

A Fondness For Monsters Lands Special FX Workshop An Oscar

By John Gregory

How does actress Meryl Streep take the punishment of falling down a flight of stairs, and continue her routine, head twisted backwards? How about Wesley Snipes being broken to pieces while frozen?

The awe-inspiring special effects adding that extra touch of realism to movies such as "Death Becomes Her" and "Demolition Man" are the results of craftsmen like Gino Acevedo of Amalgamated Dynamics Incorporated (ADI). Their skills were so incredible, ADI was awarded a Visual Effects Oscar for "Death Becomes Her" at this year's Academy Awards ceremony.

"We're using it as a door stop," Acevedo joked.

They also contributed body casts for the current hit "Demolition Man," starring Sylvester Stallone and Wesley Snipes.

At Amalgamated, Acevedo's key roles are in painting and research and development of new materials. His other skills include sculpting, making molds and doing makeup. He particularly enjoys the exacting work of painting skin tones.

Special effects studios such as ADI have the resources, knowledge and skill to trick movie audiences into believing the impossible is really happening on-screen. The work is painstakingly detailed for maximum realism.

In "Death Becomes Her" for instance, Acevedo said they fashioned six completely finished puppets of Meryl Streep. Each performed in destructive scenes such as the one in which Streep's character crashed down a flight of stairs, or had her head bashed by a shovel. One completely functioning mechanical model was used for lip-sync. That puppet appears in a sequence immediately after Streep's character was pushed down a staircase, emerging, neck broken, with her head twisted backwards 180 degrees. She continued speaking.

Acevedo said the hardest part was synchronizing the movements of the puppet with Streep's dialogue. Seven puppeteers were required to work the figure. The hands, waist, three fingers, and shoulders all required separate controls. Each movement had to be synchronized with others so that they would appear more natural and fluid.

The project on which Acevedo worked took 6 months. A crew of 25 pooled their skills for everything from molding and painting puppets to making the finished figures move in the film.

It took one week to paint Meryl Streep's puppet, and Acevedo worked closely with Streep and her makeup artist to create the perfect image.

The puppet's eyebrows presented the greatest problem, he said. Hair for puppets is punched in individually.

Challenging Projects

Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff formed ADI 3 1/2 years ago. The pair formerly worked with Stan Winston Studio on such films as "Aliens," "The Terminator," "Alien Nation" and "Pumpkinhead." Acevedo joined the company in 1991. Yuri Everson is another full-time employee. Freelance workers fill staffing gaps on big projects.

'We're grown men, but we still play with dolls'

— Gino Acevedo

ADI prefers to craft special effects for big budget films. "Alien 3" and "Tremors" are a few of the other films on which the company has worked. ADI sculpted the president's masks for the motion picture "Point Break." Their latest project involves work on the film "Wolf," starring Jack Nicholson and Michelle Pfeiffer.

"Every new project is a challenge," Acevedo said.

On "Alien 3," they worked for a year in England then spent six months in Los Angeles on the finishing touches. For that project they used a new polyurethane material so that the skeleton

would show through the shell of the "face hugger." The alien was made from foam latex, a flexible material commonly used for special effects. That material was also used to make Danny DeVito's Penguin nose for "Batman 2."

Food thickener completed the alien's look as the shiny slime oozing from its jaws.

They also participated in a Pepsi commercial in which Amalgamated's Woodruff, 8 feet tall with leg extensions, wore the alien suit, suspended by a harness.

Lifelike Materials

The process for making a figure of an alien, wolf-man or other fictional creature involves several steps. First, numerous drawings are combined for a single design which becomes the basis for a sculpture. The sculpture is formed to make a mold, which is then used to shape a cast of the subject.

"We're grown men, but we still play with dolls," Acevedo said.

The different types of synthetic materials used to form the life-like dummies necessitate a variety of ink and paint solutions.

ADI used a breakthrough silicone compound for the puppets in "Death Becomes Her." Acevedo then created a special mixture of acrylic paint and rubber cement sealer, capable of bonding to this newest and most realistic material yet.

Acevedo gives this media high marks because it not only feels and looks like real flesh, its translucent characteristics allow great possibilities for higher levels of realism

and detail. Veins, for instance, may be painted to the underside and show through the "skin," he explained.

Acevedo displayed a puppet of actor Robert Morse which demonstrated this point to unbelievable proportions. The face was so real and the skin so flesh-like that one jumps back when first touching it. The dummy was used in the unique ABC mini series "Wild Palms." To get the actor's likeness, he had to sit while a mold of his face was made. A mixture was poured over his face, allowed to dry and pulled off. Later, the dry mold was used to form a cast from which the final puppet was formed.

Since the various shops are constantly developing and updating materials, special effects artists watch other projects closely for new techniques.

The Workshop

Amalgamated's Topanga Canyon shop has several rooms where the different aspects of special effects are constructed. The largest room is the painting and sculpting room. This area is adorned with models and dummies of past projects. The most notable is a large, dark brown alien crawling down the wall. They spent six months working on the display, Acevedo said.

Along the cabinets is a row of smaller alien models and puppets, including the "baby alien," which emerged from the dog in "Alien 3." A series of shelves in the back hold more. Acevedo displayed

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the clay bust of an ape he has been working on.

In this room Acevedo showed his airbrush collection. His favorite and old standard is his \$600 Iwata. With this he is able to color the various dummies to a highly-detailed level. He credits working for amalgamated with perfecting his craft. "I've finessed my airbrush skills since I've been with them. They've given me creative freedom," he said.

Other tools of the trade are in a multi-level rounder near the airbrush supplies: paintbrushes, X-acto knives, razor blades and fake teeth, some of which are embedded in fake gums.

Next to the painting and sculpting room is a smaller room used for mixing materials to form models, masks and puppets. Inside are a few industrial-size mixing bowls. The room must be temperature controlled for mixing the various materials to a precise consistency.

Other areas in the shop are a drawing room where all the sketches are made, a viewing room where videos are shown to clients, and a machine room. The machine room contains a variety of tooling machines allowing shop workers to construct just about any mechanism their minds can imagine. It is in this room that the puppets' controls are perfected, allowing them to begin their first, tentative

movements.

Acevedo demonstrated one of the hand controls which consists of two levers with knobs that twist. When attached to a puppet, each movement pulls a cable which makes a certain facial expression or body movement.

This was further illustrated as Acevedo showed a video of Meryl Streep, first performing her lines for "Death Becomes Her," and then the puppet of her, with head twisted backwards, mouthing the same lines to near-perfection.

In this high-tech viewing room, which also houses the new Oscar statue, another video showed the puppet of the character Bishop from "Alien 3" going through his lines. The script called for the character's face to be extremely damaged — so damaged on one side that a human could not play the part. Still, the similarity to a real human's (or in this case an android's) facial expression was impeccable, as harnesses controlled the lips, eyes and temples.

From Masks To Movies

The road Acevedo traveled him on a natural progression to his current position. Acevedo enjoyed art classes at Camelback High School in Phoenix where he was a 1982 graduate.

He further developed his natural artistic ability at Phoenix College, taking theatrical make-up, graphics,

illustration and life-drawing. He was not concerned with earning a diploma. "I didn't have any intention of getting a degree," he said. "I just thought the classes would really help."

He began designing masks for a company called Imagineering shortly after graduating from high school, and this was the main focus of his efforts.

He proudly states that Liff created vampire blood 28 years ago, the kind still found in Hollywood makeup kits today

To this day Acevedo continues to design masks for the company. Two years ago, an east coast company called Colledgeville merged with Imagineering to form one of the biggest Halloween companies in the world.

Having sculpted masks for about 10 years, he is well-versed in making the proverbial witches and devils. Other efforts have included George Bush and Batman.

He credits Larry Liff, his boss at Imagineering, with getting him started on his special effects career. Acevedo has an abundance of complements for Liff. He proudly states that Liff invented vampire blood 28

years ago — the type still found in Halloween make-up kits today.

"Larry was always pushing for me to come out here (Hollywood), even though he didn't want to lose me," Acevedo said. "He knew I'd gone as far as I could in Phoenix."

In 1990, Acevedo took a leave of absence from Imagineering to go to Los Angeles where he worked for NBC on a Dick Clark special called "Friday Night Surprise." The program was modeled after an old show named "Masquerade." Celebrities appeared made up as other characters, and contestants tried to guess the name of the actor beneath the make-up. For instance, Alan Hale, the skipper on "Gilligan's Island," appeared as W. C. Fields. Bob Denver dressed as Mae West. Acevedo was involved in the make-up process.

Following "Masquerade," he did make-up for guests on the "Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson for a short time.

Then Acevedo's friend, David Miller, asked him to help work on "Nightmare on Elm Street Part 5."

"That was my first film," said Acevedo. "At that time I had pretty much decided this is what I was going to do."

Following the "Nightmare on Elm Street" project, Acevedo found an opportunity to work with Dave Nelson on Reel FX. At this point, Acevedo "packed up everything and moved to Hollywood."

The interior of his apartment is coated in a slime green.

Next, Acevedo joined the David Miller studio. There he worked on a movie called "Vulcan Mania." The film was later released under the title "Nothing But Trouble" starring Dan Akroyd and Chevy Chase.

But Acevedo didn't stay to finish the film. Instead, he accepted an opportunity at AVG Studio in Valencia, Calif. At AVG Acevedo worked on props and moving robotics for a Japanese theme park called Puro Land. A team of "five or six of us were sculptors — sculpting puros. They looked like little gnomes," Acevedo explained.

Although he demonstrates great skill when replicating human flesh, his selection of pigment for the his own dwelling comes under fire. The interior of his apartment is coated in a slime-green. A Conan-sword motif permeates the interior, with lots of gorillas thrown in. And aliens. Fantasy-type posters dominate one wall.

"I've always had a fascination with monsters," said Acevedo. That fascination, for which most 30-year-olds would be mocked, has brought him great notoriety, and a share in an Oscar.