

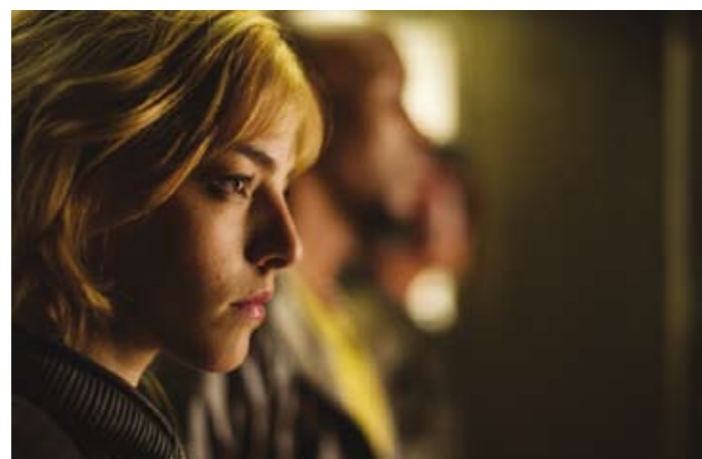


# A WITNESS TO HISTORY

*Joe Alblas has been privileged to document some of the greatest moments of human history, and although he might have been working on a film set at the time, he still had to capture the action live as it happened*

WORDS **TERRY HOPE** PICTURES **JOE ALBLAS**

“I create ‘make believe you were somewhere else’ images, by using a combination of lighting set-ups, props and locations”



**IMAGES** Fast shutter speeds and a housing for the camera are vital to capturing stills, quickly and quietly, on a movie set. Working closely with the director of photography lets Joe Alblas plan his shots without getting under the team's busy feet. His stills are of huge importance but he's more of a voyeur on-set - for scenes, such as the explosion above, he's expected to work alongside the film crew to capture the same moment.

The world of film stills is a very different place today than it once was. Forget those glorious, staged Hollywood classics by the likes of George Hurrell and Clarence Sinclair Bull; now it's all about realism and images that could essentially pass as virtual screen grabs from the movie. Those like South African photographer Joe Alblas, who specialises in this area, need all the razor-sharp reactions of a top photojournalist while being nimble enough to keep out of the way of a constantly moving film crew and cast of actors.

This is an endlessly challenging and stimulating job, and Joe's working day regularly involves being asked to produce stills of epic scenes set up as part of a big budget film or TV production. For example, towards the end of 2011 he spent three months photographing *Mankind: The Story of All of Us*, a landmark History Channel documentary series. In the process, he found himself confronted by the ice age, the battle of Megiddo, the sacking of Rome, the demise of Easter Island, Christopher Columbus's discovery of America, the Salem witch hunts, plus a host of other key moments from history. It was an extraordinary commission that yielded some amazing images, as the past came vividly to life in front of Joe's camera.

Starting out in the late seventies working part-time as a press photographer for the Sunday newspapers in South Africa, Joe found himself shooting mostly cover stories during the apartheid oppression. "Each weekend I would hope to get a front-page spread which would mean extra money," he says, "particularly if the image was being used in colour."

Within a few years he had changed direction, seeking more technically challenging assignments. "By chance I took another path, which brought me into advertising and fashion photography," he says. "The latter was my preference, and for the next 20 years it allowed me the freedom to express myself through my work. I soon began to develop a technique of creating 'make believe you were somewhere else' images by using a combination of lighting set-ups, props and interesting locations in my approach, similar to how directors today use production designers, art directors and the like to create their movie sets. Basically, this set the foundation for what I now look for in producing all my set images.

"In 2001 I finally moved back to Cape Town and almost immediately started shooting stills on international commercials, and later gravitated more towards long-form film and television drama as Cape Town turned into one of the world's most popular film-production destinations."

### Shooting the big production

Every production is different, and usually Joe's assignments are long-term and involve him spending weeks, or even months, covering every angle of the action. The style of photography needs to match the look of the film footage, and it's important for the approach to be tailored to fit the occasion.

"I always look first at who is directing," says Joe, "and study the treatments, then I'll look at who is doing the cinematography to see the style. Next I have →



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as many conversations with the producers as possible to see how I can be of service. On the major productions I'm usually booked for the duration, although there are often days without coverage on-set which allow me to catch up with any post-production.”

The big break for Joe came in 2009, when the History Channel was developing a new style drama-documentary series called *America: The Story of Us*. This was an ambitious and wide-ranging series set over several hundred years, and the requirement was for material that would fit the style of the production and might ultimately be used not just for publicity purposes but also in an accompanying book.

“My brief for the stills was somewhat different to working on features,” says Joe. “With features the emphasis is mostly on capturing the actor's portrayal of his or her character, styled in the genre of the film. For this particular assignment the producers asked me specifically to concentrate on shooting a series of plates of all the reconstructed American history scenes, which could then be used either singularly or collectively to promote this series.

“To lend authenticity to my work I adopted a vintage style that one of America's great masters might conceivably have used, and the images were full of sharpness, detail and tonal values. I also

worked only in landscape format, pretty much with a standard focal length lens, and my subjects were depicted looking far away into the distance, mimicking some of the more famous contemporary shooters of our time, such as Bruce Weber and the late Herb Ritts. For added drama, I rendered a subtle colour grade and added some texture and edge vignetting, complementing each particular scene with a more filmic look.

“Thankfully, we had a fair deal of collaboration on-set with the producers, directors and director of photography. It was amazing: when does a photographer get the opportunity to have all the components in film-making – such as the cast, stunts, props, set design, lighting, camera department, even the director – all working with him to create magnificent images?”

In 2011 Joe got an opportunity of a different kind when he landed the job of stills photographer on *Dredd 3D*, working with Anthony Dod-Mantle, an Oscar-winning director of photography. The comic book hero story had a Hollywood cast and budget to match, and was set in a future America where criminals ruled and the only force of order lay with urban cops called ‘Judges’ – Dredd being the ultimate judge.

“Films like *Dredd* are heavily geared towards full multimedia development within their marketing framework,” says Joe, “and they boast extremely efficient interactive websites. Needless to say, still imagery was a high priority. In addition to all the publicity and marketing materials my pictures were used for, they also appeared in books to accompany the DVD and Blu-ray discs.”

**Working on-set**

In terms of what Joe is asked to shoot it can vary a great deal, and alongside the more



THIS IMAGE *Mankind: The Story of All of Us* required a more filmic look and one that represented the era the shots were set in.

BELOW LEFT Another filmic-type shot for *Mankind: The Story of All of Us*, which uses vignetting and colour adjusting to adopt a vintage style in keeping with the end product.



conventional shots taken during the action, he might also be asked to shoot behind-the-scenes pictures if important producers, cast members or directors are present. There is also scope for him to suggest shots if he sees an opportunity, when it becomes a case of talking to the director to arrange them.

“To accomplish some of the special stills on *Dredd*, such as the image of Dredd's shadow [first spread], we used an old illusionary technique, which is sometimes still used in theatre,” says Joe. “We had our stunt double, Paul Hampshire, suit up in a duplicate costume to the one that Karl Urban (*Dredd*) was wearing. We then placed Paul in the adjoining room striking a similar pose, and had our gaffer project a lamp onto him to cast a mirror shadow image onto the adjacent wall.”

It's all about co-operation on a live set. Joe knows his place in the pecking order

and long ago took on board the fact that he needs to keep a low profile for much of the time when filming is taking place. “Although your status on-set might be pretty low, the importance of good stills ranks high on all producers' lists,” he says. “After all, they need to market the product way ahead of any screening. Being a special and unit stills photographer demands self-effacement. You are not shooting the movie; you have a very different role – you're there to enhance. You have to be sensitive to scripts, actors and what's going on. You've got to respect actors, keep out of their eye lines, keep quiet and keep a low profile.

“We can record just about anything the motion camera can do – low light, high-speed action, underwater. Often we attach stills equipment under some of the crane and dolly set-ups, using a remote trigger for a burst of stills from the motordrive.”

Working with a Nikon D4 these days and with fast primes – among them a 50mm and an 85mm f/1.4 – Joe has the option to up the ISO when necessary and to shoot at decent shutter speeds even when the light might be testing. His camera is encased in an AquaTech Sound Blimp for around 50% of the time to avoid any danger of the shutter release being picked up by the sound recordist, but he long ago got used to the need to work with a housing.

“Working closely with the director of photography and his gaffer is key to getting an insight into not only what is shot, but how it will be shot,” he says. “This allows you to prepare yourself for possible points of view and lens selection ahead of time.”

With a career he loves firmly established, Joe relishes his role amongst the team working on a production and it's something he finds constantly stimulating. “I loved

working on *Dredd* and the history dramas. Seeing how we will recreate on the screen something that happened eons ago with our new cinematic inventions is fascinating.

“For now there's no next big production, because I'm still working through the 45,000 stills I shot on the last one. However, one day when I get the time I hope that a coffee-table book on my work is going to be a possibility. It would be great to see everything brought together in this way.” PP



Joe Alblas is a leading motion picture stills photographer. Projects include *Strike Back*, *The British: Our Story* and *The Bible*, an upcoming series for The History Channel.

**MORE INFORMATION**

www.joealblas.com