

A battle beyond time... beyond space.

BATTLE BEYOND THE STARS



Starring

RICHARD THOMAS **ROBERT VAUGHN** **JOHN SAXON** and **GEORGE PEPPARD** as Cowboy

Co-starring **DARLANNE FLUEGEL** **SYBIL DANNING** Executive Producer **ROGER CORMAN** Produced by **ED CARLIN**

Screenplay by **JOHN SAYLES** Story by **JOHN SAYLES** and **ANNE DYER** Directed by **JIMMY T. MURAKAMI** Music by **JAMES HORNER**

Roger Corman does Star Wars!

Words: Owen Williams

I want that ship." An evil empire's number-one henchman states his dark intent as a lone rebel fighter escapes his clutches. But this is not Darth Vader expressing his distaste for asteroid fields as his forces pursue the Millennium Falcon; it's Tembo, the mutant Malmori in the service of John Saxon's tyrannical Sador, chasing the most curvaceous ship in the universe, piloted by John-Boy Walton. The Empire is not Striking Back. This is a *Battle Beyond The Stars*.

Cheap genre movies had been the stock-in-trade of Roger Corman's New World Pictures for years, and Corman had noted with some apprehension the mega-budget big-hitters encroaching on his territory: "They were the exact types of films I had been making, and they were taking away our bread and butter!" *Battle Beyond The Stars*, then, was Corman's tilt at the Star Wars market: a space adventure with the enormous — for Corman — budget of \$2 million, and worldwide distribution courtesy of Orion and Warner Bros. Released in the US six months after the Star Wars sequel, it was gradually rolled out around the rest of the world during the next year.

Corman has a reputation for spotting and developing talent (Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and Jack Nicholson, among many others, all got their start at his infamous Lumber Yard studio), and *Battle Beyond The Stars* alone boasts early career work from future auteurs John Sayles and James Cameron, not to mention regular Cameron composer James Horner, whose score (echoes of which can be heard in his future work on *Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan* and *Krull*) Corman would entirely recycle for 1983's *Space Raiders*. Its director, Jimmy Murakami, knew Corman socially, and had worked with him a decade earlier, providing the aerial sequences for *Von Richtofen And Brown*, a First World War epic that, in true Corman style, re-used all the aircraft from 1966's *The Blue Max*. That previous collaboration, he says, landed him the gig, in spite of his being, "bottom of Orion's list!"

Sayles, too, had worked for Roger Corman before, writing *The Lady In Red* and, significantly, Joe Dante's *Piranha*, bringing wit and imagination to what on paper was merely a *Jaws* cash-in. He was an obvious choice to do the same for Star Wars and grabbed the screenplay opportunity with both hands. If Star Wars was a 'Space Western', based in no small part on Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress*, *Battle Beyond The Stars* would head for immediately similar galaxies, with John Sayles looking to Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* and its Western counterpart, *The Magnificent Seven*, for direct inspiration.

In Sayles' version, the bandit chief out to trample the peasants underfoot is Sador: an intergalactic tyrant with an Aladdin Sane facial zig-zag and a dependence on wonky transplants to prolong his life. The "seven" (the number refers to spaceships rather than characters) defending the peacenik inhabitants of Akir are Richard Thomas' farmboy Shad; ingenuous brainbox Nanelia (Darlante Fluegel), who has scanned "kissing" and "wind" in her databanks, but experienced neither; Cayman (Morgan Woodward), a lizard slave-trader who travels with two bald midgets; Nestor, five zen-like beings with a hive mind and a spokesman in Earl Boen (aka the Terminator franchise's Dr. Silberman); Saint-Exmin (Sybil Danning), a splendidly endowed Valkyrie warrior with a nice line in revealing battlewear; Cowboy (George Peppard), one of those weird sci-fi anachronisms who, despite living a long time hence in a galaxy far, far away, has a thing for 20th-century Earth; and Gelt, played by Robert Vaughn, essentially reprising his *Magnificent Seven* role of the notorious gunfighter looking for a place where he can hide out.

Sayles used his "Corman money" to finance his directorial debut *Return Of The Seacaucus Seven*, and went on to become an American indie doyen with the likes of *Matewan* and *Lone Star*. His involvement with *Battle Beyond The Stars* ended when he handed in his screenplay. "Corman, typically, didn't want to pay to fly him over to California — but I did talk to him on the phone," chuckles Murakami.

Cameron, meanwhile, still only in his mid-twenties, was hired as a modelmaker, but by the end of the shoot had re-negotiated his title to that of Production Designer and managed to loosen Corman's purse-strings to the extent that he quadrupled his original salary. He likens the experience to "the guy in *The Flight Of The Phoenix* who knows exactly how to fix the plane, but they find out later he's only ever built models." Cameron's mad work ethic ran to sleeping at the studio and pulling 85-hour shifts, but legend has it that what *really* got him noticed was the design for Shad's craft *Nell*, a ship with two buxom engine pods that, the story goes, Cameron designed specifically to catch Corman's eye; the producer was somewhat known for

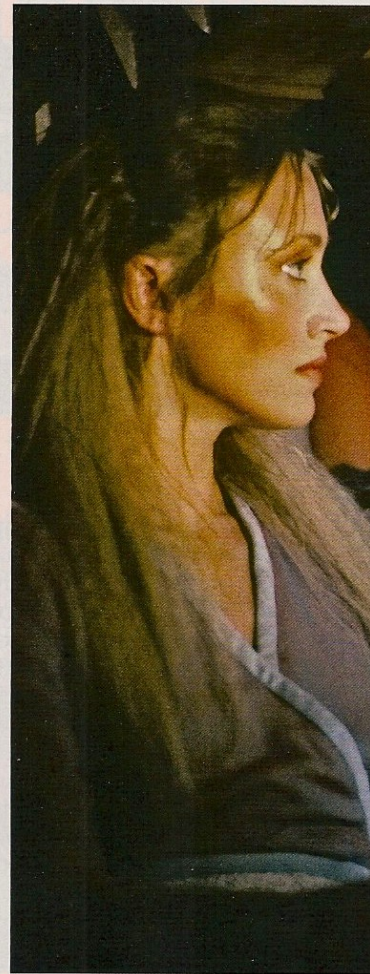
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Ah yes, the cosmophone... the piano of the skies.

“I have no ego problems. I think the film works.”
Jimmy Murakami

Battle Beyond The Stars' VFX really pulled the envelope.



the flesh quotient in his films. The “spaceship with tits” garnered immediate approval.

Rebecca Keegan's Cameron biography *The Futurist* quotes Corman explaining, “Jim intuitively understood that each spaceship had to have a personality of its own, and he expressed it clearly and simply.” Yet Murakami insists that *all* the ship designs, Nell included, were actually his own.

“I still have the original pencil drawings,” says the director, “and Nell was designed in pre-production along with the rest of the craft.” The bulk of Cameron's work was on the ship interiors (cheap enough to include among their materials Styrofoam containers from the bins at McDonald's) and the front-screen projection effects (nicked from Stanley Kubrick), but he did contribute one modification to Nell's ‘boobs’. “Roger was worried that the ‘tits’ had guns in the nipples,” Murakami tells us, “so James came up with the concept of putting the guns in those antelope horns at the top. I never really liked them, but the body remained very effeminate. I told the lighting cameraman to have the lights look like they were caressing the ship's body!”

“I like sexual imagery; it comes from my experience painting nudes,” the director laughs. “That's the audience I was aiming for! That's why we hired Sybil Danning.” The voluptuous B-movie queen ended up glued into her “surprisingly comfortable” Styrofoam Valkyrie costume after too many shots were ruined by nipple exposure.

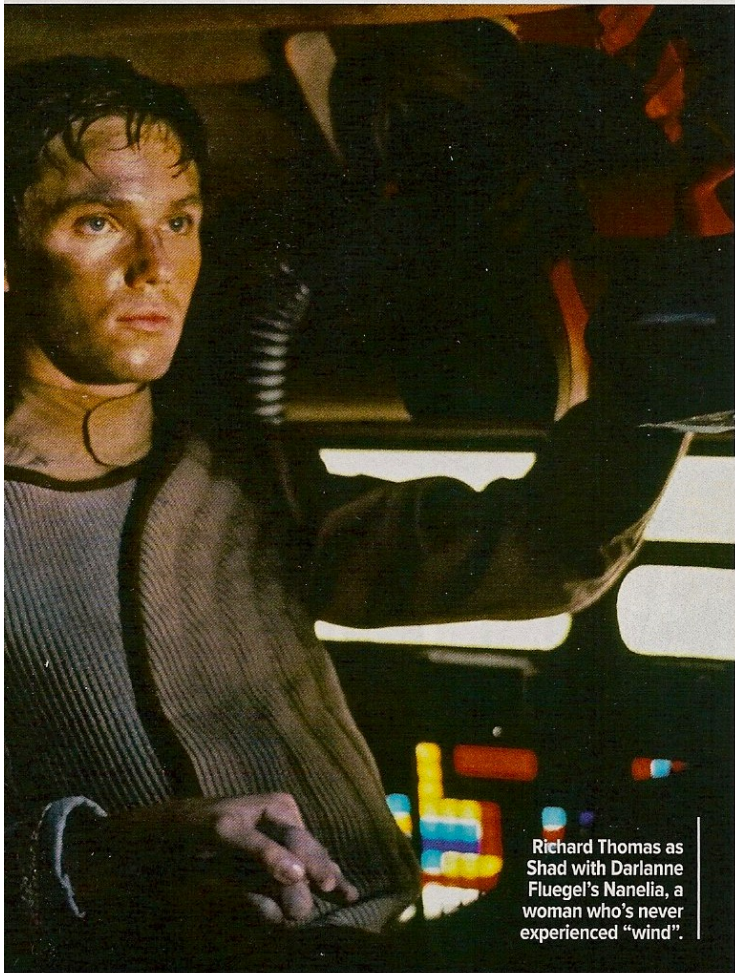
Schedule stresses and budgetary limitations meant there was little in the way of creature comforts for the production. On-set catering was practically non-existent, and Corman's attempts to cut costs by removing the fruit counter almost met with a strike. He put it back. Darlaine Fluegel (at the time a gymnast taking on her second acting role following *Eyes Of Laura Mars*) recalls that Corman's notorious studio (a genuine former lumber yard

Star Scores: Battle Beyond The Stars

Farmboy hero?	Richard Thomas' <i>Shad</i>	✓
Rogueish sidekick?	George Peppard's <i>Cowboy</i>	✓
Monster sidekick?	Morgan Woodward's <i>Cayman</i>	✓
Cute robot(s)?		✗
Faceless shocktroops?		✓
Space dogfights?		✓
Big symphonic score?	James Horner	✓
Respectable actor of note?	Robert Vaughn, as <i>Gelt</i> ;	
	George Peppard as <i>Cowboy</i>	✓
Huge, looming spaceships?		✓
It's not sci-fi, really!?	It's a <i>Seven Samurai</i> remake	✓

Star Wars
 Score: 9/10





Richard Thomas as Shad with Darlanne Fluegel's Nanelia, a woman who's never experienced "wind".



SCI-FI BATTLE BEYOND THE STARS



Above: Slave trader Cayman (Morgan Woodward) with his heat-radiating midget pals. Here: Sybil Danning's comfy swimsuit, aka what the future looks like for Myleene Klass and M&S.

with no drainage) was under several inches of water for much of the shoot, and Danning, used to "basic" facilities on European productions, shivers at the memory that her Hollywood studio expectations were dashed when she discovered there were mushrooms growing on her dressing-room wall.

The reduced circumstances added to the fun though, as did some memorable lines from Sayles' script. Danning's Valkyrie expresses the extremely odd-sounding desire to "recharge Shad's capacitors, stimulate his solonoids, and dingle, dangle, prangle his transistors", and of course, there's her infamous observation that he's "never seen a Valkyrie go down". Goodnight, John-Boy.

"That's the line everyone loves," sniggers Danning. "None of it was improvised on set; it was all in the screenplay. I did a memorabilia show, sitting at the signing table with John Saxon, and I was writing that and he was writing 'Blast her out of space!'"

Battle's post-heyday stars Peppard and Vaughn "just kind of came in and did their thing", according to Fluegel, for little more reason than the pay cheques that swallowed a large proportion of the budget. Murakami cheerfully recalls that the whisky in Peppard's "bar belt" was entirely genuine, but says that drinking on set didn't mean the actor wasn't taking his job seriously. "He used to take the script home in the evenings and work on his dialogue for the following day," the director remembers. "He loved the Cowboy and he made it work."

Vaughn on the other hand was, according to Danning, "very strange: he always has this 'Get me the hell outta here!' look. But that personality worked for that character!"

"He was moody," says Murakami, "and he read a book a day

between takes. But he knew everyone's part as well as his own, so if they got stuck he'd help them out. We didn't need the script with him there. He'd played the role before, so he didn't have to work too hard!"

Vaughn, who first worked for Corman in 1958's Teenage Caveman, doesn't give Battle Beyond The Stars a single mention in his autobiography, but everyone else is happy to look back on a production that was, the consensus has it, tough but enjoyable. Murakami's contribution tends to be overshadowed by names that went on to bigger things (he himself chose animation over a career directing live action, and he's probably now best-known for The Snowman and When The Wind Blows), and he took issue with some editing that ruined his complex camera moves. The final cut is Corman's but, says Murakami philosophically, "I have no ego problems. I think the film works."

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