

“The greatest monster kid ever to be born”

Guillermo del Toro

## Oliver-James Campbell charts the legacy of Hollywood’s greatest SFX makeup artist...

**I**n May, it will be six years since the retirement of the world-renowned ‘monster maker’ - but his creations still remain some of the most iconic in the history of film. The record-setting, seven time Academy Award winner for Best Makeup, Richard A. Baker has had a storied career, creating the model of what a successful Hollywood special effects makeup artist looks like. More than building monsters, creatures and villains, Baker’s work can also be seen in some of the biggest films of the last five decades. *Coming to America*, *Men in Black*, *The Nutty Professor*, *Psycho*, *Batman Forever* and *Star Wars* to name a few. But monsters are his calling. Upon his retirement, he was very outspoken about the state of Hollywood effects, proclaiming that the industry is suffering from the oversaturation of CGI, calling recent practices, “cheap and fast”. Speaking to KPCC (a California public radio station), Baker admitted that “the CG stuff definitely took away the animatronics part of what I do. It’s also starting to take away the makeup part”. And he’s not wrong.

His retirement marks the end of an era for practical effects. CG I is a double edged sword - it can create absolute creatures of marvel, or it can be a total disaster. With CG monsters (or characters in general), they can lose their attachment to reality. They become dull, stripping away the impact or presentation. They can look unnatural, cartoonish, weightless and distracting.

In contrast, Baker’s practical work is innovative and preeminent. For example, in *An American Werewolf in London*, Baker showed the excruciating transformation of a werewolf into a man on screen, something that had only been hinted at previously with dissolves and cutaways. This is indicative of the many groundbreaking effects he produced during his career.

In celebration of practical effects, we’re taking a look at the legacy of the man Guillermo del Toro called “the greatest monster kid ever to be born”. Here are noteworthy moments in the career of the man behind some of the most iconic prosthetic horror creatures of the 20th century.

### OLD SCHOOL MONSTER

*Octoman* was released in 1971, and was Baker’s first foray into the world of practical effects, acting as the film’s costume designer. Directed by Harry Essex, the film centres around a scientific expedition team, who stumble upon a small land-crawling mutant octopus in Mexico. With no interest from the scientific community, the team struck up a deal with circus owner Johnny Caruso, who is interested in utilising the creature in a carnny act. During the team’s absence, we get our introduction to Baker’s first creature - The Octoman. Walking upright, a large octopus-humanoid shuffles into frame. With a bulbous head, and slime-green skin texture, The Octoman has large luminescent eyes and a fixed circular mouth, with fangs the whole way around.

Admittedly, the costume is clunky, and self-evidently a costume, but the design is creative and the close up shots showcase a creature that is lifelike and present. Upon release, the film received negative reviews (from the limited press that it did receive), and has still retained these today. Fred Beldin from AllMovie stated that “though the silly rubber suit affords the viewer a fair amount of yuks, *Octaman* is a cheap, sluggish vehicle that gets tiresome long before the monster finally gives up and dies, and bad day-for-night shooting renders many sequences murky and hard to decipher”.

Dave Sindlar reported that the film “dull and repetitive”, and also complained that the film was too dark, making it difficult to see any of the action. Sindlar also criticized the film’s lack of pacing, uninteresting characters, and design of the title monster. Despite this, the film has garnered a cult following, likely due to Baker’s status later in his career, and has received praise from fans of cult monster cinema.

Dread Central writes - “Octaman I recommend strictly for fans of old school monster movies and cult cinema, as well as bad movie aficionados, and even then there’s a part of me that suggests you be prepared to fast forward when things get bogged down with dry, talky dialogue and a needlessly long cave searching scene that only results in the characters ending up pretty much back where they started”.

### CRUCIAL EXPERIENCE

After gaining his first credits in ‘makeup’ and ‘special effects’, in a couple of low budget sci-fi and horror-comedy films *The Thing with Two Heads* and *Schlock*, Baker got his first role as a special effects assistant to Dick Smith in 1973’s *The Exorcist*. Centred around a mother’s efforts to rid her daughter of a demonic possession with the help of some Catholic priests. ➡



The great Rick Baker and some of his monstrous creations from the *Men in Black* series. No wonder his hair has turned white!

RICK BAKER:

**MONSTER  
MAKER**







**Clockwise from left:** Rosey Greer and Ray Milland discover that two heads are not better than one in *The Thing With Two Heads* (1972); Octaman (1972) Rick's first film effort; Linda Blair does the twist in *The Exorcist* (1973); *The Incredible Melting Man* (1977) does what he does best; heads up as a fisherman floats down river



one? This took me months to prepare."

The director replied, "We can't shoot this, it looks like a mask". Which it didn't

because, I actually think in hindsight it was the right call. This turned out to be fortunate for me because Dick had mentioned that it was going to be very hard for him to do this. At the time there weren't a lot of people who did this kind of work, so he called up and said "Rick, I'm in a bind, I need some help here, would you consider coming out, living in my house, working in my lab and in my basement and helping me on *The Exorcist*?" I'm like, I don't know Dick, while I'm packing my bag.

Baker cites Smith's meticulous nature as a big help in teaching him to be versatile, learning new methods of creation with rubber moulds. He recalls a memorable instance of Smith demonstrating a technique after destroying one of Baker's moulds.

"There was some makeup in the film where you can see it says, 'help me' on her stomach and it's her with gaunt ribs. They decided they wanted gaunt ribs, but with a distended stomach, and so Dick wanted me to sculpt the ribs just like he did, but add the big stomach. I was really pleased with the sculpture and thought it looked just like his, and he came in and tore it apart - but it was all really helpful to learn from this guy".

Although Baker's work is not massively visible in *The Exorcist*, it is an important credit in the history of many for him, as it is where he really cemented his skills, in the environment of a high-budget Hollywood feature. Baker



remembers fondly, "The only application that I got to do was in the sequence in Iraq, Max Von Sydow's makeup, Dick was doing the face and I did the hands, whilst holding the glue jar. I was mostly just a lab assistant, somebody who ran the foam rubber and made moulds. I did a lot of work on the dummy for the head turning around scene".

### FALLING APART

In 1977, Baker would be enlisted as responsible for 'special makeup effects' in *The Incredible Melting Man*, a sci-fi horror that was originally intended to be a parody of 1950s horror flicks, until the comedic scenes were removed due to commercial reasons; the remnants of this can be seen in the tagline, 'The First New Horror Creature'. The plot revolves around an astronaut whose body begins to melt following an excursion to Saturn in which he was exposed to dangerous levels of radiation, as a result, he is driven to commit murder and consume human flesh.



Now a professional, Baker was responsible for the makeup effects on the titular character - Steve West. Actor Alex Rebar was fitted with facial appliances that simulated melting flesh, and his hands and feet were filled with liquid substances that dropped off as he walked, creating the image of a monster gradually falling apart, his outer layer constantly melting off. Once again his revolutionary techniques are on display, as during one scene, a severed head falls down a waterfall, smashing onto the rocks below. When creating the effect, Baker used a gelatin head with a wax skull and fake blood that burst out upon impact.

Despite the effects on display, the film received large amounts of negative reviews, *The Globe and Mail* stating "logic and character are jettisoned in favour of suspense and horror".

However the only redeemable factor was the work of Baker, as the presentation and prosthetics of the West character were favourably received. *The Globe and Mail* praised Baker's effects, and Rick Worland, a film professor at The Meadows School of Arts said there was "little to recommend" besides Baker's makeup effects. Blockbuster Inc reported that although the film was "unexciting



and contrived [...] Rick Baker's gross-out makeup is undeniably effective".

Author Richard Meyers states that Baker's work was undermined by poor filming, and actor Rebar's impatience with the makeup appliance, as reportedly the actor grew impatient and uncooperative with the multiple sessions it required and as such did not wear all the appliances intended in the later sequences.

It seems as though the production of the film was only an uphill battle for Baker, as on top of uncooperating actors, a poor narrative, and "tripe" dialogue, the film was extremely low-budget, there was a lot of work to be done, and his assigned scenes were always an afterthought. Speaking to *Scream Factory*, Baker recalled the difficulties of the production. "*The Melting Man* was a low-budget film, and there's only so much you can do in a film like that. I gave, what I thought was an outrageous bid, to do this film, and there was still quite a lot



of work in it. We had the various stages of the progression of the melting man, the dead nurse and a couple of bodies. Sam Gelfand, the producer, who was the fisherman who gets his head ripped off and you see his head fall over the waterfall and the brains come out.

There was a lot to do, and they shot in a very tight, low-budget way, and it presents a problem because to do makeup effects properly you need time. You need time on the set, and we didn't always necessarily get that. Many times, what I considered to be the most important shots of the day for me, the shots with the monster in it, are the last things you're doing and the suns going down. There was nothing that was state of the art at the time, and you're trying to do what you can in the confines of the budget and the situation".

### WOLF AT THE DOOR

Undoubtedly his magnum opus, the production for *An American Werewolf in London* began in February 1981, nine years after Baker had worked with the director John Landis on *Schlock* in 1972. In fact it was during the making of *Schlock* that Landis came to Baker with the idea of *An American Werewolf in London* and had a very specific idea for a revolutionary transformation scene.

In the past, transformation scenes used crossfading editing techniques, such as in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Landis felt as though an individual would not remain passive in the chair, with minimal movements, while such a transformation was taking place. 🐾

**Clockwise from above:** All images from *An American Werewolf in London*. Rick with David Naughton and director John Landis; the werewolf exits a Soho porn cinema; David Naughton's Nazi zombie nightmare; the amazing transformation scene and David's cheerful zombie pal Griffin Dunne





**Clockwise from above:** With Jack Nicholson on *Wolf* (1994); the monster baby from Larry Cohen's *It's Alive* (1974); *Track of the Moonbeast* (1972) and *King Kong* (1976); At work on a monkey from *Greystoke* (1984); *Michael Jackson's Thriller* (1984); attacked by Benicio Del Toro on the set of *The Wolfman* (2010)

Baker recalls, "to [Landis] it didn't seem right that if your body was changing into a four-legged beast, you wouldn't sit down in a chair like Lon Chaney Jr. and put your head in the corner of the chair and be really still until you finished changing - you would move and there would be pain involved". He said, "I want you to figure out a way to do a transformation that hasn't been done before".

Baker argues that the biggest development in the progression of SFX, that allowed for such an astonishing sequence, was *time*. It wasn't any technological innovations, rather, it was the fact that there was such a gap in between Landis's first film and in getting *An American Werewolf in London* greenlit. Baker remembers doing lots of press interviews after the film's release, and they would often ask about the changes that allowed for such a scene as it had not been seen before; Baker replied, "I got adequate time and adequate money. This was the first time I had that. When I did *Gremlins 2* I had a year's prep".

And so, after the commercial success of the film, Baker was now afforded opportunities to work on films with bigger budgets, and with a wider scope of creative freedom, which in turn, allowed for more fantastic creations.

After his initial conversation with Landis, Baker had the time to explore a

whole host of techniques that he could use. "At one point we should probably switch to a fake head that we can actually do something with. Originally the thought came from the hair growing. If I made a rubber head, and punched hair in it, pulled the hair in and we reversed the footage, the hair would grow out".

This was in contrast to techniques such as those in *The Wolf Man* where they would add increasing amounts of hair in between cuts. With Baker's method, you actually see the hair growing out of the actor's face, with no cuts, creating a more striking visual.

"The more I thought about it, if I have a fake head, I can push it out of shape too and eventually it evolved into what I call a 'change-o-head', whereby the head's size is physically altered without any camera trickery.

"Then I thought why does it have to be stuck with a head, so we made a change-o-hand, a change-o-back, and change-o-legs".

Another technique pioneered by Baker was the physical stretching of the body, in full view of the camera. Baker remembers conjuring up the idea having read a magic book as a kid about a levitation trick, "where you had a couple of 2x4's and you put shoes on the end, with a sheet over, and you look like your levitating, when you fact your squatting and they weren't really your legs. We could put the guy's body in

the set and do a whole fake body".

The methods and techniques that Baker was employing were so unknown at the time, and there were only a few in Hollywood, like John Chambers from *Planet of The Apes*, who employed similar ideas, that he hired SFX artists who sent him fan mail.

"For me to find a crew, I hired kids that sent me fan mail. A kid from Texas, a kid from Connecticut, and I had a crew of 18 year olds and me". It paid off however, as Baker won the inaugural Academy Award for Best Makeup that year, an award devised just for his work on this film.

Following the success of *An American Werewolf in London*, Baker's life changed, and he began to get enlisted on other Hollywood movies, with huge production budgets, allowing him the time and money to begin transforming the SFX profession. He also went to work on some of the biggest films, across all genres, of the 20th century. He even did the makeup for the Michael Jackson *Thriller* music video, after Micheal had seen the film and earnestly wanted to work with Baker.

To go through his entire catalogue would be a gargantuan task, but a list of honourable mentions wouldn't go amiss. In *It's Alive* he designed a mutinous infant child, in *Track of the Moon Beast* he designed a shape-shifting reptilian, and he was responsible for the 1976 *King Kong* design. He has also produced various werewolf-inspired designs over the years, most notably in *Wolf*, his preliminary work on *The Howling*, and also *Cursed* and *The Wolfman*. He designed the corpse of Norman Bates in the remake of *Psycho*, and was crucial in adapting the design of the girl in the american version of *The Ring*. Rick Baker truly is the monster maker of Hollywood; a man who pioneered a whole filmmaking profession, garnering much-served acclaim in the process. **DS**