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Jeff Daniels and John Goodman face a new meaning in fear: *Arachnophobia* (see page 29).

Arachnophobia Photo: Richard Foreman/Copyright 1990 Hollywood Pictures & Amblin Entertainment

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By MARC SHAPIRO

**H**ow would you like to go through life having complete strangers come up to you and call you Butthead? Sound like your worst nightmare? For Thomas F. Wilson, who played Biff in the *Back to the Future* trilogy, it is baggage he is happy to carry.

"Yeah, they call me Butthead, and they want me to knock them in the head and say, 'Is anybody home?'" laughs the comic-turned-actor. "But they're doing that because they love my contribution to the *Back to the Future* movies, so being called a butthead is something I can live with."

Wilson, post-*Future*, is certainly reaping the benefits of playing a time-traveling bully. He is currently in the editing stages on a comedic "making of *Back to the Future III*," which he co-produced with Michael J. Fox. Also on the production line is a comedy special for HBO, and ink is drying on a Wilson development deal with Disney.

"Being in those three movies has definitely given me some real shots," says Wilson. "They were such high profile films and I had such a big part in them that people immediately began to take me seriously as an actor."

It is easy to see why casting people have found Wilson's number for, once you get past the obvious hook of *Future* top-liners Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, writer/director Bob Zemeckis and writer/producer Bob Gale, the actor was literally all over these films: doing numerous variations on Biff in split screen, performing in makeup and costume sequences, and showcasing his skills as a performer.

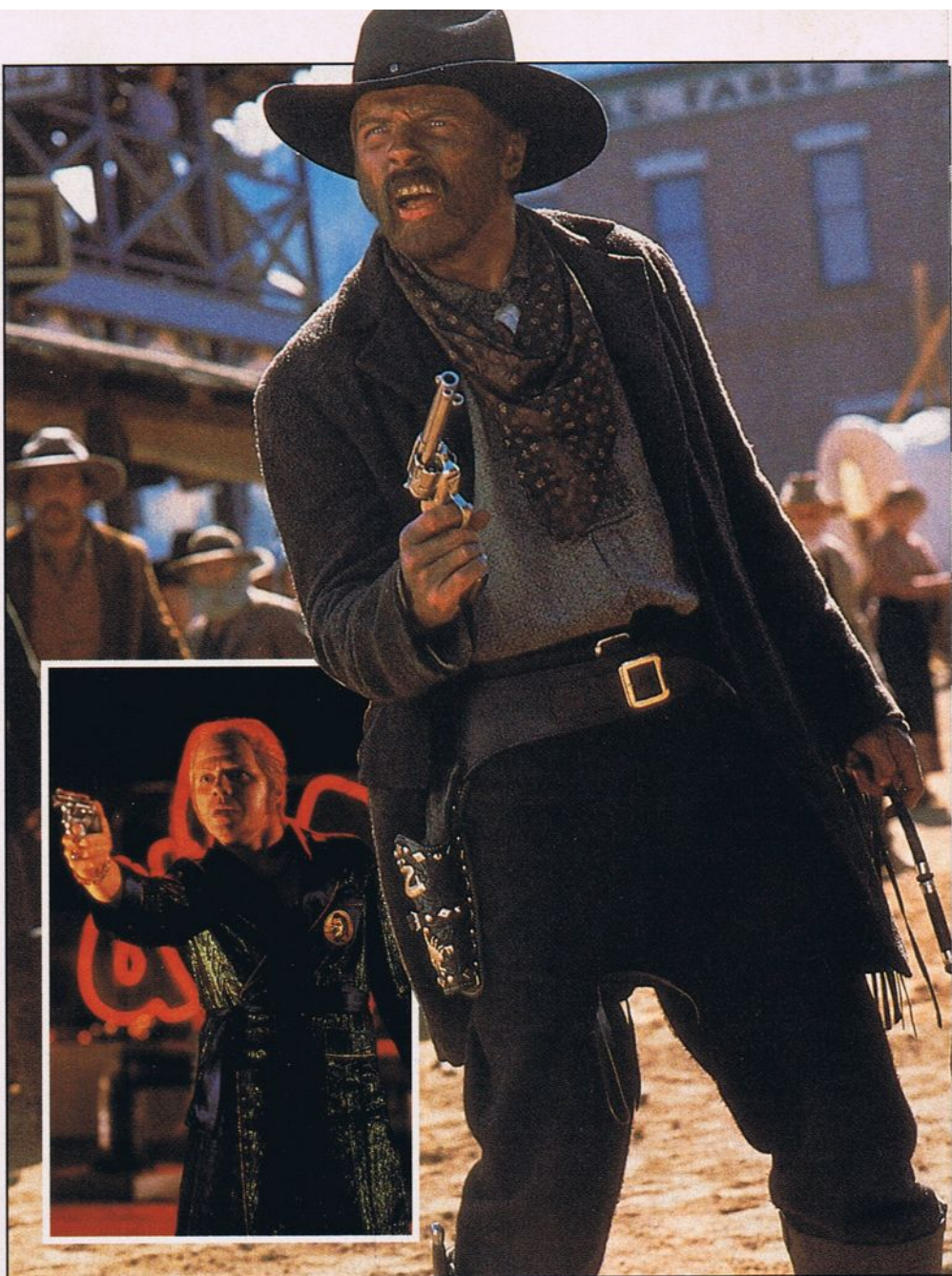
"Probably the one thing I showed that people haven't picked up on was the fact that it is possible to function after doing 20-hour days and getting a half-hour's sleep."

Wilson drops the yuks in favor of a more candid look at why moviegoers are attracted to Biff.

"People love the character because, ultimately, Biff is a failure. Biff doesn't win in the end, which is why people like him. He's this horrible guy throughout each movie, but you can be pretty confident that he's going to get slugged in the head and be unconscious at the end."

But within that relatively simple character profile, Wilson claims that Biff underwent quite a few changes throughout the three films.

"Biff became very different things as the films went along. For much of the first film, he was your basic bully who enjoyed other people's misfortune and enjoyed inflicting pain. It isn't until the very end of the film, when he attempts to molest Lorraine in the car, that we see that there's a truly evil side to Biff. That was a pretty scary moment in what, to that point, had been a lighthearted film. But I felt it was important that we saw that side of him. Sure, Biff's a buffoon, but when push came to shove, we saw that he was actually a very bad guy.



## BIFF TO THE FUTURE

Pausing on trips to past & present,  
Thomas F. Wilson comments on life as a  
lovable butthead.

"And I think that attitude pretty much carried over into the second film. Biff, as a crotchety old man, projected some pretty bitter stuff. We got to see what happens to a bully when he gets old and is still basically a loser. That was a great change in Biff's character that I really enjoyed playing."

Wilson describes Biff in *Back to the Future III* as "a further change" as we watch Biff's great-great-grandfather,

Buford, as "the first evil seed to take that off-ramp into the realm of bad." But the actor notes that while certain character tweaks were made during his trio of trips *Back to the Future*, the essence of Biff, at least to his way of thinking, remained the same.

MARC SHAPIRO, STARLOG's West Coast Correspondent, profiled Bob Gale in issue #156.



“Over the course of the three films, Biff has stayed consistently bad. And for anybody who hasn’t seen the third film yet, *don’t* look for a *Return of the Jedi* type ending where Biff says, ‘You know, you people aren’t so bad after all.’ Biff has hated the McFlys all along and it wouldn’t be true to his character to suddenly change at the end.”

### Yesterday’s Evil

Thomas F. Wilson had already made a name for himself as a stand-up comic when he auditioned for and ultimately captured the role of Biff.

“What I saw in the part at that point was that Biff was more of a speed bump than anything else,” he says. “His actions were more of a catalyst then. You really didn’t see the textures and the subtext that would come in the sequels.”

Wilson recalls that he spent much of his time on the first *Back to the Future* set “trying not to stink up the place.”

“This was my very first feature film, so I spent a lot of time on that first movie just trying to stay out of everybody’s way and not accidentally kick out any plugs. I spent a great deal of time paying attention to Bob [Zemeckis] and doing what I was told.”

However, Wilson’s fear of “stinking up the place” became a reality when he and his band of thugs ended up in a manure truck.

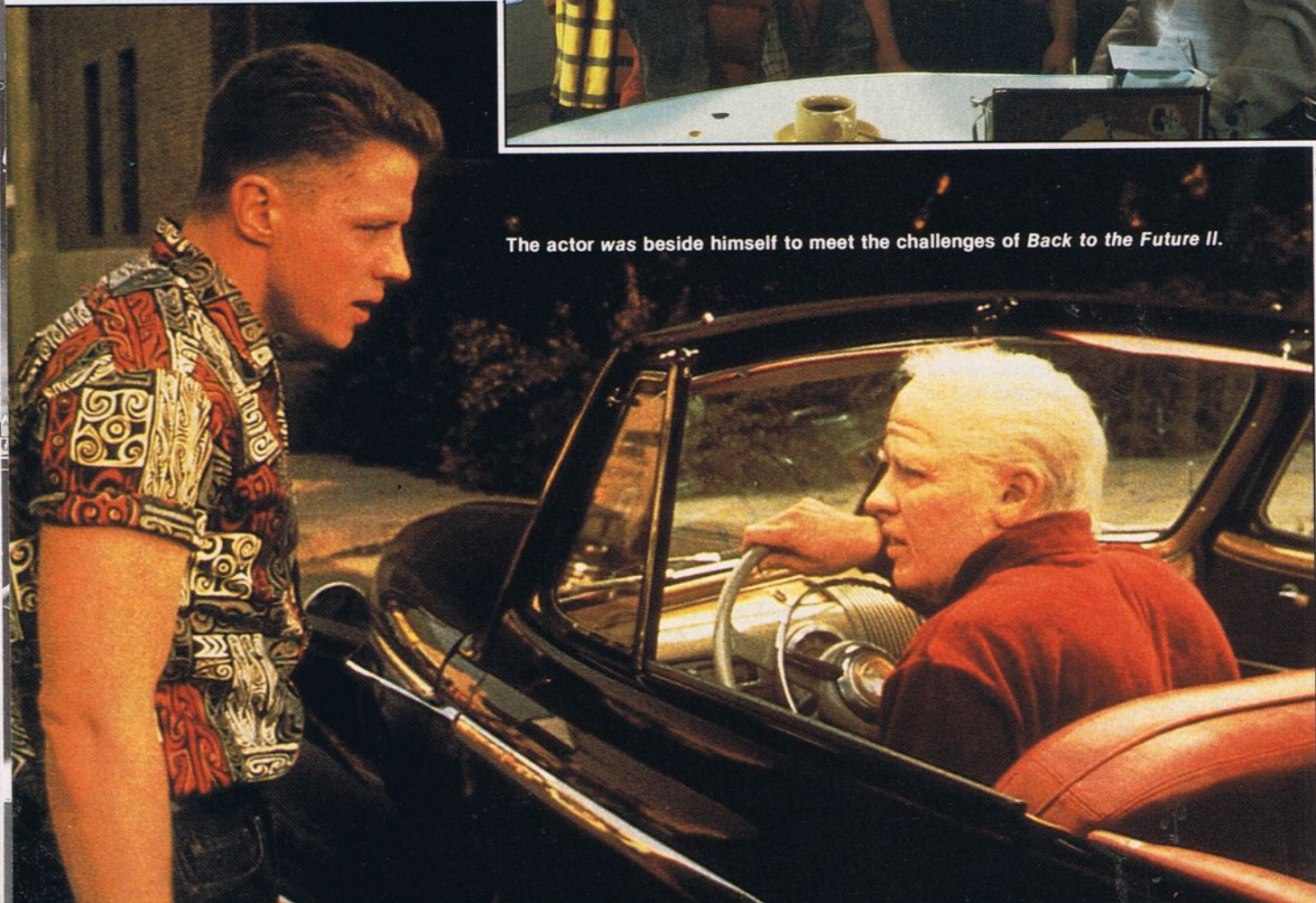
**Making his film debut in the original Wilson’s main concern was “trying not to stink up the place” acting alongside Michael J. Fox and Crispin Glover.**



Thomas Wilson notes that there was never a danger of Biff going soft on Doc (Christopher Lloyd) and company in the third film because there was a grand, evil tradition to uphold.

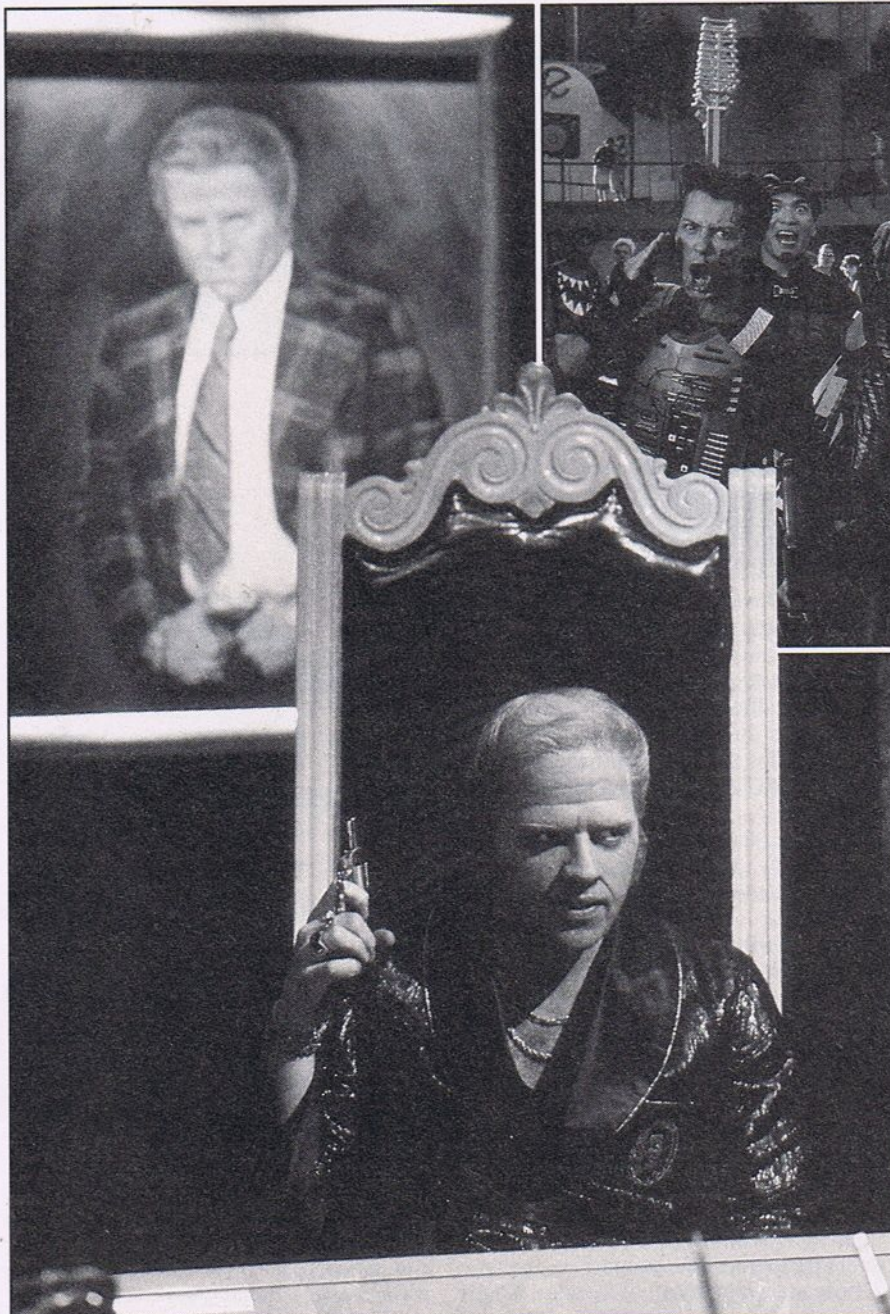


Future Photo: Copyright 1985 Universal City Studios



The actor was beside himself to meet the challenges of *Back to the Future II*.





"He's this horrible guy throughout each movie, but you can be pretty confident that he's going to get slugged in the head and be unconscious in the end," he notes.

"Ah, yes, the glamorous side of filmmaking," groans the actor at that memory. "I was buried for four hours up to my neck in a mixture of peat moss, manure and cork bits. Needless to say, I didn't have too many friends after that scene was shot."

Wilson also found much to remember in the first film's climactic sequence with Lea Thompson in the car.

"We've all got a little bit of Biff in us, but I never had that much. I had to reach down inside myself and pull out some really ugly feelings to be the brutal Biff in that scene. And I would guess that Lea had to do the same in terms of being truly afraid of what was about to happen to her. That scene proved a real triumph for me because it showed that I could be somebody that evil."

Wilson rode the success of the first *Back to the Future* into parts in the slasher spoof

*April Fool's Day*, *Action Jackson* and *Let's Get Harry* as well as continuing to perform in comedy clubs. And when the call went out for *Back to the Future II* and *III*, Wilson eagerly replied.

"I was very excited to get the opportunity to work with those people again. And it wasn't that difficult to get into the character after a four-year break. Once I got into the clothes and got that '50s style haircut, I was Biff again."

And it was a Biff that in *Back to the Future II* who was quite literally beside himself.

"The second film was easily the most difficult for me," recalls Wilson. "I was playing six different versions of Biff and his future relatives and so I was always in and out of makeup and doing a lot of split screen work. I was going to work at 3:00



To the negative criticism of *Part II*, Wilson responds, "Sure, it was dark, but you have to shake up life at times or you don't have much of a movie."

a.m. and coming home at 8:00 p.m. It really tested the limits of my ability to concentrate and to mentally keep track of all the Biffs."

Typical of the acting stretch for Wilson was *Future II*'s scene in the car in which Biff hands himself the sports almanac.

"I came in, sat in the makeup chair for six hours, did one half of the scene and then came back and screamed a lot while they took the makeup off. Then, I went back out as young Biff and did the other half of the scene. I had an earpiece and I was getting my lines as well as Bob's directions fed through it."

By contrast, Wilson's assignment in *Back to the Future III* was everything he wanted it to be.

"It was a lot of fun, primarily because it was a Western. I got to ride a horse, learn to rope and quick draw a gun, and in one scene, act out every boy's dream of walking into a saloon, pushing those swinging doors apart and have everybody in the place clear out of your way.

"The Marty hanging scene was a real surrealistic experience for me. There I was, sitting high on this horse and spinning a rope over my head. I felt just like John Wayne."

But he was, in fact, basically Biff and, by the third film, Wilson was totally in control of Biff.

"By the third film, I definitely knew the character. In the first two films, people were offering me all kinds of suggestions on how to play Biff, and to a certain extent, I was listening. But by that third film, my response was 'Wait a minute, I know this guy.' I was coming to the character's defense because I knew him better than anybody else."

Philadelphia native Thomas F. Wilson studied international law at Arizona State before turning his attention to entertainment

(continued on page 72)



## Paulin

(continued from page 61)

challenge in *The Right Stuff* came from playing material that was both historically accurate and extremely well-known.

"You couldn't just say things like, 'We have lift-off and the clock is running,' or 'You're on your way, Jose.' That last line that Slayton said struck a particular note with me because I can remember as a child watching that first Alan Shepard flight, hearing Slayton say, 'You're on your way, Jose,' and wondering what the hell he was talking about. You tend to try extra hard to make something authentic when it's a childhood memory," says the actor.

By his own estimation, Paulin is an "actor who has always worked. But being in a high profile picture like *The Right Stuff* sure didn't hurt my career. I got many calls to play astronaut parts after that film. But typecasting is an easy thing to fall into, so I deliberately avoided everything that involved my having short hair for a long time. I didn't want to get the tag of, 'Yeah, Paulin does great military types.'"

A valuable acting lesson was learned in what Paulin considers "a wonderful apprenticeship role" as a space station operator in the Roger Corman quickie *Forbidden World*.

"Since I come from a Method background, I wanted things to be honest. So, when we shot the dinner scene, I did my homework and figured my character was the kind of guy who would wolf down his food. We were shooting this scene where we were eating poundcake with this disgusting red sauce on it, and I was *downing* these poundcakes. It was about halfway through my third poundcake, when I was feeling that I was about to throw up, that it dawned on me that they could be shooting this scene all day! It was at that point that I stopped wolfing and started nibbling," he laughs.

Paulin worked with director William Friedkin on "Nightcrawlers," a riveting episode of the new *Twilight Zone* in which he played a Vietnam vet haunted by all-too-real memories of the war.

The actor, whose screen credits also include *A Soldier's Story*, *From Hollywood to Deadwood*, *Teen Wolf* with Michael J. Fox, *Under the Freeway Sign* and the TV miniseries *East of Eden*, returns to the subject of *Captain America* and whether his disfigured alter-ego could find his way to a possible sequel.

"Initially, we had two ways of shooting the ending. In the first, we were going to make it very clear that the Red Skull was dead. The way it was finally shot it appears that the Red Skull has probably died. But my guess is that, if there were a sequel, the character could be back.

"And I wouldn't mind playing the Red Skull again. With a character this complex, there are always new areas to explore. And as long as they could provide that complexity in future scripts, I would love to continue to play him." ❄️

## Wilson

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with an acting stint in summer stock productions at Villanova University. He then went in for stand-up comedy and quickly moved up the ladder with regular appearances in numerous East Coast clubs.

### Tomorrow's Promise

Wilson took his act out West in 1981, alternating Los Angeles club appearances with commercial and episodic television work. And it is his comedy background, the actor claims, that helped him in dealing with elements of the *Back to the Future* saga.

"I think it was a definite advantage in terms of knowing when a joke comes in and how to play it," says Wilson. "Biff has had several good, jokey lines in each of these films and coming from a comic background has given me the skills to deliver those lines with the maximum impact.

"Being a stand-up comic has also allowed me to deal with the pressure of delivering the goods each day on the set. When you're on stage in front of a few hundred people and a joke bombs, the reaction is obvious. In movies, the camera replaces the crowd, and when the camera rolls, you better be ready for any reaction."

Wilson was ready for a negative reaction toward the end of the third *Future* film. Anyone would be if they had been cooped up with the same group of people for nearly a year.

"I was thinking, 'The good feeling between all these people just isn't going to last.' The pressure was too great. Somebody was going to explode and there was going to be a real ugly scene. But I was amazed because the longer we went on and the more burned out people were getting, the better friends they became. The relationship over the course of the last two films changed, but happily, for the better."

With the trilogy behind him, Wilson takes a quick look back at the relative merits of the *Futures*.

"The first film was as close to perfect as you can get. I had never seen a tighter script. The third film had a great story and was my favorite in terms of what I got to do in it. But I think the stock will rise on that second film as the years go by. Sure, it was dark, but you have to shake up life at times or you don't have much of a movie."

Like most smart actors, Wilson is shying away from Biff-type roles as he picks and chooses upcoming projects. No, he's not trying to put distance between himself and his breakthrough role. In fact, Thomas F. Wilson is going to miss the big guy.

"Yeah, I'll miss Biff the way you miss an old teacher who was a pain in the neck," he says. "Biff is always going to be nostalgic for this period in my life. Being Biff and making these movies was a very difficult process, but it's an experience I'll look back on fondly. But I'm walking away from it happily, and I'm looking forward to the future." ❄️

## Marshall

(continued from page 32)

endangered species, is one that Marshall describes as "starting off appearing to be one thing and ending up something else."

The director returns to the subject of spiders and what this first outing in the hot seat has taught him.

"I'm learning a lot about compromising," he says. "I'm constantly changing things to fit with changing situations. I've learned how difficult it is to shoot out of continuity. Shooting second unit in the past was easy because the first unit directors had to come in and match my stuff. But on this film, we're shooting one part of a scene and finishing it six weeks later, so I'm having to remember what we did and how things looked and try to keep all these fragments clear in my head.

"But probably the most important thing I've learned is to have your script finished *before* you start filming. Since we've been updating the script as we've gone along, we've never had enough prep time to adjust to the problems we've faced with the spiders. If we could have written things a little differently, we could have made the spiders work better."

One potential problem that looms large is whether Disney, who is jumping into the genre thriller arena with this Hollywood Pictures film, might take the scissors to *Arachnophobia* to preserve their decades-old wholesome image. Marshall doesn't appear worried that his directorial debut might be neutered.

"I don't think the Disney people are as concerned about maintaining an image as they are about reaching as broad an audience as possible. They've told me that they want this film to be scary but they don't want it to be terrifying. I told them, 'OK, but how will I know when I've crossed the line?' So, I said, 'I'll make a deal with you. Let me shoot *everything* I want to shoot and, if it's too much, we can cut it back later. At some point, we'll all sit down and decide what's scary and what's terrifying and I would like to think when that time comes, we'll be adult about it.'"

Marshall has nothing else definitely planned beyond finishing *Arachnophobia*, but he does admit that there are certain kinds of films he would like to address in subsequent directorial assignments.

"I would like to do a comedy, an action picture and, maybe, a thriller. If George Lucas does any more *Star Wars* movies, I would sure like to direct one of those. But I don't think I would be interested in doing a sequel to this movie. I've done my spider movie."

And, to a certain extent, *Arachnophobia* is having its effect on Frank Marshall.

"I had many dreams about spiders at the beginning of this film. I can't say the spiders are haunting me yet, but we've got some scenes coming up that are going to be pretty intense. And I'm *convinced* that's when the bad dreams will come." ❄️