



SHANGHAI SURPRISE

2magazine went behind the scenes of the movie set of *Shanghai*, made all the more special because our tour guide was none other than famed production designer Jim Clay himself, whose long list of movie credits include *Match Point*, *Love Actually*, *About a Boy*, *The Crying Game* and the award-winning *Children of Men*.

WALKING ALONG THE main drag Nanjing Road of a 1940s Shanghai, you first pass The Great World Casino, adorned with a billboard of a showgirl kicking up her heels. Old-fashioned rickshaws with black leather tops and vintage cars line the streets. Behind you is a pagoda-style teahouse and a smoke-hazed opium den. Turn the corner and you find yourself wandering down a quaint market alley with hole-in-the wall barber shops and stalls selling vegetables, fruit, dried fish and rusty-looking oil lamps (a street which becomes a lot less quaint as the movie progresses, especially when baskets with severed heads of Chinese soldiers are hung up along the street).

Touring the movie set of *Shanghai* is a bit of a surreal experience – shift your gaze beyond the carefully constructed Chinese facades and palm trees, and the orange roof of a Thai temple and modern apartment blocks bring you back to reality.

In true Hollywood style, not one single frame of *Shanghai* was shot in China, but – apart from the indoor scenes at film studios in London – on the backlot of MoonStar Studio in Ladphrao, on the outskirts of Bangkok. Shooting wrapped up in August and the movie is due for release at the end of the year. *Shanghai* is a romantic thriller about a US secret agent played by John



Cusack, who heads to a Japanese-occupied Shanghai in 1941 to investigate a friend's murder. Directed by Mikael Håfström (*1408, Derailed*), the movie co-stars Chinese actress Gong Li who plays a singer in a nightclub, and Chow Yun-Fat as her gangster husband.

Jim explains that the original plan was to shoot in Shanghai, in the scarce pockets of the city where remnants of a bygone era like the Jewish quarters are still intact. Locations were scouted and a fully prepared art department had been set up, but for reasons which remain unclear – script issues or perhaps the timing due to the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics – the Chinese government rescinded its filming permission at the last minute, nearly leading to an early demise of the project.

"It was quite a shock," Jim says. "At that point we all thought that the movie might go down, but Harvey Weinstein, our main producer, was determined to keep it going." After considering Vietnam, Malaysia and Hong Kong, the moviemakers relocated the shoot to MoonStar Studio in Bangkok, Southeast Asia's biggest facility. "We had the opportunity to build this huge backlot set and suddenly thought: 'This is a great new start.' We could build what we wanted here, so we went for it and it has worked out spectacularly well."

Although large in scale – the set covers a sprawling 13,200 square meters – Shanghai is not the biggest budget movie the production designer has ever worked on. The overall budget of *Shanghai* is a closely guarded secret but Jim is at liberty to share that he had US\$ 4.5 million at his disposal, out of which the entire set in London and Thailand had to be financed. With London costing just under a million, 3.5 million was left

for Thailand. To make up for lost time, Jim and his crew were given only 15 weeks to replicate a 1940s Shanghai. At the peak of construction there were around 300 workers. "The set was big on ambition. And glorious for design – because it was a period piece, inevitably you've got quite a lot to build so it was absolutely appealing from that point of view," he says.

Growing up, Jim knew from an early age that he wanted to become an architect, although it quickly became apparent he wouldn't be doing so within the typical stream. Seeing how their young son spent most of his time designing model homes and fiddling around with electric wiring, his parents sent him off to work in a drawing office in the iron and steel industry in northern England at the first opportunity. Jim didn't last very long and ran off to London to try his luck with the BBC. "In those days, the 70s, the BBC ran a fantastic apprentice scheme and those who showed promise, were kept. I went there for six months and stayed 20 years," he laughs. "We were given a wonderful training. I traveled the world with the BBC – I owe them an awful lot really."

The doors to Hollywood swung open to Jim because of his work on the critically-acclaimed and multiple award-winning TV series *The Singing Detectives*. "The director, Jon Amiel, went to Hollywood to make a movie and took me with him. That launched my film career and I've been fortunate ever since to keep working."

Although based in London, Jim "travels endlessly", building movie sets around the world. Working in Thailand, he was impressed with the quality and expertise of the local crew. "A production designer is only ever as good as the team around him, starting with

his set decorator, his supervising art director, and all the people who build the set!"

It's easy to see what Jim means when examining the facades of the replica-Shanghai up close and finding out not all is as it appears at first glance. But then deception is the name of the game in film-making. I marvel at two pagoda-style watchtowers, which turn out to be painted *tromp l'oeil* style and are completely flat. "We won't be shooting these too closely, but from the end of the street they will look perfectly three-dimensional," Jim laughs.

Another example of the type of craftsmanship and detail that goes into the art of set design is the enormous naval tanker, docked at the harbor. The ship has clearly sailed the seas and its metallic flank sides are getting a bit rusty and weathered. Again, this effect has been cleverly achieved by paint and plaster. "Essentially everything is created using the same three materials: scaffolding, framed plywood for the walls and plaster – whether you build a Venetian palazzo or a depressing council flat," Jim discloses. Many people have asked him where Hugh Grant's living room in *About a Boy* was located and were surprised to learn the apartment was, in fact, entirely a prop set.

It's not the first time Jim's handiwork has been mistaken for the real thing. For *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, coincidentally also set in the 1940s on a remote Greek island, Jim constructed a picturesque town square. "The Greek tourist board filmed it like crazy and used the movie stills in their tourist brochures, saying 'Come to Thessaloniki, see the old town square,'" he laughingly recounts. "People told me they went to Thessaloniki but never could find the town square which was used in the film."

It seems a shame to tear down the *Shanghai* movie set and there have been talks of preserving it. Jim believes any studio which has a backlot like this can attract all sorts of future business. "It's a real asset and they really should think seriously about it as an investment." However, given the estimated US\$ 100,000 it would take to convert the *Shanghai* movie structures into more permanent ones, it's unlikely that the set will stay. But take heart, the movie's depiction of the breathtaking set won't struggle to remain in your memories for a long time. And if you run across tourist brochures promoting an old-town Shanghai which looks too good to be true, don't say you haven't been warned! **E**

