

CROWE'S NEST

Russell Crowe and director Peter Weir hit the high seas for the high-stakes adventure *Master and Commander*.

By Jay A. Fernandez

Deep into filming the 19th-century naval warfare epic *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, director Peter Weir was orchestrating a chaotic scene in which Paul Bettany's character, the ship's surgeon, performs a grisly operation belowdecks in the midst of a raging battle. The ship, the HMS *Surprise*, was bucking from a restless sea, cannon blasts, and the crush of French and British sailors trying to murder each other above. Mangled men were being brought to the doctor in growing numbers. It's a complicated scene, and Weir clearly wasn't happy. Something was just . . . off. He surveyed the set—jammed full of equipment and actors—and finally swiveled his gaze to the ceiling, built to authentic specifications at only five feet, six inches high.

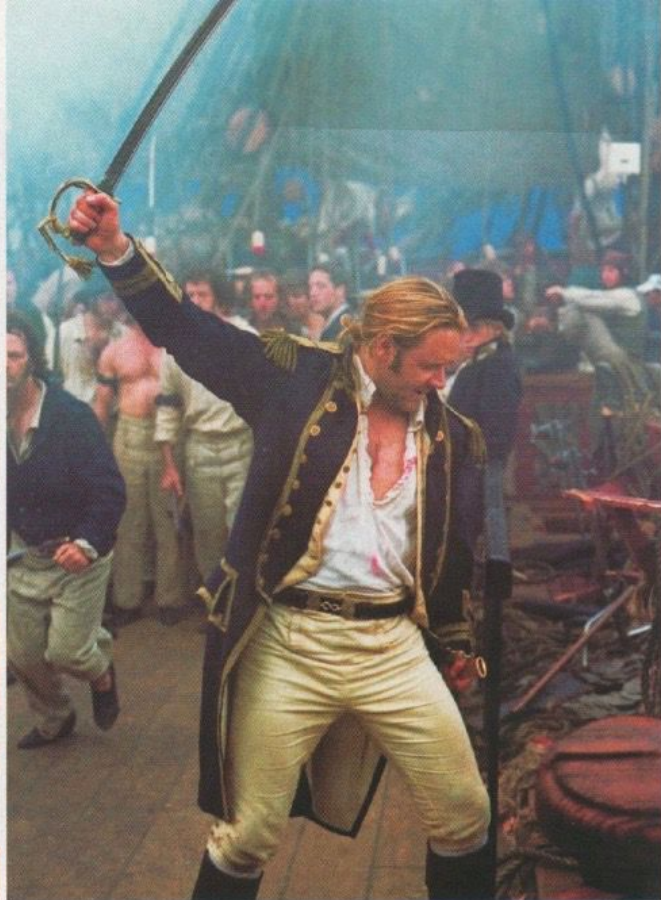
"It was like the bit in *Aliens* when they all look up," Bettany recalls. As he watched, Weir picked up a bucket of fake blood, dipped his hand in, and began palming handprints on the ceiling. "Something wasn't ringing true, and it's that there would have been people [steadying themselves]. Whether you happen to notice it in the movie or not, his attention to detail is just . . . I don't know anybody with such a facility to remain that intent."

The devil may be in the details, but it takes a certain creatorlike omnipotence to sort them all out. Weir's obsessive focus on the minutiae and creation of intense moods amid the organized chaos of an enormous production is the hallmark of a career that stretches from the atmospheric Australian mysteries *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*, almost 30 years ago, through the ordinary-men-in-unfamiliar-worlds dramas *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Witness*, *Fearless*, and *The Truman Show*. In *Master and Commander*, set in 1805 during the Napoleonic Wars, Russell Crowe





MASTERS OF THEIR DOMAIN: Clockwise from above, Crowe (right) and Paul Bettany, who portrays the ship's surgeon, learned how to play violin and cello, respectively, for their onscreen duets. "That's a load of pressure," Bettany says, "because you're like, 'I don't want to fuck up when he's just been brilliant!';" Crowe rehearses the storming of the enemy vessel, the *Acheron*; Max Pirkis plays Lord Blakeney, a midshipman Aubrey takes under his wing; Billy Boyd as Barrett Bonden, the helmsman and coxswain.



and Bettany (who costarred in *A Beautiful Mind*) don the uniforms of British naval officer Captain Jack Aubrey and his close friend Stephen Maturin, characters immortalized by writer Patrick O'Brian in a series of 20 novels. Under orders to capture or sink the French frigate *Acheron*, they are attacked by their enemy in a dense fog, their ship badly damaged; thus begins a vengeful chase that ends in a cataclysmic and bloody confrontation.

"This is a film about command," says John Collee, who cowrote the script with Weir, taking elements and episodes from several of the novels. "The whole story of Peter's life is really the story of Jack Aubrey—this sort of successful sea captain who basically could get a commission to go anywhere but was constantly pushing the boundaries and finding himself in charge of a ship in a whole new kind of sea."

Under Weir's determinedly steady command, the majority of *Master and Commander's* \$120 million budget (cofinanced by Fox, Miramax, and Universal) was devoted to one thing: re-creating the down-to-the-grommets-and-gunpowder reality of life in the British navy. It was a vision that required hundreds of sailors, scholars, sculptors, smelters, shipwrights, actors, and technicians (including several seaworthy survivors of *The Perfect Storm*) from four continents to achieve. Much of the five-and-a-half-month shoot was spent filming in the gigantic water tanks near Rosarito, Mexico, that Fox built for *Titanic*. The *Surprise* is a detailed re-creation of the *Rose*, a Revolutionary War-era replica the production bought for \$1.5 million in Connecticut and piloted through the Panama Canal to Mexico. For two weeks of scenes shot on the open sea, the *Rose* itself was used, refurbished by the filmmakers and launched each morning from Ensenada. Though exhilarating, the authentic sailing experience had its drawbacks. "I haven't seen that many people puke since a Cure concert in the late eighties," Bettany deadpans.

Long a fan of O'Brian's books and a collector of stories and artifacts from the period, Weir convinced several of his potential staff to crew the *Endeavour*, a reproduction of Captain James Cook's 18th-century vessel, for four days off the coast of Australia before preproduction began. From that point on, everything was geared toward creating a world audiences could practically swim in—from the cacophony of battle, a storm sequence, and rousing galley scenes to the stirring quietude of Aubrey and Maturin's

violin and cello duets and a visit to the Galápagos Islands. "Peter wanted it to be the most beautiful movie ever made of this era—and it is," says production designer William Sandell. Says Bettany, "It's an action movie of awesome proportions."

Throughout the shoot, Weir seemed to be all places at once, verifying the authenticity of every detail, from the color of the cannon smoke to the knots being tied by actors in the background of shots. "Where a lot of directors are just back there watching the monitors and talking to the actors, he was picking up swords, moving around," says stunt coordinator Doug Coleman. "He would sometimes wear the costumes. He wanted to feel and smell and taste everything that was going on."

To establish a consistent mood for the actors, Weir asked them to hang cloth over their mirrors off the set and refrain from watching TV; they should instead pass the time writing letters, playing music, and painting. Before many scenes, he would prepare cast and crew by getting on the "God-mike"



THE YOUNG MEN AND THE SEA: Weir and additional casting director Judy Bouley recruited nearly 100 "sailors" (never called "extras") after a six-month search for candidates from around the world. "I want guileless men, not men who sell themselves," Weir told Bouley. The chosen included a former Greek sponge diver, two Aussie shipwrights, an apple farmer who plays the fiddle, and an amputee. "They didn't look like your Southern California SAG background players," producer Duncan Henderson says.



WEIR SCIENCE: Above, the *Surprise* gets pummeled by a gale-force storm, which the special-effects crew created with the help of two jet engines, wave and wind machines, and four dump tanks, each capable of dropping 3,000 gallons of water. "The dump tanks did throw people off the ship on occasion," Boyd says. "Luckily, I was the helmsman, so I was holding onto the wheel for dear life. No acting required." Left, Weir and Crowe work out a master plan.

and spinning lengthy accounts of the seamen's lives, then walk among them playing various types of music on his ever-present boom box; depending on the scene, the selections ranged from Pink Floyd to Native American drumming to chants. "Rhythms and music are very important in the telling of Peter's stories," says Billy Boyd, who plays Bonden, the helmsman and captain's coxswain (which is not what you might think). "When you go into the specifics of a scene, you can tell that he's thinking quite musically there as well."

This melding of music and moment reached a powerful peak on the day they shot a funeral scene with the entire cast present. Aubrey was to appear before his men to harness their sadness and cast it collectively to the sea along with the wrapped bodies of their shipmates. In a strange bit of synchronicity, Crowe heard the news not long before that Richard Harris, with whom he had become close since shooting *Gladiator*, had died. When everyone was ready, Weir played a sad, eerie piece of music ("like it was from a cathedral," one crew member recalls), and Crowe emerged to give a heartfelt speech about honoring the passing of those who had gone before. "Not a dry eye in the house," says additional casting director Judy Bouley.

Crowe, typically, took his leadership role very seriously. "Russell came on as the captain," says producer Duncan Henderson. "He sort of lives the parts that he plays." On the night before the start of the two-week boot camp, which included cannon, sailing, musket, and sword training, Crowe assembled the cast at a grog party (Weir had found an old Royal Navy recipe) and delivered his first order. He supplied each man with three shirts, color-coded for the sailor's rank on the ship (blue for officers, white for sailors, red for marines); needle and thread; and name patches, which they were to sew onto

their shirts by morning. "It was a really good idea, to be honest, because it got everyone in the right mind—set right away," says Boyd. Only one man had the audacity not only to ditch boot camp but to disobey the captain's orders: Bettany, whose mysterious Maturin plays no part in the day-to-day running of the ship and in fact cannot even swim. "I'm the rebellious, irreverent one," Bettany says. "Russell was giving orders, and I walked off. You just pretend you're a Method actor. And Russell came and congratulated me, because that's exactly what my character would have done."

To maintain the mood off-camera, Crowe drilled his men out of sight of the film crew, and he occasionally held formal dinners for the "officers" at his rented house. He also fostered camaraderie by organizing a shipbuilding competition, with accompanying mariachi band, as well as Sunday rugby games. Many of the cast members were musicians, so Crowe had a dilapidated trailer converted into a rehearsal studio where they could jam (Bettany on guitar, Crowe behind the drum kit, others on piano and bass) on some Radiohead, Clash, Jeff Buckley, and Tom Waits songs. "Russell would supply beer, and we'd all get drunk and play really loudly," Bettany says. "And possibly really badly."

The film is bookended by two massive engagements between the *Surprise* and the *Acheron*, including an extended sequence in which Crowe as Aubrey has to fight the lengths of both ships. "His abilities were just amazing," says stunt coordinator Coleman. "You'd set something up, rehearse it once, and he'd be ready. Not only does Russell Crowe know what he's going to be doing, he knows what everybody's doing around him, 360 degrees. He's a total perfectionist."

With Oscar winner Crowe and four-time Oscar nominee Weir at the helm, the hefty budget needed for *Master and Commander*—a project that had been floating from studio to studio for eight years—promised to be money well spent. "Before Russell came on board, it was a big-budget movie for art-house adventure," Collee says. "And obviously Peter is not a classic shoot-'em-up action director, so they knew from the start that they were going to get a psychological piece as well as an action movie." That, and one hell of a recipe for grog.

Jay A. Fernandez profiled Christina Ricci in the March issue of PREMIERE.