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Norman Jacobs & Kerry O'Quinn, Publishers Rita Eisenstein, Associate Publisher
Milburn Smith, Assistant Publisher Robert R. Rachoi, Circulation Director

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When Richard Edlund needs special makeup for the forthcoming sequels to *Poltergeist* and *Ghostbusters*, who's he gonna call?

Steve Johnson: Foambuster!



By R.H. Martin

Steve Johnson. Not a familiar name, right? Not unless you remember well our story on the Baker EFX team (issue #16), or the detailed coverage on *Videodrome* recently presented in a certain magazine rumored to taste like Spam. But Johnson's relative anonymity doesn't seem very likely to last, especially considering his contributions to several of the most memorable moments in *Ghostbusters*.

Johnson describes his start as "pretty much the same as everybody else that's really psychotically interested in this stuff"—a fondness for horror movies, *Famous Monsters*, teenage amateur films, and Dick Smith's *Monster Makeup Handbook*.

"There was a long time when I was more interested in directing and writing," Johnson says. "Late in high school, though, I realized that I couldn't really concentrate enough on both to do either one really well. It seemed to me that it was so much harder to get a perfect result when making a movie—you have to get a bunch of friends to help, get everything together. Then I'd watch the film coming back, and it looked like a bunch of kids playing monsters! With makeup, on the other hand, it was within my ability to get a really good product, working on my own... working on one thing for weeks, if necessary, to get a result."

After years of effort, refining his self-taught makeup skills, Johnson felt ready to submit his work to a professional's judgement, in the hope of gaining advice and encouragement. But who? And how? As it happened, Johnson stayed home sick from school one day, watching a local Texas game show, *Dialing For Dollars*. The young makeup artist stood to attention when the celebrity guest for the day was announced—Rick Baker. In the course of the TV interview, Baker mentioned that he'd be appearing at an upcoming fantasy convention in nearby Houston. Johnson resolved to be there to show Baker his work.

"I was real nervous, but I showed him my

portfolio, and he was so nice!" says Johnson. "He answered all the questions I had, and was very encouraging—though he also tried to discourage me a bit, like he tries to discourage everybody; I think he feels obligated to do that (sometimes I think I should have listened). But he gave me his number and address, and he continued to be very helpful and encouraging through the mail. A lot of my motivation to work came from a desire to impress Rick, and to get his reaction to my work."

Things got serious during Johnson's senior year of high school; though he did not yet feel secure enough in his abilities to bypass his college plans, Johnson did take a trip out to L.A., in order to check out the opportunities for living, working and studying on the West Coast. "Rick was working on *Incredible Shrinking Woman* at the time; that's when I met Greg

Cannom, Craig Reardon and Mike McCracken, who were working with him on that. All of them were a great help to me, with a great big list of supply houses and people to talk to." After returning to Texas, Johnson spent the following summer working a jackhammer for the Texas highway department, putting aside the cash that would finance his move.

"I was real nervous about moving out there," Johnson recalls. "Rick hadn't made me any promises, and I figured it would take maybe five years or so to break into the business, which struck me as a pretty shaky business anyway. So my intention was to go out there to attend college. As it happened, three weeks after I started college, Rick got me a job, and I've been working ever since. But I don't know many big words."

[Lest any impressionable young minds reading this are hereby tempted to follow Steve Johnson's example and abandon school or livelihood in order to go to L.A. and assault Rick Baker, first take some advice from Uncle Bob. Take some photographs of your work and hold them next to the photos of Johnson's work seen on these pages. Check for signs of the same craftsman and sheer talent. Be honest with yourself. Don't do anything drastic, and always have a "Plan B" in mind. This has been a public service announcement.]

That first assignment was as assistant to Greg Cannom on the low-budget SF opus *Galactic Connection*. "On a very low budget, they needed 6 apesuits, and a primal man. It was a really tough time in a lot of ways, but I knew that this wasn't the big time, and that all movies couldn't be done that way."

Within a few weeks after that initial experience, Johnson joined Rob Bottin as an assistant on *Tanya's Island*. It was the start of a long period of friendship and collaboration between the two Baker proteges. "Rob is an incredible sculptor, a very talented artist, and I really value the time that I worked with him," says Johnson. "I was very privileged in having



Johnson fine-tuning the mechanisms of his *Ghostbusters* skeletal cabdriver.

the best possible teachers when I entered this business—Greg Cannom, Rob and, later, Rick himself. Working with people like that, you learn in the absolutely best way possible. They all have a perfectionist's approach, and I took it for granted that was the way it was always done, until later when I went out and started working with other people, outside of the 'Rick Baker school.'

"What I learned from them was to do things to a degree of perfection that they would impress people on set, not just good enough to fool the camera; make it look real and live. Sometimes we actually overdid things, with details that a camera would never pick up, just for the satisfaction that comes from knowing that you're in this field for the art of it—and not just for the sake of whatever picture you might be working on. And that's not the way everybody does it."

Tanya's Island was a "beauty and the beast" tale, casting the lovely model D.D. Winters opposite a blue-eyed ape built by Bottin. Johnson was called into the picture during the last-minute crunch that was required to get Bottin's first-rate ape (worn in the film by Don McLeod) completed for filming in Puerto Rico. Johnson's sharpest memory of the shoot is of the day that director Alfred Soles shot the seaside scene in which Winters fantasizes being ravished by the ape. Both Bottin and Johnson needed to be nearby to work the cable controls for the ape's facial expressions; the solution was to bury the FX men in the



From raw clay, right, to the optically enhanced finished product,

sand up to their necks, with their heads concealed between the legs of the female lead.

More libidinous monsters followed, when Johnson was again on the Bottin team, along with Shawn McEnroe, Margaret Bessara and others, for *Humanoids of the Deep*, the story of genetic mutants who want our women. Again it was a matter of producing multiple monster suits on a minimal budget. "That was actually the toughest film I ever worked on," Johnson recalls. "We made about six suits, and one mechanical close-up head. Chris Walas made a pair of ridiculously long arm extenders, and we did a lot of other effects for it, too—heads getting ripped off, the baby monster bursting out at the end and so on."

Bottin next called on Johnson for assistance toward the end of effects work on *The Fog*. At the time, John Carpenter was concerned with beefing up the film's shock elements, and had asked Bottin to deliver an apparition to be confronted by Adrienne Barbeau—overnight. As Carpenter recalled in *Fango* #9 (reprinted in *Best of #1*), the wormfaced ghost Rob delivered the next day was far more elaborate than anything he could have expected on such short notice.

"That's part of the fun of working with Rob," says Johnson. "We got really excited



about what we could come up with, and put in an all-nighter working on it. He made it out of gelatin, melted in certain places and dressed with maggots. It turned out really nice. A week later, his dog ate it."

Johnson and Bottin came to a parting of the ways shortly after work on *The Howling* was completed; not, unfortunately, under the best of circumstances. "I'd been talking with Rick for months prior to *The Howling* about working with him on *An American Werewolf in London*. When *The Howling* happened, I



Left, the second stage of the Librarian lady's ghastly transformation; below, the three "onionheads" used for various sequences, photographed in the *Ghostbusters* ghost shop.



contracted with Rob to work for 16 weeks. I did a lot of work on the picture, working in Rob's garage and elsewhere. At the end of 16 weeks, *The Howling's* effects unit went over schedule. Rick was ready to get started on *American Werewolf*, and I was really anxious to work side-by-side with Rick—that's what I'd come out to California for in the first place. So I moved on and, as a result, Rob left my name off of *The Howling's* credits."

Johnson's most elaborate work for that film was on the "rocket wolves," designed to be shot from the burning barn at the film's climax. None of this reached the screen, however, because the rockets left an obvious vapor trail in the flying werewolves' wake. Johnson also turned in a great many hours laying hair for the

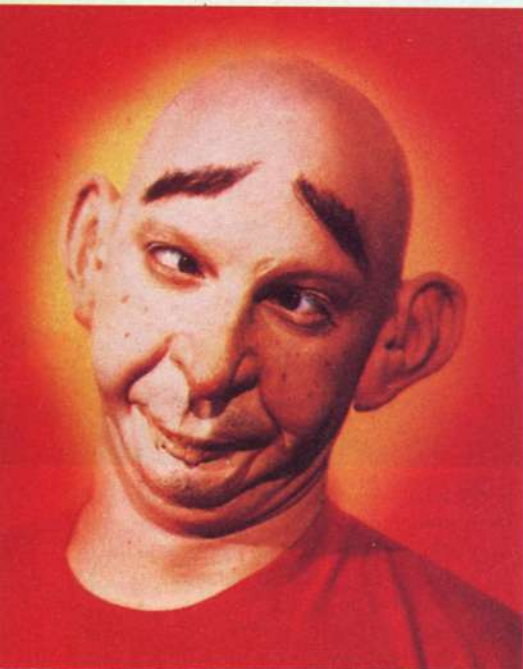
puppet werewolves, and working with the Shank brothers on the full-sized werewolf.

Though Johnson still seems a might displeased at being sleighted in *The Howling's* credits, he remains lavish in his praise for Bottin's talents. "At the time it bothered me more than it does now," he adds, "because I was relatively new at the business then. I didn't fully realize the type of pressure that someone in Rob's position has to deal with."

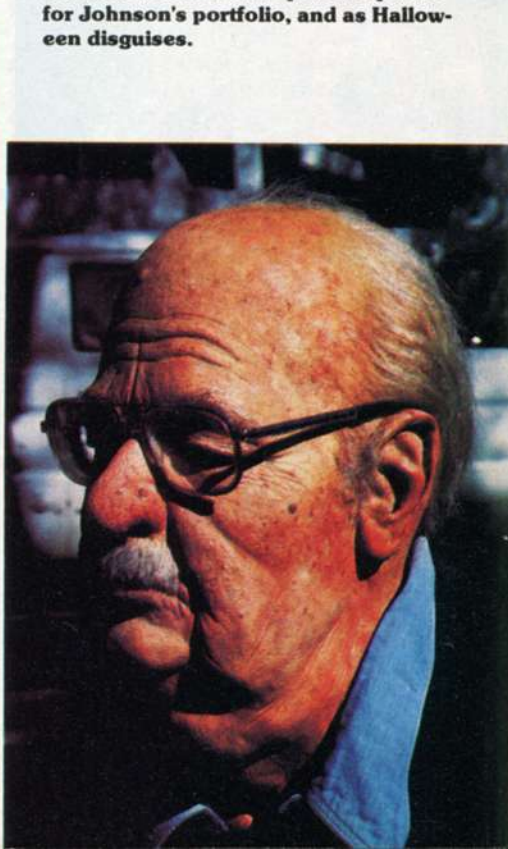
By the time Johnson learned of the credit omission, he was already knee-deep in *American Werewolf*, an experience he describes as "heaven. It was real magic, an incredible learning experience, with all of that work going on at once in the EFX shop. Also, it was my first opportunity to get to really

know Rick, and he is so nice. I couldn't wait to get to work in the morning, so I'd show up early. Working side by side with Rick Baker was a dream come true.

"The remarkable thing about that first EFX crew is that Rick selected several people on the basis of their *promise*, rather than current ability. He developed us, by giving us responsibility. The big difference between working with Rick and working with others was that the others would give bits and pieces of things to do, without giving you much idea of how the total thing was supposed to go together. That leaves little opportunity for you to think, or to contribute creatively to the finished product. Rick allowed us to contribute by making specific parts of a job *our own*, so that we



Left, two faces of Shawn McEnroe, makeup by Johnson; above, Johnson never mentioned what this demonic apparition was designed for; the three below were devised as practice pieces for Johnson's portfolio, and as Halloween disguises.





Some nasty heads from the ill-fated Sawney Beane project; a Nazi demon from *An American Werewolf*; and a sample of Johnson's earliest filmwork, from *Galactic Connection*.

could be a part of the creative process, learn more, and have the enthusiasm that you have for something that is really *your* work.

"Another difference in the way Rick worked, on both *An American Werewolf* and *Videodrome*, is that we had a long period of testing prior to starting on the actual effects. We'd do lifecasts and mechanisms, pretty much along the lines of what was called for in the script, videotape them and see how they worked, learning from our mistakes. Then, after the test period, we'd do the actual effects, which would always be that much better because of the test period. It's a very, very smart way of working, and no one else I've worked with does that."

During preproduction on *American Werewolf*, Baker was going through the unpleasantness of seeing the Spielberg project *Nightmares* cancelled (just as *E.T.* was starting), under less-than-friendly circumstances. At the time, the first EFX shop was operating in Columbia Pictures facilities, where the Spielberg project was to film. Johnson's recollection of that period offers a wonderful illustration of Baker's resilient reaction to show-biz pressures. "We weren't involved in *Nightmares*, because of union problems, so our part of the shop was closed off; we weren't really aware of the problems. One day Rick appeared at the door wearing his sunglasses and said, 'I've gotta get outa here before I kill somebody.' The next day we had to move the whole shop by U-Haul to Rick's garage, while David Cellitti, Rick's business manager, looked for a new shop location. It was the last week of October. Rick said, 'OK, guys, let's have fun!'—and he paid us for that week to work on our Halloween costumes!"

Around the same time, Johnson engaged in his first work "on his own," in partnership with another EFX-er, Kevin Brennan. "There was an actors' strike happening just as EFX was forming; because actors weren't available for casting, that reduced the amount of work that could be done on the picture at that time.

So, when the American Tourister people approached Rick to do a gorilla suit for their commercial, Rick handed it to Kevin and me, knowing we were both big gorilla lovers. That was really the first independent job for either of us, where we talked to these guys about the money and everything; of course, Rick walked us through that a bit, giving us advice and looking over the contract. We worked in Rick's garage, away from the EFX shop, and Rick let us use the body mold from 'Dino' [*King Kong* of '68], the Dino arms and Sidney [*Incredible Shrinking Woman*] feet. We made new hands from scratch, and sculpted and mechanized an entirely new head." The commercial, which features an ape-in-transit giving major publishment to some luggage in a baggage compartment, is still frequently broadcast.

Johnson thereafter rejoined EFX on AWL, working in various capacities, his most visible contributions being one of the hallucinatory Nazi demons. His duties expanded considerable for *Videodrome*, where he acted as Baker's right hand on set. "In fact, toward the end, for the postproduction stuff—the bursting body and the stomach slit effects—Rick had to be at the shop during a lot of it, so I sort of kept things going on the set," says Johnson. "On that picture, Rick got a lot more into delegating responsibility for different things to different people; Tom Hester did the handgun stuff, Shawn McEnroe, Bill Sturgeon and Kevin Brennan worked on various TV and videocassette stuff, I did the stomach slit stuff. I also got to go to Dick Smith's house when we did a body cast of Debra Harry; that was a lot of fun."

Between *Videodrome* and *Greystoke*, Johnson whipped up a new head for his American Tourister suit, which appeared in another popular, long-running TV ad, for the Taco Bell fast food chain.

Even as *Videodrome* was finishing postproduction, Baker and several EFX crew were preparing for *Greystoke*, a job Baker was of-

fered after Carlo Rambaldi's own demonstration ape suit was rejected ("It looked pretty good," says Johnson, "but it was all foam rubber, with punched hair. These suits had to survive in Africa; I don't think it was durable enough.") As soon as the Cronenberg film was completed, Rick and Elaine Baker, along with McEnroe, Hester and Johnson (later joined by Greg Cannom), zipped off to England to begin intensive work on the Tarzan film.

"The first thing Warners wanted was six suits made before they started on the film," Johnson recalls, "because it was already realized that this film would be entirely dependent on the believability of the apes. At the beginning, Rick felt, and I agreed, that puppets of all of the main ape characters should have been done, because of the difficulty of getting a real simian look on a human actor. So my first job on the film, with quite a bit of money and six weeks to do it, was to build a puppet chimpanzee. It worked out really, really well, it was controlled by 25 or so cables; Rick built an incredible universal lip mechanism that we later used in all of the ape close-up heads—it allows you to manipulate the lips to form anything from a grimace, with the lips pulled back, to a hoot... you can actually make them 'talk' with it. I did all the mechanics, all the finishing work, and supervised the facility in the detail work. I feel it's the best work I have ever done; the videotaped tests we made fooled everyone—even primatologists—into thinking it was a real chimp; we had some puppeteers there who had worked on *Dark Crystal* who were really able to bring it to life. But what the tests proved, unfortunately, was that it would be too impractical, in terms of time and manpower, to build something so elaborate for each of the ape characters, though we did do closeup heads.

"When we got into the actual work, Rick designed all the main ape characters himself, and sculpted all the heads, really astounding work. It was great to see his enthusiasm so high for a picture. There were about 20 ape

characters needed, so there was still a lot of responsibility to delegate to EFX people. For us, it was like being in Rick's position, where we needn't be involved in construction beyond the extent that we wanted to be—there was a hair department, a paint department and a mechanics department, ready to do things to or specifications, so all we had to do was design and supervise."

While Rick Baker supervised the completion of the main-character suits, Johnson accompanied Elaine Baker for the first location work, using background suits. "It was under terrible conditions," Johnson recalls. "Because Rick wasn't there, it was kind of hard to take a place in the chain of command, but the logistics had to be worked out; there we were in the middle of nowhere, under drenching rain, trying to get 10 men in apesuits up in trees. It was very, very hot—one fellow actually passed out and fell out of a tree. Luckily he wasn't hurt."

After *Greystoke*, Johnson's return to the States was delayed when he became involved in a low-budget project to film the true story of Sawney Bean, head of a notorious cannibal tribe of the last century. "Shawn McEnroe and I were going to head it up. I was really exhausted, as we all were, after *Greystoke*, so when they approached us, we named some incredible amount of money that we figured would end it—and they agreed! But then the money kept being delayed. A lot of the British crew from *Greystoke* were then about to start on *Oz* so, rather than lose them, I actually hired a few people and started work. Then, after spending about \$7,000, the money never came through! Still, I got some pretty good stuff out of it—heads and emaciated corpse bodies—and I recently got some of the money back by selling some bodies to Tom Savini to use in *Day of the Dead*."

It wasn't long after his return before Johnson

became involved with *Ghostbusters*. "I really owe that to Rick, who actually convinced Richard Edlund to hire me." Though Johnson's modest credit reads "Onionhead/Librarian Sculptor," he obviously had a much stronger hand in the design of effects than the credit implies. "We had a huge budget and plenty of time just to do the librarian effect," Johnson says, "but the Berni Wrightson design they handed me just transformed her into a skull! I completely redesigned it, with an elaborate three-stage transformation into a demonic, bestial sort of thing. They didn't even use the third stage, which I think really would have sold it—after they shot the first two stages, they felt they had what they needed." Johnson also had a strong hand in redesigning the subway ghost and the living-dead taxi driver. The green garbage ghost, known as "onionhead," remained faithful to the original conception—but the internal mechanisms that brought it to life were also designed by the credited "sculptor." In addition, Johnson's right-hand assistant Mark Wilson, who also played the part of onionhead, was omitted from the credits entirely!

Johnson's limited credit can be attributed, in part, to the normal "dues paying" to be expected of a film craftsman who has come so far, so young. It is also a function of the bureaucracy that must inevitably come with a studio-made 40-million-dollar picture. "There was a lot of duplication of effort in the ghost shop, and a lot of people who were on the payroll who didn't have a lot to do," concedes Johnson, "but that's one reason why things turned out so well! We always had as much time and as many people as we needed. And for the same reasons it turned out to be the most fun of anything I've worked on. If all my future projects are one-tenth as much fun as *Ghostbusters* was to work on, I'll be a very happy guy."

Johnson already has plenty of cause to be a happy guy. Richard Edlund has recently contacted him about handling special makeup chores for *Poltergeist II* and *Ghostbusters II*; during our interview, he was working with Ellis Burman on effects for *Howling II*; two days after we spoke, he was off to Alaska for *Clan of the Cave Bear*; and on his return, he will be starting work on a project called *Fright Night*. Clearly, the man is on a roll. Johnson's career seems about to take off, with surprisingly little of the sort of frustration usually associated with a start in Hollywood; still, he feels that opportunities for newcomers in the field have narrowed a bit since he first contacted Baker some years ago.

"Now, there's a couple hundred people out here hoping to break into the field because it's become something to do. Kids all over the country have been able to point to things in magazines and films and say, 'that's what I want to do,' and it's a legitimate thing. It used to be that, if you tried to explain what you wanted to do, the reaction would be, 'huhhh?'—there were a lot less people doing this sort of thing."

"I think that a few others and myself are very lucky to be coming in now, on what is perhaps the last cycle of a 'second wave' of special makeup artists. The first wave consisted of people like Dick Smith, John Chambers, Tom Burman, Stan Winston and Rick—people who were doing this sort of thing before it was anything. The second wave are those people who started coming in just after *Star Wars*, when it was starting to get some recognition; people like Greg Connolly, Rob Bottin, and all of the original EFX staff, including myself. We were able to come in and make contact with the originators in this field, and get some experience and the best training anyone possible could get, before that third wave arrived. We're the lucky ones."

Johnson's most spectacularly gruesome project at EFX: the bodybursting from *Videodrome*.



James Woods plays a round of "spear the hoop" on the set of *Videodrome*.



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