

Cinematographer Floats a New Look for ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ Sequel

Valentina I. Valentini



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In a year when tentpole sequels seem more frequent than ever, one of the biggest challenges franchises face is how to keep the repeats from becoming, well, repetitious.

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No doubt Disney execs faced this issue when deciding to greenlight yet another “Pirates of the Caribbean” movie. The films have spanned 14 years and four directors. “Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales” bows May 26, six years after the previous edition, with Johnny Depp reprising the role of Captain Jack Sparrow.

“The goal of this film was to breathe a bit of fresh air into the franchise,” says cinematographer Paul Cameron, who has brought his craft to notable crime dramas and heist films such as “Collateral” and “Gone in 60 Seconds,” and more recently shot the pilot of HBO’s [“Westworld.”](#)

Cameron built on the work of his predecessors. “Dariusz Wolski [who shot the first four ‘Pirates’ films] and Gore Verbinski [who directed the first three] have done an amazing job, but like any franchise film, ‘Pirates’ needed to be revitalized and reinvented.”

To give the film a new sheen, Disney also hired directors Joachim Ronning and Espen Sandberg — Norwegian co-directors since their early days of short filmmaking, who also gained experience in oceanic adventure tales with

about pirates at sea in a fantastical world. While there are similarities between the work of Cameron and Wolski, Cameron decided to pick a warmer color palette overall. He also went for more dynamic points of view, moving cameras on cranes and suspending them from cables to capture a different perspective on the sweeping, dramatic looks of previous films.

Cameron was thrilled and nervous going into the shoot. “It was very daunting to me,” he admits. “When I signed on to the movie, I was excited about shooting on the open sea. As much of a challenge as that would be, it would encompass the energy of the ocean and the way the light bounces off the water at different times of day.”

But circumstances changed. The ocean scenes were originally to be filmed off the coast of Puerto Rico, but for reasons of timing and budget the entire project ended up moving to the Gold Coast of Australia, where shooting took place in a tank.

Cameron had to change his methodology, considering ways to match the light and the energy of a real ocean. He decided to take advantage of the new conditions. One way was by controlling light: His team built a massive blue-screen arena consisting of 600-linear-foot semicircles; shipping containers stacked five high; and above those, 26-foot air walls that could inflate and deflate. In the morning, he lowered the walls to let in more light; at midday, he put them back up to get more blue-screen coverage; and in the afternoon he lowered them on the other side for additional natural light.

“Maybe I was disappointed [when we changed setup plans],” he says, “but I quickly learned to enjoy the new challenges. When I saw those finished shots — especially the wide shots of the water and all the incorporated visual effects — it was fascinating.”

Cameron is also quick to give credit to visual effects supervisor Gary Brozenich, who helped make it all look seamless.

In addition to cranes, cables and bluescreens, Cameron used drones to achieve scope. “The directors loved the big, sweeping aerial shots from previous ‘Pirates’ films,” says the DP, “but being in the tank we had some major limitations to capturing [similar points of view]. We’d never be able to get a helicopter in there, so it was the perfect opportunity to use a drone.”

Cameron partnered with XM2 Aerial in Melbourne and flew an Arri Alexa Mini, which, despite its name, is bigger than most drone-operated cameras. Australia has more lenient rules than the U.S. when it comes to flying larger unmanned aerial vehicles, so Cameron and XM2 developed a drone able carry a bigger payload.

On the second day of shooting, they maneuvered the drone around the ship, sweeping over the deck. “I think everybody was in awe at its capability,” Cameron says. “[Producer] Jerry Bruckheimer and the studio responded very well to the footage. After day three, the drone was our new best friend.”