Derek Meddings has been a part of the special effects division of the James Bond films since Live and Let Die in the early 70s, and he has helmed the cinema magic department in all of the recent Bond entries.

His voice is warm and convivial, like that of good after-dinner brandy, even when he is talking to a stranger over the intercontinental phone system. His voice holds not only warmth, but something else — enthusiasm for the magical effects he has created for television and the movies over the past two decades.

“My mother and father were in the movie business, working at Denham Studios in England. They worked for Alexander Korda. He did Thief of Bagdad, Four Feathers, all those ‘Sabu’ pictures,” Meddings explains. “My father was a master carpenter, and my mother a stand-in for Merle Oberon, and then, later, a continuity girl. So I got into the studios quite a bit as a kid. I never saw Thief of Bagdad being made, but I remember going to the studios and seeing a Disney picture being made at one point.

“I just remember how fantastic it was. You stood in awe... in disbelief, really.”

Even though his parents worked at a movie studio, it did not make it easier for Meddings to obtain employment in the magic kingdom. The entertainment world, like the military, is filled with Catch 22’s, enough to drive everyone but the most persistent to more secure, sane lines of work. He drove a truck for a removal company and spent some time packing shoes in a warehouse. In the early 50s he was discharged from the Air Force.

“I had thought about being an illustrator, even thought of doing comics for a while, but I hated drawing the same person over and over. When my mother and father couldn’t get me into the film industry, I answered an advertisement asking for a title artist at Denham Studios. Once you’re in, it is easy to get your union ticket, but before it is almost impossible. I was in my twenties when I got the job. I had to change the titles of the films into Spanish, Italian and German. They were always cowboy pictures made in America, and the titles and credits had to be redone into whatever language was predominant in whatever country the film was going to play in. The background behind the titles also had to be faithfully reproduced, so eventually I became involved in reproducing the background paintings, which often was the Arizona desert.”

His battles with the paradoxes and the conundrums of gaining entrance into the film world over, and with this basic framework of background painting as a preliminary start into the field of effects work, especially for matte paintings, Meddings still found the course to full employment in creating magic a serpentine one. He worked for a time for a commercial agency involved with ads for both television and the movies, which bored him silly. He wanted to make the fantastic seem real, to bring fantasy to life, in much the way it had been done for him when he was a child.

And then Meddings met Les Bowie, the matte painter and special effects man.

“When I met Les and saw what he did, I said, ‘That’s what I want to do!’ Les said, ‘Well, come and join me.’ So I did. I spent many happy years with Les. He died while we were doing Superman I. But back then, we worked on all the old Hammer horror films. We did all the castles. For instance, Dracula’s castle up on the hills. Les taught me most of the English special effects people their craft. I was fascinated by Willis O’Brien and Ray Harryhausen, but they were out of reach in America, and Les was the master, as far as I was concerned, in England. In The Pirates of Blood River, Les and I had to build dummy trees to drop on people, and had to do a matte shot looking out on an old galleon ship out at sea, pulling out of the harbor. We were actually filming in a small lake. The horizon and the boat were matted in. We also had to have piranha fish eating the pirates, all those lovely things that go in these films.”

From “Thunderbirds” to Bond

Despite the information written in the United Artists Pressbook released in connection with Moonraker, Meddings did not work on Stanley Kubrick’s 2001, A Space Odyssey. A little fancifulness on the publicist’s part, perhaps.

“I was asked to work on 2001,” Meddings reports, “but at that time I was doing a long-running television series called Thunderbirds for Gerry Anderson. Gerry and I worked together for ten years. I designed all the Thunderbirds—in fact all the vehicles for all their pictures. Les had left England to do a picture called Swiss Family Robinson for Disney, because he wanted to do special effects in a big way, but before he left he got me this job at Century 21, which was the Gerry Anderson place. I started all the special effects because, at the time, the company did not have any special effects. For a half hour series we had 40 special effects to create, using models. Later they turned the series into hour shows, so that sometimes we had 80 to 100 special effects to accomplish! I set up three stages and three crews to handle the work. I had 50 people working for me and had to train them all because no one wanted to come from the British film industry and work on a television series. They thought it was a little bit beneath them.

“But I thoroughly enjoyed it. It gave me a marvelous opportunity to try all the things I’d always thought could be done! You don’t get that sort of experience when you work on one picture,” Meddings reveals. “You have to work on hundreds to get that experience, really. But in the case of the Thunderbirds, every eight days we had a completely different kind of story and different effects to create. When a script was written, we would have a meeting, go over the script, and if we found it not very exciting, we would suggest different things that might take place.

“Oh, of course, sometimes we have big mouths. We try to impress people. But once you’ve suggested something, you have to find a way to pull it off.”

Meddings wanted to do miniature model shots so convincingly that the audience would never realize they weren’t looking at the real thing. This was difficult to achieve with many of the Anderson series, since the characters were puppets, but eventually the company turned to a live action series, UFO, and Meddings had the chance to work with all types of miniatures—creating saucers, ships and futuristic cars, this time filled with people, except for the saucers.

During the time that he was working for Gerry Anderson, Meddings had seen another screen character—a dark secret agent who was about to become a world-wide phenomenon. James Bond.

“I always wanted to do a Bond film,” he
confesses. "I thought the films were magic and that they were done by a genius. Somewhere back around that time, Harry Saltzman contacted Gerry Anderson and me to work on a version of Moonraker that they were thinking of doing. It fell through for some reason."

Sir Lew Grade closed down Anderson's outfit after UFO. He thought science-fiction pictures were becoming old hat. He evidently did not foresee Star Wars on the horizon.

"Production designer Syd Cain was working on an Alistair MacLean film called Fear Is The Key. He had already worked on two or three of the Bond films; he worked on Goldfinger. Anyhow, at the end of Fear Is The Key, Syd asked me if I would like to work on a Bond film. I said, 'Of course I would. I'd love to.' The next Bond they were going to film was Live and Let Die. I have worked on the series since then."

**Challenging Assignments**

He finally had a chance to utilize miniatures that the audience could not detect. The Bond films were challenges that he met gladly.

As a general rule, many effects people dread working with scenes involving miniatures and water. It is difficult to maintain the illusion of size—and long considered next-to-impossible to "miniaturize" water and waves—but such hazards have not seemed to phase Meddings, who has accomplished many underwater and above surface effects for the Bond films. In fact, he has accomplished some of these effects so well that he has fooled the people who own the full-size vehicles.

"We were very thrilled by the reaction to

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**Meddings makes some last minute adjustments on the Moonraker space station.**

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Above: In the vast hanger of a London Gas Works, Meddings supervises one of For Your Eyes Only's mechanical effects. Right: Meddings carefully adjusts the antenna of the Cloudbase model for Captain Scarlet, one of the Gerry Anderson shows.
the scene in *The Spy Who Loved Me* where the supertanker swallows the submarine," Meddings says. "Nobody suspected that the supertanker was a miniature until the front opened, and then, lots of people still thought there was a boat that did actually have a front that opened. Even the people who were originally going to supply us with a real tanker went to the premiere of *The Spy Who Loved Me* and they had forgotten they had not rented their tanker to us. They said to the director or the producer, 'I can't remember when you used our tank.' And he said, 'We never used your tank.' There was never one shot in the whole film with a real tanker. We built our miniature tanker at Pinewood Studios; I had it built 63 feet long. It had a crew of three, all special effects men who ran it. We shipped it out to the Bahamas, and shot those scenes all at sea! We did all those underwater shots with the Lotus car out in the Bahamas. We used miniatures with the Lotus car, as well, even though we also had a real Lotus in some of the scenes."

Meddings had finally climbed aboard the magic carpet, not the one that spun its fantasy ride in *The Thief of Baghdad*, but a carpet of no less a fantastic weave, and one of his own creation. It was a long way from painting Arizona deserts behind the titles of movies.

"I was up to my ears in effects. The project that staggered me the most was *Moonraker*. The only reason I say that is because we were competing with *Star Wars*. Unfortunately, we did not have the sort of equipment that they had for doing those kind of effects. I had to come up with a way of doing the effects for *Moonraker* that were of the simplest fashion. We had no optics in *Moonraker* except for a few laser beams. I did the whole picture by winding back in the camera [for overlaying FX], using mattes, and adding different elements each time we wound back the film. But when I first saw the storyboards for *Moonraker* I thought I would never finish that picture, there was so much to do.

"When you first see the script," Meddings explains, "you learn what has to be built. I then work out how I plan to achieve the effects asked for in the script."

Meddings does not think there is anything that cannot be accomplished in film, no matter how outrageous the demands of the script. Like John Paul Jones, he has just begun to fight, and the show does go on!

"We have always been doing pictures in space, monsters...and each year the effects get better because people keep coming in and finding new ways to do them. I love Ray Harryhausen's work. He has always turned out fantastic, believable work. Every year he gets better. I just hope I can, too."

Meddings is excited by *For Your Eyes Only*, the newest Bond film. The magic carpet ride continues.

### Back to Basics

"I think *For Your Eyes Only* is a knockout. It's not often I can say that because, sometimes, at the end of the picture, you are so tied up with it all that you have a lot of mixed feelings. But *For Your Eyes Only* just does not stop. It is very exciting. It has all the CRASH! BANG! WHALLOP! but it has a good story, as well. We filmed one scene in Korfu, in Greece, on a jetty that reached out into the sea. Part of the jetty was a historic monument. I had to write a letter explaining that I would not do any damage to it at all when they learned that we intended to blow it up during the course of the film. I explained to them that the way I do explosions is like all special-effects men, it looks dangerous, but it doesn't do any damage, unless we organize the damage. But when you do see the jetty blow up, it is a miniature. There's a battle going on at the time. But they haven't overdone the gimmicks this time."

It was Albert "Cubby" Broccoli who decided to reverse the direction of the new James Bond film. The movie would be less frivolous, with none of the garish excesses of *Moonraker*; for instance, gondolas that inexplicably turn into land vehicles.

"They do listen to people's criticisms," Meddings says with a smile. "Dear old Cubby, apart from being a loveable person, does get upset if people criticize James Bond. He is a little bit like myself. I hate criticism because I feel that when I've done something wrong, I don't need to be told. I know I did it wrong. Some people didn't like the idea of Bond going into space.

"When you see *For Your Eyes Only* you'll see the magic back. The movie moves so quickly, and it's filled with action. Good action."

"The scene of the jetty exploding in Korfu.

Many Bond vehicles have been showcased and destroyed—with 007 still inside. In *Eyes* (above), he gets revenge—totaling a car by kicking it off of a cliff!"
worked very well. People who were involved with the film, when they saw the explosion on the screen, asked me when I got permission to blow it up. It made me feel very good. These folks were on another location when I blew up the miniature. They didn't even query it.

"We have one sequence where Bond climbs up a monastery wall. When he reaches the top he is knocked off and falls a 120 feet! We had to build a gadget that would slow his descent down so that the rope around him wouldn't jerk him to a sudden stop, or possibly break! This gadget would pull up sandbags that were attached to the end of the rope, like a breaking system. Rick Sylvester, who did the marvelous skiing stunt at the beginning of *The Spy Who Loved Me*, was the stuntman who took the fall."

**Up, Up and Away**

Meddings’ workload has become monumental in the last few years.

"*For Your Eyes Only* is going to come out the week before *Superman II*, which I also worked on," he reports. "So I'll have two films doing the circuit. We won the Oscar for *Superman I*, and we have heard from many people that they feel *Superman II* is even better. We were also nominated for best effects for *Moonraker*. Not too bad going, really."

The effects for *Superman II* were done separately from the first film.

"We never went to New York for *Superman II*. All the flying over New York is done with effects, and very large cut-outs of New York. People weren't aware that they were looking at a mock-up of New York. We also built a New York city block—one-to-twelve scale. We built it on the 007 sound stage. We used it for the scene where the Kryptonian villains blow the cars around and smash them into buildings and through windows.

"We also built a 60-foot high Eiffel Tower. It was true in every detail. Even the lifts went up and down. The audience seems to accept it as real. They thought we did it all there, for real. A lot of it is done with front projection."

Derek Meddings has wanted to create magic. He has wanted to weave his own flying carpet. And now he is at the controls of such flights of imagination, trying to make the ride better and better. Along with stuntmen like Rick Sylvester and Bob Simmons (who has choreographed the stunts for *all* of the James Bond films), they create cinematic magic carpet rides, to worlds that have gigantic conflicts and great romances.

Meddings has finally been able to create miniature effects that fool most everyone into believing that what their eyes see is what is really happening. For a kid who once stood in awe on the movie lots of his youth has created new wonders, not only for the kids of this generation, but for the adults, as well. *
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