MOTION PICTURES

Flatliners

Director Joel Schumacher and His Crew Create Visions of Life After Death



Camera assistant Cal Roberts (left), DP Jan De Bont, camera assistant Steve Adcock and camera operator Mike Scott (with a Super 8 camera) shoot a scene from Flatliners on the set of a large greenhouse.

utside Stage 15 on the Columbia Pictures backlot in Burbank it's a sunny December afternoon. A few extras sit around shooting the breeze while some grips unload an equipment truck. Only a skeleton dangling in the back of the truck strikes a slightly discordant note.

But walk inside the cavernous hangar where some crucial scenes for the upcoming Columbia Pictures sci-fi thriller Flatliners are being shot and it's a very different picture. Visitors are immediately plunged into what appears to be an abandoned medical school and animal laboratory.

Even by Hollywood standards, this is an enormous set. Over 150-feet long, 75-feet wide, and with walls towering 30 feet into the soundstage rigging, it consists of a huge chamber and rotunda flanked by massive pillars and architectural flourishes that smack of Wagner and fascism. Two rows of glowing lights, each 20-feet high and unmistakably shaped like the male phallus, line either side of the chamber, while above in the archways a witty and sinister motif — a skull-like figure engaged in a life-or-death battle with another figure representing medicine — repeats itself up and down the hallway.

It's a slightly chilling, if entirely appropriate, image for *Flatliners*, the first picture to be produced as part of an exclusive three-year agreement between Michael Douglas and Rick Bieber's Stonebridge Entertainment and Columbia Pictures. Scheduled for release early this summer, it stars Kiefer Sutherland, Julia Roberts and Kevin Bacon as three of five medical students who attempt to tamper with immortality. Obsessed with the possibility of life after death, they take turns at placing each other in various stages of brain and heart death.

It's also appropriate that such a heavyweight subject has brought together some of the brightest talents in Hollywood. Directed by Joel Schumacher (The Lost Boys, St. Elmo's Fire) and produced by Douglas (One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Romancing the Stone), the film is being shot by Jan De Bont, ASC, whose supercharged visuals have given a high-gloss finish to such films as Die

Hard, Black Rain and the upcoming The Hunt for Red October. The gaffer is Ed Ayer, who has worked with De Bont on some 10 films, including Ruthless People and All The Right Moves. The editor. Robert Brown, has likewise collaborated with Schumacher on his last two films, Cousins and The Lost Boys, in addition to cutting The Pope of Greenwich Village, Brubaker and Police Academy.

Principal photography began on October 23 in Chicago, where Schumacher and crew spent two weeks shooting exteriors and establishing shots. "We built a large promenade set on the Lake Michigan campus at Loyola University, and then used matte paintings to connect the set and the campus exterior with Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry," explains production designer Eugenio Zanetti (Some Girls, Promised Land). "We also had to ship out and set up all the 'penis lights' we use in those sequences, and a couple of other big props, such as the base of a huge statue, so we had a lot to do in just two weeks. Fortunately we lucked out with the weather. And Chicago is a very easy city in which to shoot. The authorities are very helpful in terms of permits and traffic con-

The cast and crew then moved back to the Columbia lot to complete the 57-day shoot in several of the largest soundstages and around the backlot. "The major challenge from a design standpoint has been how to create an imaginary world that also looks realistic," says Zanetti, "and on a rather low budget."

Despite getting the big push from the studio in terms of its hot cast and crew, Flatliners has had to contend with a total budget of approximately \$15 million — a not overly generous sum for such an ambitious and complex project by today's standards. "In fact, it's been even tougher than it sounds," admits the designer. "Normally my department would be allocated about 10 percent of the overall budget, but we've had to build some 25 sets from scratch, and all for \$550,000."

"For instance, the Super 8 footage will play a very big part in the sequences where the students film their experiments. I did a series of tests with it, and to be honest, I was very surprised at just how good it looks. It almost looked too good."

Zanetti and his team were able to meet their budget by building all of the sets out of fiberglass. "It's far less expensive than traditional wood building, and I designed some of the really big sets as a series of modular shapes which we could then just keep casting," he explains. "It hasn't been easy, but it's been challenging."

"I think everyone on this project was attracted by its unusual nature — it's certainly like nothing else I've ever done," comments Schumacher during a lighting break. "It's daring, exciting and original, and I hope I can do justice to it."

Schumacher, who began his film career as a costume designer for Woody Allen, Herbert Ross and Paul Mazursky, describes himself as a non-technical director. "The secret for me is to assemble the best cast and crew I can get, and that's exactly what I've done here. I've wanted to work with Jan De Bont for a long time, for instance, and this project has turned out to be perfect because it allows the cast and crew so much freedom."

Later, watching him direct Kevin Bacon in a scene, it's easy to see Schumacher's collaborative methods in action. The setting is a large greenhouse filled with flowers and blooms, but there is no floral scent — just the acrid smell of smoke clouds being blown into the confined space through an opening at one end. And the gentle sunlight filtering down is in reality the burning glare of a large rack of powerful xenon lights mounted on a crane 15 feet above the greenhouse.

None of this discomfort is visible on the video assist monitor positioned to the side of the action, where Schumacher confers with his DP as they frame the next shot while the gaffer fine-tunes the overhead lights. But Schumacher isn't one of those directors who can quite happily sit through an entire production with his back to the actors, eyes glued to the monitor. A second later, he's going over the scene in detail with Bacon, before everyone hits their marks and tries a rehearsal.

"Joel is the kind of director who really lets you experiment with a look and try all sorts of effects, so Jan and I have been able to be very inventive on this picture," comments gaffer Ed Ayer. "We've been using a lot of different colors and lighting schemes, so that each character and the journey they take has its own signature.

"In Chicago, we had a lot of huge exteriors to light, and Jan likes using Musco lights to add some punch," he continues. "Perhaps the most difficult sequence there was a night exterior of the museum. We had to light two sides of the building, both over 400 feet long. We also used some spot PARs to highlight some of the architectural detail. Jan loves to use smoke to give atmosphere and density to a scene, and that also enhanced the

beams."

According to Ayer, the production has made heavy use of xenon lights, "for everything from day exteriors to night exteriors and all interiors, because of the intensity of the lights. They're real sharp and focused, and extremely powerful, so you get a very crisp, clean image, which Jan likes." Ayer has also been bouncing a lot of light off mylar, "especially gold and silver, which gives us a very unusual rippling effect, rather like water. We've also been gelling it, and using a bright rose on Rachel [Julia Roberts' character], a bright blue for Kiefer's character, and so on. That's been very effective.

"Overall, we've been using more xenons than usual, as well as a lot of Lekos, and some unusual setups, such as some Yani lights," continues Ayer. "They consist of eight aircraft landing lights bunched together in series of four, because they're 28 volts each. It looks almost like a Maxi Brute, but it has different bulbs and gives off a very strong, intense light, although nothing like the xenons. But it does give you a similar, highly focused, controlled beam that's really good for back lighting."

Another setup has utilized PAR 64 aircraft landing lights in conjunction with a mirror mounted on a lazy Susan. "It's given us the effect of revolving headlights, which we've used a lot in the dream sequences," explains Ayer.

"Perhaps the most complex setup was what we call 'the bathroom scene' where Rachel confronts the image of her dead father. We shot it in a very confined space where we couldn't even get lights set up. So we used a mirror and bounced a xenon off it through a bright rose gel. Then to give the effect of a hallucination appearing, Jan and the production designer came up with the idea of also shooting through this sheet of clear plastic to give the image a very strange transluscent quality.

"Today we're using four 4k xenons mounted on a Condor crane to basically give some punch to the greenhouse sequence," adds Ayer. "Xenon lights are also particularly good for giving you real strong highlights with all the greenery in there, and it looks natural. We found that using just 12ks smoothed everything out too much.

"Our next big challenge is lighting the interior of the lab, which is a huge set. We've got a bunch of Lekos — 48 total — and each one is wired to a dimmer so we can get different densities instead of having to scrim everything down. The great thing about this production is that we've had the freedom to try any idea we want."

DP De Bont is equally enthusiastic. "This is one of the very few times when the director gives the DP and his gaffer com-

plete carte blanche to create a look for the film," he points out. "From the moment I first read the script, I knew we'd have to come up with something pretty surreal to match the storyline." The first step in that direction was De Bont's decision to film everything with anamorphic lenses. "I always prefer to use them because, first, they give you the ideal frame format, and they also allow any special effects and background information to become part of the scene organically. And to me, the image is just more realistic than the wide-screen or other formats usually used."

The DP has also taken the unusual step of mixing and matching everything from Super 8 to 70mm film to give Flatliners its unique look. "We've actually used almost every possible format: from Super 8 black and white and color to Super 8 video, 16mm, 35mm anamorphic and 65mm anamorphic. And every format has been used to achieve a specific goal and emphasize the surreal look," he stresses. "For instance, the Super 8 footage will play a very big part in the sequences where the students film their experiments. I did a series of tests with it, and to be honest, I was very surprised at just how good it looks. It almost looked too good."

De Bont has also used a wide selection of film stocks. "For Super 8 we're using [Kodak] Plus-X negative, Tri-X and Ektachrome; in 35mm we're using Double-X, 5296, 5245 and 5297. This is pretty unusual," he admits, "but there have been some great advances in stocks over the past few years, especially in terms of speed, and I'm a great believer in using whatever new technology is available."

De Bont has also used everything from Louma cranes to a Steadicam and hand-held cameras, in addition to making use of Panavision's Panaflasher, which adds light during the exposure of a frame. "It's something I discovered during the *Die Hard* shoot, on which we were working in very low light levels most of the time.

"I'm also trying to do most of the optical effects in camera," he adds. "I prefer to do as little post production as possible, because I always think bluescreen and mattes are never that convincing, however well they're done. I always like to keep it first generation negative."

"It's been a huge challenge, kind of like trying to fly a 747 and build it at the same time," sums up director Schumacher. "It'd be a lot easier to make Lost Boys 2 because it's familiar territory; whereas this is quite scary, to be honest. But I like the challenge, and to my complete surprise, we're right on schedule and on budget, so we should wrap mid-January."

By lain Blair