

From the Notes of "Charlie Star Trek"

Behind the scenes of a '60s science fiction TV production, a young assistant director learns there's more to life & show business than dollars & doughnuts.

By CHARLES WASHBURN

If you had called the *Star Trek* set on the Desilu-Gower lot during the filming of the series' second and third seasons, you would have probably heard a voice answer—very crisp and direct—"Star Trek... Charlie!"

That voice would have been mine, and, as a trainee assistant director the second year, and

the show's second assistant director the third year, I usually sprinted from wherever I was on the soundstage to answer the phone. I considered the phone a part of my territory. My domain was the periphery—all of the area away from the camera, where the first assistant and the director were.

I was the main link to anything and

Leonard Nimoy (left) and William Shatner pose with Charles Washburn on an outdoor set. "My concern was helping the cast to be at ease by creating a comfortable environment," the assistant director says.

everything that happened on the set. Among my duties: preparing and distributing the daily call sheets (which told everyone what scenes would be shooting and the call times for the cast, extras and crew); calling the actors regarding their reporting times (as well as calling them physically to the set); ordering and sometimes delivering breakfast for the actors; answering any and all questions regarding what was going on; hiring extras; directing extras in the background; assigning dressing room trailers; alerting every department head of changes; distributing crew checks on payday; distributing all script changes; maintaining a log of activities each day that should be recorded on the daily production report; preparing the daily production report; cueing the special effects man when to open the *Enterprise's* sliding doors as the actors approached; maintaining contact with the unit production manager on the company's progress—and being able to explain each delay; rereading the next day's scenes each night to assure that all bases were covered. There was more, but I think you get the idea.



ing, and that he approve major decisions that had to come from our department.

Tiger was a most jovial sort. A favorite pastime of his was planting nicknames on people he liked. For example, Jake, the lot's shoeshine man, was called "Honest Jake the Gonif." Most of the nicknames Tiger used were known to the people involved and were accepted—by everyone from Jake to George Takei, who Tiger called "Take Home Pay." But some nicknames were only shared with me in private conversation. Nichelle Nichols was called "Madam Fufu," but she never knew this—until now. We would never address her personally this way, and we never considered the monicker derogatory. I think it was the combination of Nichelle's exotic look and long fingernails that suggested the name to Tiger. My nickname? There were several—"Washrag," "Washtub," even "Washbottom." I was never offended, even though the name was quite often shouted across the stage. I would always smile, yell out "Yes, sir," and run to him. I loved the man.

Some of the crew called me "Charlie Star Trek." The first ones to use that name were electrical best boy Don Merhoff and extra casting head Bob Kindelon.

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Gregg Peters was one of the most likable unit managers I had ever worked with. But, he was also a hairline production guy from "the old school." His biggest concern was in saving the company as much money as possible—and then try to save even more. Sometimes, it got kind of ridiculous. The company paid for the coffee and donuts provided for the crew each day. This service was handled by Bob "Red" Brian, our Craft Service Man (laborer). Gregg always looked at these costs with a keen eye, and watched the cast's breakfast price tag with a keener eye.

The reporting times for our main cast almost never changed. Nichelle Nichols' and Leonard Nimoy's reporting time was 6:30 a.m. to be ready for an 8:00 shoot. Bill Shatner's was 7:00. And DeForest Kelley, George Takei, Jimmy Doohan and Walter Koenig were all expected at 7:30, since their makeup requirements were minimal. Leading ladies would usually have a 6:00 a.m. call. Now, for all of the cast members in before 7:30, we would tender breakfast to avoid a meal penalty (an actor could only work 5½ hours without the company breaking for a meal, and we usually had lunch at 1:00 p.m.).

Nichelle, Bill and Leonard's breakfast order was almost always the same. Nichelle would order yogurt. Leonard would order two soft-boiled eggs with bacon. Bill's would be a rather grand order: two soft-boiled eggs, bacon, two scrambled eggs, a half-grapefruit, wheat toast, and a large orange juice.

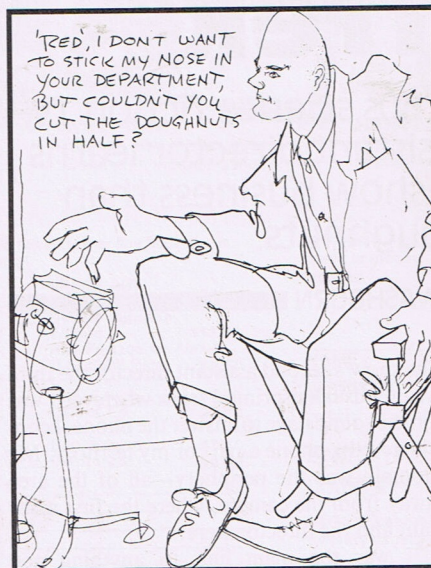
I never concerned myself with how much an actor ordered for breakfast—even though the company paid the tab. My concern was helping the cast to be at ease in the mornings by creating an extremely happy, comfortable environment.

Washburn had to know each *Trek* script backwards and forwards, and make sure each cast member was briefed on all last-minute changes. Here, he reviews a script with Nichelle Nichols.

I came to *Star Trek* with about eight months experience under my belt, having worked nonstop on feature films, TV movies and a TV series. So, I came with experience, a good work attitude, and a love for the business of creating illusion.

As a trainee on *Star Trek* in spring 1967, I worked under a second assistant director who had been aboard the first year. His name was

Leonard Shapiro. Everyone called him "Tiger." He insisted on it. But those of us who knew him well knew him to be a pussycat. The first day we met, I gained his trust, and thereafter he allowed me to do more and more of his job. His only requirement was that I let him know everything that I was do-



CHARLES WASHBURN has worked for years as an assistant director and production manager in Hollywood. He even has an acting credit—playing an intern opposite Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*. In recent years, Washburn has used his writing ability to develop many movie and TV scripts. Presently, he is looking forward to directing his first feature film next spring, *Maitland*, from his own screenplay. His script follows the life and loves of a black female singer/dancer/actress/boxer in the '30s and '40s. The project is to location in Europe.

It took a while, but Gregg finally got around to questioning me as to why Bill would order such a big breakfast. Obviously, the cost of the breakfast for one individual was a sum Gregg wanted reduced. He wanted to work it out through me. I wanted him to work it out with Bill. He never would. I think Gregg's reluctance was probably embarrassment about the pettiness of the question. And, maybe fear. To go up to Bill between takes of fighting a Klingon and ask why his breakfast order is so big could have been dangerous.

What Gregg didn't know—and I somehow never got around to telling him—was how Bill's breakfast was disposed of each day. Bill would eat a piece of toast and drink the orange juice. His wardrobe man, Ken Harvey, would eat the half-grapefruit. And his Doberman (Morgan), who Bill brought to work each day and kept in his dressing room, ate the rest.

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Gene Roddenberry often replies to the question of why *Star Trek* was so successful by mentioning the staff's dedication, the cast's chemistry, and the stories. He wouldn't deny this, but an awful lot of credit should also go to the crew.

I've worked with many crews in my 20 years in Hollywood, but the *Star Trek* crew stands out as the best. A good crew not only knows and executes their jobs with efficiency, but they create the best atmosphere for the performers to work. The *Star Trek* crew cared about each other and worked well together, but, more importantly, they loved and cared about the cast and the show.

While we were preparing the first show filmed for the second season—"Catspaw"—I was on one of the stages talking with George Hill, a grip who had worked the first season. He had a bag of candy which he had just poured into a "goodie box" on the camera dolly, declaring that the grips would keep it filled during the year. The previous season, he explained, a few half-pint liquor bottles were found behind some of the flats and in other out-of-the-way places. The feeling was that the candy would serve to help those crew members who were prone to drink on the job. George proved to be right. No bottles were ever found on the stages from then on.

One department I want to mention is the Sound Department. This was a four-man crew—something that is almost never used today. There was a mixer, a boom man, a recorder and a cableman. During the third season, the cableman, Frank Oakden, would draw caricatures of cast and crew members during lulls in shooting. Once Frank had made his cable connections and little was required of him during rehearsals and between shots, he would stand behind the sound cart and, using a shelf on the cart, sketch a drawing on the back of a script page and give it to me. After collecting more than 40 drawings from him, I showed the pile to Gregg, who decided to run off copies, have them bound and given to the crew. Some of those draw-



ings accompany this article.

There were times when a scene was staged in such a way that we physically needed two hand-held mikes on the set. At that time, Frank would man the second mike—thus getting a pay rate change—and Red, the Craft Service man, would be called upon to handle the cablework. This also resulted in a rate change for him. Frank would usually make a point of calling my attention to that fact so that I would note it on the production report. I would usually kid him about it—like thanking him for doing it gratis, or telling him that Gregg wanted him to donate his rate increase to buying more donuts for the crew. Red's signal to come and take on the cableman's job was three bells, sounded by the mixer, Carl Daniels.

Not many people considered the laborer's job in making a picture, but they just didn't know how important it was. Red helped to create that "best atmosphere" by keeping the set free from litter, the coffee hot, and tirelessly making sure that the cast's dressing rooms were clean. The thing that I most remember about Red is that he never stopped working the entire day. He was the best I've ever worked with in that capacity.

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When I think about the women of *Star Trek* I realize I had a pretty enviable job. The show required many young, beautiful girls to be in every episode—whether cast or extras. It was a delight to work where girls pranced through each scene in micro-mini crew uniforms. Since our set was a military ship, the women crew members were young, perky, and possessed a certain vitality which added to the show's overall style.

I've categorized some personal favorites I want to share:

My Favorite Actress. Let me qualify this first. What I had come to admire in any actor was that quality called "professionalism," usually attributed to one who is always at work on time; is ready on the set when they're supposed to be; knows their lines; eager to do off-stage lines for other actors; is able to adjust to unexpected changes; makes their fellow actors comfortable in working out a

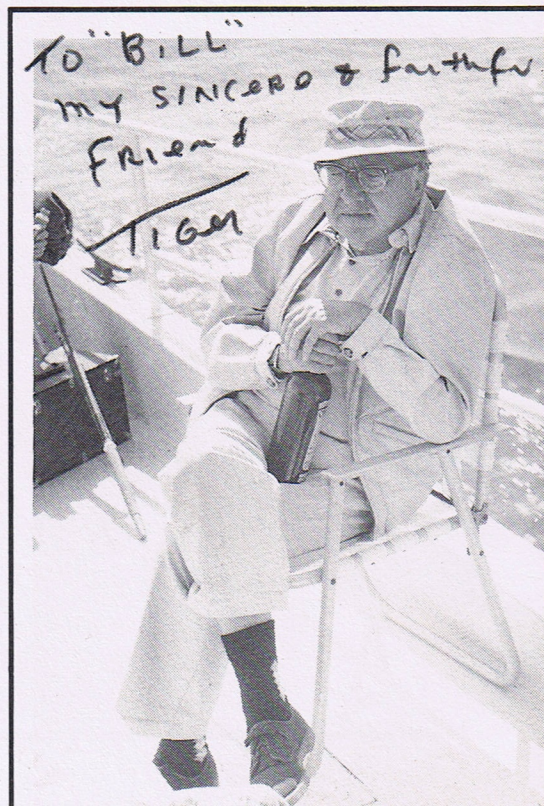
scene; is extremely cooperative with the behind-the-scenes personnel; knows their craft; and puts a magnificent performance on the screen. With that in mind, the actress who stands out in my mind above all others is the first leading lady on the first *Star Trek* episode I worked on—Antoinette Bowers (Sylvia in "Catspaw").

The Most Beautiful? Again, let me qualify. How do you judge a beauty contest? You vote for the person who exhibits most of those elements you find desirable. During my two seasons, I saw many beautiful girls walk on those stages—some made even more beautiful by makeup and wardrobe. Maybe she was aided by that Bill Theiss-created Grecian gown, but my choice is Leslie Parrish (Carolyn in "Who Mourns For Adonais?").

My Favorite Offscreen Line was uttered by an actor—and a most gifted one—Michael Dunn (Alexander in "Plato's Stepchildren"). He had just finished showing me the special equipment on his car parked outside the stage which allowed him (a little person) to drive it. The lunch break was underway and he decided he would rush to the commissary to eat. I asked him to change his costume, as eating fast might cause him to have an accident. He said: "Don't worry, Charlie, I eat neat."

Most Anxious Moment. While shooting a jungle area scene on stage for "The Apple," an explosion was set off as Kirk, Spock and the arrival party were exploring a planet. The explosive charge was apparently too heavy. Bill and Leonard complained of hearing problems and everyone was quite alarmed that it might be serious. I accompanied them

When he first signed on for *Star Trek* as a trainee assistant director, Washburn worked under second assistant director Leonard "Tiger" Shapiro, who had a nickname for everybody.



immediately to the studio nurse, who determined that they should go to a certain doctor off the lot. A studio car was summoned quickly and the three of us headed for the doctor. They were treated immediately and told to return the next day for further examination. I called the set to report the news before returning with them.

Most Unusual Request. During the production of "I, Mudd," a number of sets of twins were used. I was summoned to the dressing room of a female pair of twins by the wardrobe girl, Andrea Weaver, who told me that they were going to leave the set to go home for an emergency. When I arrived, I

Washburn currently plans to return to Europe next year to make his directing debut.

learned the emergency's nature: their pet bobcat had escaped! They were bent on leaving immediately, but I talked through the situation with them. We agreed that they would stay, but I would keep in touch through calls to a neighbor of theirs. It worked. They stayed. I never found out what happened to the bobcat, though.

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It was a few minutes after 6:00 a.m. on June 5, 1968. I had just brought coffee into the makeup room and greeted actress France Nuyen, who was in Fred Phillips' makeup chair. I made some statement about "the events of last night," and neither Fred nor France knew what I was talking about. I then

said: "You didn't hear? Bobby Kennedy was shot." France gasped, and jumped up screaming out of the makeup chair. She paced up and down the length of the room cursing to the top of her voice, releasing her anger. France and her then-husband, actor Robert Culp, were very active in civil rights causes at that time, and were most supportive of Bobby Kennedy's presidential campaign. She must have taken at least five minutes to settle down. Neither Fred nor I dared disturb her. We just stood still and waited for her volcano to stop erupting. France got through that day's scenes like the professional she was—though, with a great deal of difficulty. Whenever I see the episode "Elaan of Troyius," I'm reminded of those moments as I look at her performance in the scenes that were filmed that sad day.

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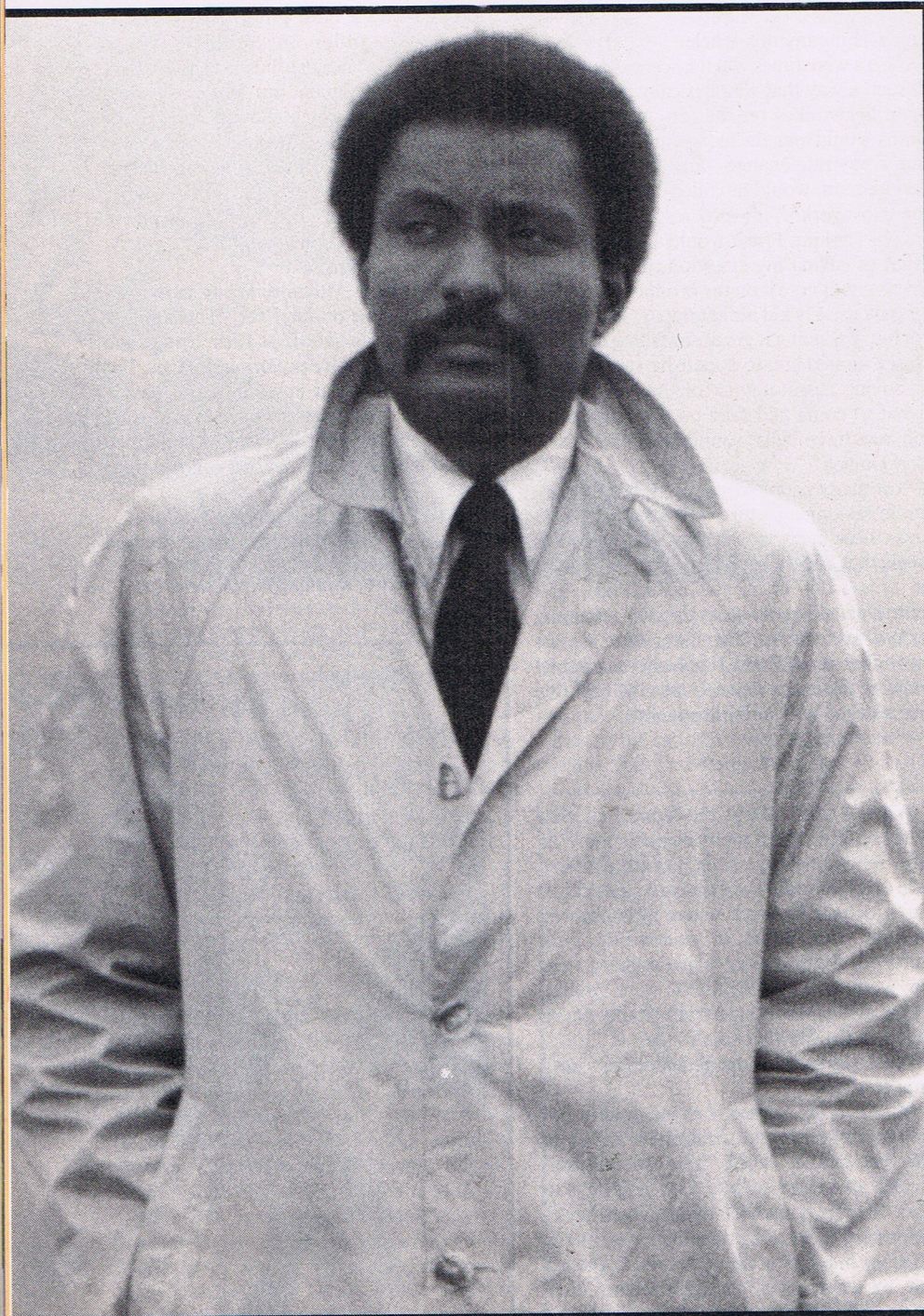
One of the areas that assistant directors got involved in was firings. We didn't do any, but, in the two examples I want to discuss, the firings came from the producer's office, and our job was to present a professional posture throughout.

A director was fired over a weekend. The reason never filtered down to the assistants. One obvious reason was that we had fallen way behind schedule. Per our schedule, every six working days, an episode is completed, with no rest, or prep, days in between. So, the day after one episode is completed, another starts. The only new crew members are the director and the other alternating first assistant director. What was noteworthy about the changing of the guard was that this new director performed a most extraordinary feat (with the crew's help). He shot 17 pages of script his first day aboard—thus enabling us to finish the episode in our usual six days. That replacement director was Herb Wallerstein. In later years, I presented Herb with a copy of his banner day's production report.

The other significant firing was an actor. I don't remember his name—and wouldn't say it here if I did. He was one of the Earps in "Spectre of the Gun," otherwise known as the "O.K. Corral" episode. The firing occurred while we were shooting. It was not generally known what was happening, but the fired actor's agent had to be contacted and the situation explained to the actor. Also, a new actor had to be hired and he needed to report immediately for makeup, wardrobe, and a quick script study. This was potentially an embarrassing situation if not handled properly. But, of course, it was in the hands of the *Star Trek* assistant director team. The new actor was someone I had worked with before, so I imagine his anxiety was eased to have someone who knew him to help make the transition smooth. Everything worked. The new actor was a perfect addition. And, the show was one of the third season's best.

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There are quite a few of the old *Star Trek* gang that I am still in touch with after almost





Breaking for lunch during "Plato's Stepchildren" filming, Michael Dunn—seen here as Alexander comforting Spock—uttered Washburn's favorite offscreen line.

20 years. Among those I've seen more than a couple of times are Gene Roddenberry, who I recently talked with when I decided to write a book on my *Star Trek* recollections; the third season's co-producer Bob Justman; story editor Dorothy Fontana; Andee Richardson, then Gene Coon's secretary; Rusty Meek, Elliot Schick, Phil Rawlins—all assistant directors; Bill Blackburn, then stand-in, now costumer; George Takei, Jimmy Doohan and Walter Koenig; John Dwyer, set decorator; Harlan Ellison (attended one of his weddings); and David Gerrold ("Trouble With Tribbles" writer. I still have his original outline called "A Fuzzy Thing Happened To Me...").

As the third season's shows were nearing completion, I got an offer to work on a feature film that would location in Jamaica. To stay and complete the remaining *Star Trek* episodes would have meant missing the opportunity to continue my growth on a distant location. I went to Gene Roddenberry to tell him of the offer and my dilemma. He helped me to make up my mind right away, and went on to offer some advice which has stuck with me since that day.

First of all, he told me that if he thought that the series would be renewed for a fourth year, he wouldn't encourage my leaving. He told me to accept the Jamaica opportunity, and thanked me for my contributions.

When we talked further about my long-range goals, I told him that my number one ambition was to be a motion picture director. He then told me some words I have never forgotten. In fact, I've repeated them many times in Career Day speeches I've given at high schools. He said simply: "I don't know what to tell you as to how to go about being a director. But, the most important thing for you to do is to *want* to do it. And, if you want to do it bad enough, you'll find the way."

I still want to do it bad enough. I've reconciled myself to the fact that timetables vary with individuals—and with circumstances. I've undergone a lot of personal and professional growth since my *Star Trek* years. I keep pushing to find that way.

Working on the series was far and away the best thing to happen to my career. I've taken a lot of pride in the success of *Star Trek*, because I was one of the people who contributed to that success. ✨

Witch woman Antoinette Bowers was the leading lady for Washburn's first episode, "Catspaw."

