

THE BLADE RUNNER CHRONICLES



*Interview by
Phil Edwards /
Alan McKenzie*

IVOR POWELL



It was really quite natural that Ivor Powell should find himself working in the film industry. Nephew of famed film critic, Dylis Powell, Ivor at age sixteen attempted unsuccessfully to break into the business. He became involved in the world of the theatre on the stage management side, working for various companies. From there he entered documentary film making and made an early foray into tv commercial production. Following a year with BBC 2 he became involved in the pop music field running various groups.

At the age of 22 he finally got the break he had been looking for, working in the art department for a film called *Journey to the Stars* as a producer's assistant. Of course *Journey* turned into *2001 A Space Odyssey* and after getting to know the mercurial Stanley Kubrick moved on to work as a special effects co-ordinator and assistant director on that ground-breaking production.

Following *2001*, Powell found himself serving duty as production manager and location manager for such films as *The Optimists of Nine Elms* and *The Adventurers*. A couple of *Carry On* features provided the producer with what he calls, "an education", due to the tight nature of budgeting and scheduling for those extremely successful films.

He started to work in the burgeoning field of commercials as an assistant director as well as contributing to the David Puttnam documentary *Memory of Justice*. It was while he was involved with this project that he met Ridley Scott, then the master of the slick tv commercial. A healthy working relationship developed and Powell became an integral part of RSA (Ridley Scott Associates).

Then came Scott's first feature film, *The Duelists* and then *Alien*. Powell worked on both these as associate producer and Scott's right hand man. After *Blade Runner* Powell felt that it was time to branch out and he is currently in partnership with director David Ashwell.

Starburst: How did *Blade Runner* come about? I saw *Alien* again recently and the thought occurred to me that it may have been inspired by the Ash sequence...

Ivor Powell: Funny enough, when Ridley was cutting *Alien* he received a script, from producer Michael Deeley, which was then called *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, I think. He told me what a terrific script he thought it was, and that he knew exactly how to do it. We have both been fans of *Heavy Metal* magazine for a long time. There was a story in that by Dan O'Bannon and Moebius (Jean Giraud) about a detective in 21st Century New York who went around blowing people away, and it was always the very image that Ridley tried to get into *Blade Runner*. Vast long corridors in mega-blocks of apartments and so on. He sent the script back to Michael Deeley along with a copy of this comic strip. He told him it was too close, and that he didn't necessarily want to do another picture about androids and not necessarily another hardcore sf movie now. We went onto *Dune* and other things including *Knight*, a medieval film that Ridley desperately wants to do...

Is that the same project as *Darkness*? (Now retitled *Legend*)

No it isn't. *Darkness* is a Dark Age fairy story, nothing to do with *Knight* at all. But a year later, when we still hadn't really cracked the script of *Dune*, tragically—as I still think Ridley is the one to do that, and *Knight* hadn't worked out. It's a case of having the script right. You might have some problems that can be worked out later. But if you are discerning then you can't take time out to rewrite scene or dialogue with 250 people waiting on you...

Would you say that the majority of problems that occur during shooting can be traced back to script stage?

Yes, if it is humanly possible, one must sort out the script, take as much time as you can. We spent nearly a year pounding away at the problems on *Blade Runner*.

How did the script chores breakdown between Hampton Fancher and David Peoples?

Hampton Fancher wrote the original. David was brought in at a much later date, when Hampton was, quite frankly, exhausted after working on this for a year or two before we came along. He had the ▶

Below: Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is informed by Gaff (Edward James Olmos) that he is wanted at Police Headquarters.





property along with a friend of his named Brian Kelly and they took it to Michael Deeley. It was very similar in a way to *Alien*, in that one of them had acquired the rights to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, and Deeley was interested enough to give them some money to go on with it. The script that Ridley first got was the Hampton Fancher one, which for me, in many ways had a lot of material in it that I liked, although it's a different movie.

Was it closer to Dick's original novel?

In a way, yes, because there was much more emphasis on the animals and the fact that there were no more real animals left . . . I think it's unfortunate that it's now really thrown away in the film as it is. Unless you know Dick's premise you aren't really aware that all the animals you see are replicants . . .

I'm afraid it is. Originally Deckard was a character whose great desire was to own a real sheep. He has a robot sheep grazing on his roof and he would go and talk to it. And then he would go and look in this expensive pet show window and look at a real one that he wanted to buy. It was his great ambition in life . . .

I'm not sure that would have worked on film, it's a lot to expect of an audience to believe that this guy is doing all this because he wants a real sheep . . .

I don't think it would have worked on film . . . probably have appeared a bit stupid. Hampton Fancher is a very romantic writer and in his original script the relationship between Deckard and Rachel was much stronger and in the end she realises that there isn't much future for them because he's human and she's a replicant. She is standing on the roof and he realises that she might be going to do something stupid and he rushes to her. He gets up onto the roof and she's standing on the edge of the roof holding onto the *real* sheep that he's bought. There's a quite moving conversation between them in which she compares the old android sheep with the way she is feeling. He thinks she is going to throw the real sheep over the edge, but she hands it to him and as she does steps back and falls off the roof, committing suicide. A very powerful scene. He hops into his Spinner and zaps out into the desert wastelands which surround the city and sets down. When he is sitting there just staring at the sands he sees a movement, which of course surprises him as there is no real animal life apart from zoos and private collections. A tortoise crawls out of the sand and he flips it on back and he just watches it for hours, like from dawn till dusk, watching this little animal trying to flip itself over, and it finally succeeds and goes waddling off. This, symbolically, says to him, that humanity is going to make it.

It's interesting that the reference to the tortoise still survives in the Voight-Kampff interview with Leon . . .

Yes . . . I always thought that scene was wonderful, but it's probably hardcore sf fanatic thinking. It probably wouldn't have worked on the big budget scale, or worked for a general audience. It may have worked in a cheaper, under ten million dollar movie, where you can afford to take those kind of risks. I still have a great affection for that original screenplay—I like it very much. But on the other hand, there were some things in Hampton's script which were unacceptable. For instance, Deckard just arrives at Zora's place without an explanation as to how he got there. Peoples and Ridley introduced this chain of events with the snake-scale that Deckard finds in the bath tub. I think that's where Peoples came in. To write that kind of stuff, street dialogue. Originally Gaff had a lot of street dialogue which was multiple pidgeon English, like six languages in one—21st Century gutter talk. Ridley does try to cram his canvas full of everything. Peoples did clarify, and help, certain areas along.

Was it a case that Peoples "polished" Fancher's script, or was his input greater than a "polish" job?

If you had to say that one person has got to get a screen credit, I suppose if I were Solomon, I'd have to say Hampton Fancher has to, because he was the one that found it and in a sense was the one who did the original material and has done the most work on it. On the other hand, David Peoples, who is a terrific writer, a real sf writer, has done a lot of wonderful stuff with it and stuck with it. The screen credit now, as I see it, is very fair.

*I've heard that there were several sequences planned for *Blade Runner* which didn't make it into the final script. Can you tell me about any of them?*

There were a couple of important scenes, I think, that were not shot. There was one beginning scene which was talked about, which was in an early script, that was never able to be shot because of finance and the fact that costs in America were escalating. It was a beginning scene that Ridley was always very keen to do, of which there were two variations. The final variation was a scene which established the Nexus 6 replicants. Imagine something like the massive pit excavation in *2001* and there was a massive high-tech furnace at one end and there was this mountain of bodies which were being shovelled onto a conveyor belt and fed into a furnace, it looked something like a load of mackerel being poured out of a trawler. And then out of this pile of bodies emerged Batty and the other replicants. And they "cream" the workers down there. I had a vision, although it wouldn't have been possible unless the actual site was on the moon, of Batty—rather like Moonwatcher in *2001*—looking

upwards and actually seeing the Earth. He knew that that was his target, his destination. It was where his creator was. The reason it wasn't in the movie was that it would have cost a couple of million dollars to do and we already had enough footage and time. It's like *Close Encounters* with that stunning opening of the planes being found, instead of opening it with the close encounter on the radar screen. Maybe we should have done. Who knows. The box office and the public will ultimately tell us. That sequence was written by the David Peoples side of it.

That other opening scene (written by Hampton Fancher) showed a sort of farmscape—one of those mid-America, endless farmscapes—and a massive tractor tilling the soil. A Spinner zaps in and arrives and lands and out steps Deckard. The farmworker notices him and Deckard walks towards this very old fashioned farmhouse. Inside, he looks around—there were photographs, clothes and soup cooking on the stove. The big bulky farmhand starts walking towards the house—he's like 6 foot 6 inch to 7 foot tall, the boardwalk outside the house literally sinks beneath his weight. He asks Deckard what he wants. Then he makes an aggressive move towards Deckard who pulls his gun and blows him away. Deckard goes over to his body, heaves him over—and this is a real Ridley-ism—just pulls out his bottom jaw bone and sees a number stamped on it. What it was, was a demonstration of what a Blade Runner does. The farmhand had been like a Nexus 2 or 3 that had been a runaway, and Deckard had tracked him down. I'm not sure that this comes over anymore because it's no longer an integral part of *Blade Runner*, that it established that there had been runaways of various Nexuses over the years, and that *why* they had to have Blade Runners. In the early days it was a case of tracking down these things which were not very human, and couldn't pass for human with a parchment like face. You couldn't see the nuts and bolts but they were primitive, so it wasn't too hard to blow them away. But as they became more and more sophisticated more and more like you and I, then the job became more and more repellant. So I guess that's why Deckard finally went into retirement, and that's the point where we catch him.

How was *Blade Runner* set up?

When *Dune* and *Knight*, which was to be done with EMI, didn't work out, we went to the States and met with Michael Deeley, who is very good on the financial side because of his dealings with EMI and British Lion. He had this script, which I think may have been with other directors before Ridley, and he went to "war" with the majors. He got a deal pretty quickly with Filmways, so out we went, and at that time Ridley wanted to make a movie in America. This was about a year after *Alien*, I guess. So we started work on the script and during the year before we actually started shooting, there were three, maybe four drafts of the screenplay which finally became *Blade Runner*. The title actually came from an obscure science fiction paperback called *Blade Runner*, which took its title from the William Burroughs. This paperback had something to do with doctors in the future where medicine and doctors are banned. There were these illegal doctors who went out to administer medical help to people, and the people who supplied them with their instruments when they ran out, were called "blade runners". Hampton Fancher gave that name to Deckard in the script, as his code name. I'm not sure whether it was Hampton or Ridley who came up with the idea of calling the movie *Blade Runner*.

How was the decision reached to shoot the film in LA?

It was primarily after getting Filmways as the major and the distributor, the problem was how to shoot it. Despite all the location scouting we did, there was no one place that had the concentration of architecture that was right. As always with a film like *Blade Runner*, it comes down to how you are going to crack the script, how you're actually going to make it work, how the logistics are going to work and how they are going to work within a price. The budget was gradually being pushed upwards and Filmways, I guess, were being carried screamingly along with it, and though we were unaware of it at the time had tremendous financial and cash-flow problems.

What was their belief in the project? Was it one hundred per cent belief?

Oh, they believed in the project, very much, yes. But I don't think they had the money for a twenty million dollar movie. It went from a twelve to thirteen million dollars, which was totally impractical, right up to a twenty million plus movie. We finally convinced everybody to do all the effects as models, I always believed that was the way to do it.

So how did the film change from a Filmways project to becoming a Ladd Company production with release through Warners?

Finally, Filmways collapsed, and Michael Deeley, very cleverly I think, turned the picture around to Tanoem and to the Ladd Company, in a very short space of time and we went through that terrible hiatus where we were trying to hold the crew together—the directors strike was looming up for a certain date later on that year. We knew that if we didn't start the movie by a certain date, we would never start at all. It was one of those pictures that you *knew* that if it didn't get made then, would never get made at all. It was a strange kind of beast of a picture. It wasn't every director's cup of tea. Finally the ▶



cash-flow started and we got off. We had at that time attempted to do a budget. I'd done a quick budget which had come out at 17 to 18 million dollars to do the picture in England. But if we'd made the move to England, it would have been too late to beat the director's strike, which ironically never happened. So for that, and some other reasons we made the movie there, at the Burbank Studios.

*I must say I think **Blade Runner** is the best designed sf film ever. How much of that was Syd Mead and how much was Ridley Scott's input?*

Ridley and I had seen Mead's book *Sentinel* and a few weeks later we were on our way over to L.A. and were delighted to learn that he does work out of there and was available. I do think that a great deal of the design work like the *Voight-Kampff Machine* and the cars is Syd's, but the *overall* image, a lot of it, is Ridley's—the way he wants things to look. It's the two of them. The wonderful thing about Ridley visualising things is that he is an artist himself. So working with other artists, they respect him and he kind of pushes them to extremes that they might not otherwise have reached.

*What about the city-scapes? They reminded me very much of **Metropolis**... was that an influence?*

Not consciously, no. We were influenced by the work of an sf illustrator named John Harris, who has done some very nice stuff on cities of the future. It really is only an extension of what America is today. We first of all thought of shooting it on location in America. We did "recces" around places like Chicago, Dallas to see a lot of their new buildings, but there was really no way to make it look real. The other alternative was to go with models. I think using models now with all the advances in motion control techniques, has become so advanced. You can use the buildings the way Ridley did, in the opening sequence. We never intended to have as much "city" as ended up in the film, as after we shot the opening sequence we didn't have a lot of money left for that. Ridley got behind the camera and shot a lot of stuff, by using some of the models, turning them upside down, stripping them down and so on. There are certainly a few strange objects in there! I know that R2D2 is on the Mothership in *Close Encounters*, and I know we have a few odd things in this. He enhanced what the original street was, and what we originally had money for—he tripled it, making it a much vaster cityscape than what he had originally.

How was Doug Trumbull chosen for the special effects?

My wish was always to get Trumbull to do it and I talked to him originally. But he was tied up with *Firefox*. We went in with John Dykstra, who I think is a very good technician, and he did a lot of work on it and in fact helped budget it. It all came out quite expensively, but the Ridley's storyboards were very expansive at that stage—I mean we were doing traffic jams in the air, incredible stuff really, things that had never been attempted before. So Dykstra's budgets for *those* effects were prohibitive. About the time that we were locking horns on that, to pull back the script and therefore pull back the effects budget, I heard that Trumbull was getting *Brainstorm* off the ground, and that he maybe wasn't going to do *Firefox*. I got on

the 'phone to him—he's an old friend from 2001—and asked him if there was anything we could do. He told me that there might be. Finally we got the most wonderful deal with Trumbull where he was on a fixed fee, Yuricich was on a fixed fee and all his crew and facilities were on our payroll. There wasn't an overhead in there—they weren't putting a huge mark-up on all their facilities and staff. *Is that something that's fairly common?*

Yes, I think it is. I think if you go to ILM, unless you're George Lucas, you'd get an overhead and mark-up in there and understandably so. Trumbull now has the only 65mm motion control set up, which is what he used in *Star Trek 1*. It allows to give you the quality of the effects that you see in *Blade Runner*, which I think are the best seen yet. Trumbull was only involved on a consultancy basis, because once it was devised *how* to do the effects, Ridley doesn't need somebody to hold his hand to explain how to frame something, and this and that.

*I think Harrison Ford is simply terrific in **Blade Runner**. As much as **Raiders** was sold on the strength of "the return of the great hero", I think Harrison is the return of the great movie star... almost like a Clark Gable.*

Hear, hear! I think he's wonderful, number one for me. Very professional, and very much a return to that kind of actor. He loves his craft and has no delusions of grandeur about him at all and he's *great* to work with. He has a very positive input on script, on how to do action scenes—terrific.

How was Harrison Ford chosen and why?

By popular demand really. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* hadn't come out then, so we didn't know if it was going to do well. We even at one time talked to Dustin Hoffman, and that would have been a *totally* different movie then. Dustin is not a macho character and he asked Ridley, "Why the hell do you want me to play this macho character?" *Why the hell did Ridley want Hoffman to play this macho character?* Because Ridley was searching for more than just a superficial macho film. He wanted a real character in there, and Dustin (as I understand it) put forward some wonderful ideas, but it wasn't the movie we were all talking about making. Finally, I think it came down to the fact that Harrison really just fit the bill.

*What was Harrison's input into **Blade Runner**?*

Well, obviously he was very good with all the action sequences. I think he was very practical about the script and some of the scenes. Just very sensible. He understands film making and how to help make a dodgy scene seem good. I think he is called upon to perform, to act more in *Blade Runner* than in anything else I've seen him in, certainly more than *Star Wars*. I think it's a very difficult performance. I think the scene with him using the *Voight-Kampff* is very good and the scene with Sean Young after that, when she comes to him is also very good. It's a very difficult part to play, because on the one hand as *Blade Runner* is a big, commercial action movie, you can't devote the time to characterisation and development to scenes that you could do in a smaller movie ○



