

# THE MASK

## Tex Avery-style antics by way of ILM effects.

By Chuck Crisafulli

Famous Looney Tunes directors Tex Avery and Bob Clampett may not be credited as collaborators on *THE MASK*, but those late greats have been guiding forces on the modestly budgeted New Line picture, which tells the story of Stanley Ipkiss, a hapless chump who is transformed into an unusual superhero when he dons a very peculiar ancient mask. The film, based on the popular Dark Horse comic series, is directed by Chuck Russell (*THE BLOB*, *NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET IV*), and stars Jim Carrey, of TV's *IN LIVING COLOR*, as Ipkiss. Also featured in the cast are Amy Yasbeck (*PROBLEM CHILD*, *ROBIN HOOD: MEN IN TIGHTS*), Peter Riegert (*ANIMAL HOUSE*), and comedian Richard Jeni, making his screen debut.

"We're able to do phenomenal things with the computer now, but it's always been used for very serious, realistic effects—like the *JURASSIC* dinosaurs," says ILM visual effects producer Clint Goldman. "On *THE MASK* we're using the computer to create photo-real Looney Tunes in the tradition of Avery and Clampett and Chuck Jones. Instead of making a believable, natural dinosaur, we're using the computer to make Jim Carrey's eyes rocket out of his head while his tongue rolls across a table. For those of us who grew up on cartoons, it's fantastic."

Director Russell is also quick to point to Tex Avery's cartoons as a model for *THE MASK*'s zany humor. "Tex Avery has been an inspiration from the beginning. In fact, I'm very happy that we got the

rights to some Tex stuff so that we could show Stanley watching a cartoon before all the madness begins to happen to him. It was our way of tipping our hat to the work that influenced us, from Tex right through to *REN & STIMPY*.

Cartoons and comic books are the kind of culture I sucked up as a kid, and it's nice to be able to add to those traditions and maybe even move them forward."

*The Mask* comic books, authored by Dark Horse's Mike Richardson, have not been so cartoonish in tone. The character of the Mask was patterned as a cross between Steve Ditko's Creeper and Batman's cackling foe, the Joker. The storylines have often had a dark and violent edge, and Russell admits that he took some liberties with his source material.

"I wanted to bring in a new group of characters and my own storyline, and I didn't want to get involved on the project until I could do that. There are some terrific things from the comic, but I think we ended up with a bigger, less horrific story.

Anticipating big summer boxoffice, New Line advanced the release to July 29.



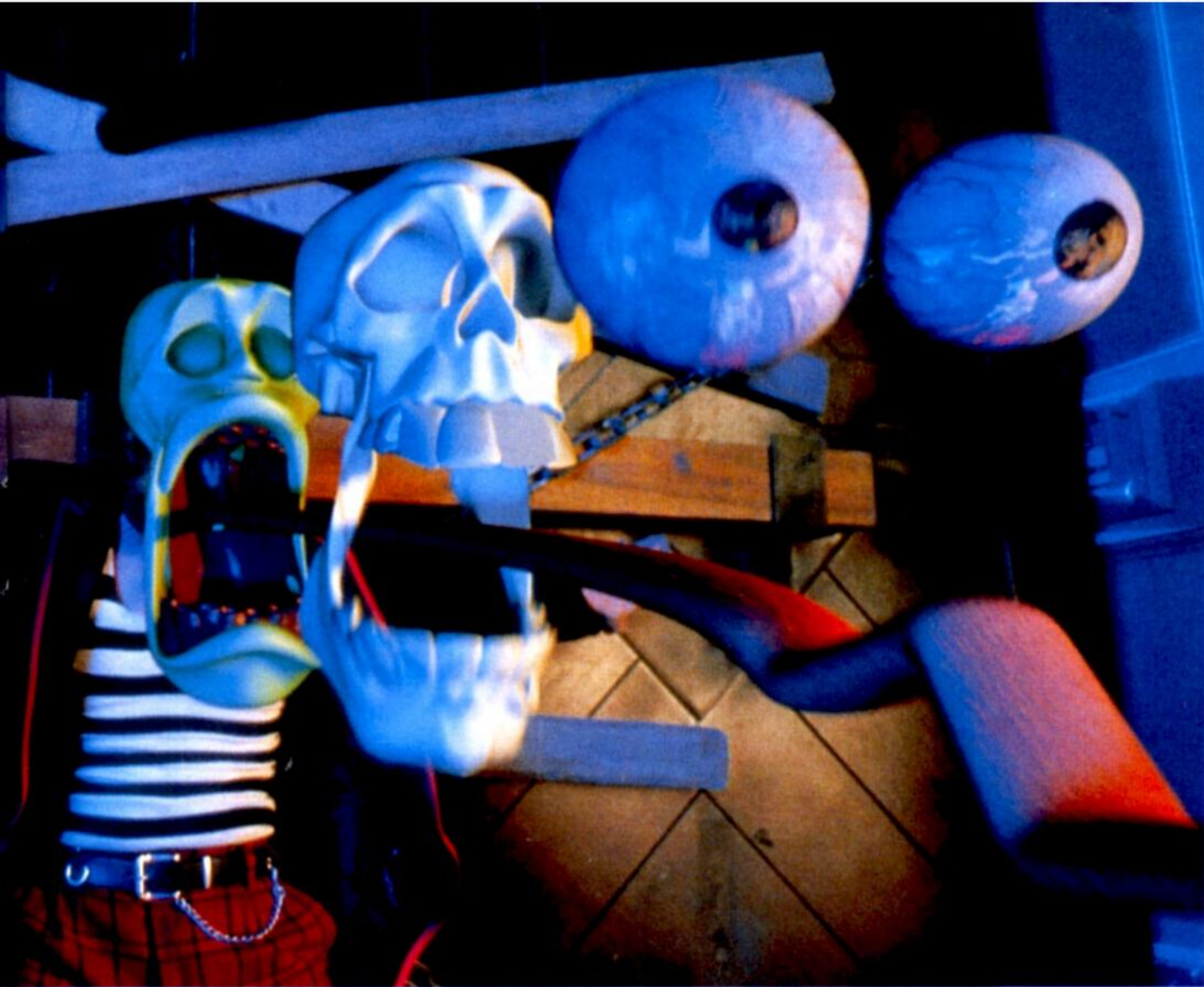
Inset: Carrey dons the mask that turns Ipkiss into a superhero.

The comics have an almost *NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET* quality to them. I wanted to keep that edge in the movie, and not make a Disney film, but there's also some fun, magic, and romance in the story now. It's hyperactive and highly comic."

Goldman says that, following Russell's lead, he and the ILM crew ended up using Avery cartoons as more of a reference point than they used the comic books. But he also adds that there is some built-in horror in the kind of comic effects they've developed.

"When you watch a real person's head change shape to look like the Wolf from Avery's 'Red Hot Riding Hood,' you get into an element of horror. The film doesn't want to be completely horrific, but a little tinge of horror keeps it cool. There's a point where Stanley's dog gets the mask on, and we ended up adding a computer-generated head to a Jack Russell terrier. That's a disturbing image. The combination of funny and a little bit scary keeps the film interesting and compelling."

Although the hyperkinetic "live-cartoon" action would seem absolutely to demand the skills of ILM, they in fact did not join up with the project until well into pre-production. Not knowing who was going to supply his effects did not restrict Russell's artistic vision, however, "My story-boarding was done prior to ILM's in-



The cartoonish Tex Avery-inspired shape-shifting abilities bestowed on Ipkiss by the titular mask necessitated state-of-the-art computer graphics effects from ILM, supervised by Clint Goldman.

involvement, but when I write fantasy, I tend to write very freely, and the storyboards were ambitious. I knew I would be into computer graphics with somebody, but I assumed that I wouldn't be able to afford ILM. I'm very excited that it worked out."

Though Goldman admits with a chuckle that ILM sometimes had trouble keeping pace with Russell's visions, they were delighted to bring them to life. But viewers of the film shouldn't assume that every odd moment on screen is by way of computers. Russell wrote the script with Carrey's comedic skills in mind, and was told by ILM after they had worked with Carrey footage that the comedian's physical prowess may have saved Russell a million dollars on the effects budget. "Carrey is the most exciting physical comedian happening right now," says Russell. "He's brilliant. There's almost an element of some of the old silent movie comedians in his work. Our goal in THE MASK is that audiences won't be entirely certain where Jim Carrey leaves off and where ILM begins."

Having had a chance to put his personal stamp on the ravenous protoplasm of the Blob and on the exploits of Freddy Krueger, Russell hopes he's done the same with the film version of THE MASK. "It's always very satisfying for me to take existing characters and make them my own. This project is the most original thing I've done, and it's something I've been dying to try—adventure comedy with an edge. I have some comedic background [Russell produced the Rodney Dangerfield vehicle BACK TO SCHOOL], and I've re-

ally wanted a chance to apply what I know about action and special effects to a comedy format. I got to go bananas on this."

The director hasn't lost his taste for horror material, but he does explain that there are some emotional perks to working on a comedy. "Having worked on comedy, horror, and things in between like THE BLOB, I've found that comedy is very uplifting. When something's funny in the film, it was funny on the set, and we were laughing. Films are always hard to make, but comedy lifts your spirits while you work on it. I like to think that on the ELM STREET I did there was a sense of hope

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**—Director Chuck Russell—**

and a sense of fun, but it was still full of shocking things and people screaming. As a filmmaker, those screams and shocks are something you have to live with in an editing room for six months. That can take its toll on you."

Goldman also sounds somewhat uplifted by the work that ILM has contributed. "Effects haven't really been all that successful in comedy films. They've usually looked a little stiff and a little stupid. But now we've got stuff that looks incredibly real and is very funny. I think the difference is that on this project ILM began to work more as a behavioral animation company than as a visual effect composite company. The basic process of filmmaking is changing for the first time in decades, and I witnessed that every day on this project."

Director Russell simply feels privileged to have had some brand new storytelling tools to use in bringing THE MASK to movie theaters. "It's too pretentious of me to talk about setting a new standard of effects work. I just think in terms of the story. I'm always tough on myself, asking 'Am I taking the safe route?' I think we followed a wild path with THE MASK, but I don't think about setting new standards. I just feel lucky that I was the first kid to open this particular toybox." □

Left to right: director Chuck Russell (THE BLOB), Cameron Diaz, and Jim Carrey (IN LIVING COLOR).

