

TRAIL OF THE PUNISHER

GRIM SKULL GRINNING,
THIS VENGEFUL VIGILANTE
ISN'T A NORMAL COMICS HERO.
HE'S THE ANGEL OF DEATH.



By BILL WILSON

The skies are clear and the city is calm. A gentle breeze tosses papers through the air and helps to cut an already sweltering heat at the end of an unusually hot, humid and rainy autumn in West Central Florida. This is Sunday morning in Tampa, and it's the final week of shooting on Marvel's newest big-screen production, *The Punisher*.

For 11 weeks, the cast and crew have owned this town, commandeering office buildings, blocking off roads and attracting pawking locals unaccustomed to the rigors of motion picture production. Earlier in the day, extras outside the AmSouth Building were filmed reacting to a shower of cash dropped from the top floor. Two wind machines blew gusts of the bogus currency into the air to whip the crowd into a frenzy for a pivotal scene in the film. Now, as the production winds down and the final scenes are shot, the principal players sit down to discuss what they hope will be the latest Marvel comic-to-film success story.

Due for an April 16 premiere, *The Punisher* is the product of a joint venture between Artisan Pictures and Marvel Studios to develop, produce and distribute Marvel character-based projects across all media without the mega-budgets of its higher-profile *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* franchises. The \$30 million adaptation of the popular comic-book character stars Thomas Jane as undercover FBI Agent Frank Castle, who shuns a desk job after a career in the field to enact vengeance on the mobsters who murdered his family. He dons the now-familiar skull shirt to become the Punisher, a cold and calculating vigilante hellbent on destruction.

Skull Lore

This film version—not to be confused with the 1989 Dolph Lundgren misfire—marks the directorial debut of screenwriter Jonathan Hensleigh (*Armageddon*) (who, naturally, also scripted). Hensleigh's story pits





Jane's antihero Castle against John Travolta as crime boss Howard Saint, the man who changed Castle's life forever by brutally killing his wife and son. The women in their lives are *X-Men's* Rebecca Romijn-Stamos as Castle's neighbor Joan, Laura (Willard) Harring as Saint's vengeful spouse and Samantha (*The Mists of Avalon*) Mathis as the doomed Amanda Castle.

The cast also includes Will (*The Postman*) Patton as Leonard Glass, Saint's right-hand man, James Carpinello as Saint's son, Mark Collie as the assassin Harry Heck, Ben Foster and John Pinette as Frank's friends Spacker Dave and Mr. Bumpo, Eddie Jamison as mobster Nicky Duka, Russell Andrews as FBI agent Jimmy Weeks, WWE superstar Kevin Nash as the muscle-bound villain "the Russian" and Roy Scheider as Frank's father.

Producing the film are Marvel Studios CEO Avi Arad and veteran moviemaker Gale Anne Hurd—known to STARLOG readers for producing *Terminator*, *ALIENS* and *Alien Nation* (see issue #200). Other key creative personnel include cinematographer Conrad W. Hall, production designer Michael Hanan and costume designer Lisa Tomczeszyn.

The Punisher represents a marked departure from Hurd and Arad's last film, *The Hulk*. "With *Hulk*, over 90 percent of the

WELCOME BACK, FRANK. His family slain by mobsters, FBI Agent Frank Castle (Thomas Jane) becomes a relentless soldier in the war against crime. Call him the Punisher.



action sequences were CGI," Hurd says. "With *The Punisher*, we're dealing with a very real-world story with minimal use of special effects to drive the narrative."

In fact, the mere mention of the CGI work in *The Hulk* elicits an animated reaction from Hurd. "You know, I'm very proud of that film," she says. "I was extremely pleased with how well the entire production went and all we were able to accomplish with such extensive use of CGI. But I was equally disappointed with the reaction it initially received, particularly when some of the first conceptual work was leaked onto

the Internet. Right then and there, many people made up their minds about the film, and they didn't give it a chance."

Death's Head

Far less muscular than the Hulk (and not remotely green), the Punisher is a far cry from the typical Marvel superhero. Created by writer Gerry Conway and artist Ross Andru (with his skull-branded costume designed by John Romita), he debuted in the pages of *Spider-Man*. The Punisher is a man obsessed with vengeance, a cold-blooded assassin who "punishes" evildoers with death. Initially a sort of comics version of Don Pendleton's paperback hero the

Executioner (an inspiration for the character), the Punisher has evolved throughout his long Marvel-ous life (at one point, even killing himself, dying allegedly for good—but he got better). Sometimes, the Punisher has employed hi-tech gimmickry and surveillance devices to help him in his vendetta against crime or has been assisted by others. But mostly, he's a lone gun, a man without superpowers, facing impossible odds yet prevailing, all the while dealing death.

"What I always liked about the character," Arad remarks, "is that here's a guy who doesn't have extraordinary powers, who doesn't have the advantage of fancy gadgets to aid him, who operates almost totally on an emotional level. His drive and determination to right a wrong enable him to do amazing things."

And what prompted Arad and company to target *The Punisher* as the next property to develop for the big screen? "Well, action is still very big, and *The Punisher* has always been a popular character—even more so in the past few years. And this is a character whom many people are familiar with; even if you haven't read the comics, you probably know the name or recognize that skull logo."

"Plus, we never approached this film thinking of it as another in the *Spider-Man* or *X-Men* genre," Hurd adds. "We never considered doing a sanitized, PG or PG-13 ver-

BORN.

Writer-director Jonathan Hensleigh (left) is focusing this film on how the Punisher came to be. Whether in comics or on celluloid, it's one bloody origin.



sion of *The Punisher*, because that just *wouldn't* be the character."

And if that poses a problem when it comes to marketing the film? "I don't think it will," Arad insists. "This is an action movie. A crime drama. And, yes, it just happens to be based on a popular Marvel comic character, but one who is much more like Blade than Spider-Man."

With the lesser-known Jane as the main character, landing Travolta to portray crime lord Howard Saint was a casting coup. "A hero can only be as powerful and as compelling as the villain he faces," Hurd asserts, "and with John in the role of Howard Saint, he brings such star quality, such power, that he makes everybody else around him better. He plays Saint as very smart and charming, not an over-the-top, larger-than-life caricature. It was important for him to know that Jonathan wouldn't say, 'We want you to play him just like the character you played in *Swordfish* or *Pulp Fiction*.' John's extremely magnetic in this film. He's very contained, controlled and intense."

Hurd and writer-director Hensleigh (Hurd's husband) got an early glimpse of Travolta's intensity and preparation before he even formally signed on as Frank Castle's nemesis. He read the script and loved it, but knew that Hensleigh was a first-time director. Travolta wanted to get a sense of what Hensleigh was like, so he set about making calls to others in the business with whom Hensleigh had worked in the past. "I was truly impressed that a star of his stature made the phone calls himself," Hurd explains. "All the reports came back that this guy Hensleigh has been preparing to direct since his first day in Hollywood. Then we all talked with John on the phone and made a



BUSINESS AS USUAL. Murder's not personal, just good business for gangland boss Howard Saint (John Travolta) and son (James Carpinello).

deal, you have to go down that road and embrace it."

But it's more than just a trail to bloody vengeance. "*The Punisher* is definitely *not* a routine revenge story," Jane agrees. "It's actually a beautiful story about a guy in a unique position. His family is murdered, and he sees only one choice available to him, and that's to go after the people who killed his family and make them pay. He can't lose, because if he gets them, he has avenged, in some small part, the death of his family. If they get him instead, then he is punished for not being able to save them. That's a beautiful story about atonement and punishment."

Haunted Castle

Behind a black tarpaulin in the lobby of Tampa's AmSouth Building—which is doubling for Saint Worldwide, the bad guy's headquarters—Hensleigh and crew are film-

ing a scene in which Jane first appears as the Punisher. The actor exits an elevator clad in black leather and the trademark skull shirt to slaughter Saint's henchmen, Dante (Marc Macaulay) and Spoon (Terry Loughlin). Although *The Punisher* marks Hensleigh's debut in the director's chair, his preparation, precision and attention to detail show that he's no stranger to a movie set. In fact, Hensleigh knew his character inside and out before he started writing the screenplay.

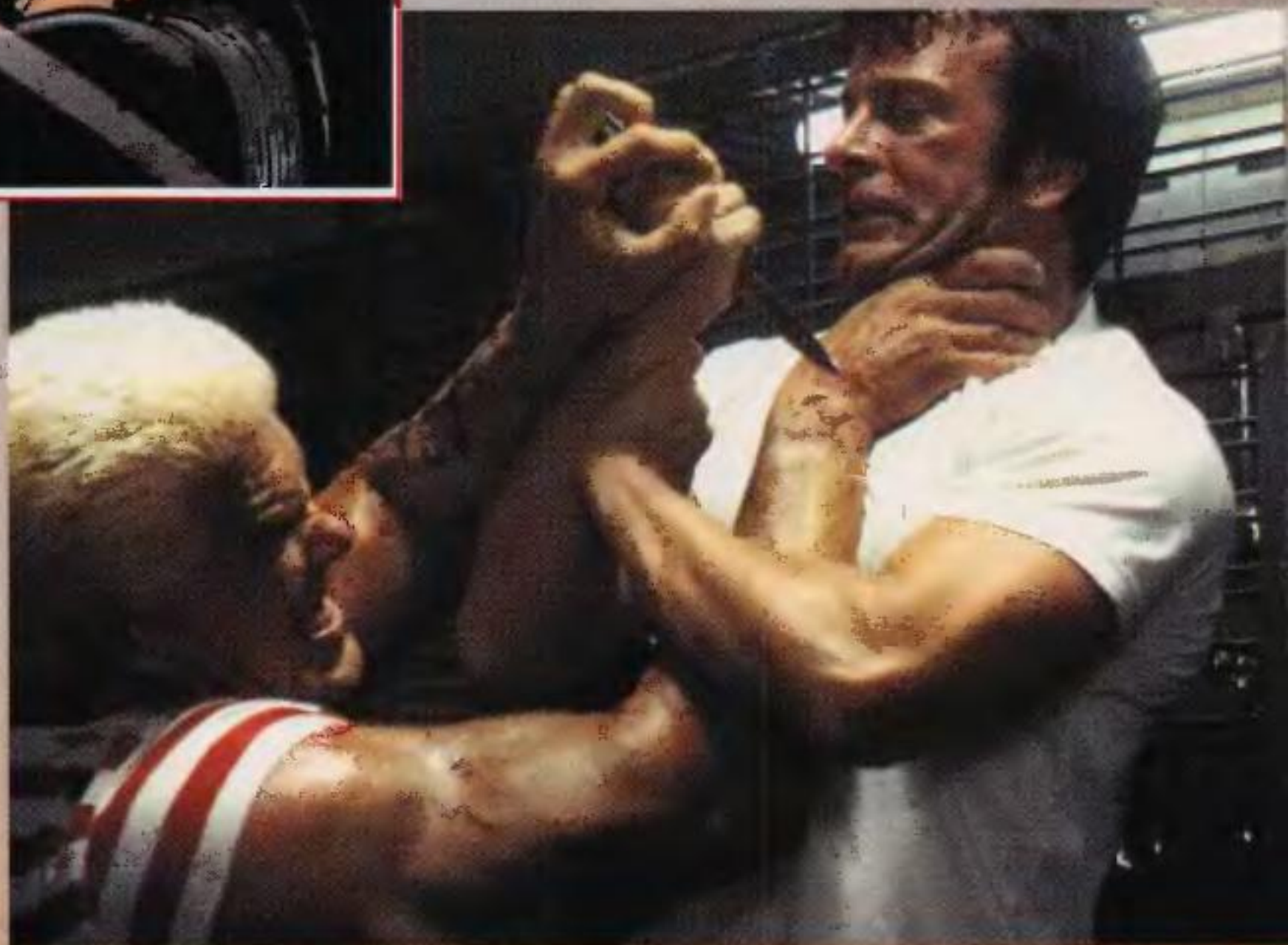
"I read all the comics, going all the way back to the beginning," he notes. "I may have missed one or two along the way, but I pretty much read each and every one of them. I had to cull certain aspects from the comics and then invent the rest of it. I took the essence of Frank Castle and developed the origin story, which takes the entire movie. I didn't want the origin to just be the first act; I wanted it to be the entire film. I was eager to explore the underlying event, which is the murder, and then, through a series of intense visuals, demonstrate Frank's metamorphosis into the Punisher, almost as an insect emerges from a cocoon. I started to build the movie backward from there—from the visuals to the underlying



set visit when he was shooting *Ladder 49* in Baltimore. We were on the same page from the very beginning." And as for that "star quality" Travolta brought to the production? "Even when we were shooting at 2 a.m.," Hurd laughs, "we had a couple hundred people across the street watching."

Hensleigh's screenplay is heavy on grim action, personal turmoil and drama—a throwback to the antihero action flicks of the '70s. "I told Marvel that I didn't just want to do a revenge story," says Hensleigh (who spoke in STARLOG #252 of his efforts to direct a *Hulk* adaptation he scripted). "But there's no way around that revenge or vigilante angle. That's how *The Punisher* was originally created, and if you're going to be in any way faithful to the underlying mater-

ARMY OF ONE. If the Punisher has one unstoppable comic-book foe, it's the Russian (above left), brought to vicious life by WWE star Kevin Nash in the movie.





CIRCLE OF BLOOD. Wounded in his campaign against evil, Castle is ministered to by a neighborly angel of mercy, Joan (Rebecca Romijn-Stamos).

event to the point where he actually becomes 'the Guy,' with the wardrobe, guns, hair and all that."

A director on his maiden voyage, in charge of a less-than-big-budget film for a smaller studio such as Artisan might have more flexibility than most first-time helmers, but Hensleigh says many of the challenges he faced were the same as on any other production, regardless of its size or scope. "This project was so meticulously planned from the very beginning, and we had such a tennis match over the script from month to month to month that I can't say I had freedom, but I didn't have any *lack of*

[2003], *six months* before we actually started filming."

When asked what changes he wanted made to the script, Jane smiles and says, "More lines." Joking or not, the chemistry between first-time director and first-time action hero is apparent. "He's the hardest-working actor I've ever worked with," Hensleigh says of his star. And when Jane is pressed on his acting "process" to get into the skin of such a violent character, Hensleigh is quick to jump in and defuse what many people would consider a *non-explosive* subject. "I don't want my actor to discuss his process for getting into charac-

ter," the director asserts. "It's a very private matter, very personal. I don't want him to go there."

Jane brings to the role of Frank Castle a dedication, focus and raw intensity that places him somewhere between avenging angel and Dirty Harry. (In fact, his line in the day's scene where he confronts the two thugs in the lobby of Saint's headquarters—"You can't kill me. I'm already dead"—would make Clint Eastwood proud.) Jane trained extensively with Navy SEALs to prepare for the role, and even his interpretation of the Punisher's trademark skull logo is intense: "The skull means two things," he says, staring back with a steely glare. "It means if you see me coming, I'm the Angel of Death. It also means that I'm dead. All of the constraints, the physical bounds of society, the rules that people live by to lead a social and moral life, I'm *dead* to all of that. Which makes me extremely dangerous, because I don't give a damn if I live or die or if I'm right or wrong. It's not for me to say or judge or do. I think the skull is more than a target or something for the bad guys to shoot at. The significance is that I am *not* of this world so fear me, because I am dead."

Grim Skies

The Punisher's \$30 million budget pales in comparison to most other high-profile action films. "I won't give you an exact number, but let's just say that no one in Hollywood would call this big-budget," Hensleigh announces. "But in terms of what we're presenting on screen, I think it's going to look every bit as 'big' as any realism-based action drama that has come down the pike in the last 20 or 30 years. We're attempting to make a full-blown, huge action picture with all of the Hollywood trappings for probably less money than a picture like this has ever been executed for. That's a bold claim, but I'll stand by it."

And the director has the support of his cast and crew in backing up such claims. "He has been around the block a few times," Jane adds. "He has worked on plenty of big movies and seen every aspect of their production, so it was really only a matter of time before they gave him a camera."



Art: Tim Bradstreet

freedom, either," he remarks. "Everything was sort of bargained out between myself and the studio, and then once Thomas got involved, he wanted changes to the script as well, which we made. So we knew exactly what movie we were making on the very first day of principal photography. Once we started shooting, we didn't alter the script at all. I insisted on that, actually. I wanted to go into production with the screenplay locked in so that we could execute the script exactly as it was written. And that was a result of months and months of meticulous planning beforehand. I first came to Tampa to do research and scout locations last January

WAR ZONE. Where the Punisher goes, death follows. Armed with a pair of guns (just like in the comics), he can take out two targets at once.



"I was waiting for the right opportunity to come along," Hensleigh remarks. "I had been on so many sets of so many action pictures and performed so many different roles that I felt I had a good understanding of the entire process and felt ready to try my hand at directing." And as a first-time director, did anything surprise him? "Yes. Just how quickly a black thunder cloud can produce rain in South Florida," he laughs. "I mean literally, in any other part of the world what would be about a 20- or 30-minute approach was honestly just about two minutes."

Didn't anyone tell them that the Tampa Bay area is the lightning capital of the world? "Only *after* we committed to filming here," Hurd laughs. "On the first day of shooting, Jonathan literally yelled 'Action!' for the first time and the sky immediately darkened, it began to pour and thunder and lightning filled the skies. We had to scramble for cover."

The chaos that ensued produced some scary moments as well. "Lightning hit the building next door," Arad interjects, "nearly taking out the art department, setting off alarms and knocking the power out." Amazingly enough, though the temperamental and unseasonable storms dogged production throughout the shooting schedule, only one day—that first day of filming—was scrubbed due to the weather. And it's those scenes lost on that very first day which are being shot in and around the AmSouth Building today.

Seeing the Punisher roaming the streets of anything other than a crime-infested metropolis was viewed as a reach for many devotees

NO ESCAPE.
The Punisher walks into theaters April 16. Does he have a bullet with your name on it?



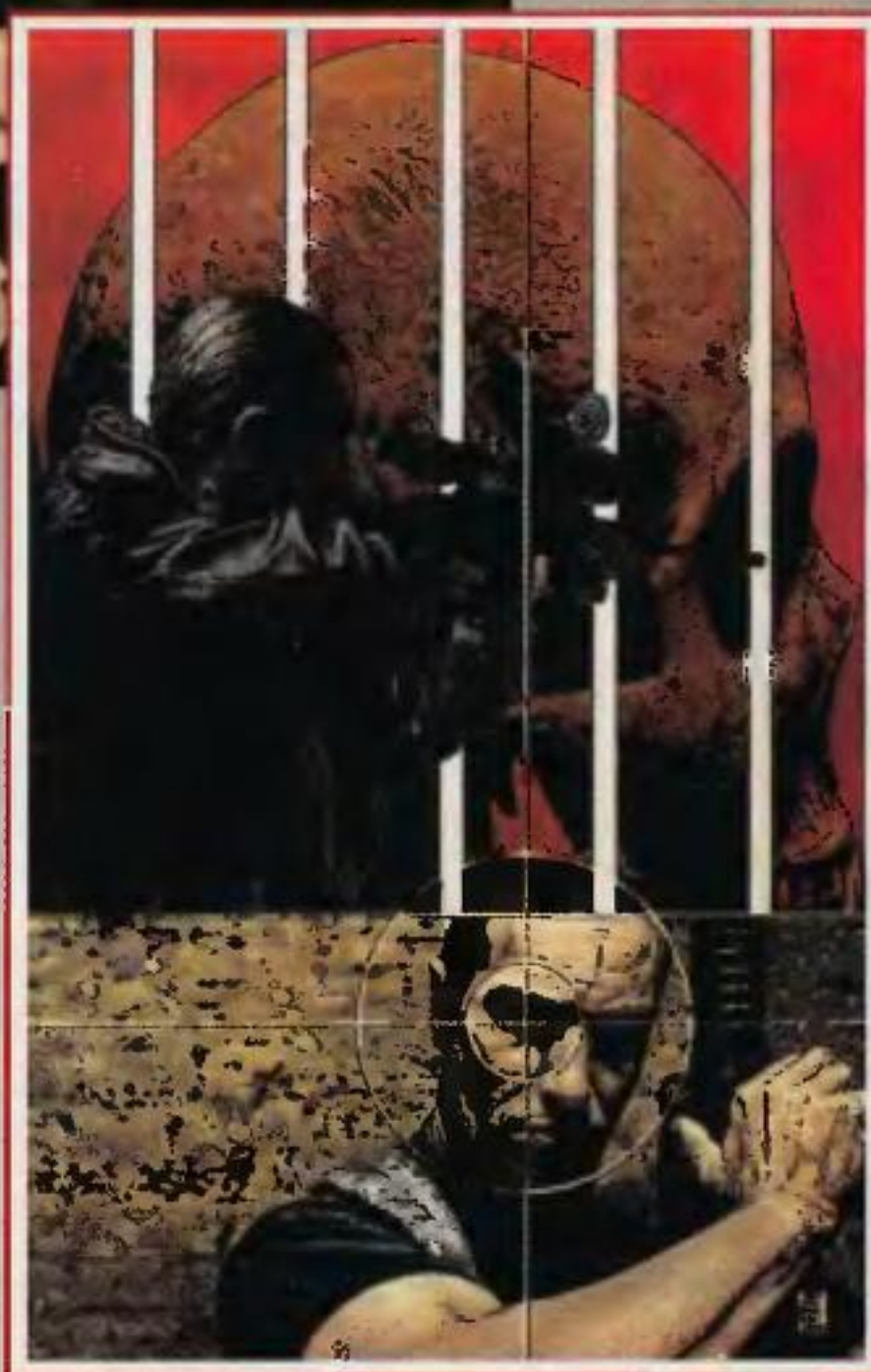
of Marvel's venerable good bad guy. The entire Tampa Bay area, in fact, took plenty of heat when word got out that it and not a more "appropriate" big city like Chicago or New York would be the film's backdrop. Message boards on the Internet went to the mattresses as a kind of fannish gang war erupted. There were unflattering comparisons to more natural northern choices and fears that *The Punisher* might go the way of—shudder—pastels and flamingoes à la *Miami Vice*. Truth be told, though, the city's checkered past and ties to organized crime going back to the '30s make it a far more reasonable choice as the setting for a crime drama than one might initially think.

"Because Howard Saint launders money in the Gulf of Mexico, I considered New Orleans, Biloxi, Mobile, Houston-Galveston and, of course, Tampa," Hensleigh explains. "But there's an element of the story that's set in Puerto Rico, and I couldn't double Houston-Galveston or New Orleans as Puerto Rico. But I certainly can double Tampa as Puerto Rico, and that really swung the vote in favor of this area."

Sequences involving the murder of Castle's family were filmed at Fort De Soto

AN EYE FOR AN EYE.

Making *The Punisher* had its difficulties—especially on the stormy first day of shooting when lightning shuttered the production.



Art: Tim Bradstreet

State Park and Honeymoon Island State Park in neighboring Pinellas County. The rest of the production lensed in and around Tampa's inner city, mostly in the Channelside District near the city's shipping port—the culturally rich Ybor City area, which is reminiscent of New Orleans' French Quarter—the Old Federal Courthouse, the University of South Florida and the city's downtown core.

All these locales represent scenes of crime and punishment, the grim backgrounds of comic-book panels brought to cinematic life by a writer-director fighting to at last make his movie. "*The Punisher* is chock full of really great, genuine moments. Every single frame is *exactly* as I originally envisioned it," Jonathan Hensleigh promises. "I'm very proud of the film, and I think it speaks for itself." ★

Design & Layout: Heiner Feil