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Helmets, designers take the edge out of war

Eye on the Oscars: Art Direction, Costumes & Makeup

By RANDEE DAWN

"War films are wonderful challenges," says Thomas Walsh, president of the Art Directors Guild. "But they're right at the top of the food chain in terms of assignments that are difficult to do well."

That didn't stop two veteran directors -- Steven Spielberg and Zhang Yimou -- from taking a bite this year, with "War Horse" and "The Flowers of War," respectively. The first is set largely in the hellish world of trench warfare, the second during the nightmare days of the Nanking Massacre.

But while both directors were unquestionably up to the serious challenges of staging war, destruction and battle scenes, they both did something unusual: Without stinting on the atrocities of battle, they chose to frame their stories as fables.

That left some of the biggest challenges on each film up to the designers, costumers and makeup artists. They had to bring a sense of verisimilitude to every scene -- with an artistic twist.

"How do you mix being pragmatic and being poetic?" asks "War Horse" production designer Rick Carter. "That's the design challenge: To create a place where both of those aspirations are fulfilled."

Carter and Spielberg have a relationship that spans nearly 30 years, which meant they had an easy, familiar way to communicate. Spielberg would sometimes say "surprise me," Carter recalls.

"Every day was like creating a new painting," Carter says.

That meant finding a way to gradually lead the audience and the film from the green, rocky hills of Devon, England into the blasted, otherworldly surface of the war's battleground across the English Channel. Carter located an airfield west of London, gutted and trenched it, then sculpted it meticulously.

Carter says he and Spielberg were influenced by the films of John Ford and David Lean, who knew how to make movies that evoked the landscape around them.

"You're tracking a sense of what was lost, and how you survive," says Carter. "That sort of thinking informed a lot of imagery, and that starts to form a fable."

It was 2006's "Pan's Labyrinth," however, that informed the imagery of Yimou's "Flowers," says the film's production designer Yohei Taneda, who notes that both films tell their stories through the eyes



'The Flowers of War'



'War Horse'

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of a young girl.

"Rather than reenact history," writes Taneda through a translator, "I felt it would be more interesting to add a slightly subjective, fable-like feel to depict war as experienced by the innocents."

To achieve that, Yimou leaned heavily on contrasting spare bursts of color with a bleak, bombed-out landscape. Drab schoolgirl clothes contrasted with the silken outfits of prostitutes and an enormous stained-glass window.

"Yimou tended to have lots of requests and demands when it came to color," writes Taneda, who built the destroyed city of Nanking entirely on soundstages and backlots, almost the opposite of Spielberg's choice to stay largely on location. Taneda says he wanted to render the bombed-out city as "ruins deserving of love," with "each crumbling building distinctive and beautiful."

But neither director wanted to tread on familiar territory. Spielberg told his department heads that "this is not ('Saving Private) Ryan.'" And in portraying the colorful red-light district, Yimou had no intention of using the signature lanterns he featured in 1991's "Raise the Red Lantern."

"He strongly insisted he would never use lanterns on his movies again," writes set decorator Yoshihito Akatsuka, who then had to come up with a substitute and chose a Chinese decorated gate.

Adhering to a "fable" atmosphere, however, required compromises. Spielberg's desire for a PG-13 rating on "War Horse" meant some "artistic license" had to be taken, as head makeup designer Lois Burwell recalls. She cites the gas burns on lead character Albert's eyes, which were first conveniently covered with a bandage and then muted once exposed. "But the integrity is still there," she says. "Accurate, but in a toned-down way. Remember, the war may be the premise but the film is about the emotions of the people and the animals."

And therein is born the artistry: With both "Flowers" and "War Horse," the directors have taken the horror-film dictum of not showing the monster to heart, which leaves the scariest parts of each in the audience's imaginations and allows the human story to dominate. Still, it's a fine line to walk -- one that can't be accomplished without expert below-the-line department heads.

"I applaud anyone who makes a war film with moderation," says Walsh. "A good war movie is not a snuff movie. In lesser hands, a war movie coming out at Christmastime -- with animals -- could be a dangerous film. These movies prove that you can show the war, but celebrate the individual."

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