



# BUILDING A CINEMATIC COMPOSITE

## BRINGING FEATURE FILM VALUES TO MTV's "LEAST LIKELY"

When MTV asked actress Kelly Hu to do an Asian-themed spot for their "Choose or Lose" campaign, she realized this would be a chance for her to work with long time friend Mark Allen. They had been wanting to work together for many years and he gladly agreed to direct.

Of course, there was no budget.

"At the time most of these spots were talking heads on a white screen," says Mark. "But that didn't seem like much fun. We decided that there was no reason we couldn't make something like we'd talked about as a feature instead. So, we set out to make the equivalent of a movie trailer for a science fiction epic that also conveyed all the public service information."

Mark ended up using concepts from a script he'd already written. The plan was to have it serve a dual pur-

pose, as both a PSA and a prototype for the movie he hoped to create. MTV thought it was an incredible idea, but that they'd never be able to do it. With the gauntlet thrown, there was no way they'd back away from the challenge.

They called their film "The Least Likely," a reference to the fact that Asian-Pacific Islander-Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 were statistically, at the time, the least likely to vote.

Their initial plan was to avoid all classic "Asian" themes, including martial arts. But as producer Leo Chu observed, "This is part of my culture. I'm proud of that, and it makes

perfect sense for the movie."

### STUNTING PROJECT GROWTH

The team also had available to them the absolute top stunt performers in the industry arranged by actor Ron Yuan, as well as two actresses (Kelly Hu and Maggie Q) known for doing martial arts in movies. They decided it wouldn't have made sense to avoid this for some external sense of political correctness.

"We were emulating blockbuster movie trailers, which always have some action scenes, so in my storyboards I had one shot which was basically a bunch of people fighting in the street," says Mark. "I wanted to shoot it from a low angle and be able to see people fighting on different levels, to convey widespread commotion."

They had only 8 hours to shoot the whole "epic," including the green-screen shots which were all done at the end of the shoot day with limited time remaining.

Mark explains: "The challenge is really in the psychology of knowing when to stop. I decided that no one would ever watch it 3 times, so I'd have what I needed if it could withstand 3 viewings."

"A composite of this scale requires balancing two potentially conflicting needs. The first is *detail*.

"I believe that you have to tell your story on every level. Whether it's noticed or not, it's definitely felt. And this is a business about what you feel. A spaceship looks more interesting with a bunch of scratches and other distressed surfaces because they tell a story about what that ship's been through.

"The other need is *simplicity*. A lot of people get into visual effects because they like complex things; but to actually complete things, simplicity is key.

"Obviously these two needs are in conflict. You balance them by asking yourself, 'What is this shot about?' This shot, for example,

Next, he went through his collection of building shots and started placing those buildings into the image. He says it came together quickly, "but I didn't like what I saw, so I scrapped that and started over.

"I mention this because I think it's good to know that you need to be honest with yourself about your work. Just because you did it, doesn't mean it's *good*. It's better to accept that sooner rather than tweak it for days trying to make it into something it's not."

He changed the design and took new photos to build a rough version of the matte. Once that was in place, he started arranging and working with the most important elements: the actors and the primary buildings.

From there he began building in more detail, evaluating whether the evolving result was actually telling the story.

"I felt it needed more escalation to convey the idea that people were



Mark Allen balances two potentially conflicting needs: the first is detail; the other, simplicity.

### A CAST OF 1000s; WELL, ALMOST

While lights were being set, Ron Yuan lined up his stunt teams to rotate quickly into frame in pairs. When they finished, the next pair stepped in and the previous pair were re-costumed for their second routine. New routines had to be designed for each pair of partners in the time it took two other pairs to fight.

### PLANNING THE COMPOSITE

With shooting done, the next step was to build the composite. Mark used After Effects with the Keylight filter, but it could just as easily have been any professional application.

was about an escalating chaos. This means that anything that supports the idea of an escalating chaos is important – even in the details. Anything that goes outside of that realm into any abstract concept that might come up in the artists' mind is simply adding complexity and potentially distracting from the controlling idea of the shot and, therefore, harms the shot and the ability to finish it on time."

### WE BUILT THIS CITY

Mark Allen began by using a few of the greenscreen shots as a reference, building the city in primitive shapes with a 3D program to provide perspective for the matte.

flooding into this battle, to support the theme of the shot," Mark says.

Allucinari's lead FX artist Dominik Wojtarowicz was doing the other half of the shots for the PSA, and had already created a flying craft. He and Mark decided to incorporate instances of it into this shot as though they were unloading more soldiers into the battle. Since the main assets — the model and texture — had already been created, the addition was an efficient repurposing of resources.

On the subject of repurposing, remember the small group of fighters re-costuming and rotating back into the greenscreen with new moves? The entire complement of



**Mark Allen**  
Los Angeles, California

Mark Allen is a writer, director, and visual effects pioneer with over 120 produced screen credits. Recently, he has directed spots for Toni Braxton, Fall Out Boy, and Sebastian among others and is currently developing film and television projects with several established actors including one with Kelly Hu...which might seem familiar... To find out more visit: [www.markallen.net](http://www.markallen.net)



soldiers on both sides is composed of the same eight actors. Watch the film in motion at CreativeCOW.net, and you'll start to see where these small teams are spread throughout the scene, doing the same thing in different places — starting at different times in their routines.

#### A COMPOSITOR'S SHORT-CUT

A lot of greenscreen is with the shots, so Mark offers a speed tip: make at least two mattes. One is the *fill* matte; one is the *edge* matte. A sharp edge matte often makes holes appear in the body area. The body matte can have lousy edges, because its only job is to fill all the holes in the body area.

The body matte's edges are shrunken to well within the silhouette of the edge matte. Mark usually sets this behind the edge matte as the safety guard. Many of the composites-within-composites that he build required several pairs of these mattes -- one for the head, one for the hand, and so on. Mark says that, especially if time isn't on your side, this is a great technique.

There are many tricks with software, he adds, but understanding the drama in your shot is the key. "Every shot has drama. Someone looking into the distance with no action -- there's still drama. The shot is about the question of what they might be looking at.

"You have to ask yourself, then, what can you do to make sure that this is clear to the audience? Sometimes it's simple. Sometimes, you have to work very hard to bring the drama out of your shot. The drama is simply the evaluation of one character's goal vs. another possibility."

As a director with a history of visual effects, Mark encourages artists to think like a director. "Acknowledge that you're part of the storytelling process. Your artistic process should be to discover how you can help tell the story through your effects."

#### MARK'S PARTING COMMENTS FOR ASPIRING COMPOSITORS

"It's a good idea for any aspiring visual effects artist to study magic, because the rules of magic apply to effects perfectly. You don't need to become the annoying guy who whips out endless card tricks at a party. You just need to know what magicians concern themselves with when doing a trick, or as magicians will sometimes even call them, an 'effect.'

An important rule of magic is to *know where the audience is looking*. From there, you can control where the audience is looking

Painters and illustrators (which aspiring effects can also benefit from studying) are very familiar with the idea of how the eye travels in a frame and how to anticipate that already, so this idea shouldn't be foreign to most artists. Stay aware of that, and you'll know where to put your effort."

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