

# FIRE-BREATHING BOREDOM

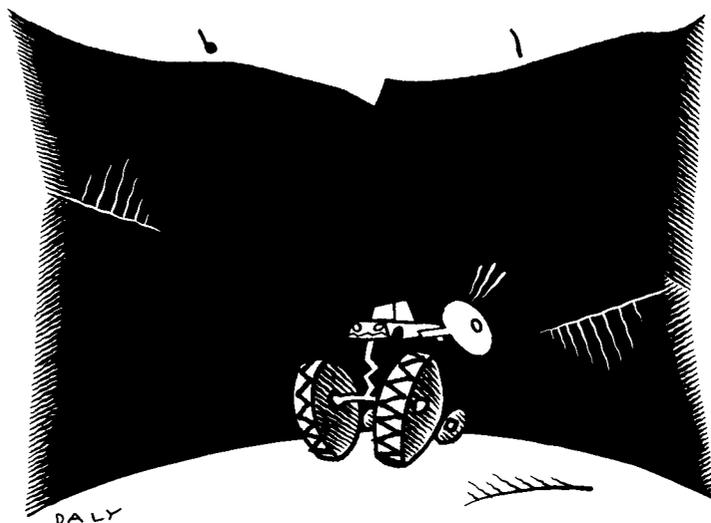
BY TODD SEAVEY

My David Letterman-influenced aesthetics had led me to expect that the American monster trucks I saw at Madison Square Garden would crush all sorts of interesting things: watermelons, burning TV sets, hapless Ford Fiestas. The TV ads ("NITRO-burning, CAR-crushing MADNESS," etc.) had made me look forward to heavy-metal anarchy: mud flying, cars flipping over, the first row of the audience smooched by mammoth tires but still confident they'd gotten their money's worth.

Instead, the trucks just came out, to much fanfare and announcer hype (with songs by Megadeth and Metallica playing in the background), and jumped over little white cars. Not mangled, not hunted and destroyed, not ground into atoms, but jumped over. In short, I wanted the automotive equivalent of a Godzilla movie, but all I got was Evil Knievel with bulkier vehicles.

This after starting the show with the national anthem and making me think that by the end I'd be proud to be an American and prouder still of automotive technology. This despite arousing the crowd's tribalistic passions by dividing the vehicles into "Team New York" and "Team New Jersey." This after introducing vehicles with intimidating names like Bigfoot, Gravedigger, Snakebite, Predator, and Carolina Crusher (the last one being a Chevy with the slogan "Have you driven over a Ford lately?" painted on the back).

Once in a while, motorcycles came out and raced around in the dirt, which was more exciting because at least the riders would sometimes fall off. I'll never again think ancient Roman audiences were barbaric for wanting gladiators to kill each other. They were probably starved for action after watching an hour of the monster chariots (falsely advertised as "LION-



grinding, EUNUCH-crushing ACTION! ACTION! ACTION!").

My hopes were raised by Vorian, the car that transforms into a flame-throwing robot (incidentally, a traditional Japanese form of performance art). If he had just transformed, taken a bow, and walked off, things might have been OK. Unfortunately, he went into a long monologue about how he'd come to save us from the evil "Rotar" (or something), a character played by a man in a rubber alien mask and a silver robe.

I had trouble hearing Vorian, but I think there was an anti-drug message in his explanation of Rotar's origin. Rotar apparently came from a planet where an "atmosphere full of noxious drugs" transformed the population into mutants—mutants now bent on conquering Earth. Calling another atmosphere noxious while standing in (not to mention emitting) exhaust fumes at Madison Square Garden struck me as hypocritical, but my attention was soon diverted by Rotar's vow to kill the audience.

Rotar said he was pleased to see so many members of our "culture" gathered in one place because we'd be easier to destroy. Eventually, Vorian would ask the audience, in a noble, Stentorian voice, "Do you want to see me waste this slime-ball?" and dispose of Rotar in a blast of

flame and spurting alien blood. Even at his death, I felt the character of Rotar remained underdeveloped.

The bulldozer that fixed up the track in Madison Square Garden was one of the highlights of the show for me, and I cheered as it scooped up dirt. It was more thrilling than seeing Bigfoot a fifth time.

Despite the Falling Fire Angel and the Dynamite Lady (not to mention the "Dynamite Lady" theme

song), the monster truck fest was disappointing enough to inspire me to dream of Lettermanesque improvements—and this was the one event where I thought such daydreaming would be unnecessary. Bored fans often amuse themselves by coming up with simple ideas for improving spectator sports: land mines on the golf course, armor on the basketball players, bonus points for collisions in car races, etc.—the kind of visionary sports speculations that led to the creation of *American Gladiators*.

We Americans dream big, but it's the Japanese who have the guts and shamelessness necessary to make such excessive dreams reality, whether it's putting six extra knobs on a stereo, subjecting game-show contestants to physical torture (like being dragged by an elephant), or encrusting their toy robots with so many spare parts that they look like they could transform into a whole assembly plant, never mind a car.

With its big vehicles, the monster motif, the transforming robot, and the techno-power fetishism, the truck show struck me as something the Japanese could find a way to do much better than we can. Anticipate U.S. import tariffs on trucks with wheels over eight feet wide.

Todd Seavey is a writer in New York City.

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