

As the new film *Shanghai* shoots to thrill this month, a famous Hollywood production designer gives writer Ellen Boonstra and photographer Surachart Booncharoen a sneak preview of the scenic sets built in Bangkok

behind the Screens



REPLICA OF THE GREAT WORLD CASINO. THE ORIGINAL BUILDING IN SHANGHAI HAS BEEN PRESERVED AND IS NOWADAYS IN USE AS A CIRCUS.

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WALKING ALONG THE MAIN DRAG OF NANJING ROAD IN SHANGHAI OF THE 1940S, we passed the Great World Casino, adorned with a billboard of a showgirl kicking up her heels, while old-fashioned rickshaws with black leather tops and vintage cars lined the streets. Off to one side squatted a pagoda-style teahouse and a smoke-fogged opium den. Around the corner was a quaint alley with hole-in-the wall barbershops and stalls selling vegetables, fruit, dried fish and rusty-looking oil lamps.

Touring the movie set of *Shanghai* was a surreal experience. Beyond the fantastic, artfully constructed Chinese facades and the palm trees hovered the reality checks of a Thai temple and modern apartment blocks. In true Hollywood style, not one single frame of *Shanghai* was shot in China. Apart from the indoor scenes filmed at studios in London, the rest of the movie was shot on the backlot of MoonStar Studio in Ladphrao on the outskirts of Bangkok.

The spy thriller, starring John Cusack, Chow Yun-fat and Gong Li, premiered at the Shanghai

At the peak of construction, some 300 workers toiled for long hours under a broiling sun to recreate Shanghai of the '40s in less than four months.



STREET VIEW WITH OLD-FASHIONED RICKSHAWS

International Film Festival in June – a bit ironic given the fact that the movie almost wasn't made because the filmmakers were not allowed to film in Shanghai.

Hollywood production designer Jim Clay explained that the original plan was to shoot in the old parts of *Shanghai* where the remnants of a bygone era like the Jewish quarter are still intact. Locations were scouted and a fully prepared art department had been set up, but for reasons which remain unclear, possibly the movie's time frame during the era of Japanese-occupied *Shanghai* or the upcoming Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, the Chinese government withdrew their permission at the last minute, almost canning the film for good.

"It was quite a shock," Clay said. "At that point we all



In full scale, the movie set covered a sprawling 13,200 square meters and reportedly cost US\$ 3.5 million to build.

thought the movie might not happen, 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 we 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."

At an early age Clay began sketching plans to become an architect, but it quickly became apparent that his interests were more fanciful than designing monolithic office towers. Seeing their young son spending most of his time designing model homes and fiddling around with wiring, his parents sent him off to work in the drawing office of an iron and steel company in northern England. For an imaginative young man like him, a job like that was the brass ring. Soon he packed it in and headed to London in search of more golden opportunities 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 laughed. "We were given wonderful training. I



LEAD STARS LI GONG AND JOHN CUSACK

IN LOVE AND WAR

A US secret agent (John Cusack) heads to a corrupt, Japanese-occupied *Shanghai* a week before the attack on Pearl Harbor, in order to investigate a friend's murder. Directed by Mikael Håfström (1408, Derailed), the movie co-stars the Chinese actress and famous beauty Gong Li, who plays a singer in a nightclub, and the legendary Chow Yun-Fat as her gangster husband. Japanese stars Rinko Kikuchi and Ken Watanabe also play pivotal parts in what has been hyped as a *Casablanca* of Asia breed of thriller. As the love triangle heats up, the city teeters on the brink of collapse, and the action accelerates.



THESE TWO BUILDINGS WITH PAGODA ROOFTOPS MAY LOOK THREE-DIMENSIONAL BUT IN FACT ARE COMPLETELY FLAT FACADES!

for the walls and plaster – whether you build a Venetian palazzo or a depressing council flat,” the set designer said. Many people have asked him where Hugh Grant’s living room in *About a Boy* was located. Much to their astonishment, those scenes in an apartment were shot on a purpose-built set.

It was not the first time Clay’s handiwork has been mistaken for the real McCoy. For *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*, starring Nicholas Cage, and set in the 1940s on a remote Greek island, Clay 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 recounted with amusement. “People told me they went to Thessaloniki but never could find the town square which was used in the film.”

Because of MoonStar Studio’s stellar work on the new espionage thriller, the production designer believes the studio has a star-bright future. It’s a shame, however, that the rustic sets for *Shanghai* have already been torn down. That is typical of the fate awaiting most movie sets: the cost of turning them into permanent structures is prohibitive.

Fortunately, the crew’s artful handiwork has been preserved for posterity on celluloid. As the movie lights up screens across the globe over the next few months, look a little more closely at those sets and see how the land of make-believe has been transformed into a realm of exciting reality, redolent of Shanghai’s glory days as the “Pearl of Asia” before it was decimated by the onslaught of World War II.

Seen from a distance, two of the pagoda-style watchtowers looked completely real. Seen up close they were flat.

travelled the world with the BBC – I owe them an awful lot really.”

Because of his splendid work on the critically revered, multi-award-winning TV series *The Singing Detective*, Hollywood was the next stopover on his career trajectory. “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.” Based in London, Clay, whose long list of movie credits includes *Match Point*, *Love Actually*, *About a Boy* and *The Crying Game*, is forever on the road, building movie sets around the world. Working in Thailand,

he was impressed by the expertise of the local crew and their quality workmanship. At the peak of construction, some 300 workers toiled for long hours under a broiling sun to recreate Shanghai of the ‘40s in less than four months.

Examining the facades of the Shanghai set revealed a few optical illusions typical of the illusory film industry. Seen from a distance, two of the pagoda-style watchtowers looked completely real. Seen up close they were flat. “We won’t be shooting these too closely, but from the end of the street they will look perfectly three-dimensional,” Clay said with a laugh.

On the set, another paragon of craftsmanship and detail was the enormous ocean liner docked at the harbour. By the look of its rusty and weathered hulk, this vessel had weathered high seas and low temperatures. That was another mirage. In reality, the boat had been given a paint-and-plaster makeover. “Essentially everything is created using the same three materials: scaffolding and framed plywood



HOLLYWOOD PRODUCTION DESIGNER JIM CLAY AT THE HARBOR, WITH THE PORT AUTHORITY IN THE BACKGROUND.