

Behind-the-scenes artists show that it takes the right clutter to create the right clatter

by Norma Meyer

BURBANK, Calif. - In the hit movie "American Gangster," those aren't the sounds of Denzel Washington's footsteps whenever his drug-lord character struts about the tough New York streets. That's really Alyson Moore, wearing her worn men's size-6, hard-soled shoes from an Army surplus store and walking in place heel-to-toe on a cement slab strewn with coffee grounds.

BEHIND THE SCENES - Warner Bros. foley artists Alyson Moore and John Roesch do a movie's everyday sounds, such as an actor's hands on a steering wheel or opening a car door. CNS Photo by Carol Kron. **SOUND TRICKS** - Hollywood foley artist Alyson Moore makes the on-screen sound of a dog walking with her jury-rigged hands (gloves and paper clips). CNS Photo by Carol Kron. **CREATING CLATTER** - It's in his job description: Foley artist John Roesch has an array of shoes to match a character's footsteps. CNS Photo by Carol Kron. Moore's footsteps were recorded 2,800 miles away from the location shoot, which was over by the time she and colleague John Roesch were subbing for Oscar winners on a Warner Bros. soundstage that resembles a pack rat's cluttered garage. With the crime drama projected on a screen, Moore took the part of Washington's legwork, while Roesch, in softer-soled lace-ups, synchronized his steps to Russell Crowe's gait.

The post-production sound-effect pros do much more than Hollywood's most famous feet. They also break bones.

"If it's a face punch where the nose gets broken, we'll take some celery, wrap it in a chamois that is somewhat wet, put it on a pillow and hit that so you get all the sounds together," says Roesch, who has worked on some 300 films. If it's only a busted finger, they'll break a snap pea in half.

In today's high-tech, computer-generated world of moviemaking, Roesch and Moore, who've been at their jobs a quarter of a century, couldn't be more old-school hands-on.

They're among Hollywood's elite group of foley artists who custom-make hundreds of taken-for-granted film sounds, such as the opening of a car door (done with the real thing) or the pop and crackle of a fireplace (Moore has used crinkly cellophane from flower bouquets, and Roesch once laid out pieces of uncooked

spaghetti and pushed them slightly with his finger until they snapped). They create the rustle of a bad guy's clothes (by crunching up a leather jacket with their hands), the gushy, horrid sound of a person being stabbed (a knife plunged into a watermelon), but also bring to life a romantic kiss (by sucking their forearms and loudly releasing).

"If we've done our job correctly, you don't notice what we've done," says Roesch.

The busy duo - for their next gig, Roesch will be the feet of Steve Carell in the upcoming "Get Smart," while Moore is Anne Hathaway's Agent 99 - normally dress in sweat pants and T-shirts for their in-sync live performances on the dusty Warner Bros. foley stage. They're surrounded by junk, ranging from pots and pans to a tree-branch cutter and plastic tubs with labels like "Feather Dusters" and "Playing Cards." They never know what will work.

When "American Gangster" needed the specific sound of soldiers' coffins latching, Roesch pulled out his old road case that once held a PA system and when locked shut and amplified made the desired on-screen sound.

They may be working on blockbuster-budget films, but their 85 pairs of footwear, which include slippers and golf shoes, are haphazardly gathered on the floor like thrift-store finds (which many are). They select which pair to wear based on a character's personality, weight and the scene.

A 10-speed bicycle in one corner played a crucial role in "Hook." Roesch turned it upside down, held a small feather to one of the turning tires and voila! - Tinker Bell had the sound of fluttering wings. Nearby, there's a sword the foley artists scraped up and down with a dinner knife for a "Braveheart" battle din and a tub basin they splashed in when Leonardo DiCaprio ran through a river in "Blood Diamond."

In the floor's center is the "super pit," an area with various surfaces to walk on such as wood, artificial turf and dirt. There's no snow, though, so before Roesch trudged in place as Vince Vaughn's character in "Fred Claus," he laid out snow cone ice and sprinkled it with cornflakes to get a frosty crunch.

Yes, they are tricksters. "The next time you watch a film, see if a dog actually has a collar. You'll probably hear one whether he has one on or not," Roesch says.

Moore demonstrates a "dog collar." It's a door lock and chain that she jangles.

She's also good at being a dog. She slips on cut-down red leather gloves that have paper clips attached near the fingers. When she rhythmically moves and taps her "paws" on the floor, it sounds like the click-click of a walking pooch.

While some foley artists wield coconuts for horse "hooves," Roesch and Moore prefer toilet plungers. Well, actually the rubber ends, which they've stuffed with old rags and sealed with duct tape so the sound isn't too hollow.

"There are no rules. Whatever the audience believes is the correct thing to do," Roesch says.

THE BIRTH OF FOLEY

The art of foley was named for Universal Studios sound pioneer Jack Foley after his death in 1967. Decades before, Foley started using his feet and everyday objects in post-production to correlate with the film. (Legend has it that director Stanley Kubrick was about to reshoot costly scenes of Roman soldiers marching in "Spartacus" because the armor sound couldn't be heard, when Foley rushed in with a large ring of keys he rattled to make the chink-chink.)

Sound is always recorded on movie shoots, but it can be overrun by actors' dialogue or drowned out by environmental noise such as wind or an airplane overhead. Foley artists do the subtler sounds, which are later combined with "hard effect" prerecorded sounds, such as gunshots or chirping birds.

"We don't do the bird tweeting, but we do the wing flap," Moore explains. "We don't do the gun shooting, but we do the loading of the gun, the handling of the gun, the trigger being pulled. For a car, we would do a key into the ignition, turning the key, and putting the car into gear, but we wouldn't do the actual motor running."

Pine cones are a foley favorite - They too can simulate breaking bones. For "Blade 3," Moore and Roesch swirled cones together with coffee grinds and 1960s-era recording tape to make the whooshing sound of vampires turning to ash.

Jell-O has also had behind-the-scene roles. Moore was stumped on what to use for the sound of astronauts walking for the first time on Mars in "Red Planet," until she opened a fridge and found an old bowl of cherry Jell-O with the top frozen. When she put her hands through the gelatin, it made an odd cracking noise. In the sci-fi thriller, it's the surface of Mars.

While filming "E.T.," director Steven Spielberg became concerned that the space alien might be too scary for children, so he asked for a warm, funny sound to accompany its on-screen moves. Roesch ended up taking a T-shirt, taping off the arms and necks, turning it upside down and pouring quarts of Jell-O inside. The ball-like shirt was shaken in front of a mike. Roesch's hands, by the way, were the feet of E.T.

For the spy comedy "Get Smart," Roesch and Moore will probably create some oddball effects, but they'll also make dozens of typical sounds, like a coffee cup being put down or typing on a laptop. And since they always do footsteps for the entire cast of a film, they'll be racking up their career walking-in-place mileage.

Roesch, who also does footsteps of actresses, demonstrates his forte after slipping on women's red, low-heeled pumps that are fastened with bows and were purchased at a Salvation Army thrift store.

"Glamour," he says with a chuckle. "That's the key word in this job."

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