Ocean Survivor Lends a Hand in the Making of Life of Pi

by Steven Callahan

Photos left to right: Sled Reynolds, Steven Callahan, Peter Sorel-Courtesy Fox 2000 Pictures

In 2009, Fox 2000, a division of 20th Century Fox, hired me to meet with famed director Ang Lee and scriptwriter David Magee who wanted to adapt Yann Martel's novel Life of Pi In order to produce a major motion picture, but they had no experience with boats, the sea, or survival, all essential elements of this story. Several other directors had given the production a shot but had to give it up for a variety of reasons.

Life of Pi is a fictitious allegory in which an Indian family is moving to Canada with the animals from a zoo they have run in Pondicherry, India, when their ship sinks and the teenager Pi finds himself in a lifeboat in the Pacific, his family gone and his only companions a zebra, orangutang, hyena, and tiger. In short order, only Pi and the tiger, named Richard Parker, are left. As they drift together for 227 days, they establish a dangerous but co-dependent relationship. The book was generally considered "unfilmable," not only because of the fantastic nature of the story but also because in the motion picture industry there is an old saw: "Never make a film with kids, animals, or on the water. "So we are doing all three . . . and in 3D!" said Lee, a joke that would carry throughout the production. I would learn why these rules exist, and the particular challenges and opportunities of filming in 3D, but if we could succeed, we could lead the way to making other ocean pictures more realistic and dramatic than ever before.

I have loved film since I was a child in the 1950s, scared to death by the original Blob and mesmerized by Sinbad, the sailor with its fighting skeletons. Well familiar with and a fan of Lee's films since his early works, I was attracted by his continual desire to tackle something a little different and by his love of pushing the envelope, instead of essentially re-making movies. When the project was finally given the green light in the fall of 2010, Lee called me and asked me to "help

make the ocean into a major character" rather than to film it just as a setting, which is normally done for motion pictures involving the sea. I saw this request as a unique opportunity to bring wide audiences around the world into the offshore ocean environment and to show its diversity, beauty, and wonder, as well as its discomforts and terrors. With limited dialog, the film's physical elements—from the overall conditions of the sea and sky right down to the smallest details of Pi's raft and tools—would be essential to help reflect the mood and pace of the story and detail how Pi evolves as a survivor and spiritual creature in the watery wilderness. In a subliminal way, these elements could also increase the world's consciousness of the diversity and value of offshore waters that are essential to humankind's survival but, in recent times, have been threatened by our activities.

When I got to Taiwan, where principle shooting took place, Lee asked me "to make the film better." When I asked what that meant specifically, he answered, "To help us make it convincing; to bring to it authenticity." My own survival drift and many other offshore passages would serve as a foundation on which to build this authenticity. While working with the creative professionals in numerous departments, I found that everyone was keen to give enormous amounts of energy in keeping the smallest details both realistic and relevant to the story. Every gaff, hook, and hatchet would be period accurate and could be found in a Japanese ship's life boat. As I and others designed and built props, we used the actual materials and tools Pi would have at hand. As the life boat, the raft that Pi builds, and other

physical elements of the story evolved, these details subtly show his mental and emotional development and reveal the stages common to any survival experience. However, our search for authenticity would have to stretch beyond the physical elements of the sea and the survivor's life into the heart of the story itself.

Photo: Peter Sorel, Courtesy Fox 2000 Pictures
Daily discussions with Ang during shooting

A Very Personal Involvement

No art form is reality. When writing nonfiction like Adrift, the aim of the artist is to capture the heart of a story worth telling, a theme echoed throughout Life of Pi itself. In nonfiction this is a process of "editing reality," in fiction of creating imaginary convincing enough to allow readers or viewers to suspend their disbelief.

Yann Martel is a fine writer but not a mariner, so it was never a surprise to me to find numerous elements of Pi's survival journey and ocean environment closely related to those found in Adrift and other real ocean survival tales like Dougal Robertson's Survive the Savage Seas. As I re-read Life of Pi numerous times, and the film

script, I felt increasingly married to the story overall, as if Life of Pi was a fictitious mirror of Adrift.

When floating about the Atlantic, I felt I had been handed an allegorical tale, which I tried to reflect in the writing of Adrift. I never considered myself any kind of heroic survivor but instead a flawed observer of the real star of the show: the environment—the sea and its creatures who were clearly my superiors in that domain and who would eventually become a part of myself both literally and spiritually. My dorado and their majesty and mystery symbolized this godly presence, and they served as my sustenance, became my companions and highly spiritual superiors, posed a great threat to me and nearly killed me, and in the end, brought to me salvation. So as the mayor of Duckyville, which I called my raft and surrounding environment, I had my dorado or "doggies" while Richard Parker served Pi in much the same role.

Photo: Sled Reynolds

Vlad the hyena

Pi begins as a precocious boy who practices several religions, but in my view, he finds God in the real world at sea, the spiritual reflected by and embodied in the physical world. As I wrote in the introduction to Adrift, quoting a letter I had written home to help explain why I set off to cross the Atlantic on what would become my ill-fated sailboat, Napoleon Solo, during my return crossing, "I wish I could describe the feeling of being at sea, the anguish, frustration, and fear, the beauty that accompanies threatening spectacles, the spiritual communion with creatures in whose domain I sail. There is a magnificent intensity in life that comes when we are not in control but are only reacting, living, surviving. I am not a religious man per se. My own cosmology is convoluted and not in line with any particular church or philosophy. But for me, to go to sea is to get a glimpse of the face of God."

The omnipresence of irony, paradox, and dilemma are central themes that run throughout Adrift. When it blows hard, I make great progress, but it makes it harder to fish and produce water; when it is calm, it's easier to fish and I get maximum water production, but go pretty much nowhere, for example. The dorado feed me but also are dangerous to catch. In Life of Pi, ironies and paradoxes are found not only in the ocean but also in Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger, and a strange island on which they land where sustenance and danger coexist.

Both tales share not dissimilar internal struggles as well. In Life of Pi, Pi struggles to discover and tame, or at least coexist with, and eventually recognize his need for the beast within himself. I

routinely summarize my drift as "being dumb enough to sink my boat and then spending two and a half months drifting about 2,000 miles (1,800 nautical miles) while learning to live like an Aquatic caveman." A core theme that runs through Adrift is with the struggle between the physical, emotional, and rational parts of myself, each of which is essential to survival but each of which has needs that often compete.

A fishing and shark-dissuading spear for Pi

I point out in Adrift, from the sinking onward, that people do not think or feel just one thing. We are multidimensional creatures, often thinking and feeling many things at once. As I bail out of Solo, for example, I point out that there are numerous voices in my head all at the same time, from a guy panicking to a calm commander to somebody amused by the camera merrily taking movies. This multi-dimensionality is, I believe, the root of inner human conflicts, but it also provides us with the ability to see from multiple vantage points and tell many stories about the same thing. Pi offers the viewer a choice between two stories, which they can choose according to their need. I write in Adrift, "Out of the infinite number of events that

happen every second, many must be surrounded by odd circumstance. Yet life must be nourished with meaning just as with food, and stories give events meaning. I reach for the most unique and surprising: strange coincidence, long shot, miracle. I need a tale of miracles. Is the whale my totem, my animal counterpart? Is this a test of the that totem, a test of the whale within me?" Based on the huge role that keeping a log played in my own survival drift, scriptwriter David Magee honed Pi's dependence on writing in his survival manual to stay sane and make sense of the chaos of survival and life itself. In fact, if one could look closely at the writings that Pi makes in his manual, one would find most are actually copied passages from Adrift.

Just as Pi's fictitious and my own real survival depended on numerous serendipitous events working out just right, it was, in part, Martel's mentioning of me in his novel that led friends to send me a copy of the book in when my wife and I lived Australia in 2002, and eventually this mention lead Lee and Magee to my door. My life has been guided by such confluences of fortuitous events, everyday miracles if you will. The fact that the opportunity to work on this film flowed directly from my own experience nearly thirty years before and allowed me to carry into the present the spirit of the dorado and the sea, which not only threatened me but also kept me alive and revealed many valuable insights and visual memories, made this experience a continuing story of my own life, and highly personal. I try hard to be committed fully to any project with which I am involved, but these and other parallels within the two tales drew me in more deeply than usual.

Hopefully, this helped Lee and Magee to develop and coordinate the film's wider philosophical and emotional elements with the physical details, and aided Suraj Sharma to shape the role he played as the teenage ocean survivor Pi.

Photo: Peter Sorel, Courtesy Fox 2000 Pictures
Coaching Pi and props—raft, seat, and sun shade

From Reality to Expressionism

For the making of Life of Pi, I was charged with lobbying to make scenes and events as real as possible. In the end, this was compromised by the fantastic nature of the story of an Indian boy stuck on a life boat with a tiger, by physical restrictions of filming primarily in a wave tank, by Lee's artistic tastes, and by other factors. It was a delicate balancing act to achieve something that looked consistent, not disjointed, and especially real enough to involve audiences deeply in the oceanic and survival worlds while not scaring them away or making them seasick!

From our first meeting in 2009, Lee and Magee were keen to explore what life offshore is like, not just on a liferaft but also on the many passages I have made, so I supplied them with details about how flying fish glide and power themselves with

their tails, how ocean currents flow, and what configurations life boats take. Our conversations even went far beyond the technical to encompass psychological, philosophical, and spiritual issues. Little could I know then that Magee and Lee would use several of my experiences as basis for what have since become iconic images in major scenes in Pi, most notably in the breeching whale streaming bioluminescence at night. This scene was based on a late-night encounter I had in 1985 while I was delivering a boat transatlantic. Another scene we called "tiger vision," pans back to reveal the life boat on a flat sea that reflects the heavens as if the life boat floats in space. These conditions rarely occur, but when they do, they can make a mariner feel quite disoriented, perhaps even hallucinogenic, and certainly spiritually humbled yet joined with the heavens. Certainly, it often is literally true that sailors who cross oceans are as isolated from humankind as astronauts circling the globe, floating in space, among the stars.

During pre-production work in late 2010, I first provided feedback on the script and pre-vis, a kind of animated story board, trying wherever possible to make sure that things like the motions of the sinking ship and the seaway would look natural. I also provided research, graphics from my own files, and advice for the visual effects artists on which the film was heavily dependent and who maintained their own vast library of imagery. I worked closely with the script supervisor to map out the film scene by scene with all it's physical needs, such as how character, clothes, life boat, rafts, and other elements evolved in the script and how they all needed to reflect mood, story line,

and time passage. I mapped out how sky and sea should look for every scene, which also had to reflect the proper mood and passage of time and give us a starting place with which to plan the kind of waves to generate in the wave tank under construction Bill Westenhofer's (head of visual effects) artistic eye and the technical prowess of his visual effects team coordinated all the input and live footage to then render realistic backgrounds and blend them all seamlessly, something that would earn Bill an Oscar.

As the official "marine and survival consultant," I continued work through principle shooting and post-production in an ever-expanding role during which numerous departments, including art, wardrobe, makeup, and props were more than patient and welcoming to me. The prop department allowed me to camp out in its office where I could be active in designing and making props and remain close to the wave tank. I also lent a hand in setting things up or giving advice to the second unit working on nearby sets.

Because a majority of the film takes place on the sea, it was important to Ang Lee to create as realistic an open-ocean environment as possible. Calm conditions as seen in Titanic are fairly easy to achieve, but open-ocean swells and complex wave patterns common at sea are not, and Ang's appetite to capture these and vary them constantly remained insatiable. Those who've tried to mimic ocean waves previously in films like The Perfect Storm using only computer graphics appear, to my eyes and to those of other mariners, to have ended up with forms obviously unrealistic, both overstated and too regimented, too often

cartoonish looking. In some films, scenes appear as if shot in a living room with folks splashing buckets of water over the actors

Generating waves in 246 by 98 foot tank

Shooting Pi in 3D could aid a great deal to the realism of the waves, but filming real waves would be ideal. Yet shooting footage at sea is unrealistic for many practical reasons. To obtain the proper oceanic environment, a wave tank was created specifically for Life of Pi. The tank stretched 246 feet long by 98 feet wide and 10 feet deep, and it contained 1.86 million gallons of water. A 12-bay wave generator run by 2,000 horsepower motors and huge vacuum chambers stirred up waves more than 7 feet high. Nothing even similar had ever been made before. To get a handle on what was possible and to vary the surfaces to suit each scene, Lee would turn to me to test the tank's limits. I experimented throughout shooting with timing, pressure, and other variations to find useful patterns and discard others, to map out exactly what wave forms would look like in different parts of the pool, which helped to position the life boat and Pi's raft, and finally, to direct technicians in generating specific waves that suited Lee's needs.

Of course, no tank, no matter how large, unless it is the size of the sea itself, can completely reproduce the oceanic environment, but the advances in computer graphics allowed the visual effects wizards to merge real wave forms we created in the tank with realistic backgrounds in a seamless way that I never thought possible.

Photo: Sled Reynolds

Tiger training in wave tank

In the end, Life of Pi is not real life, but I am extremely proud of the way in which all the artists achieved a consistent and stunning expressionistic look to the film that is convincing, much as I sought to do with my writing and especially with my illustrations in Adrift. So much can go wrong in a film. Any inconsistent element—in script, direction, music score, editing, acting, or even small details—can throw the entire thing off or make it look hokey. In Life of Pi, even the visual elements at sea could easily have appeared disjointed or inconsistent, but thanks to so many under Lee's direction, that did not happen. Audiences and critics appear to love the film, and my mariner friends have commented on how realistic it looks on screen.

I am more than thankful to Ang Lee, Fox, the producers, and every one of the immense and amazingly talented crew for allowing me to be a part of the production and for letting me work with them. I dearly hope this will pave the way to the making of more films that take place in the ocean environment where, ironically, far from civilization, human issues often are magnified and more easily examined, and where people are measured more by who they really are than by title, position, or the thickness of their wallet.

Water can and seat props

Note: Many thanks to Paul "Sled" Reynolds, animal wrangler, and Peter Sorel, still photographer, for their permission to use some photos that they took during the filming of Life of Pi. Uncredited photo by Steven Callahan.