

RICHARD KIEL

In conversation with the star of *Moonraker* and *The Humanoid*

Interview by Tony Crawley



Above: Richard Kiel, as Jaws, poses with Blanche Ravalec (who plays Dolly) on the set of the new Bond epic, *Moonraker* (1979).
Left: Jaws gets to the foot of the matter in this aerobatic sequence.

Richard Kiel is a pain in the neck. Looking up at him for an hour or so plays sheer havoc with the neck muscles. He's rather tall, you see. Even when he's sitting down, he's tall. Ultra tall.

He's seated now, finishing lunch in Kensington. The wine bottles are open. He doesn't have to use his steel teeth. But seated, he's the same height as the waiters buzzing by with open mouths. Like me, they're trying not to stare. But he does take some getting used to. Richard Kiel is used to people trying to get used to Richard Kiel.

He measures in at 7ft 2ins. A ceiling brusher, if ever there was one. *Time* magazine, being forever more precise, not to say fussy, says he's 7ft 1½ins. But what's a quarter-inch between friends. Or among giants. Suffice is to say, if Kiel got together with Peter (*Star Wars*' Chewbacca) Mayhew, you'd hardly notice any difference in height, if indeed there is one. Then again, if he did get together with Mayhew, traffic would shudder to a halt and buildings would rattle in their wake.

Richard Kiel weighs around 315 pounds. He wears size 17 shoes and a 19-inch collar. "It gives you a forced motivation," he remarks about his enormous height. "I'm aiming for success in movies to support my life style."

If acting falls through for Kiel he has a sideline career to fall back on. Real estate. He doesn't risk becoming unemployed. His frame couldn't take it. "I tried it once," he remarks.

Starburst: Having lately completed two sf movies—two-and-a-half, counting the high space quotient of *Moonraker*—I wonder what interest you might have in science fiction, per se.

Kiel: I love it. I have nothing against it. I'd like to do other things as well, though. Like *Force Ten From Navarone*, and more comedy. I did a family-type comedy in the States. But it's true, I've done plenty of science fiction, right back to *The Human Duplicators* in 1964. And I've written science fiction, in fact. Such as . . .

"I was under contract to play *The Hulk*. But I had other things I wanted to do."

I write short sf stories. One was called *Strange Worlds Within*, about the potential infinity within the atom. It dealt with Einstein's mathematical theories; the idea that if you go far enough in one direction, you'll end up back where you started from. Plus the fact that when I went to school, the atom was composed of three particles of matter: the electron, the proton and the neutron. Now, there's hundreds and hundreds and hundreds! And they all have elliptical orbits of the North and South Poles, even though they travel at the speed of light. That's not unlike the universe and the galaxies and our earth going 400,000,000 miles in a year. Einstein said that if you were going close to the speed of light,

"It sure didn't work out. They don't pay enough for a man my size to eat, dress . . . just to live!"

He is, of course, a natural for space fantasy material. But not for him the role behind a mask—like Chewbacca, for instance. Or, indeed, *The Incredible Hulk*—although he was the first choice for the tv series. He's an actor, tried and tested, and therefore wishes to use his own face.

One of his earlier films was the well-intentioned but rather poorly finished sf offering from the brothers Woolner: *The Human Duplicators*. His new entries are *The Phoenix*, made, would you believe, in Taiwan—and Italy's latest *Star Wars* rip-off, *The Humanoid*. Earlier this year we saw him off fantasy duty in *Force 10 From Navarone*, which co-starred Han Solo himself, Harrison Ford.

Before landing on his size 17 feet in acting—Richard took off in producer William (Cannon) Conrad's tv series, *Klondike*—he had the usual assortment of odd jobs. He was a washing-machine repair man once, though how he fitted under the kitchen sink takes some explaining.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, on September 13, 1939, he first moved to Los Angeles with his folks aged eight. By twelve he had reached almost his present height and was, sure enough, a wiz in his school's basketball team. He paid his acting dues in the theatre, but to start with, his height was against him on the screen—the usual array of hoods, dumbbucks, toughs and lumbering dementia in such tv shows as *The*

Rifleman, *Gilligan's Island*, *I Spy* and *Barbary Coast*. "Having played giants, psychopathic killers, retarded customers many times, I've run into the situation where the directors think I'm really like that. And the general public, through miscasting or whatever, seems to think he guy has got to be a dullard. A big dummy.

"Of course it upsets me. I'm blessed with a pretty good aptitude. I could read *Readers' Digest* when I was five. So I used to react when directors said they wouldn't ask me to do anything 'too difficult'. Now I see the funny side of it. I tell them: Look, I can walk and talk. If you want me to do something, just ask . . . though I realise it'll be a big surprise to you!"

Kiel prefers intelligent directors. Top of his list—the current 007 boss, Lewis Gilbert. "He can see that I'm a human being." It wasn't always that way. His first film, *Eegah*, in 1961, had Kiel playing . . . a cave man.

Since when he's completed about twenty features including Otto Preminger's *Skiddoo*, Robert Aldrich's *The Mean Machine* (he was a fellow convict of Bert Reynolds), and he had just completed the thriller, *The Silver Streak* with Gene Wilder when he got the call to glory—the world's favourite villain, Jaws.

Lunch over, I rode to Heathrow with Kiel for his only interview of his twelve-hour trip—with *Starburst*, what else? He talked about space and he talked about fiction. He also explained why he decided not to become *The Incredible Hulk*.



Richard Kiel as he appears in the title role of *The Humanoid* (1979).

you'd appear to someone not going that fast, to be infinitesimal in size; yet inside the space craft, of whatever, you'd appear normal size to the people with you. So who knows? And I just took it from there. . . .

I have a feeling you've turned down some sf or fantasy work, though. *The Incredible Hulk*, for example. Surely you were offered that series?

Well, yes, I was under contract to do

The Hulk. But I had some other things I wanted to do. First of all, I'm a family man. Then, I'm an actor. And the movie business is a business. I've been an actor for almost 19 years. I think *The Hulk* is wonderful. My two kids love it. But it's not my thing. American television is a grind! But I was going to do it, because of the money, you know. For the family. I left by mutual agreement. Marvel Comics wanted a guy with more muscles, and I think it worked out to everyone's benefit. You mean you didn't want to turn green every week on tv, hmm?

"*The Phoenix* is a special *Sinbad*-type film. Fantasy for all the family."

I don't have any interest in playing somebody behind a mask. I like to make people cry, make people laugh, make people afraid, make people sad. Every actor has a big ego, of course, and part of the enjoyment of acting is not being Jaws, but being Richard Kiel playing Jaws. When you get into a part where you lose your identity completely, that isn't any fun. Not for me. For some people, it's fine. For the guy doing *The Hulk*, Lou Ferrigno, it's great, I'm sure. He's new. So this can only be a very gratifying experience for him. But it's not your thing, as you say? No, it's not for me. I've worked in legitimate theatre, live television, radio. I've written and directed, taken voice lessons,

dramatic lessons, all kinds of things. None of which come into working in a role like **The Hulk** . . . and particularly not on television. In American television, you're looking at a 16-17 hour day. I know, I've done it. Now, I'm in a position where I'm getting films where we work a normal workday, then we go home and I can be with my family. They also take *time* in films, to do things properly. As long as those kind of parts keep coming in, why do the other thing?

Were you offered the films of Conan or Thongor?

I have a very close rapport with my agent. He's been with me since the beginning. He knows what I want to do. He doesn't even tell me about any offers for things I wouldn't want to do. He knows that, for me, the play's the thing. Naturally, if I wasn't doing anything, he might start looking at such offers differently. As of now, we're looking for more sensitive roles, with all the facets of the emotions. A *Cuckoo's Nest*, say. We're in a great time for actors like me. You don't have to look like Robert Redford anymore, or Dustin Hoffman, Alan Arkin and the guy that did *Taxi Driver*, De Niro. Films now can have different types of people in them. Sometimes it makes them more interesting.

"The Humanoid is a very charming, good story that nobody can mess up."

Is that why you're in The Phoenix—made in Taiwan, of all places.

I guess they wanted to capitalise on the Bond . . . They certainly wanted me to make it very, very badly.

I can see the Bond connection: you play Steel Hands, right?

But when I got down there they wanted me to wear steel teeth . . . ! I just told them: "Wait a minute, guys, I can't do that, you know." We shot it in Taiwan. With wooden cameras. I'm not kidding . . . ! A big part and a lot of work. They got 14 months work out of me in two weeks. Really incredible. I had to work hardest on staying alive—stopping them doing all the stunts with real swords.

What's the film about?

Ah! I play the protagonist. Can you imagine a 7ft 2ins houseboy with a sword and a top-knot thing on my head? And I think he's taken over by women's libbers . . . or something. I really don't know. They didn't have a script in English. All I can say is that it helped me buy my house.

How do you cope without an English script?
I managed. My feeling was that most Oriental films don't make the American market, unless they're quite good. My agent and I rationalised that if this turned out bad, well, it would never show up.

It couldn't harm you, then?



I'm not knocking it. I'm sure it will be a very interesting film. It's not that I'm not proud of it or anything. It was interesting to work on, and I feel it's a special Sinbad-type film. Fantasy for all the family. Probably it will run in the summertime in America as a children's programme—with a Disney or a Spiderman movie.

Italy's The Humanoid, therefore, must rate as a much better production?

Oh yeah . . . ! **The Humanoid** is a \$5-million film. It's very charming, a good story that nobody can mess up. It's such a strong story: a robodog and a little boy. . . . The **Wizard of Oz** in outer space. Kind of what **Star Wars** might have been.

"Might have been"? I thought that was Oz, exactly.

I'm not really comparing the two films. I'm just saying **The Humanoid** has maybe a stronger storyline than **Star Wars**.

Every new sf film claims that.

The Humanoid's strength is not based on special effects alone. The effects are there. They're done by some of the people who did **Superman** and **Star Wars**. They spent a lot of money on them, but they're not

relying on the effects. Here's where you have a good story, surrounded by special effects, rather than the effects being the entire film.

Your title role of Golob, sounds at first, more deadly than Jaws. But you're not a robovillain, all steel from head to toe,

"The general public has come to think that the big guy has to be a dummy!"

I understand. You start off as a reasonably average chap and you're zapped into being this humanoid creature.

Yeah, he's victimised. I'm a protagonist again. . . .

With your build, what else?

Golob is a space sailor, just doing his job up there in outer space, with a robodog to keep him company. He has this big brother image: not the 1984 image, more like any kid's big brother. When he's changed, his world isn't totally taken from him. The leaders of his world remove



Left: Golob (Richard Kiel) matches his strength against a futuristic Iron Maiden to save the life of Barbara (Corinne Clery) in the Italian Space Opera *The Humanoid* (1979). Below: Kiel poses for a *Jaws* publicity picture.



the sensors implanted in his wrist by the villain—the control—and then Golob is on their side and ends up being a major factor in overthrowing the evil forces.

He even sacrifices himself in the end, to save them, doesn't he?

Not now. We changed that. It ends now with a full sunset shot, walking off to the sequel bit. It's another family film, really. It has fantasy and everything, and there's a kind of subtle romance between Corinne Clery and myself. At the end, I think you'll feel that maybe Golob isn't going to be so much of a loner. He's found friends. It's a very good part for me.

*And for another alumnus from both *The Spy Who Loved Me* and *Force Ten From Navarone*...*

Yeah, Barbara Bach plays the evil one, Lady Agatha. She chose the more dramatic of the two female roles. It required more acting than just being another beautiful heroine again.

Who took over Donald Pleasance's role of the inevitable power-crazed villain?

Arthur Kennedy. He's very good.

You sound high on the film. Yet Italian

movies, and particularly those of an *sf* nature—**Starcrash**, for instance—can be one hell of a mess during shooting.

Absolutely! The big difference here was not my control, nor Arthur Kennedy's, nor anyone's in the cast. It was the Titanus company's interest in getting into the English-speaking market. It's difficult to make a film just for Italy these days and still make any return (or break even) on the original investment. So this film was pre-sold to a major television network in America, it was pre-sold to Columbia for European release and to American-International in the States. And that meant a lot of conditions. It was not to be a typically spaghetti **Star Wars**. It had to have a quality that the American and English audiences expect.

And has it?

I've seen some of the film and, again, it's not an effects movie. The effects are just there. This is a story. It's about people. And it happens to take place in the future. So it needs special effects to achieve that look, and it looks pretty good. We had some difficulties. For instance, we tried to shoot it with direct sound, which is a departure for the Italians, who post-synch all the dialogue in their films, as you probably know. Very difficult to shoot direct sound. You tell an Italian that he can't make a noise on the set and he doesn't understand.

You mention your control before... Can you explain that?

My conditions were having total script approval. But I'm not an unreasonable person, so I didn't have any problems in that area. The director, George B. Lewis (his real name, by the way, is Aldo Lado) is keen on becoming a world-wide director, not just another Italian film-maker. When I gave him a four-page synopsis of my feelings towards my character of Golob, he jumped up and down with joy. There were a lot of ideas he hadn't considered, some of these sparked him off to other ideas—and they fitted in with what I had in mind. We got on fine. He was just delighted that, you know, I cared.

Apart from the Bonds, do you have a particular favourite among your films?

The Human Duplicators was a good role. It could—it should!—have been much

better movie. But I don't think the people set out to make a **Day The Earth Stood Still**. They set out to make money.

Who are "they"?

The Woolner brothers, Murray and David Woolner. They didn't take the care it needed. There was a lot of miscasting and things like that.

*A British critic said it had all the panache of Roger Corman re-making **Metropolis**, minus cohesion and coherence. Your character, Kolos, dropping in from an alien galaxy, started cloning everyone in sight. I seem to remember: George Nader and company.*

Hmm. I preferred the other side of the visitor. That gave me an opportunity to be sensitive. I had a relationship with the blind girl in it, Dolores Faith.

"I write short sf stories. One was called *Strange Worlds Within*, about the potential infinity within the atom."

Restoring her sight before departing, defeated and obviously returning home to destruction as a failure.

I liked the role. But like I say, the film should have been better. It was good practise for me, put it that way.

*So was **The Spy Who Loved Me**, a full thirteen years later. All your new films are a direct result of your immense triumph as **Jaws**. How did you net that part?*

Because of a television series in America, which came about because of a film I did with Burt Reynolds: **The Mean Machine** (US title: **The Longest Yard**). They were the small steps that led to **Jaws**. **Barbary Coast** was just another unsuccessful tv series sold to Britain...! We made only thirteen weeks of it. Westerns just weren't in and we had a lot of competition on the other networks. You know, over there you can have 11,000,000 people watching and it's not enough—18,000,000 is the bottom line! It's all numbers. Even the actors have ratings.

You're joking?

No. They're called TVQ—television quotients. Alan Alda, of **MASH**, has been leading the list of 365 names for years!

They put your name into a computer to decide if they'll cast you. It's all based on your commercial appeal. And I couldn't even get an interview for **Barbary Coast**. Who knows why? Some political or financial thing with the casting people, or my TVQ didn't measure up, I don't know. I eventually sent a registered letter to the producer asking to be seen, feeling I was right for the show. His secretary had seen **The Mean Machine** and I think she persuaded him to see me. So I did the series, all thirteen weeks. BBC, I think, bought it here and Lewis Gilbert's continuity script supervisor saw it, mentioned me to him, suggesting that he and Cubby Broccoli should see me for **Jaws**. That's how I got it.

Did you see right off what the role might do for you?

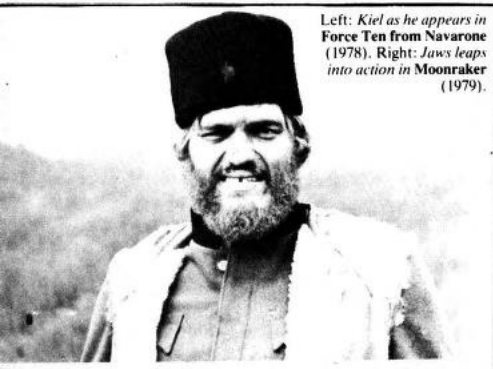
I was a little frightened of it to start with. It has all the ingredients for a cartoon character. It could have been just a little too much... I met with Cubby, we had lunch, and I told him I'd like to bring more of Richard Kiel into the part. Rather than play a stone-faced killer, I wanted some humour, humanism, perseverance, to give **Jaws** a child-like quality, that made him forgivable no matter what he did. The kind of things that Boris Karloff brought to the original Frankenstein monster.

It sure worked. Though my little daughter will never forgive you for terrifying her!

I've seen that **Bond** film in about thirty countries. I've yet to see the audience not applaud and cheer **Jaws**. They shot two endings, you know. They didn't know what to do with him. It was Lewis Gilbert who had his hand on it more than I did. I tried to do something different, but I never realised how important it was to do a **Bond** film.

*Well, until you came along it was more usually the girls who made good out of an 007 caper. Now you're back again in **Moonraker**—and on **Bond's** side this time? That's right. I have a girlfriend as well. But I'd rather not talk too much about **Moonraker**. There's too many surprises in it. Let's just say the implication is that next time we see **Jaws**, he'll be pushing a baby carriage.*

With his teeth, you mean!



Left: Kiel as he appears in **Force Ten from Navarone** (1978). Right: **Jaws** leaps into action in **Moonraker** (1979).

