



## The "Western" Godfather

Kurt Russell spills the beans.

**It didn't surprise me that Kurt Russell was willing to go off topic during our interview last April.**

After all, it was the end of the day and he was likely tired of telling the same handful of anecdotes about *Poseidon*; about nearly drowning during the production, about accidentally putting a hole in Josh Lucas' scalp, about peeing in the tank.

And Russell loves to talk—I learned that 10 years ago when we wasted most of my interview time arguing libertarianism and Jeffersonian democratic principles when we were supposed to be discussing Snake Plissken and *Escape from L.A.*

What did surprise me was how eager Russell was to talk about the movie *Tombstone*. As soon as I mentioned the famously troubled production of the beloved Western, Russell lit up and began to go into unprecedented detail about the who's, what's and why's.

Actually, surprise is too gentle a word; shocked is more like it.

The fact is, while rumors have circulated about precisely what happened when screenwriter Kevin Jarre was fired as director, early in the production, and was replaced by *Rambo 2* director George Cosmatos, the cast and crew have been very close to the vest about specifics. Since the film was released in 1993, the shroud of silence concerning the picture has rarely afforded anyone much more than a glimpse of the real story, for reasons Russell at last made clear in a 20-minute conversation that took place in a suite of the Regent Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles.

Russell also discussed Kevin Costner's role in the production, both before the movie started and after the picture was wrapped, details of the financing and distribution, certain curious casting considerations and the legendary missing footage that *Tombstone* lovers have been dreaming of seeing for 13 years.



Kurt Russell (right) drops a bombshell revelation about who really made *Tombstone*. Val Kilmer (left) shares his thoughts about the turmoil on the set (see sidebar on p. 24).

— ALL IMAGES COURTESY BUENA VISTA UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED —

**Henry Cabot Beck:** *The Tombstone* scholars, Allen Barra, Bob Boze Bell and those guys, are getting together in *Tombstone* in October for the 125th anniversary of the O.K. Corral gunfight.

**Kurt Russell:** Are they? That'll be fun. Has it been 125 years? Eighteen—what?—81? I guess so. That sounds right.

At one time I really knew about Wyatt Earp because that movie—*Tombstone* is one that's actually worth talking about—that was the one time I had gone out and got the money. I backed the director; the director got fired, so we brought in a guy to be a ghost director. They wanted me to take over the movie. I said, "I'll do it, but I don't want to put my name on it. I don't want to be the guy."

I said to George [Cosmatos], "I'm going to give you a shot list every night, and that's what's going to be." I'd go to George's room, give him the shot list for the next day, that was the deal. "George I don't want any arguments. This is what it is. This is what the job is."

"Yeah, absolutely."

I got him from Sly Stallone—called up Sly, said I need a guy. Sly did the same thing with *Rambo 2* with George. And I said to

George, "While you're alive George, I won't say a goddamn thing." [Cosmatos died April 19th, 2005.]

And it was the hardest work of my life. *Tombstone* was so painful. *Tombstone* was so tough, you know what I mean? It was just so painful; it was hard physically to do—I got four hours sleep every night. And I'm so happy that we got it made.

I didn't get a chance to edit the movie, which I thought was unfortunate because it could have been one of the greatest Westerns ever, ever, ever made. And it's pretty damn good. We had a great cast. A phenomenal script.

*Some of the direction is terrific. There are great shots—especially the crane shot over Curly Bill [Powers Boothe] when he exits the opium den—*

That's actually how good the script is. That shot is, there's no way not to do that shot. The movie demands it. The script demands it. But what's bad about that shot, if you look at it, is it's badly timed. We had no money. BANG! Half an hour later, the light breaks on the gunshot—Cut. Print it. Go on, move on. But it works.

## The Fight Scene That Kills Off Kevin

In May 1993, I got a sneak peek at a new movie getting set to film. The script, called *Tombstone*, by screenwriter Kevin Jarre (*Glory*, *The Tracker*) really nailed the Earp story, and I bemoaned in my daily journal that I couldn't have done as good a job (I had the conceit I would write the definitive Wyatt Earp script). Several weeks later, Jeff Morey, the historical consultant for the movie, called me and asked if I wanted to visit the *Tombstone* set. While there, I witnessed a fight scene that would prove to be the last straw for Kevin Jarre (the scene won't make it into the final movie). Two days after that scene, he was fired. Here's my journal entry from that day:

**June 9, 1993**

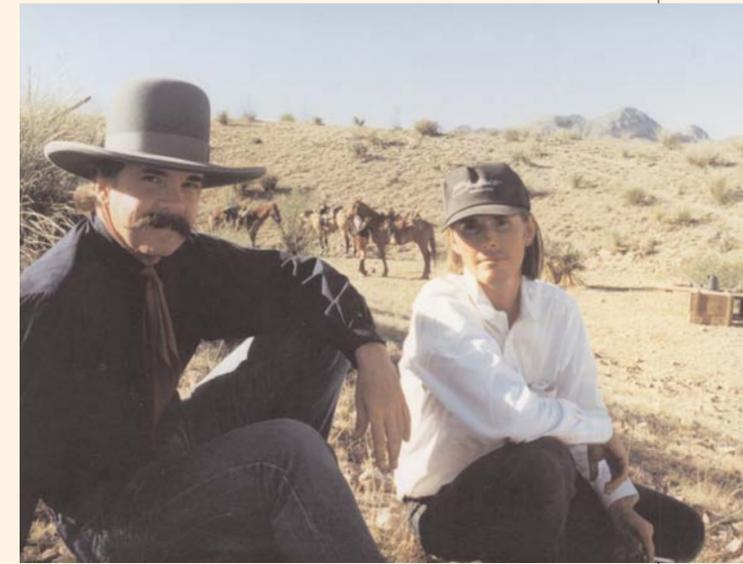
I leave the station [KSLX, radio station in Scottsdale, Arizona] with Deena [my daughter, 13] at 9:30 and drive to Tucson. Pick up Jeff Morey at 11:30. A flat tire puts us about an hour behind, and we finally take off at about one p.m. We cruise easily to Sonoita, using a movie production crew map to get to the Elgin movie site, which is on the "Research Ranch" property.

After missing a turn that sets us back a half hour, we arrive at three p.m., pulling into the side canyon where the *Tombstone* crew is filming. We can see all the way up into the draw where the "Rustler Park" scene is being filmed. Big trucks are parked down by the main road—all kinds. Three body dummies are sprawled across the tailgate of a big white truck. I take a pic of Deena with one of the dummies, and we head, on foot, up the draw.

We spot Val Kilmer on horseback. He looks pasty and small. He is sitting next to a guy in a tango hat who turns out to be Kurt Russell. We don't recognize him until he takes off his hat.

Russell and Kilmer start improvising a scene where the posse rides up (and over) several rustlers and confronts them. Russell quiets one of the bad guys, tosses his hat to Kilmer and gets down to beat the daylights out of him. This seems totally made-up on the spot. When Russell punches, he actually says, "Pow!" and "Bam!"

*Val Kilmer and Kurt Russell ride up to start off the fight scene that likely led to Kevin Jarre's cut from the movie; Jarre was fired two days later.*



On the set of *Tombstone*: Historical consultant, Jeff Morey, and screenwriter, Kevin Jarre.

— PHOTOS BY BOB BOZE BELL —

just like a kid in the backyard. Jarre steps in and shows Russell how he wants the punches delivered: "Up, across, uppercut." Russell slowly changes the sequence into a typical Hollywood fight scene even though Jarre's sequence has a sort of Queensbury boxing rhythm to it.

We gravitate to the other side and watch the scene shape up. It is warm—almost hot—a slight breeze makes it bearable. Kevin J. and Kurt walk through the scene again and again. We retire to a small hill for a better view. Kurt has words with a cowboy—quiets him—and then throws his Zorro hat to Kilmer (I wonder how many takes will occur until the hat takes off—it happens on about the fifth take).

At the end of the scene, Turkey Creek Johnson remarks that Florentino is getting away and turns to fire a Winchester at him. The first time he does this, he pulls, cocks and aims right at the gunsmith. Being a bevy of gun-savvy extras, they all dive out of the way. Turkey is oblivious to their very existence. (In fact, each time this is re-enacted, Turkey's horse starts walking and he has to rein in and aim, several times per take. Deena and I chuckle under our breath.) After about 45 minutes into this scene, Jarre looks up to where we are sitting and comes up the hill to sit down and chat. I am thrilled! I know he's very, very busy. I gush a bit more than I would have liked, but when I tell him I especially like the hats—he visibly beams.

Just before we leave, I talk to Russell. I ask him if he knows who Honkytonk Sue [see p. 8] is. He says nope. When I say that Goldie bought the rights, he says, "Oh, yeah, the water-rights story!"—meaning, the script Larry McMurtry wrote. Russell seems to be a decent guy.

When we finally do leave, Kilmer is sitting in his canvas chair, sucking on a cig and looking down into a mirror, mesmerized by something in his face.



There's a lot of great stuff in *Tombstone*. Great actors who were in a very difficult situation, who I bought their trust by cutting myself out of the movie—as an actor. There's stuff in that original script that if you were ever to read it you'd go, "Oh ho ho."

We needed to lose 20 pages. Kevin would never lose the 20 pages. He would never lose it. So once he was gone, there's only one way I'm going to get the trust of these actors and that is to cut myself out of this goddamn movie and make some changes; make Wyatt an "aura" character.

*AURA?*

In other words, you meet him, you see him, you know who he is. When you see him step off the train, that's it. There's the guy. And then Doc Holliday fleshes him out. I said, "You're going to have all the acting stuff to do in this movie, and I'm going to make sure it gets done." And I saved most of everybody else's stuff to do. Because, in fact, I could do that with Wyatt—I knew the script extremely well—and I could do that with Wyatt because I was going to play him.

I knew what I needed from the character in terms of the movie, in terms of making the movie work. But it wasn't fun to do that; it wasn't fun to cut out eight of the reasons you wanted to do the movie.

I was very disappointed with Kevin. I told Kevin he was going to get fired. I said, "It's not working, and they're going to come in here and can you," and they did. It was a bad experience in that regard, but it was a great—*Tombstone* mattered. [The drama] doesn't matter—all movies have their life. Some are easy, and some are not (laughs).

*Troubled movies are usually crap, but Tombstone comes out of all that smelling like a rose.*

It was really hard. Plus, I was doing it all on the sly. George and I had sign language going on.

*But you got along.*

Oh yeah. Very well. You had to. And he was terrific in selecting locations. But one day I came out there and the whole street is backwards. And EPK (Electronic Press

Kit, Production, i.e., documentary filmmakers) is out there that day, so I come out there and I say, "George, look at that." And he said, "Ooh," and he had to turn it all around. But he was very good to w ... he was very good at selecting locations, and he did what he was supposed to do.

*WAS IT ALL SHOT IN OLD TUCSON?*

Old Tucson, Mesquite [Dennis Liddiard, Russell's long-time makeup man, pipes up from the other room: "Mescal."—is that what it was? Mescal?

You want to talk about a book that I could write—I said, "George, as long as you're alive, I'm not going to say a goddamn thing." But I could've cared less. All I cared about was the fact that the movie got made.

*The picture did surprising business.*

It was interesting, 'cause when the movie got released—I read this great article in the *L.A. Times* about the phenomenon of *Tombstone*, how the studio was like shocked at what they

## Val Kilmer Talks Tombstone

The screenplay that Kevin Jarre wrote was quite brilliant with many, many, many, subplots, a very few of which were dramatized. I mean virtually every main character, every cowboy, for example, had a subplot and a story told, and none of them are left in the film.

The scene that I recall Kevin Jarre directing, I don't think there's anything left of it in the film, not because of Kevin's work, but just normal editing fate. It's a scene with Kurt at Hooker's ranch—but I think if my memory is correct, it was cut because the movie was too long.

I am happy with the film as it exists, because there were so many challenges that were risky to begin with. There was the changing of the director, and we had over 100 people, cast and crew, who quit or were fired, and that's gotta be some kind of record. But to have enough substance come out of Kevin Jarre's script, enough moments that made it successful, that satisfied the audience, that gave me a good feeling because we worked really hard on it—everybody did—and we made a lot of sacrifices. Many actors who don't normally play smaller roles were really committed to the idea of the whole film, and with never having experienced it before, a changeover with a director getting replaced, it could have totally fallen apart, but instead every single actor that did it, committed themselves to follow through and try to realize the film they had committed to.



*Check out our next issue to find out where you can get your own copy of the hat Val Kilmer wears in Tombstone.*



The famous walkdown to the O.K. Corral scene features (from left) Val Kilmer as Doc Holliday, Sam Elliott as Virgil Earp, Kurt Russell as Wyatt Earp and Bill Paxton as Morgan Earp.

had—they didn't know what to do with the movie. It was out there, and they were like, "How are things going with *Tombstone*?" They didn't promote it very much, didn't know what to do with it, didn't know where it was coming from. "What's happening here?"

It was a Western. A Western! They didn't know anything. And it wasn't their baby. I'd gone and got 25 million dollars from Andy Vajna to make the movie. Andy and I had been on a bicycle trip, that's where the relationship came from. A bicycle trip we did a couple of years earlier. He said, "If you ever have a project..." I said "Fine."

And my old agent at William Morris, I left my old agent—do you remember when that shit was going down?—and I was the last one to leave, actually. And I was over at CAA and a couple of years later, '89, and my old agent called me up one day: "There's a script that I'm aware of, that you should do. But," he said, "there's a lot of politics involved here."

*Politics?*

At that time, Jarre and Costner were going to do the movie. Then Costner decided he liked the idea of doing, not *Tombstone*, but *Wyatt Earp*, with Kasdan writin' it. And he gave the movie to Kevin with his best wishes. Good luck.

I got the script from my old agent. Jarre was with William Morris. And I thought it was a phenomenal script, and I called and said I wanted to do it, and they said "Ooh"—because Costner was at CAA with Ovitz, and there was the Kasdan project and blah blah blah

But CAA was great; they got us going. And I went to Andy Vajna and got the money. And I went to my brother-in-law, Larry Franco, who produced a thousand movies, and I asked, "Larry, can I do this for 25 million dollars?" And he looked at it, went through it, semi-budgeted it and said, "Sheee—just. Just."

At the time, Kevin Jarre was the guy. Kevin was going to direct it. Kevin was such a good writer, it was such a good script, there was no reason not to back it. That was the start of it. And from there, the story just goes—you can't even imagine. We had one place [Disney/Buena Vista] we could be released.

Willem Dafoe was going to do the movie. Doc Holliday. But Disney wouldn't release the picture with Willem Dafoe, with him playing Doc Holliday.

There was a time—do you remember Denny, it was two or three weeks before we started shootin', and I got a phone call from—I forget who—anyway, I got a phone call, and it was just before Val was going to come on—we had to have a release. Costner had shut down all avenues of release for the picture except for Disney, except for Buena Vista

*How?*

He was able to. He was powerful enough at the time, which I always respected. I thought it was good hardball. And that was the story, and some part of it was true, because the only place we were gonna release that picture was through Buena Vista. That much I knew. I was told that by Kevin Jarre. Jarre said, "We're dead in the water anyplace but Buena Vista." But he wanted to cast Willem Dafoe, who was absolutely brilliant in his conceptualization of it.

*He would have been good.*

He would have been phenomenal. But they came back, told Kevin Jarre, "Nope. You can go with Val Kilmer, but not Dafoe." So we said, "We love Val Kilmer!" (Laughs) One of those things.

*But then Kilmer was great.*

Terrific. We spent a lot of time, thank you very much. Best he's ever been. Yeah (laughs). Wonder why...

What I was going to say about Costner—really interesting—OH! I remember—just before they were going to do the deal with Val, I get a phone call to go see Andy Vajna, who sits me down, says, "I want you to think about something. What would you think about playing Doc Holliday?" I said, "Oh—that's interesting. I thought about that when I read the movie, but I think we're going to go the way we are." Andy says, "Cause I was kind of thinking of, what would happen if you played Doc Holliday and Richard Gere played Wyatt Earp?"

(Raucous laughter all around.)

I didn't know if that was something somebody had come up with that Andy had to consider. I don't know what it was, but I had to actually sit there, two weeks before we were starting, thinking, "I got to think about a lot of things here. Man this is not right—(laughs)."

I said, "Nahh, I think we should just do what we got. Make the movie." But that's great history. Maybe I would have said, "Sure," and I would've, like, got hit by a truck. And Willem Dafoe would have been back, and it would have been Willem Dafoe and Richard Gere (huge laughs). Who knows? The world's crazy! You never know.

*What about the Jarre footage and all the cut parts people have been talking about?*

The shame about *Tombstone*, that you can't possibly appreciate, although Andy Vajna did give me the tape of everything on the movie, to, whenever I wanted to, to reconstruct the movie. The movie, what you saw, okay, is that movie. The movie is *The Godfather*—a Western



**ALMOST CASTED:**

Richard Gere as Wyatt.  
Willem Dafoe (right) as Doc.

Godfather. That's how different that movie is from the one you saw.

*So why don't you reconstruct it?*

'Cause I got a life. Someday I may do it. But I'd need to go back to the script, back to all my notes, have to find my notes—You know what I found the other day?—'cause I'm movin' stuff—I found the last scene I wrote, the scene between Wyatt and Doc. The hospital scene.

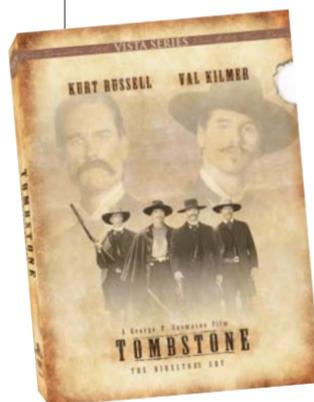
*"This is funny."*

"This is funny." There was a great scene written by Kevin Jarre for that, but because of the things we'd done, I was trying to lead to a different ending.

As the interview was concluding, and Russell's people were frantically trying to pry him away so that he could attend some evening event, I mentioned that some edited footage of the movie is supposed to be shown in Tombstone in October.

Russell responded: "Well, I don't know what they've got, but all that stuff is put away in my garage, including an interesting scene that shows a deeper relationship between Wyatt Earp and the cowboys. Who knows?—maybe sometime..."

Henry Cabot Beck writes about entertainment for a variety of magazines and newspapers, and is the U.S. correspondent for Dublin's NewsTalk 106.



The best Tombstone DVD release available to date is the Director's Cut by Vista Series. The movie itself offers commentary from Cosmatos, but we all know, we'd rather hear what Kurt has to say for the next DVD.

CLASSIC WESTERNS

Silent screen actor William S. Hart befriended legendary O.K. Corral gunfighter, Wyatt Earp, so it makes sense that the first actor to appear in a film as Wyatt Earp (below, second from the left) was in a W.S. Hart picture (Hart is third from the right). Yet most people first learned of Wyatt Earp when Hugh O'Brian (right) portrayed him in ABC's *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (1955-61). Also shown below is the first movie to tell the Tombstone story, 1932's *Law and Order* (middle), and 1994's *Wyatt Earp* (bottom), starring Dennis Quaid (left) as Doc Holliday and Kevin Costner as Wyatt.

