anybody in particular - and that is the question of what is interesting. From reading other fanzines I have gathered that fans are interested in personal life histories and tales of personal experiences and travels, not to mention articles and discussions on sf and fantasy. So what's so bloody boring about the Rave? I mean, I know my life history is not very interesting, but I've read some really

boring albeit "fannish" stuff in other fanzines, including yours, as I've let you know once before. I put "fannish" in quotes, because the said stuff is deemed to be fannish only by virtue of its being about the doings of fans, though really it's no more than the thoroughly boring suburban mundane doings of human beings who just happen to be fans. I refer to such dramatic tales such as how someone got his suburban nuclear family into the car and rushed off to a con - presumably, just because it's about getting away to a con, it is deemed wonderfully interesting, or, closer to the bone, "A Day in the life of..." Or longwinded raves on fannish bureaucracy/politics. Don't get me wrong; I'm not telling you or anyone else that you shouldn't publish such stuff. I'm only saying that I don't find it interesting and feel puzzled how others, presumably the heavies of fandom, do, given everything else. (By the way, in case you're worried, I have no complaints about the latest Sikander; I find the tale of your wedding interesting.) Of course we sf folk are very varied and have different ranges of



interest; it's just that I feel rather oppressed by the fandom "establishment".

((Sorry about the mistake with your title. Jack called it incorrectly but, like you say, I should have picked up on it. // I would've thought it is not the subject matter that makes an article interesting, but the way it is handled.))

Taral
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CANADA

Personally, Sikander is my favourite of Australian zines. I used to like other zines more, but that was quite a number of years ago, and these days I don't even think Leigh Edmonds can necessarily cast a shadow over the fanzines of Irwin Hirsh. Q36 in its various manifestations, WAHFFUL, and WeberWoman's Wrevenge straggle behind in second place. Geg has had better days, but none recently. I don't see The Notional or whatever Bruce Gillespie is up to, so that solves the problem of whether they're better than Sikander or not. (I'm talking about my personal preference, after all.) The Space Wastrel and The Mentor are in some other universe than mine, and not in the running at all. So... So I'm a bit surprised that Jack didn't rate Sikander rather more highly than he did. He said nothing very negative about it, except that he thought the zine needed more neat. Some issues probably did, but after Ted White's massive blitzkreig of the Land of Oz, there was never any doubt of Sikander's record as a weighty fanzine. Nevertheless Jack finds that, with the exception of The Notional, none of the zines he reviewed rose above the mere "good". I'm not able to comment on TN, but if Leigh and Valma are running it I can guess that it's up to their usual fine standards. All the same, I'd be reluctant to rate a newszine over the entire Australian fanzine field, unless it were very little like a newszine at all, and more like a fannish monthly. This could be just the case. I'm a bit more puzzled that Jack seems to lump everything else together as pretty much on one level. Do TSW, WWR, and Sikander have so little to choose between them? We could resort to time-honoured (and worn) phrases about each to his own taste, but I believe that sort of thing is hogwash, meant to avoid arguments. I'm quite capable of appreciating the quality of a superb sercon zine, even if I don't have the slightest interest in reading it. And I perceive quite clear differences in the qualities of the zines Jack reviewed. From my previous statements, it's easy to see how I place Sikander in relation to the rest of the pack. Luckily it's not my job to sort the rest out. It was Jack's though, and I bet he was afraid to offend the editors. His conclusion doesn't exclude the possibility that any of the zines fell far below the rating of "good", but he went to lengths to avoid saying as much. While much of what Jack said made perfect sense, on the whole the review was too wishy-washy to place confidence in.

I enjoyed John Foyster's "Fanzinatin' Rhythm" considerably more. He has definite opinions about what was good and what was not, and can say why. He also had an overall scheme for his opinions, that puts some light on

British fanzine publishing during a creative period of interest. Mind you, I thought John could've been a bit more convincing about some details. I never thought of Dave Langford's early humour as "mildly contrived". I thought he was funny, but I concede that I might have overlooked the nuts and bolts of his writing. I wasn't equipped to see if any of the screws were loose in the middle-seventies, and knew I either liked something, or didn't. I did. I guess, though, in the Twilight of the Elder Gods of British Fandom it's understandable if someone looks under their hems for stilts and elevator shoes. Why only last week a certain Puerto Rico fan wondered if perhaps every word written by Walt Willis was a gem! Time changes every truth. To return to John, though, I wish this chapter of his review column, trip report, whatever, had been more timely. Unfortunately, I read both British fan writing collections six or seven years ago, and don't have as clear a memory of their contents as this short lapse would lead you to expect... It would have been nice, too, if either volume was still for sale.

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A real frisson I experienced there as I opened our copy of Sikander 12 and read John Foyster's review of Mood 70 and By British - the first full review of the two anthologies to be published anywhere, and only seven years after they themselves appeared! At this rate of progress, John should be up to Patrick Neilsen Hayden's Fanthology 81 by at least the end of the century...

Okay, okay: an uncalled-for slight, particularly as John's piece was intended less as a review than as a chapter of his GUFF trip report, with a wholly different purpose - as his introduction to the chapter makes clear. But while I accept many of the criticisms about the mismatch between my history of the decade and the actual contents of By British - and would take this opportunity to point out that his article fails to make it clear precisely which article came from which anthology, this implying that my history applied to both and was even written for both - I would in my defence state that, as a history, it was written at too close a range (both personally and periodically) to the events and personalities it describes to have much hope of attaining the distanced, objectified perspective necessary for a truly even-handed, non-partisan survey. As John says, the tendency to treat small events as though they were of world-shattering significance bulks large throughout my history - but (again in my defence) are not historians persistently cursed by a desire to locate and assess influences and movements and elevate above the rest the perpetrators of same?

As I said, though, I accept many of John's criticisms - but at the same time I think I should also say that the seven years between then and now have (as one might expect) wrought quite a sea-change in my opinions. As early as 1981 I was stating that the last third of the history ought to be rewritten to correct what it had become obvious was unfounded speculation about the supposed "anti-fannish backlash" waiting in the wings; and now... now, were I to write such a history at all it would be

an altogether cooler, more ironic affair, the focus less (as it was then) on an attempt to prove the dominance of the ultra-fannish ethos that many if not most of us thought was the only "true" fandom, and more (as it should have been) on an attempt to record and evaluate the legacy left by what actually happened. My only regret (a very mild one) is that I know I won't ever write such a piece.

Since we're discussing the past, however, let me focus now on the letter from Chuch Harris - who says that we will one day "put up statues to Joe Nicholas - Fan Benefactor" and goes on to say that "at least (I tell) you about your faults as well as your complete and utter worthlessness so that you can correct them in your next attempt". The fact that this is something I haven't done for the past seven years makes this statement not only inaccurate but irrelevant, and as such a waste of both your space and your readers' time. I no longer write fanzine reviews; I do not think that the fanzine reviews I wrote during the late seventies were any good; and I am heartily sick and tired of their being continually dragged up by all and sundry (particularly those who weren't even active in fandom during the period in question) in the letter columns of (especially) overseas fanzines whose editors have little or no direct experience or even knowledge of contemporary British fandom. (Hence, perhaps, all those Australian fanzine reviews which wax lyrical about material from Terry Jeeves, John Owen and Peter Presford while remaining completely ignorant of even the existence of - say - Anne Hammill, Christina Lake, Nick Lowe, Phil Palmer and Jimmy Robertson.) Which is perhaps one very good reason why, when overseas fanzine editors receive letters from such as Chuch Harris and Ian Bambro which pass comment on other British fans, the said editors should ask themselves whether the said comments are a true reflection of what's going on in British fandom or just the stirrings of someone with nothing better to do; and think twice about publishing them. Or: how would you like to be subject of random vilification and abuse by your contemporaries in the pages of non-Australian fanzines, and wouldn't you be demanding that their editors check a few facts before rushing into print?

((The only time I recall a review of, say, Erg in an Aussie fanzine of the last few years, it was panned and was reviewed as nothing more than a Terry Jeeves fanzine - not the be-all and end-all of British fandom. Perhaps you get a different batch of Aussie fnzs to me. // And was Chuck Harris throwing abuse at you? I don't think so; he was praising the value of serious criticism of fanzines. You may not like the reviews you once wrote but I think you still believe there is something worthwhile in criticising fanzines; it comes out in more fairly recent letters to Pam Wells, Bruce Gillespie and myself, and you having published Leigh Edmonds' column in Fuck the Tories. I agree that Chuck should've made the distinction on when the reviews were written, but your name was just one that he could've used. Had he used the words "Greg Pickersgill" instead of "Joe Nicholas" the point of his letter would not have been any different. // Then again....about two weeks after receiving Joseph's letter I received...))

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I'm sorry about this but I've made a terrible, terrible mistake. A cataclysmic megabooboo that will plunge all fandom into war. Again. In the last Sikander I rashly prophesied that eventually we would erect statues to Joe Nicholas - Fan Benefactor, and I praised his old fanzine reviews as an epitome of constructive criticism.

Irwin, you'd better cancel all that mish-mosh. This is what happens if you borrow Vinç Clarke's old fanzine files and forget that they are dated 1980 instead of 1986.

I had a letter from Joseph today. He is not like that at all. He is annoyed that people think he might be like that... It might have been true six or seven years ago but nowadays Joseph is a Changed Man. He is nothing like the old seventies Nicholas - nowadays he is a brand new edition. (With very hard covers.) He says my quote is not only inaccurate but also quite irrelevant.

Ah, the shame of it. Unlike Joseph I shall never be ideologically correct.

I don't suppose we have any real option. You will have to recall the last issue and delete my offensive bit; phone Iconoclasts Inc. and topple the statues, raze the Hall of Fame, melt down the bronze plaques, and hope that eventually people will forget. They won't, of course. If you do get over to Conspiracy 87 I'm the heap of sack cloth and ashes in the far corner, ringing my little bell and chanting "Unclean." Spurn me.

Yvonne Rousseau
PO Box 8
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VIC 3054

John Foyster's "Fanzinatin' Rhythm" inspired me to borrow By British and Mood 70 from him; and reading them inspires me to say (and please carefully clear your mind now of all unworthy prejudices derived from remembering that I nominated a rival GUFF candidate) - Irwin, are you sure you want to go to Britain? Have you read the kind of thing they're prepared to say about other people In Print there? Remember Chris Priest describing how Jack Williamson's sound-effects from the nextdoor lavatory cubicle convinced him that someone on the forthcoming panel was scared even more shitless than he is? Remember Dave Langford describing how Jim Barker, unable to convey in words what Ian Garbutt is like, produces a drawing ("ALL: No! Good grief! He can't be like that! (Laughter.) DAVE WINGROVE: No, no, that's pretty flattering.")? Can you cope even with the attention of Rob Holdstock? - he who, having heard Kyril Bonfiglioli greet a Maggie with a loud and cultured "MAGGERS!" and a Bobby with a similiar "BOBBERS!", began to follow him around, waiting in vain for him "to recognise Nick Webb or someone"? Could you, had you been Peter Roberts, have coped with Graham Charnock's raising doubts about your actual sex by calling you a Succubus instead of an Incubus? If Josephine Saxton is there, will you not pale at the recollection (from Peter Nicholls) of how, dancing with Roy Kettle, she "picked him up and threw him, with a

careless and lordly gesture, sixteen feet across the room into the small (or should I say large) of Rog Peyton's back"? Reflect carefully, lad, upon what you are letting yourself in for!

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Paul Stevens; Pamela Boal; Chuck Conner; Lucy Sussex; Larry Dunning; Skel; Brian Earl Brown; Ian Covell; Jack Herman, "My article could've have more commentary and less mere listing. I think I bit off too much. I shouldn't have been so inclusive, and should've omitted several of the fanzines and concentrated on examples of zines doing a good job and those not. Instead I tried to freeze a moment in fanzine history and in doing so talked too much about individual trees and not enough about the shape of the woods."; Mike Glicksohn; Ali Kayn; Harry Andruschak; Rob Gregg; and Bruce Gillespie. Also late locs on #11 from Harry Warner, Jr; Jeanne Mealy; Brian Earl Brown; and Joy Hibbert. Thank you one and all.

Perry Middlemiss **On mothers & worthwhile experiences**

The best way of answering someone who espouses the virtues of "worthwhile experiences" is to turn and run as fast as you possibly can in the opposite direction. Invariably, your adversary has either: (a) not yet engaged in the "worthwhile experience", would like to but would like someone along for moral support and has decided that you're top of the pops for that week; or (b) undertaken the "worthwhile experience" so long ago that various psychological blocks have conveniently appeared over the ensuing period to convert all the bad and embarrassing moments associated with the experience into warm inner glows. Just as invariably, these two options - by their very nature I guess - are championed by your newly ex-best-friend in the first instance, and by your long-suffering mother in the second. In and event, both are highly dangerous and should be avoided at all costs.

For what seemed like centuries during my teenage years, my mother was obsessed with the idea of getting me to take up either ballroom dancing or the piano-accordion. To be frank, I never could figure out this fixation on piano-accordions, which I loathed with a vengeance, but the dancing idea only needed a small amount of logical analysis to get to its gist. It was, of course, women. And, it almost need not be pointed out, as far as mothers are concerned, getting their sons to meet women has to be the ultimate in worthwhile experiences for them.

Back in the halcyon days of my youth I was somewhat backward (in my mother's view) in my dealings with those creatures of the opposite sex. This didn't worry me overtly but for quite a few years it seemed to drive my mother almost to despair. The fact that I wasn't particularly interested didn't phase her one bit. She had obviously made up her mind

that my social skills were so sadly lacking that she would supply me with some if it was the last thing she ever did.

Now most people will have come into contact with a mother at some time in their lives so will need no reminding that, when it comes to wiliness, mothers leave foxes for dead. Their little tricks and tactics are legion. And all have the one purpose of getting you, the child, to undergo the worthwhile experience of the month or, in my case, the century.

In order to achieve her aim, my mother was forced to employ all those techniques and talents possessed only by parents of the female gender. This was absolutely necessary because, as was well-known around our household, once I got hold of an idea I was harder to move than ten-day old concrete. This was an attitude that I had been cultivating, with I think some success, for more years than I can remember. Don't consider for a moment that I was merely stubborn - it was much more than that. Underlying everything I did in those days was a deep and firm commitment to the ideals of indolence.

My mother was facing a fairly difficult task then, though she must have been buoyed up by the knowledge that she had had a few victories over me in the past. I considered these previous defeats of little or no consequence when seen in relation to the ensuing battle. What my mother thought I have no idea.

The opening gambit from my mother in any familiar skirmish of this kind was the tried and true method of Pointing Out the Bad Consequence.

"You should get out more and meet people. Stop spending all your time sitting around the house."

"But I do meet people Mum."

"You know what I mean." When in fact I didn't have the slightest idea.

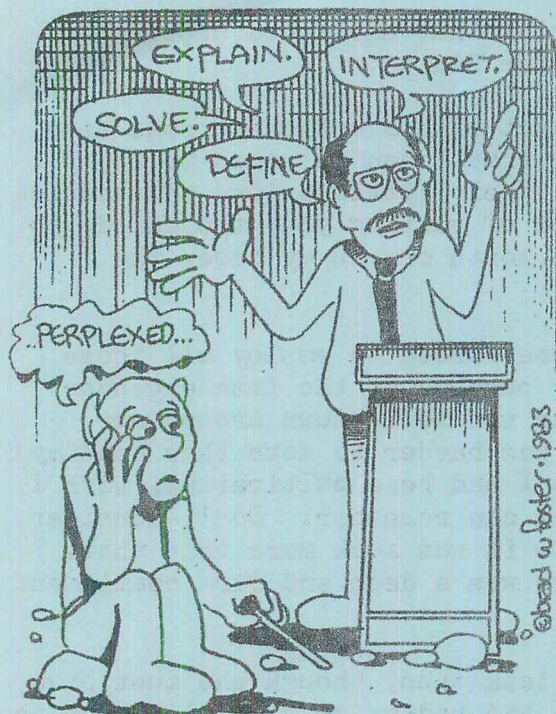
"No. What?" A bit dangerous as it can leave you open to just about any form of attack, but my patience was wearing thin and I wanted to get to the guts of this exchange before Dr. Who started.

"You want to get married someday don't you? How can you get married if you never meet anyone? Do you want to live alone for the rest of your life?" There it is.

"Who says I'll ever want to get married?" A classic rejoinder: skirt the basic issue and answer with a question.

"Of course you will. Everybody does." Faltering a little now.

"But that doesn't mean I will. I don't have to do something just because everybody else is doing it. Do I?" Careful, don't push too far.



"I don't want to discuss this anymore. Go and get ready for tea." Round One to the kid in the corner.

Slight variations on this theme would surface for the next few weeks until my mother realised that the standard frontal assault had Buckley's chance and so moved into the next phase which consisted mainly of a furtive push down the sidelines.

For this strategy to have even the faintest hope of success reinforcements were required. This normally took the form of my father, although on this occasion my brother was also a part of the support team. Either off his own bat or as a result of various machinations behind the scenes, my male sibling had succumbed and had taken to this ballroom dancing stuff with an enthusiasm

rarely seen. I did not then, nor do I now, know exactly what was driving him on this unusual way, but it was obvious that his excitement was supposed to become infectious.

A totally unfair advantage can be obtained in any squabble if you have the opportunity to choose the battle ground. Timing is also very important. To say that my mother was a past master at gaining the initial upper hand would be something of an understatement. When she had decided that the problem befronting her was going to be a tough one to crack she always settled on the dinner table as the arena. It was perfect. My father was always available to provide valuable support when called upon and it was an easier task to attract his attention when he only had a meal in front of him as opposed to some epic of the spaceways. My brother - rarely seen inside the house - could be prodded and pushed into saying and doing the right thing on pain of death. And my younger sister could sit at the end of the table following the conversation like a tennis spectator who has no idea of the rules but likes to watch the little white ball anyway.

Best of all though was her timing. Dinner time was bad enough for a growing lad like myself but to actually choose the evening meal after I had spent the best part of seven strenuous hours watching the cricket on TV was stretching things a bit far. Everything was in her favour and I wandered into the trap like a lamb being led to the slaughter.

As I mentioned, my brother only needed the odd prod to keep him on the straight and narrow but to get this particular conversation moving in the right direction my mother was quite willing to bluntly kickstart him into life.

"Did you have a good night out dancing last night?" Alarm bells would start ringing immediately I heard questions like this. The only solution in the early stages was to keep your head low and wolf the food down as fast as you possibly could.

"Yeah, it was great." A slight wince at the use of the first word in the reply but she wasn't about to be sidetracked at this critical stage.

"So what did you get up to?" A tricky one for her this. She had to hope my brother had enough decorum not to blurt out something she didn't want to hear.

"Well, first we..." and on and on. I started aggravating my sister not long after this diatribe began in the vain hope that I might stop the flow. No such luck. My brother was waxing lyrical all over the place and nothing, but nothing, was going to stop him in mid-wax. All I got for my trouble was a stern look and a crack on the fingers with a spoon. Whenever he sounded as though he was running a little light on for descriptive and anecdotal material my mother would help him along with a few well-chosen comments to my father about the dancing they used to do when they were younger. It seemed to go on for an eternity though I was convinced that it would stop eventually because the main purpose of this whole episode was to go to work on me with the thumb-screws and at the rate I was demolishing the meal in front of me they were going to have to be quick.

Sure enough, eventually the well inside my brother's throat ran dry and I could feel the searchlight eyes of my mother start to zero in on my downturned head.

"So what do you think?"

"About what?" It sounded dumb and was meant to.

"About ballroom dancing. I think you would have a good time."

"Why?" There was nothing else for it. I was in such a bad strait that I had to fall back on the ultimate defense - The Continuous Question. If you thought your parents hated it when you were five or six just imagine what they must feel like when you do the same thing when you are in your mid-teens.

"Well, he had a good time didn't he?"

"So he says but I don't understand why." To my brother: "What was so good about it?"

A small but significant shift in direction. Asking my brother the question was intended to sound natural and throw my mother off the scent. It certainly threw my brother. He had obviously thought his part in this whole charade finished with his rendition of his dancing exploits. Now, here I was, tossing a question at him when he least

expected it. He wasn't happy all of the sudden and I could tell that I was going to be in for a couple of bruises later. Needless to say my mother came to his rescue.

"Your father and I think that at your age it would definitely be a worthwhile experience." Hitting with both barrels - bringing the all-important concepts into play along with a vague, yet potent, slap at my youth.

"Why?"

"Don't keep on saying 'why' all the time."

"I have to learn somehow. Don't I?" A chink in the armour is starting to show and the subject is beginning to wander. Before long we are off the topic entirely and have moved on to football or the weather - something totally innocuous. Despite the apparent cessation of hostilities I didn't consider that much of a victory had been won here. My mother held her own fairly well and while she may have backed off a little she didn't lose much ground. On the other hand there was still those bruises to collect.

Sometime after the bruising had diminished to something approaching a mild discolouration, no further pressure had been applied and I started to get worried. The longer I had to wait for the next installment the more I was convinced I would have trouble surviving it. Such waiting leads to an increase in introspection which predicates a loss of confidence in one's natural survival abilities. Without the full strength of my own convictions I was a sitting duck. And my mother knew it.

We were now entering uncharted territory in this test of wills. On previous occasions my mother would have indicated a stand-off by some passing remark about dropping the subject in question. In this instance nothing had been forthcoming from that quarter and I was totally at a loss to know what to expect. None of my friends knew either. It seemed that none of them had been in a similar boat. Not being privy to their domestic clashes I had no idea whether this was purely a matter of a lack of strength on their part or a greater grasp of the tactical intricacies of their mothers'. Whatever, I was in trouble.

In retrospect I should have noticed the initial signals. Being ordered to change into clean clothes to go down the street to do some shopping was obviously one of the classics. And I missed it. I like to think that it was my lack of confidence that blinded me in this way but that would be evading the issue somewhat. To give credit where credit's due, my mother had had me on the back foot ever since the waiting period started. She was now merely collecting the scalp.

So there we were, my mother and I, wandering up and down the main street doing the shopping. She charging ahead at what seemed like a manic pace, and me tagging along behind with a deep-set frown on my face

trying to figure out what was going to happen next.

In the best chess stratagems, overwhelming advantage can be gained by forcing your opponent to concentrate on the centre board action while building up, and then executing, a decisive thrust down the flanks. So too with our current contest. My mother acted as the centre board bait to keep me distracted long enough for her to utilise her ultimate tactic - The Manoeuvre of the Unexpected Encounter. An "accidental meeting" with one of her friends, accompanied by a suitable aged daughter, left me standing in the street totally snookered. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. And with the prospect of a long stretch in parental purgatory if I even flinched. Seemingly before I even had time to react we were having afternoon tea in a living room not our own. The contest was all over bar the shouting.

Oddly enough, the afternoon turned out rather well. The daughter could laugh quite infectiously and had more than a few brains in her head. What eventuated, however, will have to be a story for another day.

- Perry Middlemiss



It all began in January. A fellow graduate from the film course at the West Australian Institute of Technology rang and asked if I would be interested in working with him on a film, Heavy Duty, for the Electrical Trades Union. Even after he explained that negotiations were in very early stages and that consequently there was no guarantee of funding, that is a pay-packet, I jumped at the opportunity. Our first production meeting was the following week. There were three of us. Andrew was dealing with the ETU, Linda was helping him write the script, and I was to look after finance and organisation. To compress five months work into a few lines: by the beginning of June we had a script, a \$16 000 budget, a schedule, and an enormous amount of work to do in the few

weeks before Principal Cinematography commenced in late June. Andrew was to direct, I was the Production Manager, and Linda the First Assistant Director.

We were working well as a team and I was growing confident that the shoot would go smoothly with only the minimum number of hitches. What I didn't realise was that the decision had already been made that would lead to us running behind schedule, overshooting on film and video stock, and regularly having actors sitting around idle at \$16.82 per hour. The decision was the choice of Camera Operator and Director of Photography. They were Andrew's choice. He had worked with them previously in a small TV studio and been impressed with the standard and speed of their work. What didn't become apparent until too late was their inability to maintain that level of performance outside the strict confines of the TV studio.

A day of documentary shooting on Betacam a week before the principal shoot was, in hindsight, a good indication of things to come. As they both had vehicle trouble, I had arranged to pick up the Operator and DOP. On my scheduled arrival at their common residence I found that the Operator still had to eat his breakfast and then pack his gear, while the DOP had decided to drop his motorbike in for repairs and be picked up from the garage. This meant that I sat around for twenty minutes before back-tracking ten kilometres through peak hour traffic into the city centre to a garage which the Operator had forgotten the exact address. We were only an hour late getting to location, a delay that didn't seem to bother my passengers in the least.



It was on the third day of the principal shoot that I finally stopped being polite and lost my temper so comprehensively that I was still shaking from the release of tension over an hour later. The first day had been disappointing. Of three actors required in the morning, only one had finished within the four hours allowed. The scene scheduled for the afternoon was cancelled when the DOP decided that there was insufficient light to shoot an exterior scene at 5pm on a winter day. The fact that there had been sufficient light a couple of hours earlier, a time marked on the schedule for shooting it, seemed too obvious to bear mentioning. Day two was an improvement of sorts. Both the scenes scheduled for the day were completed, even if we didn't finish until four hours late. But it was a disaster as far as film stock was concerned. One third of the allocation of 16mm stock (300 feet/20 min. of the 2400 feet) was shot in covering two scenes with a planned screen time of 45-60 seconds. Heavy Duty was beginning to make Michael Cimino and Heaven's Gate look frugal.

That second day left me with the feeling I was staring a disaster in the face. The end of the first day had seen a conversation in which I discussed with Andrew the inability of the crew to keep to a fairly easy schedule. We put it down to first day fumbles and expected the next day to be much faster. It was much worse. Only the fact that we were shooting interior scenes and could work after the sun went down saved us from having to abandon a second scene. And it was only after the sun went down and I was able to escape both the office and the car (as Prod. Manager I was in charge of a Production Department of one - me - and spent most days either on the phone or in my car), that I was able to watch the crew and realise what was going on. I hope never again to be on a shoot where it is patently obvious that neither the DOP or Operator have read the script, let alone the storyboard, and where the Operator refuses to take any direction as to camera placement while the DOP continually mislays his light meter and has to ask the rest of the crew to find it for him. If I hadn't been writing the cheques to pay for it all I might have been able to treat it as some sort of sick joke. As it was, I just felt sick.

So I talked with Andrew again. We couldn't afford the shooting ratio, couldn't afford the overtime, and wouldn't always have locations where we could work back until 9pm. We decided I would talk to the crew and spell out the situation; a low budget film that couldn't afford to continue in the fashion to which they had accustomed themselves. Arriving half an hour after crew call on the third day in order to effect a dramatic entry, I was foiled in my plan by the total absence of the crew. Linda and Andrew were the only people there. Convinced I made a mistake with the call sheets, I checked through them to see where the crew had gone to. There was no mistake. The DOP arrived 40

minutes late and, without apology or explanation, proceeded to do very little. An hour after the crew call the Operator arrived, also without apology or explanation, and promptly decided it was time for coffee and a smoke. I began to wonder if there was something wrong with me.



After deciding there wasn't, I lost my temper. This involved shouting quite loudly while waving my prop, a can of film. No doubt I looked and sounded foolish from afar, but the results at close range were quite gratifying. In fact I think I now understand why some people arrange matters so they can lose their temper on a regular and frequent basis; apart from the very satisfying jolt of adrenalin, people will modify their behaviour quite dramatically in response. Day three of the shoot of

Heavy Duty was the first in which the scheduled scenes were shot in the scheduled time with the allocated footage. I went to sleep that night feeling much happier and quite pleased with the success of my foray into the 'angry boss' role.

The problem with modifying behaviour, as I discovered over the remaining few days of the shoot, is that short term stimuli only have short term effects. There was never a day as Day Two, but the speed and efficiency of Day Three wasn't repeated either. I considered losing my temper again and discussed it with Andrew, but we agreed that it would be better to let the situation remain at 'acceptably poor' rather than risk worsening matters. So I stayed away from the shoot as much as possible - it was frustrating to watch the time and money being wasted - and caught up with the paperwork and phonecalls at the office.

The shoot is completely finished now. We filmed the last of the cancelled scenes this morning and did a special effects shot in the afternoon. I was hoping that the last day would be short and sweet, but should have known better. Conversations like the following were de rigeur for the morning:

DOP: Where's that roll of 85W6 gel?
 OP: You've got it.
 DOP: I thought you had it.
 OP: No.
 DOP: I don't have it.
 OP: I thought you had it.

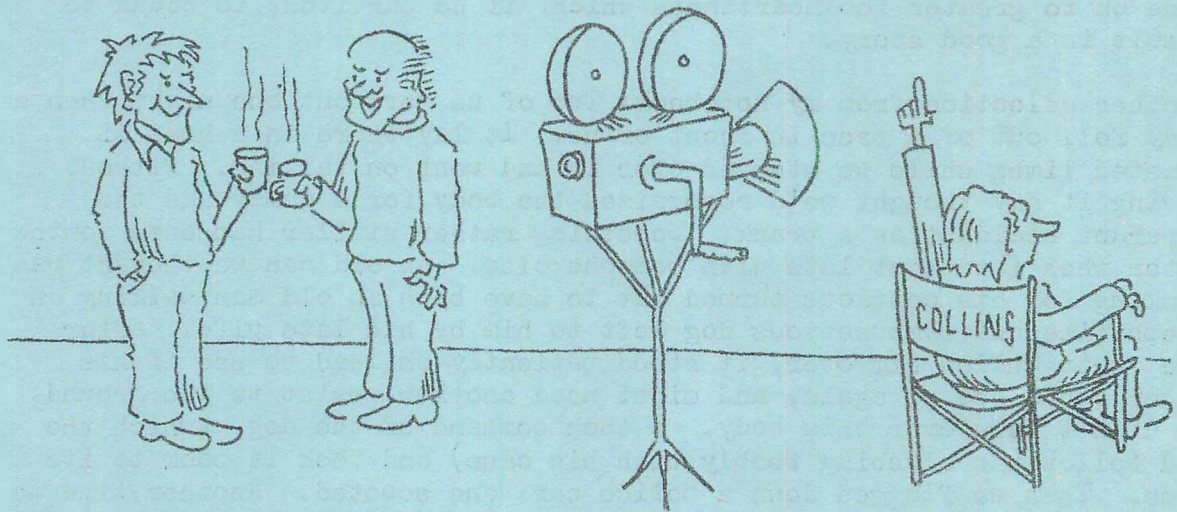
The roll of gel, worth \$80, is still lost. I considered suggesting that they were obviously in the wrong job and should consider writing sketches for The Benny Hill Show, but decided on grinding my teeth down a little bit more. To stop myself from developing an ulcer in record time, I skipped out on watching the special effects shot and went to the office instead. To amuse myself there I went through the budget searching for a spare \$140 to pay for repairs to a light that had been comprehensively dropped and smashed:

DOP: I don't know what happened to the 9 bank. Do you know what happened to the 9 bank?
 OP: The 9 bank?
 DOP: Yes.
 OP: No. I don't know what happened to the 9 bank.

Obviously there are lessons to be drawn from all this. For a start, there are two people who I will never work with again. And never again will I let myself be put in a situation where I am responsible for the finances of a production without having the power to hire and fire to protect them. Not that I have any visions of storming the fort of feature film production after keeping one \$18 000 documentary roughly in shape and pointed in about the right direction (and yes, our budget did increase by \$2 000 over the period of the shoot - an absolutely necessary bonus as it turned out), but another union is talking of having a film and Andrew, Linda, and I are front runners for the job. But perhaps the most important lesson I learnt in the course of filming

Heavy Duty is the crucial importance of working with professional people. By professional I mean people who can turn up on time and work efficiently and quickly at a job with a high level of competence. Put down on paper like that it seems almost naive. I always used to assume that people employed to start work at a certain time did, unless there was some unforeseen delay. I also assumed that people who work freelance - people whose future employment is contingent on their word of mouth reputation - would work to a standard designed to maintain or improve their reputation. I know better now. And now that my involvement with H.D. is winding down I have only one little wish. I wish that the next film I work on, whether it be as a runner on a feature or a more senior position on another low budget special, be a film where people get to work on time and do their job well so that I only have to worry with what I'm supposed to do. I'll let you know if it comes true.

- Mark Loney



In a recent letter in SFC, our fearless public servant, Leigh Edmonds, reveals to astonished readers that he has pimples on his bum. Now the question I want to ask on behalf of my fellow fans is this: how do we know? Fans, we cannot let a statement like this go unchallenged, for all those fans who wish they could turn out fanzines as good as Leigh Edmonds' must know whether Edmonds has a secret edge on them - pimple-power! - and what they can do to attain it. How do we know whether his claims to fannish superiority are really true? Yes, there is only one way. Somebody will have to check. On behalf of Australian fans, I deputise John Foyster to carry out this mission; to invite Leigh over on the pretext of preparing a batch of stencils for BOF, whip his pants off, and see!

Other fascinating sidelights then could follow. Has Bruce Gillespie more pimples than John Bangsund? Is Lee Harding's success as an Australian science fiction writer, at least in part, due to his pimples?

- 'Bambi, the Flying Kanga', CHUNDER! 3, 25.11.1972.

Bad Places Taral Wayne

I used to make friends who were science fiction fans. At present I seem mostly to make friends who were once science fiction fans. Logically, the next step would be to make friends who had never been science fiction fans, and presumably never would be. That eventuality is comfortably over the event horizon still. Live for today.

Somehow, my friends at home never seem to be up to much in the way of mischief. All the same, things happen that appear in a quite different light if I'm reminded of them. The friend, for instance, who took up mycology and inveigled me into eating some noxious looking fungus he found at the side of the path in a remote region of the bush, in a deep ravine, in darkest North Toronto. Neither of us died, and my friend has gone on to greater foolheartiness which, if he survives, is bound to result in a good story.

Another selection from my notebook: Two of us were out one night when a body fell out of a tree in front of us. It lay there in a heap of twisted limbs while we stepped over it and went on talking. Without giving it any thought we'd recognized the body for a dummy and the apparant accident as a prank. Something rather similar happened months later when I was out late with someone else. An old man we thought was looking for his contacts turned out to have been an old man walking an elephatine and rambunctious dog left to him by his late wife. After the mutt pulled him over, it stood patiently on lead to see if his owner could get up again, and might need another assist to the ground. We didn't walk over this body. I took command of the dog, (which the old fellow was clubbing feebly with his cane) and took it back to its home. Then we flagged down a police car and scooted. Another time we were walking down the main drag when one of the street bums who made his living playing the marmonica (badly) collapsed in front of us. His head made an unpleasant sound connecting with the sidewalk. I doubt he even noticed, though. He was preoccupied with what I instantly diagnosed as a fit of some vague sort. Some paramedics who happened to come by a couple of minutes later bundled the bum into their ambulance and disappeared, siren howling, up the street. (I had done my part, I reasoned, by supplying the source of contagion of this mysterious plague of falling bodies.)

Once, my friends and I were investigated by the RCMP. One Phil by name comes and goes from Toronto, and every time he's back in the city he tries to start a sort of conversational club at The Davenport Gardens (Fine Chinese and Canadian Food). He has very particular ideas of what sort of person should attend the meetings. The flyers he puts out are worded very carefully to attract only that sort of person. Inevitably he attracts known science fiction types that he specifically doesn't want, proto-fans, utter dorks, and at last the Mounties. They were

convinced that they'd come across a group of subversive pederasts dealing dope. "Bill" the waiter firmly denied that anyone peculiar ever patronized his Fine Establishment, and all was well.

But let me tell you how I nearly destroyed Southern Ontario and Upper New York State...

Paul is an ex-science fiction reader, or nearly so, who I've known for a bit more than two years. Like everyone else I know, he has some odd ideas that don't square with consensus reality. That sort of thing often makes people interesting, if they can manage not to be outright crackpots. One of Paul's idea fixes is that when he was a boy he knew of a playground that was haunted.

This came out at a Christmas party, about 2 in the morning after most of my guests had left the house. I turned the lights down so that the survivors could tell ghost stories, which was done to everyone's satisfaction. When Paul's turn came he said that there was a playground in Niagara Falls (Ontario) that all the neighborhood kids shunned. It was peculiarly situated, and sometimes caused an unreasonable fright. Paul himself had felt it, more than once. He said that often he'd mean to go in, but something would stop him. "Something? What kind of something," he was asked.

"I don't know," he said in paraphrase. "Just a feeling that if I went in there, something awful might happen. Or that something awful was there even if nothing happened."

Simon, who'd also lived in Niagara Falls, said that he didn't think the place was haunted, but nevertheless there were times when he refused to go in.

"Once," Paul continued, "when I was older, I drove past the place meaning to stop. I couldn't - literally couldn't. I was in a car another time with someone who did exactly the same thing. He took off like a shot when he went near the place, and couldn't get a grip on himself for quite a while after."

That evening we learned several other interesting details about the place. Sometimes the playground was alright - it felt perfectly safe and no-one hesitated to go in. It had nothing to do with day or night, though foggy or drizzly conditions were generally forbidding. Odd things happened in the homes of people Paul knew who lived nearby the place. There was a bare spot in the middle where the awful feelings were worst, and nothing would grow there. The playground wasn't far from an old churchyard. And of course it was likely the spot where a battle of the War of 1812 was fought.

The stage arrangements were classic. As such they produced more than a bit of skepticism among those who'd never seen the place. Paul and Simon had wanted to drive people to Niagara Falls some Saturday for a day out, and I suggested that we take the opportunity to visit Paul's

playground. They said it was fine with them, but naturally they themselves mightn't want to go in with us. Depending on the prevailing metaphysical conditions.

Bob Hadji, local raconteur of spooks and ghouls, was skeptical, but impressed with the textbook similarities. He'd heard of many "bad places" and knew of one or two. He and a boyhood buddy had made one in fact. They'd found an underpass that hissed. Air was forced down the expansion joints of the road above, and produced the sinister sibilance whenever a car passed. In a little alcove in the supporting architec-

ture, they painted a skull and crossbones, built funeral pyre, and occasionally scribbled Latin curses. In next to no time at all, the entire neighborhood knew the place as The Hissing Skull. Bolder types would come in daylight to cradicate the skull. By night it would be renewed by Hadji and reinforced by even more ferocious cruses. Hadji said that the place was entirely artificial, but nonetheless had a pretty thick atmosphere at night when the hissssss whistled out of the darkness. He took me there this summer, and the grinning skull was still visible. The curses had been mortared over by the Highway department, but the mortar was peeling off so that many were legible. The alcove even showed signs of recent offerings. However, The Hissing Skull no longer hissed. Perhaps ritual had degenerated over the years, and the charm lost its potency.



Hadji allowed that he could tell if Paul's playground was spooked. I

promised to unspook it if the miserable apparition dared to show its shirttail. When I was about two, going on three, I remember one of very few arguably supernatural experiences that made an impression on me. A light appeared on a wall and frightened me, making me cry. Mommy told me it was an angel. I'm convinced by neither the light nor the explanation these days, but it's arguable that it was a genuinely benevolent spirit. So I made a case that I was "protected" against evil influences. Certainly I'd never felt a "bad place" on my own. Fortified by this academic stand, I reasoned that I could defy Paul's playground.

On that note the evening ended. Spring and summer came and went without an outing. The playground was almost forgotten. Somewhat to my surprise, though, Paul stirred himself enough to organize a drive this fall. In almost the last good weather this year we drove out to Niagara Falls and saw his and Simon's old stomping grounds. Most of the

afternoon we spent hiking along the nature trails in the Niagara Gorge, a couple of miles below the falls. The playground was very much on everyone's mind, but Paul didn't want to go in until dark. Until then we had to be satisfied with a quick drive by in daylight. Then we drove over to the north shore of Lake Erie to discover a wading beach.

In broad daylight, the park was just visible beyond a sort of narrow entrance-way between two houses. There were stone gate-posts, and the houses to either side were fenced off with chicken wire. Behind their yards was the park or playground. Just some grass, an embankment, and a hedge were visible from the street. It was an odd set-up, but far from unnerving.

I think it was Hadji who pointed out the hex sign painted on the garage next to the way in.

On the way back to the park we were shown another bad place to be. It was out in the country, at the end of a dirt road. An overpass had been built out of cobble stones for a disused railway. Darkness had fallen by now, and the long narrow stone tunnel was lit by our headlights. Beyond was blackness seeming darker than the surrounding night. Simon said that when he was younger he could just drive a mini through the tunnel. That led to a shortcut over a farmer's field. The point of this maneuver is forgotten by the author, but there was a story about the tunnel that I'm less likely to forget. Not far from there was an old house that had burnt down around the turn of the century. The family perished inside, but a boy ran burning out of the house to expire halfway through the tunnel. The story goes that if you light a match there at night, you'll hear distant screams, and the wind will blow out the match. I don't doubt that matches blow out if lit in a natural wind-tunnel, but from the look of it I think it's unlikely that many try the test.

In a mood to tackle the main feature of our program, we parked brazenly at the entrance of Paul's playground. If the place seemed a little suggestive in daylight, after dark it was dramatic. The street was frozen in mercury light, and the entrance to the park was an inky tunnel too much like another we'd just seen. By shading your eyes, though, you could make out against the urban airglow the same secretive space beyond the gates. Paul announced that in spite of appearances the place felt clean that night. Both Simon and Paul thought they'd go in with us. There was no wisp of fog, no full moon, or any other signal circumstance, and once over the chain and away from the street-lights it wasn't even a dark night.

You walk for about a hundred feet before you're in the park proper. Past the enclosing backyards the entrance opens up into a field about the size of an average schoolyard. It seems anything but spacious though. At the back, the ground rises up in an embankment, man high. A hedge grows at the top of this, concealing a well-lit parking lot or tennis court, but the light in the playground comes entirely from the sky. At one end I could make out some swings and a slide in the

darkness, at the other end goal posts. Paul pointed out the bare spot - three of them now, so he didn't know which was the original - and indicated the end that ran up against the churchyard. It also lay concealed behind a dark hedge. In effect, the park was surrounded by dark walls that rose above it. Or was it sunk below natural ground level? There was a funny sweet smell in the air too.

Funny smells in the air are dead give-aways that there's supernatural hanky-panky going in. But I'd smelled that smell before, and kicked new-cut grass on the ground. When I mentioned it to Hadji, he said he'd noticed the smell first off too, but wasn't sure he knew what it was. Cut grass though - shit - nothing supernatural about that. Oppressive though the place was, nothing seemed amiss. We stood around a while and talked about the bare spots. Paul still couldn't make up his mind about them, about which was the bare spot with the evil aura. The three of them made a line from the slide to the middle of the playground, clearing up that mystery in my mind at least. Then Paul and Simon and Victoria left Hadji and me in the park. We jawed a bit, in peace, and also left.

We all conferred, and Hadji gave his evaluation. He'd felt nothing out of the ordinary about the place, but he could see how it might give you the creeps if you were predisposed to them. Then Hadji and Paul went in alone, to see if he'd pick anything up without a crowd.

A couple of minutes later, they returned. Still nothing but a perfectly natural unease at being in a dark place by themselves. Hadji had to admit, though, that the build up of expectations and the self-consciousness were beginning to fray his nerves. Then came my moment.

Hadji was right. Focusing on your own fear only feeds it. It was like being asked not to think "red" or "sex" for five minutes. You can't help but think of those things once brought to your attention that way. I could only think of how dark it was, and that I was going in alone, and that Paul had said the place was scary, and just how scared am I? as I went over the chain and the lighted gateway shrank behind me. It was only two hundred feet, thank god, not the last two hundred steps to the gallows, and I was standing in front of one of Paul's bare spots without having much time to worry about it. There were three of them, as I said, and I hoped that I had the stamina to provoke each of them in turn. I took a nervous look around to be sure I was alone, and unzipped. Then, one by one, I insulted the spots of which one was the alleged center of the malignant influence that lay on the park.

I had just stamina enough. Then it was zip up, turn my back, and walk unhurriedly back to safety with my heart thumping in my chest. Ten seconds, fifteen, thirty - don't start hurrying or I'll run - forty, and step over the chain. Safety.

"Were you scared?"

"Nah."

Well, actually, I wasn't. I was nervous that after all there might be something to what Paul'd said, but the park communicated nothing.

I said that I'd noticed one peculiarity I hadn't picked up on before. Hadji and I went back in. With his company the nervousness was gone, completely, and the park went on saying nothing. In the center once more, we stopped. I asked him to listen to the sounds of the city around us. I thought they didn't sound like they were in the distance, as they should've, but more like they were in the playground with us. Might the enclosed character of the place have the odd effect of working like a bowl of echos? He thought it might. If it were true, it would make otherwise unnoticed background sounds seem menacingly near, just

below the level of awareness. But neither of us could be sure if things sounded different or not, so we left the question unsettled.

Then we left Niagara Falls, getting back to Toronto a couple of hours later, tired and beyond caring about spooks who might wake up wet in thin graves.

Perhaps it had been better if we had. A few days later, the first earthquake shook Niagara Falls. A day later it moved closer to Toronto, shaking Burlington Ontario and other points east. Then Toronto shook, early in the morning. It wasn't felt in this household, though neighbors only a block away swayed to the tremours. After that, a mild quake was felt in Ottawa, three hundred and fifty miles to the north-east.

If some power sought out the agent that provoked it, and failing to locate that

provocation fell dormant again, there might be a casual connection between that and my act in Niagara Falls. Or there might not be.

Science, of course, has it that fluids seeping into the rock can lubricate microfaults, precipitating earth movements. But between you and me, I don't like fantastic explanations.



- Taral Wayne (reprinted from Groggy, Oct. 84)



SIKANDER THIRTEEN

December 1986

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How come all Juniors are old people? - Wendy Hirsh