

The Skeleton Wore Fishnets

Dana Fredsti

Almost everybody has the proverbial skeleton in the closet, a mistake or youthful indiscretion that haunts them. I've got one bad enough to make having been married to a man who now sports a fake Heidelberg dueling scar on one cheek and wears fangs in public look relatively innocuous. After all, he didn't have the scar *or* the fangs when we were married. I can laugh those off, secure that nothing more incriminating than a wedding album connects me to this person. Not like my starring role in *Princess Warrior*.

A lot of people, upon hearing that title, assume I'm talking about *Princess Bride* or *Xena, Warrior Princess*. I wish! No, I'm talking about a low-budget movie made by Vista Street Entertainment, a production company known for managing to fit a strip club scene or facsimile into every movie, regardless of genre or period setting. (They're also responsible for all of those *Witchcraft* movies you see on the rental shelves. Vista Street has a lot to answer for in whatever circle of Hell awaits bad filmmakers.)

I can't blame my agent for putting *Princess Warrior* on my résumé. I didn't have an agent. I sent in my own headshot and got called in to read. At 28, I'd started pursuing acting rather late, at least by Hollywood standards. Up to that point, my only on-screen part had been an extra (Slave Girl with File) in *Legion of Iron*—thankfully forgotten in the mists of time.

One of a half-dozen girls wearing short skirts or tight pants, low-cut bust-maximizing tops, and high heels, I read for the producer (also the screenwriter, I found out later) and the director, both first-timers in their late 20s. A brief glance at the script told me that this part called for a ham content matching William Shatner's. So I summoned my inner Captain Kirk and read a scene concerning what

happens when a white-hot spoon is inserted into a human mouth. Bet you didn't know that it sort of... *cleaves* to the tongue, did ya? Years later, I still have my doubts.

Long story short, I gave great white-hot spoon and got the part. Driving up to Valencia to meet the producer at a local watering hole and pick up my script, I was so excited. Ah, credulous simplicity...

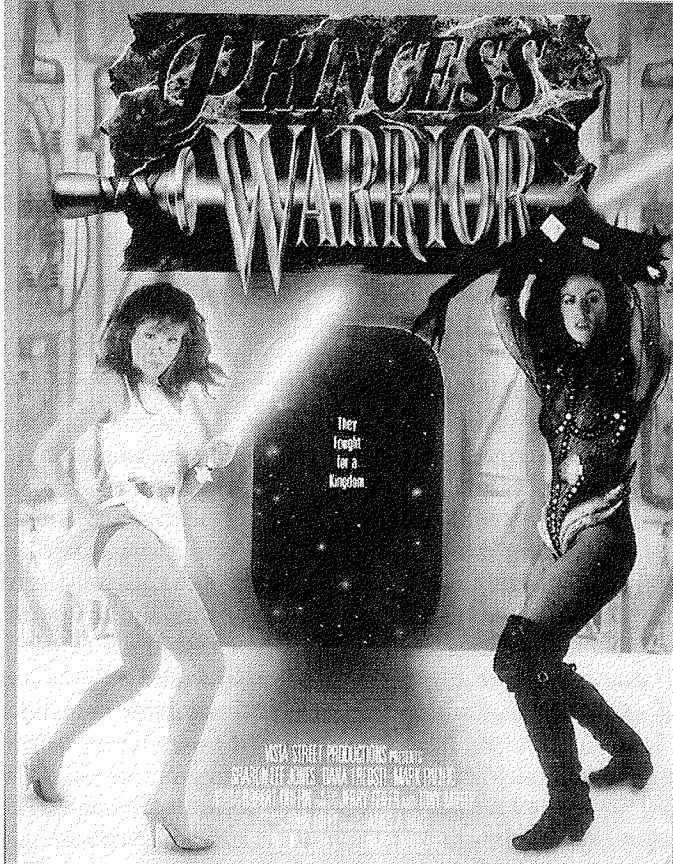
Anyway, I played Curette, princess on a planet where women reign and men wear blue lipstick. A planet where the good girls are blonde, the bad ones have big hair, and all have tacky taste in clothing.

"This brushes against Incredibly Bad territory, with bad princess Curette (Dana Fredsti) splendidly evil." •Trash City

Elder daughter of the royal family, Curette stands to inherit the throne, but her dying royal mother passes on the "ring of power" to Ovule, the younger—blonder—daughter. This so infuriates Curette that she swears to kill

her sister and take the throne. A fight breaks out over their mother's deathbed. A naked Ovule escapes via transporter to earth, materializing smack in the middle of a wet T-shirt contest where she steals a contestant shirt, is predictably doused with water, then goes on to find true love and discover the answer to "Kiss? What is kiss?"

Curette follows with two henchwomen, Bulimia and Eczema. (I am *not* making up these names.) Disdaining the thought of wearing shirts bearing the logo "Better When Wet," Curette and her gals beat up three drunk stuntmen (okay, three stuntmen playing drunks, although at times the difference was hard to define) and snag their nifty Lycra bike shorts and black cotton tank tops. Curette, being a princess, gets the shorts with the blue stripe up the side while her



henchchicks must be satisfied with orange stripes. As to where they got the kung-fu slippers we wore for the rest of the film, heck if I ever figured it out.

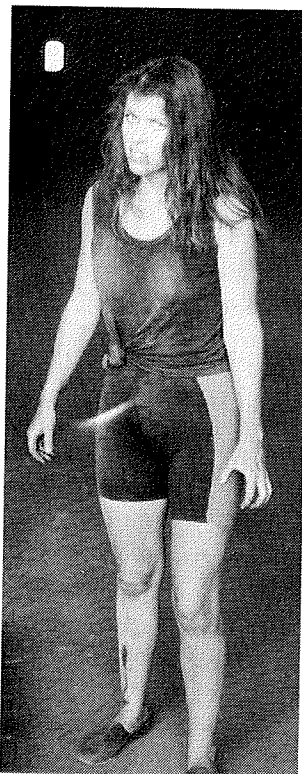
Curette thoughtfully provides the audience with the reason one has to be naked when using the transporter: because any inorganic matter in the transporter turns the passenger into a bunch of "super-charged, super-fucked ions." Oh yeah, and it was a good excuse to show a variety of naked breasts.

"For fans of low-budget films, this could be entertaining to watch."—Amazon.com

You're saying, "You read the script, Dana. You knew what you were in for." To some extent, that's true. I could tell *Princess Warrior* wasn't going to get me nominated for any awards. Hell, at a budget of \$60,000 for the entire film from pre- through post-production, it wasn't even qualified for a Golden Turkey Award. But it was my first lead part—and esteemed actor Michael Caine says to always take lead roles, no matter what the film. (Thanks a lot, Michael.) I figured the finished product would be released on video in countries far, far away, where the bad dialogue could be blamed on the dubbing into Latvian or Mandarin. This made the nudity (remember the transporter and those superfucked ions) seem less dire. There would even be an "edited for television" version I could show my parents.

As a result of my naiveté, I went into the two weeks of production—12-hour days, six days a week, 25 bucks a day—determined that (a) I would keep a positive attitude; (b) have fun; and (c) walk away with something I could use on a demo reel.

Viewing the costume picked out for Curette's planet scenes tested both (a) and (c). It combined fishnet stockings awash in glittery stones with black faux-leather encasing my torso, excepting mesh cutouts for the breasts, lined with a flesh-colored fabric to give the illusion of showing naughty bits. The sleeves had black bat-like wings attached to the elbows that I kept forgetting were there. As a result, I knocked things over whenever I moved my arms. I was spared the indignity of black ankle-high, spike-heeled gogo boots because I owned a truly awesome pair of cus-



Behind the scenes photos from the author's collection.

tom-made thigh-high black leather boots with stacked heels that made walking and even fighting possible. The end result made me less a fashion victim than fashion terrorist.

Only one male actor was actually hired for the planet scenes—to play Ovule and Curette's father. ("He's nothing but our mother's whore," says the filially disrespectful Curette, tossing in a "Silence, dog!" before blasting Dad into oblivion). He wore a silver spacesuit that I'd swear was left over from the original *Lost in Space*.

He was luckier than the three hapless crewmembers (remember the budget) drafted as male concubines for my introductory scene. Their costumes consisted of loin-cloths and aforementioned blue lipstick as I chewed the minimal scenery, proclaiming, "I hope you're satisfied...because I'm not!" The implied orgy must've been pretty tame since their lipstick wasn't even smudged. Of course, neither was mine, a deep red that turned Day-Glo orange under lighting that made me look like Joan Crawford in *Mommy Dearest*.

The futuristic weapons weren't any better. They were supposed to be lightsabers of sorts: clear Plexiglas tubes filled with colored liquid that would have computer-generated effects added in post-production. Not a bad idea except that, as I discovered while trying to choreograph a brief fight between myself and one of the good blondes, the damn things broke on contact. She and I were both splattered with liquid and bits of Plexiglas. By necessity, the "big" battle, which happens before Ovule escapes to Earth, consisted of a bunch of girls with no theatrical combat background daintily wielding weapons that couldn't make contact. Woo-hoo!

"One of the funniest but most entertaining 'lightsaber' battles I have ever seen. Scantily clad women with little lightsabers and some cool sound effects. Wow."—

Amazon.com reviews

Even worse was the presence of a foreign stuntman—a friend of our stunt coordinator, said coordinator also playing Johnny the Cop—who claimed to be a sword expert. "You always aim at eyes and knees when cutting," he told us. After 10 years of theatrical combat training, I knew that this was not only a crock of shit, but a dangerous crock of shit, and made no bones about saying so. This did not endear me to our stunt coordinator, a man with hair that would hold its shape in a wind tunnel. He sported a black leather vest and an air of machismo—both on- and off-camera—that made his much vaunted heterosexuality extremely suspect. Having a bit of machismo myself (but no leather vest), I didn't care. Hell if I was gonna back down on the subject of sword fighting to a guy whose idea of proper fighting stance was to stick his

butt out and arch his back as though he was letting loose a big fart.

The producer tried to keep both of us happy by letting me choreograph my own moves in this scene while Macho Man and his pal did the rest. I also extracted a promise from the producer that when it came time to film the climactic fight at the end of the film, my boyfriend—who also had a background in theatrical combat—would do the choreography.

Lest you get the impression that I'd developed a diva complex after landing a lead role, I got my own coffee and helped clear the craft service table when the poor Production Assistant (in charge of just about everything, since he was the only PA allowed in the budget) was overwhelmed. Stuntmen aside, I got along with pretty much everyone on the film and never claimed I had to "stay in character" to excuse bitchy behavior. I tried my best to maintain a good attitude, despite provocation aplenty:

- While the director and DP sat in the backyard of our location house eating M&Ms, my boyfriend (there as weapons handler, since guns were involved) directed three major sequences (including the spoon scene).

- The stunt coordinator showed me which way he wanted me to take a punch to the jaw by grabbing my head and twisting it to the side, necessitating lots of painkillers and a trip to the chiropractor the next day.

- When we filmed the glowing "birthmark" sequence,

the lighting assistant burned my leg with a light bulb, which also melted my Lycra shorts. (Okay, that was funny at the time.)

- 8 hours were allotted to film the wet T-shirt contest sequence (since noted as the longest – and dullest – wet T-shirt contest in film history), but the climactic fight scene between myself and Ovule only got 3 hours, including the time to choreograph it. Keep in mind that she had no previous fight experience.

- On one of the hottest days of the year, the producer failed to notify me that call time had been pushed back because shooting ran late the night before. This resulted in dragging myself out of bed without enough sleep to wait in a hot warehouse in Saugus for two hours, wondering where the hell everyone else was.

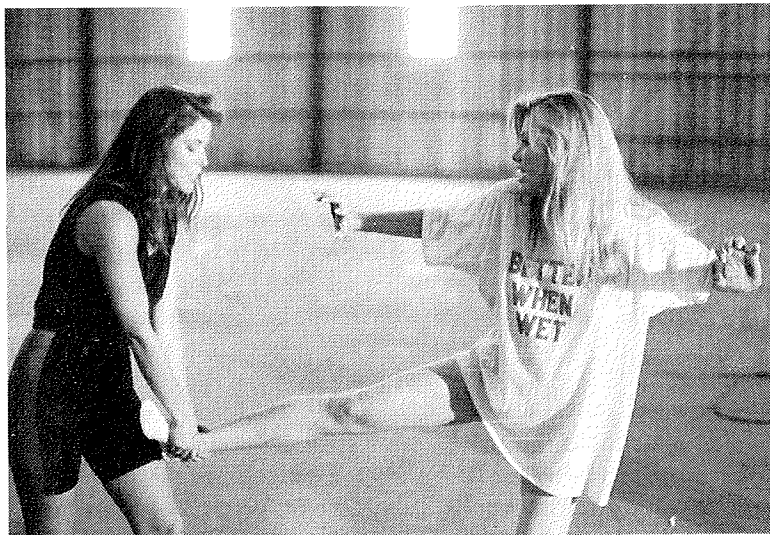
Actually, this incident did provoke the closest thing to a prima donna reaction: I was rightfully furious. The director—who had confused both myself and the actress

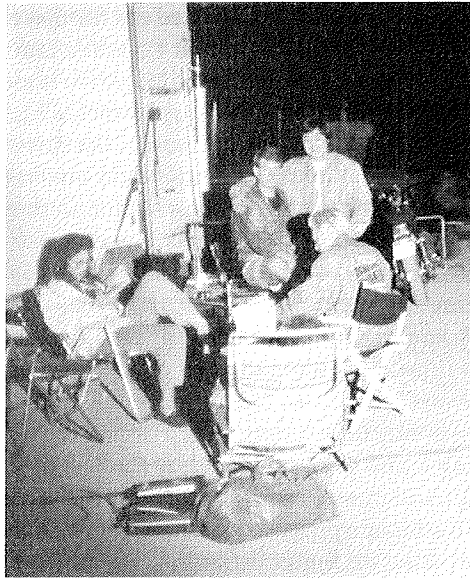
playing Ovule with our characters—avoided me for most of that shooting day. (No doubt afraid that I'd make him wear blue lipstick and pack his pop'n'fresh doughboy bod into a loincloth. Like I'd have him as a concubine!) This meant that he wasn't present for the fight scene, but since he hadn't really directed up to that point, it didn't make much difference. (In fact, his biggest contribution to the film is a scene where he plays a guy talking on a pay phone who gets interrupted by the hero. His key line: "Is this...are we rolling?")

Despite the above incidents, I had fun making the film. A lot of the time, it felt like Judy and Mickey trying to put on a show in Dad's barn. Most everyone worked really hard and was easy to get along with. The late nights and long shooting hours were mitigated by the fact that several of the cast and crew were downright fun to hang out with. One of the blonde priestesses and I stayed friends for several years after we finished filming. Heck, for a brief time, I even got along with the stunt coordinator. During the car chase sequence (filmed up and down the same three streets of Valencia), I, Bulimia and Eczema, 'Johnny,' and his partner (an absolute sweetheart named Augie) were trapped together in a car for hours on end. We came up with the Dollar Club, in which the first of us to "make it" in the Industry would pay each of the others a dollar. None of us has had to shell out the four bucks yet, more's the pity...

Even the interminable filming of the wet T-shirt contest had its humor. Our beleaguered PA was sent out to purchase the best quality shirts he could find for the contestants. I guess it was a matter of sparing no expense for the seminal scene in the movie. He arrived back on set (a bar in the local bowling alley), beaming proudly as he proclaimed, "I got the very best they had!" and handed over six of the thickest, most water-resistant cotton T-shirts money could buy. It took literal buckets of water to penetrate these shirts enough to reveal the vaguest outline of the contestants' nipples.

Several of us realized that we were making camp, rather than art, and approached our characters with that in mind. If all the actors had used the same approach, the film would've had a different quality. Oh, it would've still been bad, but more like *Cannibal Women in the Amazon Jungle of Death* as opposed to "What were they thinking?" Unfortunately, there will always be actors who insist on seeing every part they play as serious acting—or rather, actors who take themselves too seriously to get the joke—





podge that's hard to follow, glued together with wet T-shirts and a ve-r-r-r-y long car chase.

"The fun◦dopey film starts out on another planet, as a swords and breasts thing. The chase takes them here, where they have trouble dealing with dominant males, but not too much trouble. The film is witty, but gets a little drawn out in the second half."

◦Douglas Pratt, *The DVD◦Laser Disc Newsletter*

Again, none of this would've mattered if things had gone according to the law of averages and *Princess Warrior* had vanished into the mists of foreign distribution. But like a bolt of lightning, the producer called to tell me that *Princess Warrior* had been picked up by USA Network to join its late-night line-up of bad movies on *Up All Night*. He even had the first date it would air. Wasn't this exciting?

"Mixed feelings" does not begin to describe my reaction. On one hand, I was going to be on TV, a lifelong ambition. On the other hand, I was going to be on TV in *Princess Warrior*. And because the director failed to shoot several scenes over for television (i.e., without nudity), the TV version was even more incomprehensible than the original.

Okay, I thought. Late-night USA Network? Who's gonna see it? I'd be safe. Then in another of those mixed blessings, my name was one of three in the *TV Guide* listing for the movie. With a last name like Fredsti (Oh, why hadn't I used a pseudonym?), it stood out like the proverbial sore thumb.

In truly morbid fashion, I watched the television pre-

and without a strong director at the helm (Director? What director?), the result was an uneven hodgepodge of styles and tone. Combine that with the fact that all of the scenes did not get filmed and you have an uneven hodge-

miere of *Princess Warrior*. It ran on a night hosted by Rhonda Shearer, a personality with little to commend her beyond big blonde hair and a bra size that evidently exceeded her IQ—or at least that of her hostess persona. If she had lambasted the movie, it might have been bearable. I mean, *Princess Warrior* was inadvertently tailor-made for an MST3K-type show. But all the stupid bimbo did was visit LA clubs and flirt, intercut with shots of her running through alleys, large breasts bouncing in her leather top. This should've made the movie look witty by comparison, but instead of being a counterpoint, Rhonda Shearer's insipid antics just highlighted how truly bad a movie we had made. (Gilbert Gottfried hosted another showing of *Princess Warrior* at a later date. It was much more fun to watch with someone trashing it in blow-by-blow fashion.)

The days that followed were interspersed with phone calls starting with "So, Dana, I saw your name in the *TV Guide*" or "Carrying any white-hot spoons?" or just wordless laughter. I couldn't blame 'em. I rolled with it as best I could, figuring that it could've been worse. It could've been the version with nudity.

Then one day I went into a Blockbuster Video and was confronted by row upon row of *Princess Warrior* in the New Releases section. I was doomed. DVD releases made their way out in recent years, one of them purchased by the editor of *Morbid Curiosity*. At the after-party for the Borderlands reading of MC #4, one of the guests asked if I'd brought my white-hot spoon. At that moment, I knew I had to face my past and drag that fishnet-wearing skeleton kicking and screaming from its dark corner.

At the same party, another guest put the *Princess Warrior* experience into a perspective that I could accept. Jeff loved *Princess Warrior*, comparing it to a low-budget *Showgirls*. It doesn't get much campier than that, folks. If Jeff got half the giggles watching me cavort with my blue-lipped concubines that I got watching Elizabeth Berkeley take on Vegas, then I'd done my job. Henceforth, I'll be proud to be the only villainess in movie history whose weapon of choice was a white-hot soup spoon.

