



Tips from the Top: Special effects supervisor Alex Gunn



■ **This SFX wizard, 58, on squaring up to sly, a close call with Nastassja Kinski and blowing things up in Gangs of London**

Were you someone who liked blowing things up as a kid?

Yes, definitely. I knew what I wanted to do as a career from the age of nine. I was brought up on a diet of Thunderbirds, Captain Scarlet and the Saturday morning picture club. Being in the cinema was totally captivating, as was visiting the Imperial War Museum, which was then like a glorified junkyard. When you went inside there were bits of wrecked plane, blown-up tanks and machine guns you could play with.

Did you go to film school?

I did my A levels at a local all-boys grammar school in 1978, the year after the first Star Wars came out. Because it was the first movie to use a stop-motion camera, everyone realised computers were coming and our sixth form was part of an experimental class that was taught how to program them. I went to Bournemouth film school, where the two lecturers ran film and TV studies like a production company. We didn't read scripts, watch movies and discuss them. We got our hands dirty. I learned how to load film, record, edit and track lay.

How did you get your first break?

After I got a job as an assistant film editor I made a 20-minute drama/documentary of A Day In The Life Of A Special Effects Man and added a little spaceship sequence on the end. I used that as a visual calling card and sent VHS tapes to all eight SFX supervisors in the UK. I still have lovely letters from two of them on my wall, which I use as inspiration. One was Derek Meddings [Superman, Thunderbirds] and the other was Kit West [Raiders Of the Lost Ark]. A third, Alan Whibley [Revolution], offered me two weeks' work. So I got into film special effects as a trainee, swept the floor, made the tea.

Your first job was 1985 big-budget flop Revolution with Al Pacino and Nastassja Kinski. Intimidating?

Revolution was the biggest-financed film in UK history at that time and huge in scale. We completely took over King's Lynn city centre. There were cannons, bullets, explosions and smoke. I did have words with Nastassja. We were doing a night scene and she was standing on the dock with a flambeau, a stick with some material wrapped round it and a flame coming out. We put some absorbent fire-retardant material around the top and a little bit of petrol and diesel mix on it because that gives a lovely orange flame. Nastassja's had gone out and the fuel was running down the stem. She shouted, 'I've got fuel on my hand! What do I do?' I said, 'Just drop it.' Instead, she turned around and said, 'Don't you shout at me.' I said, 'I wasn't shouting, just drop it' and with that she threw it away. I thought, 'That's my career over', but the following evening she came over and in front of everybody apologised. A true star.

Mistakes, you've made a few?

One scene with Rambo in Thailand. Rambo booby-traps an old World War II grand-slam bomb and it explodes. The script demands you see Rambo running away and this shock wave come flying over him and splaying him flat. Sly Stallone wanted to do the stunt himself. We've got this wall of 12 giant air cannons, which you fill up with debris, and ten pyrotechnic cannons, which have got powder charges in them and even more debris. Sly's producer tells me they only want to do this once. We do it and 11 of the air cannons don't fire. So I have to go up and tell Sly we need to do this again. His face is like thunder. He's out of his chair - 'F***ing limey!' I square up to him and say, 'Go on, then. I'm gonna let you get the first one in.' He says, 'And then what happens?' I said, 'If you don't knock me out, I'm coming for ya.' Then he burst out laughing. The second time we loaded a bit extra in the cannons and it took 30 seconds for all the debris to stop raining out of the sky. From that point on, he was one of the best directors I've ever worked with.

Is there a special effects job you're particularly proud of?

Gangs Of London was one of the best jobs. I love episode five when the satchel is dropped out of the window and the plastic explosive goes off. The wonder of working with a director like Gareth Evans is that he knows how to

use the tools in the tool box. We built foam dummies and put bottles inside them with blood bags and shredded the costumes. Nowadays, the CG is so good that you can track and literally wallpaper a picture of the human over the dummy. So when the dummy blows apart, it is the skin and the clothes of the human but the viscera are from your exploding body underneath. It conforms to the laws of physics.

What advice would you give to somebody wanting to start out in your business?

Special effects is hugely engineering-based so anyone who wants to get into it should do an engineering course. Learn how to use a lathe, a mill and all the other big machine tools. Now you have to be a coded welder to show you are at a certain standard. That's very important when you're building a rig that's got Tom Cruise hanging off of it.

Has the SFX industry evolved in terms of diversity?

It's never been an issue for us. Approximately a quarter of my crew at Arcadia SFX are not white men. They are women or men from all sorts of different backgrounds and persuasions. Hayley Williams is the first female SFX supervisor in Britain ever. The criteria for SFX are you've got to be strong, able and observant.

The facts

Salary: If you've a year's HND engineering course and know how to use a lathe and a mill, it's about £600 a week for a five-day week.

Regular hours? You will work at least 12 hours a day and you do not sit about. Personally, I think it's counterproductive to do more than that.

Short and sweet advice: Look and listen.

Top tip

'FX people have a mentality that it's not a problem it's a solution waiting to be discovered'