

THE SPIRIT: THE NEW FILM NOIR

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San Francisco is home to some of the most state-of-the-art visual effects facilities in the world. One such innovative VFX and film production company is The Orphanage, who is in charge of the visual special effects in *THE SPIRIT*, a film based on the graphic novel by Will Eisner and adapted by *SIN CITY* creator, Frank Miller. I am invited to attend a round-table interview to view the first trailer of the film with the creators of this visual spectacle.

We navigate our way up and down the steep hills until we arrive at the Presidio, a beautiful park that houses, among others, the CGI powerhouse of George Lucas, Industrial Light and Magic. The Orphanage sits amongst a lush, tree-filled landscape; a place where creativity seems to be born out of the environment itself. Some of The Orphanage's previous projects include: *IRONMAN*, *LIVE FREE OR DIE HARD*, *SIN CITY*, and *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW*.

Suddenly we see Frank Miller approach us and with him a very enthusiastic Deborah Del Prete, the producer of *THE SPIRIT*. We are invited into a huge conference room with a large screen and begin by seeing the trailer for the film. Although you get the sense that there is a very iconic Frank Miller stamp of style on it, the teaser gives us a glimpse that this movie learns from *SIN CITY* and makes a fresh film noir. Stu Maschwitz, the visual effects supervisor on the film, and co-founder of The Orphanage, and Nancy St. John, the visual effects producer join us at the table as we prepare for our interviews. It is worthy to note that prior to The Orphanage, Maschwitz spent five years at ILM where he quickly became one of its youngest supervisors. A visual effects wiz-kid to be sure. After the teaser ends, Frank Miller energetically begins:

FRANK MILLER: You know, we want this to be as utterly realistic and gritty as possible. No, seriously, this is an adventure and a romance.

WHY DID YOU MAKE THAT CHOICE?

FRANK: I think we followed Eisner's original vision, which was to make *THE SPIRIT* be a very Zorro-like, striking, scary figure and I did that without reservations.

DEBORAH: This first trailer does have some things in common with the black and white look of SIN CITY, but the movie is not black and white.

FRANK: Yes, this is a full color movie.

DEBORAH: No-one's going to think it looks like SIN CITY after they see the next trailer.

FRANK: Not once they see Eva in gold.

Eva Mendes a casting choice no doubt from Mr. Miller, who has a knack for picking beautiful women.

FRANK: I think the use of color is the one thing that moviemakers have been struggling with since the days when Alfred Hitchcock moved from black and white to color and I don't think he ever did that successfully, to tell the truth, as bold as that sounds. It took Stanley Kubrick to really employ color the way it could be used...that sometimes pulling color away can be as dramatic as using it and in THE SPIRIT what Stu and Bill Pope (Director of Photography) and I have done is try to use the color to express emotion and tone more than reality. I am sick of movies where I see a spumoni of colors flying at me all the time. I would rather see a color used as what color is, a weapon.

YOU HAVE BEEN QUITE ADAMANT TO SAY THIS ISN'T *SIN CITY* BUT WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM THE WAY THAT ROBERT RODRIGUEZ AND ZACK SNYDER TACKLED SIN CITY AND 300? THEY WERE QUITE RADICALLY DIFFERENT.

FRANK: Well, it was Robert Rodriguez I worked with mostly. What I learned was much like what I learned doing the comic book of SIN CITY which was draining it of color completely, then bringing it back selectively. I realized the true power of color. I'd rather not feel like I'm in a candy shop when I'm watching a movie. My eyes blur when I see too many colors on screen so you'll see color used very selectively in this movie and very intentionally.

DEBORAH: Before SIN CITY the one thing that was always missing in comic movies was one of the essential elements that make people fans of comics; the work of the artist. I think that is something that is definitely an element of THE SPIRIT, using the work of the artist....Eisner as well as Miller.

FRANK: And I was constantly informed as I worked on this with Stu and Bill. So there would be less reliance on a literal realism and more on emotional or even temperature based realism. So when scenes feel cold in THE SPIRIT, they're going to feel cold because Stu loaded them with just the colors that weigh down the figures and feel cold.

STU: What Bill is uniquely gifted at as a cinematographer is achieving the same emotional impact that one of Frank's drawings has but through cinematography and basically Bill hands the torch to me when I start doing the backgrounds.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT IN TERMS OF THE ACTION AND THE VIOLENCE AND THE SEX?

FRANK: It won't be like SIN CITY. It's much more abstract. This is my game and this is Will Eisner's creation. I believe a great deal in hinting at things and throwing shadows across walls and I'm not really a "spurt of blood" kind of guy, believe it or not.

STU: The live action photography for the most part has limited sets and a lot of big green walls, but that is overly simplistic because there is I think a misunderstanding about how these movies are made that you can throw up a few lights and a big green stage and add everything in later and one thing that I wanted to try to put forward on this movie is this idea that visual effects is not post-production, that it is something that permeates the entire process so it starts with planning. One of the first things that Frank and I did together was to take his beautiful storyboards which you could publish tomorrow as a comic book and...

FRANK: We will.

STU: ...And we begin to animate them and create a rough animated version of key scenes in the film and so when we went to the stage and began to shoot, we could show everyone a version of what the movie was going to look like and so a lot of it has to do with having a plan and shooting a lot of raw ingredients.

DOES THE VISUAL EFFECTS PROCESS AFFECT THE ACTORS DURING THE SHOOT AND HOW MUCH?

FRANK: May I jump on that? Yes, it does. It does a great deal because you got to understand at first you just imagine this room within nothing but green walls

around you and you have to play a part and the only thing that you have to deal with is whatever prop is involved: a gun, a wrench, you know, a paper cutter, anything...and you have to create the rest but this is this classic black box performance for actors. I found that it was very, very liberating.

DEBORAH: It's only about the performances and I have to say it's an amazing thing when you think about this technology that everybody's like well, we have 1,800 plus special effects shots in this movie and that's massive and it's a digital movie. The truth is it's more about the performances and the actors from the director's point than any other movie because his whole concentration during the time he's shooting is all about that and I think you see it in this movie with these actors.

FRANK: Thank you. The other thing that has to be kept in mind here is that when she mentions the number of special effects shots and I mentioned how critical Stu is in making this, sometimes the best art is done by a Ninja. Sometimes the best art is done invisibly. There are several shots that I called for in my script and in my storyboards that Stu challenged me on saying that this will look digital. He didn't want it to feel like you were being ripped out of real film into digital and I ceded to him. He was right because I realized that he didn't want my heroes to turn into Bendies and bounce against buildings and I didn't want the camera to rip across skylines in a way that no jet could do and it was really Stu's aesthetic that helped tame this and make it more of an urban story than a special effects.

DEBORAH: And one other thing you had to do from the beginning was to tell the stunt people you only want stunts that a person could actually do. There is no stunt in the movie that a human could not do.

(Frank noticeably begins to fume.)

FRANK: I got a problem. I got a problem with the post-MATRIX approach. I mean, MATRIX was real fresh...but I don't like the idea of hitting somebody and have them fly 20 feet. For the simple reason that it doesn't tell me that somebody has been hurt. If you hit somebody, they drop and so I was insistent that we have no flying figures.

DEBORAH: Or guys that instead of jumping fly, and pause in mid air.

FRANK: No, and also I'm really sick of people climbing walls. I mean, thank you CROUCHING TIGER. Thank you MATRIX, but can we stop now?

BUT WHY IS THAT? THIS IS THE WORLD OF FANTASY.

FRANK: Oh, but fantasy has to be rooted in a tactile reality or else it has no meaning whatsoever. Also, year-by-year some tricks just lose their charm.

DEBORAH: Some of the things we did are never done. Again, we had this special effect wizard with Stu. We had Bill's genius with lighting and we had things we wanted to do. I'll give you one small example. After Frank and I got the script where we wanted it to be, there were a number of sequences in the movie that were underwater. And when we were meeting with the creative team which was Bill and Frank and Stu, I said the thing about women underwater in comics is that they always look gorgeous. They look perfect because there's no actual water, they're just drawing bubbles. How can we achieve that in film and how can we make it look real.

FRANK: The wonderful thing about a discovery like that which we made during the Eva Mendes sequence underwater is that it allowed us to then look at the Lorelei sequence featuring Jamie King and in one day using the same camera, we got more than a week's worth of work out of this one actress. She infuses the movie. I mean, you really don't go for more than 15 minutes without running into her and it's because this camera it's a technological marvel of sorts and also because actresses like Eva and Jamie are so disciplined that they can act fast when they know they're in slow motion.

SO THIS CAMERA SHOOTS IN SLOW MOTION.

DEBORAH: Yeah.

FRANK: Because we were going for the hair. The hair has to flow like it's underwater.

STU: The thing you have to understand about this camera, it's called the Phantom, it's a digital camera that can shoot up to 1,000 frames per second and so in order to achieve the underwater look with the flowing hair we're shooting at frame speed that's between 250 and 400 frames per second which means that a tenth of a second of time on the stage turns into a minute of footage.

FRANK: It's an astonishing effect, astonishing effect.

STU: The hair turns flowy underwater but that also means that if you don't – if you're out of performance perfection for a blink, it becomes epic, you know, so speed acting was...

FRANK: One of the things that I've got to say that as I got into having this new toy I – we had Gabriel Macht underwater and I said get a shot of Gabe, get a close-up on his eye and he said what's the direction and I said none. I said 'just close your eyes' and he slowly closed his eye, opened it and it wasn't quite a good one. He did it again and he just blinked naturally and in the middle of it we found this piece that is The Spirit coming back to life because it's so slow that it's frightening.

STU: It's unlike anything you've ever seen.

DEBORAH: We're not trying to make people think oh, look at that effect. We're making them think wow, they're underwater.

FRANK: What may be my favorite shot in the entire movie is completely the result of Stu's conviction about knowing the limits of what digital wants to do and it's a shot where The Spirit is sliding up a water tower and stumbles just slightly and then slides back down. Now that was done by a stuntman. If it had been done digitally, he would have been perfect and he would have been Spider-man and it would have been boring. Instead it was Eisner and Eisner was the soul of this movie and really there was not an hour, let alone a day, where his name didn't come up as we were working on this thing and The Spirit is always a bit of a fumble bub. He's brilliant, he solves the problem, but along the way he might just trip and break his nose.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO CREATE A WILL EISNER FILM INSTEAD OF ONE OF YOUR OWN CHARACTERS?

FRANK: Okay. Well, let me jump on that. Someone asked me at Will Eisner's memorial if I would do THE SPIRIT and I said no, absolutely not and I walked about 10 feet and turned around and said 'nobody else gets to touch it'. It began as a protective decision. You know, I just didn't want my dear friend's work and one of the geniuses of my field corrupted. Then I got to work on figuring how to do it and I got to work with Deborah who has been with me from square one in figuring

out how to make this movie. And when you say tribute, the only way I challenge that word is that this is not a monument, this is not something rusty that's built to celebrate an old piece of work. What I want to celebrate is the energy of an artist in his twenties who was handling a comic book page for the first time and was throwing everything at it with the technology of his time which included things like Rubber Cement, India Ink and a horsehair brush. Now I got Stu. I got Bill Pope. I mean I'm throwing this technology at it but I believe that if I didn't Will Eisner would rise from the grave and throttle me and so it's not a tribute. It's a brand new thing just like what he did and pass or fail, you know, I wait for the judgment when I reach the great Jew in the sky. I don't know.

The interview ends, but I feel that Stu, who is very busy these days, has more to say on the magic of making THE SPIRIT. I schedule a phone interview with him to be conducted upon my return to Los Angeles. When I eventually call him, he's excited for the interview and unassuming.

PHONE INTERVIEW WITH STU MASCHWITZ:

HOW MUCH HAS THE TECHNOLOGY EVOLVED SINCE YOU STARTED?

Well, obviously a lot but I think the main evolution that I witnessed and was a big part of was that my business partners and I worked at Industrial Light and Magic at a time when visual effects was the exclusive domain of large companies with a large technology infrastructure and high powered work stations that were expensive and light years beyond anything that a person would ever think to own. And in the short time that I was at ILM that changed and it became feasible to do feature film quality visual effects on a personal computer and so in a sense what happened is that the technology ceased to be the most important aspect of the capability to do this kind of work and it opened up a door for creativity to be the deciding factor in how visual effects are created. I think the opportunity now exists for people with cool creative ideas to do – I don't want to say to do whatever they want, but people certainly have a lot more tools to express their ideas now. The technology restrictions are so far reduced that it's really up to the creative individual to exercise some kind of self-control because there's not going to be nearly as many restrictions on them from a technology standpoint.

We're firmly in the position that traditional artists have been in for years which is that when you sit down to do an oil painting, there's no-one necessarily telling you not to use every single color in your palette, you have to decide to exercise some restraint or not. But it's a decision that you make consciously as opposed to having it enforced on you by the tools.

HOW MUCH DID YOUR EXPERIENCE ON *SUPERMAN RETURNS*, *NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM*, *GRINDHOUSE*, *PIRATES* AND YOUR OTHER FILMS PREPARE YOU FOR A FILM LIKE *THE SPIRIT* IN WHICH VISUAL EFFECTS ARE SO PROMINENT?

Those are some really big movies that we're very fortunate to have had a chance to work on but there are a couple of others in there, some smaller ones that we worked on that probably prepared us more. We worked on a lot of films for Robert Rodriguez including some of the SPY KIDS movies and we worked on SKY CAPTAIN, THE WORLD OF TOMORROW so we're familiar with the idea of these movies where the majority of the photography is on a green screen stage and the backgrounds are created virtually. Probably the most prominent example of that is when we worked on SIN CITY so the comparisons between SIN CITY and THE SPIRIT are obvious. Although I think they're very different movies, on the surface the technology is the same. The technique is the same.

DO YOU AND FRANK MILLER HAVE THE SAME KIND OF APPROACH TO *THE SPIRIT* OR A DIFFERENT APPROACH AND IS THIS WHAT MAKES THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE RICHER?

I think it's a combination of those two things. I've always found Frank's artwork to be very cinematic and he's been influencing my film-making since I was in film school with his comic books so obviously it's a dream come true to get a chance to work with him. But as you heard him say the flipside of that is that Frank is new to all of this technology and very excited by it whereas I have been doing it for a long time and I am not as prone to be excited about the technological opportunities. I'm actually a very traditional film-maker at heart so in a way I think part of what Frank enjoys about our relationship is that I have a very level head about where and when we should pull out the big guns of technology. I am just as likely to suggest a solution that's kind of old-fashioned and homegrown as I am to suggest something that's very technically innovative. So I think our collaboration is very close but Frank is supplying the unbridled vision of this movie and I'm really just trying to keep up and channel that wherever I can. And in my own small way I'm also trying to defend the elegant simplicity that his comic book artwork has and try to be a representative for that on the cinema front.

HOW DOES THE TEAM WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE THIS UNIVERSE AND HOW DOES THE TEAM COME UP WITH THE NARRATIVE FOR THE FILMING? HOW INVOLVED ARE YOU IN EACH STEP OF THE PROCESS?

It begins with storyboards from Frank and, of course, that immediately puts us at an amazing advantage because Frank's storyboards are the most beautiful

illustrations you've ever seen in your life. I had a team working for several months before principal photography, taking those storyboards and turning them into what we call animatics which are animated versions of the storyboards that have sound and music and give a very good visual sense of what the action of the film is going to be and we did that for several key sequences of the movie. That became the fundamental guide to scheduling and shooting so what we had on the set was giant boards with the frames of the animatic printed out which are basically Frank's drawings and we could always pop open a laptop and see an animated version of the scene that we were shooting. The benefit of that is that you have a drawing to look at that shows you not only what the action of the scene is but what the background is likely to be. That helped to inform Bill Pope about what the lighting and what the logic of the lighting might be for any given scene and how he should frame his shots in preparation for backgrounds that had yet to be created.

SO HOW IMPORTANT ARE LIGHTING, SHADOWS, AND TEXTURE TO CREATE THE WORLD IN WHICH THE SPIRIT LIVES?

Those three things you mentioned are the most important things. The principal quality of Frank Miller's artwork that makes it stand out is his ability to communicate a great deal of factual and emotional information with a very minimalist image. I think what's really cool about this movie is that that dovetails perfectly with Bill Pope's capabilities as a cinematographer. Bill set the bar very high with his lighting of the actors and we are now trying to fill his shoes and achieve that same kind of visual simplicity with the backgrounds and obviously the two have to work together and look like a seamless piece. Looking at reference images with Bill and talking about our approach and talking about how we would pop the characters off of the backgrounds at times and allow their silhouette to be partially obscured by the background always with an eye towards Frank's artwork and towards creating an image that invited the viewer to lean forward and fill in some of the blanks themselves. We didn't want to make an image that explained itself immediately to you. We wanted to make an image that left a little bit to your imagination.

AS THE VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR, HOW DO YOU BALANCE THE CREATION OF VISUAL EFFECTS WORLD WHILE MAINTAINING A CONNECTION TO REALITY?

I think the way that I do that is through an avid interest in photography. I think that there is a real danger – there's this twofold danger in creating synthetic images. (1) Is that you can do whatever you want and so you might find yourself thinking that it's okay to do whatever you want. Like oh, I'd really like to have a highlight over here or I'd really like to have a shadow over here so maybe I'll just

do that. I'm fond of quoting that the death of art is the absence of limitations. What I think is really great about grabbing a camera and going out to try to take some photographs is that you don't have control over everything and so you're in a way looking to capture a unique perspective on something that is almost mundane, something that a hundred people might walk by. As a photographer your job is to find a unique perspective on it and you do that not through exercising a great deal of control over what's in front of the lens. You do it through where you put the lens and how you focus it. In a sense, what I find myself trying to do in computer graphics is create an environment in which I can find and discover surprising and interesting images as opposed to starting from what I might desire and then bending everything to my will. I like to create an environment where I can explore and be surprised by what I find. And (2), the flipside of that is what that requires is a certain amount of technology to allow pixels to behave in the way that light in the real world does. If you lay out for yourself a groundwork of technology that accurately simulates what happens in the real world, then it provides a really rewarding environment in which to be creative. If you don't have a technology basis and if you're basically inventing everything and creating everything, relying on your brain to come up with every idea, every color, every pixel in the frame then you're going to forget some stuff and you rob yourself of the ability to be pleasantly surprised by something that happens. Happy accidents and little weird, unexpected, delightful things happen all the time on a movie set and they don't happen enough in computer graphics so I try to create an environment where they can happen.

AND WHAT PERCENTAGE OF THE FILM WOULD YOU SAY USES VISUAL EFFECTS?

I think it's safe to say that 100% of it uses visual effects even though there might be a small handful of shots where it's not obvious how the visual effects are used. For instance, there are some scenes that were shot on a traditional set where maybe only the view out the window is computer generated. Or maybe a decision to build a set for one scene versus using a virtual set. That is a visual effects decision. The other signature thing about this movie is going to be the look. There's a very strong visual motif running throughout the film. This kind of high contrast Frank Miller look that is as much a visual effects concern on a simple shot as it is on a complex shot. I think the rough count at this point is 1,850 vfx shots. Of those, there's probably a couple hundred that don't have any obvious visual effects in them but every single one of them is being touched here in the color correction suite. Every single one of them is potentially a visual effects shot if we find some way to enhance it or improve on it so I feel very safe in saying that visual effects are involved in 100% of this movie in the same way that cinematography is

involved in 100% of this movie.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH FRANK MILLER?

When you have a director who is confident in their vision and knows exactly what they want, the surprising thing that happens is that you get more creative opportunities. I think it is the small director who micromanages his team. I think it is the visionary director who makes huge allowances for other people to contribute creatively because he knows that because he has supreme confidence in his ability to manage that process and include only the good ideas that magnify his own vision. So when you have a director like Frank not only are you invited to but you're actually pushed to contribute creatively and as a result you wind up giving him the best stuff you got.