

cinefex

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Q&A: Eli Sasich
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INTERVIEW BY JODY DUNCAN

In 2008, Occidental College student Eli Sasich wrote the script for a 21-minute short film intended to be his thesis project for a degree in art history and visual arts. Titled *HENRI*, the screenplay was set aboard a ghost ship adrift in space. A malfunctioning life-support system has killed the crew, and the ship's part-organic matter, part-computer control system — Hybrid Electronic / Neuron Responsive Intelligence — is the sole survivor. Haunted by memories of the ship's dying captain, and a beautiful woman and young boy at a beach, HENRI is moved to interact physically with the real world, and thus assembles a robotic body in which to explore the ship.

Through the help of friends and family, Sasich raised \$15,000 to fund the project. Though he attempted to return those funds when *HENRI* proved to be too ambitious for a thesis project, his donors insisted that he keep it as seed money for his next film project — whenever and whatever that might be — and the young filmmaker dutifully put it aside, with thanks.

HENRI continued to tug at him, even as he returned to his native Salt Lake City and began working as a video editor. Using the original \$15,000, plus money raised through



Kickstarter, Sasich finally went into production on *HENRi* in 2010. What followed was a two-year odyssey into the perilous, challenging but often rewarding world of low-budget, independent filmmaking. Driving Sasich throughout was a piece of advice offered by the late makeup and effects master Stan Winston, whom he met in a chance encounter as a teenager in 2001 ...

Tell me about meeting Stan.

I met him at ComicCon. I was just wandering the floor, and I saw Stan Winston Studios' booth. I was this wide-eyed, 16-year-old kid, and Stan Winston was one of my heroes, along with Dennis Muren, Doug Trumbull, Phil Tippett and all of those guys. So I went over to his booth, and Stan himself was just standing there, looking at some papers. I introduced myself, and he was so gracious. We ended up talking for a good fifteen, twenty minutes.

What did the two of you talk about?

I told him how much I respected his work and the characters that he'd brought to life; and he asked what I wanted to do. I told him that I wanted to direct. I said: 'I know how hard that is; I'm not naïve' — even though I probably was back then. And he said, 'Well, if not you, then who?' That was so simple, but so true, and it has always stuck with me. That was Stan's whole thing, daring to dream.

When you first wrote HENRi, you intended it to be your thesis project for college. What was the original impetus for the story?

Well, part of it was a practical thing. During the time I was looking for my thesis proj-





The screenplay for a 21-minute science fiction short – written by aspiring filmmaker Eli Sasich for an unrealized college thesis project – eventually came to fruition as HENRi, the story of a hybrid brain/computer intelligence system that becomes the sole survivor of a spaceship, the Pythagoras, adrift in space.

ect, I learned that there was a standing spaceship set in Laurel Canyon. I went to see it, and I thought, ‘Oh man, this would be great for some type of sci-fi film.’ I was interested in sci-fi, anyway, because I’d started reading Philip K. Dick and that sort of thing. And my thinking was: ‘If I do a sci-fi movie, I won’t have to build a set — and so that’s what sparked the story. I wrote it with the intention of shooting on that set, and doing the HENRI character as a full-size bunraku-type of puppet; but it didn’t work out. It was too ambitious, and there were liabilities issues with the school; and so, I wrote a paper for my thesis, instead, and shelved the project.

(After graduating college and returning to Salt Lake City, Sasich found another lover of old-school effects in Clark Schaffer, a model maker and effects technician with credits on A-list Hollywood productions such as Speed and the Iron Man films. Schaffer also had his own effects facility in Salt Lake City.)

Tell me about meeting Clark.

I met him through my work doing video editing. I went to his shop, and he had all of these cool miniatures and elements of effects work he’d done for big movies. So we started talking about our love for those kinds of effects, just geeking out about all the great effects films and the heyday of visual effects. Eventually, we started talking about HENRI — because I was still obsessed with it. It was like the one that got away that I couldn’t let get away. Clark and I were meeting about another project entirely, but it seemed like every time we met, we wound up talking about HENRI. So finally I said,



'We're always talking about *HENRi* – let's just do *HENRi*.'

In college, you had decided that it was too ambitious for a thesis project. Weren't you concerned that it was going to be too ambitious for an independent film project, as well? You didn't even have access to the free spaceship set at this point!

That's where Clark came in. He suggested that, instead of shooting it full size, we build all of the sets as miniatures – which would cut down on costs significantly. A storyboard artist friend of mine and I storyboarded the entire short, and I took that to Clark, and we figured out, shot by shot, what we would need to build. Of course, building the miniatures was just one part of the equation. Those miniatures had to be lit and shot correctly, too.

As a director, how much experience had you had shooting miniatures?

Zero. My only 'experience' was reading in *Cinefex* and in 'making of' books about what others had done with miniatures! I needed someone who had a lot of experience shooting miniatures; and so, I went to IMDb and looked up 'director of miniature photography,' and I saw that someone named Tim Angulo had been the miniature effects DP on *The Dark Knight*. I thought, 'There's some great miniature shots in that!' So I looked up his website and sent him a blind email, telling him about *HENRi* and explaining that I needed a director of miniature photography.

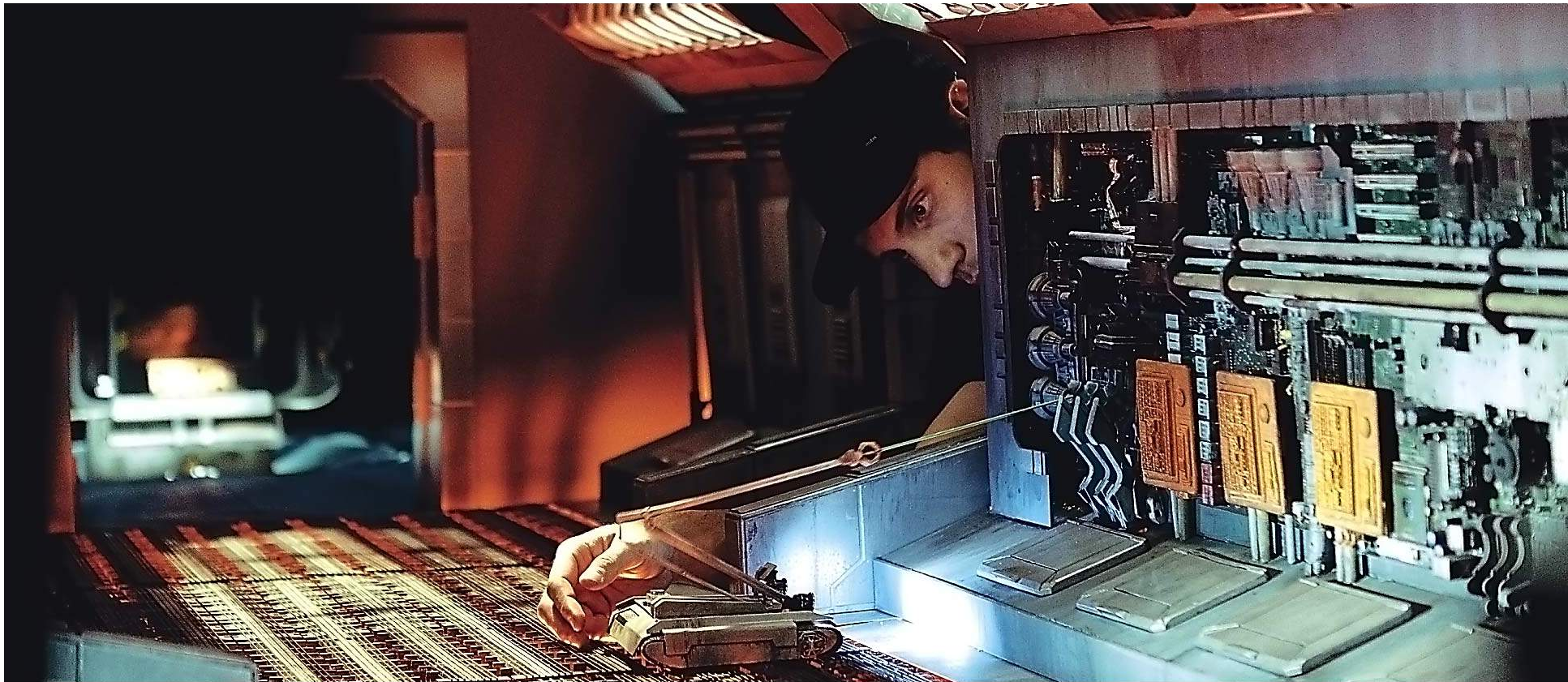
That was gutsy.

I'm headstrong in that way. I never have any shame in asking. Of course, I didn't really expect to hear back from him. I just contacted him because he seemed to be the best, and I wanted to aim high. So I sent him this email, along with some photographs and a





Alone and haunted by memories of human contact, the ship's Hybrid Electronic / Neuron Responsive Intelligence – HENRI – control system assembles a robotic body made of spare parts as a means of interacting with the physical world of the derelict spacecraft. To make the film in his native Salt Lake City, Sasich gathered veteran effects practitioner Clark Schaffer, master director of miniature photography Tim Angulo, producer Jefferson Richard and visual effects supervisor Matt Hoffman of BluFire Studios. Budgets were low, but enthusiasms ran high as Sasich and his small crew resurrected old-school visual effects techniques to make HENRI a reality.



The independent filmmakers cut costs by shooting HENRI almost entirely on quarter-scale miniature sets built by Clark Schaffer and his crew. Scaled spaceship interiors included a cockpit, corridor, sleeping quarters, and observation, telescope and engine rooms, all of which are explored by HENRI. Initially, Sasich intended to capture all of his HENRI shots in-camera using a 16-inch-tall rod puppet. Sasich positions a remote control vehicle – called ‘SAM’ for Systems Assistance & Mechanic – in the miniature corridor set.

brief synopsis, and he emailed me back a couple of days later! He said, 'This looks interesting — send me the script.' So I sent him the script, and he read it; and a couple of days later, we talked on the phone for about an hour. He said, 'Look, I've never done a short, but my wife says that I need to give back, and I feel as if I do, too — so I'm going to do your film.' We literally couldn't have done it without him. He turned out to be a great teacher and collaborator.

A similar thing happened with producer Jefferson Richard, didn't it?

Yes, same thing. I knew I needed a really experienced producer, and I looked Jefferson up on IMDb. He lived in Park City, Utah, at the time, and, like Tim, he had only done bigger features. But we met and, again, he was drawn to the idea of the movie, and so he came onboard. I can't overstate how much work he did. He was absolutely essential to getting *HENRI* done.

Tell me about casting your two human characters — the ship's captain and the human manifestation of HENRI we see at the end of the movie. In both cases, you cast actors who had particularly strong identifications with high-profile genre films of the past: Keir Dullea from 2001: A Space Odyssey and Margot Kidder from Superman.

I really wanted to get those types of names into the film. I thought it would give the movie a nice sense of history, especially since it is kind of an homage to the old sci-fi films. So I told Jefferson: 'I'd love to have someone like Keir Dullea for HENRI. How cool would it be to have him play the opposite character from what he played in *2001*? Instead of Dave, he'd be playing HAL in this one.' And Jefferson said, 'Well, why don't we get him?' Keir was in New York at the time, and when we contacted him, he said: 'If you can



come to New York to shoot my scene, I would love to be a part of this. The script spoke to me.’ He immediately understood the connection to *2001*.

Tell me about casting Margot Kidder.

I knew I wanted a woman as the captain, and I wanted someone who had some history and weight. Jefferson had a friend who had been Margot’s roommate in college, so we knew we could probably get to her. So we did, and she said ‘yes.’

The real star of the film, of course, is HENRI. For me, the design of that robot is one of the film’s brilliant strokes, because it elicits such an empathic response from the viewer.

The credit for that goes to two very talented production artists we had working with us — Craig Sellars and Thomas Pringle — whom I met through an online forum. They are both in Canada, and so I’ve never met them in person — I just talked to them on the phone.

What guidance did you give them as they started to design HENRI?

I told them that it was really important that HENRI look like a junkyard robot. I’d drawn some stick figures that included the asymmetrical eyes and his peg leg, and I sent those to them. I also gave them some reference of past characters I’d liked. Then they came up with the design, and they pretty much nailed it with their first attempt.

Since you’d be shooting on miniature sets, HENRI was going to have to be either a scaled puppet or a CG character. Given your love of old-school effects, I assume you preferred to go with the former.

I never wanted to go in the direction of CG. For one thing, I didn’t have the budget





Tim Angulo sets up a shot in the engine room that houses HENRI. Recognizing that his film project needed a top-notch director of miniature photography, Sasich sent a cold-call email to Angulo, a distinguished 25-year veteran in the field, with credits on high-profile projects such as Armageddon and The Dark Knight. Taken by the screenplay, Angulo agreed to go to Salt Lake City for two weeks to shoot HENRI – his first-ever short film.



First assistant camera operator Mark Weiler and gaffer Alexander Lee adjust lights within the sleeping chamber miniature. HENRI's exploration of the sleeping chamber reveals that the Pythagoras' hypersleeping crewmembers have expired and been reduced to skeletons due to a malfunction in the ship's life-support system.

for it. But more than that, I wanted to do it like it would have been done in the past. So we decided to do it with a quarter-scale rod puppet that measured 16 inches tall. We had a full-size insert head and hand, but we would shoot the majority of HENRI's scenes with this quarter-scale rod puppet. We'd shoot it motion control, with puppeteers manipulating the rods, and then we'd shoot a clean plate so we could remove the rods in post.

(Clark Schaffer and his crew spent four months building the puppet and the miniature spaceship interiors, which included a cockpit, corridor, sleeping quarters, observation room, telescope room and engine room. The only full-size sets were a two-wall section that was used for extreme closeups of full-size insert elements and the full-size chair in which the ship's captain converses with HENRI before dying. The crew also built a spaceship model for full-body shots of the craft floating in space.)

Tell me about the design and construction of the ship, as seen in exteriors.

I have to give Clark full credit for the design of the spaceship. I wanted something that looked lived-in, that looked industrial and functional. I gave Clark some ideas, and then he did a sketch. We did two or three tweaks until we came up with the shovel-nose and thin body, which I really liked.

Did Clark build that model, as well?

A model maker named Randy Cooper — who's worked with Clark quite a bit — built it from scratch. He had molds from different models, and he took pieces from those to build this custom shape, which measured four and a half feet long. That ship is still sitting



in my parents' garage in Utah.

How did you shoot it?

We shot it greenscreen, motion control, and then put in a CG starfield. I wanted to shoot it that way because, again, that's the way they used to do it, shooting multiple motion control passes.

All of the models were ready to go, I assume, by the time you starting shooting. When did the shoot start, and how long was it scheduled to be?

Our first day was June 14, 2010, and we shot over the next two weeks. I had been talking to Tim Angulo throughout preproduction, of course, on the phone and via Skype. And then he came to Utah. I moved back in with my parents so he could have my apartment for those two weeks — which was a way to cut costs.

What were the main challenges of that first two-week shoot?

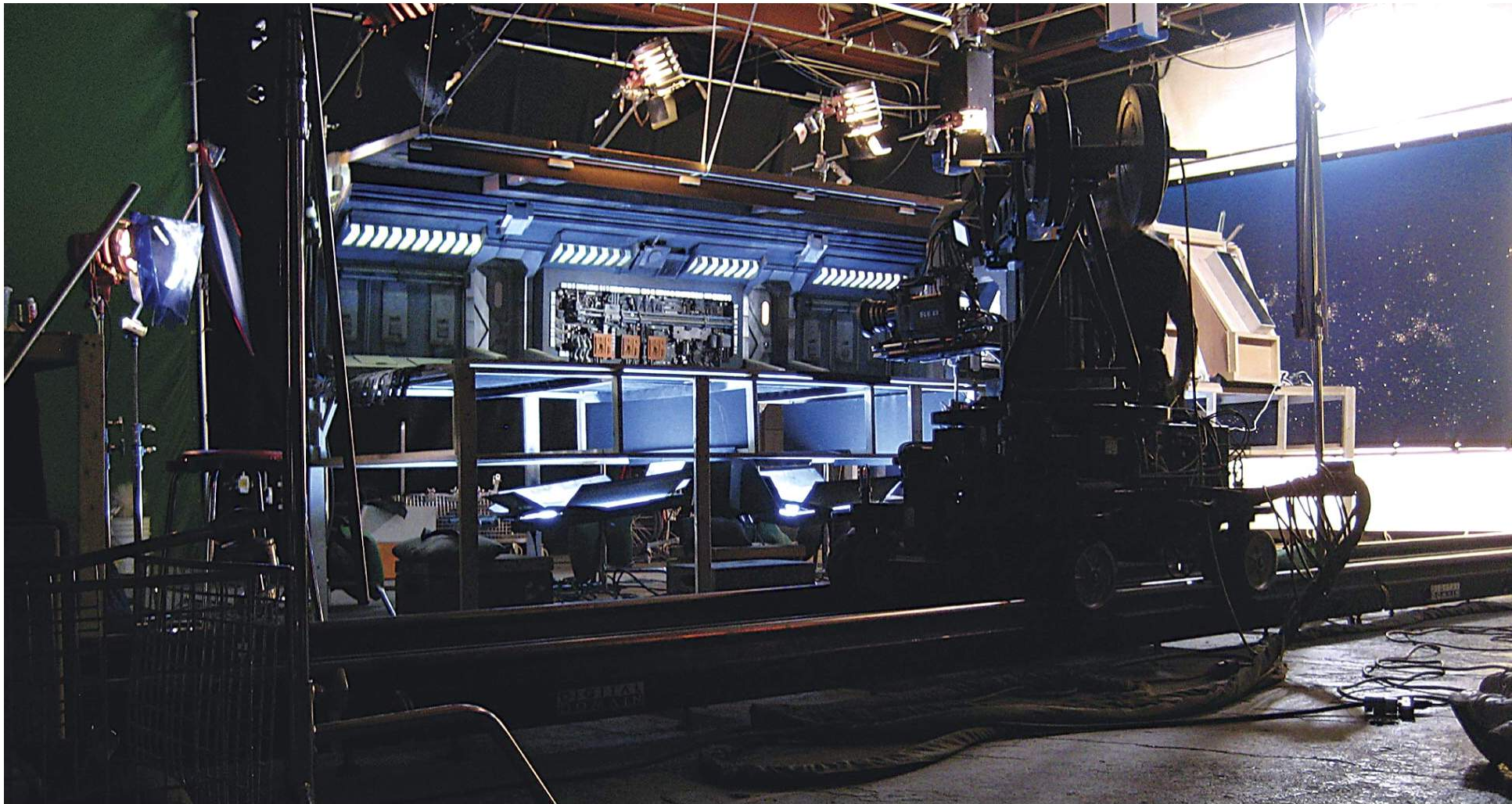
The most challenging part, by far, was trying to get a performance out of the HENRI puppet. Even though we had tried to get professional puppeteers, we wound up with friends and other crewmembers puppeteering it. I jumped in, when necessary, too. It turned out to be a big mistake not having professional puppeteers.

How many people would it take to puppeteer a HENRI shot?

If it was a full-body shot, five or six people. One would be on each leg, one on the torso, one on each arm, and one on the head. But partly because of our inexperience, and partly because of limitations of the puppet itself, we would do 20 or 30 takes and still not get something that worked.

Did it get any better as the shoot went on and you gained experience?



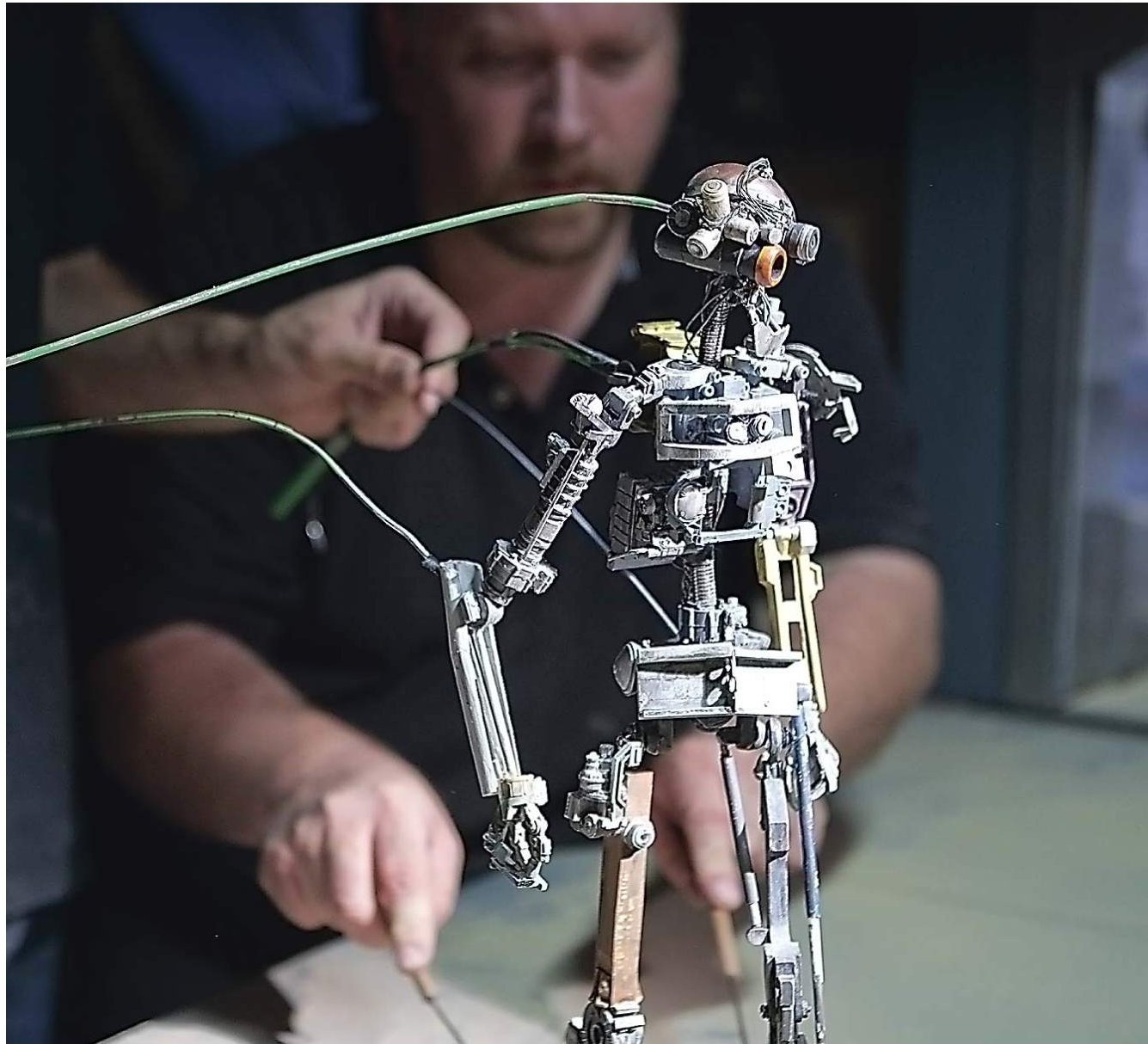


A motion control setup for the corridor set. Motion control enabled Angulo and Sasich to shoot repeat passes with and without the scaled HENRI puppet in frame. Postproduction crews used clean passes of sets to paint out rods and puppeteers in final shots.



Model maker Randy Cooper works on a full-size insert head used for HENRI closeups. Production artists Craig Sellars and Thomas Pringle translated Sasich's original stick-figure drawings of a junkyard robot with asymmetrical eyes and a peg leg into a final HENRI design.

The 16-inch-tall HENRI rod puppet saw much action during the shoot, but the small scale of the puppet, coupled with the inexperience of the non-professional puppeteering crew, resulted in a less than satisfying HENRI performance. Sasich ultimately replaced all but 15 rod puppet shots with a CG HENRI that had been modeled – somewhat on a whim – by a digital artist at the Salt Lake City studio, and was then rendered, animated and composited into shots by BluFire Studios.



We got better in some shots, depending on the camera angle. Every once in a while, we'd get magic in a shot — and we could see it when it happened. But it didn't happen very often. Most of the time, I just had to call shots at 24 takes and move on — whether they were working or not — because I couldn't spend all day getting one shot right. We just kept going.

It must have been very stressful to realize that your Plan A for getting your HENRI shots — which was also your Plans B through Z — wasn't working.

It was terrifying! Eventually, I had to make a decision, because we were getting more and more behind. Fortunately, on the first day of shooting, a guy working at the same studio had asked me if he could make a HENRI computer model. And I said: 'Sure, why not? Go for it!' He wanted to do it for free, and I thought maybe we could use it on the poster or something. I had no idea that it would save our butts.

Because you wound up using that CG model for some of your HENRI shots?

Yes. After that first two weeks of shooting, I did a rough assembly, and I could see from that first cut that HENRI only worked in about 10 percent of the shots. Part of it was because we didn't have real puppeteers operating the puppet, but part of it was the puppet itself. It was a beautiful piece of work, and the model team did an incredible job on it, but it should have been bigger. It had a tendency to blow the scale in shots. I would look at a clean plate of one of the miniature sets, and it would look full scale. That same shot with the puppet in it would suddenly look miniature. So that was a lesson learned. Of course, if the puppet had been bigger, the sets would have had to be bigger, which we couldn't afford on our budget.



So you did this first rough cut and realized that you were going to have to ditch a lot of the puppet shots and replace them with a digital HENRI.

Right. So then I started looking for a visual effects company that could do that. I'd worked with BluFire Studios on a few projects. They were doing a lot of television and commercial work, and they'd done a dragon movie with a CG dragon I thought looked really good. So I started talking to them, and they said, 'Yeah, we could do it — but it's going to be expensive.'

There wasn't really room for 'expensive' in your budget, was there?

Not at all. But they really got behind the movie and agreed to do our CG HENRI shots. And that was incredibly freeing when we did our reshoots because it meant I didn't have to worry about where the puppeteers were going to be. We would still do a walk-through with the puppet for lighting and reference, but I could shoot it however I wanted.

You just shot clean plates then, with the intention that BluFire would add in the digital HENRI robot?

Yes, but I also shot an actor — named Elwon Bakly — who stood in as HENRI. Before, I hadn't really been able to direct HENRI's performance. I was just happy if we got the puppet to move right. Now, I could actually think about things like character and emotion. And Elwon gave a great performance, walking that line between robotic and human behavior.

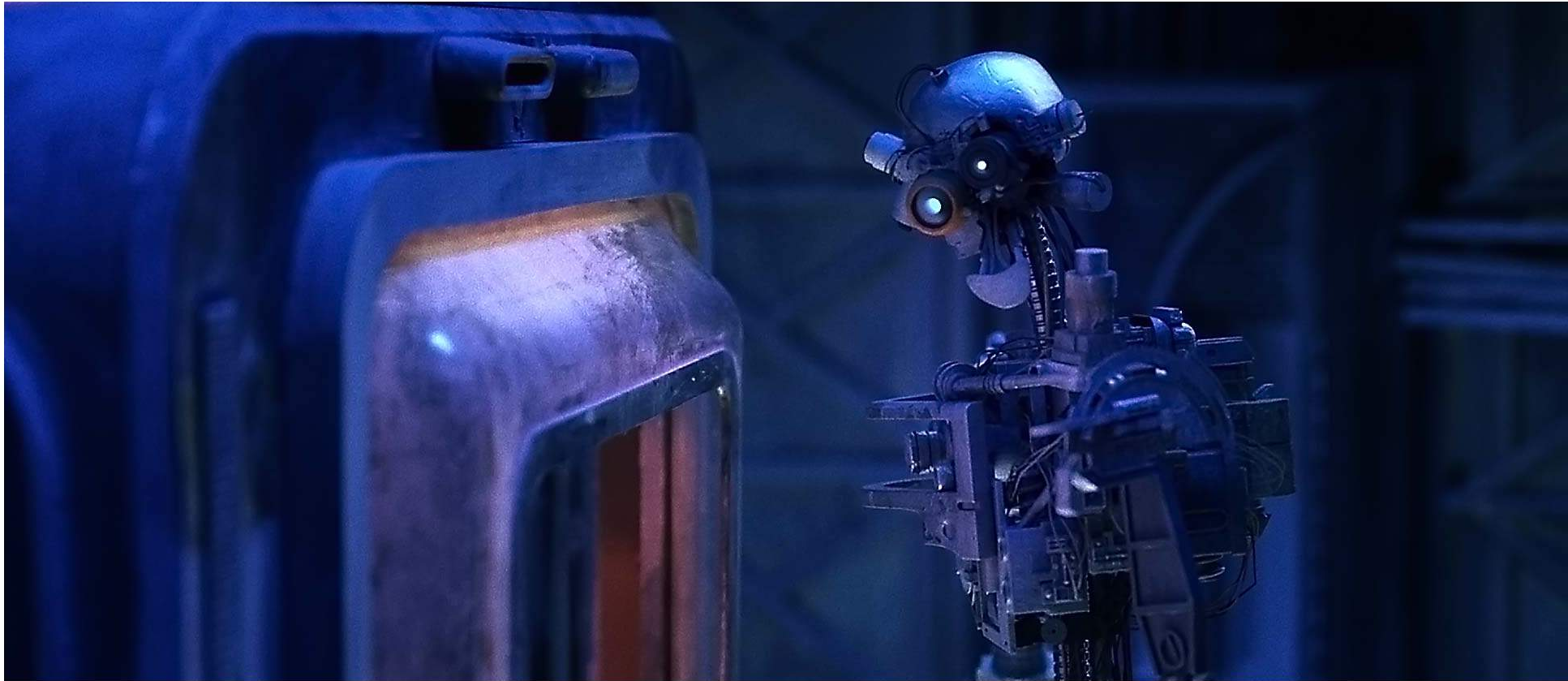
Did you just shoot him on an empty stage?

Pretty much. If there was interaction with a set piece, we'd put something in there — but mostly it was just shooting the actor as HENRI, matching the original puppet shots.





First assistant director Daniel Midgley, Eli Sasich and Clark Schaffer puppeteer HENRI in the sleeping chamber set. Full-body HENRI shots required up to six rod-manipulating puppeteers – one on each leg, one on each arm, and one each on the head and torso.



HENRI stares into the engine room compartment that once housed his brain. When a first rough cut of the film revealed that the rod-puppet delivered a satisfactory performance in only 10 percent of the shots, Sasich made the decision to shoot clean plates into which BluFire would incorporate a computer animated HENRI. The CG approach – though not what Sasich had originally intended – afforded the filmmaker far more freedom in moving the camera, as it obviated the need to frame out puppeteers.



In a four-month-long preproduction schedule, Clark Schaffer's model crew built the Pythagoras model by casting pieces from various spaceship molds and rearranging them into a custom form featuring a shovel-shaped nose.

And then I re-edited the film, and gave BluFire three images for each shot – the clean plate, the original puppet shot, and the actor as the robot – which their animators used as reference for key-framing the digital HENRI performance.

In the final film, how many shots of the rod puppet were you able to keep?

Fifteen or 16 shots. The match between the rod puppet and the digital puppet was really good. BluFire did a fantastic job. Matt Hoffman was our visual effects supervisor there, and he oversaw everything. Matt and BluFire worked on *HENRI* for about a year, doing about 60 CG HENRI shots, as well as a lot of composites. I think there are only 10 shots in the whole movie that don't have some kind of visual effects work.

You released the film early 2013 – about two years from the time you started preproduction. What has been the film's life since you finished it?

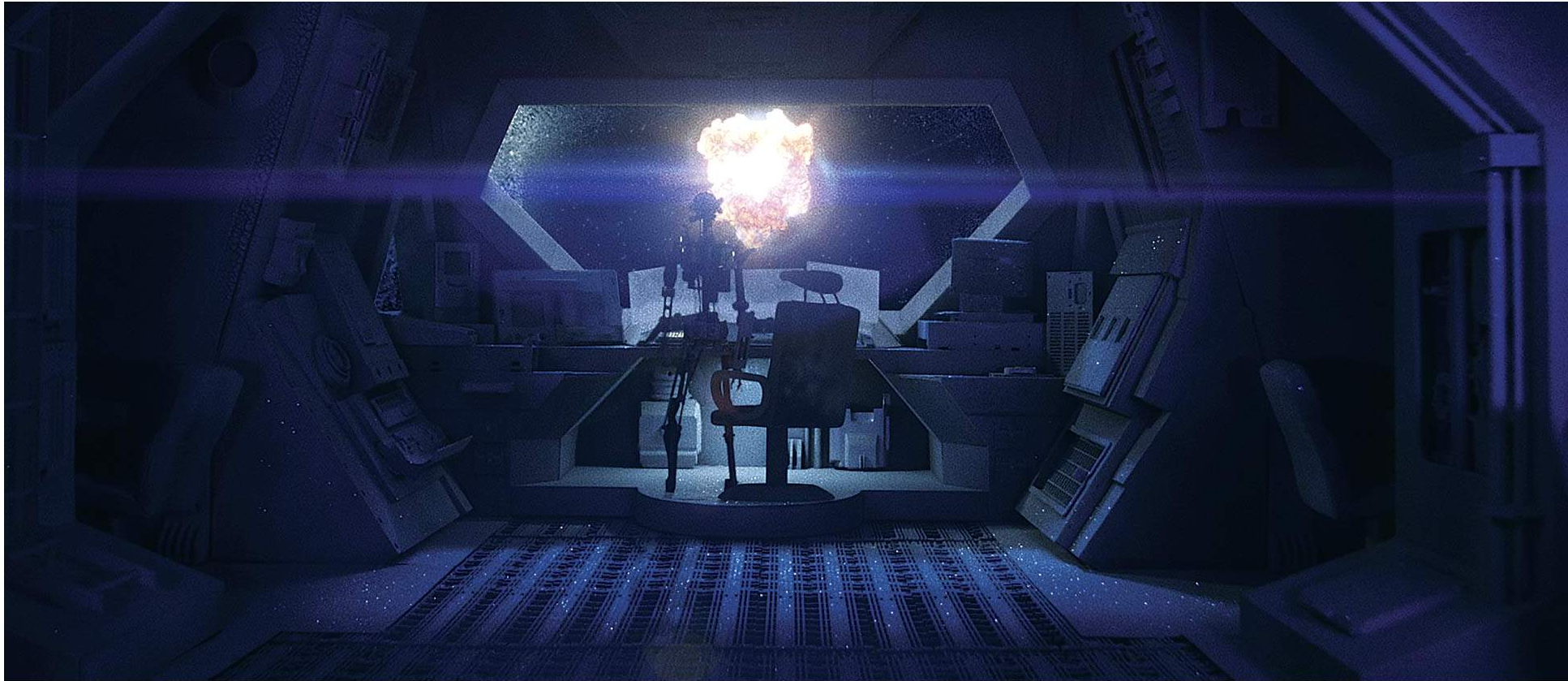
We premiered it at LA Shorts Fest, and people responded very well to it. After that, we won best international short film at the Toronto After Dark Film Festival, as well as best sci-fi short at the Philip K. Dick Film Festival. We've done festivals in New York, Napa and San Diego, and we were just accepted into the London Sci-Fi Festival. We've also released the film online.

There's something about HENRI that touches people. I was struck by how many times in this interview you mentioned people wanting to be a part of it, just because it 'spoke' to them. Clark comes onboard, even though he's used to working on much bigger films. Tim signs on to a short for the first time, because it speaks to him. Jefferson comes on. BluFire gives you a huge discount on the digital effects, again because the project moves them to be involved.





For exterior views of the Pythagoras in space, Tim Angulo shot motion control passes of the practical spaceship model against greenscreen. BluFire Studios integrated that model photography with computer generated star fields in postproduction.



In the film's final moments, HENRI and the Pythagoras are engulfed in a supernova explosion. Production shot two passes of the quarter-scale cockpit set, one with greenscreen outside the cockpit window, and the other with interactive lighting representing the supernova, which BluFire Studios created using a custom particle setup in Eyeon Fusion. BluFire also provided a digital HENRI and captain's chair, tracking both to the original plate passes.

It's true — *HENRi* really attracted people and pulled everything together. There's something about the story that people connect to. It's probably the same thing that captured me and wouldn't let me go. There's a very human heart to it, and people continue to respond to that at these festivals.

What happens now?

With *HENRi*?

With *Eli*.

Well, I made the film because I loved it, but I always knew that it would also be a calling card. So, when it was done, I moved back to Los Angeles and showed *HENRi* to agents. And even though it was a very different kind of sci-fi film, they responded to it, and I wound up signing with an agency. I have a low-budget sci-fi script that I'm working on with a friend, and then another indie feature that I wrote alone. So I've got those two things going. Ultimately, my goal is to have films on the big screen, so I'm pursuing that, fighting the good fight. Of course, thousands of other people are out there doing the same thing.

Yes ... but if not you, then who?

Exactly!

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