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DEMON ISLAND:
Creating Production Values
on an Independent Budget

ALSO...
Employing local color to
give *Hittin' It* a sense of place



Kodak. The Filmmaker's Film Maker

Demon Island: Creating Production Values on an Independent Budget

According to a story in Jewish folklore, if you toss breadcrumbs on a body of water at the end of a High Holiday period you can symbolically cast your sins away. For Scott and David Hillenbrand, that ancient tale provided the seed of an idea that blossomed into a chilling story. The brothers produced, wrote and directed *Demon Island* (a.k.a. *Piñata: Survival Island*) based on that story. David also composed and conducted the score. This is the third independent feature for the Hillenbrands, following in the wake of *King Cobra* and *Hostile Takeover*.

Demon Island opens in a primitive Central American village wracked by famine and disease. The camera observes a shaman ritualistically drawing evils spirits out of the inhabitants to purify the village. He confines the evil spirits in a piñata, fashioned out of clay, and casts it into a river, which carries it out to sea.

The film flashes forward some 500 years into contemporary times and focuses on two boats carrying ten college students and two chaperones to an off-shore island. It is a gloriously sunny day. After landing, the students are divided into boy-girl teams that will compete in a scavenger hunt during a weekend holiday break. One team discovers the piñata, which has washed up on a beach. They unwittingly let the evil spirits escape, the equivalent of opening Pandora's box.

The Hillenbrands are film school graduates who organized Hill & Brand Productions in Los Angeles, where they launched their careers in 1991 with *Adrift*, a critically acclaimed stage play, and later ventured into music and films.

"David and Scott told me about *Demon Island* while we were shooting *King Cobra* in 1998," says cinematographer Phil Schwartz, who has photographed all three of the brother's independent features. "They knew from the beginning they wanted the film to be based in reality. Sometimes unbelievable things happen to ordinary people."

Schwartz worked his way up through the ranks of the mainstream Hollywood camera crew system. He apprenticed as an assistant cameraman and operator with such influential cinematographers as John Bailey, ASC, Adam Greenberg, ASC, Jordan Cronenweth, ASC and Tom Del Ruth, ASC.

About two months before they started shooting *Demon Island*, the Hillenbrands handed Schwartz 257 pages of storyboards, but he knew that was just the beginning.

"It's my job to get inside their heads to get a sense of how they see the story and figure out the visual nuances," he says. "Scott and David have a talent for using all of the elements in the frame and fusing them into a story, and they are open to ideas."

The Hillenbrands made an easy decision to compose *Demon Island* in the 1.85:1 aspect ratio, because much of the story takes place in the jungle with tall trees and there are many two-shots where the visual language is closed-in and slightly claustrophobic.

They shot for 26 days on a ranch near Acton, California, where the com-

pany built a village for the opening scene, and four days on beaches in Marina Del Rey and Malibu, California. The audience discovers the village during a high crane shot that swoops down and reveals the shaman exorcising the evil spirits.

"Originally we were going to differentiate the opening sequence by printing it in a sepia tone, but the Hillenbrands felt it looked too warm, and that would have been the wrong visual subtext," Schwartz says. "I remembered reading about how Nestor Almendros (ASC) optically desaturated colors in *Sophie's Choice* (in 1983). That became our visual reference. We experimented at CFI (Labs) and finally got the look they wanted by creating separate color and black-and-white dupe negatives. They were precisely registered and used to optically create a master for printing that scene."

The cast included Nicholas Brendon, Jaime Pressly, Eugene Byrd, Nate Richert, Garrett Wang, Kasey Fallo, Lara Boyd Rhodes, Julia Mendoza, Daphne Duplaix, Aeryk Egan, Tressa di Figlia and Robert Tena.

"We watched the actors bond, sometimes through the viewfinder during re-

Stephen Chiodo (left) works with directors-producers Scott (center) and David (right) Hillenbrand to put some finishing touches on the animatronic creature for "Demon Island."





Cinematographer Philip Schwartz (suspended) films the animatronic creature in "Demon Island" with the help of stunt coordinator Tom Ficke (left) and FX technician Frank Pope (right).

hearsals, and David and Scott adjusted the storyboards to give them the freedom to interpret their roles," Schwartz says. "I've heard certain directors claim that lighting gets in the way of their relationships with actors, but they are missing the point. Lighting is an integral part of any film's visual language. It strengthens the audience's connection to the story and the actors."

One of the actors was exceptionally pale, which wasn't right for his character. Schwartz used a cosmetic gel from Rosco to add a touch of warmth to his skin tones. He also used a little eye light and a touch of fill on the actor's face. It's transparent to the audience.

Confrontations with the demon are sudden, marked by more aggressive camera movement, and the frame rate occasionally ramping up and down. The filmmakers used fire, smoke and a blanket of fog to create a mysterious atmosphere in the woods. As the story unfolds, the fog becomes more prevalent, and colors become more neutral and colder.

"We had extreme contrast in the forest lighting," Schwartz notes, "with dark

shadowy areas and bright highlights. As the story develops, we relied on the Steadicam and frenetic handheld shots in contrast to the smoother dolly moves earlier in the film. We couldn't have done this picture this way without a Steadicam. It allowed us to move the camera with the characters in rugged terrain going around trees and through foliage for tracking shots. It was the right energy and it saved precious time laying tracks."

Schwartz limited his film palette to the 500-speed Eastman EXR 5298 negative for night, interiors and darker exteriors. He rated the film for an exposure index of 400, for a richer negative. Schwartz used the 200-speed 5293 Eastman EXR film for other daylight exteriors.

"Sometimes the fog would roll in and it was completely gray with no contrast, and suddenly it would burn off and leave us in blazing sunlight, so we needed a film with a broad dynamic range," he explains. "We were generally lighting our nights in confined areas. For wider shots, our conservative HMI package was focused in appropriate places to give scenes a feeling of depth."

The Hillenbrands wanted the nights to feel un-lit and naturally dark with just a hint of blue. Schwartz also added a subtle one quarter-plus green gel to the lights, subliminally suggesting an uncomfortable and slightly queasy feeling.

Why not shoot without light as some videophiles preach?

Schwartz replies, "You might get an image without light, but what about contrast, depth, tonality or dynamic range? If you want rich palpable blacks you need something bright—a torch 30 feet deep into the background to motivate a little light on the side of a face, or a flashlight or the moon in the frame edge to give the audience a visual reference for darkness."

Initially, the demon was solely an animatronic created by Chiodo Brothers, Inc. It enters scenes from the trees with the aid of special rigging. The design of the demon is borrowed from pre-Columbian art. The audience experiences its perspective through images recorded with a DV camera shooting through a multi-faceted crystal mounted

in the matte box. It rendered a low-resolution kaleidoscope of pulsating, reddish images that were filmed out to 35 mm film.

After the first cut was tested with audiences, the Hillenbrands decided to tweak images of the demon, so it evolves as the story progresses to keep the audience from getting complacent about its presence. They decided that the most effective option was augmenting the animatronic with CG images, and later in the film totally replacing it with computer-generated animation. The Hillenbrands decided their best alternative was to recruit their own visual effects team and establish a temporary digital postproduction facility. They recruited a team of 12 experienced animators, led by visual effects supervisors Kirk Cadrette and Andrew Orloff, and lead character animator David Smith. This method gave the filmmakers freedom to experiment.

The Hillenbrands purchased fully equipped NT workstations custom built by Streamline Technologies running Maya 3-D animation software. No reshoots were necessary, though they did cull some new background plates from out-takes of the original footage. The original negative was scanned and converted to digital files during off-hours at Sony Pictures Imageworks. Compositing was orchestrated by Jeff Matakovich, whose company, Optical Illusions, also recorded the completed digital files onto film.

Demon Island incorporates some 150 visual effects and around 250 animated demon shots with some 2,000 cuts. The film is being released theatrically in the United States through Palisades Entertainment, and internationally as well as home video and television by First Look Media. The Hillenbrands say that the marketing plan developed with their distributor relies heavily on radio advertising aimed at targeted youth audiences, a trailer they created, and the website (www.demonisland.com). They tested the campaign in Arkansas and it will roll out in other markets during fall and winter. The Hillenbrands next project is *A College Sex Comedy*, a farcical comedy set to begin filming in the early fall.

Oetiker employs local color to give *Hittin' It* a sense of place

Hittin' It is a comedy feature produced in south Florida in 15 days on a tight budget. Director of photography Phil Oetiker's challenge was to create a warm, sunny world in a cost-effective way. One solution was to work with the sun rather than avoid it.

"It's a spring break movie for people who didn't go to Florida," Oetiker says. "So it was important for the audience to share the experience with the healthy, sun-kissed actors. We achieved this by using a lot of color and letting the sun shine in."

G geared to a young, urban audience, *Hittin' It* follows the misadventures of two African-American college students on spring break. "Deep down, I think that everybody likes spring break/beach movies," says director David Daniel. "*Hittin' It* brings a unique spin to the genre by taking familiar elements and adding a little bit of a street edge."

The filmmakers first met as New York University film students. Oetiker served as director of photography on Daniel's feature film *Paper Soldiers*.

Oetiker was a camera operator on *Law and Order* as well as Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* and *Malcolm X*, and Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm*. His cinematography credits include the HBO movie *Am-bushed* and episodes of the TV series *Homicide*.

Although a cinematographer himself, Daniel felt Oetiker's strong narrative background would help him make the transition to director.



Phil Oetiker plans a shot for the comedy *Hittin' It*.

"Phil is from the New York practical location school, and that very contemporary operating and lighting style fits the urban genre films I make," Daniel explains. "He's picked up lighting techniques from top cinematographers."

Despite limited resources, Oetiker and Daniel were determined that *Hittin' It* would have an appealing visual style. They decided to create a big-budget movie feel by using longer, tighter lenses.

The filmmakers looked at older films for inspiration. The color palette employed by cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, ASC on *The Birdcage*, which also took place in south Florida, was one inspiration. "I wanted that warm, Latin quality, with more browns and richer greens and blues," Daniel explains.

Oetiker translated Daniel's vision onto film through his choice of film, lenses and filtration. The latter included use of Coral filters in conjunction with 85 B color correction filters in daylight

scenes. He also used a light black pro mist filter to soften the sunlight's harsh edge.

Seeking lenses to enhance the warm look, Oetiker selected a set of old Cooke prime lenses designed for 35 mm cameras but retrofit for the Super 16 format. The widest angle lens in the set was 18 mm. He also carried a 12 mm Zeiss prime.

Gaffer Gerald Jones was on the set with a palette of gels in tropical, exotic hues Oetiker called "Miami colors." He'd tell Jones, "Let's use a Miami color" and receive the appropriate color gel for the situation. Instead of CTB for ambient moonlight, for example, Oetiker used a different blue containing some green.

Oetiker says he was just following the local custom. "Miami is a very colorful city," he explains. "When the South Beach deco buildings light up at night, contemporary architecture lit by color-gel covered lights complements them. I splashed bluish-green on trees, placed tropical yellow or a cool blue. After a few days, you see patterns and create a consistent look."

Oetiker chose Kodak Vision 320T 7277, a tungsten-balanced film stock. "I depended on it to render the colors the way they looked to me," he declares. "In the past, I'd see a great color on the set that looked dingy on the screen. If these colors are not recorded correctly, they can come out looking awful. The Vision 320 got exactly what I envisioned. The stock is so versatile, you can shoot an entire movie with it."

Despite the limited budget, Super 16 was only the origination format considered.

"The arrow is pointing up for Super 16," claims Oetiker. "People are realizing it's more cost-effective to originate with Super 16, than go to a digital intermediate, especially if there are digital intensive postproduction applications. There's a wider and less expensive range of lenses, and Super 16 equipment is easier, more durable and more dependable than digital cameras. There's a better looking product when you originate in film."



**The Filmmaker's
Film Maker**

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