



*The following is the gushy report I wrote immediately after my visit to the **GODZILLA** (2014) shoot. Additional notes are in Italics. By the time the text was cleared the film had come and gone and nobody was keen on printing it so here it is for your amusement. On-set photos are all by members of the crew.*

SATURDAY 22nd June 2013

I awoke at 3:30am to board the shuttle to the airport. It had been a week of little sleep since receiving the invitation on Monday. Suddenly a project had to be finished before the weekend came, travel arrangements needed to be made, and a lifelong dream was about to become reality, a strange reality laced with exhaustion, thrills and bemusement.

After hours of flights, heavy eyelids opened to find myself in Vancouver International Airport. EJ Foerster, the Second Unit Director, had sent a driver to pick me up. The Second Unit Director on GODZILLA... a driver... and me. Ridiculous, inconceivable! Yet there the driver was, holding a sign that read 'Nautilus', reaching out to shake a hand closely resembling mine. *'Nautilus' was the codename under which this Godzilla was being filmed.*

Dave "the Driver" Miller is a Vancouver native and a great guide to the city. As we drove through long leafy hilltop streets, passing one nasty fender-bender, he pointed towards Washington State visible far to the south, and near the end of the journey the rear of a street façade, "the WATCHMEN set". We pulled into the film studio complex, where a security guard eyed us warily before opening the gate. Later I was told that this guard had stopped an ice cream van entering the lot until it was redefined as a craft service vehicle. Dave took me upstairs to the Production Office to meet Adrienne and Jessica, who told me to relax, help myself to coffee and snacks and wait for EJ. Walls were lined with schedules, accounting forms, headshots of the cast and a chart showing Godzilla's size compared to humans, buildings and an aircraft carrier. The image of Godzilla was a simple profile graphic, unlikely to look much like His Majesty would in 2014. Leaning against a low table covered in trade magazines was a pair of in-line scooters; Adrienne said there was a scoreboard somewhere showing the top times for a circuit of the department. Gareth Edwards, the Director, was the current Ben Hur of the office.

Wanting to make sure I did not harm the movie I asked if photographs were permitted anywhere, which got a “no” and prompted the signing of a non-disclosure form. I had wanted a shot of Akira Takarada’s photo, showing that he plays a “Japanese Immigration Officer”, but the camera stayed in the bag all that weekend in Vancouver. *Takarada was in six Godzilla films including the very first one in 1954.* So with a little time on my hands I stood in the snack room trying to get my head around the fact that all this was actually happening. *Takarada’s scene was cut from the theatrical release. I was told there would be an extended edition, hopefully with the scene included, but as of 2018 this has yet to emerge.*

Suddenly EJ came striding into the office, radiating energy and warmth. “Do you want to see the Art Department?”

I think I said yes without stammering. It was just across the stairwell, behind a code-locked door. Display boards were covered in glossy prints of pre-production art, mostly visualisations of sets and locations. Tokyo in ruins, San Francisco ablaze, Hawaii flooded by a tsunami, secrets hidden beneath a jungle.... A submarine hung vertically in tropical trees, its propeller dangling above investigators carrying Geiger counters. Then my first glimpse: a familiar shape, although its head is proportionately smaller to the body, and the rows of dorsal plates more like jagged spikes than the leafy shapes we have seen before. Of course, many months of development lay ahead before the final design, but at this stage at least our boy was looking good. In some shots, Godzilla looms between San Francisco’s towers, a silhouette in the inferno. In others he bestrides inundated streets. As far as I can tell, this Godzilla isn’t looking for somewhere to lay eggs.

Wide tables were covered in set models. Most were intricate white foamcore miniatures, built by one guy EJ said, with tiny figures to show scale. These were accurate enough to be reference for the full size sets. In the centre of the room were large, messier constructions. One was a wrecked Chinatown. The most intriguing was a cavern interior I had glimpsed in the pre-vis art. Partially buried in the floor was a massive spinal column, with several ribs arcing from the ground. EJ casually described it as “Old Godzilla”.

“So, would you like to check out some sets?”

We headed outside and EJ drove across to the other side of the complex. The security guard was quite effusive this time once he realized who the driver was, which ironically held us up at the gates a lot longer, although EJ was happy to chat with him. Parking outside a huge structure, another guard let us in and EJ led the way past a black curtain blocking off the rest of the interior to reveal the largest set in the building. He asked, “Impressive, huh?”, as if he hadn’t noticed me gawping like a mudskipper.

The bulk of the space was taken up by the full scale version of the cavern. Colossal ribs and stalagmites poked towards the gantries far overhead, festooned with lights. Fearsome stalactites were suspended on cables. EJ took a photograph of me standing in front of the set with his own camera, then invited me to climb up on to the bones for some more. The texture and painting of the cave and bones was fantastic, enhanced by grey earth scattered about. Being an idiot I was wearing slippery smart shoes, but somehow managed to scramble on and off the set without mishap. A happy idiot, though. I never imagined I would ever touch Godzilla, let alone *stand inside him*.



The rack o' ribs set



Hard to tell, but I'm ecstatic.



In the belly of the beast.

This was followed by a walk through a partial ship's interior, housing the cabin used by the character played by Ken Watanabe, who I was delighted to hear was named Serizawa (*Dr Daisuke Serizawa was played in the original GODZILLA by Akihiko Hirata*). Beyond this consoles from a control room were stashed under plastic sheets, possibly from a nuclear power plant set seen in the art department. Perhaps this was the control room set which would be displayed at Comic-Con International in San Diego in July.

EJ drove out to the Nokia Corporation building in Burnaby, which was masquerading as the Janjira nuclear power plant, "Where Nature Is Power" according to the prop sign. Production vehicles, trees and strips of lawn lined the street. Vehicles and signage showed that the setting was Japan. Asian-American background actors were dressed as plant workers and security guards. A Libra Head camera mounted on a Super Techno Crane would be following the entry of a car carrying Bryan Cranston's character into the station. Cranston is usually identified as a star of 'Breaking Bad' these days, but 20 years ago he was supplying voices for *anime* dubs and a couple of episodes of 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers'. A stationary camera below would film the security barrier, looking past a gardener busy keeping the grass immaculate around the Janjira sign. Several rehearsals and takes would be required to co-ordinate all the people, vehicles and barrier-raising to EJ's satisfaction. In addition, location images

and light readings were being recorded by an effects supervisor who said cooling towers would be composited into the power plant scenes.

EJ had a seat inside a canvas enclosure crowded with monitors, control boards and crew. First Assistant Production Coordinator Kim Buckham and the Second Unit's Director of Photography Roger Vernon, who had worked with EJ on previous shows including the TWILIGHT trilogy (2010-12), flanked EJ watching monitors for each camera and behind them were people taking care of the sound, colour and footage needed by the effects department. Another assistant stood by EJ with a microphone and relayed instructions over a loud speaker. Previously shot scenes could be instantly replayed on the monitors, which came in very handy for matching actors' eye lines to as yet unseen monsters.

At this point I apologise for not remembering everyone's names and jobs. EJ introduced me to a lot of crew, usually as "Godzilla's Brain", although said brain was the worse for wear at this point. His brother-in-law is a friend from my Japan days who had told him about my obsession and lumped me with the nickname. EJ had checked out my website and found the poster August Ragone commissioned for Haruo

Nakajima's appearance at Monsterpalooza 2011).





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Haruo Nakajima at Monsterpalooza. Photo by Chris Mirjahangir. Nakajima was the main Godzilla actor from 1954 to 1972

EJ and Gareth Edwards asked for a copy each of the poster, followed by drawing GODZILLA's crew t-shirt and the set visit. My thanks to JD Lees (*G-Fan*), August and Ed Blair (*Famous Monsters of Filmland*) for sending them copies of their magazines. *When I was invited to the sets I asked if these editors, August and Godzilla artists like Bob Eggleton and Matt Frank could also come, but had no luck. Sorry guys! The reader is encouraged to check out their work.*



The crew shirt design, art directed by EJ Foerster.

Before the set visit I got the occasional call for Godzilla factoids, for example "So what does Godzilla eat?" Anyway, EJ ran a tight and happy crew and they were nice to the total stranger with the weird name in their midst. How nice, I was about to find out. One of the crew told me Raymond Burr, the lead actor in GODZILLA, KING OF THE MONSTERS (1956) and GODZILLA 1985, had been born in British Columbia, and was so delighted I hadn't known this that he announced to everyone in earshot "Hey, I found something Godzilla's Brain didn't know!"

By now the sky had cleared. A grey heron glided in to the pond across the road, a bright yellow Sulfur Butterfly flashed amongst the greenery and fluffy seeds drifted by. I was trying to keep out of everyone's way and out of the sun when EJ asked me another one of those questions you can guess the answer to:

"Would you like to be in the movie?"

I don't think I squealed like a little girl. Not out loud.

I was taken to the props and costumes people. The props man was called "Tony Props", although this might not have been his name at birth. I was dressed in white overalls and a safety helmet and Tony Props fitted me with identification tags. Mine was for "O. Matsumoto", his photo being as Tony put it, "the least hairy I could find" (I am hair-free).



O. Matsumoto then walked over to the gathering group of fellow Janjira workers, who seemed a little cool at first, understandably enough as they are professional performers working long hours and I was just thrown in as EJ's friend. However, after a little while they warmed up. I made it clear I wanted to not get in their way, and managed not to trip. One Chinese-Canadian later did a comedic double-take and exclaimed "Hey, you're white!", but I guess the odd *gaijin* might work at Janjira Japan. We spent moments between takes discussing which *kaiju* belonged to which studio.

The scene was classic Fleeing Crowd. We were spaced out in the lot in front of the building. Behind us was a crashed truck. A guard played by "Charlie" would wave panicking workers through the gates as the cooling towers collapse above and behind them, before taking off himself. The first run would be out into the street aiming at a fixed camera as closely as possible before veering left or right (*this might have*

made a dynamic shot in 3D but the close-ups weren't used in the final cut). The second run would be closer to Charlie as a handheld camera filmed him in close-up.

We rehearsed a little then went for take 1. On the cue of "Smoke up!" from the loud speaker, smoke blossomed from behind the truck and shrubbery. Then we heard "Rolling"... "Action!" and took off. By imagining messing up the shot I simulated fear of imminent death. Once everyone passed the camera we heard "Cut!" then "Reset!", which meant making our way back to our starting positions. Our wrangler remarked, "You guys have done this before!" After several takes of this we were feeling it in our knees and the afternoon seemed to be increasingly hot and humid, especially for terror-stricken people in overalls and helmets and, in my case, my lucky King Kong underpants. This is the sort of detail you don't get in *Film Comment*. *I played Matsumoto as someone out of breath from running all the way up and out of the power plant. A crew member asked if I was okay! However, my method performance was ignored by the Academy.*

Finally we heard the obscure technical term "Chips & balls!", which seemed to mean the scene was done. It was time to go to the next location.

This turned out to be the set Dave the Driver had pointed out. The WATCHMEN set had been dressed as a street in San Francisco's Chinatown (Bryan Sutton is the set designer for WATCHMEN and GODZILLA).



Forget it, Jake. It's the Chinatown set.

At one end the monitoring station was reassembled, and at the other, just like the model in the Art Department, there was an ornate gate, chipped and buckling, beyond which rose a mound of debris. Rubble and appropriate litter was everywhere. The street was lined with shop facades selling San Francisco postcards, Alcatraz t-shirts, dolls, figurines, fireworks and so on. Smashed cars slumped on the sidewalks. Colourful lanterns hung above. The crew was larger as a complex and dangerous scene was due to be shot after dark. At 8:30 it was lunchtime, which I spent with EJ and his son Jake in their trailer. He told me about his choice ski gear company, High Society, and they were also keen on checking out the Jazz Festival near their home in Aspen Colorado.

Darkness had fallen beyond the Watchmen walls, but within huge lights blazed and the world beyond the hill of wreckage was blocked by a huge green screen. In the ground between the screen and the mound lay large funnels, which shaped explosives. The pyro technicians could have supplied any colour or value of explosion and the choice tonight was dark. A flying harness was rigged up over the set so that the stunt double of hero Ford (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) could be spun out of the flames into a pile of boards. These were made of rubber. The Main Unit had already shot Taylor-Johnson's scenes here, so tonight's work was stunts and pick-up shots. The night's scenes had been reviewed on the monitors in a compilation of Main Unit footage, animatics and notes. At this point in the story, Ford and his team have explored the nest of the rival monsters, the Mutos, in a deep pit beneath Chinatown. Ford drops in a gas truck and sets it off.

Non-essential people were clustered at the far end of the set. Fire service people stood by. If the set caught fire we were to leave and not try to salvage any of it. Once the stuntman had done final rehearsals on his timing and flight, he took his position just over the crest of the debris. Final checks were made, then a wall of scarlet and yellow flames shot up, curling into black clouds, as "Ford" was sent arcing into the rubble.

Someone near me said, "That's Hollywood."

SUNDAY 23rd June 2013

By the time I reached my friend's home, hung out with him and his wife and taken notes on the day it was 2:00am. Somewhere out there, throughout the night, the Second Unit would be filming monster attacks, soldier attacks and general mayhem.

After a morning enjoying the family and their friends, and beautiful British Columbia, birthplace of Raymond Burr, it was back to town to meet EJ at Caffe Artigiano on West Pender Street and Thurlow. The Main Unit had just returned from their lunch. A section of street was blocked off, police real & fake and people dressed as soldiers stood around, and military and police vehicles were surrounded by background actors and crowds of bystanders. Smoke drifted across them. I hoped no unsuspecting passersby were too alarmed. Some of the Second Unit had another section of street blocked off just

around the corner and were unloading crushed, burned cars and chunks of rubble.





Wreckage



You can just see the rain cranes behind the glare of my head.

EJ arrived around 4 o'clock and introduced me to Gareth Edwards, as "Godzilla's Brain" of course, at his monitoring station. We spoke briefly, mostly about where we were born in England (*he was born in Nuneaton, Warwickshire*). He was obviously extremely busy but he did invite me to "Get wet" and join the action as a member of the Fleeing Crowd. Here's where you'll really want to slap my idiot face: I said the Second Unit had already filmed me. I didn't want anyone to spot me in two different scenes. Perhaps I could have just been an extraordinarily unlucky Janjira employee. *Also in consideration, I had*

found out I would be crashing on someone's couch that night and turning up soaking wet might have



seemed rude.

Gareth Edwards and the storyboard.

Edwards was soft spoken and looked relaxed and thoughtful in the midst of the huge production, focused on improving the storytelling with each take. You might have seen his film *MONSTERS* (2010), and perhaps his previous simulations of disasters befalling Mankind in the television documentaries 'Death Star' (2002), 'Magnetic Storm' (2003), 'End Day' and 'Hiroshima' (both 2005), and 'Perfect Disaster' (2006). *He would later direct ROGUE ONE: A STAR WARS STORY (2016) and is an Executive Producer on GODZILLA: KING OF THE MONSTERS (2019).*

So I lurked beside the monitors, set up halfway down the block. The street had been dressed with facades, signage and vehicles to simulate downtown San Francisco. Actors playing soldiers were snoozing in their seats. Storyboards were propped against the wall, executed in digital freehand and a collage of building photos. The hero today was Ellie (Elizabeth Olsen). Traffic was jammed up so people milled between the coaches and cars. (*In the scene*) a flying male Muto swoops in to the canyon and lands on a roof. The crowd backs off, but then the pointy legs of a female Muto strike the street behind them. Then, off to one side, dorsal spikes arise from the harbour....

The Muto sketches were rough and, as with Godzilla, much will happen to their design before the film is done. At this stage they looked more like foes for Gamera. Their heads reminded me of Gyaos and the scuttling female's limbs recall Legion (*see the excellent Gamera trilogy of 1995-1999*). Of the couple of monster fights I saw in storyboards and animatics, neither evidenced breath or beam weapons.

EJ introduced me to a few people including Unit Production Manager Jim Rowe, another veteran of WATCHMEN and MAN OF STEEL. Taking a breather nearby was Visual Effects Supervisor Jim Rygiel. I could not resist bothering him, as he had worked on so many effects-heavy shows such as the LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy (2001-3) and STARSHIP TROOPERS (1997). Like almost everyone in the Main Unit he was wary of questions until he got a nod from EJ. Godzilla would be about 350 feet tall in this film, with some leeway depending on the scene, and all digital, although Toho had been pressuring him to use their miniatures department. I was hoping for some knowledge, or even respect, of the pioneering work of Eiji Tsuburaya, but there did not seem to be any from the few effects department people I buttonholed in each unit, which cracked this wistful fanboy's heart a little. I am sure the new Godzilla's effects will be as realistic as much as a giant monster movie can be.

Mounted on a crane above us was the rain machine, an array of arms each ending with a rotatable head fitted with a couple of L-shaped nozzles. Olsen took her place between the cars, a Steadicam held just in front of her, and put herself into the moment. The rain began to pour. The background actors stood there soaking although Olsen was shielded until the last moment by towels and a large umbrella. On a megaphoned cue of "Rain up!" the downpour kicked into high gear and everyone got soaked. Their heads looked up to the east. "Impact!" and they all stumbled back as Muto 1 appeared. "Impact 2!" and they span around to see Muto 2 has blocked their way. "Nautilus!" and our hero rose from nearby Vancouver Harbour.

Although 'Nautilus' was used here and the logo on crew chairs and so on is an 'N', the real name of the film seems to be common knowledge. I overheard bystanders telling others this was GODZILLA.

Between each take the actors would shelter from the rain as it wound down. Lucky ones found towels, although these became in short supply. Olsen, draped in towels and dressed in hospital scrubs, consulted with Edwards. She seemed dedicated and listened intently to any suggestions. To the other side I saw people take off their shoes and wring out their socks, which were sometimes lined with plastic

bags. I guess if you're in a North American Godzilla movie you run the risk of trench foot.



The next set-up required only half the rain machine in action. Olsen and a crowd ran for cover from the monster clash behind them. Surprisingly, none of the performers asked me for advice. Once almost all the people are sheltered, soldiers close the doors. In a reverse shot we would see Godzilla's head coming into view just as the doors close. It was a smaller scale set-up but required quite a few takes to co-ordinate the crowd, Ellie's glances behind her and the doors closing on them. By this time EJ had left for the Second Unit location on Eveleigh Street, and I was getting nothing but suspicious looks, so I headed his way.



EJ on the 2nd Unit location. Background left, the raised platform described below. Background right, the "hospital entrance".

Down the end of the street, past the wreckage, the monitor station had been set up just inside a multi-level car park. To its right was a scene of harried staff and soldiers at the entrance of the San Francisco General Hospital. Once this was done, a platform was quickly constructed in the road, surrounded by a track for a camera mounted on wheels. While this was being set up I talked with Sound Boom Operator Donald D Brown about his many shows, including MAN OF STEEL and PERCY JACKSON (both 2013), but

especially his tales of Sam Peckinpah.



Don Brown with sound boom.

A pair of actors dressed in security uniforms climbed on the platform. The moving camera filming from below transferred attention from the man to the woman to the missile-carrying helicopter which would be passing overhead. Both scenes were nailed pretty swiftly. The action was being followed by an effects supervisor, who graduated from the film school in Bournemouth, England, and now lived in Vancouver. He would shoot plates of the area so the environment could be tiled and the helicopter composited in. He seemed keen on seeing the 1990s Gamera trilogy.

At 7:30 it was the Second Unit's lunch break, and afterwards, time for me to leave. EJ, Jake and my friend had arranged a place to couch surf at. Again, EJ would be shooting all night then at 6:30 the next morning fly down to San Diego to film on an aircraft carrier. His next scene on this evening would involve soldiers on a tower roof top, looking down on the battered street as it trembled from the stride of the awesome Godzilla.



Monitor shot showing the 2nd Unit mayhem