



## Desert inspires a happy ending

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By JOAN OSTERWALDER / The Press-Enterprise

John Huff was considered a Hollywood has-been when he moved to his remote desert ranch in 1999.

But the writer found inspiration and success in his backyard. One day, as he gazed at the towering, odd-shaped boulders surrounding his home in Gamma Gulch, a rocky outpost about eight miles north of Pioneertown, he imagined the havoc they would wreak in an earthquake. Huff, 59, went to work.

Six years later, he is the co-writer and first-time director of an award-winning independent movie.

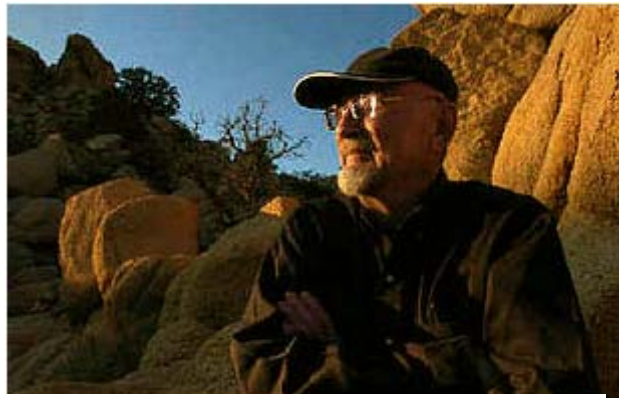
"Cyxork 7" is a dark comedy about the making of a seventh installment of a failed sci-fi franchise. Billed as "no money, no script, just egos and earthquakes," it follows the desperate cast and crew willing to risk their lives to film a predicted cataclysmic earthquake for free special effects.

The movie stars Ray Wise as the aging action hero Rex Anderson, aka "Kommander 88," who fights the monster Cyxork.

The set is fraught with tension because a naïve director is trying to change the series to reflect her artistic vision, angering the star and fans. Tracking the production's impending encounter with disaster is the trash-talking, sensation-hungry Generic News Network – a parody of future news reporting.

The film was primarily shot at Huff's Millennium Ranch. The script was rewritten 54 times and crafted to fit the location, Huff said.

Filming took three weeks in spring 2004 and cost less than \$1 million -- an "almost-no-budget" shoot by Hollywood standards, Huff said.



Rodrigo Peña / The Press-Enterprise  
Writer John Huff moved to his ranch near Pioneertown for its health - promoting climate after being diagnosed with leukemia.

Last month, "Cyxork 7" won the chairman's "best of festival" award at the Foundation for the Advancement of Independent Films festival in Hollywood. Huff said he hopes the recognition boosts the chances of finding a distributor.



"This is the top," Huff said. "You're not supposed to do what I do at my age."

The Kansas City native broke into Hollywood as a writer for the 1970s cult television series "Kolchak: The Night Stalker." He later was a story editor and writer for the show "CHiPs."

In 1988, he got sick and was later diagnosed with leukemia. He moved to Pioneertown for the health-promoting climate in 1990.

"I was considered dead and buried in my television career," Huff said, sitting in his wood-paneled living room.

Huff beat leukemia and took a job as a radio reporter for the Joshua Tree station KCDZ-FM. He made his comeback as a co-writer and production assistant for the 1999 feature film "The Hunter's Moon," which starred Burt Reynolds.

A producer on that movie financed "Cyxork 7," which Huff began writing in 2001.

"Everybody has their dream and he reached for his," said Gary Daigneault, the radio station's news director, who recorded fake broadcasts for the movie.

Stunt coordinator and associate producer Jim Thompson, 59, of Pioneertown, said the idea of taking advantage of an earthquake initially attracted him to the project.

"I hope people will see John's movie for the literal script it is and the funny story it is," Thompson said. Local actor Brad Vickery, 48, said "Cyxork 7" could become a cult film.

"For a low-budget film, the experience was one of the best I ever had," said Vickery, who plays a gaffer



killed by a Joshua tree in a quake scene.

Filming was sometimes as rough as the environment. The cast and crew had to contend with rain, hail and winds so strong they blew a tent a mile away, Huff said.

Pets caused a stir on the set, as well. Huff's dog, William, once walked into a scene. The make-up artist's costumed Chihuahua, Mr. Pockets, inadvertently became part of the movie after actress Cassandra Creech, who plays Anderson's love interest, carried him during shoots, he said.

Some leftover props are the only reminder of the production on the 5-acre ranch, which Huff is selling to move to Yucca Valley.

Huff said the desert has been good to him: "I moved out here to die and I got a career instead."

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