

SUNDAY Lifestyle

'THIRTEEN DAYS' SHOT IN THE PHILIPPINES

With or without Costner, the set is the star

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GATDULA

KEVIN Costner was not there. Nor was any other big star. But the sets and props which were built, to recreate the Cuban missile base for the actor's latest movie, "Thirteen Days" were enough to amaze a spectator in Pagsanjan, Laguna, where the Hollywood film was partly shot.

A 7-ha, open-air field in Dingin, Pagsanjan was used as the setting of the Cuban missile base, where missile capable of being fitted with Soviet atomic warheads were stored in 1962 at the height of the cold war, resulting in a near collision between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Hollywood production crew teamed up with local workers behind Philippine Film Studios Inc., led by Jun Juban.

"Pagsanjan will be the centerpiece of the worldwide scope of the crisis," offered Hollywood producer Peter Almond. "The scenes here will be seen throughout the film in interspersed moments with indoor shots. This is really the essence of our drama because of the huge missile capable of bringing atomic warheads that could destroy three quarters of the US given only a five-minute warning. Without this site, it's like having the movie 'Jaws' without the shark."

Another the Philippine setting used was the former American air base in Clark Field, Pampanga, where scenes at Miami air base were filmed.

"Thirteen Days" had its principal photography for four months in Los Angeles, where the production recreated at replica of the White House. The film also spent one month in Washington D.C., where a small unit also worked on the movie.

Confrontation

The movie is based on the Cuban missile crisis, "The script was inspired by the confrontation [between] the US and former Soviet Union of the height of the cold war, when the nuclear option was very active among the superpowers," Almond said. "This confrontation [started]when the Soviet Union, without explanation, introduced offensive nuclear missiles to the island of Cuba in 1962, the US had to be responsible for it. They resolved the crisis in 13 days.

"We have to look all over the world for right combination of locations like air fields in Florida, missile in the jungle of Cuba, ships at sea for the Atlantic and

Caribbean and we can only find those locations in the Philippines. It's also unbelievable; not only did we find the perfect location, but also the equipment here. In Pagsanjan alone, we have 30 period vehicle – steam shovels, tractors, bulldozer, missile erectors, gas trucks.”

Almond notes of the extraordinary capability of the local production crew, which made it possible for them to film in the country.

“We couldn't ever have put this together without the efficiency and resourcefulness of the workforce here,” he said. “We hired extraordinary artisans, carpenters, machinists and workers from the Philippine film community who worked by hand to create many of the details. They placed machines in the cold cars and trucks so they would run.

“They built 65-foot-long missile powered by hydraulics that were the heart of our story. We were also lucky to get help from the Philippine Air Force, which allowed us to use 15 jet planes in the period. Five F-5 fighter jets were converted to American Air Force appearance, with full support of Filipino work force.

“We found 10 F-8 planes – which are almost impossible to find anywhere in the world – in the Philippine Air Force storage and we rebuilt them to full flying. They were transported to Clark base in parts by tow trucks

Joint production

“Thirteen Days” is a joint production of Beacon Picture and New Line Cinema, the same team behind such box-office hits as “Air Force One” and “End of Days.”

Almond is producing the with Costner and Armyan Bernstein, CEO of Beacon Pictures. Almond also developed the story with David Self, who was named Show West Producer of the Year. Self was behind such film as “Air Force One,” “End of Days,” “For Love of the Game” and Hurricane.”

“Costner is Kenneth O'Donnell, the closets adviser and chief of staff of President John F. Kennedy and a close friend of the Kennedy brothers – Robert and John – from their days in Boston politics,” Almond said . “He (Costner) give us the opportunity to go into the rooms where the president is having his most intimate discussions about what option he should choose and what powers he should consider in making decisions. Kevin is the window to the story.”

President Kennedy is played by veteran Canadian actor Bruce Springwood, who was recently seen in “Double Jeopardy,” Steven Cult plays younger brother Robert, who was then the attorney general.

Asked what attracted him to the Cuban missile crisis story, Almond replied: “It's one of the great and dramatic moments in modern history when the world really stood still and entire state of humanity was anxious because the two super powers were competing for influence over the world to such an extent that they would go for the nuclear option to settle the conflict.

Nuclear option

“It's an option that we can hardly imagine today, but it still exists because there are smaller nations holding nuclear options and the way the leaders of this nations decide is important to see in the Cuban missile crisis. The story on the big screen is an example where men who have high responsibility decide not to use this ugly choice and how they could hold back and yet maintain their national dignity.”

Director Roger Donaldson describes “Thirteen Days” as an epic political thriller. The movie marks his reunion with Costner, whom he directed in 1987’s dramatic thriller, “No Way Out.”

“That was a long time ago and a lot has since happened to Kevin’s career and he’s a director himself now,” Donaldson said of Costner, “He’s a great talent to work with.”

It’s the first time for the director to shoot in the Philippines, although he was in the country in the early ‘80s to attend a film festival, where his movie won the best actor award for Bruno Lawrence.

“It’s difficult when you’re not used to the heat, Donaldson said, “It was very hot at first, but you get used to it after a while. The local crew has been very enthusiastic and hardworking. It’s a real pleasure to work here and I would love to work here again.”

Donaldson was also at the helm of “Dante’s Peak,” where Mt. Pinatubo was mentioned by lead actor Pierce Brosnan. Moreover, he directed “Species” with Natasha Henstridge, “Cocktails” with Tom Cruise, “The Getaway” with Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger, “Cadillac Man” with Robin Williams, “White Sands” with Willem Dafoe, “Marie” with Sissy Spacek and “The Bounty” with Mel Gibson.

The Hollywood production team for “Thirteen Days” includes Chris Buddy, director of photography and Paul Dizon, unit production manager and associate producer who also worked on “Amistad,” “Jurassic” and “End of Days.”

Complicated sets

Production designer is Dennis Washington, whose credits include “The Fugitive,” “No Way Out,” “Dante’s Peak,” “The Fugitive,” “Prizzi’s Honor” and “The General’s Daughter.”

“We created great sets here with a lot of help from Filipinos,” Washington said. “The sets are the most complicated, expensive and elaborate, but the local crew made everything look good. We only had two-and-half months to put everything together.

“We started work late last year, I can here three times to get all the period props together. Everything was pretty much built from scratch. There’s very little that we brought in from California. Everything came out surprisingly well. It’s been wonderful, from my crew, the construction crew and set decorating property, it was absolutely terrific.”

“Thirteen Days” is being filmed with a budget of \$80 million. The movie will be shown in the US in November and is expected to be released in the Philippines early next year.

“This will have a great impact on the Filipino audience not only because it’s your country which has been used in the filming but also because the issue is important throughout the world. And the drama will make a compelling movie experience for the entertainment of this historical moment,” Almond said.

The production utilizes 250 local talents who played soldiers, Cuban women and another minor roles, 300 crewmembers, Upcoming sexy star Ingrid Mendoza plays a Cuban military officer.

The Hollywood entourage is composed of over 30 people. The Pagsanjan filming shows much of the special effects used in the movie, like the missile operation and air flight over the site. A lear jet was brought over from the US to fly over the site to detect the missiles.

Authenticity

The film also boasts of the shutdown sequences that involved the only casualty of the Cuban missile crisis, when an Air Force officer taking photographs of Cuba from 75,000 feet in his small plane, was shot down by air missiles.

“Through this site and the help of digital special effects, we were able to give it authenticity,” Almond said. “An American actor named Christopher Lawford plays this brave pilot. He is a nephew of President Kennedy and the son of actor Peter Lawford and Jeanne Kennedy, the president’s sister.”

The local producer of “Thirteen Days,” Jun Juban, has worked on over 40 foreign productions filmed in the country, including the Oscar winning war drama “Platoon,” “Brokedown Palace” with Claire Danes and Bill Pullman, and was shot in Intramuros.

“This is a labor-intensive project,” said Juban of “Thirteen Days.” “The set here is only a second unit operation, but the behind-the-scenes production was tremendous. It’s fun and hard working on a Hollywood film. It’s blood, sweat and tears.”

The Pagsanjan local is not alien to Juban, who used it as the backdrop for the TV movie, “In the Name of the Queen,” about the Dutch-Indonesia war, which was shown on cable.

Recently, an American production team also came to the country to scout for possible location for an upcoming Tom Cruise movie, “Fertig,” the biopic of American World War II hero Wendell Fertig. This time, the Philippines will not be used as a sub-location for another place. The country itself will be depicted as actual setting for the movie.

Juban hopes to work for that production, which would mean his second time on a Tom Cruise movie, following “Born on the Fourth of July,” which was shot in Ilocos.

Juban was recently appointed by President Estrada as chair of the Philippine International Film and TV Office, tasked to promote filming of foreign movies in the country. “Hopefully, it will also be the gateway for local productions to get into the international market,” he said.