V FOR VENDETTA: Let the terrorists win?

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In the 1970 science fiction thriller Colossus: The Forbin Project, Eric Braeden starred as Dr. Charles Forbin, inventor of a supercomputer designed to ensure a safe future for mankind; disaster ensued. The following year, playing the U.S. President’s senior science adviser in Escape from the Planet of the Apes, he set out to save mankind from domination by apes in the far future—and, again, disaster followed. Then in 1997, playing multi-millionaire magnate John Jacob Astor in a certain James Cameron-directed mega-hit, he boarded the Titanic!

Off-screen, fortunately for Braeden, things have gone a great deal better. The actor (real name: Hans Gudegast) has progressed from a struggling German-American supporting actor, resisting Hollywood typecasting (villainous and Nazi roles), to the co-star of TV’s popular WWII series The Rat Patrol (1966-68), and one of the deans of daytime drama: For over a quarter-century, he has starred on TV’s top-rated soap The Young and the Restless and has earned multiple Emmy nominations (Outstanding Lead Actor in a Daytime Drama Series) for his performance as Victor Newman. (He won in 1998.)

Braeden, now marking his 44th anniversary as an actor, was recently (August 2005) feted by the American Cinematheque with a Forbin Project retrospective screening at which he made a personal appearance.

STARLOG: The Colossus screening at the Egyptian Theater—how did that go?
ERIC BRAEDEN: I was more than pleasantly surprised. I have only now become fully aware of how good a picture it really is. Now I appreciate it and realize why Steven Spielberg was on the set almost every day when we shot it. Oliver Stone is also impressed with the film, I've heard. And when I did Titanic, after the scene where I came down the stairs in the firstclass dining room, James Cameron turned to me and said, "Never," I thought he was saying something about [the way I had acted] the scene, so I was about to become slightly belligerent [laughs]. I said, "What do you mean, 'Never'?" And Cameron said, "You don't remember the last line in Colossus?" Turns out that he, too, is a big fan of the movie!

STARLOG: When you were offered the lead in Colossus, you initially had reservations—and with good reason!

BRAEDEN: When I was offered Colossus, I was doing 100 Rifles [1969] with Burt Reynolds, Raquel Welch, Jim Brown and Fernando Lamas in Spain. Tom Gries directed that, and he was also the originator of The Rat Patrol. I got a call from an agent saying that [Universal] would love to do a screen test with me for a starring role in a picture called Colossus. I had a week off, so I flew back from Madrid to L.A., did the screen test and returned to Spain, where my wife and I shared a huge flat with Fernando and [his wife] Esther Williams.

When the next call came in from my agent, he said, "Guess what? They loved your screen test, and Wasserman wants you to star in the picture." Lew Wasserman—the president at Universal Studios and the most powerful man in Hollywood. I cannot begin to describe to you the feeling of elation, the unparalleled euphoria I felt. There was a pause, and then he added, "However..." I said, "What?" He said, "He wants to change your name [from Hans Gudegast]." I said, "You must be kidding. Never. I simply won't do it." And I hung up. Within seconds, I went from utter euphoria to depression and dejection.

STARLOG: And the reason why Universal was insistent on a name change?

BRAEDEN: Wasserman very specifically said that no one with a German name would star in an American picture. I had four weeks to think about it, and I talked to my wife for a long time. We took long walks in Madrid, and as she and I discussed things, slowly I softened my attitude. My wife reminded me of having played the son of Curt Jurgens on Broadway in a play [The Great Indoors] with Geraldine Page and Clarence Williams III, done in 1966. Jurgens told me, "Go back to Germany. You'll play nothing but Nazis in Hollywood. That's our fate." I said, "I will make a difference. I will be the one who gets out of that trap somehow."

Colossus was that escape. And up to that point, I never was burdened with the typical German accent, so I thought I had a chance to get out of it. I then considered the careers of Maximilian Schell, Hardy Kruger and various others and thought, "Well, I guess I have to bite into the sour apple." To change from Hans Gudegast was very difficult. Long story.
short, we came up with a name that was somewhat close to my emotional life. From the village I came from in Germany, Bredenbek, I took the first part, Breden. In order for it not to be pronounced 'Breden', I spelled it B-r-a-e-e-n. And Eric's a Nordic name—it could be British, Swedish, German, Norwegian, anything. Hence, Eric Braeden. It took me a while to get used to it, but...in retrospect, I’m glad I did it.

BRAEDEN: When you were making Colossus, were you at all into science fiction?

STARLOG: Not at all. And I still couldn’t care less. I knew nothing about computers, and I’m still a technophobe of sorts. However, after having done Colossus, I was often approached by computer science students who said, “Oh, my God” and “Can you tell us how...” I mean, they would ask about things like “the heuristic programming section,” and I had no idea what they were talking about! I would say, “No, no, no—I’m so far advanced in this stuff that I really cannot burden you with it. Also, it’s a interpreting the role and concentrating on the issues that pertain to performers, and that means relationships with directors and fellow actors. I was very impressed with [Colossus director] Joe Sargent. I can’t say anything but the nicest things imaginable about him. He’s the warmest, nicest director I’ve ever worked with. Hands down. He’s an actor’s director. Joe had been an actor himself, so he understands them, and you never get that feeling of there being a gulf between the two. He’s a wonderful man and a great director, and when I see the film now, I realize just how good he is. He’s damn good. For example, when you watch the crowd scenes in the computer room, he did a wonderful job with an essentially static set. But there isn’t too much action. I’m so impressed with what he did.

BRAEDEN: Didn’t you see too many films. The reason I don’t is because I can’t sleep after them most of the time. I stay up until 4, 5 a.m. [thinking about how] I want very badly to write movies, I want to direct, I want to do all that, and I know damn well I won’t. I used to watch Woody Allen films, and Ingmar Bergman, but...I can’t sleep afterward, because I so badly want to do it then, and know full well what my limitations are. So now I won’t frustrate myself with that stuff.

STARLOG: What can you say about your costars, Gordon Pinsent [a JFK lookalike who played the U.S. President] and Susan Clark [Forbin’s colleague and, later, lover]?

BRAEDEN: Gordon was wonderful to work with. He was a gentleman and a fine actor. When I saw Colossus again on Saturday, I thought, “Damn, he was good.” Working with Susan was a pleasant experience.

STARLOG: You two had a nude scene of sorts in the movie.

BRAEDEN: Susan had some difficulty, contractually with Universal, about that issue. That’s all I remember—there was some controversy in regard to whether she wanted to be seen in the nude or not.

BRAEDEN: Look, I’m basically European—you think I give a shit whether someone is nude or not? [Laughs] I think it’s great. To have any reservations about it, to me, is sick. The notion that people have strange feelings about seeing a nude body is totally perverse. That’s how we were born! You think God was ashamed when He created us? I mean, it’s utterly ludicrous! There’s nothing at all wrong with a nude body.

BRAEDEN: James Bridges, who wrote Colossus, had mixed feelings about the way the film turned out. He thought it was a little too sentimental and that Sargent humanized the people too much. He felt the movie should have been “colder.”

BRAEDEN: I disagree with Bridges, even though I can see, intellectually, where he was coming from. It’s an interesting point: There is... although a machine designed to protect mankind, Forbin’s super-computer gets other ideas after hooking up with its Soviet counterpart.

Susan Clark is Forbin’s colleague and love interest. The two share a semi-nude scene in the film, which gave Clark some concerns. The European Braeden, however, had no reservations.

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say, I sat back and thought, “I’ll be damned. This is a pretty damn good movie!” I sort of had tears in my eyes at the end, and I reflected, “My God, I never really thanked Joe enough for the wonderful job he did as a director. Nor did I thank the production designers enough. Or the producer, Stanley Chase, who put the whole thing together.” The technical aspects of it, and the directorial accomplishment, are tremendous. I never gave the film enough credit. Now, I have enormous respect for it. Colossus became visceral when I saw it again.

**STARLOG:** Universal bolted up the release of Colossus. They did a real half-assed job of it, perhaps because they were more interested in promoting Airport (1970).

**BRAESEN:** They didn’t do a damn thing with it. But I think that also had to do with the fact that it was a very bad time for movies. Remember, there was a recession in the country. For a period of about three years, between ’70 and ’73, Hollywood made almost no films. Around that time, I was approached by a wonderous agency called Chase-Park-Citron, the Rolls-Royce of the agency business back then. Herman Citron took me to lunch at the Hillcrest Country Club in Beverly Hills and told me, “You’ll be a big star one day, but do me a favor, don’t do any television right now. You gotta be patient, because they won’t be making films for a while.”

What nobody knew was how long the recession would last. But I had a child and a family to feed, so after a while, I said, “I can’t wait this long.” Hardy any films were being financed. That’s the period during which you had Tony Curtis, Anthony Quinn, Jimmy Stewart, Rock Hudson, all kinds of people, suddenly starting to do television, because no movies were being made. So I started doing television. And that was, in a sense, the end of my film career. That’s the brutal reality of Hollywood. I guest-starred on all kinds of shows, and became so utterly bored with it that I said, “I want out of this business.” Then I was offered the thing I’ve been doing now for 25 years...

**STARLOG:** The Young and the Restless.

**BRAESEN:** Correct. I looked at it with great trepidation. I signed a deal for, I think, three months—and wanted out after three months. Then they dangled the inevitable carrot. I succumbed, and the rest is history.

Incidentally, after Colossus I was approached to do James Bond. I was at lunch with [007 film series producer Albert R.] “Cubby” Broccoli at his house, and Cubby—who was very pleasant and nice—asked me, “Do you still have a British passport?” Lots of people thought I was a Brit, but I told him I didn’t have a British passport, and that was the end of that. He said that no one but a subject of the British Commonwealth—British, Irish, Canadian or I think even Canadian—could play the part of James Bond.

**STARLOG:** That would have been a heck of an opportunity.

**BRAESEN:** No question about it. But at that time, I wasn’t even that interested. It was sort of derivative. I mean, how can you replace Sean Connery? You can say what you want, but he’s the only James Bond I would ever take a look at. So it didn’t intrigue me in the least.

**STARLOG:** Do you recall the details of getting the part in Escape from the Planet of the Apes?

**BRAESEN:** No, they were just interested. Don Taylor—who has passed away now—was a nice man and an actor’s director. That whole group were pleasant people—[stars] Roddy McDowall, Bradford Dillman and Kim Hunter... Escape was an enjoyable experience. I’m just glad I didn’t have to play one of the apes! I felt sorry for those actors. They came in at 3 or 4 a.m. every morning for a four-hour makeup job. That’s absolutely horrendous. I have nothing but respect for that. Then at night, they had to take the damn makeup off!

**STARLOG:** You would think the Apes pictures would be silly movies, kids’ flicks with talking apes running around, but there are some intelligent ideas in a few of ’em—especially yours.

**BRAESEN:** The character I played, Dr. Hasslein, had a rather reasonable position. [Hasslein wanted to sterilize the apes an actor, you have to live with that. When you play the bad guy, there’s always the mixture of... There’s a smile on people’s faces, yet if they’re young enough, they’re shocked. But I was used to that, because I essayed so many bad guys.

**STARLOG:** Did you watch your own movies when they came out?

**BRAESEN:** I’ve seen Colossus altogether three times; the other night was the third. And I’ve watched Escape once. My part in Escape was an example of all the bad-guy types I’ve played. And I had developed such distaste for [that pigeonholing] that I could have screamed. That goes along with something that has been a motivating force in my private life, and hence I created the German-American Cultural Society, because I was sick and tired of the dehumanization of German characters. The fate of most German actors, as we discussed before, was to essay these terrible people. In those days, I played all kinds of heavies—American, Russian, Italian; any heavy you can imagine, I’ve run the gamut. But I was tired of that, and that’s why I love what I’m doing now.

Cornelius and Zira so that world-dominating apes would not descend from them.] I remember going to a party, and telling Steve Allen and his wife [Jayne Meadows] that I thought Hasslein’s position was reasonable, and they were just aghast! I never forgot their reaction. I said, “No, just think about it...” It made a great deal of sense, what Hasslein said.

**STARLOG:** Hasslein goes off the deep end in Escape and becomes the “villain of the piece,” but dagnabbit, he’s convinced that he’s doing the correct thing. And I’m not sure that he isn’t right.

**BRAESEN:** Exactly. That’s what made it an intriguing part.

**STARLOG:** In an old interview, you talked about the reaction you got from kids after playing Dr. Hasslein.

**BRAESEN:** [Laughs] I would walk through Westwood, where my family and I lived at the time, and parents would be walking with their kids, and they would say, “Oh my God, that’s the terrible man who shot the baby chimp.” As

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Colossus gave Braeden the chance to break free from stereotypical roles. After seeing Colossus recently, Braeden realized how good the film is. He has high praise for its director, Joe Sargent.

Universal head Lew Wasserman offered Braeden the chance of pace Colossus lead—if the actor (born Hans Gudegast) would change his name.
[The Young and the Restless], and I’ve loved it for the last 25 years. Or at least 24 of the 25, because the first year I hated it. But after about a year, I began to realize that I had been given a chance to play aspects of a human being that I was never given before.

That’s why I think daytime television has an enormous advantage over nighttime programming and most films. Actors get to touch upon elements of a character that they normally don’t get to portray. In films and [prime time] shows, you have a good guy and a bad guy. But the character I play [in this daytime soap] is very complex; he’s capable of coldness and brutality as well as affection, tenderness and vulnerability. You don’t get to explore that often in other media, and I’ve enjoyed that part of it enormously.

I’m extremely loyal to this medium for that reason. I dreadfully regret not having painted a large canvas—namely film and nighttime TV—because many people don’t see The Young and the Restless since it airs during the day. Although over 120 million people a day do watch this stuff all over the world. But if I were starring in a successful nighttime series, or if I had this longevity in films, then a larger group of people would see it. That I regret, but otherwise, I’ve been allowed to try things in daytime that I was never permitted to do before, and I’m eternally grateful.

STARLOG: Even before The Young and the Restless, you had already pretty much disappeared from features by the 1970s.

BRAEDEN: After Escape, its producer, Arthur Jacobs, wanted me to star in a film called The Aquanauts. It was going to be some huge, underwater, bottom-of-the-sea adventure, and it sounded exciting. We did some testing on soundstages at 20th Century Fox, but then Jacobs passed away, so The Aquanauts never came to fruition.

STARLOG: Did you enjoy working with Jacobs?

BRAEDEN: Oh, he couldn’t have been nicer. Jacobs used to have parties at his house in Beverly Hills, and I [usually] never go to Hollywood parties—that has been a rule of mine as an actor. Unless [the hosts] know you don’t want anything from them, I would rather remain arrogant and distant. If they want something from me, fine; otherwise, I couldn’t care less. I’ve always told that to my son [screenwriter Christian Gudegast] as well: “In this town, familiarity breeds contempt. Be aware of that. Stay distant, stay mysterious, stay away.”

However, I succumbed to Arthur’s invitations because he promised to have ping-pong tournaments [laughs]. If it’s anything with sports or competition, I’ll go to it. So I would have ping-pong games with Walter Matthau, Dick Van Dyke and all kinds of people. That was the only way he got me there!

STARLOG: It was sports that brought you to America, and sports again that brought you to Hollywood.

BRAEDEN: I was on the smallest team ever to win the German Youth Championship in track and field. My disciplines were discus, javelin and shot put.

STARLOG: And you received a track scholarship to Montana State University.

BRAEDEN: First, I was in Texas for about four weeks, then I went to Montana and worked as a cowboy for a German rancher who had come to America at the turn of the last century. I then applied to the University of Montana, Missoula, on a track scholarship. They accepted it, and I was there for a year, but the scholarship only covered tuition, not my living expenses. So I worked in a lumber mill from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m., outside of Missoula, in a place called Bonner. I worked on the “green chain,” which means you’re outdoors in the winter, just a roof over your head, the rest is open. You can imagine how cold that was. Ten guys on one side of the green chain, ten on the other side, and freshly cut boards come out of the sawmill. You’re responsible for certain-sized boards, and you stack them all night for eight hours. I was home by 3 a.m., got up at 7 a.m., went to my first class at 8 and listened to lectures on philosophy, humanities, political science or whatever. I would be dead tired. I went to track and field practice at 2 p.m., then slept for an hour and went back to work. That was my first year in Montana. And then I said, “This shit has gotta stop!”

STARLOG: [Laughs] I feel exhausted just hearing about it!

BRAEDEN: Through my girl friend and her friends, I met a guy called Bob McKinnon, who was on the swim team, and he was looking for a partner to go with him up and down the Salmon River in Idaho, the River of No Return. It’s called that because no one had ever returned from an attempt to go up against the rapids and down again. You have to differentiate between that and going down the rapids in a rubber raft—which is relatively easy. Try going up in a 14-foot-long Crestliner aluminum boat, with a 40-horsepower Johnson motor, and then down again. No one had ever done that. I asked Bob, “What’s the upshot?” He said, “We’ll make a documentary film. Then we’ll go to California.” I said, “I’m in.” Anything to get away from that hellhole that I was in at the time—although Montana is really beautiful.

We made the river trip, sponsored by Johnson Motors and Alcoa Aluminum. I almost died on that three times. The part of it that was filmed was only two miles near an accessible road on the Salmon River—the most dangerous parts were not shot. The section filmed was on the tamest part of the river. But we made our documentary, The River Runners. It almost cost me my life, but it eventually brought me to California. We were actually sponsored to take a bigger boat and go up the Amazon and down again... Thank God that didn’t work out!

STARLOG: And then you began acting?

BRAEDEN: Well, at first, I didn’t know a soul in LA. So I started parking cars, and I worked for a furniture moving company. But getting back to [your earlier question about] sports... They’ve always been an enormously important part of not only my physical well-being, but my psychological [health]. I grew up during the post-war years in Germany, which was a tough time. My Dad died when I was 12, and that makes you a very angry young man. The thing that saved me was sports—mostly track...
and field, but also ice hockey, boxing, soccer... I did everything. It got my mind off things.

STARLOG: Things such as...

BRAESEN: The first four years of my life were spent under bombs. They bombed the shit out of the town I was born in. I viscerally remember the nightly bombings, and then daily and nightly bombings. It left enormous... scars, and a great deal of impotent anger. My father died, I grew up with three brothers and I got into fights all the time—if not with my brothers, then with whomever looked at me cross-eyed... [pause] So sports was an avenue out of that complexity of emotions, those conflicts, that anger.

Coming to America, I continued with track and field, and later on I played for a Jewish soccer team called the Maccabees. By then I had become politically aware, because I had seen for the first time—at a theater in Beverly Hills—a film about concentration camps. It was Mein Kampf [1961]. I was 19 or 20, and it was the first time that I saw what actually hap-

Stanley Kubrick's 2001 may have prompted Universal to make Colossus: The Forbin Project, but the studio subsequently dropped the ball in marketing the result: a truly thought-provoking motion picture.

pened in those camps. In German high school, we had not discussed it; we studied everything up until the Second World War, and then Adolf Hitler was dealt with sort of... descriptively, but not really seriously.

So my introduction to this horror was in 1961. I'll never forget it... It was one of the [eye-opening] moments of my life. I wrote letters full of vitriol and anger to my mother and asked, “That is what my father's generation was part of?” He was dead, so I couldn't ask him questions. I went through this whole enormous upheaval of anger, shame, guilt and fury. Very little has been done about my generation's reaction to all that. It's one of the most difficult things to deal with, because there's nothing you can do to undo it. So I joined the Maccabees, and whilst essaying Nazi characters on The Rat Patrol and [other projects], I played soccer with the Star of David on my chest every Sunday. We had seven Israeli players, two Brazilians, a Mexican and two Germans, and we won the 1972-73 U.S. Championship. That's one of the proudest moments in my life.

STARLOG: And, as you mentioned earlier, you co-founded the German-American Cultural Society.

BRAESEN: Our main aim is German-Jewish dialogue. We have Jewish members and non-Jewish members; it's consciously and intentionally a mixed group, and we discuss issues that pertain to this subject matter. I also have very close relations to Israel, I visit there, often, as a guest of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. I have a deep sense of solidarity with that country. If you think about it for five minutes, you realize that Israel is largely a product of the Holocaust and that, as Germans, we have a responsibility—my generation has a responsibility, first of all—to make sure that none of that horror ever occurs again.

You do that by insuring that democracy remains intact and that no one is allowed to invoke the so-called “emergency laws.” Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution allowed Hitler to create an emergency, so he was able to shut down all opposing press and incarcere any one who was against him. It allowed that bastard to completely take over and suspend all democratic rights. That we must never allow again. There's a danger in this country right now, because there are fewer and fewer people taking over more and more media. It leads to oversimplification. We need a diversification of news and opinions in order to insure that democracy survives. That is the true lesson to be learned and extrapolated from the Nazi experience.

STARLOG: Getting back to your TV career, let's bounce a few titles off of you. Kolchak: The Night Stalker?

BRAESEN: [Laughs] We did that one [continues to laugh], I think on the Queen Mary. [More laughs]

STARLOG: And you were the werewolf?

BRAESEN: [Laughs] Allen Baron, an old friend, was the director, and we had lots of fun doing that.

STARLOG: And Wonder Woman?

BRAESEN: Lynda Carter was extraordinarily beautiful. And that wonderful actress, Ken Mars, was in it, too. Beyond that, I don't remember a damn thing. What I recall of Wonder Woman is nothing except that Lynda was gracious and one of the most beautiful women I've ever worked with—and I've worked with a few.

STARLOG: IMDb lists you as an uncredited actor on Joe Dante's Piranha. Were you a part of that production?

BRAESEN: I didn't do that, and let me tell you why. I was offered a role, and I went down to the location, but it was so haphazard that I turned around and said, "No, thank you." It was so shoddy, the whole thing, that I said, "Not interested," and left before I started.

STARLOG: A little while ago, you mentioned your son. What is he doing now?

BRAESEN: I'm proudest of his accomplishments, because he does what I've always wanted to: He writes. And he's a damn good writer. He goes under the name of Christian Gudegast, and he scripted A Man Apart [2003] and is writing all kinds of other things right now. And he's going to direct soon. You will hear from him. No question.

STARLOG: I read a bunch of old interviews with you, and almost invariably the interviewers mention that you don't suffer fools gladly and you're very intense and arrogant. How come I find myself talking to a pussycat? What have you done with the real Eric Braesen?

BRAESEN: "Arrogance" isn't really the right word; it's a sense of integrity and knowing who I am, and I will not kiss someone's ass in order to get somewhere. Either buy what I have to offer or don't—and I don't give a damn. I am really most cooperative when I work with people who approach me on an equal footing. But when I detect any kind of condescension, I'll come after you so fast, you have no idea. And I don't give a shit who you are, I don't give a damn whether you're a cop or what director it is—and directors have the tendency to megalomania. As soon as I notice any of that, I'll come after you. You will know that I am around.

If you approach me in a decent manner, if you treat me as a human being, with respect, I will treat you with respect. Immediately. No questions asked. Let me give you an example: I cannot stand it when I'm with friends of mine, American friends, who deal very arrogantly with busboys or waiters. I've been one myself, and it's important to deal with other human beings with respect, regardless of what they do. I don't give a damn if they're janitors, busboys or doctors.

If I see a human being in you, and we relate as human beings, that's fine. But if you try to be condescending with me in any way, I'll come after you. That's as simple as it is. I don't suffer people who use authority arbitrarily. But if you treat me as a human being, with respect and decency, you can have anything.