

The Dragon Danced at Midnight, Ray Bradbury

The Dragon Danced at Midnight

Remember the Aaron Stolittz jokes? How they called him the Vampire Bat because he was a fly-by-night producer? Remember his two studios? One a piano box, the other a cracker bin?

I worked in the cracker bin near the Santa Monica graveyard. Great! Dead, you just moved ninety feet south to a good address.

Me? I plagiarized scripts, borrowed music, and edited film on *Monster*, *The Creature from Across the Hall* (my mother liked it, it resembled her mother), *The Mobile Mammoth*, and all the other Elephantine Aphid and Berserk Bacillus films we shot between sunset and sunrise the next day.

But all that changed. I lived through that great and awful night when Aaron Stolittz became world-famous, rich, and nothing was the same after that.

The phone rang early one hot September evening. Aaron was up front in his studio. That is, he was hiding in one two-by-four office, beating vinegar-gnat sheriffs off the screen door.

I was back splicing our latest epic film, using stolen equipment, when the phone buzzed. We jumped, afraid of bill-collector wives shrieking long-distance from forgotten years.

Finally, I lifted the receiver.

“Hey,” a voice cried, “this is Joe Samasuku at the Samasuku Samurai Theater. Tonight at eight-thirty we scheduled a genuine Japanese surprise studio feature preview. But the film has been waylaid at a film festival in Pacoima or San Luis Obispo—who knows? Look.

You got ninety minutes of film any way resembles a Samurai widescreen or even a Chinese fairy tale? There's a fast fifty bucks in it. Give me the titles of your latest somebody-stepped-on-Junior-and-now-he-looks-better-than-ever pictures."

"The Island of Mad Apes?" I suggested.

Uneasy silence.

"Two Tons of Terror?" I went on.

The manager of the Samasuku Theater stirred to disconnect.

"The Dragon Dances at Midnight!" I cried impulsively.

"Yeah." The voice smoked a cigarette. "That Dragon. Can you finish shooting, cutting, and scoring it in ... eh ... one hour and thirty minutes?"

"Monster apple pie!" I hung up.

"The Dragon Dances at Midnight?" Aaron loomed behind me. "We got no such film."

"Watch!" I snapped some title letters under our camera. "As The Island of Mad Apes becomes The Dragon Dances et cetera!"

So I retitled the film, finished the music (old Leonard Bernstein outtakes run backward), and jockeyed twenty-four film reels into our Volkswagen. Usually films run nine reels, but, while editing, you keep film on dozens of short spools so it's easier to handle. There wasn't time to rewind our epic. The Samasuku would have to make do with a couple dozen cans.

We dented fenders roaring to the theater and ran the reels up to the projection booth. A man with a dire pirate's eye, and a breath like King Kong's, exhaled sherry wine, grabbed our reels, slammed and locked the metal door.

"Hey!" cried Aaron.

"Quick," I said. "After the show may be too late, let's go grab that fifty bucks and ..."

"I'm ruined, ruined!" said a voice, as we went down the stairs. Joe Samasaki, literally tearing his hair, stood staring at the mob as it jostled into the theater.

"Joe!" we both said, alarmed.

"Look," he groaned. "I sent telegrams warning them off. There's been a foul-up. And here comes Variety, Saturday Review, Sight and Sound, Manchester Guardian, Avant-Garde Cinema Review. Give me poisoned American food, go on!"

"Calmness, Joe," said Aaron. "Our film ain't all that bad."

"It's not?" I asked. "Aaron, those supersnobs! It's Hari-Kari Productions after tonight!"

"Calmness," said Aaron quietly, "is a drink we can buy in the bar next door. Come."

The film started with a great explosion of Dimitri Tiomkin themes upside down, backward, and super-reversed.

We ran for the bar. We were halfway through a double glass of serenity when the ocean crashed on the shore. That is to say, the audience in the theater gasped and sighed.

Aaron and I raced out, opened the theater door to gaze in at whatever dragon happened to be dancing that midnight.

I let out a small bleat, whirled, and leaped upstairs to beat on the projection-room door with my tiny fists. "Nincompoop! Louse! The reels are reversed. You got the number four reel in where it should be reel two!"

Aaron joined me, gasping, to lean against the locked door.

"Listen!"

Behind the door a tinkling sound like ice and something that wasn't water.

"He's drinking."

“He’s drunk!”

“Look,” I said, sweating, “he’s five minutes into the reel now. Maybe no one noticed. You, in there!” I kicked the door. “You’re warned! Line ’em up! Get ’em right! Aaron,” I said, leading him shakily downstairs, “let’s buy you some more calmness.”

We were finishing our second martini when another tidal wave hit the coastline.

I ran into the theater. I ran upstairs. I scrabbled at the projection-room peephole. “Maniac! Destroyer! Not reel six! Reel three! Open up, so I can strangle you with my bare hands!”

He opened up ... another bottle behind the metal door. I heard him stumble over tin cans of film strewn on the concrete floor.

Clawing my scalp, like a scene in Medea, I wandered back down to find Aaron gazing deep into his glass.

“Do all movie projectionists drink?”

“Do whales swim underwater?” I replied, eyes shut. “Does leviathan plumb the ocean seas?”

“Poet,” said Aaron reverently. “Speak on.”

“My brother-in-law,” I spoke, “has been projectionist at TriLux Studios for fifteen years, which means fifteen years in which he has not drawn a sober breath.”

“Think of that.”

“I am thinking. Fifteen years seeing day after day the rushes for Saddle of Sin, the rerun of Sierra Love Nest, the recut of Pitfall of Passion. The concussion alone would give a man bends.

Worse in long-run theaters. Imagine, the ninetieth time you see Carroll Baker in Harlow. Think, Aaron, think! Madness, huh? Up-the-wall panics. Sleepless midnights. Impotency. So? So you start drinking.

All across night America at this very hour, conjure up the little settlements, the brave small forts, the big neon cities, and in every one, this second, Aaron, all the film projectionists, no exceptions, are drunker than hoot owl skunks. Drunk, drunk, drunk to a man.”

We brooded over this and sipped our drinks. My eyes watered, imagining ten thousand projectionists alone with their films and bottles far across the prairie continent.

The theater audience stirred.

“Go see what that madman is doing now,” said Aaron.

“I’m afraid.”

The theater shook with a temblor of emotion.

We went out and stared up at the projection-room window above.

“He’s got twenty-four reels of film there. Aaron, how many combinations can you put together out of that? Reel nine for reel five. Reel eleven for reel sixteen. Reel eight for reel twenty. Reel—”

“Stop!” Aaron groaned, and shuddered.

Aaron and I did not so much walk as run around the block.

We made it around six times. Each time we came back the shouts, squeals, and improbable roars of the crowd in the theater got louder.

“My God, they’re ripping up the seats!”

“They wouldn’t do that.”

“They’re killing their mothers!”

“Movie critics? You ever see their mothers, Aaron? Epauettes down to here. Battle ribbons across to there. Work out at the gym five days a week. Build and launch battleships in their off-hours. Naw, Aaron, break each other’s wrists, sure, but kill their mothers ...?”

There was a gasp, a hiss, a long-drawn sigh from the midnight dark within the California architecture. The big mission dome of the theater sifted dust.

I went in to stare at the screen until the reels changed. I came out.

“Reel nineteen in for reel ten,” I said.

At which moment the theater manager staggered out, tears in his eyes, face all pale cheese, reeling from wall to wall with despair and shock.

“What have you done to me? What are you doing?” he shrieked.

“Bums! Bastards! Ingrates! The Joe Samasuku Samurai Theater is ruined forever!”

He lunged at us, and I held him off. “Joe, Joe,” I pleaded, “don’t talk like that.”

The music swelled. It was as if film and audience were inflating themselves toward a vast ripped-forth explosion which might tear mind from matter as flesh from bone.

Joe Samasuku fell back, pressed a key in my hand, and said, “Call the cops, telephone the janitor service to clean up after the riot, lock the doors if the doors are left, and don’t call me, I’ll call you!”

Then he fled.

We would have dogged him out of his old California patio and down the mean streets had not at that instant a huge stolen chunk of Berlioz and a cymbal smash straight out of Beethoven ended the film.

There was a stunned silence.

Aaron and I turned to stare madly at the shut-tight theater doors.

They banged wide open. The mob, in full cry, burst to view. It was a beast of many eyes, many arms, many legs, many shoes, and one immense and ever-changing body.

“I’m too young to die,” Aaron remarked.

“You should’ve thought of that before you messed with things better left to God,” said I.

The mob, the great beast, stopped short, quivering. We eyed it. It eyed us.

“There they are!” someone shouted at last. “The producer, the director!”

“So long, Aaron,” I said.

“It’s been great,” said Aaron.

And the beast, rushing forward with an inarticulate cry, threw itself upon us ... hoisted us to its shoulders and carried us, yelling happily, singing, slapping us on the back, three times around the patio, out into the street, then back into the patio again.

“Aaron!”

I stared down aghast into a swarming sea of beatific smiles. Here loped the reviewer of the Manchester Guardian. There bounded the mean and dyspeptic critic from the Greenwich Village Avanti.

Beyond gamboled ecstasies of second-string film reviewers from Saturday Review, The Nation, and The New Republic. And far out on the shore of this tumultuous sea, in all directions, there was a frolic and jump, a laughing and waving of columnists from Partisan Review, Sight and Sound, Cinema, multitudinous beyond belief.

“Incredible!” they cried. “Marvelous! Superior to Hiroshima Mon Amour! Ten times better than Last Year at Marienbad! One hundred times greater than Greed! Classic! Genius! Makes Giant look like a Munchkin! My God, the New American Wave is in! How did you do it?”

“Do what?” I yelled, looking over at Aaron being carried for the fourth time around the lobby.

“Shut up and ride high in the saddle!” Aaron sailed over the ocean of humanity on a sea of smile.

I blinked up, wild strange tears in my eyes. And there in the projection-room window above, a shadow loomed with wide-sprung eyes. The projectionist, bottle in numbed hand, gasped down upon our revelry, ran his free fingers over his face in self-discovery, stared at the bottle, and fell away in shadow before I could shout.

When at last the hopping dancing dwarfs and gazelles were exhausted and laughing out their final compliments, Aaron and I were set back down on our feet with: “The most tremendous avant-garde film in history!”

“We had high hopes,” said I.

“The most daring use of camera, editing, the jump-cut, and the multiple reverse story line I can remember!” everyone said at once.

“Planning pays off,” said Aaron modestly.

“You’re competing it in the Edinburgh Film Festival, of course?”

“No,” said Aaron, bewildered, “we—”

“—planned on it after we show at the Cannes Film Festival competition,” I cut in.

A battalion of flash cameras went off and, like the tornado that dropped Dorothy in Oz, the crowd whirled on itself and went away, leaving behind a litter of cocktail parties promised, interviews set, and articles that must be written tomorrow, next week, next month—remember, remember!

The patio stood silent. Water dripped from the half-dry mouth of a satyr cut in an old fountain against the theater wall. Aaron, after a long moment of staring at nothing, walked over and bathed his face with water.

“The projectionist!” he cried, suddenly remembering.

We pounded upstairs and paused. This time we scratched at the tin door like two small, hungry white mice.

After a long silence a faint voice mourned, “Go away. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do it.”

“Didn’t mean it? Hell, open up! All is forgiven.” said Aaron.

“You’re nuts,” the voice replied faintly. “Go away.”

“Not without you, honey. We love you. Don’t we, Sam?”

I nodded. “We love you.”

“You’re out of your mother-minds.”

Feet scraped tin lids and rattling film.

The door sprang open.

The projectionist, a man in his mid-forties, eyes bloodshot, face a furious tint of boiled-crab red, stood swaying before us, palms out and open to receive the driven nails.

“Beat me,” he whispered. “Kill me.”

“Kill you? You’re the greatest thing that ever happened to dog meat in the can!”

Aaron darted in and planted a kiss on the man’s cheek. He fell back, beating the air as if attacked by wasps, spluttering.

“I’ll fix it all back just the way it was,” he cried, bending to scabble the strewn film snakes on the floor. “I’ll find the right pieces and ...”

“Don’t!” said Aaron. The man froze. “Don’t change a thing,” Aaron went on, more calmly. “Sam, take this down. You got a pencil? Now, you, what’s your name?”

“Willis Hornbeck.”

“Willis, Willie, give us the order. Which reels first, second, third, which reversed, upside down, backwards, the whole deal.”

“You mean ...?” the man blinked, stupid with relief.

“I mean we got to have your blueprint, the way you ran the greatest avant-garde film in history tonight.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Willis let out a hoarse, choking laugh, crouched among the tumbled reels, the insanely littered floor where his “art” lay waiting.

“Willis, honey,” said Aaron. “You know what your title is going to be as of this hour of this fantastic night of creation?”

“Mud?” inquired Hornbeck, one eye shut.

“Associate producer of Hasurai Productions! Editor, cutter, director even—maybe. A ten-year contract! Escalations. Privileges. Stock buy-ins. Percentages. Okay now. Ready, Sam, with the pencil? Willis. What did you do?”

“I—” said Willis Hornbeck, “don’t remember.”

Aaron laughed lightly. “Sure you remember.”

“I was drunk. Then I got scared sober. I’m sober now. I don’t remember.”

Aaron and I gave each other a look of pure animal panic. Then I saw something else on the floor and picked it up.

“Hold on. Wait,” I said.

We all looked at the half-empty sherry bottle.

“Willis,” said Aaron.

“Yes, sir?”

“Willis, old friend ...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Willis,” said Aaron. “I will now start this projection machine.”

“Yes?”

“And you, Willis, will finish drinking whatever is in that bottle.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you, Sam?”

“Sir?” said I, saluting.

“You, Sam,” said Aaron, flicking the machine so a bright beam of light struck out into the quiet night theater and touched an emptiness that lay waiting for genius to paint incredible pictures on a white screen.

“Sam, please shut and lock that heavy tin door.”

I shut and locked the heavy tin door.

Well, the dragon danced at midnight film festivals all round the world. We tamed the Lion at Venice at the Venice Film Festival, we took first honors at the New York Film Festival and the Brasilia Special Prize at the World Film Competition.

And not just with one film, no, with six! After *The Dragon Danced* there was the big smash international success of our *The Dreadful Ones*. There was *Mr. Massacre and Onslaught*, followed by *The Name Is Horror* and *Wattle*.

With these, the names of Aaron Stolitz and Willis Hornbeck were honey on the lips of reviewers under every flag.

How did we make five more smash hits in a row?

The same way we made the first one.

As we finished each film we grabbed Willis, rented the Samasuku Theater at twelve midnight, poured a bottle of the finest sherry down Willis’s throat, handed him the film, started the projector, and locked the door.

By dawn our epic was slashed to ribbons, tossed like monster salad, gathered, respliced, glued fast with the epoxy of Willis Hornbeck’s subliminal genius, and ready for release to the waiting avant-garde theaters in Calcutta and Far Rockaway.

To the end of my insignificant life I shall never forget those nights with Willis shambling among his whirring, shadow-flickering machines, floundering about from midnight until dawn filled the patio of the Samasuku Theater with a gold the pure color of money.

So it went, film after film, beast after beast, while the pesos and rubles poured in, and one night Aaron and Willis grabbed their Academy Oscar for Experimental Film, and we all drove XKE Jags and lived happy ever after, yes?

No.

It was three glorious, fine, loving years high on the avant-garde hog. But ...

One afternoon when Aaron was chortling over his bank account, in walked Willis Hornbeck to stand facing the big picture window overlooking Hasurai Productions' huge back lot. Willis shut his eyes and lamented in a quiet voice, beating his breast gently and tearing ever so tenderly at his own lapels: "I am an alcoholic. I drink. I am a terrible lush. I booze. Just name it.

Rubbing alcohol? Sure. Mentholated spirits? Why not? Turpentine? Spar varnish? Hand it over. Nail-polish remover? Pure gargle. Rumdummy, mad fool, long-time-no-see-the-light-of-day Willis Hornbeck, but that's all over. The Pledge! Give me the Pledge!"

Aaron and I ran over and circled Willis, trying to get him to open his eyes.

"Willis! What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. All's right." He opened his eyes. Tears dripped down his cheeks. He took our hands. "I hate to do this to you nice guys. But, last night ..."

"Last night?" bleated Aaron.

"I joined Alcoholics Anonymous."

“You what?” screamed Aaron.

“Alcoholics Anonymous. I joined.”

“You can’t do that to me!” Aaron jumped up and down. “Don’t you know you’re the heart, soul, lungs, and lights of Hasurai Productions?”

“Don’t think I haven’t put it that way to myself,” said Willis simply.

“Aren’t you happy being a genius, Willie?” shrieked Aaron. “Fêted wherever you go? Internationally famed? That ain’t enough, you got to be sober, too?”

“We’re all so famous now,” said Willis, “and loved and accepted, it has filled me up. I’m so full of fame there’s no room for drink.”

“Make room!” yelled Aaron. “Make room!”

“Ironic, huh?” said Willis. “Once I drank because I felt I was nobody. Now, if I quit, the whole studio falls down. I’m sorry.”

“You can’t break your contract!” I said.

Willis looked as if I had stabbed him.

“I wouldn’t dream of breaking my word. But where does it say in plain English in the contract I got to be a drunk to work for you?”

My tiny shoulders sagged. Aaron’s tiny shoulders sagged.

Willis finished gently.

“I’ll go on working for you, always. But you know, and I know, sober it won’t be the same.”

“Willis.” Aaron sank into a chair and, after a long and private agony, went on. “Just one night a year?”

“The Pledge, Mr. Stollitz. Not a drop, not once a year, even for dear and beloved friends.”

“Holy Moses,” said Aaron.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re halfway across the Red Sea. And here come the waves.”

When we glanced up again, Willis Hornbeck was gone.

It was indeed the twilight of the gods. We had been turned back into mice. We sat awhile, squeaking gently. Then Aaron got up and circled the liquor cabinet. He put out his hand to touch it.

“Aaron,” I said. “You’re not going to ...?”

“What?” said Aaron. “Cut and edit our next avant-garde epic, Sweet Beds of Revenge?” He seized and opened a bottle. He swigged. “All by myself? Yes!”

No.

The dead rocket fell out of the sky. The gods knew not only twilight but also that awful sleepless three o’clock in the morn when death improves on circumstance.

Aaron tried drinking. I tried drinking. Aaron’s brother-in-law tried drinking.

But, look, none of us had the euphoric muse which once walked with Willis Hornbeck. In none of us did the small worm of intuition stir when alcohol hit our blood. Bums sober, we were bums drunk. But Willis Hornbeck drunk was almost everything the critics claimed, a wildman who blind-wrestled creativity in a snake pit, who fought an inspired alligator in a crystal tank for all to see, and sublimely won.

Oh, sure, Aaron and I bulled our way through a few more film festivals. We sank all our profits in three more epics, but you smelled the change when the titles hit the screen. Hasurai Films folded. We sold our whole package to educational TV.

Willis Hornbeck? He lives in a Monterey Park tract house, goes to Sunday school with his kids, and only occasionally is reminded of the maggot of genius buried in him when a critic from Glasgow or Paris strays by to chat for an hour, finds Willis a kindly but sober bore, and departs in haste.

Aaron and me? We got this little shoe-box studio thirty feet closer to that graveyard wall. We make little pictures and profits to match and

still edit them in twenty-four reels and hit previews around greater California and Mexico, smash and grab.

There are three hundred theaters within striking distance. That's three hundred projectionists. So far, we have previewed our monsters in 120 of them. And still, on warm nights like tonight, we sweat and wait and pray for things like this to happen: The phone rings. Aaron answers and yells: "Quick! The Arcadia Barcelona Theater needs a preview. Jump!"

And down the stairs and past the graveyard we trot, our little arms full of film, always laughing, always running toward that future where somewhere another projectionist waits behind some locked projection-room door, bottle in hand, a look of unraveled genius in his red eye, a great blind worm in his soul waiting to be kissed awake.

"Wait!" I cry, as our car rockets down the freeway. "I left reel seven behind."

"It'll never be missed!" Aaron bangs the throttle. Over the roar he shouts, "Willis Hornbeck, Jr.! Oh, Willis Hornbeck the Second, wherever you are! Watch out! Sing it, Sam, to the tune of Someday I'll Find You!"

The end