

‘Show and Tell’ Pulls Back Curtain on Visual Effects

Experts Reveal Tricks In Advance of Awards

By Mark R. Madler January 22, 2007

In a scene from “Mission: Impossible: III,” star Tom Cruise jumps from a tall skyscraper in Shanghai.

Except that building is not in China. It’s a parking garage at Universal Studios.

In an episode of ABC-TV’s “Alias,” star Jennifer Garner jumps from atop a tall building in Sydney.

Except that building is not in Australia. It’s the network’s corporate headquarters in Burbank.

For another ABC show, the now-canceled “Commander-In-Chief,” Whiteman Airport in the north San Fernando Valley stands in for an airport in Orange County where the presidential jet Air Force One gets held hostage.

Except the plane doesn’t exist. It’s all a computer-generated image.

“The best complement we got was when someone came up to me and thought we had actually rented Air Force One,” said Mark Kolpack, one of the effects supervisors for the show.

Visual and special effects create the “How did they do that?” moments in a viewer’s mind as they sit in a darkened theater or in front of their television set at home. Save for a handful of pioneers in the field, the artists creating those effects go unnoticed by the general public.

Peer recognition is another story, which is where the Visual Effects Society comes in with its annual awards ceremony taking place this year on Feb. 11 at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood.

In advance of the awards is the “Show and Tell,” a gathering of effects professionals during which they explain the how-to of the effects for nominated films, television shows, commercials, music videos and video games.

The event, which took place Jan. 13 at the Skirball Center, pulls back the curtain on the creating, compositing and image manipulation taking place on computer screens in post-production houses to add, for instance, the flotilla of military ships taking part in the invasion of Iwo Jima in “Flags of Our Fathers,” released by Warner Bros. or create wholesale ancient cathedrals seen in “The Da Vinci Code.”

Sometimes, the effects are all about making the reality of a given location look better than how it actually exists.

Take for example the Dominican Republic where Disney’s summer blockbuster “Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest” was filmed. Director Gore Verbinski found that the island wasn’t

“exotic” enough, said Susumu Yukuhiro, the digital effects supervisor.

“We had to alter it a lot,” Yukuhiro said.

In the fore mentioned scene from “M:I:III,” the filmmakers were challenged by an edict from the Chinese government requiring Shanghai to go dark after 11 p.m. and that the city tends to be smoggy.

With layering and compositing, not only does it appear that Cruise jumps from a skyscraper but the surrounding buildings are lit up and the night sky is clear.

Tech jargon tended to seep into the explanations of creating the effects - content, assets, rotoing (short for rotoscoping) and computerized fluid dynamics.

That last was a term used by Mohan Leo in explaining the water effects created for Warner Bros. summer flop “Poseidon,” specifically in the scene in which the luxury ocean liner gets knocked over by a giant wave.

Using a real ship for the capsizing scene was out of the question. Miniatures were thought to be unconvincing. So effects artists at Industrial Light and Magic created a computer generated ship and then worked with a team from Stanford University on fluid dynamics to create a water environment that looked real and convincing, right down to the droplets and mist splashed up after the ship overturns.

“This was the most complex environment ILM ever rendered,” Leo said.

Hearing what goes into creating visual effects gives a greater appreciation of what the artists do and the limitations they face.

The “Commander-In-Chief” effects team learned the military was not forthcoming about details on Air Force One and had to do their own background research to get the look of the plane right. The team working on “Flags of Our Fathers” found a challenge in working within the economical and efficient filmmaking style of director Clint Eastwood.

The 180 visual effects shots used in the nominated episode of “Alias” were done in three weeks at a cost of less than \$1,000 per shot.

“We’re not inventing technology here,” Kevin Blank said. “We’re operating in a different economic reality and doing the best we can.”

Academy Award Winners

Two employees of Technicolor Digital Intermediates in Burbank are among the winners of scientific and technical Academy Awards announced on Jan. 5 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Joshua Pines and Chris Kutcka received an academy certificate for the design and development of the TDI process of creating archival separations from digital image data.

The TDI process is based on the production of digital separation negatives creating archival elements that can be scanned and digitally recombined in the future.

“We continue to help advance the industry on the technology front so this is a big achievement,” said Tom Bracken, a spokesman for Thomson, parent company of Technicolor.

Consumer Electronics Show

The Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas has come and gone for another year, leaving in its wake all kinds of talk about the latest in electronic gadgetry.

“Overwhelming” was the description of the show given by Marty Shindler, an Encino-based management consultant on business issues for creative and technology companies.

Shindler spent two days at the trade show, setting aside time to visit specific booths among the more than 2,000 taking part in the show.

Among the products catching his eye were the high definition products, broadband cell phones which allow for downloading of video, and ultra mobile PCs, a computer weighing 2 to 3 ½ pounds with a monitor 12-inches or less.

“It’s for people who don’t want a full laptop but don’t want to rely on their smart phones,” Shindler said.

At the LG Electronics booth, Shindler said he checked out an autostereo monitor capable of showing programming in 3D.

This new equipment paves the way for the day when a monitor is capable of showing an image in 3D without the need of having special glasses, Shindler said.

Films made in 3D could take off in a big way in the next several years. Disney will release “Meet The Robinsons” this spring to both traditional and 3D theaters. Filmmaker James Cameron begins work this year on his 3D sci-fi film “Avatar” scheduled for release in 2009.

If viewers go for 3D on the big screen, television manufacturers like LG, Philips, and Sanyo are betting they may want it at home, too.

“After the movies come out there’s going to be a DVD,” Shindler said. “Well, why not release it in 3D.”

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