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OUT AND ABOUT

Fallbrook Film Festival Q&A sessions enlightening!

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Nathalie Taylor
Features Editor

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What do Hollywood stuntman Dick Ziker and set decorator John M. Dwyer have in common? They have both won Emmy Awards; they both worked on the films "Patriot Games," "Terminator 2," "Star Trek V" and "Jaws;" and they were both guests at the 2009 Fallbrook Film Festival's round of Q&A sessions held at the Art Campus of Fallbrook. Linda Mandrayar of Bonsall also hosted a Q&A session, sharing her experiences as a filmmaker in India.

As a stuntman, Ziker has broken his back twice but still comes back for more. The original "multitasker," a stuntman has to drive a car crazily, fall off a motorcycle or jump off a cliff. Ziker has done all three, and more, in his enduring career.

Ziker had the audience gasping at times when he screened a series of film clips from his flashy and splashy career. Also serving as stunt coordinator on many of the films, Ziker works hard to find ways to create a "wow" factor. With explosions, freefalls and wild driving it is amazing that he has survived and is still smiling! Beginning with the television show "Rat Patrol" then working as the action guru on more than forty years worth of shows and films. He draws the viewer into the action, making them feel every bump and swerve.

As stunt coordinator in the movie "Smokey and the Bandit II" Ziker used an impressive cast of 200 stuntmen. Police cars and semi-trucks were barreling toward each other in a desolate landscape, moves which Ziker said take a great deal of calculating for speed and other factors.

CGI, or computer-generated imagery, is fast putting stuntmen out of business, Ziker noted. However, in my opinion, films like "Clear and Present Danger" with wild crash scenes will never look the same, or be nearly as exciting, in CGI. Ziker said he was privileged to work with Harrison Ford on this film as well as on "Patriot Games" and called Ford "an excellent stuntman."

Ziker said he is the "luckiest person in the world" because he loves his career. He just keeps on going - with a flash and a splash and a crash!

John M. Dwyer's job as a set decorator is to make the production sites believable. He has set decorating in his blood, as his father was a "prop master," working with film pioneer and director D.W. Griffith.

Dwyer's Oscar nomination and Emmy Award give testimony to the fact that he does his job well. His first feature film was "Jaws," and it was all uphill from there.

At times film directors will request certain props; some requests are easy to fulfill and some are a bit more difficult. When Dwyer worked with Clint Eastwood on the film "The Eiger Sanction," Eastwood required that the artwork used on the set be original. Dwyer consented and had original Picassos carted to the set in an armored car.

Dwyer worked on 420 episodes of television shows, with much of his work concentrated on "Star Trek." He worked on the original series and then "The Next Generation." He also worked on sets for the "Star Trek" movies: IV, V, VI, VII and "Insurrection." The 1998 film "Insurrection" was his favorite work, requiring an entire city to be built on the shore of a lake.

The sixties comedy television show "McHale's Navy" was Dwyer's first job as a set decorator. He worked on the show during its last season, when the crew of the PT 73 was based in Italy. Peeling paint, bullet-hole-ridden walls and smoking ruins were all part of the sets. Dwyer said that because the show was filmed in black and white the set decorating was a "different concept." He explained that it was necessary to pay more attention to the contrast of various textures against one another. "It is more fun," he said. "Color work is more general."

As recently as 2002, Dwyer has labored to create ambiances within fabricated worlds. "Star Trek: Nemesis" was his latest palate and the sky was the limit there!

Bonsall filmmaker Linda Mandrayar shared that fifteen years ago she "packed up" her home, including two young children and as many Great Danes, then headed to India to join her husband Dharan, who was in the midst of filming "Ele, My Friend." Since the film featured elephants, the Mandrayars lived in wilderness huts for about a year near both wild and tame herds.

During filming, a tense moment occurred when a wild bull elephant charged the set and the crew had to quickly lead the trained elephants and others to safety.

Years later the family returned to India to make another film, "White Rainbow." Set in the city of Vrindavan, where thousands of shunned widows go to live out their lives, the film highlights the struggles of these women in modern-day India. Mandrayar said that the film, released in 2005, "is slowly making a difference."

To aspiring filmmakers, Mandrayar commented, "Make something you can be proud of - something that will take on a life of its own."



Nathalie Taylor photo.
"Star Trek" set decorator John M. Dwyer explains a device held by Captain Kirk (William Shatner).



Nathalie Taylor photo.
Hollywood stuntman Dick Ziker comments on his exciting career.



Nathalie Taylor photo.
Filmmaker Linda Mandrayar discusses "White Rainbow," which was filmed in India.

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