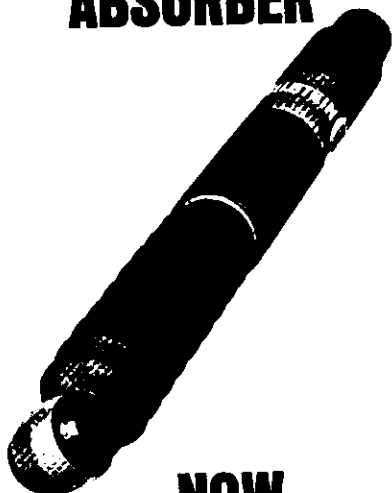


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**JEAN SHEPHERD**

• HOLLYWOOD, Calif.—A spokesman for Korngelt International Cinema Productions today announced the beginning of shooting on a new wide-screen spectacular horror picture: "The Earth is threatened by an invasion of foot-long radioactive incendiary cockroaches spewed up from the bowels of the earth by an atom bomb explosion. Standing between the evil cockroaches and the destruction of civilization is a team of Oriental Kung Fu fighters trained in age-old techniques of Asian martial arts. After the completion of the 8-day shooting schedule, the film will receive world-wide distribution. Filmed on location in Taipei and Gary, Indiana, the concluding scene will feature the largest tidal wave ever filmed."

The mimeographed bit of flackery was just one shard out of the mountain of junk mail that arrives on my desk daily.

"Giant cockroaches," I muttered. "At last somebody in the dream factory is turning out films touching on contemporary life."

I began to think of those foot-long incendiary radioactive cockroaches, creeping out from under the file cabinets, stalking the halls, ravishing the steno pool, devouring in great gulps the enormous memo-spewing mimeograph machine in the mail room. Millions of them sucking up phone wires, their evil waving antennas sending out radar waves, looking for more phones to eat, wave after wave of green-glowing cockroaches, controlled by a devilish intelligence from outer space. I leaped to my feet.

"Hoo . . . Hail" I yelled, sending a deadly karate chop whistling through the air and snapping my \$1.49 pencil sharpener right off the wall. Years of studying the martial arts by watching old James Bond movies on TV had honed my reflexes to razor sharpness. Kicking out savagely—"Hail"—with my right foot I gave the small space heater beside my desk a crushing blow. It shuddered to a halt as a faint pain coursed up the marrow of my right leg. Karate is not without its price, even to the most skilled.

"What the hell's going on in here?" It was my friend Stanley, peering in the door, holding his paper cup of lukewarm instant coffee—which is practically the badge of contemporary urban office life.

"Hoo!" I yelled. He had caught me off guard and thinking I was being attacked from the rear, I struck out instinctively.

"Take that, you goddamn incendiary cockroach!" I grunted, catching Stanley a crusher below the Adams' apple which would have splintered a 10-inch beam.

"Gee whiz," Stanley wheezed, "you're sure getting awfully touchy these days."

"Sorry, Stanley. You should always knock before you stick your head in an office around here. You never know when you might get it knocked off. You can't take chances these days. Brotherly love is dead. Honor and gentility are but a mockery. It's us or the cockroaches."

Stanley and I went down to the Chock Full O'Nuts for lunch. On the way down in the elevator I told him about Korngelt International's great new flick. He snorted. He and I have this game we've been playing for years, inventing plots of movies. Sometimes we'd go for weeks, adding and embellishing a hypothetical film, including dialogue and shot angles. Our best effort to date was a joint effort which we entitled *The Invasion Of The Egg People*. We saw it as a natural double-feature pairing with another of our

Why use vampires in a horror flick when reality—like gaping potholes and ravenous cockroaches—is so much more believable?

Oscar winners, *The Evil Claw's Got John*.

We were squatting at the counter of the Chock Full O'Nuts concentrating on our tuna salad sandwiches when it hit me.

"You know, Stanley, it just hit me," I said.

"What hit you?"

"I've been thinking about this cockroach movie and I think these guys are lighting the way. Our films have not been making it because we've always got these mummies and things that come out of the swamps with flippers . . . and that stuff just don't make it no more. Mummies are out; you hardly ever see a mummy these days."

"That's true," Stanley agreed, thoughtfully sipping his imitation orange drink.

I went on: "The thing about cockroaches is that they're real. I mean, you can just imagine a foot-long cockroach crawling out from under your refrigerator."

"Jeez, I'm eatin'. Will you cut it out." Stanley is a sensitive person.

"No, Stanley, we got to face it. Cockroaches mean more to people today than vampires. Why, I know one guy who had his Sony 25-inch TV set ate up by a nest of cockroaches that got in the power supply, and . . ."

"Wait a minute," said Stanley, raising his hand to silence me. "Are you trying to tell me that the tried and true elements of our film classics are passe?"

"Stanley, let's face it. We got to move with the times. If Korngelt can come up with cockroaches—and you know what a schlep he is—we can come up with even more relevant . . . and that's the key word, Stanley . . . a relevant monster, a monster everyday almost-normal people can fear."

I could see the surrounding elegant luncheon guests of Chock Full O'Nuts drinking in our every word. It's a little game Stanley and I play every day at lunch. We call it "Big Shot Producers." We carry on loud and boisterous conversations the way we imagine Hollywood wheels do at The Polo Lounge. The fans eat it up.

"Stanley, I got it!" I slapped him on the back. "I got an idea for a great monster picture. It cuts those cockroaches going away. How about this: *The Pothole From Outer Space That Swallowed New York*? All over the country, potholes are getting bigger and more sinister by the hour."

Stan touched my arm for silence, his voice in a husky whisper rich with awe and admiration. "It'll make a fortune! Just don't open your yap too much in this place. That's a dynamite idea. You've done it again, J. B. Good God, I can see it now . . ."

"Wait, Stanley. Let me sketch in the scene. As the camera picks up the action—and we can get this outa stock footage—it is New York at dawn, a vast panoramic shot. The sun peeping up over Jersey."

"Wait a minute, you yuck," Stan barked. "The sun goes down over Jersey."

"Yeah, well, we can fix that with a process shot somehow. Seagulls wheel high over Jamaica Bay. The camera moves over the great town. A few milkmen are seen, tiny dots, their trucks rolling over deserted streets. We super the credits. And then the camera drops down, down, down, down, down . . . to one tiny square of pavement somewhere on the West side of Manhattan. We are looking at what appears to be an innocent pothole. A cab's wheel rushes by. The pothole grows, even as we watch it. There is a groan from under the earth. This great pothole suddenly yawns like a chasm. A crosstown bus crashes into it and disappears. People run screaming. Charles Nelson Reilly, an absent-minded pothole scientist, is seen at his desk. His phone rings. His assistant—Goldie Hawn—a young marine biologist, rushes into the room. Her father, a palsied professor of Transcendental Yoga, has been swallowed up by the pothole. Even now, buildings are tumbling into the yawning chasm. The President of the United States declares a national emergency. He is

seen in conference with Japanese scientists, all wearing black horn-rimmed glasses. Jet planes scream overhead. . . ."

We paid our bill and left amid the thundering applause of the patrons at The Chock.

"You know, Stanley, that's no joke," I said after we had escaped the swinging doors and were back out on the sidewalk.

"I've had the vague feeling for some time that the world is falling apart. That hardly anything works any more. Potholes are everywhere. Did you hear about that family that came to visit New York a while back? They just got through the Holland Tunnel when they hit this giant hole. Busted their axle and cracked the air conditioner . . . a classic introduction to Fun City."

We walked along, wrapped in our own thoughts. We threaded our way through crowds of mid-town pickets. The needleworkers, the transit workers, the staple-pullers, the canary cleaners, the popcorn men . . . everybody in the world except Stanley and I seemed to be on strike.

"Stanley, my boy, it is truly falling apart. According to Edward Gibbon—you remember, Stanley, his thrilling bestseller dealing with the decline and fall of Rome—the first sign of fatal decay came when potholes appeared in the Appian Way. Centurions returning in triumph from far-flung provinces busted their chariot axles in the victory parades. It was a hell of a note! After that, it

6  
Rome's fate was  
sealed the  
first time the Appian  
Way claimed  
a chariot axle  
during a  
victory parade  
9

was noticed that the pools became leaky and the orgies lacked style, what with everybody bailing and wringing out their togas between courses. And then, Gibbon went on, each group within the population began demanding more and more of a share of the loot and they fell into bitter quarreling."

An angry picket waving a sign proclaiming WE DEMAND A 74 PER CENT WAGE INCREASE, 7 MONTHS PAID VACATION AND A 9-HOUR WEEK. THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SPIGOT REAMERS, LOCAL 1040 ON STRIKE FOR ALL HUMANITY jostled against me.

"Who ya shovin', buddy?" he snarled as I tried to edge past him. "You Scab Bastard!" he yelled, "Ya crossin' a picket line!"

"Sorry, fella. I'm an official pothole inspector. I'm just here inspecting potholes, not spigots."

He glowered. He didn't know I was actually telling the truth. •