

Mastering the Art

High hopes for low-budget

By Sara Bader

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A Kung Fu dream

How does someone barely out of college with very little money take one camera, a handful of martial artists and unpaid (and untrained) actors, and the mountains of Western North Carolina and come up with an award-winning feature-length Kung Fu film? It takes determination and patience. It takes commitment and persistence. It takes a gorilla costume with an animatronic jaw and ceramic teeth. It takes a martial arts master trained by the same instructor who taught Chuck Norris. It takes *three* credit cards. And it takes time. Lots of time.



The seed of TJ Wiedow's [Golden Blade III: Return of the Monkey's Uncle](#) was planted in 1999 when a student film assignment prompted the first of the trilogy, *Golden Blade*, with a run time of 11 minutes. [Golden Blade II: The Search for K'an](#) (33 min.) followed and won "Best Comedy" at the 2001 Eye of the Beholder Film Festival in Asheville, N.C. That summer, "Jason [co-writer] came over to my house with some sketches of Sung's head sewn on a gorilla's body, and we couldn't stop writing, and cracking up! This is all Jason's fault," Wiedow divulges.

Wiedow's intention was not necessarily to spoof, but to pay homage to classic Kung Fu films of his childhood in the 1980's, drawing from memories of [Saturday Afternoon Kung-Fu Theater](#). *Golden Blade III* is complete with bad spelling and grammar in the subtitles, out of sync voice dubbing, ridiculous eyebrows and of course, a magic sword. Kung Fu fans' hearts pound for the overdone sound effects in the fight scenes, particularly the classic spar in the market. The quintessential scenes that unfold and lessons learned are only enhanced by the comical characters and their Kung Fu style that teeters on the line between super hero and supernatural.

Meet the ninjas



A real estate broker, a psychology professor, two chefs, two students, a guy with a paper route and a guy who ran a skate park all walk into a room. There's no punch line here. This is the group hand-picked by Wiedow for the main roles in *Golden Blade III*. Wiedow did not troll the local theaters for aspiring actors who would do anything to get their big break. Instead he opted for his friends, girlfriend, local martial artists and a dude with a really great beard to play the core cast of his first feature-length venture. Approximately 50 other secondary actors and extras were chosen from four casting sessions in 2002.

"There were so many volunteers that dedicated their time to making the movie. It was difficult to coordinate the scheduling and you never knew when (or where) you were going to be filming next," said Brent White, who originally requested to play a 'good guy' during casting. His character ended up being the evil bald-headed bully and tax collector Peng Wang.

The physical stress of shooting and re-shooting fight scenes also got to the actors at times. Casted for his fantastic goatee and love of the Kung Fu genre, Tim Bosse, who played Tsuto, Master of the Five Deadly Hits, said his least favorite thing about shooting was "all the running."

Aside from scheduling conflicts and physical labor, cast members remember their time on the set and working with Wiedow quite fondly. Christy Blankenship, who played the lead female role of Sister Wang said the best part of being involved in the film was "making friends with really talented folks from different walks of life. The skill set of the cast and crew was pretty amazing - professional actors, highly trained martial artists and survivalists, talented musicians, filmmakers, computer whizzes, visual artists, dancers, massage & bodywork therapists - you never knew what type of conversation you might get into at any of the shoots."

Being part of a low-budget film gets the cast involved on a deeper level than just memorizing script and playing to the camera, and it can tell a person a lot about how far they want to take their acting career. "I really liked learning more about how movies are made. Watching movies has been a totally different experience for me since being involved with GBIII," said Blankenship, "but this film has proven that I have NO future in acting!" Wiedow begs to differ about her skills, "People always ask me where I found her, she nailed the part of Evil Sister to the floor."

Still, even a little local fame can't be too bad. The star, who plays our hero Chen Zen, Spencer Bolejack, AKA Spencer 'Bulletscheck,' who prefers relative anonymity to the tabloid fame of Hollywood, said, "Occasionally someone in Asheville will come up to me on the street and be like, 'HIYAA!' and get in a Kung Fu stance." They better watch out for the super-hard 'Fist of Chen!'

[Dan Burrello](#), one of the rare cast members who had both martial arts *and acting experience*, describes his ruthless character, Granddaddy Wang, as "the strange lovechild of [Tony Soprano](#) and [Pai Mei](#);" in other words, heavy-set mob boss meets powerful and wise Kung Fu master directed by [Quentin Tarantino](#) in [Kill Bill Vol. 2](#).

Interestingly, Tarantino's high-budget Kung Fu blockbuster was in production during the same time as *Golden Blade III*, but by the magic of the Hollywood wallet, *Kill Bill Vols. 1 & 2* were released while Wiedow's film was still in production. "It was unnerving to see the release of a film on the same subject with so many of the same elements but on a much larger budget, all while we were working so hard on such a low budget," said Wiedow. "Luckily, by the time we finally premiered, the buzz about *Kill Bill* had worn off – they were damn good movies, though!"

One man, one camera

Wiedow moved from his hometown, Charleston, in the low country of South Carolina to the mountains of Western North Carolina in 1998. He earned a B.A. in Mass Communication with an individual degree in Audio/Visual Production Arts in 2001. From 2002 to 2007, Wiedow spent countless hours nurturing *Golden Blade III* from pre-production to filming to the three years of editing and post-production so that someday he could sit back and enjoy the "Ultimate Widescreen Edition" DVD of the movie, complete with drunken creator commentary featuring himself (AKA Moss Herbstien) and old friend and co-writer, Jason Hawk Greenalch (AKA Professor Albatross).



There was no question that he had the determination and the commitment. In separate interviews, three of the leading actors in *Golden Blade III* mentioned Wiedow's good-natured relentlessness in getting each scene just right. Anyone on the set on any given day would hear some variation of "Cut! Great job. Let's do it again... Cut! Great! We'll probably use that one! Can we try it one more time?" but Wiedow's persistence was a direct reflection on his passion for the project, and that ultimately rubbed off on his cast.

"TJ is easy to work with mainly because he keeps the atmosphere lighthearted and fun but still productive, even when everyone is exhausted after a full day. I don't remember ever seeing him truly frustrated or completely stressed out; he just seemed to stay positive, to choose to see what was useful and good in any given situation," said Blankenship.

Chuck Blackburn, who played Uncle Zen, was Bolejack's (Chen Zen's) real-life sensei and one of the most experienced martial artists in the film. He's a psychology professor and studied under Grandmaster Shin, whose most famous student, [Chuck Norris](#), can be remembered from several action films in the 1980's. Still, Blackburn was impressed by young Wiedow's talent and drive. "I was absolutely amazed! TJ's creativity with one camera, a bunch of volunteers and scrounged props was awesome," said Blackburn. "He knew when to push and when to compromise. He was always open to ideas."

In addition to finding the right combination of people to appear on screen, Wiedow had to scout out the perfect locations for the correct look and time period of the movie which he says is "sometime before electricity." Anyone who knows anything about Asheville knows that those who call it home are proud of and dedicated to all things local. Wiedow is no exception and pooled his resources to find unique castle-like properties in the area for both interior and exterior locations.



For two years, he even lived in the space that became Sister Wang's underground laboratory, complete with the hand-crafted bamboo gorilla cage. "We were constantly collecting creepy stuff to put in there, painting walls, and of course letting the gorilla cage age naturally so that it was brown instead of green," Wiedow recalled. For the outdoor scenes it only made sense to use the nearby ancient hills of Western North Carolina. The end result is what he refers to as "Appalachian China."

Wiedow also turned to local talent for the soundtrack, which overall was one of his biggest challenges. Fortunately, music was donated by many eclectic Asheville musicians. However, none of the other sound was recorded during the actual filming. Most of the voiceovers were done by the players, but the voices you hear do not necessarily match the faces on screen and the mish-mashed Asian-sounding language doesn't adhere to any dialect from the Orient.

And then there were the sound effects... Wiedow gives an example of the harrowing detail, "There are over a hundred punches in most of the key fight scenes. Each punch requires a *swish* sound before the punch, a combination of two or more stock punch sounds, the yell of the puncher, and the *ooof* of he (or she) who got punched, not to mention the footsteps of all four feet in the shot. That's a lot of digging around in sound banks for one or two frames of movie running at 30 frames per second, for 90 minutes." Soundtrack nightmare indeed.

No rest for the weary

Since the premiere in the summer of 2007, Wiedow has not exactly taken a break. Along with taking various jobs in photography, videography and ad design to pay his bills, he has vigorously promoted *Golden Blade III* to national and international film festivals, in his own time and at his own expense. It has paid off some, and it has taken patience. Wiedow has been heard and seen quite a bit around town with [several accolades in the local press](#), including two surprisingly positive reviews from infamous and often harsh local movie critic "[Cranky Hanke](#)." And they keep coming back for more. Since the premiere at the [Asheville Fine Arts Theater](#), *Golden Blade III* has been screened at local favorites [Asheville Pizza & Brewing Company](#) and [Westville Pub](#).

But the local scene isn't enough for Wiedow. He and some of his cast and crew recently traveled to Folly Beach, S.C., where the Kung Fu comedy was chosen as an Official Selection at the [Charleston International Film Festival](#). While that was a great experience for everyone who went, for Wiedow it was more like practice, as now he's set his sights on a bigger prize. Wiedow is taking *Golden Blade III* clear across the country to the [Action on Film International Film Festival](#) in Los Angeles this summer. [Watch a video review of GBIII by AOF's Maria DelleGrazie here.](#)

If all goes well, Wiedow won't be traveling alone to the City of Angels. Eric Lamar Foster, best known as the human head on the gorilla, was involved in the film from the beginning assisting with production in building sets, choreography and costuming. Foster himself is an enthusiastic fan of *Golden Blade III* and would likely travel to China if it meant he could help promote the film and support Wiedow. However, plane tickets from Asheville to L.A. are expensive. To buy Foster's plane ticket, Wiedow is having a fundraiser screening of the film at the [Asheville Pizza & Brewing Company](#)'s main screen. After all these years TJ Wiedow is still committed to the project. Now he is getting ready to fly to the opposite coast, hopefully accompanied by his gorilla friend, where he might find his own magical sword, or at least a generous distributor who understands the true value of such a grassroots endeavor.

