EIGHT LEGGED FREAKS

The Spiders are on the March
How to Put A-Level FX in a B-Movie

By Chuck Wagner

Warner Bros.' EIGHT LEGGED FREAKS wants to be the vanguard of a new trend: an old-fashioned B-movie that happens to boast great effects. Having worked as a visual effects supervisor on SPIDER-MAN and now EIGHT LEGGED FREAKS, Karen Goulekas knows too well the magnitude of the task. "I would definitely say we weren't using an 'A' budget!" she laughed. "It was a tight budget for the amount of work that we did. I think the work came out really nicely.

"It's kind of funny. This is almost the same story as GODZILLA, where I came in in the middle. On EIGHT LEGGED FREAKS, I missed principal photography. There was a previous visual effects supervisor on the show by the name of Tom Dadres—he was there for the shoot. I guess it just didn't work out, but we'll be sharing main title credit. He left, and I came in and inherited whatever was there. So I was really only on it for the post-production portion."

Of course, this meant Goulekas was stuck with anything left undone by the time principal photography wrapped, and CG effects are mainly done in post. "Exactly!" she said. "It was lacking a little bit in survey data, tracking data, and camera reports, but we were able to work around it. I got there at the fun part, when it was time to direct the animation and create the spiders: the character of them, and the goop that spurts out of them when they shoot. None of that stuff had been done yet. It was great."
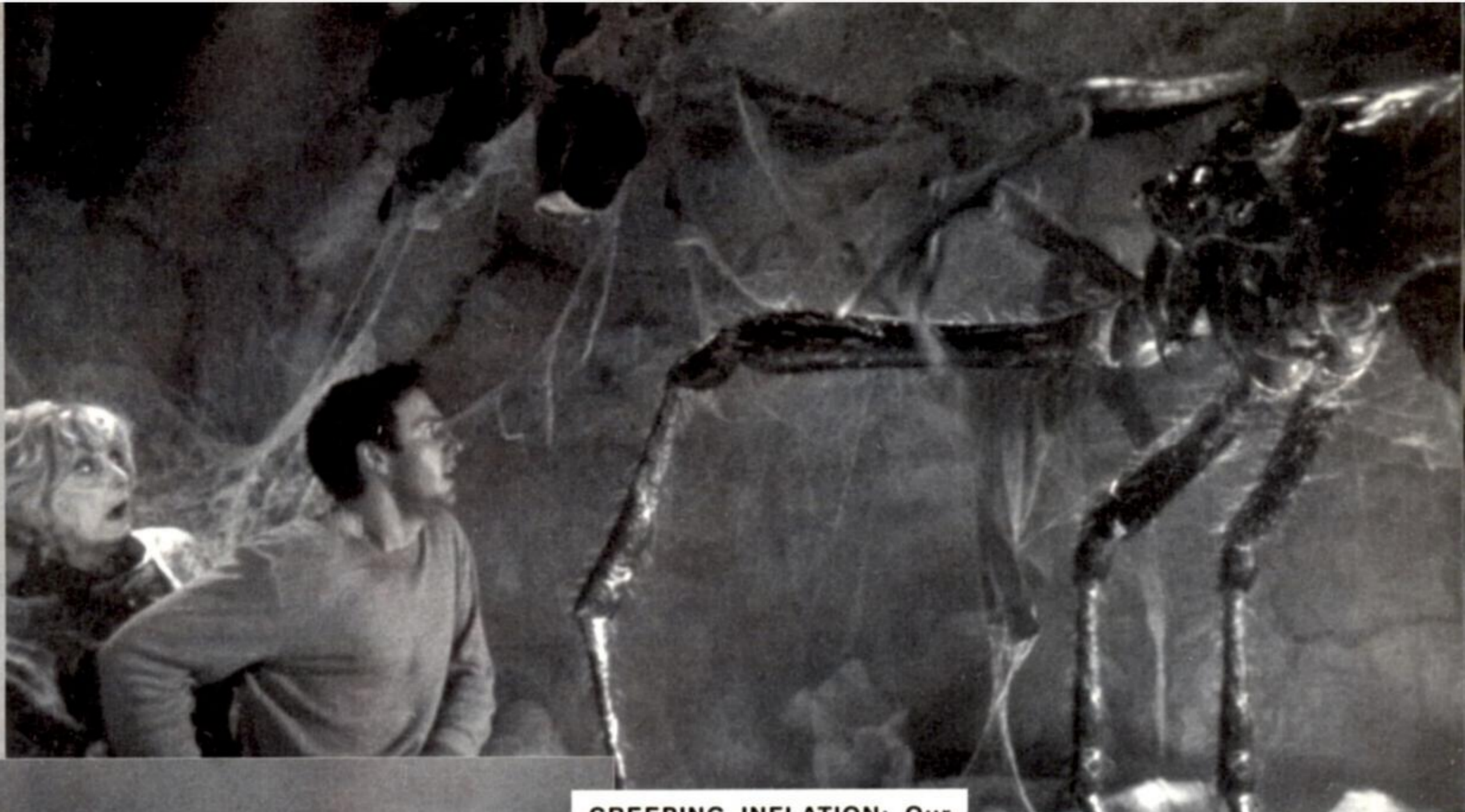
Goulekas' crew used mostly key-frame animation to create the rampaging arachnids. "There were cycles the artists could pull from," she said. "But you never really use the straight cycle. We studied the live spiders, but then they made an animation cycle in the computer—different walks and runs for the spiders. An artist might load a cycle in, but then we'd have to change it. In character, the spiders would have to pause, rear up, slow down—the cycle was very much just a starting place. The way we had these guys attacking...and some of the spiders laugh—they shake up and down; they're fighting with each other. They're not really doing a lot of spider stuff. They walk the way real spiders would

OFF THE SHELF FRIGHTS: Working under a restricted budget, the EIGHT LEGGED FREAKS effects crew had to conjure up an army of deadly arachnids.

walk.

"The spiders themselves took a lot of work. It's four times the amount of animation than for a human—instead of two legs, we have to think about eight. And there was the organization of large numbers of spiders. We couldn't just use 'flocking software.'"

Flocking software allows easier creation of movement in large groups, based upon general rules for herd movement. "This wasn't a herd of cattle," Goulekas said. "The spiders all had different things going on. Even if they were all running,

some would rear up, or they'd attack each other. There's all kinds of little, sub-level things going on. We've got scenes where there are just hundreds of spiders packed in. So cycles would be used for maybe the far, far away spiders."

In THE GHOST AND THE DARKNESS—a project that didn't employ Goulekas—real lions were filmed against blue screen and then composited into scenes. "There's no way we could do that with spiders," said Goulekas. "The spiders would have to be magnified, and there'd be no way to line it up. Plus, the spiders' motions were really driven by the motion of the people. As the person started to run, then mimicked falling down and getting mauled, we had to animate to his performance, rather than him trying to move to the spi-

der's performance."

On-set stand-ins weren't used for the spiders. "The actors all mimed it," Goulekas explained. "They knew at a certain point to fall over. Some of the guys had wires on them, and they'd yank them backward. Or they'd be shooting guns in the air at the spiders, and we'd put a spider there and explode it.

"Sometimes it gets really tricky with eye-lines and stuff, but when it's with spiders, it's not like it's a CG character having a conversation with a live actor, where the eye-line isn't going to be forgiving at all. When it's fast action with a giant spider coming at somebody, there's a lot more leeway."

Given the budgetary constraints, off-the-shelf software was the order of the day. "There really wasn't anything proprietary about it," Goulekas said.

CREEPING INFLATION: Our good friend, toxic waste, once again provides the mechanism by which common spiders are "embiggened" and go on a rampage in EIGHT LEGGED FREAKS.

"We used Maya. It was a combination of pulling from run and walk cycles as a start point. We used path animation, where you basically draw out a path and the spider orients itself along that. From there, on top of that, the animator would animate. In the case of a spider specifically attacking a human, we would key-frame animate all the way. For the most part, the whole thing was key frame. I had a little program that was my tally: how many spiders in a shot. The last number I had up was 2,206 spiders. All told, there were about 200 CG effects shots—shots with spider animation were 191."

That's a lot of spiders. "There were some real tarantulas that were kind of pets there at CFX [Centropolis Effects]. Some of the people liked them, and would let them walk on them. I wouldn't touch them. I don't like the big tarantulas."

In the film's plot, as you might imagine, the cause of all the trouble was that B-movie staple: industrial greed. "It's a toxic waste accident," Goulekas laughed. "Something contami-

nates the water, and it's like steroids for the spiders. They're growing and growing and growing through the whole movie. They're killing off people—it's a funny movie!"

For Goulekas, it was all in a day's work. "I wouldn't call this one of the more difficult films I've worked on. The goop the spiders shoot was probably the most difficult stuff to develop, because it was liquidy. Basically, the practical goop that comes out of the spider was applesauce dyed green. Anything you see coming out of the spiders, we did in CG. There was talk early on about trying to do it practically, but what are you going to do? Explode a bag of applesauce on set at exactly the right time and right place?"

What was most challenging? "There were these shots—we called them the cat shots. There's this part in the movie where a spider goes into a vent. The family cat follows after him. Originally, you just heard the screeching of the cat fighting and all these sound effects and people are looking at the walls and the ceiling. Well, [producer] Dean [Devlin] and [director] Ellory [Elkayen] decided, 'Let's add in some really comical effects.' Basically, we would have a cat face come smashing through the plaster of the wall, and then a spider body, and then part of a cat. It was just really funny. It cracks the plaster and you see the imprints. It's cartoonish, in a way. Sick, but funny." CFQ