

INSIDE *HANCOCK* BY GERRI MILLER



INTRODUCTION

When people fantasize about having super powers like Herculean strength, indestructibility or the ability to fly like the heroic icons of comic books, they're probably not thinking of Hancock. The title character in Will Smith's latest action flick is a reckless boozehound with a bad attitude who wears his superhero-hood with misanthropic reluctance. His behavior earns him the contempt of his fellow Los Angelinos, though he doesn't particularly care until the publicist whose life he saves (Jason Bateman) returns the favor by persuading him to [rehabilitate] his image.

It's a decidedly different kind of summer vehicle—and a much darker character—for Smith, who previously owned the July 4 holiday box office with such blockbusters as *Independence Day* and both *Men in Black* movies. But according to producer Akiva Goldsman, who worked with Smith previously on *I, Robot* and *I Am Legend*, “You could give him the room service menu and he could perform it and everyone would go see it.” Plus, he adds, Smith's inherent good nature “lets him get away with more stuff. He has to stretch harder to be malevolent.”

Smith had to stretch actual, as well as acting, muscles for the very physical role, which required lots of running and a fair amount of stunts involving harnesses and wires. However, he had quite a bit of virtual help from a digital double created by the visual effects team, which also had to invent CG elements ranging from a beached whale to a swarm of tornadoes.

Hancock's movie magic came together under the direction of Peter Berg (*The Kingdom*, “Friday Night Lights”) and the design wizardry of effects master John Dykstra (*Star Wars* and *Spider-Man* franchises), executed at Sony Pictures Imageworks. Visual effects supervisor Carey Villegas and digital effects supervisor Ken Hahn give us the 411 for this article, while Goldsman explains why it took 15 years to bring it to the screen.

DVD Extras

According to Akiva Goldsman, many excised scenes will wind up in the DVD. “There was a different opening, Hancock jumping off a building. And he has a date with a girl he meets in a bar,” a scene cut at the last minute. “It was actually really funny, but it revealed how tender he was too early,” Goldsman explains. “It showed a little too much.”

BACK STORY

Talk about protracted labors. “Hancock,” originally titled “Tonight, He Comes,” has been in development since the early ‘90s. Goldsman, the Oscar-winning writer of *A Beautiful Mind*, and who also wrote the scripts for *The Da Vinci Code*, and *I, Robot*, produced “Mr. & Mrs. Smith,” and was writer-producer on *I Am Legend*, repeatedly banged on studio doors but got nowhere with it for the better part of 15 years. “It was dark and emotional at a time when superheroes were less three-dimensional. It was very difficult to get anyone interested in making it,” he explains.

Then flawed heroes began to emerge in movies like *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*, and even the animated [feature], *The Incredibles*, paving the way a bit. Finally, Richard Saperstein bought it for Lions Gate, Michael Mann agreed to direct, and Mann, Goldsman and screenwriter Vince Gilligan worked on a new version of the script.

Will Smith became attached three years ago, but Mann ultimately opted to direct *Miami Vice*, and several directors declined before Peter Berg took

the job. Meanwhile, the script went through more revisions so Smith made *I Am Legend* first. “We had to build a structure that served two different tones. That’s complicated,” explains Goldsman, alluding to a twist involving Mary (Charlize Theron) and her connection to Hancock.

The script continued to evolve during production, which posed problems for the visual effects team. Notes Ken Hahn, “Concepts changed, story ideas changed and the visual effects had to keep up.” It wasn’t the only challenge they faced. Continue reading to learn about some other challenges.

But even if there were a sequel, as *Hancock*’s ending would suggest, Goldsman has no plans to act again anytime soon. Having written the screenplay for *Angels & Demons*, the follow up to *The Da Vinci Code* that’s due in theaters next May, he has several writing and producing projects in the works. Fond of re-collaborating with filmmaking talents in what he considers a team sport, he’d work with Will Smith again “any time he wants to.”



Disgruntled superhero Hancock (Will Smith, left) saves the life of PR exec Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman, in car, right).

MAKING “HANCOCK” FLY

While Will Smith spent many days in harness rigs suspended above various Los Angeles locations, the actual flying was done by his digital double, created via computer. Unlike the masked Spider-Man, an earlier Imageworks creation, Hancock wears no disguise, and devising a CGI version of the highly recognizable Will Smith was much more difficult. Several different versions needed to be created because Hancock changes clothes, and the flying simulation itself isn’t straightforward. “He’s supposed to be drunk,” notes Carey Villegas.

The shots began practically, with Smith hoisted in mid air on wires. Camera positioned on the ground or on hydraulic cranes captured his movements that would be added to with a computer while erasing any evidence of wires.



When Hancock (Will Smith, left), saves the life of a PR exec, he tries to return the favor by cleaning up the disgruntled superhero’s public image, despite the fact that his wife, Mary (Charlize Theron, right) thinks that Hancock is a lost cause.

“Even when the wires are removed you still have a sense of where those wires were, so it’s always a challenge,” notes Villegas. “Also, we had to do a lot of post-camera manipulation to recreate the same style of photography that Peter Berg used. It’s very frenetic and hand-held and incorporates a lot of snap zooms. We wanted to match that. Otherwise it would feel like a different film.”

Not only did the VFX team have to adapt to Berg’s fast-paced “run and gun” shooting style, “no matter

how much pain it might cause us,” laughs Hahn, the director made a few pretty tricky post-production requests, including a physically impossible visual punch line involving two prison inmates. “We never got the data on the actors we needed to make visual doubles for, but we came up with a pretty nifty rig that matched the live action shots and lived up to the challenge,” says Hahn.

Hancock’s final scene, conceived late in the game and shot in New York, was a last minute addition, but for the majority of the sequences the Imageworks team had more than a year to conceptualize and render the visual effects, beginning with the pre-vis (previsualization footage) that serves as a reference guide for the filmmakers and ending when post-production finished a few weeks prior to release. They needed all the time they could get, because some of the most complex sequences to film were just as complicated for the effects team to execute.

DIGITAL MAGIC

In Hahn's estimate, there are roughly 550 visual effects shots in *Hancock*, and the majority of them are divided among the big set pieces in the movie, including a freeway chase, a train derailment, a bank robbery and a battle on Hollywood Boulevard. The latter involved closing down a block to traffic for multiple days and lots of CG augmentation.

One reason for that was the swarm of tornadoes they needed to add, which were revised numerous times. According to Hahn, it was difficult to devise a twister that looked real but still fit the stylized esthetic Berg was aiming for. "He wanted them to move in a very specific way," adds Villegas.

The 125-member Imageworks team was also responsible for effects you don't notice—and aren't supposed to—if they're done right. These include digitally erasing wires and palm trees, "putting walls where there weren't walls, and windows where there weren't windows. That's the most seamless work we've done in the movie," says Villegas proudly.

"Sometimes we'll add inn cityscapes," adds Hahn, offering the train derailment scene as an example. It was shot in Long Beach, California, but per Berg's instructions, "We added a vista of downtown Los Angeles in the background."

Imageworks also worked its digital eraser on some extra people in the Malibu beach scene involving Hancock and a beached whale, in addition to creating the CG leviathan. For reference on set, "A very small section of the whale, the front right quarter, was built as an animatronics with a moving eye," says Hahn, and a tossable prop was provided for Will Smith, but the effects team created a new cetacean from scratch in post-production.



Hancock (Will Smith, right) saves the life of an injured female cop (Liz Wicker, left) - using her battered cruiser as a shield -- before taking out a gang of heavily armed bank robbers.

Another tricky element for the VFX specialists involved close-up shots "that would transition from live actor to our CG version, or vice versa, within the context of one shot," says Hahn. The solution? Motion capture, a technique used in all-CG films like "Beowulf" and "The Polar Express" but also applicable to scenes in live action movies requiring digital doubles.

“After principal photography was done and there was a rough edit, we identified the transitions and we brought in Will and Charlize for a day each and had them act out very similar performances,” outlines Hahn. To get as much detail as possible, they dotted the actors’ faces with nearly 300 tiny markers, almost twice the amount used in “Beowulf.” The result? A seamless, undetectable morph.

For Hahn and his team, previous experience on *Spider-Man* and other films was a distinct advantage. “I had some sense of what was achievable because of what we’d done previously. You’re not constantly having to reinvent the wheel all the time,” he says.

Nevertheless, the stakes are constantly rising. Filmmakers “want to improve upon things they’ve seen in the past, and do it faster and cheaper,” notes Villegas. “And we never want to go in and recreate something we’ve seen before. We always try to bring something new to the table.”

There were also some challenges to filming on location. Fly over to the next section to read about some of those.

ON LOCATION

Most of “Hancock” was shot on locations in and around Los Angeles, including two jails (one for exterior, one for interior) and the downtown intersection of 5th and Figueroa for the bank standoff. To Akiva

Goldsman, it was the most complicated sequence involving the principal actors. “There’s cop cars, explosions, people moving back and forth and a lot of helicopter work,” he notes.

The only scene filmed outside of L.A. posed a different problem. The final sequence, shot in New York City, originally called for Hancock to walk through Times Square, with autograph-seeking kids running after him.

But as Goldsman and Smith had discovered while shooting on *I Am Legend* there, Smith can’t go anywhere without drawing a crowd, and the mob on this particular Friday night was large and rowdy. “It was pandemonium,” recalls Goldsman, and that necessitated an improvised solution. “We went around the corner to 49th Street and we shot the scene.”



When disgruntled superhero Hancock (Will Smith, left) saves the life of PR exec Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman, right), Ray tries to clean up Hancock’s image.



Shooting on the streets of large cities requires planning and negotiation, especially in New York, but getting permissions and cooperation from local authorities isn't that hard "if you ask nicely enough," allows Goldsman, noting tax incentives, rebate programs and film commissions. "As long as you're not pissing people off, you're spending so much money that it's OK," he adds.

Weather didn't pose any obstacles thanks to the good California climate, but unexpected SNAFUs always arise. For example, "We planned to shoot in one direction on Hollywood Boulevard and found out the light was wrong, so we had to turn around. You always have to have two things in your head so you can go to Plan B."

It was somewhat of a relief to shoot scenes of the Embrey family at home in the relative quiet of the Universal back lot, a short walk from "Desperate Housewives" Wisteria Lane and the "Ghost Whisperer" house—and not far from the section later lost in a fire. But that location came with its own idiosyncratic problem. "It was right by the Universal tour," remembers Goldsman. "Often when we were ready to shoot, the tour tram would come by."

He isn't thinking about the logistics of a sequel just yet, even though *Hancock's* ending clearly sets one up. "Not till it's out in the world and people really like it do you really go there," he says. With *I Am Legend*, we wouldn't have been able to kill [Smith's character] if we were thinking about a sequel," Goldsman points out. "You have to be able to think of it as its own thing."

Spot the Producer

Both Akiva Goldsman and Michael Mann appear briefly in *Hancock*, billed as Executive #1 and Executive #2. "It was the bad end of the dare," says Goldsman, explaining that director Peter Berg asked Mann to be in the movie, and Mann replied, "I'll do it if Akiva does it."