

# Visual Effects MASTERCL



From tackling the aesthetic wizardry of such early efforts as *RoboCop 3* and *Armageddon*, to more recent work such as the *Star Trek: Picard*

series and even *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, artist Robert Chapin has a genre CV worth celebrating, as Andrew Cardno discovers with this exclusive interview...

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Robert "Bob" Chapin (also known as Dr. Rob, in select circles) is the Hollywood Everyman. Working in the industry for over 30 years, Bob has done it all. He has done VFX for some of the biggest names in the business, a stuntman of great renown particularly in the realm of swordplay, a writer and director of projects such as his hit web-series *The Hunted*, which has been running

for 24 years, and *Ring of Steel*. If you can think of something, Bob's already done it – weathering the storm on Fred Dekker's notoriously troubled *RoboCop 3* (1993), an early visual effects project, and stepping into such FX-heavy superhero blockbusters as *X-Men 2* (2003), *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004) and *The Fantastic Four* (2005). Now at the age of 60, Bob shows no signs of slowing down and continues to occupy his time with whatever he feels like doing, as *Infinity* was happy to find out...

Above:  
The Millennium  
Falcon from *Star  
Wars: The Force  
Awakens* (2015)

**Let's begin with a pretty obvious question – how did you start your career in Hollywood?**

I came to LA in 89, my brother was out here acting and writing. Meanwhile, I had no idea what I wanted to do. But when I saw the Disney movie *Tron* in the early 80s, I thought "Man, this is so cool" and I knew that was exactly what I wanted to do...

**Right, *Tron* was pretty ground-breaking when it comes to visual effects...**

Exactly! And it was because of that film that I signed up for some of the first ever computer classes at my high school. This was back in the day when we had TSR-80's, the first ever computers that people were taught how to efficiently use! I thought that if I wanted to do something like *Tron*, then, hey, I'm going to have to go to school for it. However, there were no colleges offering classes for the visual effects side of things. Nowadays you can go to any college and come out qualified with a computer graphics degree. But, instead, I went to college and did a computer science

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## DRAGON FURY

Left:  
Bruce Locke in *RoboCop 3* (1993)

Right:  
Dustin Hoffman and Robin Williams in *Hook* (1991)



degree. Then, eventually, I ended up at a party with two people - Jamie Dixon and Rebecca Marie. These two had a visual effects company called PDI - standing for Pacific Data Imaging - and I was like "Oh cool, that's exactly what I want to do, actually," and during our first conversation I had mentioned that I also did sword-fighting and coincidentally that's exactly what *they* wanted to do [laughs]. So, it ended up being this perfect situation where I would teach them sword-fighting if they would let me work for them [laughs]. I was doing all this, while still etching out some money with stunt work, which I did to make ends meet. Really, I just happened to be at the right place at the right time, which is how things work in LA...

**You are very heavily involved in both camps of cinematic creation from practical to digital, do**

**you feel like your stunt work has had any impact on your visual effects work or vice versa?**

Back in the day I was one of the few stunt guys that also did visual effects. I've worked on a few films where I've been the star, the stunt coordinator and effects guy all in one, such as *Dragon Fury* and *Lancelot: Guardian of Time*. When I was working on *Dragon Fury*, I was doing sword-fights on the show and the prop guy told me he had always wanted to learn how to sword-fight.

**You worked alongside Sam Raimi for *Army of Darkness*, what was it like working on such an effects-heavy movie so early in your career?**

You know something, it was nutty [laughs]. This was during my first couple of years in LA. I was working on *Hook* and *RoboCop 3* too, actually, and about halfway through those *Army of Darkness*

came up. It is interesting because when they shoot films like *Hook* or *Army of Darkness*, which need to look like a certain period in time, they usually go to Europe - I mean, they have the castles [laughs]. But for *Hook* they converted a set at Sony studios for the ship, pirate town and it was shot right where I live so it was a no-brainer to hop on that gig. 🐉



Then I found out that Sam Raimi was shooting *Army of Darkness* in the California desert, and they needed a lot of sword-fighting guys too – and they were shooting at night. So, for two weeks, I was doing *Hook* during the day, a full twelve hours, and at night I would drive out to the desert to work on *Army of Darkness*. Usually, I would have to catch sleep in-between takes. It was freezing cold in the outer desert but maybe it was because of these conditions that I began to feel a little creative - because it was when I was tired and freezing, on that *Army of Darkness* set, where I came up with idea for my first feature film, *Ring of Steel*, which I wrote, and which got made in 1994.

**You are credited on the Michael Bay blockbuster *Armageddon* under the name Dr. Bob - do you mind telling me where this nickname came from?**

I picked it up in school. Just a nickname really - but when I came out to LA, I actually had a "Dr. Bob" license plate. Funny story - I was approached by a real doctor once and he was shouting at me going "You, you, just took that license plate! Prove to me you are an actual doctor - because you do not look like one to me [laughs]." But it came with the

**Above:**  
A scene from *Armageddon* (1998)

**Top right:**  
An effects shot from *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004)

added benefit of never getting parking tickets and I never realized this till years later... Anyway, sometimes I let that name stick on the credits too. Just some fun [laughs].

**You were one of the digital artists on the fantasy-adventure classic *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, did you get to work in China?**

Unfortunately, no. I was in the house just chilling - doing the visual effects work in post-production [laughs]. It was unfortunate, I love being on set. While I was watching the footage, I saw something that they were doing, which was really clever. They shot a lot of Chow Yun-Fat's swordplay in super slow motion. I was sitting there wondering "So, is this tai-chi or something?" - but what they were actually doing was shooting his swordplay like that so that when they sped it up it would look more precise and tighter. Very clever, and just look at the final film! It looked amazing!

**Let's talk about some of the biggest budgets you dealt with. What was *The Chronicles of Riddick* like to work on?**

Oh *Riddick*, God damn it. There's a whole story there. Rebecca and Jamie that I

mentioned earlier, were the ones that got me working on that. They were working out of a studio on the Universal Studios back-lot with a bunch of different visual effects artists, and they were going to need about twenty to thirty artists to finish this film. It was a slog. Most days as a visual effects artist don't start till like noon-ish because you're up working late the night before and the directors see the footage early in the morning. But, with *Riddick* they wanted everyone to be there for 7AM and it took me like an hour to get there so I was up at 5AM each day.

**Yikes - of all the films in your CV, that is the one that stands out as maybe have the most visual effects "overload", it looks like it would have been a huge undertaking...**

Yeah, and the film was on a very tight schedule. With most films they plan out their schedule, it will go principal photography, post, release date. On *Riddick* the principal photography was delayed, they lost the locations too, Vin Diesel got sick, so the start date kept getting pushed back - meanwhile, the release date stayed the same.

Obviously, the effects team can't work on the film until we get the footage, or the director decides what he is doing. So, we



finally get the footage, and we have a month to complete what should have been six months of work. At this point there are two options: crap visual effects or spending a bucket-load of money to get every artist you have to work 24/7 in order to get the product finished - which was the case with *Riddick*. So, we were working seven days a week, nearly full days during this time. We are slogging through this film and the tough part is that we had no idea about the art direction. We are sitting there with these ships with back-swept wings and wondering "which way does it fly? Is it this way? Or that way?" And then halfway through production someone comes in and tells us that they are facing the wrong way [laughs]. Well, no one told us!

#### Sounds like a tough shoot!

Oh yeah, and there is so much more I could tell you. Just a lot of bad communication... And then when we finally did see the finished movie. Oh... We didn't know whether to laugh or cry... To me, it was just so bad. There were some upsides, though, because since we were doing the effects work on *Riddick* on the Universal back-lot, we did manage to sneak into the theme park a few times and ride the *Jurassic Park* ride [laughs].

**Your parents were both puppeteers by trade, did that have any effect on you joining the Jim Henson group for *Muppets from Space* and what was it like working alongside the best puppeteers in the business?**

Yeah, good research, because my parents were quite famous puppeteers, they performed for the Kennedy children at The White House! When they decided to have kids though they gave it up and got "real jobs." So, the puppets were still around but they only came out occasionally. It was like finding out that your parents were superheroes and I always wanted them to pick it back up and get into show business again [laughs]. If there is any one thing that they imparted to me from a young age, it was "follow your dreams and don't give up". When I came to LA, my mum said, "be a musician, be an actor, be a writer, even be a bum on the beach... but just don't become a schoolteacher". And then I went and married a schoolteacher [laughs], so go figure.

**As somebody in both camps, what do you prefer when it comes to film-making are you more on the practical side or the visual effects side, and do you think that there is a perfect blend between CGI and practical work?**

*Lord of the Rings* shows that in-between side - one hundred percent, for me that is when the business began to really change. There were still plenty of model shops in LA at the time of *Lord of the Rings*, one of the most prestigious was ILM who, of course, helped make *Star Wars*. However, some of them went out of business, maybe thinking there was no future after that, and with the rise of these new superhero movies we were doing like

the *X-Men* series, but my friend's company Hunter/Gratzner Industries continued to thrive. They made models and miniatures of stuff blowing up for films such as *Shutter Island* - the Scorsese classic that I also did effects work on. But they realized that they needed to use visual effects at the same time, because times were changing, so I got brought in too.

I worked as a visual effects supervisor, and doing stuff like *Shutter Island* for them was so good. Together we were able to create that perfect blend of practical and digital - and you can see that on some of the other stuff I have done like *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. But back in the day, when I was working on *Armageddon*, visual effects still hadn't really caught fire, the technology was not there, so it was just easier to blow things up practically. Now you can do it with computers, and it is safer and quicker. So, yeah, I think that mix is really for the best.

**Speaking of superhero films, your resume is absolutely stacked with comic book movies - what was it like working in the early days of comic book films?**

I have a few stories from my times on comic book films. When I was working on the *Fantastic Four* films, me and the team had a meeting with the director Tim Storie and an army of producers. During the interview Tim did not say a word, but the producers were like "Okay, so we've got invisible women and people on fire" and then after their long rant handed us about seven different scripts [laughs] because everyone had their own idea of what this film was going to be... ➡

Clockwise from top right: *Muppets From Space* (1999); *The Fantastic Four* (2005) and *The Chronicles of Riddick*



**Clockwise from above:** A poster for *Black Adam* (2022); the Cerebro sequence from *X2* (2003); Robert Downey Jr in *Iron Man* (2008); Robert's book, and he shows off an overhead lift

**Yeah, *The Fantastic Four* was being reported as quite a troubled movie, even before it hit cinemas back in 2005...**

Well, what can I tell you? Only me and the team then took those *seven* scripts, *seven...* and we collected them together and began to map out all the visual effects shots that might be needed in the first fifteen minutes of the movie and, even then, we were completely screwing around with it because it was so hard to take it all seriously - we created this love affair scene between Sue Storm and Dr. Doom, put some baby making music in there, just letting off steam because it was such a crazy production...

**Comic book purists would have your head if they saw that footage.**

[Laughs] Interestingly, when handed our take back to the producers, without all the love affairs and stuff, and they said, and I quote "this is exactly what we were looking for." Then they went ahead and shot it, because that was the only thing they could approve for shooting. The final script was still being worked on, even when they shot the opening stuff!

**Talking of films that lacked a good story, what was it like working on the recent flop comic book film *Black Adam*?**

The worst thing about *Black Adam* was after they tested it, they knew how bad it was, almost immediately... and they were ready to pull it. However, they had already sunk billions into that movie - so, they tried to save it. The main plot of the film is they kill Black Adam's kid, and he wipes out the city, which sets him up as the anti-hero. In the original draft he was the father of two kids, and only one of the kids dies - so the audience is sitting there like "well, he has a second kid" which means he hasn't lost everything. Which to the studio meant "OK, let's just get rid of the second kid" and all

these scenes were shot. Me and the team had to meticulously scrub the film and remove this poor little kid from all the scenes that he was in and there is no doubt in my mind that they didn't tell him. So, this poor kid was probably showing up to *Black Adam* on opening night after telling all his friends that he was in a movie with The Rock and then there is no trace of him within the film, which means no residuals or any benefits like that, it could have paid for his college! And that really broke me up. That is probably my strangest story from that whole very strange period of doing *Black Adam*, and just knowing it was going to flop...

**Continuing the thread of comic book movies, what was it like working on the *X-Men* franchise?**

I worked on the Cerebro sequence for *X2* and boy is there a story! I was brought in for an interview with Bryan Singer and they did not ask me a single question. Bryan was sitting at the table, and he was like a six-year-old kid playing with action figures as he described to me what was happening in this scene. I wish he did actually have action figures as

it would have helped me gather much more of an idea as to what was happening than Bryan going, "So, we've got all the X-Men and they're really cool! We've got Nightcrawler and he's disappearing in a cloud of smoke like *poof* and Cyclops has these laser eyes and they're going like *zwoom!*"

He went on like this for a good fifteen to twenty minutes as he gave me the run-down on all these different superheroes, how cool they are and what they were doing in this scene - the man had passion I cannot deny him that. Then everyone in the room just looked at each other, turned to me and went "Relax... You'll do great!" with no real concept of what I could do. Regardless, a few months down the line and the film is



This image: Robert was Matthew Lillard's stunt double in *Scooby-Doo* (2002)



Left: Scenes from *Cloverfield* (2008)



**But it is good to let the readers know that, right? Like, if you are going to do visual effects there is no guarantee you are going to be animating "Iron Man" if you get assigned that film?**

Oh, for sure - and as the visual effects field got bigger and bigger, there was more stuff being parsed out and, in some cases, you end up with whole departments working on just *King Kong's* toe. And I am not even kidding! Unless you are the supervisor, and sometimes I have been in that chair, you are only getting pieces and parts - especially on a huge blockbuster like *Iron Man*.

I do recall that for the final scene of *Iron Man*, we had to make all these intricate models and then you had to get a camera to glide across them. To get this camera exactly where you needed it, you needed to navigate this insanely complex model that costs millions of dollars, and you needed to be exactly correct. At the time we were using this motion control camera called the Buddha - which weighed about a ton, you can look this up, I am not joking [laughs] - and it had this giant arm that could swing around and go through a building, and it had to be precise to the micrometre.

**Given your answer to the last question I hope you didn't just do the grass on Cloverfield!**

I was on set for *Cloverfield*, actually, and I was super excited about it. It was around the same time I was doing my web-series *The Hunted* and they were doing the same style of camera work that I was using. One of my fondest memories of *Cloverfield* is where they are on a rooftop and there is a big explosion off in the distance and the head of the Statue of Liberty comes crashing into a building in front of them.

So, I am on set for that and I'm blanking on his name but our tech guy, who was absolutely fantastic, was one of the first people to mount an accelerometer on a camera so that we could track the camera and put visual effects onto the scene. This is most of the work you do on set as a visual effects artist, finding where you need trackers... I'll be looking around, seeing that we need a marker in the top window of a building and placing an LED light here and there - just collecting data as the chaos of the set unfolds. That scene had tons of explosions, debris and it was a pretty cool gig to work on.

**Do you remember when you first saw the finished movie?**

Yeah, and so many people got sick watching that film, the hand-held footage did not sit well with them [laughs]. But I recall watching it through a small monitor on the set and even then some people, and this was the crew, were saying that they felt a bit dizzy [laughs].

**You have done a lot of stunt work throughout your time in the industry, one such film that popped out to me when browsing your filmography was your work on James Gunn's first Scooby-Doo film as Matthew Lillard's stunt double. Could you tell me a bit about that?**

I had some friends at that shoot, who brought me in. Matthew Lillard had to fly into a guard, and I just happened to be the right build and height to double for him, so I went ahead and did it. They had a whole climbing sequence that they had to do, and I'm a climber and I know how to rig - so I helped them with this climbing sequence. Then they told me they needed a double for Freddy, so I'm putting on the character's gear and doubling for him too. Then they tell me that, hey, actually, we need all these cast members doubled - could you stand in for Velma? Then I did Daphne, so I was wearing costumes for all of them and performing different stunts. I never got credited though [laughs]. Don't ask me why!

**You worked on The Force Awakens which marked the return of Star Wars, what was it like working on such an iconic franchise?**

I wasn't initially meant to be on that project, but a buddy of mine had to drop out and I took his place. I had no idea what I was going into, he just said that I would get a call at some point. I've been working on visual effects a long time, so I can pick and choose what projects I sign up for, but when I got the call, they couldn't tell me what it was - just that it was 'Huge!'

Detective that I am, I put two and two together and go "Uh... is it the new *Star Wars*?" as it was the only big thing coming out soon - they returned with "I can neither confirm nor deny that it is *Star Wars*" but, yeah, come on [laughs]. This project was top secret, we were in a sound-stage that was essentially a military base. Unfortunately, for you and the readers I cannot divulge what it was I did on *Star Wars* - I have been sworn to secrecy for the rest of my living days and I am not even kidding. They made us sign an NDA that we carry with us until we die, not. Which is crazy to think about, because even top-grade military secrets have a shelf-life of about twenty years.

I can tell you that someone did make the grave mistake of nearly leaking something from the project. He was thrilled to be working on the show, as anyone would be! And decided to snap a picture of the slate from the day on his cellphone. It doesn't give anything from the film away, but the alarms went off!

Security was called, George Lucas was on the hotline - Defcon 5 broke out on that sound-stage [Laughs].

behind schedule and the effects people have plenty of downtime because we weren't receiving the footage. During this downtime, I thought it would be a fun idea to just insert Spider-Man and Batman and other random superheroes we liked into different scenes just as a gag-reel and we put them into the sequences with Cerebro. Somehow, this dumb gag reel stuff that we shot had made its way far enough up the line that it got mixed up with the footage from the actual film. It was nearly in the final cut; I can guarantee you that if one person wasn't paying close enough attention - it would have made it into the final film! Imagine the problems [laughs]

**You worked on the first Iron Man movie, which helped to redefine the modern superhero genre, how was that?**

It's funny because when films like that are parsed out between studios, you never know what you are going to get. So, when people see that I've worked on a film like this they are wondering if I've done the monsters, or the spaceships and I'm standing there thinking, "Man, you are going to be so disappointed if I tell you that a lot of my work on *Iron Man* was making sure the grass looked as green and real as possible every time you see it" [laughs].