Giving '300' movie a comic-book grandeur - LA Times (2007)

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Director Zack Snyder mixes tricks to create a comic-book grandeur for '300' on the screen.
By Sheigh Crabtree, Special to The Times

A pack of tourists and a museum docent fanned out in front of "Leonidas at Thermopylae" in the Louvre a few months ago. Spotting Jacques-Louis David's 1814 oil painting of a buff, naked warrior king preparing to lead 300 Spartan troops into battle, a cheerful young American said: "Awesome. I just made a movie of this."

"Really?" said the docent. "… what does it look like?"

The young man shrugged and smiled. "It basically looks like this."

"Well, those men are all naked," the docent said after a long pause.

"Yeah," the man replied. "That's kind of what the Spartans were all about."

Zack Snyder is something of an expert after spending years creating his own audaciously loud, fast-paced cinematic painting of the Spartans' tale, "300," a $60-million live-action adaptation of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's 1999 graphic novel.

Snyder has visualized thousands of permutations of the overmatched Greek force that held off hoards of advancing Persians in 480 BC, fighting to the death for their freedom and inspiring the resistance of their countrymen. And for "300," he's developed an inventive visual vocabulary, shooting on film and using a bevy of fancy camera, lighting and sonic tricks drawn from his work in commercials to bring his actors, filmed against neutral bluescreen, to bold life in a moody CGI world.

In his second at-bat directing a big studio picture, Snyder, 40, could have tossed off a clanking sword-and-sandals epic, its comic book heroes encased in an impenetrable wall of visual effects. At worst, as far as the studio was concerned, Snyder, whose first film was "Dawn of the Dead," might have pulled off a passable hybrid of "Troy" and "Sin City," which both performed solidly at the box office.

But "300," which opens Friday in regular theaters and in Imax, seems to defy the conventions of stiff and airless bluescreen movies in which muted performances belie pretend environments. The rule on Snyder's sets was that anything the actors touched had to be real — the stone paths they walked on, the elaborate litter that carries Xerxes, the Persian king. Instead of playing strictly to imaginary foils, they had more tangible environments to ground their performances. Battles were staged with swords and shields.

Snyder samples from high and low culture — everything from the masterworks of Greek antiquity to Super Bowl beer ads. But it was Miller's bold silhouetted frames and Varley's firelit colors in the pages of "300" that Snyder and his cast and crew seem to have tattooed on the backs of their eyelids. In the more than three months of prep, 60 days of shooting on bluescreen sets in Montreal and year-and-a-half in postproduction, it was broad visual references, as opposed to words, that informed the creative intent of the movie.

Much of the action unfolds in bold tableaux under the stormy skies of battle and aftermath — the dust of an attack, smoke of a burning village. The reds of capes and blood are the only colors that cut through in silhouetted backgrounds. Austere rocks and an angry Aegean Sea below offset the brutal violence and almost inhuman discipline of the outnumbered Spartans in battle.

Gerard Butler, who stars as King Leonidas, signed on after watching a four-minute Snyder test shot. During production Butler spent hours in the art department studying artistic renderings and referring back to the graphic novel, he said. "I knew I would never again come across a hero quite as masculine, powerful or uncompromising," Butler said. "When you read the graphic novel you see every pose the king has is such a position of strength and power…. I pushed for this stylized movement from the novel when you see us all walking together, leaning forward and marching like a machine."

Miller, who co-directed "Sin City," has spoken effusively about Snyder's "300" adaptation ever since a teaser debuted at Comic-Con last summer — it was played three times in succession for rapturous comics fans in the crowd. Miller has said it's not that Snyder faithfully copied every last detail in his novel, it's that he tapped into a similar mythic scope. Snyder nailed the visual ideal of an oral history told over hundreds of years by firelight.

"Very accurate, detailed figures walking around in battle is boring," Miller said. "The most important thing was to strip

them down to helmets and red capes…. Spartans move like lightning. Reality be damned."

But reality did intrude slightly as the studio and filmmakers considered the contemporary resonance of the film. "There was a huge sensitivity about East versus West with the studio," Snyder said. "They said, 'Is there any way we could not call [the bad guys] Persians? Would that be cool if we called them Zoroastrians?' "

In the seven years he worked on the film, he said, "the politics caught up with us. I've had people ask me if Xerxes or Leonidas is George W. Bush. I say, 'Great. Awesome. If it inspires you to think about the current geopolitical situation, cool.' "

Achieving the vision

IT may be easiest to talk about Snyder's visuals in "300" in broad strokes, said Larry Fong, the director's classmate at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and his longtime cinematographer. For those involved in the production, especially Snyder, the three most common adjectives used to describe "300" are "cool," "awesome" and "amazing" — which don't go a long way in conveying specifics.

In that regard, Fong said he had yet to read a description that conveyed his sense of the look and tone of the movie. "The other day someone on the Internet said it looks 'antique.' That's pretty good. Actually, we were going for something so unique and original and amazing that nobody has invented words for it," he joked. "I'm sure when Leonardo was laying around on his back working on the Sistine Chapel his patrons weren't like, 'We're paying you a lot of money here, pal. What do you mean 'heavenly and angelic'?"

Truth be told, Fong explained, everyone from studio heads to production assistants was slightly boggled by Snyder's vision. "It's not that we didn't have faith, it's just sort of alchemical what he pulled off. I don't think any one person knew, but each person had a piece of the puzzle. It's Zack who saw the puzzle the whole time from a distance."

A few of the key ingredients in Snyder's secret cinematic sauce: thousands of hours of visual tests, shooting on film and shooting everything lighted as if it were golden hour, overcast or under shimmery moonlight.

Although high-definition video has become a de rigueur medium for bluescreen shoots — for one thing, film has to laboriously be scanned into the digital realm — Fong shot film because Snyder relies heavily on variable speed lensing, which new digital cinematography cameras aren't so great at yet.

"I'm glad we didn't shoot in HD," Fong said. "When you think period, you think film, which is funny because in ancient Greece there was no film. But for us, the cinematic experience was informed by film artifacts. We wanted the film grain to show."

Snyder at play

IN a dazzling battle sequence, heavily influenced by Snyder and Fong's work in commercials, the two used a camera technique known as a "lens morph" or a "nested zoom." Basically, three Arriflex cameras were mounted with a wide, a medium and a macro lens that ran at 150 frames per second. When cut together, the action shot moves blazingly fast, in an extreme change of perspective that isn't created purely by either cutting or zooming. "Using two techniques at once is all part of the weirdness," Fong said.

High adrenaline visuals were then underscored by a bold soundtrack.

"When you watch this movie, it should be loud. It should hurt your ears," Snyder said.

He moved into a casual air guitar pose. "There's some chaanannt chanannt — you know, some hard guitary bits." Then he craned his head back into half-yodel, half-ululation pose. "There's also yunhyunhyunh, like sing-y kind of stuff." Suddenly self-conscious, he said, "That's me describing it to [composer] Tyler Bates. Not pretty at all."

The movie's sonic moments envelop the picture in atmospherics that don't come with a closed bluescreen stage. Those postproduction sounds were drummed up by supervising sound editor Scott Hecker. "We developed the atmosphere as we got into the soundtrack," Hecker said. "We incorporated more ocean winds and tonal material that helps bring locations to life. With production recordings from bluescreen shoots, you can hear the size of the room. We had to bring in a vast canyon feel to broaden the scope of the sound."

The frosting on "300's" cake was a "super-contrasty, silvery bleach bypass" digital intermediate master — basically a Photoshop-like adjustment of color and contrast. That process was overseen by Company 3's Stefan Sonnenfeld, who, like Fong, said he was already getting calls from producers asking him to replicate the film's look.

"This is Zack's style," Sonnenfeld said, who has worked with Snyder on commercials since 1992. "It's the fight

choreography, the actors' performances, Larry's lighting, the emotional interactions, the silhouetted compositions…. This is what Zack was destined to do. We're all like, 'Wow, Zack. You have finally found the playground to fulfill your dreams.' "