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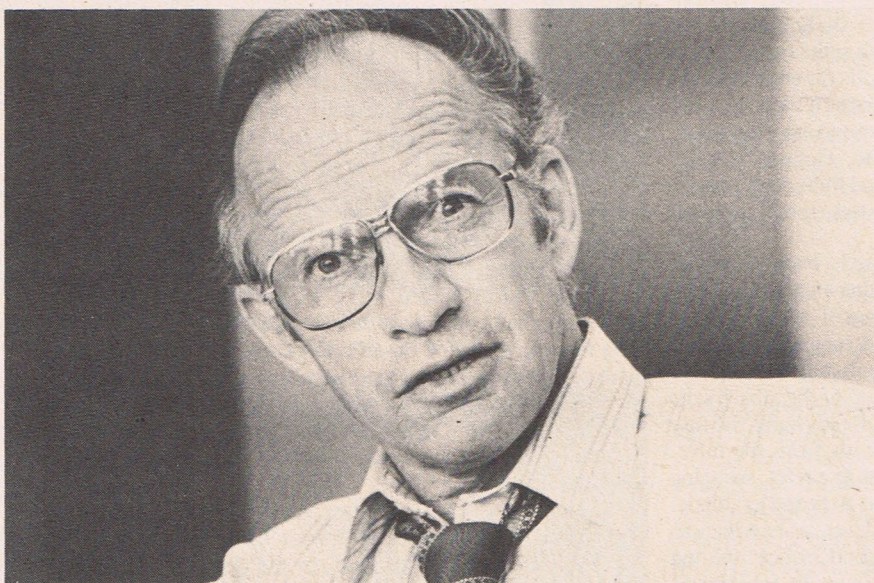
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Walker Edmiston

A man of many voices talks about his off-and-on-screen appearances.

By JAMES VAN HISE



PHOTOS COURTESY WALKER EDMISTON

In the many features which STARLOG has presented on people whose film work is all off-screen and behind-the-scenes, we've seen that an incredible array of talents are brought into play in producing a motion picture. But one talent which has remained obscured is that of the *voice artist*, a person whose talent goes virtually unnoticed when compared to the praise and accolades showered on actors, directors and special-effects technicians in a motion picture crew. In a sense it can logically be argued that a voice artist does create special effects, only the special effect achieved employs his own voice, and in fact the effect is the artist's voice.

While many actors are capable of achieving unique vocalizations as part of their craft, few of them depend almost solely on this ability for their vocation. One who does is Walker Edmiston.

Active in films and television for some 30 years now, Edmiston has had on-camera supporting roles in some 80 motion pictures and television episodes. He has done major voice matching, looping, narration and creative voice work in 60 feature films and 40 different television series (often in several episodes of a single series), as well as countless commercials. His list of credits encompasses a *Who's Who* of the genre and includes all of the *Planet Of The Apes* features, *Marooned*, *The Immortal*, *The Andromeda Strain*, *Earthquake*, *The Hindenburg*, *Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Black Hole*, *Star Trek* (TV and motion picture), *Galactica*, *Land Of The Lost*, *Trilogy*

of *Terror*, *Westworld*, *Futureworld* and *Altered States*.

In the Gene Wilder/Donald Sutherland film, *Start The Revolution Without Me*, Edmiston recreated the powerful voice of Orson Welles for Welles' off-camera lines. How did such a strange turn of events come about? Edmiston explains. "Orson Welles had narrated the film and then the producers came back here from France, cut it, re-edited and changed it considerably. They rewrote the script. When they called for Orson Welles, he was in Europe. They were stuck, but someone through the grapevine knew of me. I came in and I listened to Welles' voice through headphones so that I could stay in tune and achieve the flexibility, timing and *impending doom* sound that Orson Welles seems to be able to create, and I did the new dialogue. This is all legal. When a performer is unavailable and a picture must be finished, a substitute may be used."

Opening Doors

The road to that enviable assignment and others, such as *Star Trek* and *Battlestar: Galactica*, began with a televised puppet show.

"I started in 1949 with Bob Clampett [a popular long-time director of the Warner Brothers Bugs Bunny cartoons] on *Time For Beany* with Daws Butler and Stan Freberg," Edmiston recalls. This show, which originated at KTLA in Los Angeles, was a hit when it went into syndication the following

year. In 1961 it evolved into the *Beany and Cecil* cartoon show. "Then we went to New York for a while in the Fifties and when I came back out here I was on a local kids' show where I created a lot of characters, like Barky the Dog and things like that. But then Gene Autry bought the station and he wasn't interested in kids' shows. That was when I left to get into acting.

"Well, it's difficult when you first try to do something different. I told them that I'd had my own TV show for 14 years, but when I said it had been with puppets they really cooled and wanted to know if I'd done anything else. Well, I had done a lot of announcing. I used to announce all the sports car races at Riverside because I used to race. I won the first Riverside Grand Prix in 1957 in the under two litre class. We built our own car and raced it. So I was pretty well known in sports cars. Anyway, the announcer experience stuck with them and I was called a couple of weeks later for a part on *The Virginian* as a huckster and pitchman and that opened the door a little. It gave me one credit. Then *Maverick* did an episode which satirized *Gunsmoke* and I played the Dennis Weaver character. From those two I went to the cover of *TV Guide* and the *Bob Hope Show*. That got me going and opened a lot of doors for me.

"I did a lot of *Wild, Wild West* [including "The Night Of The Fatal Trap" and "The Night Of The Colonel's Ghost"] and *Big Valley* episodes doing interesting characters and villains.

"Then I started to do voicing, such as in *Star Trek*. Oh, I must have done six or seven. In one—'Return of the Archons'—I did one section of Harry Townes's [Rege's] voice and of Landru. With Harry Townes there was an area where a door had slammed over his dialogue and he wasn't available so I did the scene where he goes, 'We're being absorbed! We're being absorbed.' He has a lot of dynamics and nervousness and sibilance in his voice when he talks.

"In 'The Corbomite Maneuver,' where they used Clint Howard as the little boy, Balok, I was his voice. We'd tried a number of different things and then we just went to one of those very soft, child-like, ethereal vocals. It was more in timing and attitude than in voice. That's what's so important in creating a voice for creatures and all types of unearthly things. You have to analyze what it is, what they do, are they large, small, and what is the prowess behind them. And physically, of course, that makes a lot of difference as he had those big teeth and a weird little smile, and this was before so many of those pictures about strange children."

Edmiston was active in all sort of voice work in the sixties and seventies; when he wasn't working in films and television, he did commercials, cartoons—*Top Cat*, *The Flintstones*, *Sealab 2020*, *H.R. Pufnstuff* and many more—as well as the voices in talking toys from Mattel including Cecil, Mr. Ed and Mickey Mouse.

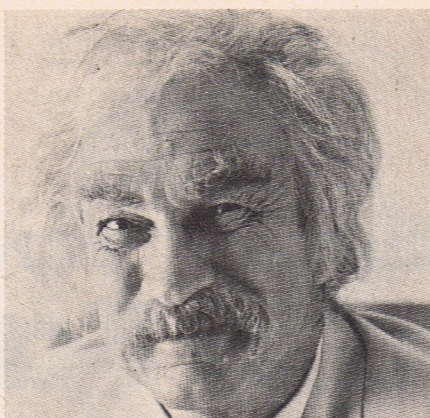
In features he was the voice of the Hyen-man and some of the other creatures in *The Island Of Dr. Moreau*. In *The Hindenburg* he looped the voice of an FBI agent who interrogates a woman who seemingly predicted the disaster. In *Westworld* he appeared on camera as the man being tortured on the rack in the medieval section of the dream park. In the recent *ALIEN*-inspired chiller *Scared To Death*, Edmiston was featured as the police chief. With *Star Trek* he not only looped the voices of three background characters in the motion picture, but it was Walker Edmiston's voice that was heard two years ago as the Klingon in the McDonald's commercial promoting the *Star Trek* Happy Meals! (Hearing him reproduce that voice during the course of this interview was quite an experience!)

A Good Ear

"I do many voices that I can't do, and people ask me what I mean. What I tell them is that I'll be hired to come in and do a voice, and prior to going in I can't do it. But I listen to the tape of the voice and that way have done things like Strother Martin in *Slapshot*. Somehow, I have this ear where I can hear a voice and reproduce it."

On television Edmiston has done various voices for *Battlestar: Galactica*, including the pilot, and in the old series *Thriller* he played the very straight assistant to a weird undertaker (played by Henry Jones) in "Till Death Do Us Part." In two episodes of *The Six Million Dollar Man* he played Russians (in one he was an assassin and in the other a General) and in two others he did voice-overs.

In "The Dorian Secret" episode of *Buck Rogers*, Edmiston not only did the voice of



Opposite: Walker Edmiston sans make-up. Above: Walker's Twain and "old prospector."

Koldar throughout the episode, but he also played Koldar and wore the mask up until the unmasking sequence when Koldar and his people were revealed to have a genetic affliction which made them look identical to one another. A younger actor was used to portray the Dorians through the use of camera tricks, but rather than go through the trouble of looping the actor's voice later, Edmiston convinced the director to let him do the voice on the set, standing just out of camera range, while the actor mouthed the dialogue. To the surprise of many, it worked, and the effect is quite convincing.

"I've somehow been involved with a lot of unearthly type films. For instance, in *The Sentinel* I did several voices, including some of the strange, weird sounds at the end.

"In *The Land Of The Lost* for Syd and Marty Kroft I did a lot of voices. I even helped to create the Sleestak suits because I've done sculpting and many things like that over the years with making my own puppets. I was Enak the Etruscan; I sculpted the head and made my own three-fingered hands for the suit so that I could pick up things. I also played the character of an old prospector from the Civil War who guarded his claim from the Sleestak with a cannon. There was one scene where I fired the cannon at them and the charge in the cannon was so strong that it actually knocked one of the actors playing a Sleestak off his feet.

"Back when they were still casting the part for the voice of Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back* I was called in to test for it. When I read the dialogue I used the same strange voice I'd used for the old prospector, since Yoda was supposed to be 500 years old. I used those same kind of highs and lows and drifting from coherency to near senility. They really liked it and for a couple of weeks it looked like I had it, but then they went with Frank Oz. It's funny, though, but when we saw the movie, as soon as Yoda started speaking, my wife turned to me and said, 'That's your old prospector,' and darned if the speech pattern wasn't nearly identical to my audition, except that the voice was Frank Oz sounding very much like what I had done.

"A lot of the things I do now are like what I did for *Altered States* in creating the voice of the creature in that. When we first started talking about it, they wanted an ape or a



monkey. They tried a lot of animal sounds, playing them backwards, but it just didn't work. Then someone said, 'Hey, I worked with Walker and he did the Devil Doll with Karen Black on *Trilogy Of Terror*.' So they called me and I came in and discussed it and they explained what the film was, in that a scientist regresses back into a Neanderthal. Well then, I said, he certainly isn't an ape. The whole voice structure would be a lot different, then.

● "I did all of the *Planet Of The Apes* pictures. I did many voices for those, including the ape baby at the conclusion of *Escape From The Planet Of The Apes*, and I did the big gorilla that reaches through and strangles one of the astronaut apes and then goes berserk. I did chimps and all the extraneous sounds and we made a master track that they could just put in anywhere.

"In this *Altered States* we discussed it and then they showed me the film. When I saw what happens, when he bursts through almost right into the audience and runs down the hall and outside where the pack of dogs chase him, I saw that there were many moods to this creature. He was not just a guttural animal. We did more than twice what they used because they didn't know really what they wanted to do. I filled most all of the action with sounds, and made them almost intelligible, but not quite.

"Here I was regressing back to the little creature with Karen Black—that same idea. In *Trilogy of Terror*, the Devil Doll (from the Richard Matheson story 'Prey,') was supposed to be from South America, so I had created words that were unintelligible since they were supposed to be foreign words coming out of this strange creature that you can't understand. I did that a number of ways—very low, medium and very high. Then they changed the decibels in the track and added an intensifier to make it a little more piercing, more shrieking. We did the same sort of thing on *Altered States* and it turned out very well."

In a business which often requires that a talent be both specific and flexible, Walker Edmiston has flourished, and his multitude of unseen voices is a ready example. Now when you go to see a film listen closely, and you'll have one more special effect to take into consideration. ★