

Kung Fu

TV Series Flashback:

Behind the Scenes With David Carradine
("Kwai Chang Caine")

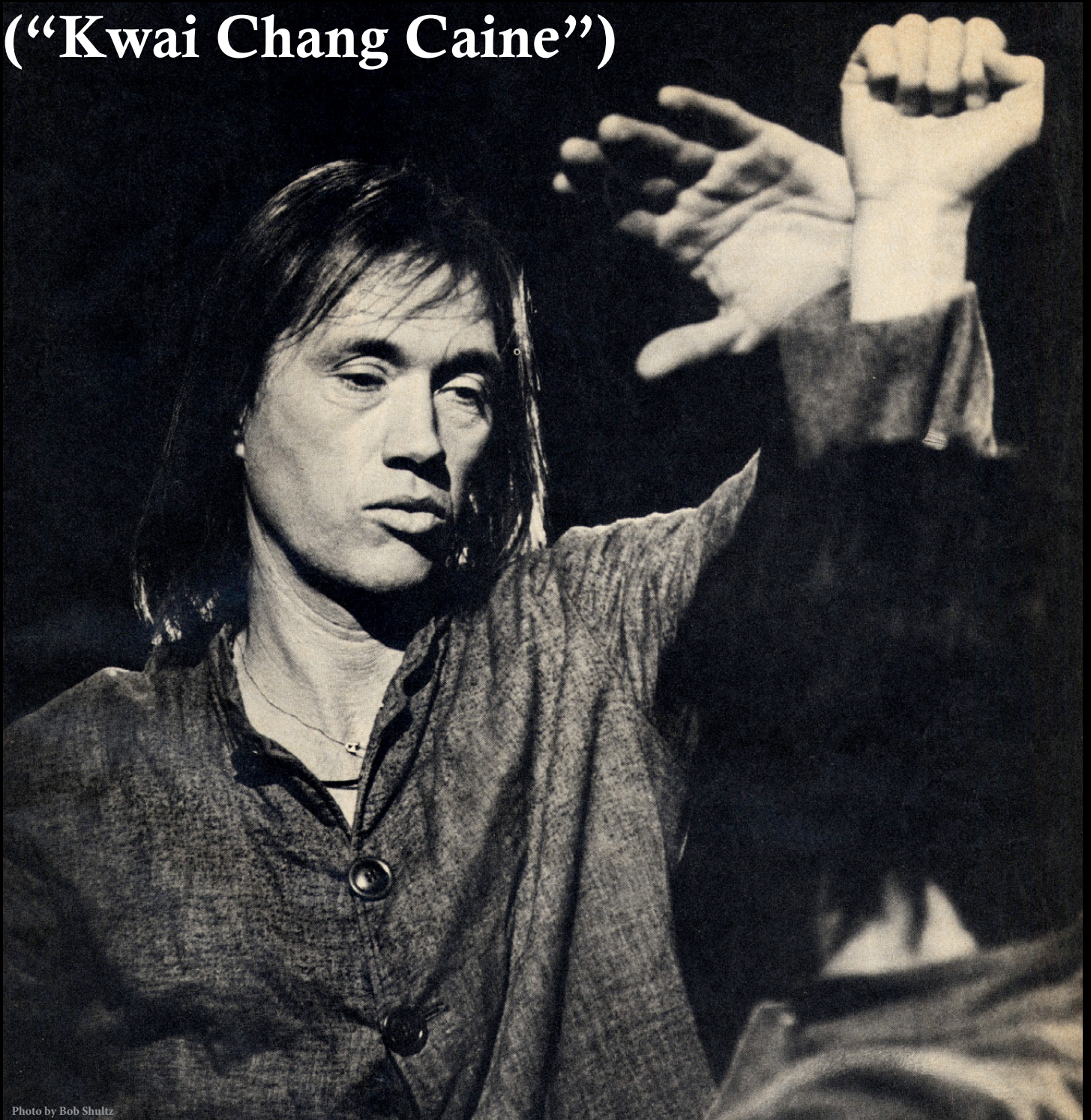


Photo by Bob Shultz

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By RICK SHIVELY

"YAAAWN . . . Hey," yells a lighting man from his perch atop the rafters of a pseudo barn sitting in a corner of the mammoth "Kung Fu" sound stage at Warner Bros. film studios, "Is it true you get sleepy just before you freeze to death?" A few of the crew members within ear shot chuckle goodnaturedly at the comment then turn away, burrowing their hands a little deeper into their coat pockets and shivering against the damp chill not yet melted off by the mid-morning California sun.

Within the confines of the set itself—a cutaway version of the interior of a barn about the size of a living room—a half-dozen actors, including the series' star, David Carradine, and that episode's guest star, Barry Sullivan, stand around in Western costume. Occupying themselves during a lull in rehearsal, some make small talk or just stand idly by while others run through their marks with exaggerated motions.

On the right side of the set, a horse skitters nervously. The handler moves quickly, and, with the practiced ease of a man who knows how to work with temperamental actors, he pats him consolingly on the rump and whispers soothingly in his ear. Satisfied, the horse resumes his placid, bored expression and haughtily leaves the lesser players to their ruminations.

Clustered in front of the set, the crew members mill around, watch the actors run through rehearsal, tell jokes, or, like good employees everywhere, complain about the working conditions and the lack of intelligence on the part of all supervisory personnel.

As the rehearsal goes on, the actors run through a fight scene over and over again, each time adding something new or throwing something out. In addition to the actors, the director and camera crew interrupt occasionally to make sure camera angles are going to work properly. And, of course, Kam Yuen, the kung-fu stylist who's the martial arts advisor on the program, moves in every now and then to correct Carradine on the execution of a kick or a move.

Finally, the director tells everyone to take a break and the whole crowd gratefully heads for the door and the welcoming warmth of the sun. But Carradine, seemingly unperturbed by the cold, continues to wander around for a few minutes in his bare feet. "Christ, I don't know how he can stand it," says one crew member gesturing with undisguised awe at Carradine's unfrocked tootsies, "I'd come down with pneumonia if I ran around like that."

Eventually, Carradine meanders out into the street and encounters a nautical looking character sitting on the costume truck whittling on a large piece of wood. The man tells him that he had known his father, John Carradine, years before and had once traced the origin of the family name back to Italy. Carradine—despite his reputation for unabashed candor sometimes bordering on the impolite—graced the man with a warm smile and spent several minutes chatting amiably with him before heading off to his dressing room.

A tall, lanky man, Carradine moves with a kind of easy lope that eats up an awful lot of geography at an incredible pace. Like his television character Caine, he presents such a low key physical presence he doesn't look like he's expending much effort at all. But you soon find yourself huffing and puffing and tagging along like a clumsy puppy if you try to squeeze a conversation out of him on the run.

THE "NATURAL" WAY

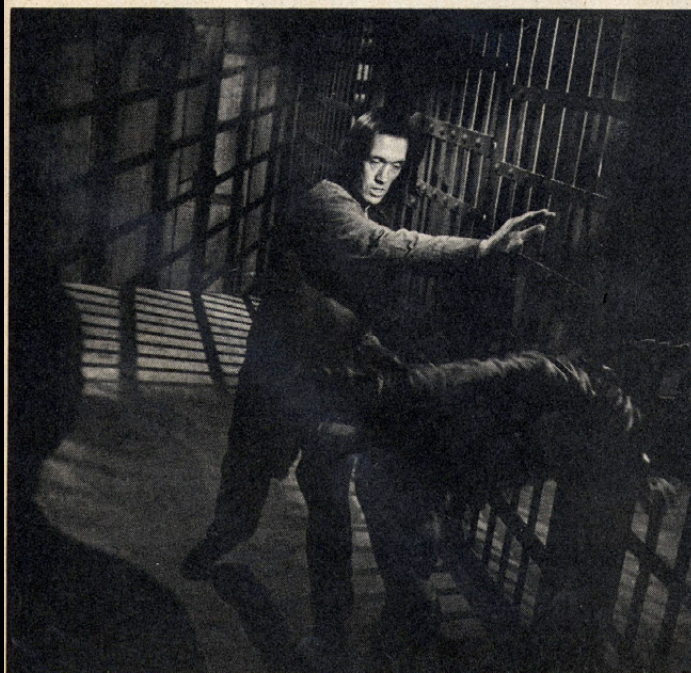
"I'm an athlete," he says matter-of-factly in the tomb-like stillness of his dressing room. "I'm capable of doing amazing feats, you know, athletic feats. I can jump over anything, I can run like a deer. I used to climb mountains, which, in a sense, is

◀ Photo Courtesy of Warner Bros. Television



THE MANY LONG HOURS spent in choreographing the intricate fight sequences on the "Kung Fu" set pay off for Kam Yuen (see lower left photo) as he helps David Carradine perfect the movements. Carradine's admiration for Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire led him to emulate their styles and ultimately develop his own forms of dance. This plus his own athletic abilities enable him to last through the hours of rehearsal and filming necessary to produce a few minutes of action on the screen. Between takes he will often run out into the sunshine where he frolics and leaps in a manner bespeaking a young carefree animal rather than the usual image-haunted Hollywood actor.





the same as gymnastics. Everything that I've gotten into that had anything athletic about it, fencing, skiing, balling, anything—I always found that I didn't need to learn how to do it, I could just do it."

Carradine's skills as an athlete and dancer have come in extremely handy during the series. While there are only two or three fight scenes to worry about in each episode, they are all choreographed meticulously. The fight scene mentioned earlier for instance, took about three-and-a-half hours to rehearse and film, yet the action you'll see on the television screen will only last about two minutes.

The choreography is so important, in fact, one recently published article claimed Carradine won the "Kung Fu" part mainly because of his much acclaimed dancing role in a Broadway play entitled "The Royal Hunt of the Sun." Carradine denies this, however, and claims he got the part simply because he went out and worked for it.

Either way, he did have the dancing background prior to the series and it has helped considerably since then. But Carradine never has had any formal dance training other than "about a year" of tap dancing and some ballet. Instead, he relies on natural abilities he cultivated in his own uninhibited style. "Sometimes I'd go to a Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire movie," Carradine says, recalling his youthful enthusiasm for the dancing arts, "and I'd come out of it and find a deserted street, a storefront, you know, where you go inside and it's all marble and it sounds fantastic. I used to always wear taps on my shoes and I'd just dance, crazy dancing. I did that for years. I used to stand there and talk to people and dance at the same time. I used to drive people crazy."

But his father apparently didn't share his son's enthusiasm. "My father wouldn't let me be a dancer," Carradine recalls with a rare smile. "He said, 'No son of mine is going to make his living with his feet.'" An interesting comment, considering his son is now making \$10,000 a week literally kicking the hell out of an assorted group of Western baddies.

Carradine seems to shun any kind of formalized or organized efforts. Despite his remarks about his athletic prowess, he really doesn't practice any type of structured sports. "I don't really participate in any kind of athletics at all," Carradine says, referring to games people play. "I don't do any kind of sports or anything, I just jump around a lot. I always climb and dance and run." His face turns serious for a minute and then he adds poetically, "It's almost a way of laughing to me."

A STUDENT'S RESPECT

Carradine still doesn't practice any of the martial arts either, including kung-fu, outside of his work with the show. But he has developed a tremendous respect for Kam Yuen, the Chinese kung-fu stylist who recently resumed his role as martial arts technical advisor for the program. "I've just fallen in love with him," Carradine says with genuine admiration in his voice. "He's as far into some things as anyone I've ever seen. You know," he adds thoughtfully, "he may be farther in than anybody."

The lanky actor also feels that Yuen's appointment as martial arts advisor has made a big difference in Caine's performance in the show and Carradine's performance as a martial artist. "The thing with 'Kung Fu' is to try to mirror forms. You know, to make it look like not only can I take care of myself, but like I was training in this particular art.

"Before Kam Yuen came back in the series, I had



spectacular things that I used to do, but none of them had anything to do with kung-fu. You know, I could jump 16 feet in the air and catch somebody with both feet. But it just had nothing to do with the form. Now I'm learning forms."

But the problem with training the actor in the correct style at this late date, is that it tends to rob the series of some of the theatrical aspects of the fight scenes. But, in the long run, according to Carradine, they should work out better. "It's funny," Carradine admits, "because I go through a time right now where I really don't look as good as I used to because I'm trying to do the forms and get the feet right."

Carradine's sympathies with the martial arts world though, still lie more on the philosophical plane than the physical one. But it's not the all encompassing general philosophical hedging one hears so often. He doesn't claim that he, as an individual, derives any benefit from the specific arts at all. What he does say is that he shares a kind of philosophy that is or should be the basic benefit of the arts.

"It's funny," he says, his eyes taking on the familiar far away look one sees on the television screen every week, "I can almost say that I'm a martial artist even though I don't practice it or anything. In a great way, I am a martial artist in the sense that Bruce Lee once wrote about—he and his friend, 'A way not towards tranquility and peace but towards vanquishing the inner foe through complete externalized violence that is ultimately directed on yourself.' Something like that is what I'm doing."

While Carradine is willing to share this belief, he hastens to add that he did not pick it up from the arts themselves, or, for that matter, that he even borrowed it from them. "I just graze along," he says, "without ever knowing anything about this. . . . I'm always picking up a book and reading, finding out it's something that I'm doing. When I read 'Siddhartha,' it was like that. It's just curious to me that somebody would write a book about it when that's how it feels all the time."

ENTER BRUCE LEE

He does confess, nevertheless, to a tremendous influence from Bruce Lee. Even though he had never met Lee, he does feel a bizarre sort of kinship with him now. "I feel almost possessed by the spirit of Bruce, something like that," Carradine says seriously. "I never met him, but I really feel possessed by him. It's weird."

According to Carradine, the circumstances that brought about the strange relationship were even more weird. "Seeing 'Enter The Dragon' was the only passing I had with him," Carradine recalls, "and I didn't see it until after he was dead. I went down to Grauman's Chinese Theatre and sat in the first row. I just sort of sneaked in, I never really wanted to go down there, I figured it would be really freaky. But as I sat and watched it, I was just totally exalted. It was like seeing a religious experience."

"After the lights went up, there were two or three people who came down in front and said, 'What do you think of this movie?'"—they had seen it six times. These weren't people out looking for blood, but just like people who were really hip, Jesus freak looking people, Zen people, you know, far out people. They wanted to know what I thought of it and they had the same feeling I had.

"I realized there is something, I figure, like James Dean is really alive again. You know, I understand there's really some kind of meaning. There's something very deep."

As for the mysticism connected with kung-fu, Carradine is unimpressed. He believes the early secretiveness the art demanded was foolish and was basically self-defeating. "I just think all information should be out on the street," he insists. "I don't really care if the art prospers or not. The art is the means. I think the art can die if we go past it."

"If it's done it's whole thing, Kam Yuen could suddenly walk away and spend the rest of his life on a mountain top. If the whole world comes to, we leave the martial arts behind, and that's great."

But the question, according to Carradine is, "Are the martial arts being taken up sincerely, or is everybody just buying the record?"

Carradine, however, doesn't seem to need the martial arts to reach that goal. He apparently has captured the idea of it on his own, without even knowing how it happened. "I've walked around corners and everybody just immediately looked at me with fantastic anger and terror or whatever it was, without ever knowing who I was or anything," he says incredulously. "And then, they end up just walking by me. It's something I've learned how to do, which is to me, the real essence of the martial arts. You don't want to fight. You present something that stops the blow before it ever gets to you. The total end of kung-fu is humility."

It's this same virtue of humility, this basic principal of the martial arts that he finds so refreshing in his friend Kam Yuen, and probably, in the character Caine. "There's nothing about him," Carradine says, praising his friend again, "that I have ever seen that would tell me that he's any good at all. And yet, his students think that he is just beyond reach."

The answer, according to Carradine, is "his humility. His humility is totally flawless," he says with a kind of awe. "The only way you can learn to become great—that's what he starts with. His attitude is something else."

There's a knock on the door and a voice tells Carradine, "Ready on the set." Putting down the flute he had been toying with as he talked, he gets up, excuses himself and heads for the sound stage.

WRAPPING IT UP

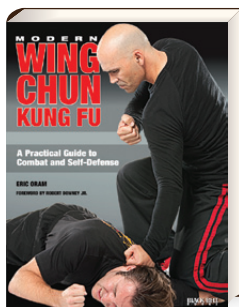
Back on the sound stage, the actors and crew had taken up their earlier positions and the director was ready to start filming. As a couple of actors ran through the fight scene one last time, Barry Sullivan accompanied them singing, "I want to be around to pick up the pieces."

The chatter died down as the director yelled for quiet and the actors began spouting their lines again for about the 50th time that day. This time, however, the air of sarcasm had disappeared and there was a more businesslike tone about the whole operation. The scene went all the way through this time but at the last moment, Carradine flubbed the last kick. "Shit," he exploded, "I came down too close."

After a few minutes, they started it all over again. Everybody's timing was perfect and the fight scene came off without a flaw. Even some of the hard-boiled crew members erupted with praise for the way Carradine had pulled it off.

Finally, the director dismissed the people for lunch and the place started emptying out again like Grand Central Station at rush hour. As the "grasshopper" walked up the ramp leading into the street, he turned to an unseen individual he apparently had been holding one of his running conversations with, and, in the true spirit of Oriental philosophers everywhere, said, "Hey, don't sweat it, man." ☆

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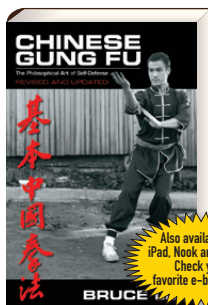


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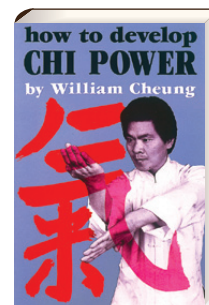
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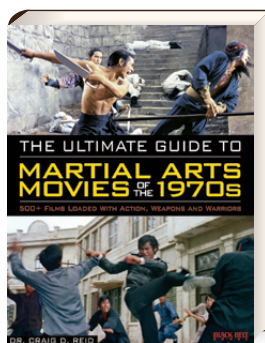


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