



A U S T R A L I A

Dr. George Miller

Mephisto in a polka-dot tie

by Barbara Samuels

Wicked isn't the word. GEO Magazine's November cover boy beamed out from a smouldering background like some kind of cherubic demon, Mephistopheles in a polka dot tie. And the prop was a nice touch: a visor encasing his right hand looks like the latest in S&M headgear. But this grin set the dominant tone. *Audacious.*

So who better to front a story on the Australian movie boom? This, after all, is the guy whose first feature blew a hole through that string of well-mannered period pictures, whose second was elevated to art film status in nothing flat. The former MD whose two-picture track record proved enough for Steven Spielberg to offer him a segment of the upcoming *Twilight Zone*. The man whose dexterity in staging a chase sequence almost redefines the concept of the 'moving' picture. Mad Max's Daddy.

It's all very lofty, and George Miller is anything but. The commercial success of *The Road Warrior* has sent his market value soaring, but this gently handsome 36-year-old remains unaffected by the noise and committed to what he sees as the primary purpose of the film exercise: "telling the story." It's been suggested that the response generated by the *Max* saga stems less from the story than the crackerjack execution, but Miller doesn't buy it. His tale of a loner adrift in a hostile landscape is something he consciously fashioned—second-time round—on the framework of comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell's "Adventure of the Hero", a compendium of international myth and legend with a Jungian basis. The idea that Max's tale struck some kind of unconscious chord in international audiences offered Miller both an explanation for the first film's phenomenal success abroad (excluding North America: it was dubbed and then buried by the distributor) and a narrative line for the second.

"I think one of the functions of any kind of storytelling is to contribute experience," he says now. "To let us confront experience that we don't understand or wouldn't normally have. The urge to see these kinds of stories or to tell them comes from somewhere other than the intellect, and that's what Campbell's talking about." He views filmmaking as a perfect medium for the myths, since "I'm one of those people who believes that films are 'public



● Visual electroshock as plied by Mad Max Miller and Mel Gibson in *The Road Warrior*

dreams', a shared audience response. They're something we experience collectively when we sit in a dark place and reproduce a kind of dream state. A film doesn't exist on the screen: the drama happens in the minds and bodies of the audience."

At Miller's hands, the minds and bodies of *Road Warrior* audiences are subjected to a kind of visual electro-

shock, a cinematic dynamism so overwhelming that it virtually kicks the debate over the picture's 'intellectual' merits right out of the arena. To chart Max's journey across this acrid no-man's land where petrol is the life force and the car an extension of the human nervous system, he held onto the basic movie tools and went the limit. It's a startling choice in an era when people



● Bruce Spence as the Gyro Captain fights off the marauding hordes

are shooting half their films against blue screens and then marrying actors and effects in the lab—it's raw movie craft, and it works. This is a literal 'road picture' with a dazzling sense of immediacy; the gritty terrain with its ribbons of asphalt and that blinding blend of speed and colour are transmitted 'first generation' with all their textures intact. It elicits a genuine gut response, a sense of proximity and involvement that you just can't get from a collection of mattes and opticals. Miller's power source here is his film language, and it's the angles, composition, lighting and nifty, flash-frame editing that make *The Road Warrior* crackle with real stylistic audacity.

The showpiece segment is a climactic, thirteen-minute chase sequence, an exhilarating textbook on the kind of montage moviemaking that is now Miller's trademark. He claims a fascination with the chase format because "when you look at it, it's pure, primitive cinema. None of that stuff ever happens; it's just little bits of film put together to create that illusion. All the old Mack Sennet-Harold Lloyd-Buster Keaton material: pure, visual cinema. And that's why the chase is so exciting, particularly when you're starting off as a filmmaker. You've got the compulsion for it because you're trying to understand precisely what it is."

With its echoes of movies past (Miller acknowledges his debt to both the western genre and the samurai film tradition) and its numbing new vision, the picture is really a celebration of film culture and form at their purest. And it's so gleefully controlled that he even jimmies with the aspect ratio; when a black and white academy frame explodes into anamorphic colour at the opening, you're pulled into the sheer energy of the thing at cyclone speed. If all that's not enough, the movie's beautifully acted and wickedly funny to boot.

It's also a film fueled by that audiovisual chemistry of violence, a virtual ballet of cartoon stunts and impossible death. And although details of the carnage are relatively spare (*Mad Max* was an all-round rougher movie, and there's a sense of comparative restraint here), *The Road Warrior* finds its leitmotif in that jagged explosion of metal and flesh. That fact has inevitably opened the floodgates on the same moral debate over cause and effect that dogged Walter Hill's *The Warriors* and Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*, and Miller readily admits he's got no pat response to it.

"I think there are problems," he re-

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flects. "I think violence and aggression in our society are a little bit like love and death; things we don't understand all that well. There's no way a filmmaker can answer that question, except perhaps to look at statistics and note that the level of violence or violent death tends to remain fairly constant. You can't determine whether what you produce is causal or even *cathartic*. Because you always have to face the idea that people who are going to act out their violence would probably do so anyway, regardless of the provocation." But he's distinctly uncomfortable with any attempt to intellectualize the problem. "You go back to Campbell, and you find this recurring need to confront the nightmare side, the dark side of ourselves. And we shouldn't try to understand it in a purely intellectual fashion, because it comes from somewhere else. I don't think you can just look at an individual response, either. A lot of things become much more explainable in terms of the collective; the individual response is only important to the individual. That's why I always try to imagine an audience of about a hundred people, even inside the camera."

Due to the film's unique status as the most obviously 'commercial' of the big Australian movies, that audience—numbering well into the millions—is a remarkably varied one. Miller is aware of the reasons, and finds one of them slightly misdirected: he doesn't view *The Road Warrior* as inherently Australian. "It's a film that exists in film culture. It doesn't belong in Australia—it's set there, and it doesn't attempt to hide the fact, but it doesn't belong to Australian culture. It belongs to a post-apocalyptic heroic fantasy which is shared by all cultures. It's been accorded a little too much attention as an 'art movie', which it really isn't. Australian movies have that cachet at the moment, and a lot of people went to the picture simply because it was Australian. It wasn't quite what they expected."

But then, neither is George Miller.

The medical background has proved invaluable to journalists and industry folk alike, who use the "Dr." prefix to distinguish him from his namesake and countryman of *Man from Snowy River* fame. And it's also provoked a recurring question: why the jump from medicine to movies?

"Just a fascination with film," he admits. "When I was growing up (in Chinchilla, Queensland, and then in Sydney), I guess I served a kind of 'invisible apprenticeship'; going to films, drawing cartoons, reading all the comics. And when I went to medical school with my twin brother and we sat in the big lectures together, I found that his notes were a lot better than mine. So every morning for almost three years, I'd go to the movies and he'd get the notes. I'd turn up for practical classes in the afternoon."

He had a chance to finally try his hand at the medium when his younger brother (enrolled in architecture at the same university) entered a film competition. George came in on the project, and the siblings' one-minute effort won the prize—enrollment in a one-month film workshop in Melbourne. The experience was a crucial one: it linked Miller up with his producer and business partner Byron Kennedy, and effectively decided his future. But he left his options open by serving a two-year stint in a hospital,

a move that enabled him to register as a doctor. Holidays and weekends were devoted to filmmaking. "That was when the industry started to get subsidized, so there were a lot of grant films being made. Always something you could work on for free. It was a small, 'cottage' affair."

A short collaborative effort between Kennedy and Miller entitled *Violence in the Cinema* picked up some festival prizes and led to a distribution offer. "When we heard the word 'distribution', I honestly didn't know what that meant. When we found out, we began to realize what feature films were all about, and decided to go one." Between the decision and *Mad Max* came a short (*The Devil in Evening Dress*) and bits and pieces of work on other people's documentaries. "But most of the learning was theoretical. And that's why the first film was so terrible to shoot."

Miller claims he wouldn't necessarily take that kind of gargantuan leap now, "but that's what was happening in Australia then." On a budget of \$350,000 and more nerve than know-how, the young filmmakers barreled ahead. Straight into anamorphic. "We couldn't afford Panavision, but there were some old TODD-AO lenses that someone in Australia had bought for a commercial, so we were able to hire them at a very cheap rate. And then we cut the film on a 16mm black & white reduction print. I wouldn't do that again."

The money problems were compounded by sheer bad luck. Miller was forced to recast the female lead when the original actress broke her leg in a car accident en route to the set. In the middle of post-production, they ran out of cash and lost their editor: Byron became the sound editor, and George cut the picture. And the glut of Australian films on the market delayed *Max*'s release by a year—a full twelve months to confront the mistakes.

"It was a wonderful learning experience to cut around problems, to try to salvage things. And it's then that you realize how the poison sets in at the scripting stage. You can usually look back—apart from organizational mess-ups—and find that if you don't face your problems in the script, you face them on set, and if you don't face them on set, you face them in post-production, and if

● Kjell Nilsson as The Humungus



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you don't lick them in post-production, the audience has to lick them for you. Then you're in *real* trouble."

He remains convinced that the screenplay is the core of the process, and takes particular pride in the work he did with Terry Hayes and Brian Hannant on *The Road Warrior*. "The film is literally the first cut. We were so pressed for post-production time (nine weeks) that we had to cut reel by reel and freeze the reels as they came. We were working in five editing rooms, and I was bouncing from one to the other. Then we had to lay sound and score to them, and mix without seeing the finished film, which is absolutely terrifying. But there was very intricate work done in the screenplay; the spine was locked in from the very beginning. Had we been faced with that kind of post-production scramble on *Mad Max*, it would have been a total disaster."

For a man who had built his reputation on a couple of widescreen 'pop culture' movies, his next move was somewhat of a surprise. He turned to a purely Australian subject and to a different medium; *The Dismissal* is a six-part TV series on the fall from power of Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. Kennedy Miller Entertainment put the project together with Terry Hayes producing, and Miller himself directed one episode. The series has garnered word-of-mouth raves in advance of its national screening. A principal attraction for Miller was his view of Whitlam as "a classical tragic hero," but the element of historical perspective also played a part. "The crisis tore the country apart; it put us into a kind of constitutional twilight zone. The governor-general invoked a law that the monarchy of England hadn't used for two hundred years (and fired the Prime Minister). It was a very arbitrary thing, and, ultimately, very tragic for Australia. I think the value of the TV series is how well it makes people understand what happened."

Miller's current Hollywood involvement in Spielberg's *The Twilight Zone* underlines the concern (voiced by Americans, often as not) that the Australian filmmakers may well lose their sense of national self to the lure of Hollywood. It's not a fear he shares. Now wrapping post-production on his 20-minute segment, he regards his work in the States as "a very enjoyable experience. I didn't have the responsibility of a whole feature, and it didn't take two or three years out of my life. It was like making a student film inside the studio system." Inundated with nightmare stories about that very system and its blasé crews, he found his two-week shoot "quite the opposite of what I'd expected. A lot of the crew were from outside, very young, and they mixed well with the best of the crews here. I couldn't have imagined a better group."

The U.S. experience also reinforced one of his stronger instincts: he's a passionate believer in the collaborative aspect of filmmaking, and he saw that sentiment echoed in the style of Steven Spielberg. "He's happy to be entirely

collaborative. He's got such confidence that he doesn't have to protect anything. He's much freer with what he does, so there's no adversary relationship with his people."

Miller's situation back in Australia is much the same story, and accounts in good part for his decision to return—despite a tempting offer in the States. He's not yet willing to see himself as a "director for hire", mainly because "I'm still in very much of a learning situation. That's why I'd like to keep making films in the same way we've been doing—essentially independent. We do the financing, the writing, the direction, and get intimately involved in the distribution. Film is very much an organic process, and the more of a 'specialist' anyone becomes, the more they're doomed to failure. As filmmakers; not necessarily in terms of a career. If you're just a writer, you've got less of an understanding of the process than if you were a writer/director, or a writer/editor. And it's important to have that understanding because the process is changing daily."

He returns at a critical juncture for the Australian industry, and while supportive of the principal of government subsidy ("There wouldn't be an industry without it"), he shares the general concern over events of the past two years. "There's always that terrible mixture between the business and the craft of making films. It's always the same story. You go from the 'cottage industry' and start evolving. And once you mature, with all the advantages that brings, you also get the massive disadvantages. Institutionalized adversary relationships, people who realize you can make a good living from films. Everyone kept saying: 'We've got to avoid what the Canadians did, and exactly the same thing is happening'."

His own immediate plans? To continue work on two scripts postponed by the rapid-fire succession of film projects the partners have undertaken. And to hold onto that singular, primary purpose in the face of a tricky domestic situation.

"Look," he says, "they're all important: the money, the financing, the careers. But when one of them becomes even slightly more important than that desperate, passionate need to tell that story, then you're in real trouble." ●

● Mel Gibson as Mad Max

