

Cecile Marie Tecson – Visual effects artist

Behind some of Hollywood's special effects is a Filipina

by CYNTHIA DE CASTRO / AJPress

ALMOST any Hollywood movie, music video and TV commercial that you see today uses visual effects of some sort—from the *X-Men* to *Die Hard* to car and burger commercials—visual effects make the imaginary look completely real! Visual effects (commonly shortened to VFX) create environments which look realistic, but would be dangerous, costly, or simply impossible to capture on film. If you go behind the scenes of most Hollywood films today, you will find incredibly talented visual effects artists who work with an amazing array of technology to create the incredible scenes in movies that look so real on the big screen! One of these very talented visual effects artists is a Filipino-American, Cecile Fortun Tecson.

Cecile has done a surprising array of visual effects that have been integral to the story and appeal of such movies as *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, *Hostage*, *Paycheck*, *Die Hard 'Live Free or Die Hard'*, *The Spirit*, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, and Music Videos for Celine Dion, *N.E.R.D.*, Kelly Clarkson, Shania Twain, and others.

In an exclusive interview with *Asian Journal*, Cecile described in detail the amazing work that she does as a visual effects artist.

"Visual Effects often combines live action footage of people or computer generated imagery, with a background. It's about taking these layers and compositing them on top of each other in order to create a real environment that doesn't really exist. Sometimes environments are combinations of real places and actual paintings or digital paintings. I've painted in clouds, trees, mountains, and such in order to recreate whole live environments," explained Cecile. "For example, I've worked on car commercials from Mercedes to BMWs where we would have to cut the cars out of their real scenes and put them in a completely different location. This can be difficult at times because the camera may circle the car and it takes a lot of technique to try and cut out every detail needed to place it into a different environment. Also, when you watch car commercials, you don't see the cameras that are reflected through on the sides of the cars. Part of our work is removing anything from cameras to truck rigs holding those cameras. It takes a lot of work for a simple car commercial." Cecile said.

A few seconds of visual effects for 30 second commercials we see on TV take many, many days to work on, revealed Cecile. "I've worked on funny Burger King commercials where a man walks around wearing a burger costume, I had to merge the costume with his body to look like he's really a part of the burger. These are little things that we spend days on. I've also worked on 3D animated characters for a PETA commercial where a skinless alligator and furless rabbit demands their skin and fur back from a woman that is using the fur as a coat. This required a lot of work in adjusting color and lighting to place these animated characters in an environment and to make them look as real as possible even though they are talking."

Thanks to visual effects artists like Cecile, movies no longer have to have "a cast of thousands", as in the days when Cecile B. DeMille produced *The Ten*

Commandments. Cecile admitted that part of the work she has done is multiplying people in scenes. "In music videos, for example, most of the time there are just 20 dancers and we create hundreds of them in order to come up with one big scene. Sometimes they are in front of green screens and we use what is called a keyer in order to separate them from the green screen and have them as one element. The same thing goes for filling up empty football arenas as well," Tecson revealed.

Born in Los Angeles in April 26, 1978, Cecile Marie is the oldest child and only daughter of Armando "Andy" Tecson and his wife, Elizabeth Fortun Tecson. Her siblings are Armando Jr., Samuel, and Joseph. Ever since she was five years old, Cecile has been into drawing. She graduated with honors from the Marymount High School in Los Angeles and was consistently in the Dean's List at The University of California, Irvine, where she took up Fine Arts, major in Studio Arts and minor in Digital Arts.

"Being born from very artistic and musical parents, I wasn't surprised that I also ended up in the arts. My grandfather, Lauro, was a painter in the Philippines under the guidance of the Philippine painter Amorsolo. I used to watch my grandfather as a child as he painted oil paintings in our garage. I still remember how he mixed paint and how he used his brush strokes. He passed away before I was able to ask him questions, but because of those memories I believe it was enough for me to understand how images are slowly created," said Cecile. "My father, Andy, is a photographer and a violinist. My mother was a pianist and a florist who designed flowers for weddings. I would assist them sometimes when they worked. I know now that their lives have inspired me and have strongly influenced me in pursuing art."

Cecile admitted that she started at the bottom in the industry and worked her way up. Her first job in Hollywood was as an intern for *Entertainment Tonight* inside Paramount Pictures, where she mostly climbed shelves; putting back lots of old video tapes in the tape library. "I thought it was fun just being on the set. But, I also realized that it's not as glamorous in the entertainment industry and it is definitely a lot of hard work." She then moved on to a post-production studio called Creo, where she worked as Client Services/Runner. "I made sure the clients, such as producers and directors, were attended to if they needed anything from coffee to lunch. I also delivered those final tapes to the next studio."

A great trait of Cecile is her willingness to learn, which opened new doors for her to becoming a visual effects artist. "I was open to anything really. I learned everything from traditional art in the form of painting and drawing, to learning computer art in the form of graphics or editing video. I loved it all. In Creo, I tried to learn everything there from working as a Tape Operator assisting in laying off the final product for commercials, music videos, and movies. I would stay late after work learning new computer programs for 2D Visual Effects. I had so much fun learning to paint and roto, which

is a technique of manually creating a matte, like cutting people out of a live-action plate so it may be composited over another background. I remember the other artists saying, "Just throw her into the pit," where they just gave me a lot work amongst the many artists. I really had no choice but to learn and balance my many hats at work. They were the best mentors," Cecile related.

Within six months at Creo, Cecile was promoted as a roto artist, and eventually, became a visual effects artist. In her two years in the company, Cecile worked on *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* and many TV Commercials and Music Videos for stars such as Celine Dion, *N.E.R.D.*, Kelly Clarkson, and Shania Twain. Then, she joined a company called RIOT where she worked on more commercials and movies such as *Hostage*, *Paycheck*, *Die Hard 'Live Free or Die Hard'*, *The Spirit*, and *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. In January 2009, RIOT merged with Method Studios, known in the industry as an international award-winning provider of Visual Effects for some of the world's best movies, commercials, and music videos.

Of the many movies that she has worked on, Cecile says that *Wolverine* is her favorite project. "In a scene in that movie, the Wolverine jumps off his motorcycle, takes his claws and rips through the helicopter that is trying to kill him. The helicopter then spins out of control, falling to the ground and explodes to pieces as he walks in front of it. It's an amazing effect because this falling helicopter in real life had all these wires attached to it in order for it to spin, and dummies as the helicopter operators. My job was to make sure the dummies were not seen, wires were removed, and that all the helicopter parts were falling in a balanced way. Some parts were not meant to fall off, such as the top of it, so I had to paint in the top of the helicopter back on as it spun around frame by frame."

Another scene showed Hugh Jackman who starred as Wolverine, jumping out of a water tank and running out completely naked. Anointed by *US Magazine* last November 2008 as the "Sexiest Man Alive," Jackman in that scene was actually wearing beige underwear. "I had to do some "butt work"; meaning, I had to recreate a butt by digitally painting in one while Wolverine was running. He already has a great butt, but I hoped I made his butt look even better!" Cecile said with a smile.

The hardworking VFX artist confessed that she



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works long hours, 10-12 hours everyday. But Cecile says it is all worth it. "It's challenging and exciting to see the raw footage given to us and use our ideas in bringing the imagination to life through visual effects. Every shot I've worked on is never the same and each has a different challenge in getting the work done. We want to make things as real as possible for the viewer," she said.

Tecson's upcoming work is a movie called *The Time Traveler's Wife* with Eric Bana and Rachel McAdams: A romantic drama about a Chicago librarian with a gene that causes him to involuntarily time travel, and the complications it creates for his marriage.

"I did some challenging work for that movie and I love the two actors, so I'm very excited for when it comes out in August. The next project that I'm about to work on is the re-imagining of the horror movie, *Nightmare on Elm Street* set for 2010," said Cecile.

Cecile hopes to work in Visual Effects for a long, long time, but she would love to do her own art on the side. "I also would one day love to teach art to kids. That would be so much fun!" she said smiling. Meanwhile, Cecile makes it a point to live each day to the fullest. "Because my mother passed away from cancer in 1997, when I was just 18, I've always seen life differently and really try to live it to the fullest. She's given me strength and the passion to love life and people."

"Studying more Visual Effects tutorials is also key. In fact, that is my advice to aspiring Pinoy artists who would like to get into the industry. Keep learning! Everything from Photoshop to other computer programs called Discreet Combustion and Nuke. I'm constantly reading and doing tutorials. Watching movies and going to art shows is good too! Absorb it all like a sponge and don't give up." ■

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