

PRAYING M.A.N.T.I.S.

Suiting up for night action, Carl Lumbly has what it takes for superheroism.

By IAN SPELLING & MARC BERNARDIN

Growing up, Carl Lumbly wasn't one of those kids who devoured superhero comic books and dreamed of riding shotgun in the Batmobile or leaping tall buildings in a single bound. "No, my dad wouldn't allow me to have comic books," says Lumbly, a respected dramatic actor whose most visible role was probably Detective Marcus Petree on the long-running *Cagney and Lacey*, but whom genre fans will remember for his role as John Parker in *Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai: Across the 8th Dimension*. "I did do a lot of reading, though, a lot of science fiction, a lot of adventure. My favorite books were the ones where it was written from the point-of-view of an animal or it was written about an animal's life, like *Stuart Little*. I've always lost myself in books."

Now, Lumbly is getting lost in the world of genre series television, as he brings to life the character of Dr. Miles Hawkins, a wheelchair-bound neurophysicist by day and, by night, the heroic Mantis, which also happens to be the title of the new Fox series in which Lumbly stars. The actor, a friendly, soft-spoken and talkative man, describes *M.A.N.T.I.S.* (created by *Batman's* Sam Hamm and *Darkman's* Sam Raimi) as a rather unusually conceived superhero/action-adventure,

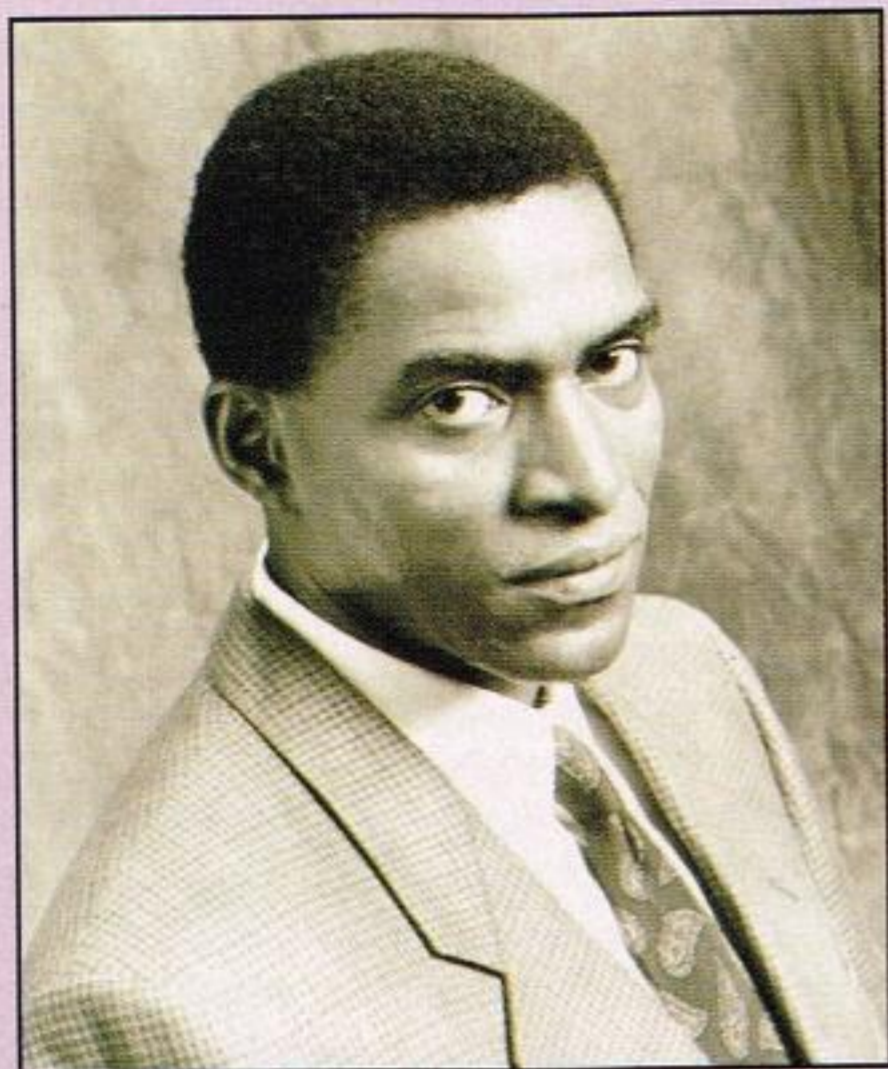
especially in that this hero in question has no real superpowers. What he does do, he accomplishes mostly by using his wits, though it's his brilliant application of technology which enables him to even be in a physical position to utilize those wits. "The genesis of it is that Miles Hawkins is felled by a bullet during what we believe is a riot situation. He's paralyzed from the waist down and, as part of his recovery," explains Lumbly, "he wants to walk again."

"So, he and John Stonebrick [Roger Rees]—his project manager at Miles' company, Hawkins Technologies—conceive an electrical stimulation suit, not unlike those that exist now. In the fiction of our piece, he perfects it. He puts it on, ostensibly to walk, and is then sucked into fighting crime, usually answering a cry for help. Then, he begins to enjoy what he's capable of doing."

Hawkins, it was revealed in the pilot, spent a hefty part of his life as a major cog in the war machine, working for the military industrial complex. He designed, among other things, biological weapons. And, notes Lumbly, Hawkins' deep involvement in his work fostered the type of arrogance and distance towards science that reduces people to statistics without ever recognizing the human consequences. In some ways, then, the bullet that tore through Hawkins' body helped to restore his humanity. So, when Hawkins dons his costume and fights the good fight, he is actually and metaphorically atoning for his past sins.



For Lumbly, portraying both the wheelchair-bound Dr. Hawkins and the character's heroic alter-ego offers many an acting challenge. First, there's the matter of emoting from the confines of a wheelchair. Then, there's the issue of making Mantis a different kind of superhero. More? Absolutely. *M.A.N.T.I.S.* calls for Lumbly to deal with an intricate costume and, of course, some hi-tech special FX. All of those elements, which might scare off



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some actors, attracted Lumbly to this project. Of the obstacles facing him as a thespian playing a man restricted to a wheelchair, Lumbly reports that, "Truly, there are none. As a matter of fact, I would have to say there are certain advantages. Given the grueling nature of a day on the set, whenever I'm playing Miles, I at least know I'll be able to sit down. I went into the role and did my research on the basis of 'What would the obstacles be?' and 'What would the difficulties be?' I've come to view people in wheelchairs as being differently abled. They don't have use of their legs, but

"He's a loose cannon."

they do have the wheelchair, which is as good a form of locomotion as you might want if you can't walk. You figure out how to do everything you need to do."

As for making Hawkins a fresh superhero for audiences, Lumbly notes that "there's a lot of hope in the character." He reiterates that Mantis doesn't have any real superpowers, and adds that, unlike, say Batman or Superman, Mantis doesn't share a cordial relationship with the power structure of his domain. Batman, for example, knows Commissioner Gordon and, even though he's operating as something of an independent agent working

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outside the law, the Dark Knight thinks nothing of stopping for a chat with the powers that be. "No one is trying to arrest Batman or Superman," Lumbly points out. "Mantis is a little different. No one really knows about him. The police are trying to find out more about him. There's an ambivalence about whether he's actually doing good.

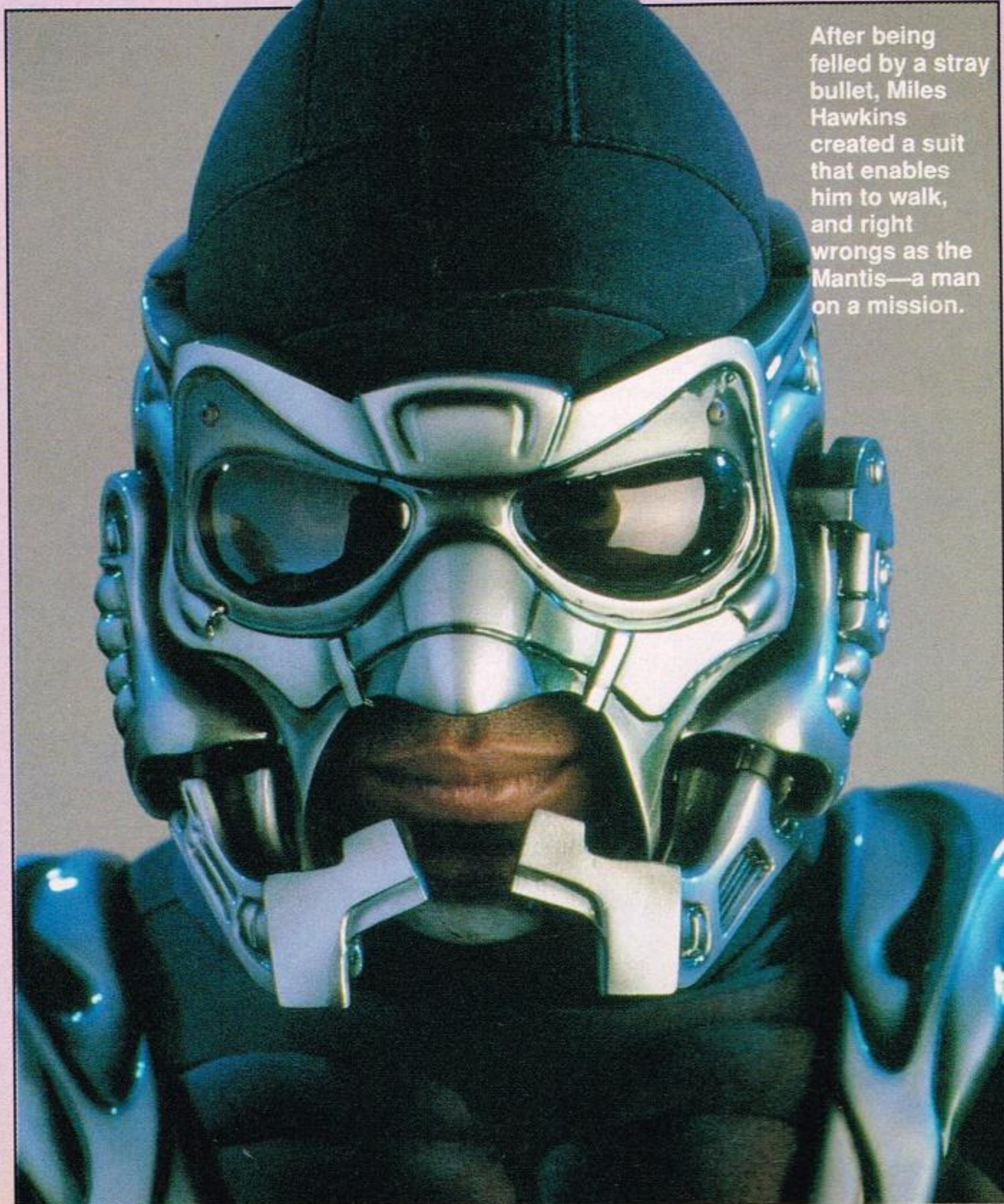
"Even though he may be apprehending criminals, he's certainly not working within the system. He's a loose cannon. No one knows what he's up to. All they know is that whatever he's doing, he's taking it all into his own hands and working in ways that people are unfamiliar with. No one has been able to get ahold of him to talk to him. I'm having a great deal of fun playing this one out. I normally don't get to have that much fun. I usually play cops, doctors, lawyers and rather straight-laced, if not anal, individuals. That has been my strong suit. It's nice to play half of a man who isn't totally familiar to me [or audiences] and then the other half of the man, who I'm familiar with and who I just have to hang onto from week to week."

Masked Man

Many actors dislike working with FX, but Lumbly enjoys the variety they bring to his day, to his portrayal of Hawkins/Mantis, to the look they bring to the show, and he likes how the costume frees him to become the Mantis. Still, he acknowledges, it gets mighty

hot beneath the elaborate electrical stimulation suit. Already, though, in just the first few weeks of the series' production, modifications have been made on the costume and, with a trouper's spirit, Lumbly has forced himself to get used to his *M.A.N.T.I.S.*-wear. "For one thing, there could be no question about which side of the character I'm playing. When I'm in the mask, that's it," he states. "I don't think I've ever put on anything that gets me into character as quickly or as fully. My vision through the goggles isn't quite what it would be normally, but it also gives me a kind of protection and a bizarre sort of autonomy.

"The wonderful thing is that the man is committed to not killing anyone. As you can imagine, in an action-adventure setting, that presents some major challenges for the writers and for the production. If you don't create mayhem yourself, you have to be able to at least insert the character into a mayhem situation. What we're trying to do is say that there are some non-lethal ways to deal with lethal people. There are people who may have gone over the top or who are operating in a misguided manner and, maybe, finding more firepower, and more lethal ways of dealing with them is simply adding to the overall weight of the violence we now find in our world. What we're trying to do on this show is force all of us to hopefully be more inventive in dealing with this good guy/bad guy situation."




After being felled by a stray bullet, Miles Hawkins created a suit that enables him to walk, and right wrongs as the Mantis—a man on a mission.

Even without the costume, it sounds as if Lumbly finds Miles Hawkins a fascinating character with a great deal of room for growth and development. Initially, *M.A.N.T.I.S.* presents Dr. Hawkins as a brilliant but reclusive and dismissive man who begins to regain his humanity after he's shot. He's a man who comes to understand that the freedoms and privileges we have as individuals in a society should prompt us all to want to be responsible for ensuring that those freedoms and privileges can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of their economic level, ethnic background or racial heritage. "What Miles learns about himself is that the individual who had been able to wall himself away and had the arrogance of science to protect him is coming closer to the world in recovering from the violence, committing himself to reducing and lessening the violence in the world, and becoming less of a crippled individual," argues Lumbly. "Hawkins learns about being differently abled and how the perception of disability is one that comes from the outside. If you learn to handle whatever conditions life has brought to you, then, in your mind, you're *not* disabled. There's a battle that goes on every day in just having the world not put certain limitations on you."

As seriously as Lumbly takes his character, so too does he take the responsibility of being a role model. After all, he knows that young kids, including his own six-year-old son, will be watching *M.A.N.T.I.S.* Still, he doesn't quite feel any added pressure. "Pressure is too strong a word," he remarks. "I feel I'm privileged and blessed to be in this situation, and so I feel a responsibility. I like feeling responsible. I went through a period of time when I was essentially a loner and I didn't choose too many of my responsibilities very carefully. Now, maturation and life have just brought me to a place where I think I'm fortunate to have responsibilities because it makes me feel connected. As much as there is a certain kind of pressure brought on by the fact that you're more in the public eye and are held more accountable for what you do, I think that's probably as it should be if you have the nerve to stick your face out there and say 'Look at *me*.'"

The episodes of *M.A.N.T.I.S.* that Lumbly most appreciates are the ones that hit home personally. On a show such as *M.A.N.T.I.S.*, in which there are two sides to one man, there's much for Lumbly, and the audience, to relate to. The actor's favorite hour to date concerns an old flame of Dr. Hawkins', an African woman with whom he attended school. She appears as abruptly as she disappeared more than 15 years earlier and, of course, promptly winds up in jeopardy. "She hasn't ever seen him in his wheelchair. Now, he has this complete other side of his life that she cannot know about



We all have our crosses to bear—and Dr. Miles Hawkins takes to the streets as a costumed hero in *M.A.N.T.I.S.*



Banzai Photo: Bruce McBroom/Copyright 1983 Sherwood Productions, Inc.

"If I was given the opportunity to do John Parker again, I would leap at it," says Lumbly (right) of his alien character in *Buckaroo Banzai*. "Absolutely."

and he can't share with her yet," Lumbly reveals. "It will come to bear on her. There was something about it that I found very interesting because so many people know me from a different time in my life. People can't believe that I'm an actor. There are people who knew me as an actor when I lived in New York and was only doing stage work and they can't believe I'm doing television. I'm fascinated by the way we change. There are all these different choices for things that can affect your life and push you in a different direction. It's interesting what sticks and what doesn't."

Real Character

Born and raised in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, Lumbly managed to turn a love for writing into a career as an actor. By the time he arrived in Hollywood, TV roles proved easier to find than theater opportunities. Though best known as Detective Petree on *Cagney & Lacey*, a role he recently reprised in a *Cagney & Lacey* reunion TV movie, Lumbly's other television credits include *Taxi*, *Going to Extremes*, *L.A. Law* and, most recently, *seaQuest*. Among his motion picture credits are *Caveman*, the thrillers *The Bedroom Window* and *Pacific Heights*, and the dramas *To Sleep with Anger* and *South Central*.

One part that has stuck with Lumbly, and genre fans, was his role as the Lectroid John Parker in W.D. Richter's intriguingly off-kilter *Buckaroo Banzai*, which co-starred Peter Weller, John Lithgow, Ellen Barkin, Jeff Goldblum and Christopher Lloyd. Lumbly remem-

bers the film fondly, recalling that the freedom he had in playing the character resembled his early stage experiences. "There was an improvisational quality to that film. I remember again being inside a suit," he says, laughing. "Rather than being inside a helmet, I was inside a face mask that was spirit-gummed to my face. I remember being on location in the basement of what looked like a Goodyear tire factory on an LA day that was about 102 degrees. I remember making a mental note to myself that I would *never* do this again. But

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it was an incredibly fun shoot. I remember how every day we would come in and look at the script and the director would say, 'Let's figure out what to do.' The script was there but we were allowed to bring a lot of ourselves to it. Whenever I see that film, I'm kind of amazed.

"We were all pretty serious about it. As wild and wacky as *Buckaroo Banzai* was, the scenes were played with whatever truth we could get from them. We were all in the spirit of it. Richter had cast people who could go ahead and wrap themselves around the concept. The only thing I regret about it is the early perception that it was trying to be some-

thing other than it was. I thought it set out to be an incredibly funny, sort of sly take-off on the science fiction genre. Maybe some of the sly parts overwhelmed people, although it did go on to become quite a cult favorite." And if ever someone managed to mount a sequel? "If I was given the opportunity to do John Parker again, I would leap at it. Absolutely."

As the conversation comes to a close, Lumbly contemplates a recent comment by Jack Nicholson, who described horror and fantasy roles as the American equivalent of Shakespeare, in that they're Gothic, rely heavily on language and makeup and costumes, and perhaps more importantly, reflect different facets of the human psyche. "I wouldn't disagree with that," says Carl Lumbly after a pause. "If Shakespeare were alive today, he would probably be lifting things from *M.A.N.T.I.S.* For his day, he was involved in the popular culture. In fantasy and horror, you get to play at a heightened level. Also, for me, playing a man of science, the dialogue is certainly much, much better than on most television shows. When you affix your mind to the kinds of concepts and ideas in *M.A.N.T.I.S.*—the paralyzing dart works by using an electrical charge to trigger a biochemical reaction that distorts the brain's synaptical firing system—you're there. So, I wouldn't disagree with Nicholson at all. In Shakespeare, you get to say exactly what you feel, very succinctly and very to the point. I would say that *M.A.N.T.I.S.* actually affords me more of that than I normally have as an actor." ❄️