

The Road Warrior

Producer Byron Kennedy Talks About The Spectacular Sequel to Mad Max.

By David Everitt

The *Road Warrior* is a futuristic adventure that surpasses even its predecessor *Mad Max* for nightmarish danger and headlong excitement. Although its storyline and tone is very different, *The Road Warrior*, in terms of high-charged thrills, can be described as Australia's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Like *Mad Max*, *The Road Warrior* takes place in a crumbling, anarchic society, devastated by a World War in the Middle East that has destroyed the world's major oil supply. Embittered by the murder of his wife and child, and hardened by his ruthless quest for revenge in his first adventure, *Mad Max* now roams the wastelands, living by his wits as an amoral scavenger. In this terrible new world, the most valuable commodity is gasoline for which men are willing to kill or be killed. Max comes upon a band of vicious, and not to mention very ugly, marauders laying siege to an armed compound that surrounds a makeshift oil rig. Max becomes involved with the desperate people of the compound and eventually decides to help them break out of their trap.

Mad Max was the most financially successful movie to come out of Australia and *The Road Warrior* now seems to be duplicating that phenomenal box office record. The makers of these pictures are now in a position to take on just about any project they desire. The two men who find themselves in this enviable situation are producer Byron Kennedy and director George Miller.

Before forming a partnership with Miller, Kennedy had founded his own filmmaking company at an early age (after graduating from high school) and had been making television commercials and documentaries. In 1971 he gave a lecture at a summer film school at Melbourne University where Miller happened to be a student. The two men met at that point and, according to Kennedy, they "stayed partners ever since."

The close partnership between Kennedy and Miller is based on a common attitude about moviemaking that was very unusual for Australian filmmakers at the time. Kennedy says, "We primarily want to make movies that we would like to have seen as kids. We don't

make movies influenced by peer group pressures or anything like that; we make them from the gut, if you like; make what we want to see, not necessarily what other people want to see." He describes the movies he would have liked to have seen as a kid by saying, "I hated talking in movies. I would walk out of matinees when characters

started talking. I always liked to see action, preferably chases, and strong conflict." Although there are others in the Australian film industry who, like Kennedy and Miller, want to make what Kennedy calls traditional Hollywood narrative movies, the vast majority of Australian filmmakers have very different ideas. This majority, Kennedy says,



Mel Gibson returns as the unstoppable Max, now aided by the boomerang-slinging Feral Kid.



Bruce Spence plays the Gyro Captain, pilot of a makeshift helicopter, who forms an uneasy alliance with the loner Max.

has its "origin in the European tradition of filmmaking, the sort of slow, almost indulgent movies where there's a lot of dialogue, very much talking heads, whereas I'm almost opposed to dialogue in movies. To a great extent I believe movies should be moving images accompanied by sound effects—and dialogue is an annoyance."

Max's most fearsome adversary is the animal-like Wez. On his left wrist he sports a mini-crossbow and on his head a red mohawk.



Another ingredient that accounts for the winning combination of Kennedy and Miller is the dovetailing of their respective moviemaking skills. "Basically," Kennedy reports, "we're comprehensivists. One thing I noticed when I first came to see the industry over here in America was how specialized it was. One guy pushed the dolly around or the camera and that's all he did and he does that all his life and knew more about it than anyone in the world; whereas we came from a filmmaking tradition where we had to do the camerawork, do the editing, even the artwork for the titles. George and I are both the same that way. We're able to mesh and assume certain roles fairly easily without saying I'll take care of this side and you'll take that side. We cross over a hell of a lot and that way we sort of work as one." Kennedy's duties on the *Mad Max* pictures do not fit the stereotypical image of a cigar-smoking producer working out of a lush studio suite. In addition to usual production responsibilities, Kennedy has directed second unit scenes, supervised the laying of the soundtrack, and operated cameras, as well as flying helicopters and performing car stunts.

The first film by Kennedy and Miller to attract widespread attention was a short movie with the intriguing title of "Violence in the Cinema—Part I". Kennedy describes the film as a "tongue-in-cheek satire that was commenting on the violent trend in movies about ten years ago when *Straw Dogs* and *Clockwork Orange* first came on the scene. The violence was handled very explicitly, very gratuitously, but so overly so that it became a joke in itself. In fact, the film was hosted by an actor who was playing the role of a media psychologist; as he was pontificating on the violent trend in films and while he's giving this lecture, there are people coming up and committing various atrocities against him and around



The brutal marauders make use of a wide variety of bizarre weapons.

him as he is continuing to talk, totally oblivious to what's going on." The movie, distributed worldwide, was very successful but, in order to appease some people who didn't quite take the film in the right spirit, signs had to be put up in movie houses warning people that they were about to see something that was horrific and gruesome.

Over a four or five year period, Kennedy and Miller then developed the concept of *Mad Max* from Kennedy's original idea of doing a documentary on car racing to a full blown fictional film about futuristic cops operating along the borders of a horribly disordered society. The experience of making this first feature was very difficult because, says Kennedy, "no one had attempted that kind of film in Australia before. In fact, the overwhelming consensus was that it wouldn't be possible to shoot it. There just weren't the stuntmen, there weren't the experts to do these things." In solving all the problems involved in the extensive action sequences in the picture, Kennedy and Miller strove to make the images as rousing as possible through the dependence on mobile cameras. Kennedy points out, "There's not one shot in either of the *Mad Max* movies where the camera is on the side of the road, panning as vehicles pass. In every shot the camera is actually in the car or traveling with another car. That's our basic underlying philosophy, that the camera must be a participant so that the audience can participate in the action rather than observe them."

In *The Road Warrior*, this participatory action is enlarged in scale and reaches a new level of excitement. There were a few injuries during the making of the picture, but the action is

so fierce and so relentless that one would tend to expect that there had been much more injuries, if not a death or two. Kennedy explains that, to a certain extent, the action scenes were made to seem more dangerous on screen than they were in reality through careful use of film craft. The placement of the camera, the editing, the sound effects, and continuous camera movement all contributed to the illusion of danger. He then adds that another factor in the convincing recklessness of these sequences is "that the Australian stuntmen are so enthusiastic, so keyed, that they're basically prepared to do anything. I don't mean to say that they're not scientific, because most of them come from stock car derbies, auto crash shows. The film industry in Australia wasn't big enough to support a permanent bunch of stuntmen specializing in cars so we had to go to a professional car-crashing circuit to get them and they tend to have different ways of doing things that are more spectacular because of the competitive nature of those auto circuits. They've got new and different stunts that are hard to get from people who are in the movies. I believe, particularly in America, they revert to the Starsky-and-Hutch or Dukes-of-Hazzard way of doing it all the time because it's tried and proven. There are not many new ideas in action movies coming out of America. One of the really encouraging things about Australia is its sort of freshness and the fact that most people in the industry have come from other industries and have brought with them new ideas, new concepts."

Some of the new ideas in stuntwork stem from the fact that Australians do not have the luxury of depending on a lot of elaborate physical effects equipment. Kennedy says, "We don't have the equipment down there to roll cars or propel motorcycles by using mortars, as they're called, or cannons. We still do it all with ramps, and the techniques we use for the motorcycle stuff will literally be the actual rider doing it himself. So the technique that we used was to literally stage the sequence as a reality and rely on the skill of the stuntman and the camera angle to enhance it. In some instances we used dummies, but most times the actual person was driving the car—there's no remote-control cars or anything like

Humungus, the marauder chieftain.





Max and the Feral Kid under attack in the cab of a speeding truck.



In a desperate moment, the battered Max relies on his deadly shotgun side-arm.



For defying an order from Humungus, Wez is put on a leash until the final assault erupts.

that—all those major crashes and impact effects were either someone driving the truck and doing the stunt or someone on the motorcycle or in the automobile."

The Warner Brothers distribution plans for *The Road Warrior* seem to indicate that the movie has a good chance of making a lot of money in this country, unlike the first *Mad Max* film which was a huge success everywhere else but the United States. Kennedy feels that the problem with the release of his first feature in America was corporate confusion. The picture was sold to American International Pictures which was taken over by Filmways just three months before the movie was to be released. "We believe," says Kennedy "in the subsequent executive shuffle that went on, the film probably wasn't given the best opportunities it would have had, which generally seems to happen when companies change management." The Warner Brothers release pattern for *The Road Warrior*, on the other hand, which begins on May 18, is described by Kennedy as "excellent."

Now that he and Miller have established themselves as heavyweight moneymakers, many options are undoubtedly open to them. One option that Kennedy is not particularly interested in is moving his base of operations to Hollywood. Although he is interested in making Hollywood-style narrative movies, he doesn't look upon Los Angeles as necessarily the best place to make such films. "In fact," he comments, "I think the healthy thing to do is to move out of Hollywood. It's such an incestuous town; also it's not a town really run by production people."

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During the climactic chase, the marauders leap from their vehicles onto Max's fortified truck to finish off the ex-cop.

