

Just because the raptors are smarter in *Jurassic Park III* doesn't mean they took direction any easier.

PARK STRANGER

It takes a seasoned director such as Joe Johnston (right, with Sam Neill) to keep a complex film like *JP III* afloat.

A newcomer to the land of dinosaurs, director Joe Johnston strove to make "*Jurassic III*" his own.

By MARC SHAPIRO

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Joe Johnston is normally pretty cool under pressure—until it came to *Jurassic Park III*. "I think on this film I said 'shit' almost every day," laughs the director. "A lot of stuff was a pain in the ass."

Johnston is acknowledging the *Jurassic III* grind during a break from marathon duty in the editing bay, making the movie PG-13-friendly for a May screening before the MPAA ratings board. For the soft-spoken director, the cutting room has become a second home since

he stepped up from special FX and production design to direct the fantastic likes of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, *The Rocketeer* and *Jumanji*, along with the smaller, more personal *October Sky*.

"The stakes are obviously a lot higher on this film," Johnston offers. "At this point we're in heavy postproduction mode. Every shot has to make the movie better. Stuff gets trimmed, shots get added. These movies are big and expensive. I feel a responsibility to the people putting up the cash to make this the best

movie it can possibly be. The last thing I want is for people to come to *Jurassic Park III* and be disappointed."

Johnston would seem like the ideal director to helm a pressure-packed, big-ticket monster film. He is widely known as a meticulous filmmaker, one capable of sorting through the often contrary demands of a major special FX film and making sense of it all. Yet despite his background in optical magic, Johnston has quietly earned a reputation as being an actor's director. All of this came into

play during *Jurassic Park III*, which had the added distraction of a script that was seemingly in a constant state of rewrite.

Actor William H. Macy, who has complained long and loud about the confusion surrounding the ever-changing screenplay, nevertheless has given Johnston high marks for his consistency and focus on the set. Producer Larry Franco adds, "No matter what was going on, you could always count on Joe to straighten out the problems and keep the production going. He always seemed to have the answer." Creature maker Stan Winston applauds the ease with which Johnston moved back

decided not to," Johnston reveals. "As far as I know, I was the only one Steven considered for *Jurassic Park III*. I had no hesitation about taking this on. Steven warned me that these movies are really hard to make. While I knew, intellectually, what he was talking about on one level, I really had no idea how difficult this was going to be. Logistically, I knew it would be a nightmare."

But Johnston also knew that *Jurassic Park III* would play to his strengths because, as he readily admits, he is a near-maniacal adherent to the allotted time and budget. "I really like to stay on

community was that the director was a relatively soft yet competent filmmaker who could be counted on for a workmanlike, by-the-numbers job that would mimic Spielberg and not deviate too far from the established *Jurassic* formula of big dinosaurs, lots of action and a paucity of dialogue. Johnston has heard the stories, but is quick to deny them.

"I had a lot of creative freedom in molding this," he insists. "This is a Steven Spielberg production, and I really feel like I was hired to make this film for Steven. But I know he didn't hire me to make the movie the way he would make



Photos: Zade Rosenthal

One way to make this a bigger sequel was to cast a larger predator—the Spinosaurus.

and forth between the real and FX worlds, saying, "He had the edge on a lot of directors in that he comes from a special effects background. He knows the shorthand, he knows how things work." Actor Sam Neill gives the director points for "being an all-around nice guy" and "a director who was willing to let us try different things."

Typically, Johnston tends to take the accolades in stride, preferring to point up the fact that *Jurassic Park III* was, in his lexicon of credits, just another in a long line of learning experiences. "I look at this as one big student film," he says. "It's just another chance for me to learn more about what it is I do. And trust me, you can never learn it all. Anybody who says they know it all is yanking your chain."

Johnston and *Jurassic Park III* executive producer Steven Spielberg have had a long relationship, with the former earning his stripes on two of the Indiana Jones films and *Always*. "I knew Steven had liked *October Sky*, and I had told him that I was willing to direct *The Lost World* if he

schedule," he says. "I've always figured that I'm part of the scheduling process. If I know how long I think it will take to make this movie, then it's my responsibility

"I knew I would be better off leaving a lot of the real frightening moments to the audience's imagination."

ity to bring it in on that schedule. For me, moviemaking is always a daily juggling act. It's fun and nerve-wracking at the same time. Because once you leave a set, getting back to it is almost impossible."

At the time Spielberg tabbed Johnston to do *Jurassic Park III*, the buzz among the more cynical members of the Hollywood

it. He wanted me to make my own film, though I still wanted to be the third one in the series. I wanted to be perceived as a part of the *Jurassic Park* franchise and story. I was never going to attempt to make a movie that was in some other universe; I really wanted what I was going to do to feel like it was *Jurassic Park*. But at the end of the day, I knew this film was going to have my fingerprints all over it, and I didn't want those fingerprints to be used in court against me."

Following his selection, Johnston plunged into nearly a year's worth of work with a large group of writers. "The basic storyline wasn't set in stone when I came on," he notes. "There were other ideas that were explored and discarded. When we decided on this one, we all knew this was definitely the way to go."

The screenplay (credited solely to Peter Buchman at presstime) finds Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) researching new theories about the intelligence of the voracious velociraptors. A wealthy thrill-seeker played by Macy invites Grant

along on an aerial tour of the dinosaur breeding grounds of Isla Sorna, and the scientist, lured by the money involved, agrees to join the party. But their plane is brought down by one of the island's prehistoric inhabitants, and the survivors soon find themselves under attack by hungry beasts of all shapes and sizes—including the raptors, who give Grant and company a terrifying lesson in just how smart they are.

The filming of *Jurassic Park III* was the expected amalgam of starts and stops, the coordination of live and digital FX and the inevitable surprises largely associated with the constantly in-flux script. Johnston was forced to rethink his approach to making the film on an almost daily basis.

"Before we began filming each day, I would give myself a shot list that I could not possibly shoot," the director notes. "We'd get started and then, about two hours in, I would see how things were going and how much we would be able to get done. Then I would go back and say, 'OK, I can live without these four shots, but I need these two to make things work.' Directing this movie was a daily process of figuring things out."

And a good deal of his effort was spent adhering to the basic *Jurassic Park* tenets. "This is a movie about people trying to survive on an island full of dinosaurs," Johnston says. "It has to be scary and thrilling. Yes, we're going to see some blood and gore, but I went into this film with the attitude that it is often what you don't see that is more intense than what you do. I know the audiences for *Jurassic Park* films are always looking for a fun thrill ride, but they are also quite sophisticated. I knew I would be better off leaving a lot of the real frightening moments to the audience's imagination and, by doing that, I would be allowing myself more creative freedom."

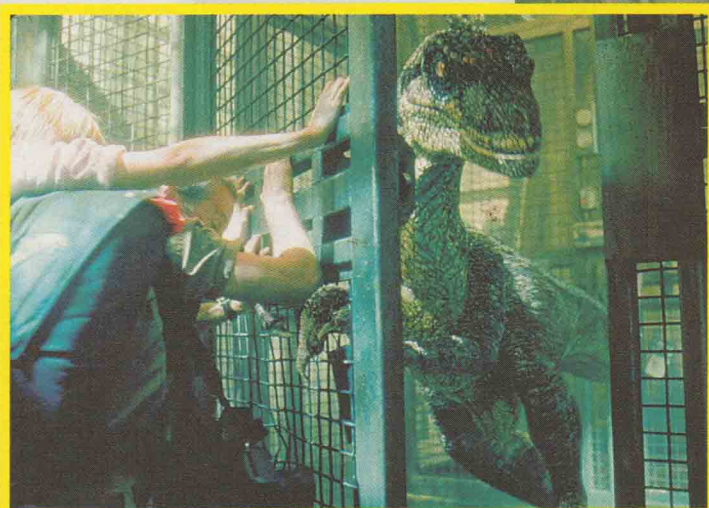
While claiming that some of his best moments came when he was directing the actors "not running and screaming from the dinosaurs," Johnston was well aware that the creature action—including such new sights as a flying reptile chase and a face-off between the T. rex and the heretofore unseen Spinosaurus—was the meat and potatoes of the *Jurassic Park III* experience. On these scenes, his FX background was of great assist when it came to the all-important communication between Winston's creature shop and Industrial Light & Magic.

"There was definitely a bit of short-hand going on between the shops," he



Never get between a dinosaur and its young—even if they're artificially spawned.

Photos: ILM



Johnston's copious FX experience means he knows how to give weight to CGI creations.

says, "and my having a special effects background did make the whole process a lot easier. And it also made for a different approach because, when I'm directing, my attitude is that I don't want to know what's involved in making it happen. I want to be free enough to say, 'Let's add such-and-such to this shot' without know-

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ing what it's going to cost. I understand the rules that you can and can't break, and we ended up breaking rules right and left on this film.

"My major goal was to come up with something new for Industrial Light &

Magic, and that was saying something because with the technology being what it is, there is not much that can't be done. But I remember on more than one occasion asking [on-set ILM supervisor] Jimmy Mitchell, 'Can you do this?' He would say, 'Well, we've never done it before, but I think we can.'"

A California native, Johnston is typical of the film craftsmen who came of age in the 1980s and honed their craft in widely divergent areas, on landmark films, while aiming toward the final goal of directing. Going under the more formal name of Joseph Johnston, he cut his teeth on the original *Star Wars*' miniature and optical units while also acting in an uncredited turn as a Death Star Trooper. He moved up to visual FX art director on *The Empire Strikes Back*, and filled the same position on *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Return of the Jedi*. By the mid-'80s, Johnston's reputation for quiet efficiency in the special FX field saw him taking on more diversified responsibilities: first as production designer on *Ewoks: The Battle for Endor* and *The Ewok Adventure*, then as 2nd unit art director in *Indiana Jones and the Temple*




This beast will find its way out of the cage soon enough...

story *October Sky*, grew in his maturity as a methodical and unflappable director.

"I don't know if I was always unflappable," Johnston notes. "If I think about it real hard, I'm sure I had those moments when I didn't always have it together. But I do know that, for me, taking the next step up to director was an ongoing challenge. I was dealing with major special effects, scope and spectacle and, most importantly, real live actors. It's a true juggling act to keep those balls in the air, but I always felt that I knew what I was doing and was up to the task of bringing those films in."

And he has continued to learn his craft on *Jurassic Park III*, admitting that directing all manner of prehistoric creatures has been a hook that has kept him going. He was also able to apply heretofore unused elements of his own style as he mixed and matched dinosaurs and humans. And while the buzz has been relatively hushed, there is talk that with *Jurassic Park III*, Johnston may have surpassed Spielberg at his own game.

The director chooses his words carefully on this subject. "It's hard to do something the way Steven does it," he points out. "Steven has always had a sense of what he can get away with. Sometimes what he gets away with is outrageous. I don't know if I've done anything better in this movie than Steven did with the previous *Jurassic Park* films; I know that he has a style, and I've been conscious of that style. When there has been an opportunity on this movie to capitalize on something Steven might have done in the previous films, I have really examined that, and know that Steven has sort of stretched this canvas for me. I want to paint on it much like Steven has, and yet still have it be my painting." 

of *Doom* and finally as 2nd unit director for **batteries not included*.

"I came from an era of special effects that's almost ancient history now," Johnston reflects. "Then, you'd build a model, put it in front of a bluescreen and composite it with a background. That approach was considered state-of-the-art at the time. Now it's a lot easier. But because I came up through all that, I understand the rules and, by association, I know how to break them."

Given his background, it came as no surprise that Johnston gravitated toward fantasy films when he took the step up to directing. And he did not begin with baby steps. *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (where he replaced Stuart Gordon) and *The Rocketeer* boasted almost wall-to-wall FX, but they were also a solid education for Johnston in the intricacies of dealing with flesh-and-blood actors and the cold, hard facts of being responsible. Johnston weathered these trials by fire and, in subsequent directorial efforts including *Jumanji*, the live-action portions of *The Pagemaster*, segments of *Young Indiana Jones* and finally the well-received coming-of-age



As if a plane crash and rampaging monsters aren't bad enough, the weather doesn't cooperate either.

Photo: Zade Rosenthal