DAMAGE CONTROL

Has the state of Hollywood safety improved since the 'Twilight Zone' catastrophe 20 years ago?

By Todd Longwell

The tragic deaths of veteran actor Vic Morrow and child performers Myca Dinh Le and Renee Chen in a helicopter accident on the set of "Twilight Zone: The Movie" were a wake-up call for Hollywood to get serious about safety issues. But during the 20 years since that fateful morning of July 23, 1982, has it really become any safer in the filmmaking trenches? Sadly, fatal accidents and serious injuries still occur with astonishing frequency on film and TV sets. Stuntman Harry O'Connor was killed April 4 while performing a parachute jump during the making of "XXX" in Prague, and welder Tim Holcombe was killed on March 6, 2001 by a forklift that had been converted for use as a crane on the set of the hit feature "Spider-Man."

The incidents are not confined to below-the-line workers. Pierce Brosnan and Halle Berry were hurt this year in separate incidents while on the set of their upcoming James Bond film "Die Another Day"; Brosnan injured his knee, and debris from a smoke grenade lodged in Berry's eye.

According to California Occupational Safety and Health Administration statistics, 14 fatal occupational injuries took place in the motion picture industry nationwide in 2000, the most recent year for which figures are available. That's up from 1998 and 1999 (seven and six fatalities, respectively) and down from recent peaks in 1993 (the year Brandon Lee was killed while filming "The Crow") and 1995 (23 and 20 fatalities, respectively). But those figures don't include fatalities on films shot in other nations, where safety regulations usually are more lax and injuries are more likely to go unreported.

Still, compared to industries like construction, motion picture work does not appear exceptionally hazardous. In 1997, construction had 12.3 deaths per 100,000 workers nationally, while the motion picture industry in California had a rate of about 4.3 deaths per 100,000 workers. But Rana Platz-Petersen, business representative for the Motion Picture Studio First Aid Employees, IATSE Local 767, says those statistics are deceiving.

"In the entertainment industry, you have thousands of people who work in offices and do nothing," she says. "If you just counted the people who are actually out in the field, we would be a high-hazard occupation."

Fatalities are only a small part of the story. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 3,200 nonfatal occupational injuries were reported in the motion picture industry in 2000. Under California law, any workplace accident resulting in an injury or illness that requires inpatient hospitalization for more than 24 hours for anything other than medical observation, or which results in any significant degree of permanent disfigurement, must be reported to Cal-OSHA. But some say on-set accidents, many quite serious, frequently go unreported.

"Are there cases of accidents where we're not notified and we discover later on?" asks Hassan Adan, district manager of the Los Angeles office of Cal-OSHA's compliance division, which investigates accidents and complaints. "Yes. We respond to those accordingly."

The underreporting of injuries might have less to do with criminal wrongdoing than with the testosterone-heavy atmosphere on film sets, which primarily are manned by teamsters and usually feature a handful of stunt people who risk their lives for a living.

"They're macho guys," Platz-Petersen says of the stuntmen. "They won't report an injury. You basically have to drag it out of them."

To ensure that injuries and liabilities are kept to a minimum — and to protect themselves from multimillion-dollar personal injury and wrongful-death lawsuits — most of the major studios maintain risk management and safety departments, which do everything from evaluating environmental dangers for office workers to signing off on which stunts action stars like Jackie Chan can and can't do themselves. They also maintain safety hotlines to which crew members can report problems anonymously.

In April 1982, a few months before the "Twilight Zone" tragedy, Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers president Nick Counter helped found the Industrywide Labor-Management Safety Committee with other guild, union and management representatives. To date, the committee, which meets monthly, has drafted 36 safety bulletins containing guidelines — not regulations — for a wide range of on-set procedures involving everything from stunts, firearms and heli-

copters to poisonous plants and exotic venomous reptiles. Copies of the bulletins are distributed to every studio.

"You have specific issues that come up because of the particular location," Counter says. "(So) they'll have what we call 'tailgate meetings' at the site, in which these matters will be reviewed further."

Says special effects supervisor Matt Sweeney, whose credits include "The Fast and the Furious" and the second, third and fourth installments in the "Lethal Weapon" film series: "There's always a safety meeting prior to doing a big stunt or a big effect. The first assistant director will call everybody around and say, 'This is my understanding: You're going to be there, we're going to do this and this and this, and do you have anything to add, Mr. Special Effects Supervisor and Mr. Stunt Coordinator?' It really helps to have everything organized."

Sometimes, a film's insurer will call in an independent safety consultant like Louis Therrien, president of Production Safety Services in Pasadena, to monitor an entire shoot or a particularly dangerous scene. Therrien visits the set, meets with department heads and the first assistant director and looks for potential problems, such as the questionable placement of a pyrotechnic or a truck blocking ambulance access.

"Everybody's got a role, and they're generally fairly busy trying to get everything in frame and on schedule, so sometimes they're not necessarily seeing the full picture," he says. "It's not that they're not being safe; they're just focusing on the core aspect of what they have to do."

Sometimes, that focus can be blurred by fatigue, which National Transportation Safety Board statistics say is responsible for industrial accidents that cost U.S. businesses $5 billion annually.

The issue was thrust into the spotlight in March 1997, when assistant cameraman Brent Lon Hershman died after falling asleep while driving home following a 19-hour workday on the film "Pleasantville." Members of the International Cinematographers Guild, IATSE Local 600, contending that the long hours worked by crews result in off-set accidents, began circulating a petition for "Brent's Rule," which called for studios to impose a 14-hour limit on workdays.

Later that year, the Directors Guild of America and the Screen Actors Guild passed resolutions to work with other unions to limit the workday to 12 hours, but those efforts have stalled since then — in part, sources say, because the rank and file of the ICG and nearly every other Hollywood IATSE local have protested that such a move would nearly eliminate their cherished "golden time" wages, which generally kick in after 12 elapsed hours and pay them double time during a five-day work week and triple time on the sixth day.

There also has formed a general consensus that, with runaway production already seriously threatening their livelihoods, U.S. crews do not need to give producers one more reason to shoot projects on foreign soil.

Rather than adopting "Brent's Rule" outright, IATSE has begun inserting clauses in union contracts stating that if a workday on a location shoot outside the "30-mile zone" (the radius of which is calculated from the intersection of Beverly and La Cienega boulevards in Los Angeles) exceeds 12 hours, producers must provide crew members with housing and, in some cases, transportation to and from the set.

Often, a serious accident is caused by not one, but a multitude of factors — like when a grip is electrocuted when the scissor crane on which he is standing is knocked into a power line by a pyrotechnic set off in haste by an effects supervisor who has been rushed by an aggressive director trying to get a shot before the sun sets. In the "Twilight Zone" case, producer-director John Landis and his co-defendants in the ensuing trial — helicopter pilot Dorcey Wingo, special effects coordinator Paul Stewart, unit production manager Dan Allingham and associate producer George Folsey Jr. — were acquitted on criminal charges, but Cal-OSHA found more than enough blame to go around, citing 36 safety violations in its report on the accident.

"If anyone sees something that may cause a safety problem, it's their responsibility to bring it to the attention of the director or the first assistant director so it can be dealt with," Counter says.

That's the theory. But in practice, people often are afraid to speak up.

"You're looking at a whole production company sitting there, and you're going to tell them they're going to have to wait and do something different?" Therrien says. "That's time and money. For people who haven't been around a long time, it's very intimidating."

Some believe that the "Twilight Zone" tragedy could have been avoided had Landis not insisted on placing the helicopter in the same frame as Morrow and the children. In 1982, the illusion could have been created through artful editing; today, through CGI and digital compositing, the actors and helicopter could be filmed separately and put in the same frame during postproduction.

Adan says the key to safety is not technology, but "training, training, training." He praises the Industrywide Labor-Management Committee's Safety Passport Program, a series of courses designed to give free-lance film workers uniform instruction on topics such as injury and illness prevention, personal protection equipment and hazard communication. But as of February, only 700 of a potential 35,000 workers in all of IATSE and the basic craft categories had completed such a course.

But no matter what new training or technology comes along, it is unlikely that film and TV sets can be stripped of their inherent hazards. By their very nature, sets are dangerous — staffed by large crews of temporary workers laboring more than 12 hours a day in unfamiliar environments and temporary structures, performing high-risk tasks (such as demolition, car wrecks and high falls) with power tools, cranes, helicopters or explosives in a high-pressure atmosphere. Some say all but the most powerful are afraid to speak out about safety for fear that they might never work in this town again.

Of course, even if every available precaution is taken, accidents still can happen. As veteran stunt coordinator Vic Armstrong — who recently completed "Die Another Day" and has worked on several other Bond films — observes, "Even if everything is taken care of, things can still go wrong because that's what an accident is." ■