

Cinema – Exclusive On Set

Caption over article: “In the disaster film by former James Cameron collaborator Steven Quale, a gruesome tornado horror breaks out over a small town in the U.S. countryside”

Caption on photo, page 1 of text: “This scene, filmed in the studio, plays in the film in front of the artificially added background of the vastness of Oklahoma”

People call them G-d’s vacuum cleaners. When tornadoes shape the landscape, heavy concrete structures crash in and wind velocities up to 300 km per hour circulate. From “The Wizard of Oz” to “Twister,” Hollywood has impressively depicted the wrath of tornadoes in the US Midwest several times. Director Steven Quale (“Final Destination 5”) wants to top these examples with “Into the Storm” and pull the viewer right into heart of the cyclone.

“Everyone is familiar with tornado videos on youtube and thinks, because of that, that they have an idea of the primitive power of these storms,” Quale says on the set, outside of Detroit, Michigan. “But I grew up in the Midwest and I can assure you that it’s something very different, when you sense the unimaginable power of the suction of a tornado on your own body and experience deathly fear in a shelter.” On this sunny August afternoon, however, no one expects dangerous bad weather zones. On the contrary. Huge sails protect the place where they’re filming from unwanted light intensity, and giant wind machines are standing by to agitate everything that’s not nailed down through the air.

Caption on next page: “The horror on our faces was not always acting” – Hobbit Star Richard Armitage

Quale, who worked as second unit director under James Cameron on “Titanic” and “Avatar,” does use laborious CGI-technology to visualize the cataclysmic storm damages, but he relies as much as possible on handmade effects. Thus it happens that on this day, his lead actors Richard Armitage (“The Hobbit”) and Sarah Wayne Callies (“The Walking Dead”) are literally being shaken to pieces by the wind machines and are acting in front of a background of circling debris and blazing walls of fire. “In one scene a 40-ton-semi [lorry] crashes right next to us on the pavement,” Armitage relates in a pause from filming. “The stunt people drew a chalk line on the street and said, you can come this far and no further. Then the scraps were flying around our ears. The horror on our faces was not always acting.”

The stage for the shooting is a university building that is doubling as a school in a small town in Oklahoma. A dozen yellow school buses are parked on the parking lot of the campus, some of them already thrown around or knocked about by the killer wind gusts. In the subsequent scene, the school’s pupils flee into the buses, because a Category F6 Tornado is racing right toward the campus. Whether there’s ever been such a Category F6 tornado has never been demonstrated scientifically.

Caption on this page: “When our tornadoes rage, everyone should hold on tight”

The upper boundary until now has been occupied by Category F5 storms, like those that appeared in 1925 in Missouri, Illinois and Indiana, or 1999 in Oklahoma. Explanation: Tornadoes are classified according to the theoretical twelve-step Fujita scale, which was proposed by Chicago meteorologist Tetsuya Theodore Fujita. The very highest category of F12 would not be physically possible on earth, as winds cannot exceed the speed of sound.

In “Into the Storm,” such a mega-F6 storm is brewing. A group of storm hunters puts itself in a vehicle like a tank in search of unpredictable natural phenomena and is soon caught in the eye of the storm. “We show four different levels of tornadoes,” Quale explains. “Just when it looks like they’ve survived the

worst, new supercells form and the cloud front turns around, worse and more annihilating than before." This in variations that at the beginning seemed exaggerated even to the actors. Armitage: "When we read the scene in the script, where the fire tornado breaks out, we thought it was a crazy idea. On the next day we saw on on youtube how such a column of fire [lit. Feuerrüssel -- elephant's trunk of fire] swept over the Australian outback."

Steven Quale is clear that his film will inevitably be compared with "Twister," the disaster movie produced by Steven Spielberg. However, he distinguishes strongly between the two films: "'Twister' was an entertaining spectacle with partially comedic undertones. "Into the Storm" goes in a different direction. When our tornadoes break out, everyone should hold on tight."

--Scott Orlin