

# *Fists of Fury*

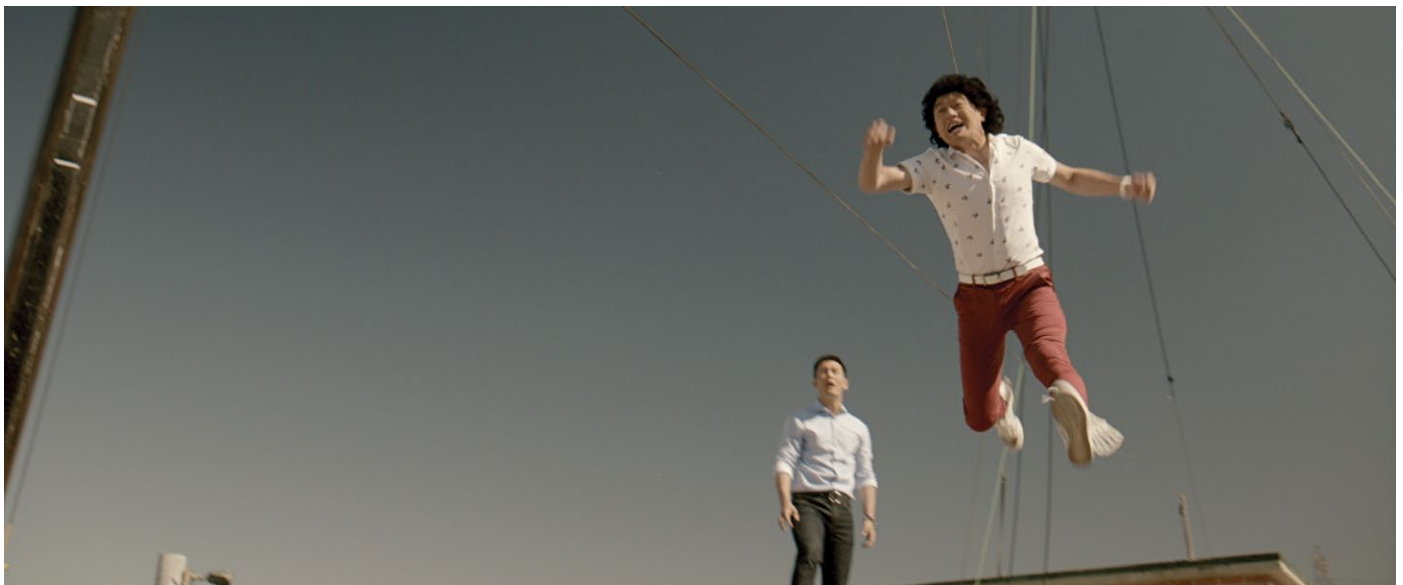
Catching up with DP Sam Chase and his Guild camera team for the L.A.-shot, China-bound, *Hollywood Adventures*

by PAULINE ROGERS

Unit Stills by RICHARD CARTWRIGHT / Stunt Images and  
Frame Grabs Courtesy of Enlight/Perfect Storm



**IN AN ERA WHERE MOVIE THEATERS ARE BEING TORN DOWN IN THE UNITED STATES, CHINA IS BUILDING THEM SO FAST THAT THEY CAN'T KEEP UP WITH NEW CONTENT. THIS TREND OPENS THE DOOR FOR INTERESTING POSSIBILITIES – LIKE THE ACTION/COMEDY *HOLLYWOOD ADVENTURES*,**



Star Tong Dawei taking a wirework jump in rooftop scene

**FEATURING CHINESE STARS ZHAO WEI, HUANG XIAOMING, AND TONG DAWEI. IT IS THE FIRST PRODUCTION SHOT IN THE U.S. FOR THE MAINLAND CHINESE MARKET, AND IT COMES FROM THE *FAST AND FURIOUS* SERIES DIRECTOR/PRODUCER JUSTIN LIN'S COMPANY, PERFECT STORM.**



Zhao Wei (with Tong Dawei in background)





Bottom: DP Sam Chase lining up a shot for large party scene

**“It actually started as a simple road-trip movie and exploded into a mega-action adventure,”** explains director Timothy Kendall, who co-developed the story with Lin. The two had collaborated on a low-budget action/comedy series called *The Book Club* for Lin’s YouTube Channel YOMYOMF. *Hollywood Adventures* centers on Jim (Huang), an uptight Beijing car salesman who gets dumped by his girlfriend (Zhao) while she is in L.A. on an internship. Jim procures a last-minute plane ticket on a tour dubbed “Hollywood Adventures” to win her back. But things spiral out of control when Jim falls in with his criminal tour guide and his savant sidekick. Mayhem ensues, and the trio land in trouble with the mob, the FBI and seemingly the whole Hollywood system.

“Directing comedy well is already challenging,” Kendall muses. “Directing comedy in a foreign language is exponentially more challenging. The social dynamics – the tropes that Americans intuitively understand – may not

translate so well in China, and vice versa.”

Kendall cites one scene in a redneck bar, where Jim realizes he can get out of a sticky situation by provoking his girlfriend to punch him in the face. (Earlier in the film, Jim sees an American reality show where characters punch each other and celebrate each hit.)

“Thwarting a dangerous scenario with a silly action is a comedy trope that we’ve seen in movies before,” Kendall observes. “Yet while American audiences understood the reference to the punch show, it wasn’t exactly clear to the Chinese audience why the main character insists on being punched in the face. To help solve this, we later picked up an insert shot of the television that plays the American punch show in the bar. For me, it was about finding a balance between the American and Chinese audiences so they wouldn’t be completely taken out by a joke they don’t understand, and upping the ones that are universal – not always easy.”



Stars Tong Dawei, Huang Xiaoming and Zhao Wei make a run for it!

**To bring that balance to the screen, Kendall turned to** cinematographer and long-time collaborator Sam Chase, who had briefly lived in Shanghai, and who notes that about “85 percent” of the show was shot in L.A., with the remainder in China.

“There is a huge character arc for all three leads in this film, so the look evolves as the story progresses,” Chase explains. “We were making very particular and subtle changes in composition, movement, lighting, color palette, color grade and lens usage to try to reflect those internal changes and the external forces acting upon them. We hoped to distinguish this film from other Chinese blockbusters by making it distinctively American, while also attempting to convey something more universal with a strong aesthetic that steered away from clichés.”

Chase opted for a 2.39:1 aspect ratio because he thought it played better for capturing the copious car action, as well as the vast landscape of the American west. “A lot of people don’t think 2.39 is funny,” he shares. “But I think it gave the three leads a great space in which to work.”

The DP describes his main capture system, the ARRI

ALEXA XT Plus, as an “excellent cinema camera,” and also gave some love to the Sony F55, which he used for plates and high speed. The overall blended package included two ALEXA XT’s shooting ARRIRAW, one F55 shooting at 240 fps in 4K RAW, and a series of PL-mounted Blackmagic Pocket Cameras with 16-mm Zeiss Super Speeds for attaching to cars and planting close to stunts. Initially Chase wanted to shoot anamorphic, but reality set in, and he chose spherical. “I realized that I needed glass that was easy to work with and that I could readily get multiple sets of with easy-to-match zooms,” he adds. “Panavision Primo primes and zooms were a perfect fit.”

Before production began, Chase met with gaffer Mike Ambrose to conceptualize a more dark and contrasty approach than is typical of standard comedies. To facilitate an ambitious production schedule with complex stunts, Chase says he and Ambrose “worked it out so that we keep moving parts on the set floor to a minimum, and light spaces and then faces.” Chase also held many preproduction meetings with A-camera/Steadicam operator Mark Goellnicht, whom he calls “a tremendous



Stephen Tobolowsky, “blowing up as Wronald Wright”





Hollywood Motel Room

asset” to the team. Matching long car-chase scenes with 2nd-unit stunt work was made easier by 2nd Unit DP Patrick O’Brien’s also manning B-camera on the first unit. Chase says the preproduction conversations with Key Grip Pat O’Mara were nearly endless: “Insert car work, stunt work, cranes, big interior/exterior and studio rigs. I leaned on Pat more than just about anyone on this film, and he was a rock,” the DP states.

**Another key member of the team was D.I.T. Zack Charney Cohen**, who worked closely with Chase, VFX Supervisor Robert Staad and Post Supervisor Louise Runge to create a system that was both flexible and could reduce costs.

“We tailored it so that, with loader Nick Lantz, I was able to do most everything,” Charney Cohen explains. “Live color was done using a combination of Fujifilm IS-Minis, occasionally HDLinks for extra cameras, and all run through Pomfort Live Grade; all editorial and Web dailies were also done by us on set through Resolve.

“Our biggest day on main unit we were fielding three Alexa XT’s [ARRIRAW], an F55 [RAW 2K, 240 fps], three

Blackmagic Pocket cams, three DSLRs, two GoPros and even an iPhone,” Charney Cohen adds. “We essentially had one take on every big action moment – from car-flip sequences to blowing up buildings. One sequence, in particular, was probably one of the most challenging – for both comedy and action.”

That scene involved a “monster van jump,” which soars Huang and his cohorts through the air, crashing through a billboard, and somehow landing safely below. It’s a moment that could never be adequately sold through CG.

“The van jump is not just a majorly difficult stunt, it is also an important story point,” Chase relates. “There is a kind of time-stoppage dream sequence [shot later on green screen] that takes place inside the van. This jump was 100-plus feet long and over 25 feet high, so for both safety and practical reasons we didn’t want to do it more than once.”

“Safety is always the primary concern when doing these specialized stunts,” Stunt Coordinator Mike Gunther recalls. “Working with my team at 5150 Action, I devised a plan [to test out the landing area].” The van was fitted with a specialized cage, seat and modifications to make driver



Rhys Coiro as megastar “Gary Busheimer”



For the key "van soaring through a billboard scene," Stunt Driver Corey Eubanks flew more than 100 feet through the air, at speeds nearing 50 mph before landing safely in a "catcher," Stunt Coordinator Mike Gunther had built from 500 boxes.



Corey Eubanks as safe as possible but with enough room for him to drive. Gunther's team also built a catcher with more than 500 boxes. While this was happening, Eubanks walked the jump, lining himself up mentally.

"You really only get one shot with this kind of stunt," Gunther emphasizes. "Thousands of dollars and countless hours of planning and meetings go into 15 seconds. Corey drove the van to his starting mark and gave me the signal – good to go. Test cameras rolling as he took off down the road, reaching his target speed of 46 miles per hour. Speeding down the road, the van leaped into the air, soaring more than 100 feet before landing safely in our catcher. The test was a success."

Chase recalls how Gunther and Eubanks had dialed-in the weight balance on the car to perfection, "but we were still faced with the additional difficulty of this van's needing to crash through a billboard on its trip back to earth," he says. "We had one van, one sign, one shot – and no margin for error where safety or precision were concerned. Camera departments are statistically

the most at risk of any department on set, and these are exacting situations where we need to make every effort to keep our entire crew safe."

Although the *Hollywood Adventures* team ran one arm car, one crane, one ground-planted remote head, and two long lens positions, and then buried Blackmagic Pocket Cameras and GoPros in every conceivable position, Chase says the trickiest shot was from the pursuit car. "It was going to lead the van as it approached the launch ramp, then pan and track it running parallel as it flew through the air," he remembers. "I put Patrick [O'Brien] and his focus puller, Ray Milazzo, in the arm car with Tim, and jokingly told them they better just keep driving if they blew the take."

Kendall rode in the chase vehicle to get the best POV of the shot, which he says turned out flawlessly. "I remember as a student filmmaker there was an accident on my set where a young man got injured," he recalls. "As the director, I am fully responsible for everyone, and while the injury was very minor, that lesson about safety





Top Left: DP Sam Chase lining up a shot. / Top Right: Director Timothy Kendall (rear left with hat) watches as Chase lines up a shot. / Bottom Left: Chase (left) with Kendall (right) / Bottom Right: Chase (foreground in plaid) sets up a shot with A-camera operator Mark Goellnicht (baseball hat and headset)

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stuck with me.”

In fact, Kendall is so committed to his moviemaking that he tried some *Hollywood Adventures* stunts himself to help the actors (who did their own stunts) gain confidence.

“Yes, it’s ridiculous to have the director throwing himself around crash pads and fly-rigs,” Kendall laughs. “I suppose when the actors would see me try something – they were more inspired to go for it themselves. There’s nothing like having the real actors’ faces on screen during huge action moments. The sore muscles, bruises and ego-slams were totally worth it.”

Chase adds that to have “all three leads game to do their own stunts” was a lucky break. “These are not action stars,” he says. “They tend toward romantic comedies and dramas, so their participation in stunt work was a testament to their own fortitude and to the confidence Tim and Mike Gunther and his team instilled in the rehearsal and training process.”

**A prime example was a downtown-L.A. sequence** where Huang and his two sidekicks have to make a giant “leap of faith” from one building roof to another over an alley. Key Grip Pat O’Mara had to provide a 45-foot MovieBird telescoping crane with a Libra remote head onto the top of the rooftop location. “We needed to have an engineered platform built approximately 40 feet by 16 feet to be able to move the crane around,” O’Mara describes. “Mike Gunther had a 200-ton Champion crane available for his wire work, so we utilized it to raise the MovieBird to the roof.”

“Roof space was limited for camera positions, large frames weren’t practical for light control, and with so much to shoot in two very short days, trying to keep the actors out of front light really proved to be a challenge,” adds Chase.

The “alley” being jumped over was actually a lower rooftop of the same structure where the art department had built a giant practical turret to which the actors





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would jump. The lower roof had been lined with digi-green and crash boxes.

“Pat O’Mara managed to get that telescoping crane up to get the lenses where we needed them,” Chase describes. “We also had a camera position in a lift and another long lens that had Patrick and Ray dragging sticks, and an 11:1 around the roof all day long in the hot sun. Our dolly grips, Jim Leidholdt and Jamie Young, were tirelessly laying deck and pushing that crane around for two days. They slammed every move that was put their way, rehearsal or not.”

Another major hurdle for the L.A.-based Guild team was shooting car interiors for the final chase sequence, done on a massive green screen stage (276 by 32 feet) with an overhead 30- by 50-foot green screen that could be moved along the entire length of the set and then dropped vertically, like a garage door. Ambrose designed an interactive lighting rig consisting of three 4- by 20-foot LED panels, articulated on chain motors, horizontally or vertically for lighting effects, and reflections that played footage of the actual practical location captured by the plate unit.

“We captured plate shots with [three] ALEXAs on a 270-degree rig on an arm car. VFX Supervisor Robert

Staad had used this setup many times, including in the excellent comp work that he’d done for *Hangover 3*, so I just followed his lead,” Chase reflects.

As to any filmmaking culture gaps, Kendall reports the Chinese stars’ being “amazed” by the “short” shooting schedules and “long” planning sessions. The American crew learned a lot, too – like how to bless the cameras before a shoot, and how to deal with massive social media. “Starting the first week, sites like Renren, China’s Facebook, and Weibo, China’s Twitter, were posting pictures of our work on set,” recalls 1st AC Markus Mentzer. “How they got the shots to post, well, that was a puzzle.” 🎬

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