

Cast Away

- behind the scenes with cinematographer

Don Burgess

Cast Away probes the depths of the soul of a human being who is forced to rely solely on himself for survival. The film opens in Moscow where Chuck Noland (played by Tom Hanks), a plump trouble-shooter for Federal Express is tracking down missing packages. The location is established with shots on Red Square with St. Basil's Cathedral and other familiar landmarks providing authentic background.

A transition scene takes Noland to Memphis, Tennessee for a Christmas dinner with his fiancée Kelly (Helen Hunt) and her family. That scene is interrupted when Noland is yanked into a crisis in Malaysia. He rushes to an airport and catches a ride on a cargo plane. There is a storm en route and the plane crashes into the ocean. It's a frightening scene but Noland manages to grab a raft, which deposits him on a deserted Fijian island. He spends four years alone on the island.

How does he survive? How does the experience alter his character? The story revolves around those questions. The film, produced by 20th Century Fox, is based on an original story scripted by William Broyles, Jr. Cinematographer Don Burgess has previously collaborated with director Robert Zemeckis on **Forrest Gump** and **Contact**. During preparation, Burgess and Zemeckis



Tom Hanks as Chuck Noland in *Cast Away*

scouted locations from Moscow to Monuriki, an uninhabited Fijian island. The decision to frame **Cast Away** in the Academy standard aperture (1.85:1 aspect ratio) was partly motivated by the vertical shape of the island.

"The coloring is lush green. There's a beach with palm trees and a wonderful steep mountain face. At first look it seems like paradise but

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▲ Cinematographer Don Burgess, ASC (left) and Director Robert Zemeckis discuss a shot in Moscow for *Cast Away*.



in reality the island is his jail," Burgess explains. "It's surrounded by reefs and waves with no easy way off."

After shooting scenes in Moscow, Memphis, Los Angeles and on Monuriki, director Robert Zemeckis scheduled a year-long break to give Hanks time to grow a beard and lose the 50 pounds he gained to play the over-stuffed character earlier in the film. During the hiatus, Zemeckis and Burgess collaborated on producing **What Lies Beneath**.

They returned to the island to shoot the scenes leading up to his rescue and reunion with Noland's fiancée Kelly. The scenery provided by nature looks idyllic but don't let that fool you. Burgess was shooting at a location with no interiors except for a small cave and no light except for the sun, moon and fires. There are no crowd scenes, not even a two-shot, and no dialogue except for conversations Noland has with a volleyball that washes up on the shore.

"There probably aren't a lot of actors who could carry it off," says Burgess. "The burden was on Tom to keep the audience involved and caring whether Noland lives or dies. It was also a challenge for Bob (Zemeckis), to keep it interesting."

Burgess designed two different shooting styles and looks. Earlier in the film, Zemeckis wanted the camera frenetically tracking with Noland who is always in perpetual motion. "I think there was one crane shot in Moscow," Burgess recalls. "Everything else was shot with a Panaflex Platinum camera on a Steadicam. We wanted that energy."

Burgess composed scenes early in the film with Primo wide-angle 17 to 27mm lenses. The wide-angle shots allowed him to put the characters into the environments. He carried that look into the Christmas scene in Memphis and into the chaotic airplane crash sequence. In contrast, Zemeckis wanted camera movement on the island to be as simple as possible.

"We usually had the camera on sticks (a tripod), and shots were almost locked off," Burgess says. "There are only a few dolly shots on the beach."

Burgess also notes that Hanks had a lot of input about the character he was portraying and the way he changed after being stranded on the island. The cinematographer had to stay in tune with the actor and help him reveal what was beneath the surface.

Noland built a camp on the island and found a cave that provided shelter during tropical storms. Those scenes were filmed in a cramped, dark space in flickering warm firelight mixed with dim daylight sometimes coming through the entrance. Burgess says there were times when he underexposed the Kodak Vision 500T film three to four stops. The texture allows the audience to share Noland's experience.

Burgess had two crews working at the same time. While he was shooting one sequence, the second crew was setting up the next one, so there were no delays.

"We used a GPS (global positioning system) to calculate the direction and angle of sunlight in conjunction with tide charts," Burgess says. "We usually had only one hour of shooting before the tide and angle of sunlight changed."

Some scenes were filmed on sets, including the house where the Christmas dinner is held, the plane interior, and the underwater sequence when the plane sinks into the ocean. The raft scenes were filmed in a tank of the lot at Sony

Studios in Los Angeles, and the inside of the cave was also on a stage.

Burgess used the *Kodak PreView* system, rented from Panavision, while he was shooting at the Moscow and Memphis locations. The PreView system includes a digital still camera, laptop computer and software that allowed him to simulate shooting with different emulsions, focal lengths, filtration and diffusion. The prints were annotated with data including film type, exposure, lens and filter information. It took three to four minutes for an assistant to make each print using a portable laser printer.

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"Sometimes I'd make some small adjustments in how I planned to light," says Burgess. "But mainly I used this system for continuity if we were shooting more footage for a scene that was originally filmed days, weeks and sometimes months earlier."

The Christmas sequence was covered with two Panaflex Platinum cameras on Steadicams. They were constantly moving, capturing the kinetic flow of energy.

Zemeckis wanted a warm and cozy look in the house, which contrasted with the business side of Noland's life. Burgess and art director Jim Teagarden discussed every color in the house and the cinematographer also conferred with

the set decorator about the choice of fabrics and furniture.

"The luminance levels of colors record differently on film than they look to the human eye," Burgess says. "Even a subtle difference in the shade of a wall behind a character can affect skin tones. We also planned where to place lamps, windows and furniture. For example, we discussed putting a glass door on a cabinet so it reflected images when we shot from a particular direction and angle."

Lighting was tricky because Burgess was shooting with two constantly moving Steadicams. Soft light was motivated by a chandelier. He primarily kept the angle low and used handheld lights traveling with the cameras for subtle fill light on close-ups.

The airplane set was on a gimbal. The movements it generated, coupled with a shaky cam, helped create the illusion that the plane was violently vibrating during the terrifying crash sequence. The crash was filmed with a handheld camera from Noland's point of view, which allows the audience to experience the terror through his eyes. There was a green screen on the cockpit window that was later replaced with images of an angry ocean seen from the point of view of a pilot in the cockpit.

"He can see the plane hit the ocean," Burgess says. "The fuselage splits and water rushes in, pulling him out of the plane. We picked the scene up in the tank, where we were shooting with underwater cameras. We were 20 feet underwater. He grabs and inflates a life raft that sucks him back up to the surface. It was like a missile taking off. We did some under- and over-cranking during this sequence because

▼ Cinematographer Don Burgess, ASC shoots Chuck Noland (Tom Hanks) in a Fed Ex warehouse for *Cast Away*.



PHOTO: FRANCOIS DUHAMEL

everything seemed to be happening quickly during the crash, and being underwater slows everything down.”

It's night-time when he gets to the surface and the only source of illumination is the occasional strike of lightning. Burgess used four scissor arcs to create the illusion of lightning penetrating the blackness of night. He augmented that source with a Lightning Strikes unit to give some additional “pop” to some shots. “There are times when the screen is totally black, then lightning flashes, you briefly see him on the raft and feel the violent motion of the waves,” says Burgess.

The camera was protected by a water bag. It was on a crane with a remote head on a Lenny arm. The physical effects crew was using wind machines to create 100 mph winds and water cannons pounded the raft and Hanks.

“The joke on the set was that we were inventing ways to torture him,” Burgess says. “Sometimes we had second and third cameras in water-proofed housings on the surface, so we had several visual perspectives for the editor.”

Noland sees the island for the first time in the glare of a lightning strike. The raft bumps something. He reaches out and grabs a piece of rock. He awakens on the beach on a brilliant sunlit day.

Burgess shot day for night scenes, creating a high contrast look. “There was no other light source and we didn't want a movie night back-lit by the moon,” he explains. “After he learned how to build fires, we used that as a source of illumination, so it feels true. I used a Panaflex XL camera on the island. It's hardy and that was important because of the wind, rain and salt. We had a technician from Panavision who cleaned the cameras and lenses every night to keep the salt from corroding them. We kept the film cool and dry using ice chests and fans.”

During earlier scenes, Burgess used very light one-eighth to one-quarter Pro-Mist® filters on camera lenses to soften contrast. He didn't use them on the island.

Burgess shot the first daylight exterior scenes on the island with Eastman EXR 50D film and Kodak Vision 250D film. When they went back to the island, he switched to the Eastman EXR 100T film because it recorded a look that was a little crisper and harsher than the look for the early days on the island.

Ken Ralston of Sony Images Works worked with Burgess on effects elements where CG and other backgrounds were composited with live-action shots. Burgess used Kodak SFX200T film to photograph green



PHOTO: ZADE ROSENTHAL

▲ On location in the Fiji Islands filming *Cast Away*.

and blue screen foreground elements because it recorded ultra-sharp images and provided clean separations when the film was converted to digital images. All the camera film recorded on the island was shipped 25 miles daily by boat to another island with commercial air service to a lab in New Zealand that processed the negative and provided dailies.

“Everything slows down when he's on the island,” Burgess says, “including the way he moves. The camera is practically immobile. There are only a few dolly shots

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later in the picture and very little panning and tilting. His life is reduced to the bare essentials. You begin to ask yourself why he bothers to stay alive. It's a monotone existence. You can almost feel the life being sucked out of him.”

The only dialogue is the occasional conversations that Noland has with the volleyball that he names Wilson. You can almost read Noland's mind as he decides to build a raft and attempt to get off the island.

“I give a lot of credit to Tom Hanks and Bob Zemeckis,” Burgess says. “They made it interesting. They had to keep the audience informed and entertained and it has to be

believable. The audience must empathize with the character.”

Noland eventually builds a raft and manages to get off the island and steer it through the reef. That scene was filmed from Noland's perspective with the camera mounted on a small jet boat. There is also some handheld coverage with cameras in the jet boats as he paddles through the whitewater surf. After the raft gets through the reef and out to sea, Burgess shot the raft from a barge with the camera on a crane with a remote head to stabilize the pitch and yaw. The one exception is a night storm scene that was filmed in the tank at Sony Studios.

“At dinner each night, we planned the next days shots,” he says. “When we were shooting close to the beach, we could build some scaffolding and dolly along the tracks. That allowed us to get up on a crane to change perspectives. There was always a weather contingency plan for shots we could make in bad weather.”

Throughout the film, Zemeckis intercuts scenes of Noland looking at the one picture he has of Kelly. There is a big welcoming party when he is rescued and reunited with Kelly. That raises the final question. Has he changed?

“I think the audience will be surprised by how the story develops and how involved they become with Chuck Noland, his survival and his life,” Burgess concludes. “It's a different type of picture. There's no stylized photography that's going to grab people's attention but it's a compelling story and I enjoyed the experience.”