

cinefex

number 71
\$8.50
Canada - \$11.50



JOHN CHAMBERS MAESTRO OF MAKEUP

article by Scott Essman

It has been more than a decade since John Chambers shut down his Burbank lab in favor of more sedentary pursuits, but his name still evokes admiration and respect among current luminaries in the field of special makeup effects. Widely recognized as one of the industry's earliest trailblazers, Chambers is credited with pioneering new makeup techniques and generally raising standards of technical mastery during his prolific thirty-year career as a makeup artist in television and film.

Chambers' Hollywood calling had its origins in the training he received as a dental technician while serving a three-year stint in the army during World War II. "I learned how to pull teeth and sculpt partial bridges," Chambers recalled. "After the war, I continued in the medical field, working for seven years at the Hines Veterans Hospital in Maywood, Illinois, a rehabilitation center for Korean War veterans." Called upon to fashion prosthetic limbs and body parts for injured patients at the center, Chambers was also given the job of casting body organs for anatomical research and restoration. "They'd send a fresh heart to me in a bucket of ice and want me to make a model of it. It was a great training ground — a key part of my education — but I knew that it wasn't going to be a lifelong vocation."

Instead, Chambers looked to the fledgling television industry as a more interesting outlet for his specialized skills. "I wrote a letter to NBC in Los Angeles, describing my techniques and the materials I used for sculpting," Chambers related. "I was fortunate in that a top man there wanted to learn lab work and offered me a job." Joining NBC in 1953, Chambers rose quickly through the television ranks, introducing innovations along the way. One such innovation — acquired from his days at Hines — was the use of dental stone as a casting

medium. "In the fifties, a hundred pounds of plaster cost two dollars, and a hundred pounds of dental stone cost sixty. So everyone typically used plaster. But I introduced this very high-caliber, fast-setting material, which worked better." Initially assigned straight makeup work at the studio, Chambers soon found himself experimenting with Max Factor test makeup as NBC went from regional to national, and from black-and-white to color. Several years would pass, however, before the artist was able to overcome the closed-shop mentality of the makeup industry and concentrate on prosthetic work — his true area of interest and expertise. "The union made it difficult, but I was adamant. I knew NBC wanted me to do more advanced work, so I constantly fought with the establishment."

Eventually gaining access to the prosthetics lab, Chambers began putting his thorough medical knowledge of materials and techniques to good use. In one of his first assignments, he created character makeups for Pruneface, Flattop and others in an early television version of *Dick Tracy*. "John brought medical technology to television," stated makeup and creature artist Tom Burman. "He was a facial restoration technician as well as dental technician, so he knew how to make plastic laminate prosthetic eyes and the most gorgeous medical appliances. He brought technical skill to a field where most were artists or had learned their craft from plaster-shop people."

After six years at NBC, Chambers moved on to Universal Studios, working in the makeup lab under department head Bud Westmore. In 1963, he created ten striking disguises for Kirk Douglas as well as makeups for Burt Lancaster and Frank Sinatra in *The List of Adrian Messenger* — his first widely recognized makeup success in film. A year later, he developed the key makeups for the monster comedy series, *The Munsters*. Assisting him on many of the projects was a young Michael Westmore, who, having come to Universal to apprentice for his uncle Bud, soon found himself under Cham-



At the pinnacle of a thirty-year career in film and television, veteran makeup artist John Chambers accepts, from presenter Walter Matthau and friend, an Academy Award for outstanding achievement in makeup for his work on Planet of the Apes.



After several years in television, John Chambers joined the Universal Studios makeup department where, early on, he distinguished himself as the principal creator of the prosthetic makeup devised to disguise the all-star cast of *The List of Adrian Messenger*. Posing with some of the work produced for the film are department head Bud Westmore, and associates Michael Westmore, Chris Mueller Jr. and Chambers.

shows as *I Spy*, for which Chambers created a memorable Oriental appliance makeup for star Robert Culp; *Mission: Impossible*, which entailed a series of mask disguises for Martin Landau; and *The Outer Limits*, whose rapid production pace had the artist cranking out a monster every week. Television's minimal budget and scheduling constraints would ultimately foster Chambers' legendary knack for improvising makeshift characters on short notice. For a *Night Gallery* episode entitled *Pickman's Model*, calling for a monster who emerges from the Boston sewers, he fashioned a creature that, despite its low-budget origins, would become a cult classic and one of Chambers' personal favorites.

In 1966, Chambers collaborated with mask and prop maker Don Post Sr. on a twelve-foot-tall King Kong project for a wax museum in Ontario, Canada. "John knew my father from the fifties and early sixties," remarked Don Post Jr., owner of Don Post Studios, "when he would periodically help my dad make molds and finish sculptures if he was in a bind. The King Kong project also included artists Ellis Burman Sr. and Marcel Delgado, who sculpted the original creations for the 1933 version of *King Kong*. So it was quite an exciting time."

Later that same year, another assignment—arriving by way of Tom Burman, then a makeup apprentice at Twentieth Century Fox—would prove to be the definitive project of Chambers' career. "There was a big show coming," recalled Burman, "and department head Ben Nye was going to retire if they went ahead with it. Fox had done some extensive tests that didn't work, and I had heard that the producers wanted the man who had done *The List of Adrian Messenger*. So I spoke up, and said, 'The person who really innovated that work is John Chambers.' John picked up the screenplay; and the following Monday he came in, called me over and said, 'Tommy, you're with me on this—and I'm going to win an Academy Award.'"

In January 1967—with makeup artist and close friend Dan Striepeke—Chambers began work on
(continued on page 165)

bers' tutelage. "There were no other lab technicians on the west coast with the knowledge that John had in prosthetic materials," acknowledged Westmore, now makeup supervisor for the *Star Trek* film and television franchise. "He made all of his dentures himself and taught me to do so. Because of John's teaching, I still make all my own dentures for the Ferengi and Klingons on *Star Trek*."

By the mid-sixties, after six years at Universal, Chambers' mastery of prosthetics and his superb craftsmanship had gained the attention of Hollywood. Gambling on his reputation, he launched a freelance business out of his Burbank home in a converted garage equipped as a full-service makeup lab. From there, John Chambers welcomed a steady stream of film and television producers from nearby studios, who called upon him to create everything from eye bags to noses to ears for a variety of projects. "It was an incredibly meticulous, well-organized operation," recalled sculptor Michael McCracken, who would later join Chambers in his garage setup during the seventies. "John fixed it up with linoleum flooring, grinding wheels and an oven. He gave off a strong feeling of confidence, so producers were very comfortable with him."

In 1965, a small side job that came to the shop was one that would eventually engender global recognition. "It was a petty thing," Chambers said, referring to the now universally recognized Spock ears he created for the Vulcan character in the original *Star Trek* television series. "Gene Roddenberry had approached me about doing the entire show, but I didn't take it because of a money dispute with Paramount. I did, however, cast Leonard Nimoy's ears and make all of the molds, sculptures and ear appliances for the first year of the series." Fourteen years later, those molds would serve as a guide for makeup artist Rick Stratton, assigned to the first *Star Trek* feature film. "We couldn't figure out how to do the three piece ear mold," Stratton recollected. "John had cast the ear in stone and sculpted the Vulcan ear tip on the cast. The tricky part was putting a seam on the backside of the ear and sliding in a third piece of the mold to retain the detail on the back. It was kind of tight due to lack of space behind the ear. Of course, once we saw how John did the process, it seemed easy."

The sixties would prove a profitable time for Chambers' fledgling venture. Among the television projects that came to the shop were such popular

JOHN CHAMBERS

(continued from page 160)

Planet of the Apes. Tasked with designing, creating and applying scores of convincing ape makeups for a cast of hundreds, Chambers would oversee a huge crew, delegating authority in the supportive manner that was to become his trademark. "I got the chance to dabble in everything," said Burman, who served as an apprentice on the picture. "I was awed to be working amongst all these journeymen, especially since I knew we were doing something memorable that had never been done before." One of Burman's first assignments was to sculpt the initial ape concepts. "The original sculptures were much more authentically apelike. Due to my lack of sculpting skills at the time, my later sculptures looked a little more humanoid. The producers saw them and eventually went in that direction." Under Chambers' guidance, Burman would learn many new methodologies — now standard practice in the makeup effects field. "I had to throw away everything I knew before *Apes*, because it was sloppy, plaster-making, prop-shop technique, and relearn, from the ground up, about foam latex, plastics and mold-making. John was fastidious, and these were practices that makeup artists, myself included, had no knowledge of then."

Anticipating the difficulties in transforming people into apes, Chambers was determined to use actors whose facial features would best compliment the simian makeups. "We sought actors with brown eyes and flat noses that would fit into the muzzle of the ape appliances," Chambers related. "Some of them were picked at random and their noses were too large. We found that we needed physical actors, and they were usually among ethnic groups." Concerned about the repercussions of casting apes along ethnic lines, the studio resisted Chambers' approach. "In the very first tests," Burman noted, "we had Filipinos for the chimpanzee characters, Chinese people for the orangutans and black men for the gorillas. But Fox was not going for that — it was the late sixties, and there was considerable

Pruneface and other Dick Tracy characters were created by Chambers for an unfilmed television pilot. / Chambers touches up an Alfred E. Neuman makeup worn by Fred Astaire during a dance number on a television variety show.

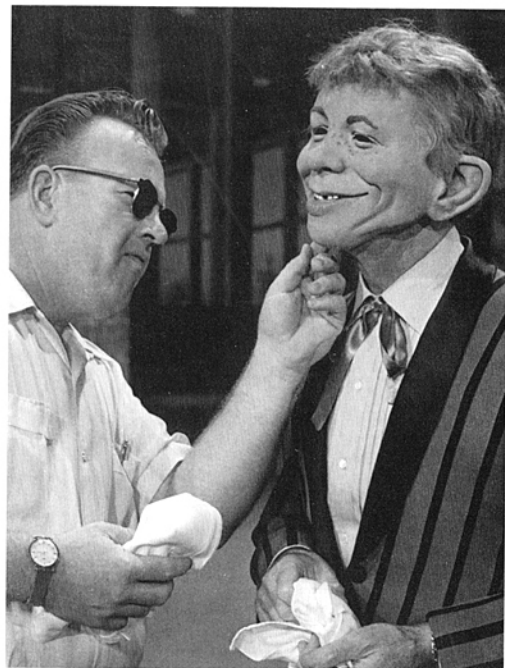
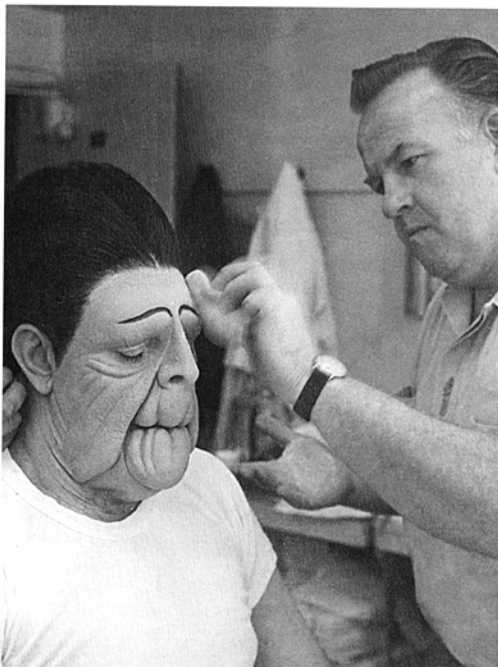
racial unrest." Characteristically uncompromising, Chambers eventually convinced the studio to put his original choices back into the cast.

The artist's resolve would also extend to casting decisions involving principal characters. Originally tested for the part of the orangutan leader, Dr. Zaius, Edward G. Robinson had his own makeup artist redesign the Zaius facial appliance with an unobstructed mouth to accommodate a breathing problem. Upon seeing the new makeup, Chambers objected vehemently. "I told the producers he had to wear the appliances we made so that he would fit in with the rest of the characters." Though the artist and actor discussed possible compromise solutions, the issue could not be resolved, and the role was eventually recast. "I didn't want it to come to that, but it couldn't be helped. Word got back to me that Robinson later remarked that in his whole life, he had never met anyone who was as set in what he wanted to do as I was."

Using an unprecedented approach to the makeup designs, Chambers fashioned facial prosthetics for the assorted characters using T-shaped, three-piece makeups — brow piece, upper lip and lower lip for chimps and orangutans, and two-piece appliances for the gorillas. The prosthetics, made out

of an experimental foam rubber that allowed the actor's skin to breathe, would prove extraordinarily effective. "As I was testing the *Apes* appliances on the actors," recalled Howard Smit, a veteran of forty-five years as a makeup artist, whose first film assignment, in 1939, was making up the Munchkins for *The Wizard of Oz*. "I would chat with them and, after a time, forget that I was talking to a person. The appliances were that convincing. John Chambers was as brilliant an artist as I have ever worked with when it came to prosthetics."

Forced to meet the large-scale demands of the show, Chambers also pioneered new production techniques. One of the most innovative would entail prepainting the ape appliances. "That had never been done before," Chambers remarked, "and I was having trouble finding people capable of working within my system. Everyone I met with thought himself a fabulous artist; unfortunately, I couldn't afford to have Da Vinci and Michelangelo. I needed people who could do makeups that were uniform-looking." Seeking a flexible paint for the masks, he utilized acorn glue — a neoprene-based contact cement that he mixed with universal colors. Solvent was added to the glue to thin it down so that it could be airbrushed on.



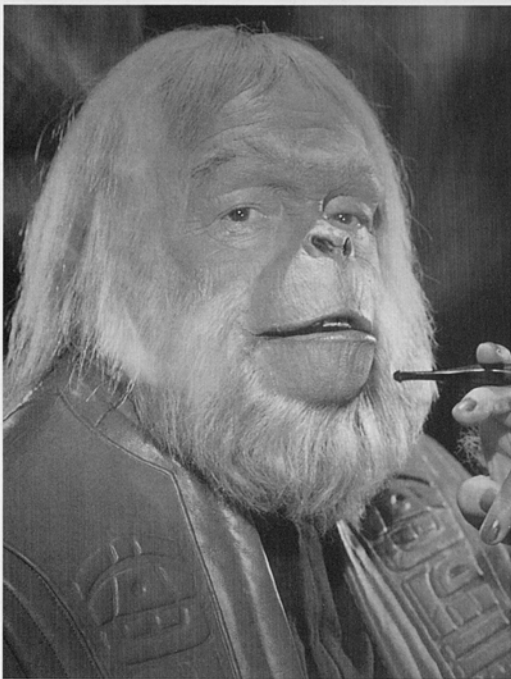


In the biggest assignment of his career, Chambers created dozens of simian characters for Planet of the Apes. Kim Hunter and Roddy McDowall, as chimpanzee scientists, try to communicate with Charlton Heston. / Maurice Evans as the ruling orangutan, Dr. Zaius. / James Gregory as a gorilla warrior in Beneath the Planet of the Apes, the first of four sequels to the original.

Equally innovative was the assembly-line approach Chambers employed in manufacturing the dozens of slip-rubber shell background masks that would be used in wide shots. "When we airbrushed with spray guns to paint the masks, we discovered that one artist could do the work of twenty. For appliances, after the foam rubber pieces came out of the mold, we put them on a vacuum-form support, then lined them up and airbrushed them one by one. At that point, they were ready to be fitted on to the actors' faces using a special spirit gum to attach them."

To help with the arduous task of making up the enormous cast of principals and extras during completion of principal photography, Chambers rounded up additional assistants and schooled them in prosthetic application. "We brought in people who were practically off the street," stated Burman, "and trained them for two weeks, ten to twelve hours a day." With as many as sixty makeup artists and forty hairdressers working on the set every day to accommodate a cast that included 160 extras with background masks, Chambers' systematized approach would prove a godsend. "Everything was laid out like paint-by-numbers — an appliance, a backup appliance, a vacuum form that the appliance would sit on, a base coat, a high-light and a shadow. We also had a hackle to lay hairpieces in, with the hair and wool all mixed and ready to go." At the end of each day's shoot, the prosthetics would be removed using an alcohol acetone solution that cut the glue and washed out the rubber without damaging it. "Out of practical necessity, the background masks were used over and over again. Usually they were assigned to a particular person; so by the end of the shoot they were pretty raunchy. Since we couldn't possibly keep up with all the appliances — when, on a daily basis, we were dealing with thirty-five to thirty-eight principal makeups — we would clean them in disinfectant, wash them in the acetone and alcohol, dry them, paint them, and then apply them on background principals or closeup background extras."

(continued on page 171)



JOHN CHAMBERS

(continued from page 166)

Released in 1968, *Planet of the Apes* was an unqualified success, prompting the studio to produce, in ensuing years, no less than four sequels and a television series, all of which kept the original makeup designs intact. "Werner Keppler supervised the makeups in all four of the film sequels," remarked Chambers, "but I was there for three of them, assembling the molds and getting appliances ready." For his pivotal work on the original, Chambers did not go unrecognized. At the Academy Awards ceremony that year, *Planet of the Apes* garnered a special Oscar for makeup effects, sharing the distinction with only one previous film, *7 Faces of Dr. Lao*. "They even had a chimp bring the Oscar out to me."

In 1973, sculptor Michael McCracken and Dan Striepeke began collaborating with Chambers on a bizarre film called *Embryo*, starring Rock Hudson and Barbara Carrera. The picture required dozens of embryonic stages of humans and animals, plus several old-age makeups for Carrera. McCracken would continue his association with the garage shop during the next eight years through a variety of projects, including a 1976 adaptation of H.G. Wells' classic story, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.

To explore the original concepts for that film, Chambers had McCracken complete sketches and paintings; and on the basis of those ideas, producers changed the story to incorporate about ten new characters, representing Moreau's misguided experiments in combining humans with animals. Included among these 'humanimals' were a bullman, boarman and lionman. Since the project was too big for his garage studio, Chambers began working at the reopened Twentieth Century Fox makeup lab, in collaboration with Striepeke. Also joining the team was Tom Burman, who fashioned sculptures, molds and hair for the humanimal mutants. The makeup approach would differ significantly from the relatively simple hair appliances used on the man-beast mutants featured in the 1933 version of the story, *Island of Lost Souls*. Like *Planet of the Apes*, *Moreau* proved far more complex,

Among the many 'humanimals' created for *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, one of Chambers' last major projects, were a boarman and a lionman.

with many makeups required.

During the seven-week location shoot in St. Croix, each humanimal actor required four hours of makeup application daily. "John was extremely conscientious about everything on the picture," recalled McCracken. "Every day, he would arrive to make up a character at 4:30 a.m. It was as well coordinated an effort as any I have worked on — every aspect of it perfectly timed and budgeted. With John, there was never chaos." Although the makeups were innovative, the movie — which had held great promise — did not live up to the artist's expectations. "Near the end of the picture, I was disgusted with it," Chambers admitted. "I told Michael York that I thought it would be a big flop." His prediction would prove accurate when the movie — released in the summer of 1977 — bombed at the boxoffice.

In 1981, Chambers recruited makeup artists Rick Stratton and Steve Neill to help him with an assignment for *National Lampoon's Class Reunion* involving a sequence satirizing popular horror films such as *An American Werewolf in London* and *The Exorcist*. While it was a first union gig for Stratton and Neill, the film would also be one of the last for Chambers. "For most of the jobs I had worked on,"

remarked Stratton, "there was never enough time or money to do things properly. With John, though, I saw somebody who took the time to do everything with great care. He regularly handled huge projects with the efficiency of a straight makeup artist. He was also very fair to his people. If he saw you going in the wrong direction without critically harming a project, he would allow you to screw up, and you learned from that."

Although much of his work did not make the final cut, Chambers' experience on *Class Reunion* would expose him to a whole new area of the rapidly evolving effects industry. "It was like a changing of the guard," stated Stratton. "We were using dummy heads and fiberglass cores and radio-controlled mechanical effects. It was the first time John saw this type of special makeup effect. He didn't understand all that articulated new stuff, but he was fascinated by it. The art that he had helped advance was being pushed even further by a new generation of artists."

Soon after the completion of *Class Reunion*, Chambers retired from active makeup work. Those who continue in the field, however, are quick to acknowledge his technical brilliance and willingness to share information. "Whenever I visited



Hollywood from New York in the late fifties and sixties," remarked makeup legend Dick Smith, an esteemed mentor in his own right, "I learned some applicable innovation that Johnny had developed, like finding matting materials to add to adhesives, formulating soft plastics to make scars or finding better mold materials. I came to realize the importance of Johnny's search for better materials and techniques, and that has made an enormous difference in my work. Many other artists and I learned this from him; and it has led to a lot of the technical advances in the current era of makeup effects. We all owe him our respect and gratitude."

But Chambers' selflessness was not limited to sharing ideas and information with fellow professionals. Even during his busiest work period in the late sixties and seventies, Chambers generously encouraged newcomers to the field. "Although I was not an apprentice to John on *Planet of the Apes*," recalled makeup artist Ken Chase, "I got a lot of help from him, on a personal basis, as I was teaching myself how to design and manufacture appliances for that film. Then he entrusted me with the daily application of Maurice Evans' Dr. Zaius makeup — which was a big responsibility."

As an enthused fifteen-year-old, Tom Woodruff of Amalgamated Dynamics remembered being inspired by *Planet of the Apes* and a television series called *Primal Man* for which Chambers had created various stages of primitive man makeups. "I wrote to one of the performers on the show, and he sent me John's address in California. For a kid from Pennsylvania, it was like the key to the Holy Grail. It took me days to compose a letter; and when I finally sent it, John answered right away." Over the years, the two kept in touch, and when Woodruff finally traveled to California during a summer off from his studies, Chambers was instrumental in opening doors for the budding artist. "John sent me to Ken Chase one week, and the next he called up Stan Winston and got me an interview. He pretty much opened a lot of doors for me to go around with my portfolio." Upon finishing school, Woodruff married and moved with his wife to California, where Chambers once again came to his aid. "He got me work with Tom Burman; and from there I was able to get in on *The Terminator* with Stan. Then things really took off."

Others have attested to similar experiences. "When I was fourteen, I saw a sensational spread in *Life* magazine for *Planet of the Apes*, and wrote a fan letter to John at Fox studio," remembered makeup effects artist Craig Readon. "Not a week

had gone by before I got a letter back from John inviting me to come to the studio lot. I thought I had met the greatest guy in the world."

Filmmaker John Landis recalled a time when, as a mailboy at Fox during production of *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, he would peek inside the makeup lab. "I know a makeup secret that only six people know," revealed Landis. "There's a famous piece of eight-millimeter film of Bigfoot walking in the woods that was touted as the real thing. It was just a suit, however, made by John for a David L. Wolper documentary." Landis would later repay Chambers' early hospitality when, as a young director in 1971, he cast the makeup artist as the National Guard captain in his low-budget feature film debut, *Schlock*. "He was very good. And I'm indebted to him because he sent me to Don Post Studios to develop the film's gorilla suit. They, in turn, referred me to a twenty-year-old artist who had just visited there — and that was the start of my relationship with Rick Baker."

From his early work in television's crucial first decades through his groundbreaking cinematic triumph in *Planet of the Apes* and beyond, Chambers' legacy of technical and aesthetic achievements has had an undeniable and lasting impact on the makeup community. "*Planet of the Apes* inspired us to reach for higher ground," asserted celebrated creature creator Stan Winston. "In even attempting something on the scope of *Apes*, John pushed our whole industry forward and gave us the self-assurance that, with imagination and artistic taste, we could move beyond that which has been done before."

For the seventy-five-year-old John Chambers — now residing at the Motion Picture Country Home in Woodland Hills, California — there is real satisfaction in seeing new barriers broken. "In the early days, we were hampered by strict rules, and there were many things we couldn't touch," Chambers reflected. "Fortunately, a lot of those taboos no longer exist, and there has been great progress by new artists. Having trained many of these people, when I see them creating fine things now, it makes me very proud. They're doing fabulous work."

Planet of the Apes photographs copyright © 1968, 1970 by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* photographs copyright © 1977 by American International Pictures. Additional photographs courtesy of Michael Key, Bob Burns and Tom Burman.

SPEED 2

(continued from page 154)

work at Rhythm & Hues and ILM continued into the postproduction period. And although De Bont was much more in his element on location, standing with his camera amidst collapsing buildings and falling debris, the director remained very much at the helm. "Jan was incredibly involved all during postproduction," Fangmeier stated. "In fact, he worked almost harder in post than he did in shooting. He worked seven days a week for three months to complete this movie. Jan is very much in tune with what we do. He had the confidence to use the post work as a tool; and, in dealing with the technology, he displayed a flexibility that was quite complementary. And because he stayed in control of the process, without just relinquishing it to us, everything in the film was really his choice."

When *Speed 2* opened in June, little mention was made of its hundred-plus effects shots — but public indifference to the effects was what Terreri and Fangmeier had been going for all along. "The intent was to do something where the audience wouldn't analyze the effects too much," Fangmeier remarked. "On other projects I've worked on — like *Twister*, *Jurassic Park*, *Casper* and *T2* — the audience was pretty much aware of the special effects. But at least half of the shots in *Speed 2* were those that most people would never even think of as effects. This project was really more about a recreation of reality. Most people, not understanding how impossible it would have been to do some of these things with an actual cruise ship, look at sequences in this film and say: 'Oh, that's not an effect. They did that for real.'" As invisible as those effects may have been to lay audiences, they represented some of the most difficult film work Fangmeier had ever attempted. "Going into this movie, I didn't think it would be as hard as it turned out to be. *Twister* was like a honeymoon; but *Speed 2* was like marriage — a lot harder than you think it will be."

Speed 2: Cruise Control photographs copyright © 1997 by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. All rights reserved. ILM still photography by Sean Casey. Additional images courtesy of Rhythm & Hues. Special thanks to Ellen Pasternack and Suzanne Datz.