

Film studies Adult dramas

Brooks Barnes

CBS Films, the venerable television company's upstart movie studio, had a problem with its first film. The emotional peak of *Extraordinary Measures*, a medical drama set for release in Hong Kong next month, was arriving too early.

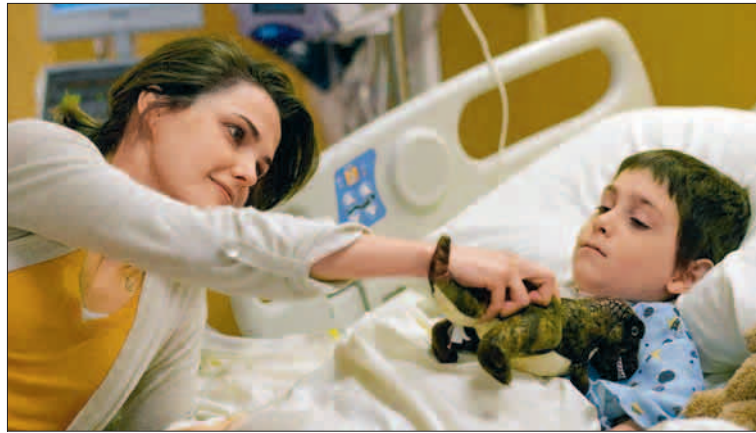
The solution? Reordering the sequence of certain scenes and cutting others. But it wasn't the filmmakers who came up with the fix – it was Leslie Moonves, the chief executive of CBS. "He was incredibly hands-on and helpful," says Michael Shamberg, one of the movie's producers, "but his contribution on the ending was crucial."

It is unusual for chief executives of media conglomerates to involve themselves in the finer points of moviemaking. But this is not your typical motion picture studio. While entrenched players such as Warner Brothers are moving away from modestly budgeted, star-driven movies in favour of mega-budget franchises or inexpensive horror and teenage titles, the new kid on the block is arriving with the old formula intact: four to six films a year, anchored by stars and costing up to US\$50 million apiece.

"There's an area in the middle where I want to live," says Amy Baer, president of CBS Films. Among the movies it has coming up are *The Back-Up Plan*, a romantic comedy starring Jennifer Lopez that arrives in the US on April 16; work has started on *Faster*, a co-production with Sony, starring Dwayne Johnson and Billy Bob Thornton.

Only a fool would underestimate Moonves, a former actor and legendary figure in Hollywood. But many veterans of the film business are scratching their heads over his strategy.

If the experienced hands can't make those kinds of movies work, isn't it terribly presumptuous of CBS to think it can? Moreover, CBS is entering the fray with an adult drama, a tricky genre in the best of



Keri Russell and Diego Velazquez in *Extraordinary Measures*. Photo: CBS Films

times but one that is enormously challenged with current audiences.

Other studios passed on making *Extraordinary Measures*, which stars Harrison Ford, Brendan Fraser, Keri Russell and Diego Velazquez. It is a story about the difficult subject of Pompe disease, an often fatal neuromuscular genetic disorder that affects the muscles and organs of children.

"Leslie and Amy were the only ones with the courage to greenlight this movie," says Carla Santos Shamberg, another producer.

Medical tales, especially involving children, can veer dangerously close to schmaltz.

"Sick children are not entertaining, and movies that tackle that subject come with huge traps – oversimplification, melodrama, misplaced hope," says Jeanine Basinger, chairwoman of the film studies department at Wesleyan University. "I hate to say it, but this topic tends to work much better on TV."

With the right touch, however, Basinger says she thinks *Extraordinary Measures* may succeed. "The secret is making these movies a celebration of a heroic stance," she says. "Give audiences something they always love, which is

that one person working against all odds can make a difference."

And the filmmakers have experience in making "issue" movies work. The Shambergs, who are a married couple, along with their producing partner Stacey Sher, were behind *Erin Brockovich*, the 2000 box office hit that won Julia Roberts an Academy Award.

"There's a hole in the marketplace for well-made adult dramas," Michael Shamberg says. "They're not damaged goods if done well." Exhibit A is *The Blind Side*, the sports drama that cost less than US\$35 million to produce and has sold US\$227 million in tickets at the worldwide box office. It also won Sandra Bullock a best actress award at the Golden Globes last month.

Moonves was modest about his involvement, particularly regarding the editing of the film. "I just threw out a suggestion," he says. "You know me, with content I can't keep my hands off." Even so, he met the filmmakers, read the script, looked at rough cuts and even visited the set – involvement that Carla Santos Shamberg says is welcome.

"People want to see good, old-fashioned storytelling," she says. "This guy has real instincts for the mass market." *The New York Times*

Virtual cinema Open letter

Clarence Tsui

Before making its bow on the internet portal The Auteurs last month, Apitchatpong Weerasethakul's *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (www.theauteurs.com/films/4093) had already been seen as part of his Primitive installation in Munich and Liverpool, and also in many international film festivals. But the film's online availability is significant, given the filmmaker's much-documented battle with his home country's zealous censors.

Probably the most critically acclaimed Thai filmmaker of his generation, Apitchatpong – the first Thai director to have a film screened at the Cannes and Berlin film festivals – ran foul of the authorities in Bangkok in 2006 with his film *Syndromes and a Century*. The Thai Censorship Board ruled the film could only be released domestically if four scenes were removed: they involved kissing and drinking in a hospital, monks playing a guitar and a flying saucer toy.

At one point, the censors even refused to return the print to the director after he refused to recut the film. *Syndromes* was eventually



A Letter to Uncle Boonmee is a subtle look at the devastation of a village

shown in limited screenings in Bangkok in 2008, with the director replacing the controversial scenes with black, scratched film stock in protest.

While hardly a piece on agit-prop, *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (www.animateprojects.org/films/by_date/2009/a_letter_to) touches on one of the most dubious chapters in contemporary Thai history: it explores the story of the village of Nabua, where soldiers committed a string of atrocities during its proclaimed campaigns against communist insurgents in 1965.

Inhabitants reported soldiers carrying out rape and murder. Fearing government reprisals, surviving men fled to the guerillas' mountain bases.

When Apitchatpong visits the village in 2008, he discovers a community in which a generation of men has grown up fatherless.

In *Letter*, Nabua is shown as a deserted hamlet, its houses and rice fields emptied of people except for a few young soldiers.

As the camera slowly glides through the houses, a voiceover – a local man reading the director's "letter" – is heard. Seemingly, Uncle Boonmee is a teacher who fled into the jungle during the military campaign 40 years ago. "What was your view like? Was it like this?" the voice asks.

There's no sense of melodrama in the intonation, but the question is heartbreaking: a mournful reflection of a war still raging in Thailand today, and a subject Apitchatpong's next film, *Uncle Boonmee Who can Recall His Past Lives*, will expand on.

Postcard

Catherine Shoard

New Orleans

Late August 2005. One event – Hurricane Katrina – dominates US television news networks. And one song is played, almost on a loop, over footage of the devastation: Randy Newman's *Louisiana 1927*, a sad attack on the government's handling of a flood some eight decades earlier. Its mordant chorus – "The river rose all day/ The river rose all night/ Some people got lost in the flood/ Some people got away all right" – became an unofficial anthem of the tragedy.

Four years on, and Newman has cooked up a fresh batch of numbers about the Big Easy, designed to erase all association of the city with large-scale calamity – for 90 minutes, at least. Like the film they soundtrack, *The Princess and the Frog*, a Disney fairy tale set in jazz age New Orleans, the tunes are determinedly upbeat – rowdy, bluesy and buzzing with fun. Dr John croaks out the title track: "Grab somebody, come on down/ Bring your paintbrush, we're paintin' the town/ Oh there's some sweetness goin' round/ Catch it down in New Orleans". It could be a tourist board slogan.

Visually, *The Princess and the Frog* – which opens in Hong Kong on Thursday – does the same job, gloriously showcasing the city's best assets, building a virtual itinerary for a trip to the city: lush bayous, spooky voodoo, steamboats throbbing with jazz, oaks dripping with Mardi Gras beads, cypresses swathed in Spanish moss, bubbling gumbo, coffee with chicory, beignet doughnuts topped with icing sugar. It looks a hell of a place – in all the right ways.

And it's that one cinema-goers are going to be seeing more of. Louisiana is the third most popular state in which to shoot a film in the US, thanks chiefly to huge tax incentives. The drive to make the southern end of the Mississippi a new hub for film production actually began before Katrina, but the devastation failed to scupper plans, thanks to the dangling of even larger financial carrots, and the leverage of its starrer residents.

Time-travelling cop thriller *Deja Vu* would, most likely, have been relocated but for the insistence of leading man Denzel Washington that it be shot in the city as planned. New Orleans homeowners Brad Pitt (who shot *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* here), Sandra

Bullock and Nicolas Cage have also done energetic lobbying.

In 2005, 11 films were shot in New Orleans; nine in 2006, 14 in 2007, 21 in 2008 and 23 last year. So far in 2010, 15 films are in production in the city. The more enterprising among them harness recent history for their plots – Werner Herzog's *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* is as much about the ragged, sun-blasted state of the post-Katrina landscape as that of its hero's mental health; post-apocalyptic drama *The Road* found some perfect locations (more muted cheers in the tourist board for this one, you suspect).

A couple of award-winning documentaries have emerged, too: Spike Lee's superb *When the Levees Broke* and Oscar nominee *Trouble the Water*.

Upcoming sports drama *Hurricane Season* casts Forest Whitaker as a basketball coach assembling a team of traumatised local children, and April sees the HBO debut of David Simon's first series since *The Wire*. Called *Treme*, it is named after and shot in one of the city's most fascinating, and most flood-damaged, districts.

Others, however, simply use it as a common-or-garden backdrop –

Louisiana is the third most popular state in which to shoot a film in the US, thanks chiefly to huge tax incentives

and it's the viability of these meat-and-potatoes projects that will test Louisiana's big-screen ambitions. Whether it can hang on to that No 3 spot depends on the likes of Renny Harlin's *12 Rounds*, Matthew Lillard's pimp comedy *The Pool Boys*, slasher remake *Night of the Demons*, kiddie sci-fi *Robosapien* and Elisabeth Shue psychodrama *Waking Madison* – hack work shot in the city on account of economics, rather than aesthetics.

Meanwhile, New Orleans is unlikely to find a more swoony homage than the one in *The Princess and the Frog*: the Disney definition of metrophilia. Ironic, then, that it was made in Hollywood. *Guardian News & Media*



Nicolas Cage keeps his head above water in Werner Herzog's *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*