

TV Close-Up: Ian Somerhalder

by Eirik_Knutzen

A solid script and decent pay for playing the title role in a three-hour telefilm called "Marco Polo" from Robert Halmi Sr. to be shot in China was an offer that Ian Somerhalder couldn't refuse. In fact, as a seasoned traveler, it was the opportunity of a lifetime built into a very interesting, big-budget project.

IAN SOMERHALDER - Ian Somerhalder, lying down, will star in Hallmark Channel's 'Marco Polo.' He is seen here in a scene from ABC's 'Lost.' CNS Photo courtesy of Mario Perez. Within a matter of weeks, he reported for work at the giant Hengdian Studios in China's eastern Zhejiang province, a five-hour drive from Shanghai. The 815-acre complex houses 13 movie lots, including one serving as a full-size replica of Beijing's Forbidden City. The city of Hangzhou - where Polo spent the bulk of his 17 years working for the Kublai Khan long ago - is only a two-hour ride away.

Marco (circa 1254-circa 1324) was born to Niccolo Polo, an intrepid explorer and leading Venice merchant in partnership with his brother, Maffeo, when they made their first nine-year round trip to Cathay and established foreign trade contacts in the Khanbaligh (Beijing) court of Mongol prince Kublai Kahn (Brian Dennehy).

Marco was only 17 when accompanied his father and uncle on their second journey to the Far East, which began in 1271. Impressed with the young man's intelligence, guts and power of observation, the Kahn asked to retain his services as a civil servant and diplomat for an indefinite period of time that stretched until 1292. In 1295, he finally returned to his parents' opulent home in Venice.

"Every day was an incredible experience," said Somerhalder, dry as dirt. "The hotel I stayed in was right on the Hengdian Studios lot and every morning I was looking at replicas of famous Chinese historical sites. Using bigger bricks, some of these structures were larger than the originals. When I finally visited the Forbidden City in Beijing, I was disappointed because our Forbidden City was much prettier."

The skinny, 5-foot-9, 28-year-old actor would not recommend shooting there in the summer, however, when temperatures hovered around 100 degrees June through August.

"The humidity was worse than in India - I lost 20 pounds in 8 weeks," recalled Somerhalder. "I'd recommend going there in late spring, early fall, unless you want to lose some weight."

"But one of the coolest things I've ever seen was a crumbling section of the Great Wall built more than 900 years ago in Mongolia on the edge of the Gobi Desert," he continued. "Walking up to that wall - made of mud bricks in that area - and touching was just surreal. I felt like I was transported back in time and the landscape hadn't changed at all. Sandstorms whipped by 100 mph winds shut down production occasionally; we'd film again when it looked like 60 mph."

Heavily recruited since he became the first major star (as Boone Carlyle) to be killed off on "Lost" during the initial 2004-05 season, Somerhalder returned to Los Angeles in time to promote "The Sensation of Sight" - an independent film - at international film festivals. Other recent movie releases include "Pulse," "The Rules of Attraction" and "Life as a House." Television fans look forward to his upcoming HBO series, "Tell Me You Love Me," chronicling the relationships of three couples from varied age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds.

A Louisiana native, Somerhalder was born in Covington and raised in Mandeville (along with two siblings) on Lake Pontchartrain - just a straight shot across the causeway to New Orleans. The son of a massage therapist and an independent building contractor stumbled into acting in school and community theater production at the age of 6 - with a healthy push from his mother.

"My parents worked their butts off to send us to Catholic schools and provide us with everything a kid could ask for," he recalled. "We had all the toys and advantages, ranging from motorcycles to horses. But the truth is that my parents weren't making lots of money, giving my mother the idea of making me a model at the age of 10. I think it's because all her friends said I could do it."

"Then my mother took every penny she had in her savings so we could get an apartment in New York for three summers," continued Somerhalder, laughing at the madness of it all. "By the time I was 11, I was signed to a three-year contract by a big modeling agency and making more money an hour than people with Ph.D.s -

it was really scary. At 16, I was broke because I had spent every dime after the agency had taken out their huge expense fees."

Brenda Netzberger, a personal manager based in Baton Rouge, finally took charge of his modeling career and he spent four highly profitable years dividing his time in 1995-98 between assignments in New York and Milan, Italy - with frequent business trips to Paris, London, Miami, Los Angeles and Barcelona, Spain.

"Modeling was lucrative, but not intellectually satisfying," Somerhalder explained. "So I studied acting with William Esper in New York. After a couple of guest shots in L.A. I did four TV pilots; four of them were picked up. Life has been really good to me here."

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