

A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN H. BURUM, ASC

QUESTION: Where were you born and raised?

BURUM: I am a third generation Californian from the rural town of Dinuba in the San Joaquin Valley near Fresno. My father had an advertising agency in Fresno. His father was the postmaster in Dinuba. My mother's family owned a local newspaper. My grandfather wanted me to be a newspaper man.

QUESTION: Obviously that plan went awry. What led to your interest in filmmaking?

BURUM: My hobbies were building model airplanes and science when I was a kid. I loved seeing how things work. I was a great 'gadgetier.'

QUESTION: How did you become interested in movies?

BURUM: A friend of the family owned the local Rexall drugstore. His son and I were friends. The store carried photo supplies. One day, my friend brought a Kodak 8 mm movie camera from the store over to my house. We shot some of my model airplanes and tried to make a little story. I was hooked!

QUESTION: When was this happening?

BURUM: I was around 14 or 15 years old. It was when the Russians had Sputnik flying around the Earth. It was a time when every kid in America was being encouraged to study hard, go to college and become a scientist, a chemist or an engineer.

QUESTION: Were you interested in studying science?

BURUM: I was not a great student, which you have to be to do that kind of work, but every family wanted their kids to go to college. I was looking through the pages of Life Magazine one day, and saw a picture of a sound stage at UCLA. The caption said that they taught students how to make movies. I thought I could make my parents happy by going to college and do my hobby at the same time. There were only four colleges teaching filmmaking at that time, and two of them, Brigham Young and Bob Jones University, taught students how to make religious films. The other film school was USC, and it was too expensive for my family.

QUESTION: We take it that you went to UCLA. What was the school like?

BURUM: My high school grades were not good enough to enter as a freshman, so I went to a junior college (Reedley College) for the first two years. In my junior year, I transferred to UCLA, majoring in theater arts. I had to make up all the lower division classes first. Every theater arts student had to take the same basic theater classes – writing, acting, directing, lighting, scenery, sound, makeup, costumes, theater history, lots of literature courses, plus art classes in drawing and art history. Once I completed these lower division classes, I then could choose my area of specialization – theater, language arts, motion pictures, or radio/television. Each area had an array of courses that everyone had to take. In my case — motion pictures — I had to take writing, directing, cinematography, editing, sound, production design, and motion picture history. Each student had

to write, direct and edit their own workshop film. Every semester, you were assigned a crew position on other student films. UCLA also had many elective motion picture courses, such as music, animation, special effects, documentaries, producing, and entertainment law. I took every one of these courses except for music. I shot a lot of student films. I also got a graduate degree from UCLA. By the time I graduated, I had shot around 70 student films, mainly in black and white. I think that only two of them were in color.

QUESTION: What other memories can you share about your time at UCLA?

BURUM: I was mentored by various talented and generous filmmakers who shared their experiences. The short list includes Arthur Ripley, Warren Hamilton, Dorothy Arzner, Henry Koster, Charlie Clarke (ASC) and Stanley Kramer. They were all legendary filmmakers. Arthur Ripley was a writer on Mack Sennett movies. He also directed features and was a 'picture doctor.' I was fascinated with visual effects, but Charlie Clark set me straight. He was one of the world's great cinematographers. He cautioned me that there were only a handful of jobs for visual effects cameramen. He advised me to concentrate on shooting feature films.

QUESTION: What about Dorothy Arzner. Wasn't she the first woman director, or one of the first, back during the late 1920s? What was she like?

BURUM: She and just about all of our teachers had started their careers working on silent pictures. They had a whole different way of thinking about visual storytelling as opposed to using a soundtrack as kind of a crutch. She started out as an editor at Paramount on such classic films as *The Covered Wagon*, *Old Ironsides* and the Rudolph Valentino pictures. During the late 1920s, she began directing films at Paramount, and later at Columbia Pictures. She also directed television commercials. Miss Arzner taught classes in both directing and production. She had a real presence. When she walked onto a set or into a classroom, everybody knew that the director was there.

QUESTION: Do you have any other memories to share from your time at UCLA?

BURUM: They taught us that everybody had to know and appreciate what everybody's job was, so we shared a common experience. To understand the other person's job has to be the most important lesson I learned.

QUESTION: What did you do after graduating from UCLA?

BURUM: Hank Schloss was one of my instructors. He was an editor, and he also worked on producing and directing animal films for Disney. He hired me to shoot one of those films right out of college. I even met Walt Disney a few times. He was very nice. We were in the Sierras for about six months, and he visited us twice. Disney also looked at our dailies and he spoke with the director by telephone every week. I was shooting with an ARRI S camera and recording images on 16 mm Ektachrome film. The ASA was 16. I shot a two-part series called *My Family is a Menagerie* in Three Rivers, near where I was born. The story was about a gypsy circus that traveled in wagons. There was an accident

and some animals escaped. A woman and a sheriff tracked them down. Each animal had its own adventure. We also did pick-up shots for a Disney movie about a little Navajo Indian boy who turns into an eagle and saves his tribe. We were working with three remarkable, trained eagles. It was amazing.

QUESTION: It sounds like you were having fun. Why did you stop?

BURUM: After about six months, I was drafted and spent two years in the Army. After basic training, I was stationed at the Army Pictorial Center in New York from 1965 through 1967. We produced training films.

QUESTION: What did you do after completing your military obligation?

BURUM: Disney Studios offered me my old job, but I wanted to get into features. The problem was that I couldn't get into the camera union, because it was a closed shop. Ron Dexter (ASC), whom I met at UCLA, was working for John Urie, a TV commercial producer. I was his assistant on some projects. I also worked with other cinematographers, including some very low-budget, biker films.

QUESTION: How did you get an opportunity to start shooting films?

BURUM: Ron Dexter was offered a job traveling with Ann-Margret to Sweden, and shooting 35 mm film of her for a television special. He was busy and recommended me. That led to opportunities to shoot films for other television specials, including one with Raquel Welch. By then, I was also shooting non-union slasher and horror films, such as *Scream Bloody Murder*.

QUESTION: Share some memories of your experiences shooting those films.

BURUM: Whether the films turned out to be good or bad or in between, I loved the process and the environment on sets. I also liked the people. The work was hard, but it was fascinating. We would shoot films in two weeks for what might be a half million dollar budget today. They would make two or three prints and bicycle them to independent drive-in cinemas in the South. It was the only way I had to practice my craft. It is the same thing in any type of art. If you want to be a concert pianist, you need a piano and music that you can play.

QUESTION: How did you finally breakthrough and get into the camera union?

BURUM: I came in through the back door. Carolyn Raskin and George Schlatter were producing a television special in videotape format with a local crew in Mexico. They hired me to do additional photography on 16 mm film as a backup. Later, Carolyn hooked me up with a lighting company that specialized in doing live and taped television shows. There was a special 'E' category in the union for electronic cameraman. I lit videotaped game shows and late night television programs for about three years, beginning in 1973 or '74.

QUESTION: Tell us about some of those programs.

BURUM: I worked on Johnny Mann's *Stand Up and Cheer*, a musical variety show, Dinah Shore and Andy Williams specials, the Sid and Marty Krofft series *Sigmund and the Sea Monsters*, *Land of the Lost*, *The Lost Saucer*, and *Wonder*

Bug. I also did several PBS drama shows at KCET that were throwbacks to old playhouse '90s shows. I was also shooting commercials, and working with the MagiCam, a special technique for creating visual effects. I was the MagiCam guy for visual effects shots on *Little House on the Prairie* and the *Mork & Mindy* television series. I also shared an Emmy for visual effects on *Cosmos*, a PBS TV special exploring outer space with Carl Sagan.

QUESTION: When and how did you break in to the Hollywood mainstream?

BURUM: I had gone to UCLA with Francis Ford Coppola. He brought me onto *Apocalypse Now* as the second unit cameraman for Vittorio Storaro (ASC, AIC) while they were shooting in the Philippines. They had shot a helicopter assault scene at a place that got torn up by a terrible typhoon. When Francis was looking at the film, he realized that he needed more material. He called and brought me there to direct and photograph the second unit. They also needed some transitional shots of the boat going up the river. Francis and I already had a common language from school. I looked at the footage they had, and watched Vittorio light and shoot for a couple of days until I felt that I understood what he was after.

QUESTION: What was it like shooting second unit for Vittorio Storaro?

BURUM: One of the things that I learned from Charlie Clarke at UCLA was that there would be times when you are called upon to match another cameraman's work. You had to be able to understand and duplicate the looks they created. Vittorio was very generous with me. He told me to shoot whatever I thought was right. I tried to keep everything I shot consistent with what he and Francis were doing.

QUESTION: We presume that this was how you finally got into the camera union as a cinematographer. What doors did that open?

BURUM: I did some second unit work on *The Black Stallion* that year (1979). That film was produced by Zoetrope, which was Francis Coppola's company. The director was Carroll Ballard and Caleb Deschanel (ASC) was the cinematographer. Carroll and I went to UCLA together. Caleb directed *The Escape Artist* the following year. He gave me an opportunity to shoot it for him. I guess you could call that my first legitimate film.

QUESTION: What was it like working with a director who is also a cinematographer?

BURUM: It was a great experience. It was a wonderful opportunity to work with somebody who really understood cinematography, and what it takes to do my job.

QUESTION: You shot one interesting film after another within a few years after *The Escape Artist*, including *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, which was based on a classic Ray Bradbury book.

BURUM: That was an interesting feature project for Disney. We shot it on the studio lot. Ray Bradbury would visit several times a week to see what we were doing with his story.

QUESTION: Right after that film you shot *The Entity*, *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*.

BURUM: *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish* were both directed by Francis. We filmed *The Outsiders* in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in about 42 days. I watched Francis rehearse with the kids in the cast, and we got our shots in one or two takes. We were preparing for *Rumble Fish* at the same time. I remember him asking what I thought about the book. I said that I thought we should shoot it in black and white, because it was right for the story. I'll always treasure having had that opportunity to shoot a feature in black and white.

QUESTION: Your career was definitely shifting into high gear. You shot *Uncommon Valor* the same year as *Rumble Fish* (1983) and followed that with *Body Double* in 1984. That was the first of eight films where you collaborated with Brian De Palma.

BURUM: We have a lot in common. We like to move the camera and watch the actors play out the scene, but I could always count on him to surprise me. Brian has a very strong, moral point of view. You can't just look at the surface of his films. There are always characters trying to redeem themselves for things they did that hurt other people. Like any top director, he will encourage you to push the limits.

QUESTION: Your subsequent projects with De Palma were *Snake Eyes*, *Mission: Impossible*, *Carlito's Way*, *Raising Cain*, *The Untouchables*, *Casualties of War* and *Mission to Mars*. That is an eclectic mixture. Pick out any of those films, and give us an example of how important creative decisions were made.

BURUM: When we were preparing to shoot *The Untouchables* (1987), Brian asked me how I thought we should approach shooting that film. It was the story of how Elliott Ness and his team of federal agents pursued Al Capone and his organized crime gang, which was riding high during the 1930s. I did some research and showed Brian a lot of black and white still pictures taken by Edward Steichen and Margaret Bourke White during that period. I said it should be in black and white. He said, 'You know the studio won't let us make a black-and-white film. What's your next idea?' I pointed to the graphic style of the pictures in Life Magazine from that period.

QUESTION: Give us an example of how you used that graphic style.

BURUM: There is a scene where the main characters played by Sean Connery and Kevin Costner are walking across the street. In the background, there are three guys all dressed in black coats with the same homburg hats and goatees. The cars on the street were all the same model in black. The idea was the supremacy of mass production. You see a lot of that in the photography of that period.

QUESTION: You must have done something right. Your peers selected *The Untouchables* as one of five feature films nominated in the annual American Society of Cinematographers Outstanding Achievement Awards competition. How about *Snake Eyes*? A top government official was assassinated during a championship boxing match. The story unfolded in the arena where a detective was trying to solve the crime.

BURUM: The story was about a crooked cop who chooses to do the right thing. You find that type of moral thread running through all of Brian's films. The detective questioned a lot of people, and each one of them had their own version of what happened. We peeled away the layers until the audience discovers the truth. We did what appears to be a single, 20-minute shot to open the picture.

QUESTION: *Mission: Impossible* was a totally different type of film that was based on a classic television series about secret agents who vied in battles of wits with villains around the world. Do you have a memory to share about that film?

BURUM: Brian likes to use a lot of different points of view. Sometimes the audience sees the story unfolding from a character's point of view. It's totally subjective. If the character was lying on the ground, the camera was looking up from that point of view. Other times, Brian wanted an objective point of view like a spectator sport. We weaved those objective and subjective shots together into the fabric of the story.

QUESTION: *Mission to Mars* was set in the future. It is the story of astronauts who are sent on a rescue mission to the planet Mars. Most of the story unfolds on Mars. Share some insights about how the visual grammar supported the illusion of being on Mars.

BURUM: We did a number of things. Because of the atmosphere, shadows cast on Earth tend to have a slightly bluish tone. We calculated that shadows would be slightly reddish on Mars, because of the lack of atmosphere. I experimented with different ways of creating that effect. One day, I was watching a home improvement show on PBS, and noticed that the reflections off a copper roof they were installing cast a slight reddish reflection on their skin. I found the copper foil I wanted in an arts and crafts store, and had the key grip put it on a reflector board. We used that device to create the right tone of reddish shadows of our characters walking on the surface of Mars.

QUESTION: We don't think you will find that little trick in textbooks about how to make films. Give us one more example of how you supported the illusion of being on Mars.

BURUM: The gravity is about one-third of what it is on Earth, so we decided to put some bounce into the characters' steps when they were walking on Mars. A big part was the performances by the actors. We supported them by over cranking the camera a bit.

QUESTION: How much is a bit, and how did you determine the correct frame rate?

BURUM: You normally expose 24 frames of film a second. We shot some scenes at 32 or 36 frames second and extreme close-ups at 48. The closer we were to the character or characters, the more we over cranked.

QUESTION: That sounds like you previsualized what it would look like at different frame rates and trusted your instincts. You also collaborated with another director, Danny DeVito, on a couple of intriguing films, *The War of the Roses* (1989) and *Hoffa* (1992). Both films earned ASC nominations. You won for *Hoffa*. It was also nominated for an Oscar. Can you share some memories of working with Danny DeVito?

BURUM: Danny and I would spend 12 hours a day during preproduction talking about every shot. He was open to ideas. We did a lot of dissolves for transitions rather than just cutting to the next scene. He wanted scenes and individual shots to evoke memories of things that happened before in the minds of the characters.

QUESTION: You recently dedicated time to mentoring the next generation of filmmakers at your alma mater, UCLA. What do you tell aspiring filmmakers when they ask you for advice?

BURUM: I tell them that it doesn't matter whether they want to be writers, directors, cinematographers or artists who paint pictures on canvas. You have to communicate a point of view. In order to communicate your story, you must be in complete command of the craft skills of your art. Without control of your art form, you render your audience deaf, blind and dumb. You must study, understand and constantly practice your craft. There is a lot of hype from hucksters about how new technology will make everyone a fabulous filmmaker. If you believe them, everyone could be Shakespeare simply because they have computers instead of pen and paper.

QUESTION: The last chapter hasn't been written in your career. What's next?

BURUM: All I can say is that I will know it when I see it.