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Exclusive interview with actor Eric Jacobus

MARCH 1, 2017 BY [AMIE CRANSWICK](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

david j. moore chats with actor Eric Jacobus...

The world has yet to learn the name Eric Jacobus. Ladies and gentlemen, hear the name and speak it because he's here, and he's about to break through. Working way off the grid and completely off the radar, Jacobus, a practitioner of Hapkido, has been building himself up through impressive short films and totally independent feature films, namely with two feature films **Contour** (2006) and **Death Grip** (2012), both of which he wrote, directed, and starred in, and the outstanding short films **Rope-a-Dope** (2013), **Rope-a-Dope 2** (2015), and this year's martial arts comedy **Blindsided** (2017). He's already appeared in the second season of **Mortal Kombat: Legacy** (2014) as Stryker and in Segment A of **The ABCs of Death 2** (2014), and he's on a clear and calculated path of action stardom.

It's obvious you're really into Hong Kong movies; your movies hearken back to the glory days of Golden Harvest.

I discovered Jackie Chan when I was around 17 or so. That's about the time when his movies were being released in my hometown in theaters.

We're talking Rumble in the Bronx and Supercop?

Yeah. I saw **Rumble in the Bronx** and **Operation Condor** in a theater. I guess that was around early high school. I really loved it. Nothing really was happening during that time period, and come 2000 or so, I called up my friend who was also a Hong Kong movie fan, and he was the only one I knew in my hometown – Redding – that I could say, "Hey, do you want to try this out – to make a Jackie Chan movie?" It sounds absurd. We had a video camera, we had a computer, and I thought we knew how to edit video. "Let's just try it out!" I thought I knew how to put a fight scene together. I'd watched enough of them – I'd watched like 500 Hong Kong films by that point. I got really obsessed with it. I lived like four hours from Chinatown. I would go down there and spend almost my whole paycheck. Whatever I could get my hands on. I loved it. I wanted to do it. That was it. We started a group – The Stunt People. The name just kind of came to us. The idea was that we were everyday guys. Our movies have always had that everyday guy feel. That's what we go for. We don't try to do ... we're not trying to be Bruce Lee's. We're trying to be action stars that can identify with the common man. Like Jackie Chan or the early vaudeville guys.

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Exactly. I don't see you guys running from explosions. I see you guys fighting in close quarters, on streets, in warehouses. I definitely saw the Jackie Chan influence in your movie Contour. Your movie Death Grip reminded me a little bit of Heart of Dragon.

Yep.

Where have you gotten your training? You can't do that stuff unless you train hardcore.

I started taking martial arts when I was 20. Before that I did a little gymnastics. And weight lifting. When I started training, I did Taekwondo for two years. Then I took up Hapkido, and I've been doing that ever since. It's known as a throw-heavy style. The kind you see at the end of **Game of Death**. What I do focuses on a lot of punching, a lot of kicking, a lot of throwing, a lot of grappling.

You mentioned earlier that there was nothing going on in the world of action movies when you became swept away by Jackie Chan. This was that period when guys like Seagal and Van Damme were just beginning to do straight-to-video movies and Schwarzenegger was doing stuff like Batman and Robin and End of Days. Not a good time to be an action star. Why do you think that was happening?

I think I have a good answer. For Hong Kong action stars, it had something to do with the handover, and I think that's why people from Hong Kong were starting to do stuff in the U.S. I know some Hong Kong people who moved to the U.S. because of that. This was around 1997. In America, I think it had to do with the borders suddenly dropping in terms of trade, so the entertainment industry just seemed to go over. When the Berlin Wall fell, it was hard to come up with a new enemy. Before that, it was easy. You had South American dictators, you had drug cartels, you had the Russians. It was easy to make an action movie. Find the bad guy and kill 'em. But who was the bad guy in 1995? Well ... I don't know. We wanted to do business with Russia, so we couldn't make them the bad guys anymore. Globalization ...

That happened with the Bond movies too.

Absolutely. It was blatant. In some countries, it still is blatant. They're doing it with Japanese and British. Because they have a very nationalistic film market. Action films require a villain. There was like a five-year period where we didn't know who to beat up.

I like that. Growing up were there any specific movies or entertainment figures that you aspired to?

There were two main sources of inspiration to me. The first one was Vaudeville. Laurel and Hardy, The Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster Keaton. I loved all of those because they were very physical. I'm not very good at audio comprehension. I'm better at visual comprehension. I understood physical comedy more than normal comedy. Early on, I idolized Arnold Schwarzenegger. That's why I got into weightlifting. My dad had bought me a weight set. I used to spend the summers in the garage. **Commando, Total Recall, Terminator 2**. Those were the big ones. John Connor was totally me in **Terminator 2**. I wanted to be that kid. Now I want to be Arnold. (Laughing.)



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that goes on for something like 20 minutes. How did you get this movie going?

In the early 2000's nothing was coming out, but **Ong Bak** came out and that was a big deal. That was great. The newcomers weren't really delivering. Donnie Yen hadn't picked up at that point yet. The martial arts was aching and craving for fight scenes. I really wanted to do a Dragons Forever. I threw together a script that was like 40 pages long. It was ridiculous. I just wanted to do an action movie. The last paragraph in the script said something like, "a 17 minute fight in a warehouse." (Laughing.) I thought all I needed then was a warehouse. I knew a guy who had one and we filmed there for like 60 days.

Oh my gosh. 60 days?

60 days. But we're talking like two or three hour days. We would shoot only when all of our schedules were aligning. Had we been able to do 10 or 12-hour days, we wouldn't have taken as long.

Did anyone get paid?

... uh, none of us. (Laughing.) I had done a movie about a year beforehand with a producer who had been trying to put together a production company, and they wanted to acquire films. I told them, "Oh, I've got a film I want to make. I just need some money to do it." He said, "Is three thousand bucks enough?" I said, "Make it five!" They gave me five thousand bucks to do this movie, and in exchange, they owned it. Five thousand bucks to me was great. I was out of college and broke. That money all went to food, a couple locations, and paying guys for gas.

You guys are really dedicated, man. I had to wait until the end credits to appreciate Contour.

(Laughing!)

It took me about halfway through to realize what you guys were trying to do, and then when it was over I realized that you were all the real thing. You guys were hurting, you guys were in pain. That's why Jackie Chan always did the outtakes at the end. I appreciated the movie then. You guys are cool.

Thanks.

So, did Indican distribute your movie at that point?

That was actually a different company. I think they ended up paying six thousand dollars to the production, and then after I was editing it while we were shooting it. It took a year to shoot it. I had a finished cut and I had a "making of" and all this stuff. I just wanted to release the DVD, so what do I do next? They said, "Well, now we need you to wait." So I sat there for a few months. I was itching to release this. I said, "Let's just show this in a theater." I showed it in a place called The Four Star Theater. Packed the house with 200 people. They loved it. I said, "Guys, we really need to release this thing. What can I do?" They said, "We'll sell it to you for a little bit more than what we paid you." So I bought it back. It was mine. I immediately released it, direct-to-consumer DVD. I made all the money back. I made a thousand DVDs at the local DVD company. We did the artwork for the DVD, we did the authoring for the DVD. It took me a month to author the DVD. I

and they sold really quick. We sold them at Comic Con, at screenings, online. Orders just came in.

When did Indican become involved?

We went to an action festival. The fact that it was shown at a festival meant that it existed. Suddenly it was on all these lists. "It's an action movie!" It was categorized. There are distribution companies that will look at that list to fill their catalogues. Indican saw our film on that list and they wanted a screener. They were the first ones we talked to, and they took it in 2007. I've been very happy with them.

There was a long gap between Contour and Death Grip. I don't know if it was a long gap to you, but it felt like a long gap to me. What happened in the meantime between the two projects?

It was an eternity. Let me say that the reason that **Contour** was made the way that it was made – in the sense that we shot it over the course of a year. We shot 60 days in the warehouse and another 40 outside, elsewhere. That's the most relaxed shoot that you can ask for. There were days when we'd go to the warehouse and couldn't think of anything to shoot. "Oh, well ... I've got to go to work at two anyway ..." Suddenly when you turn 25, 26, you meet a girl, you get married, you have a kid, you have a full-time job, and then you can't shoot like that anymore. We realized that putting together a production like **Contour** again was going to be impossible. Especially since I had to pay the bills now. I wanted to make my own living. So, it was five years of developing a great script. The thing that people say about **Contour** is, "Good action, crappy everything else." So I had to improve everything else. That meant that I had to learn how to write a good script. That took a long time. Even after **Death Grip**, I don't know what I'm doing half the time. I commend anyone who can write a good script. I wanted to work on my acting too. I took acting classes. I got some acting jobs. Jobs where I didn't have to do any fighting. I just had to act. I got hired to do acting and fighting. I was able to improve during that time. I didn't want to make another **Contour**. If I made **Contour** and then **Contour 2**, I might not really make a dent. Plus, after **Contour**, things started speeding up in the martial arts world. The thing that I kept doing is writing. I wrote a script for a year and I realized how bad it was. I threw it away and started all over. That script ended up being **Death Grip**. The stars aligned at that time. We decided to make it a legitimate production that we'd shoot in 45 days. Let's get some money to do it, let's get insurance. Let's have lighting. We needed a good camera. That was another thing – no one knew what the hell kind of camera to use during that time period.

How much did Death Grip cost, what kind of camera did you use, and where did you film it?

It cost about a hundred thousand. We used the Sony FS100. It was nice and small and cheap. We used the hell out of it. The cost breakdown: Thirty thousand goes to the cast and crew, of which I didn't take any. Then ten thousand for the equipment. Ten thousand for insurance. That's half the budget. About seven thousand for catering. It goes quick. We got the money from private equity.

You were saying earlier that a good action movie needs a good villain. I like that the villains in Death Grip are Satan worshippers. They're a cult of Satanists! That's kinda cool!

The key elements to make a good action movie, you've got to know who your villains are going to be. They have to be worth killing. I was raised Catholic. I could resonate with that. I remember reading about the 30 silver coins of Judas. The silver that he was paid to betray Jesus. I thought it'd be cool to have one of those coins floating around somewhere. The Satanic cult floats around, recovering these coins. That was my inspiration for that.

What's your idea of who the hero should be? I like the hero you play in this movie. I like your character's relationship to the guy who played your brother. That guy was really good. He didn't overact in any way. Even your acting is understated in the film. Everything is calculated very specifically in the movie, even the humor. Talk about that.

Well, I cast myself as the hero, because it was the easiest thing to do. I feel like often an action movie isn't going to get made unless you do it yourself. If you want to find the perfect director if you want to be an action star, that's going to make you look like a douchebag. That's an issue. The easiest thing is if you're both the actor and the director. I appreciate your comments about the acting and all that. Nathan, who played by brother, he was the actor of the group. I told him to play autistic, without really knowing what that meant. I had my idea of what that would be, but then he came back and showed me what his idea of what that would be, and it was like, Whoa. That's WAY better than I expected. I really didn't need to direct him much. He brought up my game. That's great. I struggled with how I was going to fit in this market of action movies. I had to make something that would be accepted by an audience. It wouldn't work if I was playing a six-foot tall supermodel or something. I had to put my strengths on camera. I've got some physical ability. I think I'm able to show some humanity as well. I can get the audience on my side.

I love that you allowed your character to get beat up in the movie. You're not Steven Seagal.

If I were 6'2 like Steven Seagal, I could probably get away with not getting beat up. People might buy it. It's tough when you're 5'6, 5'7 on a good day. I'm 5'9 in heels. I'm gonna get beat up. I also wanted to play with it. In **Contour** there were these really intricate fight scenes, and I decided that I would put the audience in Kenny's head in **Death Grip**. I wanted to show them what Kenny's thinking.

That happens a lot in the movie.

It happens a lot, maybe more times than people want, but it was an experiment. I wanted to try it out. Everyone has a vision in their head of how they're going to fight. You rarely lose a fight when it's in your own head. But then when you show the reality of it, it's much more brutal. You get beat up. It's much more Korean feeling, you know? That was a good way of showing his ego in the film. His ego is crushed all the time. The only way he can really win at the end in that end fight is that he realizes that he can't beat this guy in his own head. That's what allows him to realize that he can beat this guy. That's his character arc.

Nice. Were the Sherlock Holmes movies with Robert Downey Jr. in your head at all?

Yeah, yeah. Sherlock Holmes is a genius. Kenny's not a genius. He's very vulnerable,

Tell me some challenges of making a movie like *Death Grip* in 45 days.

Oh, where do I start? There's always a challenge to flex your muscles and innovate. A lot of the challenges come early on. Production is easy. Shooting is easy. The beginning part, getting the right idea, an original idea, that's tough. I found that writing a screenplay was hard. When I thought I had a screenplay, I would pitch the entire screenplay. I would sit down and pitch the whole thing, "My movie's about this! And this!" But in my own head, I don't even know what the story is. I don't even have an idea. I just want to do an action movie. I don't have the skill set yet to pitch an idea to somebody. That was always tough. Coming up with that script – that was the challenge.

The market is tough right now for action movies. Studios are only doing big action movies and that's it. There aren't many more movies around like *Death Grip* being made.

Yeah, exactly. The alternatives to big action movies are low-budget action movies in other countries. Bulgaria, Indonesia. In America, nobody really does these. Nobody knows how to do it cheap. If you use SAG or whatever, suddenly, you're doing a two million dollar movie. If you do a hundred thousand dollar action movie, you might as well do it for nothing. The perception of action movies in the market is that it's gotta look big. Martial arts movies can get away with a lot more. The chop sockie theater-type look. Grindhouse-looking things. That's a recent thing. The martial arts movie is much more refined than it used to be. The audience is getting used to that.

It's like they don't even want to be called "martial arts movies" anymore.

No. It puts them in a different bucket. An exploitation bucket. The major change that's happened is that MMA has gone from 5% popularity to 100% popularity. Around the world and in the U.S. Every part of the population knows what MMA is. In my hometown when I was doing **Contour**, they didn't know what a roundhouse kick was. Now everybody knows. They watch MMA at the bar or at the casino, they watch it at work, or they watch it at home. We're all wearing MMA shirts of MMA schools. In my hometown!

What do you think MMA has done to promote martial arts?

First of all, MMA has primed America for the martial arts movie. Martial arts movies used to be foreign to America. They're not quite foreign anymore. They're seeing their own type of people doing martial arts on T.V. They can imagine themselves throwing roundhouse kicks. The average viewer has a closer connection to martial arts than before. What they're also used to now is that MMA fights are not shot like a Van Damme movie – they're shot like a Hong Kong movie. It's a long take for five minutes from a wide-angle. It's not about the feeling of the fight, it's about seeing the technique. And the character drama. The fact that people want to see moves now in a martial arts fight and they like it – that's perfect. They would eat a martial arts movie alive. All you'd need to do is to show them the character drama and give them fights you can see. That's why I did **Death Grip** the way I did.

Why don't you think more guys are shooting films the way you've just described to me how MMA fights are shot?

Interesting question. I shoot a fight scene like it's science. In the course of 12 years of

the choreographer and the cameraman are literally talking to each other, figuring out where to put the camera, where to put the fighters. That's something you don't usually get with Hollywood shoots. There's that communication missing in those productions. Typically, in Hollywood they just shoot the full fight scene. Coverage style.

What films have you seen lately that have gotten your attention. Everyone loves The Raid.

Flashpoint was really interesting in terms of MMA. People are mimicking it. Donnie Yen has a special thing about him. That was a big one. I liked **Ip Man 2**. The end fight with Darren Shahlavi was great.

What do you think of Scott Adkins?

Scott Adkins. He's the world's hope. He has a vocabulary that is unparalleled. For someone of his size and his acting ability, it's incredible. I can't wait to see what he's got coming next. I really liked **Expendables 2**. It felt like the action company did a great job on it. I liked the fight with Jason Statham in the church. That was one of the best fight scenes that have been in an American movie in a long time. It was creative.

Would you be opposed to being the third guy or the fourth or fifth guy in an action movie that you're not putting together?

When I'm doing my projects, I'm obviously going to put myself in the lead. I want to push myself that way. But I would love to work on anything.

It seems like Death Grip should be getting you some gigs. It's a great showpiece for you.

It is. It's getting me somewhere. It's still new. It hasn't been distributed yet. That's what we're going for. If I send people the knife fight from **Death Grip**, it's enough for them to look at me. After they see that, they want to see the movie. After they see the movie, they say, "Okay, you can make an action movie." So let's do something. I'm able now to talk to Scott Adkins, I'm able to talk to Gary Daniels. Making the deal is another thing. But I've got my foot in the door. I'm not going about it in a conventional way. I'm not living in L.A. so I'm not auditioning for anything. I'm just trying to push my projects and trying to get big names attached to them. There aren't many people who can tell me what to do.

I hope you can get to a place where you can be doing at least one movie a year.

I would love to. We've got four we're working on right now, at once. We're trying to throw them all at the wall and see which one sticks. Different budgets, different casting options. Different distribution ideas. The whole video market is in chaos. Nobody knows what the hell is going on. Should we do a two hundred thousand dollar movie? Should we do a five million dollar movie?

You scored a nice role as Stryker in the Mortal Kombat web series. How did that come about? Talk a little bit about the experience on that.

I had run into Larnell Stovall while hawking DVDs at Comic-Con years ago, and he would end up stunt coordinating MK Legacy. He put my name in the hat for Stryker and next

front of the camera. Tancheroen was more of a visual director so I kept asking Casper Van Dien for help with line delivery and he finally said, "Just act out of place, you're Stryker in the nether realm!"

You've done several short films in a row with the two Rope-a-Dope movies and now Blindsided. What's the purpose of doing the short films? Are you stretching your craft, broadening your audience, or what?

We're honing our craft with every short film. Years ago I would pump out dozens of shorts every year experimenting with choreography, shooting, and editing concepts. I'd throw in a generic story and we'd have "test fight scene #207" to show the world. But these experiments became really frustrating because nothing was driving the experiments besides a new editing idea or some new kind of fighting style. I'd draw blanks during those sessions and it was impossible to create for a while. When we were prepping for **Death Grip**, Drew Daniels and I shot a short film called **Paper Pushers** to find a style for the film. I sketched a short dialog about a boss interviewing a new hitman for his company, and it's a typical Q&A kind of thing, until finally he asks the applicant to try and kill him with a pen. So right away we centered the choreography around a pen and an unwitting job applicant who doesn't really know whether he should kill his new boss. The story drove the fight scene, and it was easy to create funny situations and interesting choreography that way. Story feeds choreography. The other way around leads to all kinds of dead ends. With **Rope A Dope** and **Blindsided** we're applying bigger budgets to the same mindset. These short films also serve as springboards for larger projects. **Blindsided** is one that we plan to bring to a longer format, and having a short out there as a proof of concept can really help bring it to life.

Talk about the challenges of doing short films versus doing feature films. I thought you might make Rope-a-Dope into a feature. Is that the plan?

Short films have a culture where filmmakers are given leeway to leave us hanging, capture a moment, or maybe experiment with something. The American feature film has stricter rules because it's essentially modern ritual. Any time you work in a structure that draws billions of viewers into its net and delivers catharsis through an invisible speaker (the filmmaker), you're working in a religious institution. Granted, anyone can just shortcut the rules and throw their feature film onto YouTube or print a DVD, but to get into the right channels you have to adhere to very challenging rules. It's always a monumental effort to bring a short concept to feature film because the end game is captivating an audience for 90 minutes. **Edge of Tomorrow** did a perfect job with the action-based **Groundhog Day** concept because they devised a sci-fi ticking time bomb. So a feature version of **Rope A Dope** needs that device. We're still working on finding whatever that is, but we don't let that stop us from moving forward with more projects.

Have you seen a growth of interest in your career over the last few years with the release of the short films? I'd like to see you do more features, obviously. What are the chances of you doing another feature soon?

Clayton and I have seen an uptick in interest particularly since **Rope A Dope** but it's always a challenge monetizing that interest. What are we selling? Is it stunt talent? Fight choreography? Writing services? Is it a production structure that producers can buy and plug into their films? Ultimately we're selling ourselves as a filmmaking and performance team that develops innovative concepts with great action. We're attracting a broader

structure we've created and develop bigger concepts. We're really focusing our efforts on getting **Blindsided** out there to the masses so we can go that extra step.

You had a role in *The ABCs of Death 2*. How did that come about?

Clayton got me that role. It was a ton of fun and the director E. L. Katz was fantastic to work with.

What are the inspirations for your latest short film *Blindsided*?

As fans of the **Zatoichi** series and **Blind Fury** with Rutger Hauer, [director Clayton Barber and I] set out to tell the story of the blind swordsman using influences from Hong Kong, Japanese, Korean, and Indonesian cinema, all within the framework of a classic American film.

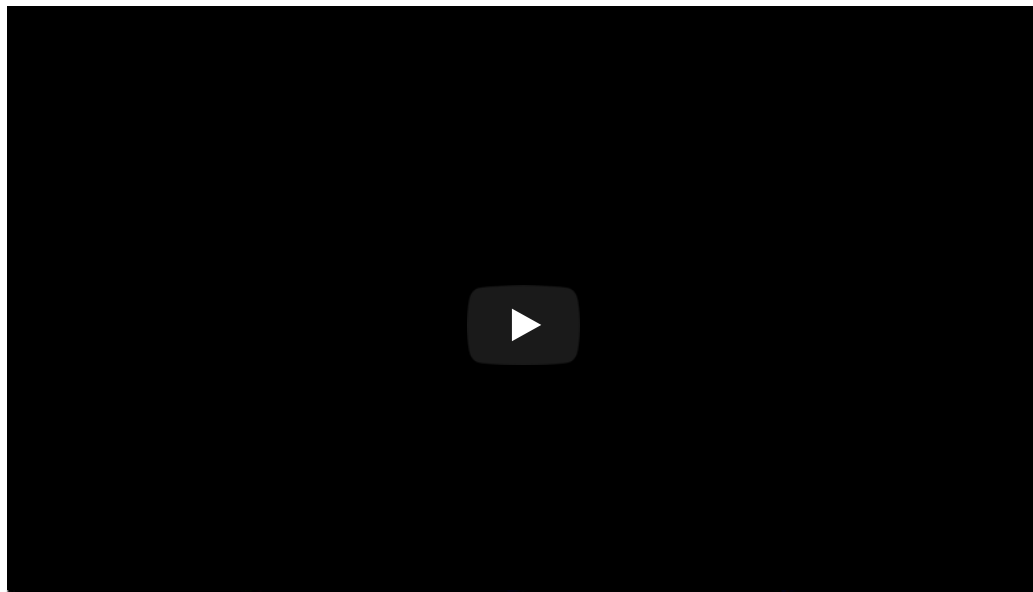
Talk a little bit about the choreography of the fights in *Blindsided*.

Rather than choreographing the short with a bias toward a particular style of action or certain moves we wanted to do, we let the story dictate the action design. The Walter character is a blind, grounded fighter armed with a blind cane and a hidden blade, fighting against 3 knife-wielding opponents. This gave us a rule book for designing the choreography. The entire action team prepped the fight over multiple sessions and everyone chipped in.

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

I want to say that the reason why I make these movies is for fans, for people who want to see them. I don't want to do them for myself. It is a labor of love. I love watching these movies. That's why I made **Death Grip**, and I've heard the criticism. I listen. For **Contour**, I took the criticism and made **Death Grip**. Now I'm getting new feedback, and overall the criticism has been much better. I don't get defensive about that. I need to build up my skills and make the best movie that I can. I make them for the fans, and I want to thank them.

Blindsided is available to watch on YouTube:



david j. moore

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