

SPOOK PROFILE

STEVEN KUTCHER:

BUGMASTER

As a professional insect wrangler, Steven Kutcher may know more about how insects behave than anyone else on the planet. He can make a cockroach hit its mark every time. He can get a fly to clean itself on cue. I wouldn't be surprised if he could convince a dung beetle to fetch him a cold one after a hard day on the set.

Odds are you've seen Kutcher's work. Since he entered the field in 1976, he's been the man behind the bugs in hundreds of films (*Spiderman*, *Arachnophobia*, *Jurassic Park*), TV shows (*Chicago Hope*, *The Power Rangers*, *The X Files*), commercials (Apple, Orkin, KFC) and music videos (Michael Jackson, No Doubt, Alice Cooper). Ants, spiders, roaches, leeches — if it crawls, flies, stings, or just plain repulses, odds are Kutcher has worked with it.

As computer graphics threaten to take over the entire film industry, Kutcher is a one-man argument for sticking to reality, at least where realistic insects in film are concerned. Kutcher has "trained" a cockroach to run across a floor and flip onto its back at a specific place. He got another roach to climb out of a shoe, up a bag of Cheetos, and on to a magazine, stopping on top of a picture of a surfboard on the magazine's cover. He even somehow convinced a wasp to fly into an actor's mouth. And all of these actions were performed under hot studio lights, when the director wanted them, and often for multiple takes. Unless you want it to grow to the size of an elephant and knock over a bus, Kutcher has demonstrated that



there's really no reason to replace real bugs with digital ones.

With degrees in entomology and biology and decades of experience, Kutcher is well qualified both to handle insects and to speak about them. He is very active in promoting education about insects, but manages to avoid the trap of oversentimentality that other ecologically minded people have fallen into. It is this love of education which led him to start a very successful series of insect fairs in the Los Angeles area.

We spoke with Kutcher when some of his work, in the form of *Spiderman*, was in the midst of breaking box-office records.

THE SPOOK: To start off, can you tell us what kind of insects you most like to work with?

STEVEN KUTCHER: I pretty much like everything, but I'll give you a "top five" list. These are not necessarily in order, but one fly, one butterfly, one beetle, a spider,

and a tarantula. What I don't enjoy doing is working with lots of cockroaches or lots of flies because they are both smelly. Working with lots of ants is tolerable.

I actually have four different ant vacuum machines, which I call ant-vacs. I can walk out in the desert and vacuum up ants. When I'm doing a scene where there are ants all over the place like in *Copycat* with Sigourney Weaver, I can vacuum them up so that they don't get killed.

SPOOK: Do you find that some insects are easier to handle or smarter than others?

KUTCHER: The brain of an insect is smaller than a pin. It can't have higher thought processes; there isn't room for it. It does incredible things, but it can't do that. So their intelligence is not on a higher plane, but they're very good at certain behaviors, so you have to adapt those behaviors to what you need.

SPOOK: So would you say that you can really control insects, or just contain them?

KUTCHER: You can control them quite a bit if you understand their behavior. I can make a fly go left or right, I can make a fly walk around the rim of a glass or land on a particular number on a piece of paper. How do I know how to do that? I've spent a lot of time studying flies. In *Psycho*, *The Joe Louis Story*, and latest Cruise film, there are fly scenes.

Just to give you an example, a movie director says he wants moths to fly around a porch light. Obviously moths can do that. But what happens is you get there with your moths and they've put up a set with a little

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light lighting up a porch, and when you release the moths they go straight for the big studio lights. Unless you know how to control the moths' behavior, they're never going to go near that porch light.

I did a Volkswagen commercial in which I had to make a fly clean itself on cue. So after I took the job, I sat down at a table with a bunch of flies and a bunch of stuff to see how I could get the fly to do what I wanted it to do. I put talcum powder on the fly and it just sat there. I put ground sugar on it, and it sat there. Then I took its head and stuck it in honey and stuck its front legs in honey, and then it cleaned itself. So when you don't know how to do it, it sounds like a difficult task.

In 25 years of filming, I have never failed a shot that I have been able to plan out. I've never failed to get an insect that was requested. My marks are very high for controllability. But now dog and cat trainers are competing for money, and they know that they can get hissing roaches somewhere so they offer a producer a package deal where they'll throw the roaches in if they can get all the animal work on a film. I often lose out to them because of price, since I charge more for insect work than they do. But the fact is, an inexperienced person can end up costing a lot more money in the long run because of extra takes and delays.

For example, when I did *Fright Night Part 2*, I had a scene in which thousands of insects pour out of a corpse's stomach. I got all of these tubes of insects ready, and I told the director he had less than five minutes after I was set up to get the shot. Insects in groups generate a lot of heat, and if you keep them bottled up like that, they'll end up dead. Moviegoers sometimes don't realize that when they see a take, there might have been 60 takes. So you can see where

an inexperienced person might cause a lot of problems dead insects are pouring out during take one.

SPOOK: Because control is so important to movie makers, do you think that computer-animated insects will completely replace real insects in film?

KUTCHER: I want to make two points. I have not worked much since *Spiderman*, and the reason is that they were worried about the strike last year so they did a lot of product early on and a lot of stuff has gone to Canada. Then there's the computer-animated stuff. Real is always better than computer generated, but if you want to get certain effects, you can't do it with real things.

On the other hand, this kind of thinking has been taken too much to the extreme. When you look at the bite of the spider in *Spiderman* [the one scene in the film where a CGI spider replaced a real one — Ed] and the other computer-generated stuff, I can usually tell the difference and I find it very distracting.

The big fault with cgi is movement — they don't know how to make things move, so they base the movement on either film clips or their limited knowledge. But insects are too complex for this to work well. They behave differently when they're relaxed or distressed, for example. You might walk differently when you're intoxicated, so if someone takes footage of you walking and assumes that's how you walk whether you're drunk or not, they're going to get your behavior wrong some of the time.

The real question is what makes a film good, and what makes it good is when you forget you're watching a film. There is a place for CGI, but for example in *Patch Adams* they have a butterfly flying around and it's computer generated. It's not bad, but it's not good. When I went out to work

on that film, it was a windy, rainy day and they decided to computer generate the butterfly instead of letting me do it. Very often directors don't want to deal with an issue or don't know how to deal with it, so they default to CGI. It makes it hard for an actor to interact with nothing.

By the way, I was not in the credits for *Spiderman*, even though I did a major scene, but the computer-animation people are all credited. Even these fourth-tier people who just do secretarial work make the credits, but I and other people got cut.

SPOOK: Speaking of problems on the set, do you have more trouble with actors or with your insects?

KUTCHER: I generally have little problem with actors and directors — they're being paid lots of money. Would you have a roach on you for \$100,000 for five minutes? Sure! I'd do it for \$10, but that's just me. I have more problems with like stand-ins, because they don't have the motivation.

Smart directors are the ones that I can talk to and educate. New directors or insecure ones want their hands in everything, and they can be a problem. On the other hand, I worked with Denzel Washington on, his directorial debut [*The Antwone Fisher Story*], and although he is a very good actor, he was obviously unexperienced as a director. So he surrounded himself with experienced people, and that changes everything.

SPOOK: Do you have any problems with animal welfare groups when you're making films?

KUTCHER: The rule is that no living thing can be harmed or injured in the making of a movie or entertainment. You can't hurt a fly or a maggot. It used to be that fish and insects were exempt, but then they got hard-line with it. In *Arachnophobia*, we cut out the bottom of John Goodman's shoe so he could pretend to step on a spider.

I say that you need to protect higher animals, but you should be able to do on film things you do in normal life, like swat a fly.

Programs like *Fear Factor* gets away with showing people eating live insects and things by saying they're not entertainment, they're a documentary. The Humane Society should be pretty embarrassed about that.

SPOOK: So if you can't kill a roach on film, can you fumigate afterwards if a roach gets loose?

KUTCHER: I don't ever have to worry about that. Any fool can dump a bucket of roaches on a table, but the important thing

I do is be able to pick them up and use them for a second take, or a third, or a fiftieth. I hardly ever lose anything. I know to look for cracks and things. I know where the insects are going to go.

SPOOK: Some people complain that the portrayal of insects in film gives people false impressions of how they should be handled. For example, you can seriously hurt a tarantula by dropping it. Do you think that this is a problem?

KUTCHER: The important thing is to understand the venue. You go to a movie for entertainment, not to learn anything. Do you criticize ghost movies and say ghosts don't do that? Unless there's a story point and they're trying to say it's factual, it's hard to criticize a movie that made for entertainment as a factual source. You don't tell your doctor to go a movie to find new medical procedures.

With tarantulas, are you going to make that kind of criticism when people get shot on film? After a movie explosion, would you complain that, "people don't shred like that"?

SPOOK: You were the originator of the L.A. Insect fair, an excellent event for people who are interested in learning more about insects. How did that come about?

KUTCHER: I had been studying insects since I was little. At one point I was sitting at home thinking about how I'd gone to mushroom fairs, cactus fairs, and I realized there was no insect fair. I knew there were these people with fabulous collections at their houses that the public never saw. I don't collect them myself, but there are a lot of people who just have draws of beautiful butterflies and things. I thought it was a shame that only other collectors ever saw them.

By the time I was done, the fair had 40 exhibitors. It was very successful. When people saw they could buy insects, they were very happy. I calculated that since I started it, over 100,000 people have come to the fair in 16 years.

At first the insect fair was shunned by everybody. The Natural History Museum wanted nothing to with it. Now there are three fairs: at the Arboretum, the Natural History Museum, and at Cal Poly Pomona. There's probably going to be a fourth starting in Fullerton.

Today the Natural History Museum gets six to eight thousand visitors on a weekend, and it would be more if there were more parking. The largest fairs in the western hemisphere are in Los Angeles, but I hear

that there are larger ones in Europe. If the fair could be at the Convention Center, they could get thousands and thousands of people coming, but there aren't big companies or big car companies backing it.

Someone should have a large nature show, like a boat show or an auto show, and have the Autobahn Society, and the Sierra Club, and all the little nature groups that couldn't sponsor a big convention sponsored by bigger companies like REI or Sport Chalet or anything nature related. You could go there and be exposed to all these different groups that occasionally you see at environmental fairs but the general public never sees. I'm not going to do it, because it's too much work, but someone should do it.

SPOOK: Is there anything you're working on now that you'd like to talk about?

KUTCHER: I just did a Lexus commercial, and there may be some things coming up, but it's been very slow for me. I'm working on articles and I have a lot of things I do on my own when I'm not doing this work. There's *The Bug Scientist* by Donna Jackson, which I'm in, and there are a number of projects I'm working on which may someday become books. I worked on so many films with a lot of major stars, I have this list of notable people I've met and worked with. I'm up to 80 and I'd like to do something with that.

For example, David Lynch likes to work with insects and he asked me once for some flies. At the opening of *Lost Highway*, right in front of the orduves, I came up to him with a brown paper bag full of flies and handed them over.

SPOOK: One last question: If you find a bug in your house or a hotel room, do you kill it?

KUTCHER: It would depend. I might dispose of it or not. But when I see a cockroach I don't see a pest, I see \$5, so I think of them a little different.

People who study insects do it for various reasons. Just because people study insects doesn't automatically endear them to me. The people I have trouble with are the ones who go to the insect fair just to make money. They could be selling dead fish for all they care. Some of the most interesting are the ones who just want to display and share what they have without selling anything. ~

For more on Steven Kutcher, see his Web site: home.earthlink.net/~skutcher.