

## Shooting Features Overseas – Pt. 1 – Logistics

A question that always comes up at festivals and other screenings is how we addressed the challenges of filming overseas for *The Enemy God*. In a series of blog posts, I'll try to encapsulate three major hurdles and how we saw them overcome on our project. The three major hurdles are: Logistics, Culture, and Governments.

In this first installment I'll talk about **logistics**. Here I am talking about things like figuring out how to ship equipment, what can be found on location, building sets, setting up production facilities, etc.

While we were in pre-production on *The Enemy God*, our plans were to do the filming in the jungle in Venezuela. Because the film tells the true story of an indigenous group in the rainforest, we wanted to try to make the film in the actual locations where the story takes place, using real Yanomamo actors in all of the roles possible.

This choice determined a lot of what we were planning. The region where the Yanomamo live is restricted so we would not be able to bring more than five or six outsiders to the location. The rest of the crew would need to be found in the local area. Now, just so you understand, the village of Coshilowäteli is hundreds of miles from the nearest town that can be reached by road or commercial aircraft. There is no industry, and no economy beyond subsistence gardening and hunting and gathering. So the number of experienced film crew who we could hire locally was pretty much zero. We would have to make it work with enthusiastic but totally inexperienced Yanomamo workers or missionaries who live in the area. Also, we could only bring equipment in by small plane to grass airstrips. That limited our weight and the kinds of toys we could bring -- no cranes, big dollies, lights, stands, etc.

So, our plan was to come down to Venezuela with a very small professional crew: Producer, Director, Cinematographer, Sound Recordist, 1<sup>st</sup> AC/Gaffer, and Makeup. We would have no 1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Director, Continuity, Production Manager, camera crew, sound crew, lighting crew, makeup staff, set decorators, and the innumerable other crew that is required to make a feature film the 'right' way.

We would have a small camera package and were committed to shooting on film (Super16 & 35mm). We wanted the look of film and its ability to handle the lighting and contrast conditions in the jungle when shooting mostly with existing light, and also for the dependability of the cameras. We did not want to be stuck if a \$100,000 HD camera got tired of the heat, humidity, dust, mud, and bugs. It's a long way to New York for a replacement. Oh yeah, and we because we were shooting film, we needed a lot of raw stock, kept cool, and a way to ship it securely back to a lab in

Caracas for processing and transfer, etc. Our plan was to dig a big hole in the jungle for film storage in the nice, cool, damp soil!

Because of the story setting, the sets were actually easy to build. They were Yanomamo structures built by expert Yanomamo crews. There's no way a Hollywood set crew could do as good a job as our guys. In fact, a whole village of Yanomamo basically moved to the location and lived there while they built the sets over the course of a few months. You can see pictures of those sets here.

<http://www.theenemygod.com/Production%20Stills%20-%20VZ%20prep.html>.

In all, it was a workable plan – not easy, but it could work. Unfortunately, all of this planning and headache (and expense) turned out to be for naught as we were forced to move production out of Venezuela due to deteriorating politics. (More about that in a future section.) With great frustration and sadness, we began a year-long search for another location. I'll talk about the changes we made in the next blog entry.

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In the last entry, we ended with our painful decision to move the shooting location from Venezuela to some other, more stable country. We checked out possible sites in Ecuador, Peru, and Panama before settling on Belize, a small Central American country just north of Guatemala on the Caribbean Sea. Belize is quiet, accessible, friendly, and with the added benefit that English is spoken by most of the population, including the indigenous groups. Also, Matt had lived and worked in Belize so he had very solid relationships in the southern area where we would shoot. Relationships are everything when working in most of the world! This opened up more options for production, but it is still far from Hollywood.

We based the production in the small fishing village of Punta Gorda, population 3,000. We found a filming location on private jungle land where we could build our sets: one large round communal village called a shabano, a small thatch hut nearby, a partial shabano that we planned to burn down, and a more modern village of mud-walled huts with palm-thatch roofs. Working on private land gave us crowd control, security from vandals (though we posted security guards as well), and it was a neutral site so we would avoid rivalries between villages in the area.

Now we also had the option to increase the crew size and equipment package. In the end, we brought in approx. 30 crewmembers from North America. Most of these were not experienced filmmakers, but we were able to pick up professionals in very key roles, like an incredible 1<sup>st</sup>

Assistant Director, an extra Makeup person, a jack-of-all-trades grip, a Script Supervisor, etc. These people made life much better and were the only reason we could even attempt to shoot on a schedule. [As a note, our schedule in Venezuela was going to be in the neighborhood of 14 weeks. In Belize we made a schedule for 8 weeks.]

Our camera package remained similar (Two, matched Aaton super16 cameras) but we were able to bring in luxuries like steel dolly track, big lighting stands, a couple of beat-up (and really heavy) HMI Pars, a steadicam, two generators, and assorted other heavy, bulky items that make filmmaking much more pleasant. We were also able to schedule a jib operator with his 24-foot camera jib to come down for a couple of weeks in the middle of shooting to give us our big money shots. (The offer of a couple of weeks work in the tropics was very attractive to a shooter from Toronto – in February!) We set up a system for sending exposed film stock to Technicolor in Toronto for processing and transfer. FedEx proved to be reliable and safe for every roll we shipped (approx 150 rolls). It's not overnight, but it worked. We had no hope of seeing dailies, but got reports from our colorist that said everything was looking great. A trustworthy colorist and lab is like gold! Colin Moore is at Technicolor in Toronto – look him up.

Shipping to Belize was a key element of our planning. Airfreight is too expensive for heavy items. It's not practical to ship by truck through Mexico. We needed dependable production vehicles so we purchased two of them in the U.S. Our big box truck (outfitted by Matt, my co-Producer, with shelves and A/C as a camera/grip truck) and a 15-passenger van were loaded up to capacity with all of the gear that was heavy and not too fragile. These two vehicles were driven from Denver to Mobile, Alabama and put on a boat bound for Belize. We did this two months before our scheduled start of principal photography. When they got there, Matt brought them through customs and down to our shooting location in Punta Gorda. Camera gear and other items that we could not let go two months early flew down with the crew just before shooting. We had nearly 50 pieces of luggage come through with a few crewmembers. It does cost!

Belize, while being a friendly place to work and pretty loose on restrictions, has pretty much no production industry or support. We had to bring in everything we would need. Matt has lived in the jungle and had lived in Belize for nine years, so he knew what to bring and how to pull it off. We rented out most of the Sea Front Inn (right on the ocean!) for our crew housing, production office, and crew cafeteria. We brought computers, refrigerators, printers, chairs, generators, and a water filtration system. We built a (mostly) soundproof sandbag bunker away from our sets in the jungle to house our generators. We built picnic tables

on the veranda where our crew ate every morning and evening. There are a few restaurants in Punta Gorda for those that wanted some time away from the film gang, but we grew very close over the few months that we were together.

In general, we had good luck with the equipment and our plans worked. That is not to say the shoot wasn't full of the normal hair-raising nightmares that are part of all movie shoots, but it came together. More about that in another installment.