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Location managers plan world shoots

Filming around the globe requires organization

By TODD LONGWELL

With a five-month shoot spread across Hawaii, Los Angeles, London and Puerto Rico, supervising location manager Janice Polley had a lot to contend with on Disney's "Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides." But the most challenging aspect of the production wasn't the months of scouting remote locations by car, boat and helicopter or other physical aspects of leapfrogging cast, crew and equipment over more than 7,000 miles of islands, oceans and continents. It was finding the time to make the phone calls to secure all the required permits and permissions.

"During daylight savings, the time difference between Hawaii and Puerto Rico is six hours," says Polley, "and there are so many different government agencies you deal with that are basically 9-to-5, you'd have to set aside a specific time to call somebody when they were open so wouldn't have to wait another day to talk to them."

Polley is one of several location managers who are used to coordinating work among a multitude international locations. While distances may be difficult to deal with, they're not as daunting as differences in culture, language and available technology.

"You have to take into consideration all the items that American film crews are used to, like certain voltage for production equipment and certain sizes of vehicles for the grip and electric trucks" says James Lin, supervising location manager for Universal's "Fast Five," which shot in Brazil, Puerto Rico and Atlanta.

When Lin scouted the Rio de Janeiro shantytowns, or favelas, that serve as the dramatic setting for the rooftop chase sequences in "Fast Five," he uncovered numerous logistical issues.

"We realized that getting all of our equipment up 600 to 1,000 feet of vertical elevation with no roads was going to be physically impossible," Lin says. Furthermore, "I realized if we put weight on any of the roofs, we could literally take out 300 to 400 linear feet of the hillside, because there is no structural support."

Lin estimates that "Fast Five" ended up shooting 65% to 70% of its Rio-set action sequences in Puerto Rico, where the advantages included a 40% tax credit and the stability and security of a U.S. territory. There, he discovered the small town of Naranjito, which had structures that could both convincingly stand-in for the Rio favelas and support the weight of a large film crew and equipment.



Production manager John Myhre surveys the Kauai location of 'Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides.'



Michael Bay on the set of 'Transformers: Dark of the Moon' in Cape Canaveral, Fla., one of many locations where the film shot.

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But it wasn't simply a matter of saying, "We're from Hollywood. We want to shoot here."

"I had to sit through hours of civic meetings trying to reassure the town that we weren't going to demolish it or burn it down," Lin says.

Location managers are also responsible for ensuring the safety of their cast and crew.

Shooting "Invictus" in South Africa in 2009, supervising location manager Patrick Mignano was confronted with a popular criminal tactic known as the smash and grab, in which thieves crash a car into another vehicle, then hop out and rob victims of their valuables.

"On the road into Ellis Park in Johannesburg where we did the rugby stadium shots, at least one set of people got smashed and grabbed every day for the first two or three days," Mignano recalls, "so we wound up having to put security on every stoplight five blocks out from the stadium just to help to deter it."

Productions don't necessarily have a supervising location manager overseeing the entire film. On Warner Bros.' "The Hangover Part II," Mignano supervised the Los Angeles locations, while the scenes shot in Bangkok were handled by local location manager Somchai Santitharangkun.

Similarly, on Paramount's upcoming "Transformers: Dark of the Moon," location manager Ilt Jones worked the multiple domestic shoots (Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere), while the Cambodian sequence was handled by Nicholas Simon, who has worked extensively in Southeast Asia.

Jones managed all the locations on the previous installment, 2009's "Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen" from California to China. In Egypt, he was able to charm Egypt's minister of state for antiquities Zahi Hawass into letting star Shia LaBeouf climb the pyramids for one scene ("It hadn't been done in 50 years or so," boasts Jones), but the simple task of getting equipment into the country proved to be a maddening challenge due to the pervasive demand for baksheesh, the local term for tipping.

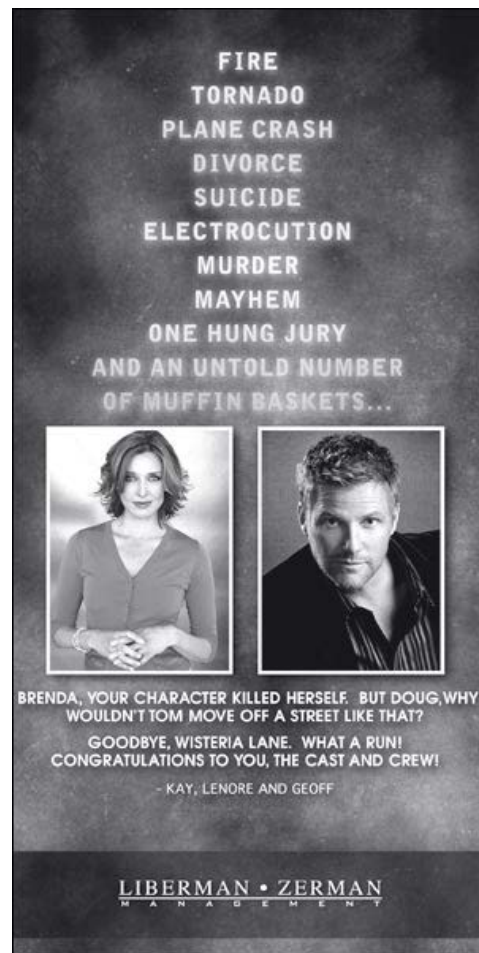
"Shipping was complicated, shall we say," Jones laughs. "But we used local agents and they knew the customs and practices to get stuff moving when it wouldn't move."

Often, difficulties are caused by a more innocent cultural disconnect such as the one Polley encountered while shooting portions of "Ali" in Zimbabwe in 2001.

"You'd ask for an elephant and a donkey would show up," Polley recalls. "[Production] was very new to them. They're just trying to help you, but they don't quite grasp the severity of it and how in Hollywood we're so used to having everything moving like clockwork."

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