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By Patrick Goldstein
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'Public Enemies' sticks to strict shooting schedule

LOS ANGELES— When I saw producer Kevin Misher painfully limping into Chaya Brasserie for lunch this week, having just returned from spending months in Chicago producing "Public Enemies," the upcoming Michael Mann 1930s gangster movie, I have to admit that my first thought was: "Oh no, Mann must've been using live ammunition again." Anybody who has ever worked on a Michael Mann film has stories to tell that sound like tall tales, at least until you spend some time on his sets and see for yourself that pretty much anything can happen when Mann has a full head of steam.

Mann the perfectionist

Outside of James Cameron and perhaps David Fincher, no one is as much of a hard-headed perfectionist as Mann, who has a special zeal for authenticity.

When I spent time on his "Ali" set in Miami, he insisted on shooting a scene in which Muhammad Ali first sees Malcolm X at the exact mosque where Malcolm was preaching. He also shot a scene set in the backyard of Ali's Miami home at Ali's real house, even though the backyard was right in the flight pattern of Miami International Airport, meaning a plane flew overhead every 90 seconds, repeatedly drowning out the dialogue.

One of the production guys shook his head, grumbling, "We didn't have this problem when we shot near LAX with 'Heat.'" "Why was that, I asked?" Michael got the flight controllers to reroute LAX traffic to a different runway for a few hours." Frankly, when I scheduled my lunch with Misher back in May, I thought for sure the producer would end up canceling. "Public Enemies," which stars Johnny Depp as John Dillinger and Christian Bale as Melvin Purvis, was slated to finish shooting June 30 to beat the Screen Actors Guild strike deadline.

But having seen what happened on Mann's last movie, "Miami Vice," which went endless months over schedule, I figured the odds of Mann's being done on time were about as slim as the Dodgers finishing the season with a winning record. And yet, here was Misher, bloodied (he actually hurt his leg in a hiking fall) but unbowed.

So how did Misher and Universal Pictures manage to keep Mann on schedule?

Misher said Mann was incredibly focused about finishing on time, no doubt because the filmmaker saw the strike deadline on the horizon, knowing it would wreak havoc if he had to shut down before shooting was completed. That doesn't mean that Mann has lost any of his thirst for authenticity.

"Whenever we could, we shot exactly where the events happened—if we could find where Dillinger walked, we shot where he walked," said Misher. "We shot at the Biograph Theater on the very street where Dillinger was killed, so that scene was exactly where the real events happened. All we did was change the facades of the buildings and reverted them back to period.

"We also shot at the Little Bohemia Lodge up in northern Wisconsin, which is the scene of a famous gunfight between the FBI and Dillinger and Baby Face Nelson."

Plenty of action

Mann even dug up vintage tommy guns that were made in the 1930s to be used by the gangsters. When I asked for details, Misher threw up his hands. "You gotta ask Michael," he said. "The guns are his department. He knows all there is to know." The truly amazing thing, frankly, is that Universal Pictures, having lost tons of moola on "Miami Vice," had the stomach to get back into the ring with Mann a second time around. But like Martin Scorsese, Mann is a great filmmaker who's a magnet for movie stars, so the studio couldn't resist the idea of an action-packed period thriller with Johnny Depp at the top of the bill.

As Misher put it: "If you're looking for action, I don't think you'll be disappointed. We've got three bank robberies, two prison breaks and who knows how many shootouts."

Slated for July 1, 2009, "Public Enemies" gives Universal a big summer tent-pole movie. But instead of the dumbed-down dreck that decorates most studio summer slates, "Public Enemies" has the opportunity to be a critical success as well.

It also boasts a romantic story line—"La Vie en Rose's" Marion Cotillard has a hefty role in the film as Depp's love interest.

'A seminal gangster saga'

Universal Chairman Marc Shmuger said the studio got revved up when it first read the script, written by Ronan Bennett with a rewrite by Mann and Ann Biderman.

"It really felt like the most exciting thing Michael's done in years," said Shmuger. "It's a seminal gangster saga, but it's also a classic doomed lovers story. They meet on the run, and you know that they know that the relationship can't last, which makes the film really heart-wrenching. With that combination, well, let's face it, there's just not that many filmmakers in the world besides Michael who could do that."