

THE CAUSE BEHIND THE SPECIAL EFFECT



EXPLOSIONS, SHOOTOUTS, SIMULATIONS OF NATURAL DISASTERS: KENNETH CASSAR HAS DONE IT ALL, AND WORKED ON BIG BUDGET FILMS INCLUDING TROY, MUNICH AND THE DA VINCI CODE. *Giselle Scicluna* MEETS THE MAN WHOSE SPECIAL EFFECTS LEAVE AUDIENCES SHAKEN AND STIRRED

PHOTOS BY PIPPA ZAMMIT CUTAJAR



As Hollywood churns out one blockbuster after the other, movie buffs all over the world are yet again entranced by even more impressive and spectacular special effects. While technology advances at breakneck speed, movies which would otherwise be mediocre works are, with clever use of special effects, seamlessly transformed into veritable masterpieces. Even if the creation of special effects is practically a science, the amount of creativity and flair involved has virtually honed it down to an art form. What emerges on the story board, finally lands on celluloid, in the process entertaining millions by bringing magic to the silver screen.

Kenneth Cassar is our very own home-grown special effects wizard. Although still in his early thirties, he has been practically weaned on the job by his late father Mario, a much loved and respected special effects pioneer in the Maltese film industry. At the tender age of fifteen, Kenneth started out as an assistant with the SFX (Special Effects) Department of the Malta Film Facilities where his father had been employed as Tank Manager/Special Effects Supervisor since the early seventies. In 2000, father and son turned freelance and formed their own local SFX company, MC-FX Malta. With an impressive CV that boasts significant works on movies shot both on our shores and abroad, it is hard to imagine what a working day for Kenneth is like.

Where does it all start? "I am first approached by the company producing the movie usually through a recommendation by other companies that I have worked for. Reputation is an all important factor in this business; you have to be a hard working, loyal team player, able to deliver no matter what, sometimes even in the most adverse conditions imaginable. Then, after endless meetings, mainly involving tough negotiations regarding the production's budget, I am supplied with the script. From then on it is up to me to make each and every scene where special effects are involved, come to life. The only limit is my imagination and mounting costs," Kenneth explains.

"My main priority after studying the script is to create the most spectacular effects viable as required in any particular scene, while safeguarding as much as possible all those involved during shooting; actors, stunt persons and filming crew. I have to liaise with the visual effects department and the stunts team at all times." I ask him to elaborate; what is the difference between special effects and visual effects? "Special effects are almost all the physical effects you get on screen; explosions, shootouts, simulations of natural disasters, all created in my workshop by my team. Visual effects are mostly computer generated."

Kenneth has obviously worked with some of the greatest movie celebrities of our time. Which project has given him the most satisfaction? "All of them. I



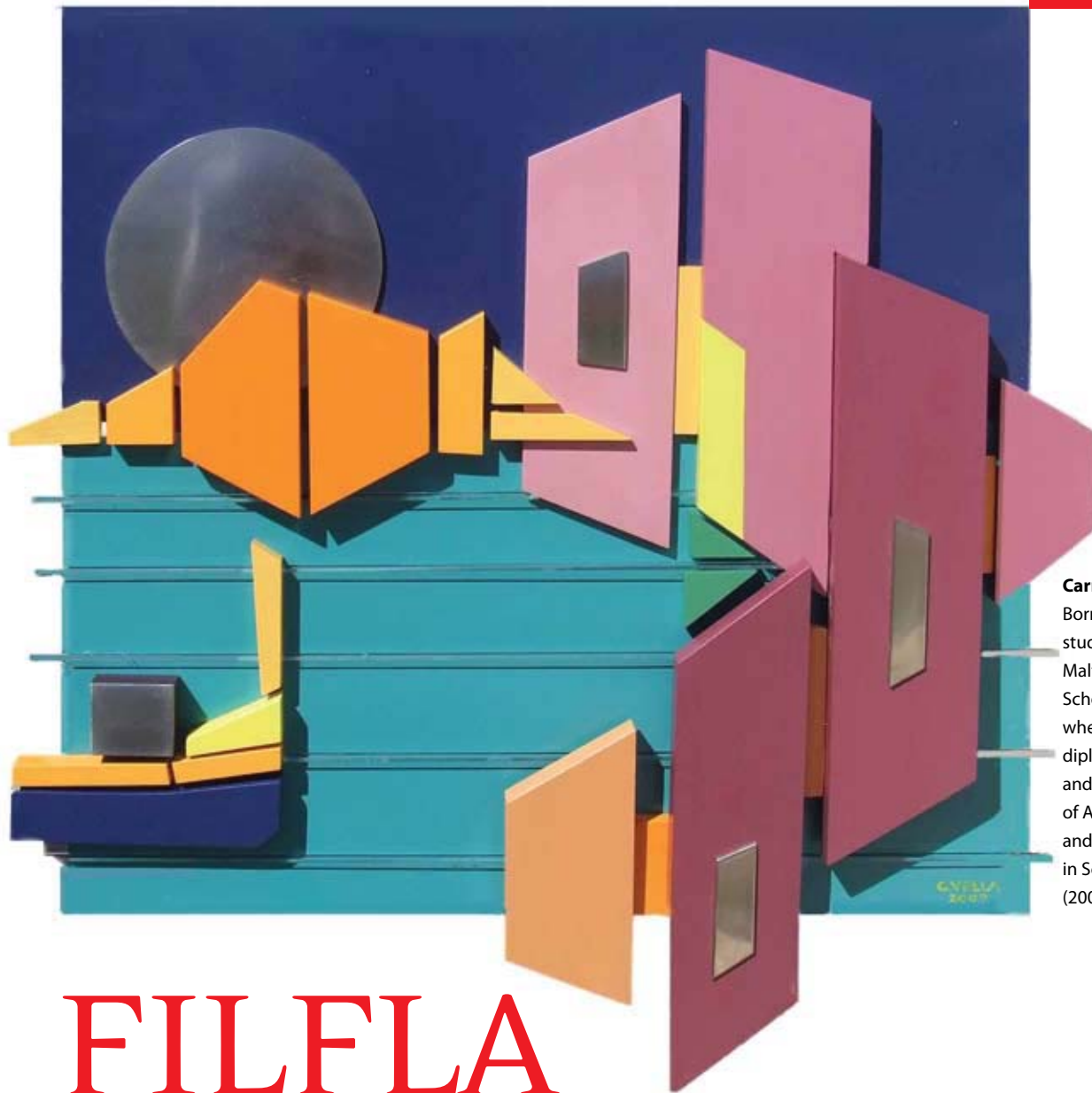
am as passionate about a multi-million dollar movie as I am about a small local production. I strive to do my best for the both; whatever the project. Having said that, the fact that I have worked on a Spielberg production works wonders for my CV. I have had the opportunity to work with so many talented people; awesome actors, some of the best directors in the business, creators of the most lavish movie sets, costume designers, the lot and that in itself is hugely satisfying. All the projects I have worked on have been a great source of pride for me, some for their sheer significance; Troy, Munich, U-571, The Da Vinci Code, The Emperor's New Clothes, Helen of Troy, Julius Caesar, Columbus: The Discovery, Voyage, Men of East. Then there were projects which although less known have been a joy to work on due to being smaller in scale, where the camaraderie is always unbeatable," he tells me. These include plenty of local productions; Angli the Movie, Qerq, Romeo & Juliet and Macbeth as well as commercials, including those for HSBC and Renault 19 (Spanish production).

So what are the perks of the job? "You get to meet some very inspiring men and women plus you get to go on location to so many exotic places, which is a great bonus. Obviously, experimenting with new techniques and gadgets for each production is always a refreshing change from normal routine. On the downside, while shooting, the hours are horrendous but definitely part and parcel of the job. It is a cutthroat business as well, so to say that competition is fierce is an understatement. Staying at the top requires great dedication, an open mind, and a keen sense of humour," he states matter-of-factly, quickly eradicating the aura of glamour surrounding the film industry.

What is the most vivid recollection of his career? His face clouding over Kenneth tells me, "It was the day my father died. We were just about to wrap up Troy. He left for hospital from our workshop in Ricasoli, and never made it back. He was only fifty-one. That day I not only lost my father, but a good friend and my mentor. That was a huge turning point in my career: suddenly I had to stand alone; I was no longer Mario's boy. There were many in the business who expected me to fall flat on my face, but my father was a meticulous man and had taught me well." He brightens up and continues, "He has left me an enormous legacy of information and knowledge, and I am just continuing where he left off."

His plans for the future? He smiles broadly, "With regard to the immediate future, I am soon going to be a dad again." His wife Tiziana is expecting their second child in March and Kenneth is clearly over the moon. As we speak, his cell phone rings and apparently, he will soon be flying to yet another location, to yet another production and from the little information he can divulge it seems as if Turkey is next on Kenneth's itinerary. ■





Carmelo Vella

Born in 1961, Vella studied art at the Malta Government School of Art from where he obtained a diploma in Painting and Appreciation of Art (1998 – 2001) and a diploma in Sculpture (2002 – 2005).

FILFLA

AND THE ISLE OF THE DEAD



Many artists are inspired by great masters and manage to reinterpret their works in their own style or manner. In recent years, Maltese artists have followed suit. Recently, exhibitions dedicated to the reinterpretation of Mattia Preti and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio were held, while other artists worked on a project entitled Filfla and Toteninsel based on Swiss-German artist Arnold Böcklin's famous work, The Isle of the Dead.

Böcklin made several other versions of this work, which fascinated great artists and inspired many of his contemporaries as well other artists of the last hundred years. The story of this painting started following a request by Marie Berna, whose husband died and Böcklin was asked to paint a picture on the theme of her bereavement. The artist first referred to this work as A Silent Island and later as an Island of the Graves. In fact in his third version of 1883, the artist clearly depicted the island

IN THEIR INTERPRETATION OF ARNOLD BÖCKLIN'S ISLE OF THE DEAD, TWO ARTISTS OFFER A GLIMPSE OF WHAT LIES BEYOND THE MYSTERY OF LIFE AND DEATH, WRITES *Louis Laganà*



Joseph Casha

Born in 1939, Casha studied art at the School of Art, Valletta; the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome; the Istituto Statale d'Arte; and the Scuola delle Arti Ornamentali. Professionally, Casha was Teacher of Art in state schools, Head of School, and Head of the Government School of Art in Malta.

as a burial chamber with rock cut graves on the inner sides of the island and cypress trees in the centre.

It is interesting to note that when one looks closely at Böcklin's painting, one notices the resemblance of the shape of the island of the dead to the tiny island of Filfla, situated about five kilometers off the southern coast of Malta. Filfla too has an interesting history. This uninhabited rock was used for target practice by the British Forces. It is also known that a small chapel dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady was built inside a small cave in 1343, and mass was held every Sunday for the fishermen working in the vicinity. Unfortunately, the Chapel was destroyed in 1856 when an earthquake rocked the Maltese Islands. Today, the island is the habitat for birds, lizards, insects and other small organisms.

Artists Carmelo Vella and Joseph Casha successfully illustrated Filfla in a similar manner in the way Böcklin did with

The Island of the Dead. Their works were part of a project which culminated in a collective exhibition by twenty-seven artists which was held last November at the German Maltese Circle, in Valletta. Although their works are distinct in style, method and medium, both artists approached the concept of death in a dreamlike fashion but with an immediacy to give their audience a glimpse of what lies beyond the mystery of death.

In Carmelo Vella's work, *The Uniting of Filfla and The Island of the Dead*, the main concept is the simplification and merging of the symbolical motifs representing the island in a minimalist manner. The artist used three different mediums: wood, stainless steel and Perspex. Colour also has a symbolic element in the whole composition.

It seems that for the artist the interpretation of *Island of the Dead* has a mathematical significance. The composition of his work is made up of diagonals balancing perfectly with verticals and horizontals while the island of Filfla can be discerned in terms of mauve quadrilaterals making up a haven. Like in Böcklin's painting there is a boat carrying a coffin towards the island. Vella used a stainless steel cube to represent the coffin. The background is made up of five horizontal Perspex bars representing the deep turquoise sea. One can conclude that for the artist, this work also expresses the delight of colour. An interesting arrangement of hues of mauve with contrasts of yellow and orange, all in mellow shades, creates depth against an ultramarine sky evoking the dead of night. A rising stainless steel moon peeps behind the geometric stylised rock formations. In this work the artist successfully achieved the personification of the mystery of time and place.

In contrast to Vella's work, Joseph Casha's interpretation of *Filfla and The Isle of the Dead* is made up of an assemblage of photographic images made with a sculpture in olive wood and a cross in walnut which were placed in front of a clear view of Filfla. The composition also includes a representation of Selmun Palace hovering in the sky on top of the island, which symbolises power, and a traditional Maltese fisherman's boat, the symbol of the voyage or the crossing to another place or dimension. In fact the work was called *Sanctuary*, and as the artist described it, it is an analogy and a metaphor for the memorial of Filfla. Casha divided the sea in three distinct patterns giving depth of field to the whole composition. It is rather a puzzling scene with contradictory images which make the viewers think deeply about the beauty of life but with a kind of contemplative self-examination.

It seems that these works are a philosophical enquiry about life and death. The *isle of the dead*, in our case the tiny island of Filfla, acts like a gateway which leads us to a new form of existence. It is a place of tranquillity where we find peace and deliverance, away from the turmoil and the chaotic elements of humanity. ■

Dr Laganà is a reader in Modern and Contemporary Art History, specialising in Jungian Aesthetics, Primitivism and other aspects of art criticism and theory. He lectures at the Junior College and the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta.