

Hollywood, Etc.: There were many sand traps to avoid while making 'Spider-Man'

by Norma Meyer

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. - There are so many "Spider-Man 3" behind-the-scenes secrets to spill: The director's obsession with finding the right sand. The blow-up dolls that doubled as Broadway theatergoers. Actor James Franco's hives.

'SPIDER-MAN 3' - Thomas Haden Church, as the Sandman, and Spider-Man Tobey Maguire go at it in 'Spider-Man 3'. CNS Photo courtesy of Columbia Pictures. The comic-book caper, with Tobey Maguire back in tights, is being touted for its envelope-pushing, computer-generated visual effects. But there's much more tangible fakery in this summer's first blockbuster release, which cost a staggering \$260 million-plus.

When the villain Sandman (Thomas Haden Church) overcomes victims with his grainy body particles, the "sand" isn't real. It's ground-up corncobs.

"We needed a substance that could double as real sand and not crush our actors when they were covered in barrels and barrels of it," says director Sam Raimi. And that's not Maguire but congenital amputee boxer Baxter Humby in Spidey's suit when the webslinger throws a vicious punch through Sandman's chest. Humby, who calls himself "The One Arm Bandit," could pull off the stunt because he was born missing his lower right arm.

The filmmakers' global search for the perfect sand to comprise Sandman - and their egghead analysis of sand components and how grains move - may be the most exhaustive in Hollywood history. A specially designed computer program replicated real sand for the CGI Sandman who morphs his mass at will. Actual sand was also used on a sound stage in the lab scene where convict Flint Marko is first atomized into the gritty menace.

"It was really weird - we studied sand for weeks on end," producer Grant Curtis recalls. He dishes up lots of insider info in his new book, "The Spider-Man Chronicles: The Art and Making of Spider-Man 3."

Among tidbits, he reveals:

- Early on, Ben Kingsley was the top pick to play Vulture, but the winged nemesis was cut from the script and replaced by Venom (Topher Grace).

- In the scene where Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst) sings on Broadway, 500 inflatable extras in costumes and wigs sat in the audience along with 500 human extras.

- Franco, who plays Harry Osborn/New Goblin, broke out in hives the day his character cooked a meal with Mary Jane at the Osborn mansion. Makeup hid the spots.

- The hospital where Peter Parker (Maguire) brings injured Harry is the set of the canceled Lifetime cable show "Strong Medicine."

- Before cameras rolled one morning, Raimi suddenly decided he had to have a shot of young women screaming at the giant Sandman blowing through New York. In his trailer, Curtis one at a time quickly auditioned five candidates shrieking at an imaginary beast - four got the roles.

In envisioning Sandman, long before shooting began, Oscar-winning costume designer James Acheson conducted his own videotaped experiments on beaches near his New Zealand home, according to the book. He wanted to see how sand looked and fell off a body.

It was a family affair. Acheson painted his brother-in-law in water-soluble glue and rolled him in sand. Then,

he buried his brother-in-law on the beach and had his wife stand on a stepladder and pour sand over the Tinseltown guinea pig as he emerged from the hole.

Meantime, Raimi and production designer Neil Spisak photographed and examined numerous sand specimens from around the world, from dustlike fine grains to coarser particles. Curtis says "literally hundreds" of sand samples were considered.

"They would get FedExes every day of different kinds of sand. They'd put it in a petri dish and shine lights on it and study it. It was really a long, complicated process," Curtis says.

"A strange process," Raimi concedes. In the end, he chose "Arizona sand" because he liked its "varying degrees of size and color." (After all that, amazingly, he doesn't know if it came from Arizona or Timbuktu.)

In the movie, the airborne sand was computer-created. And when actors were swallowed by sand, it was really pulverized corncobs, which was less costly and weighs about half as much.

"True sand is really expensive and really heavy. And with large quantities in the wind, it can be carcinogenic," Curtis says.

The producer knows firsthand about emoting while engulfed in faux sand. He has a cameo as a security guard in an armored truck attacked by Sandman. (All he really saw was a 6-by-8-foot 600-pound polyurethane fist smashing in front of him.) Curtis was buried up to his neck in 4,000 pounds of crushed corncobs that were released from two huge drums above a hole in the truck's roof that Sandman supposedly punched.

"It was like being buried alive. It was really scary, to tell you the truth," he says.

There were more than sand specialists on the movie. A "webmaster" wove the 26-by-32-foot knot-free spiderweb hammock where Peter and Mary Jane have a date. A "basketball choreographer" planned the seconds-long play between Peter and Harry at the Osborn estate. "Food stylists" concocted various stages of the briefly seen omelet Harry cooks with Mary Jane.

Even the short sequence of pre-Sandman Flint Marko being chased by cops and dogs across New Jersey marshlands took extensive planning. The nighttime foot pursuit, which involved barking animal-actors and their trainers dressed as police, was filmed at a ranch in Newhall. Raimi first had to determine how tall he wanted the grass so it looked like marshlands but didn't conceal the dogs. Then, the design team researched when to mow so the regrowth would be ideal on the shoot date.

A life-size German shepherd puppet was created to play the ferocious canine snapping at the escapee's face. Raimi also insisted on having low-lying fog, which was difficult because of wind conditions - a combo of dry ice and a fog machine eventually did the trick.

"I think people think, and naturally so, we show up and the grass is that high and the fog is there - nothing could be further from the truth," says Curtis, who clearly enjoys yanking back the curtain.

On the next to last day of the movie's shoot, Raimi pulled "one of his old tricks," according to Curtis. When the director needed a shot of money flying about after a bank robbery, he threw the bills into the air himself for the camera.

"I like to have my hands on the props as much as possible," Raimi says. "Usually anything that lands in the frame, I'm throwing it. Let's say one of Spider-Man's web balls knocked a gun from someone's hand. I'd usually be the guy throwing the ball."

Raimi's money shot never made the final cut, an irony for one of the most expensive motion pictures ever made.

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