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# BACK IN BLACK

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# THE BOY FROM THE BLACK STUFF



Five years ago a little movie called Men In Black made a megastar of Will Smith and proved the surprise box office success of the Summer. Now they're back and they've got Wacko Jacko in tow. **Samantha Altea** talks to director **Barry Sonnenfeld** about his brush with death on the set of MIB 2





than Will Smith, if not as good looking, the director is holding court at this NYC press junket with all the panache of a seasoned stand-up comedian, describing his movie-making experiences as a series of “traumatic” incidents.

Sonnenfeld claims the actual shooting of the movie was relatively simple, but it was the pressures to live up to the first film before shooting even began that caused him anxiety. “I realised that the first *Terminator* did \$40 million at the box office. The second one did around \$200 million. The first *Austin Powers* did like \$40 – 50 million. The second one did around \$200 million too. I got a movie where the first one did \$600 million worldwide and Sony and the producers are nervous wrecks. I say, ‘Now you’re giving me problems about how successful my first movie was!’ They don’t want to look stupid doing a movie that doesn’t take as much money as the first one. So there was a lot of pressure, a lot of fear. But I did spend the night in Bellevue Hospital because I thought I was having a heart attack. And by the way, if you’re in NYC and you think you’re having a heart attack, don’t go to Bellevue.”

A sly glint suddenly twinkles in Sonnenfeld’s eye and he begins his routine. He nonchalantly leans forward and then, with the impeccable timing of a professional comic, proceeds to hold his audience in the palm of his hand.

“So, I get there at 2am. We were shooting at night. I’d been in script meetings all day, we were two weeks into shooting and I still didn’t have a script. I had script meetings all the next day. We broke to eat and I started to meditate. I had taken up meditation thinking that meditating would get me through this movie. Huh. While meditating my arm fell asleep, my hand went numb and tingly; I felt a pain under my arm and my chest felt like someone was blowing up a balloon in there. So I said, ‘Take me to Bellevue Hospital’. And literally I was the only person there not in leg shackles or handcuffs. From 1am to 6am they bring in prisoners from Ryker’s Island to, like, fix ‘em up...”

“The next hospital I go to there’s a woman in the next cubicle who keeps moaning, ‘I need quinine!’” Sonnenfeld gleefully repeats this several times while he gets huge laughs from the journalists in the room. “Anyway, they do all the stress tests... I know you don’t want to talk about me, but I love talking about me...”

Sonnenfeld’s on a roll. “So, they do echocardiograms and tests and the cardiologist says, ‘Well, your heart’s in great shape, but I’ve never met anyone with more stress in my life. You must immediately take up meditation.’” Sonnenfeld waits for the penny to drop. “Well, actually I was meditating when I began to have my heart attack...”

Seems that Sonnenfeld is no stranger to freaking out during filming. “That’s kind of the way I get through every film. I fainted on *The Addams Family*.” He seems almost proud.

The director was raised in New York City and graduated from the New York film school, so it’s no coincidence that he knew exactly where aliens should be living. Yes, New York is as much a presence in the second installment of the *Men In Black* franchise as it was in the first. “When I got the script for the first *MIB* it took place in Florida, Nebraska, Kansas, Nevada, Washington... everywhere but New York. And I said, ‘Look, if I direct this movie I want to make it in NYC, because I think that if there are aliens then they’d live in New York. Mainly because they wouldn’t have to wear disguises. They could just come down and behave any way they want to and it would all be fine and dandy. When we used to scout locations we would just look around at people and go, ‘Alien, alien...’ Actually, we called them Redgicks, so that they didn’t actually hear us calling them aliens. Redgick was an alien from the first movie.”

A self-proclaimed “guy with a lot of motion blur”, Sonnenfeld continues his “set” at breakneck speed. “I make

*Continued overleaf...*



Above:  
Lara Flynn Boyle  
as Serleena. We’ll  
pretend we haven’t  
noticed the cleavage.

Opposite page:  
*Men In Black 2*.  
Photos! Lots!

**E**N ROUTE TO BELLEVUE HOSPITAL, TWO WEEKS INTO the shooting of *Men In Black 2*, the thought that ran through Barry Sonnenfeld’s mind was, “This is a no-lose situation. Either I’m healthy and I’m not dying, or I die and I don’t have to direct this movie.”

But then that’s not so surprising, given the pressure of a first movie that grossed an incredible \$600 million and left all eyes on what you’re going to deliver in the sequel. Some five years since sharp-suited agents J and K first protected our planet from the scum of the universe, *MIB 2* reunites Will Smith with Tommy Lee Jones for further alien ass-whumping. Sonnenfeld, who now looks as laid back as one of the CG worms that populate his latest movie, leans back on his chair, places his hands behind his head and almost seems as if he wants to kick his feet up on the table in front of him. Funnier

“Michael Jackson says, ‘FROM THE DAY I WAS BORN, MY ONLY DREAM WAS TO BE ON THE POSTER OF MIB 2. I said, ‘From the day you were born?’”  
BARRY SONNENFELD

the actors talk, like, really fast. This movie, without credits, is only 80 minutes and 26 seconds, yet the script is 120 pages, which is the length of a normal script. I didn't cut much out; I just make the actors talk fast.”

How does Sonnenfeld put his own identity on a movie? “It's really weird. I look at all the movies I've directed and somehow they all look like I've directed them. I realised that all directing is having really strong opinions about millions of questions. The accumulation of questions creates tone and style. There are the big questions – like who do you cast in these roles – to the small ones. Every day you're asked from a thousand to ten thousand questions and sometimes you don't even think about the answer, you just say it. But it's all part of your personality, and who you are. It's answering all those questions. ‘The car should move faster, there should be more blur...’ I like motion blur. I like it more than most people do. See, that's just part of my personality. A guy with a lot of motion blur!”

“I never feel comfortable directing, ever,” he continues. “I never assume that anyone's gonna laugh at anything I do, so I always keep it short.”

*Men In Black 2* is, naturally, another feast of digital effects. Sonnenfeld is comfortable with the possibilities offered by the tech wizards. “The visual effects allow me to be the same guy as I am when I'm directing the real actors,” says Sonnenfeld. “Like Lara Flynn Boyle sticking her tongue in Tommy Lee Jones' ear. That wasn't scripted. I called Lara over and I said, ‘On the next take, put your tongue in

Tommy's ear.’ She looks at me and says, ‘You want me to put my tongue in his ear?!’ It was totally spur of the moment and that take ended up in the movie. Then, about a month ago, just when we were about to finish the movie, I said to ILM, ‘How much would it cost to elongate her tongue and add some green elie stuff?’ And I think they said, like, ‘\$24,000’. I was feeling good that day and I didn't think Sony would find out. So I said, ‘Do it.’ So that was like a series of happy accidents.”

As far as Sonnenfeld seems to be concerned, thank God for happy accidents. He readies himself for his next story. By now you can sense he's yearning to tell it.

“We got a call saying Michael Jackson wanted to be in the movie. I wanted him in the first *MIB*, but he wouldn't do it. At the time I was asked why Michael wouldn't be in it and I was quoted as saying that the real aliens never let you put their face up there on the screen. But I think Michael forgot about that. So now, five years later, Will Smith is thinking that Michael Jackson should be in the movie and I'm saying, ‘I don't... Oh, okay, I'll speak to Michael.’”

“So Michael tells me that he wants to be in the movie, but he wants a ‘through line’. He wants to be important to the plot and he wants to be in many scenes.” Sonnenfeld feigns exasperation. “So I go, ‘Michael, you can't be in many scenes because we're shooting. We're nine weeks into the movie, there's a script, there's a plot. You can't be in many scenes.’ He said, ‘Okay, at least I can be important to the plot.’ I say, ‘No, you can't be important to the plot, we already have a script, we're nine weeks into shooting...’ He goes, ‘Okay. Can I wear the Suit?’ At which point I say, ‘Yeah, you can wear “the Suit”’. He says, ‘If I can wear the Suit and be on the poster, I'll do it.’ Michael says, ‘From the day I was born, my only dream was to be on the poster of *MIB 2*.’ I said, ‘From the day you were born?’”

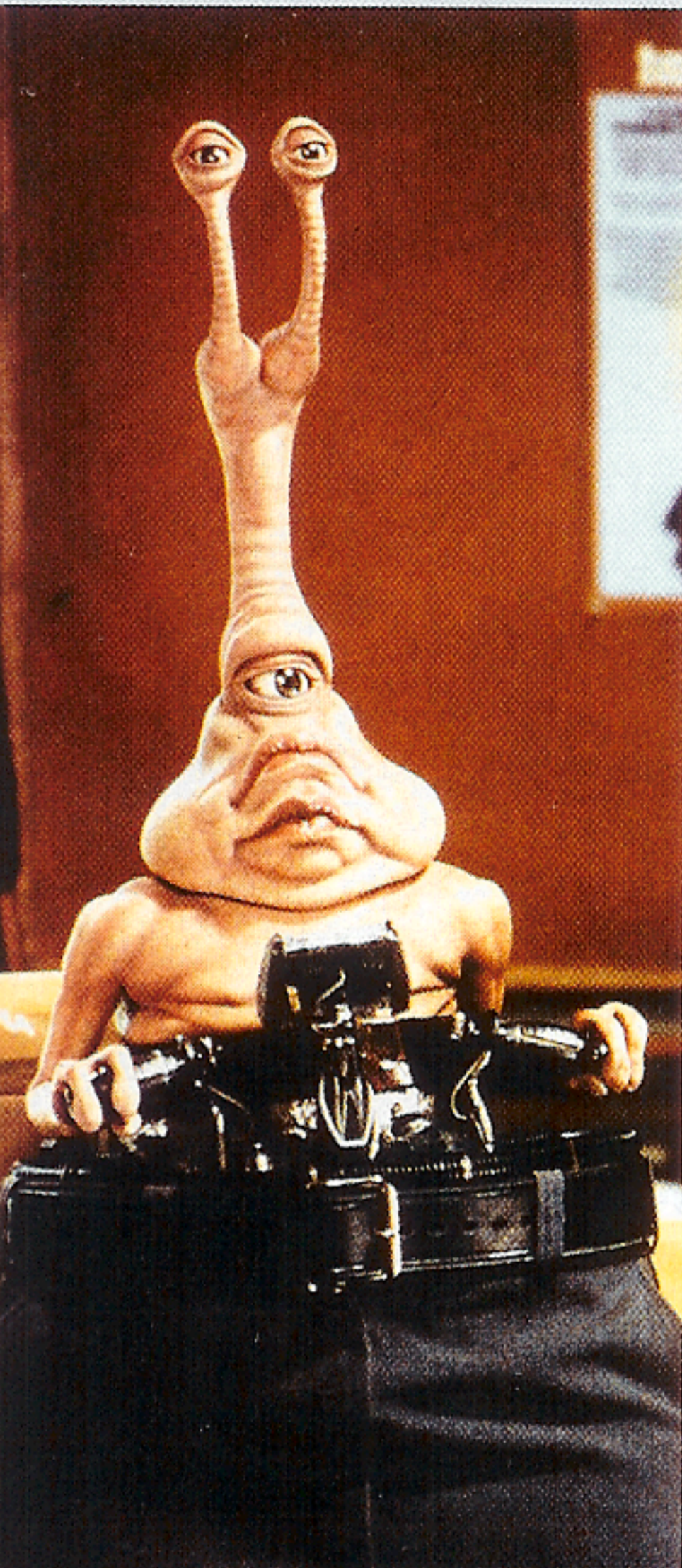
“I say, ‘Well, here's the thing, Michael. You can't be on the poster because, contractually, only Tommy and Will can be on the poster and if anyone else is on the poster it kicks off other people's contracts, whereby Johnny Knoxville, Lara Flynn Boyle, Rip Torn, all get to be on the poster. At which point Michael says, ‘Well, they can be on the poster too...’ I was in the office of Amy Pascal, the brilliant and beautiful chairman of Columbia Pictures, and I said, ‘You know what, here's Amy...’ I said goodbye and left.”

Hold on, there's more. “So Michael comes on to the set and I say, ‘Stand here so that the lighting technicians can see how you look.’ I tell him, ‘Okay, go put on the Suit and I'll see you in 20 minutes. He says, ‘Well, we need to talk about the scene.’ I say, ‘We do?!’ Aaarghhh! Okay. It was a blue screen day, and blue screen days are horrible days. The blue screen is huge – it's about 40 feet high by about 100 feet long and the blue is so intense that it makes you angry. What happens is that your brain is desperately trying to fill in all the other colours that aren't there. Your brain is working so hard that it doesn't want to be annoyed by any conversation or anything.”

“So, we have the blue screen on one wall, and on the other side we have a pizzeria set, because we're shooting some stuff in that set too. Cut to blue screen over here, crews of 150 people staring at the other end of the stage, where Michael and I are sitting at a pizzeria, chatting about a scene. So Michael's saying, ‘Can I see pictures of what will be behind me?’ I go, ‘No.’ He goes, ‘What will be behind me?’ I go, ‘Icebergs.’ He goes, ‘Big icebergs?’ I go, ‘Huge.’ He says, ‘What else?’ I go, ‘Water. Lots of water.’ ‘What else?’ ‘Sky. There'll be sky.’ ‘Okay, and what will it sound like?’ I go, ‘There'll be penguins!’”

Sonnenfeld laughs along. “I say, ‘I don't know! I'm making this stuff up, man! I don't know if there are going

*Continued overleaf...*



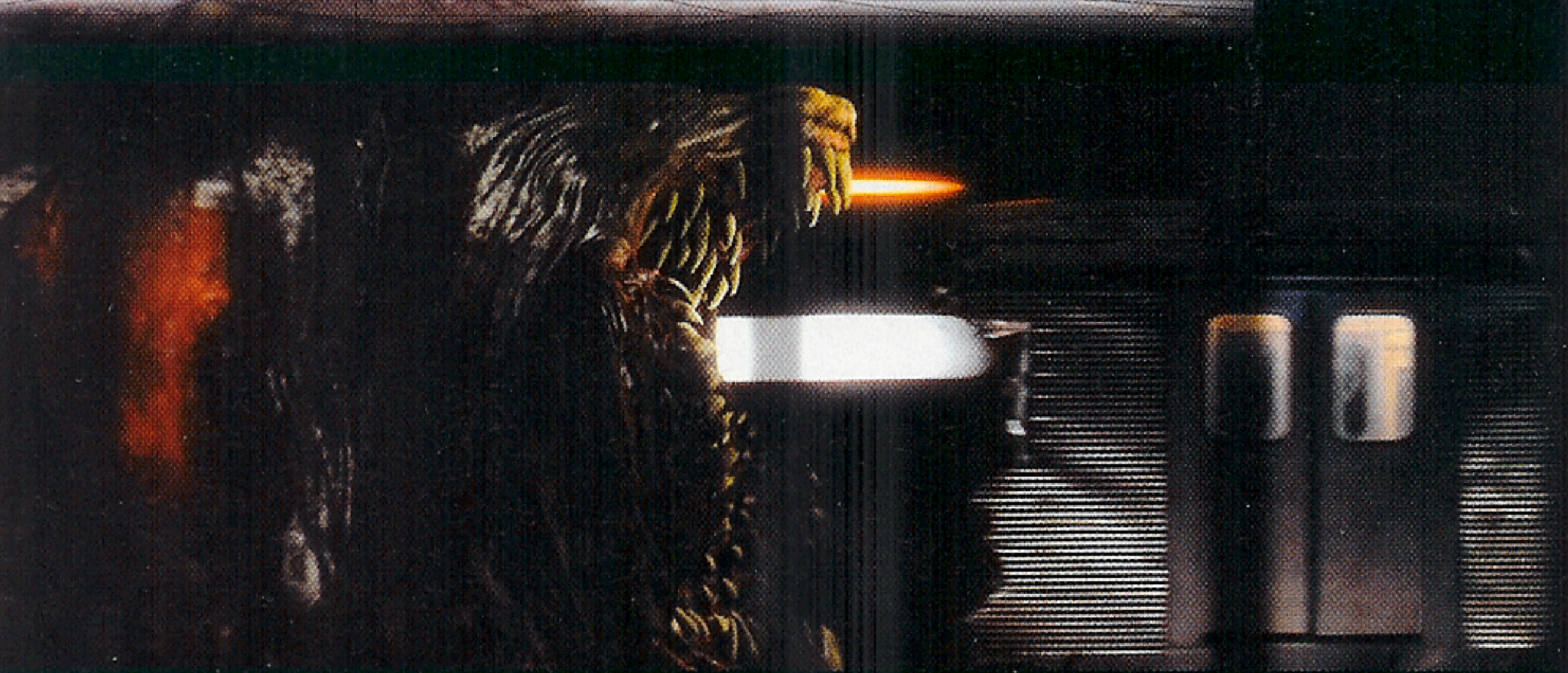
Will Smith and canine friend.

Above (left): Not Michael Jackson's cameo. The plastic surgery hasn't yet gone that bad...

“Wetter, wetter, wetter, shinier, nastier!” CHRISTIAN ALVMANN



Just some of the concept designs for the *Men In Black* sequel. You know, he could probably sell some of these and make himself a few bob...



# THE BLACK ARTS

Chuck Wagner talks to ILM conceptual artist Christian Alvmann



“WE THOUGHT ABOUT ALL OF THE old sci-fi movies from the ‘50s and their wacky, zany monsters,” says Christian Alvmann, a conceptual artist for Industrial Light & Magic. “*Men In Black* has that motif: fun, popcorny, and not too scary.”

“Barry Sonnenfeld always has such a nice way of introducing aliens. There’s always a little surprise. I think we did 400 or so actual creature designs that we put in front of Barry, and probably about 1,000 pieces of art overall for the film. Out of the 400, I think ten might end up in the movie.”

*Men In Black 2* sees villainess Serleena return to Earth in the form of Lara Flynn Boyle. “Serleena’s the big, evil alien in the movie. She’s made up of these... things... somewhere between a plant and an eel, which allow her to change in and out of any form. She took a lot of work. Originally she was to be a real creepy, thorny kind of plant. And as we went along Barry seemed to be really interested in making things kind of wet, slimy and nasty. It seemed to evolve and take on a life of its own. We ended up with the slimy eels. If you remember the first *Men In Black*, the guys were always covered in the guts of some alien they blew up. Barry loves that. There’s that whole ‘Eeeeeew!’ factor. One comment Sonnenfeld kept

making was ‘Wetter, wetter, wetter, shinier, nastier...’

And then there’s Jeff, a most unusual denizen of the New York subway system. “When we got the script,” Alvmann explains, “it called for a giant, train-eating worm with thousands of teeth. We said, ‘Oh wow, it sounds like *Dune!*’ We tried a thousand variations to go with something more aquatic looking. That’s when we got the whole transparent



idea, the lobster claws. We must have done 50 drawings just to figure out what his teeth would look like. We try to make all of our aliens a character, not just a creature. Jeff is this kind of grumpy New York loner that hangs out in the subway and eats trash.”

Johnny Knoxville, the lunk-headed daredevil of MTV’s *Jackass*, pops up as an alien – one with a second head, and identical face, on a wormy appendage. “They’re kind of like twins,” explains Alvmann. “Alien twins. The second head basically grows out of his back. But it’s one creature – Scrad and Charlie. Scrad’s the bigger one and Charlie’s the little guy. The more human-looking one has the weird name. That’s Barry for you! He’s the quintessential New Yorker. If you look at a lot of his aliens they have a lot of New York attitudes.”

Also in the alien bestiary are the coffee-slurping worm guys from the first film – “They go into battle in one scene” – and Frank, the pug dog alien who gets to function as an agent this time out. “We also have a transforming trashcan robot – the trashcan of death!”

“A computer is like a real expensive set of markers,” says Alvmann. “What other job is there where you can draw monsters all day?” SFX

Left: Anthony Kiedis from the Red Hot Chili Peppers makes a surprise cameo...

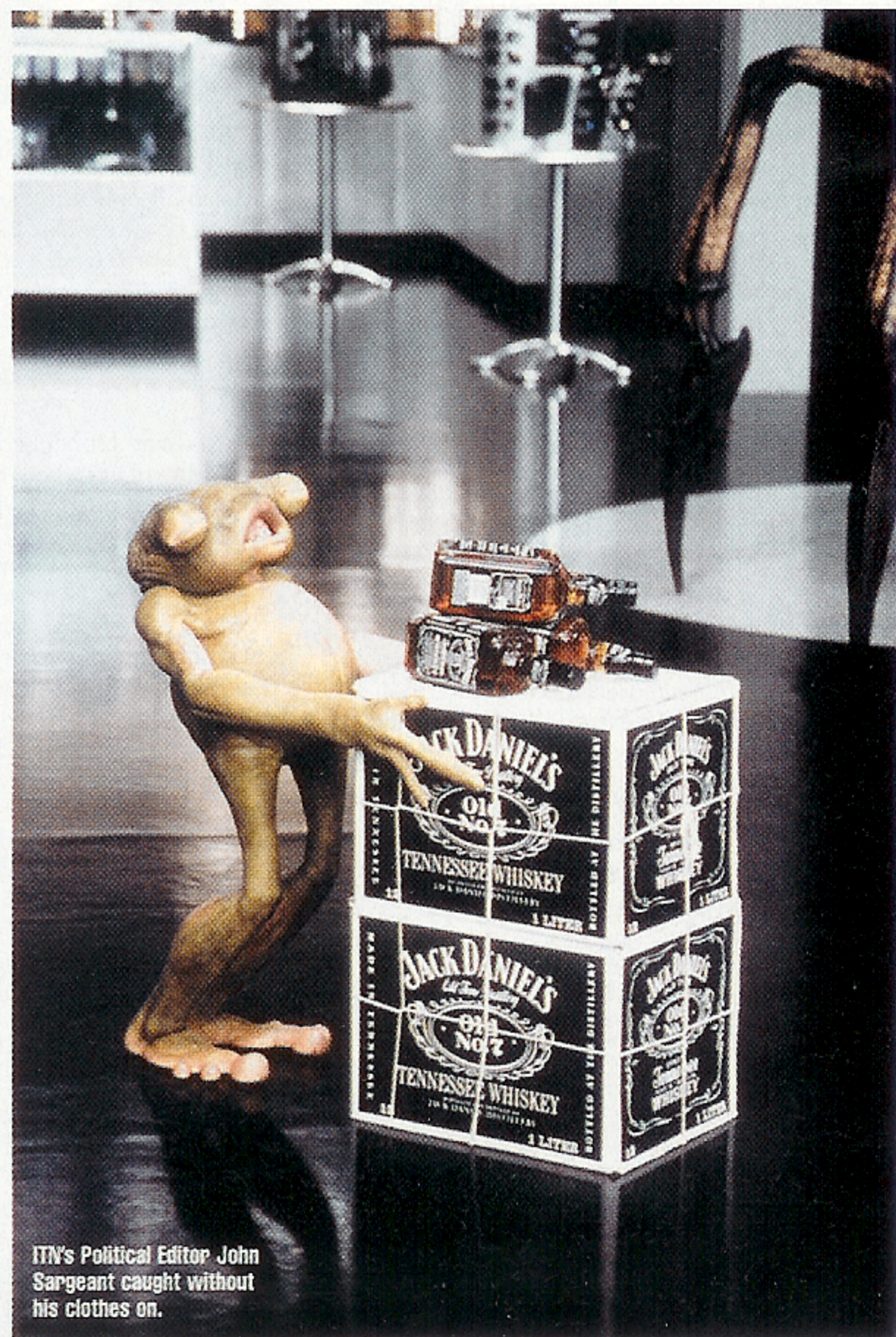
to be penguins!’ And I say, ‘You know what, it’s all going to be fine, Michael. Go and put on the Suit.’ Anyway, I’m stuck putting Michael Jackson in the movie, wearing the Suit, and it turns out that I loved working with him and I love the scene. So, it was a great time, and we’ll see if he gets a ‘through line’ in *MIB 3*.”

Sonnenfeld also makes an appearance in *MIB 2* and here’s the scoop – he’s not an alien. Given his ease in front of an audience, albeit a small group of journos, and the image of him hanging out on set in cowboy regalia (let’s not mention *Wild Wild West*), you might think he protests a little too much when he says that he hates seeing his “big fat face on screen.” But then Sonnenfeld never lets the facts get in the way of a story, and this one’s a doozie.

“My cameo turned out to be an incredibly traumatic experience,” he says. “Another traumatic experience. I play the dad, who lives in the house that Tommy Lee Jones used to live in. Tommy and Will come to get the ‘big guns.’ Tommy pushes a button and the wall behind me opens up. I knew I should have been the astronaut on the wall in the pizzeria – then I wouldn’t have had to act. I kept thinking, ‘I should have been that guy; I should have been that guy!’

“So, I do it, and I think everything’s fine, except that I hate seeing my big fat face on screen. But then there are two shots where I turn around and look at Will and Tommy in the distance. Until I saw that shot in the dailies I had no idea I was losing my hair! I watch myself and there’s a big bright light shining on my head. I think a) I just found out I’m bald and b) I stuck this bald fat guy in the movie.

“In the shot where you see the back of my head we added some CG worms in post production. So I say to ILM, ‘Listen, you’re adding the worms, give me some hair!’ They go, ‘We’ll get back to you.’ And then they say, ‘Okay, \$24,000!’ And I think, ‘\$24,000?! But I’m not even moving!’ I’m just going to have to live with the fact that I put myself in the wrong role in this movie.” SFX



ITN’s Political Editor John Sargeant caught without his clothes on.

“We hang out at the same RAP CLUBS & STUFF like that” TOMMY LEE JONES



# ALIENS, SMITH & JONES

The besuited chalk and cheese of Hollywood return. **Samantha Altea** chats to **Tommy Lee Jones** and **Will Smith** about being back in black

**SFX:** So, *Men In Black 2*. How do you make it fresh?

**Smith:** “For the most part what I tried to do was pretend like it’s not a sequel, it’s a new movie. I used the same energy that I put into every other film that I’m working on. I didn’t try to consider, ‘Okay, we’re trying to live up to the first film.’ I just wanted to go in and create something that’s new, funny and energetic and that folks would laugh at.”

**Jones:** “Same thing, exact same thing, just like that.” (Dry laugh)

**Spider-Man** took so much money. How tough will it be to top that in your opening weekend?

**Smith:** “It’s hard to top that *Spider-Man* number, you know. We’re not really expecting to do that. It’s a different kind of weekend. There’s a lot more movies out there, and for a lot of reasons we won’t get that number.”

**Jones:** “Yes, we will...”

**Smith:** “Oh, okay. What he said.”

**Jones:** “*Spider-Man*’s not that funny.”

**Are you two close?**

**Jones:** “Yeah, we hang out a lot at the same rap clubs and stuff like that.”

**Smith:** “The rodeo arena, yeah.”

**How do you feel this movie will play to an audience?**

**Jones:** “I’ve never seen an audience react to the movie. But this is what I find so surprising about our director, Barry Sonnenfeld. Things that I thought would be of no significance, things that I thought were off-handed, things that I thought were just a passing whim in my head as we were performing turn out to be huge laughs. So it’s surprising, you know. The little things we do mean a lot. And the other thing that’s surprising is the

momentum. People start laughing early and it builds like an avalanche. It’s probably a good thing that I wasn’t aware of that, or I would probably have tried to start an avalanche and then stopped one.”

**If you could erase one memory, what would it be?**

**Smith:** “It would probably be the other night, you know, when we were both drinking and things happened, and Tommy, I just want to apologise to you in front of everyone...” (Laughter)

**Jones:** “Same thing... I’m real sorry, Will. That wasn’t the real me. I’ll make it up to you.”

**So at what stage did you realise that there was a danger of being upstaged by a talking dog?**

**Jones:** “Oh, that dog never had a chance.”

**Smith:** “I am a comedy whore. I want people laughing, I want people walking out of the theatre saying ‘That was hilarious’, whether it’s a talking dog or a CG worm, or whatever. However I can get that laugh, I want people cracking up. We realised that every time that dog opened his mouth it was just hilarious. There’s something about that contact with those aliens that just makes it funny, it makes it hilarious. And I’ll take it however it comes.”

**Jones:** “You really think the dog’s a threat?”

**Have you both come into contact with fans who wear the iconic MIB black? How do you feel about that?**

**Smith:** “That’s something that happens after we do

our wardrobe and we do our glasses. For me it’s really a selfish internal process. I always want to make sure I look good and I really wasn’t thinking about how people would react. Then, after the first film, you’d see people like newscasters, who would do the entire newscast and then put the sunglasses on. What happens is that when entertainment bridges the gap between entertainment and news, that’s when those iconic leaps start to happen. And you know, you always get those fans that take it that step too far and wear the suit all the time and are there, you know, at the movie theatre in the glasses and all that. It’s always interesting to see what the kids are wearing on Halloween. When the first *Men In Black* came out there were tons of black suits and dark glasses. It always makes you feel good when it has that kind of reverberation.”

**Do you believe in aliens?**

**Jones:** “I think that the theme of alienation is very close to every person on Earth.”

**How was it working again with Sonnenfeld? *Wild Wild West* wasn’t so well received...**

**Smith:** “Oh, no, Barry’s my man, you know. We have a wonderful working relationship. You know, making a movie is trying to line up a series of small miracles. Sometimes you line ‘em up a little better than others. But in my mind, *Wild Wild West*, the concept didn’t catch on, and the concept didn’t really work for a world audience, but I didn’t feel that there was any reflection on the chemistry of Barry and I.”

**This is very different to your last films, *Rules Of Engagement* and *Ali*. What goes on in your head when you have to choose between a serious movie and a comedy?**

**Jones:** “Nothing at all goes on in my head! (Laughs) I’m always happy to have a job. And I’m especially happy to have this one. I really did like the first movie and working for Barry Sonnenfeld, with Will Smith, have been the happiest days of my young working life. There’s not a lot going on in my mind. I will say I’ve not had a lot of comedy come my way as a performer and to work on *Men In Black* and to see people laugh as a result of the work and then have a chance to do it again is a privilege. Comedy is difficult and I’ve had a chance to work with the best, and learn a lot about it and reap the benefits as an actor. Watching an audience of people howl with laughter as a result of the work you’ve done with friends is a privilege. It must be what a doctor feels like when he sees his patient get well.”

**Smith:** “I try to find a project that’s as different as possible from the last film I performed in. I enjoy being able to go from *Ali*, to *Men In Black 2*, to rap music. I like to be able to test the boundaries. You know, how far will an audience be willing to go with me? How bizarre a character, or how grand a leap will the audience be willing to make with me? That’s generally the consideration. Then of course there’s the team, making a movie is about the team. Probably my first consideration is ‘Who am I working with?’”

**Will there be a *Men In Black 3*?**

**Jones:** “I hope so.”  
**Smith:** “It would be great if people laugh enough at this one and go to the movie theatre enough times. It would be really great to wear that black suit again.” **SFX**

“I am a COMEDY WHORE!” WILL SMITH