



No Way Out

By Steve Chagollan

ISOLATION AND confinement have often served as a device for directors to study characters pushed to the breaking point. Whether it's cabin fever, the solitude of unforeseen circumstances, forced captivity or being trapped by evil forces, these scenarios usually act as exercises of will power and ingenuity. At a time when self-quarantining has tested the spirit of citizens the world over, these kinds of films have struck a personal chord with viewers as of late, and challenged directors intent on ratcheting up the tension and dramatizing the resolve of their protagonists.



DAVID FINCHER
Panic Room 2002

► Fincher embraced the idea of doing what he called “a nail-biter” movie set in a single location, where a divorced mother and her adolescent daughter are trapped by a trio of burglars expecting an empty house and no resistance. “I thought it would be an amped-up stage play, like *Wait Until Dark*, something imminently controllable,” said the director for the DVD’s commentary. But the shoot was much more complicated than he bargained for. Eighteen days into production, Nicole Kidman suffered a hairline fracture in her leg and had to be replaced by Jodie Foster (Kristen Stewart, who reminded Fincher of a young Foster, played the daughter), requiring significant reshoots. As usual with Fincher’s work, the technical wizardry looks seamless, with a roving camera that appears to float through keyholes, air ducts and even the handle of a coffee pot. “It’s not the theatricality of it as much as you’re going to be granted all-access backstage passes to everything that you could possibly see,” said Fincher. “So it’s kind of a visual theme in the photography of the movie, to come up with a way—via CG or cutaway sets where we were able to pull walls away—to let the audience know the camera can go anywhere, that the camera is free of the constraints that the characters in the movie have to deal with.”

ROBERT ZEMECKIS
Cast Away 2000

► Tom Hanks plays Chuck Noland, a FedEx exec who gets stranded alone on a deserted island in the South Pacific after surviving a harrowing cargo plane crash. Hanks introduced the project to Zemeckis after their previous collaboration, *Forrest Gump* (1994), netted them both Oscars and a DGA Award for the director. But the concept didn't gel until it was decided that survival wouldn't be a result of some fortuitous event, but an act of sheer will. "The idea came that the character would be given a choice at some point, the choice either to die on the island or try getting off," Zemeckis told *The New York Times*. "Then I could see the movie." The director's audacious decision to shut down production for a year to allow Hanks to lose a startling amount of weight and grow a beard of Biblical proportions turned out to be a master stroke. *The Times*' Dave Kehr alluded to the shared theme of "emotionally isolated characters who try to break out by inventing relationships with imaginary beings" in Zemeckis' *Contact* (1997) and *What Lies Beneath* (the film he shot between *Cast Away*'s two production cycles), and as exemplified by "Wilson," the volleyball, in this one. "We don't function well as human beings when we're in isolation," Zemeckis told Kehr. "That thing that is inside every human, that need for creative expression, ultimately becomes the main tool of their survival."



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ROB REINER
Misery 1990

► Reiner was attracted to the highly personal theme of Stephen King's source novel, which is "this difficulty that all creative people have, which is being trapped by your own success." The film's protagonist (played by James Caan), a successful writer of Victorian romance novels who's crippled by a car accident, ends up trapped in the home of a deranged fan (Kathy Bates, in an Oscar-winning turn) who objects to the new direction he's taking in his work. King was reluctant to option the book, but was a big fan of Reiner's *Stand by Me* (1986), based on his novella, *The Body*. The writer's imprisonment is both literal and figurative, exemplified by one shot (Barry Sonnenfeld was the DP) through bed rails that transitions into a shot through the trees outside, intimating a jail cell. Reiner could also relate to Caan's character, since he felt compelled to break away from his own comedy success. "You definitely see in this film why fan is short for fantastic," Reiner told the *L.A. Times* around the time of the film's release. "It's tricky, because to some degree, getting attention is a real compliment. But if you go one step further..."

PHOTOS: PHOTOFEST



JORDAN PEELE
Us 2019

► Reduced to its most basic plot elements, *Us* is a home invasion movie with flashes of horror and the supernatural. But for director/writer Peele, the story—like his triumphant directorial debut *Get Out* (2017)—represents so much more: It's about the haves and have-nots, about what it means to be black in America, about facing your own worst fears and insecurities. "The duality of this country and our beliefs and our demons, I think, is on display," Peele told NPR last year. "But I think *Us* is bigger than that. And I think one of the reasons this movie has an expansiveness is because 'us' is subjective. Everybody thinks of the term 'us' in different ways—it can be 'us' the family, 'us' the town, 'us' the country, 'us' humanity. I think in the simplest form, the very nature of 'us' means there is a 'them,' right? So that is what this movie is about to me: Whatever your 'us' is, we turn 'them' into the enemy, and maybe 'we' are our own worst enemy." As such, the Wilson family is attacked in their lakeside vacation house by their doppelgängers, which suggests a funhouse mirror effect of the most horrific kind, because it is a reflection of ourselves.



KATHRYN BIGELOW
K-11: The Widowmaker 2002

► In terms of confinement and claustrophobia, there are few situations more suffocating than being submerged deep underwater in a close-quarters vessel. *K-11*—a true-life drama about a Soviet nuclear submarine crippled when a reactor coolant pipe bursts, threatening the entire crew with radiation poisoning—might have posed the biggest logistical challenge of Bigelow's career. Characteristically, the director didn't cut corners. Bigelow and her team were able to get the actual blueprint of the K-11 itself and built sets to the actual specifications of the submarine. "We didn't want to cheat the submarine size so that it was more comfortable for us to shoot in," said the director. "You add onto that all of the equipment, and suddenly that space, which is already not terribly large, becomes almost microscopic." As part of her research, Bigelow and crew visited the actual ship. "We try to physicalize rehearsals in every film and especially this one," said Bigelow. "Perhaps no film demanded it more than *K-11*. I wanted to give these boys a mental muscle memory of what it would be in a life-or-death situation. It turned them into a crew in literally, a matter of days."

PHOTOS: (TOP) EVERETT; (BOTTOM) DGA ARCHIVES



RIDLEY SCOTT
The Martian 2015

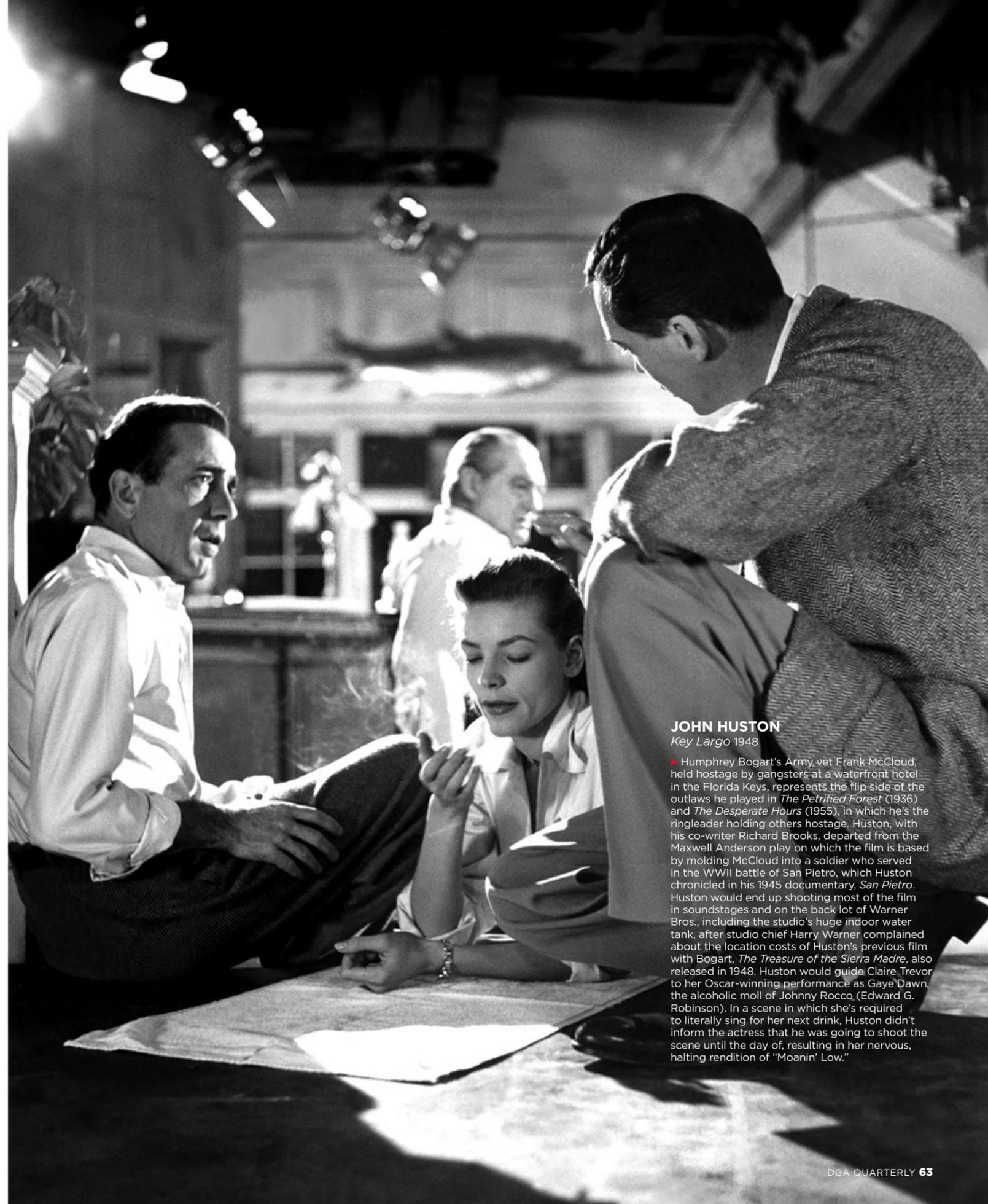
► Partly known for such nightmarish sci-fi visions as *Blade Runner* and *Alien*, Scott leaned toward science fact with this story about an astronaut left for dead on Mars by his crewmates. It's the Robinson Crusoe story in deep space, where the marooned Mark Watney (Matt Damon), a whip-smart botanist, decides he's going to "science the hell" out of his predicament, creating his own artificial ecosystem to survive and not succumb to despair. Scott doesn't allow things to get too confined for the viewer. "If we ever get tired of a man by himself, I've got somewhere to go to give him a break as it were, because I've got the universe of NASA, the universe on board the ship that has gone home and don't know that he's alive, and the universe of JPL," he said. Inspired by Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Scott left no stone unturned in his attention to detail, with Wadi Rum, the high desert in southern Jordan, doubling as Mars, while using the world's largest soundstage just outside Budapest for the rest, including Martian landscapes that required hauling in a thousand metric tons of red-tinted sand and rocks. "The film is about thinking your way through all kinds of obstacles and problems," said Scott. "And unless you can do that, you're just going to die."

STANLEY KUBRICK
The Shining 1980

► Kubrick adapted the Stephen King horror novel—about a writer and his family enlisted as winter caretakers at a grand hotel in the Colorado Rockies where things go terribly wrong—as a way of examining humanity's inherent dark side. Kubrick also wanted to avoid certain tropes associated with the ghost genre. "In a story of this kind, establishing believability is the most important matter," he said, "which is why I tried to establish a matter-of-fact visual style. We shot in what looks like existing light; no elongated shadows or melodramatic highlights. It's just the story of one man's family going insane together." Kubrick being Kubrick, that naturalistic style required massive wattages of artificial light to duplicate sunlight streaming through the windows of the Overlook Hotel, causing temperatures to soar above 100 degrees on the film's EMI-Elstree Studio set. Much has been written about the paces Kubrick put his cast through, with 50 takes de rigueur, and more than 100 not unimaginable. He also took advantage of the then relatively new Steadicam technology, for which he used its inventor, Garrett Brown, no less, as his camera operator—most memorably tracking the young actor Danny Lloyd through the Overlook's myriad hallways where he confronts two of the hotel's ghosts: twin sisters whose eerie presence is seemingly inspired by the work of Diane Arbus, who reportedly mentored the young Kubrick in his early New York photographer days.



PHOTOS: EVERETT



JOHN HUSTON
Key Largo 1948

► Humphrey Bogart's Army vet Frank McCloud, held hostage by gangsters at a waterfront hotel in the Florida Keys, represents the flip side of the outlaws he played in *The Petrified Forest* (1936) and *The Desperate Hours* (1955), in which he's the ringleader holding others hostage. Huston, with his co-writer Richard Brooks, departed from the Maxwell Anderson play on which the film is based by molding McCloud into a soldier who served in the WWII battle of San Pietro, which Huston chronicled in his 1945 documentary, *San Pietro*. Huston would end up shooting most of the film in soundstages and on the back lot of Warner Bros., including the studio's huge indoor water tank, after studio chief Harry Warner complained about the location costs of Huston's previous film with Bogart, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, also released in 1948. Huston would guide Claire Trevor to her Oscar-winning performance as Gaye Dawn, the alcoholic moll of Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson). In a scene in which she's required to literally sing for her next drink, Huston didn't inform the actress that he was going to shoot the scene until the day of, resulting in her nervous, halting rendition of "Moanin' Low."