

It's gonna be a bumpy ride

By  Daniel Derksen

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You have to really fasten your seat belt with *Non-stop*, a suspense thriller played out at 40 000 feet in the air. During a transatlantic flight from New York City to London, a US Air Marshal (Liam Neeson) receives a series of cryptic text messages demanding that he instructs the airline to transfer USD150 million into a numbered account. Until he secures the money, a passenger on his flight will be killed every 20 minutes.

You don't have to wait 20 minutes for a thrill. From the moment the flight takes off the tension and ambiguity kick in and everyone is a suspect. This keeps the film alive and guarantees that you will stop breathing when the action unfolds in the tight, claustrophobic constraints of the aeroplane.



Mystery middle

One of the reasons for this is producer Joel Silver, whose *Unknown* took the worldwide box office by storm and also produced such legendary actioners as *Die Hard* and *Die Hard 2*, as well as all of the films in the *Lethal Weapon* and *The Matrix* series, and whose instinct for action and suspense always delivers first-rate entertainment. Said Silver: "It has an incredible mystery in the middle of it, and you don't know who to trust. You are left suspecting anybody and everybody."

Another reason that contributes to the heightened realism is Spanish director Jaume Collet-Serra, who also worked with Silver on *Unknown*, *House of Wax* and *Orphan*. Collet-Serra is an actor's director and, with Liam Neeson on board, he not only creates tension, but delves into character, putting his audience into a plane in a way that we've never seen before.

Neeson appreciated all that the Spanish-born director brought to the set. He explained: "Jaume's a passionate filmmaker.

His knowledge of cameras and the accoutrements of shooting a movie is phenomenal." In addition to his director's technical expertise, what Neeson appreciates is Collet-Serra's sensitivity to performances. "Jaume has an innate sense of the truth in front of the camera with his actors. He knows if something is too much or too little and can convey that information in a very concise way. It's always very comfortable working with him."

One of the main reasons Collet-Serra decided to direct the film is because he is terrified of flying and wanted to explore his personal fear of flying and, as a director, his fear of doing a film in one location.



Are you going to be the hero?

He appreciated the psychological elements of the script that explore human behaviour in a confined space. Said the director: "I'm a big fan of movies like *Murder on the Orient Express*, where there's a number of people travelling and everybody has an agenda. This is a movie like that where you meet a bunch of people and you don't know who they are. You know what they appear to be, but in this movie they reveal who they really are. When you're in the plane and things go wrong, that forces you to reveal your true personality. Who are you going to choose to be? Are you going to be the hero? Are you going to confront the problem?"

Shooting on an accurately sized aeroplane was a potential hardship for both the cast and crew, but production designer Alexander Hammond explained that it helped that the director understood how it would affect everyone's work-in front of and behind the camera: "Jaume is wonderfully straightforward about story and action; he is a great director for saying: 'This has to be a space that works for me and the actors.' He was most concerned with where, physically, all the people on the plane would go. He needed to see how the blocking worked and if the space was conducive to the action that's written in the script. In addition, he wanted to know how you create this thing."

Collet-Serra and his team-led by cinematographer Flavio Labiano-have broken new ground with the techniques they used to lens Non-stop.

He complimented: "Jaume puts us into the story and characters-as well as into the plane-in a way we've never seen before. Because of the manner in which the team has built cameras into the plane, they've given us a unique way of showing this kind of story. They are supported by a top-notch visual effects team led by Prime Focus World, allowing us to believe everything we're seeing is real."

As well, Collet-Serra's use of modern cameras supports the decision to have the audience stay on the craft the majority of the time, as opposed to intercutting back and forth with the outside world. That was a choice that set well with Silver. He said: "Usually in these types of thrillers, the director is always cutting away. We don't cut to mission control. There are people who communicate with our crew and Marks, but you rarely leave the people that we're dealing with on the flight. Although we start the film outside and it ends outside the plane, the rest of the movie we don't leave it. That confines the audience and you realise that everything that's happening is in this space."



The director was not intimidated by the idea of creating action scenes on a small set. He envisioned that the contained environment would actually make a more visceral film experience. Said Collet-Serra: "Shooting action in tight places presents a technical challenge, but ultimately that pays off exponentially because people feel they are much closer to the action. The audience is going to feel like they're on this plane, and the action involves them and feels like it's happening all around them. You can do a lot of car chases and motorcycle chases, but having fights happen around you in a tight space is much more intense than your regular action movie."

Aside from a few scenes lensed at JFK Airport and an airport runway on eastern Long Island, *Non-stop* was filmed entirely at a soundstage in Brooklyn, New York, that was just large enough to house the aeroplane set. For the design team, it was a bit like building a ship in a bottle. The 158-foot-long movie aircraft, modelled on a 767, had 29 first-class seats and 159 economy seats, and was constructed so that the sides of the plane could be raised up for a variety of camera placements.

Technical accuracy

Silver knew that the technical accuracy would only add to the believability of the story and worked with Collet-Serra's team to ensure authenticity. The filmmakers took great pains to make sure that what the audience sees is authentic. By drawing upon professional relationships and consulting TSA officials, flight attendants, pilots and former US Air Marshals, they were able to get into the minds of those who have served on board an aircraft and find out exactly the manner in which they would behave if a terrorist threat came about mid-flight.

If you want to experience the thrill of being one of the passengers on board a flight that is hijacked in mid-air, be brave to buckle up for *Non-stop*, it delivers on all levels and guarantees the ride of a lifetime!

Read more about Non-stop and other new releases at www.writingstudio.co.za/page1037.html

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