

# It wasn't exactly smooth sailing

In pursuit of authenticity, a TV-movie about modern-day piracy ran afoul of an unforgiving sea

By P.F. Kluge



The production crew working in tight quarters aboard the yacht Valhalla.

of work was done on the two boats involved in the on-camera chase. The pursuing vessel, a fishing boat of unmatched seediness, and the 44-foot Valhalla, owned by the film's director, Michael O'Herlihy, became Noah's arks of filmmaking—Hollywood refugee boats jammed with cast and crew, littered with cameras, cases, cables, Perrier bottles, doughnuts, lights, styrofoam cups—the ensemble bobbing about on what O'Herlihy, an Irishman, liked to call "the greatest, deepest, most mysterious prairie of all." There were other words for it—frequently.

Each day was a small epic of naval maneuvering. With the mine-sweeper headquarters out of range, O'Herlihy and company would shuttle from fishing boat to yacht to water taxi to dinghy to rubber zodiac boat, packing and repacking and shifting equipment, always in pursuit of the authenticity. A bullhorn sank without a trace. So did a case of camera equipment. And a few Catalina breakfasts. O'Herlihy called it "giving up one's substance to the deep." That made everyone feel better.

"When you're dealing with the sea, you're dealing with the unpredictable," O'Herlihy conceded. "You can run away from a mistake on land. Not on the sea. At sea the wind shifts, the current shifts, the sun can shift. Just being on a boat can be tiring. Think—do you ever see a fat serious sailor?"

Raised near the sea, O'Herlihy had sailed since boyhood and had once piloted a yacht across the Atlantic. But, although they'd been screened, many of his cast and crew were not so experienced. Early on, there were enough accidents to retitle the picture "The Film That Fell from Grace with the Sea."

"My leg became a ladder of bruises from falling down," Lara Parker says. "The first time I tried taking off my jeans, I fell down four times."

On the first day of filming, four crew members were returned to Catalina, →

"I've got to get off this boat! I've got to get off this boat or I'll die!"

Those were Lara Parker's first lines in the script for "Desperate Voyage." Playing a pampered suburban wife who goes to sea "with painted fingernails and an impractical bikini," Parker was also required to get seasick, be widowed, raped and rescued. And that, as she looked back on the making of the two-hour TV-movie (scheduled to be seen on CBS this Saturday, Nov. 29) was the easy part.

"Desperate Voyage" is a tale of contemporary piracy—yachtnapping—involving predatory Christopher Plummer's bloody pursuit of a crew of weekend sailors across the Gulf of Mexico. For

authenticity's sake, producers rejected studio tanks and easy offshore locations and decided to spend their \$2-million splashing around Catalina Island, 26 miles from Los Angeles. Every foot of the film, interiors and exteriors, love scenes and killings, would be filmed at sea—wobbling actors in front of wobbling hand-held cameras.

"What 'Jaws' did for swimming, this film will do for sailing," producer Barry Weitz promises. "If the audience doesn't get seasick, if I don't bring the sea into their living rooms, I will have failed."

Whatever Weitz's high-seas mayhem may do to viewers' stomachs, it certainly had its impact on the cast and crew of 50 who spent nearly three

weeks discovering that authenticity is nice, but you wouldn't want to spend your whole career there. Lara Parker's first warning that all sailing isn't smooth came from the company's script supervisor, as they proceeded to an offshore location.

"Honey, you're not going to believe this!" the script supervisor said. "I'm thinking of leaving."

"Leaving? How will they replace you?"

"If I died, they'd replace me."

Soon, Parker saw what the script supervisor meant. The company's headquarters was a converted mine sweeper, normally rented out for weddings, funerals, sweet-16 parties and the like. It was fairly comfortable. But the bulk

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seasick. Later, the captain of the fishing boat broke his wrist in an anchor chain. A camera operator who was transferring equipment from one boat to another misjudged a wave and smashed his hand. And Patrick O'Moore, a septuagenarian actor whom the script called upon to be feverishly ill at sea, was felled by a major heart attack and taken to the mainland. "Are they trying to tell us something?" Lara Parker wondered. She wasn't alone.

At sea, Jonathan Banks, playing a retarded rapist, was expected to row a dinghy from one boat to another. "My only preparation for the sea," he concedes, "was the 'Pirates of the Caribbean' ride at Disneyland. I kept rowing around in circles in a choppy sea. I was supposed to be going straight. I said to myself, 'Calm down, you're a grown-up person. Think about it and you'll get out of it.' And I kept rowing around in circles."

Even after the film's people acquired sea legs and could jump from boat to boat a dozen times a day, even when a tidal wave generated by an earthquake across the Pacific failed to arrive, even after the striking Screen Actors Guild allowed shooting to proceed, work at sea was a cramped, grinding routine, with two dozen people often crammed into a yacht designed for four.

"I've never been so tired," says director of photography John Flinn. "I had to ask around to make sure it wasn't just me."

"I started jogging on Catalina, where we lived. I was in such bad shape," confesses Richard Raguse, the soundman. "The boom man and the cable man started too. You're rocking all day long. It saps you. I'm tired of boats. There are easier ways to shoot a movie."

Crashing to sleep immediately after supper, the crew had little time to go bar-hopping around Catalina. And that was good news for Gladys Johnson,

the company's nurse. "I told them that seasickness aggravates a hangover, makes it 40 times worse."

Seasickness. Accidents. Weather. If there are reasons to make sea films at sea, there are persuasive reasons not to. But Christopher Plummer feels that the decision to go to sea will show up in the final product.

"It doesn't take long to get into a silent state when you're out at sea," he says. Plummer is leaning against the railing of his fishing boat. With no dressing room to retreat to, no place to relax and no room to move, he glances out at the sea. Waters are calm, Catalina is off-camera, the mainland is blanketed by smog. A good day for filming. "You get this long look in your eyes. You don't talk much. A sort of inner self emerges. I was amazed how quickly it came, how soon you go inside yourself. And how much the motion of a ship adds to a scene. You've got to forget about looking graceful and moving well. You've got to go with the ship. You aren't always looking your best. But that adds tension and humanity to a scene."

To a man, the people making this film felt that they were doing something for the first time and reckoned that it was worth doing. But no one believed so more than Michael O'Herlihy, the veteran director. O'Herlihy, a sailor using his own boat for the filming, did not go ashore but spent his nights on the mine sweeper. He has a long-standing notion that films about the sea ought to be made at sea.

"I never considered doing it in a studio," says O'Herlihy. "I think the audience is sated with studio pictures where you have one long shot of a boat, a few shots of model ships and then you go to an actor standing around a quarter-deck with a propman throwing a pail of water on him.

"I've never really seen a good sea picture," O'Herlihy muses. "They miss the sea." **(END)**