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Universal Rides the Waves of Water Epic

■ **Movies:** As 'Waterworld' starring Kevin Costner nears completion, secrecy surrounds locations where cast and crew wrestle with the film that has apparently surpassed its \$100-million budget.

By JUDY BRENNAN
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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

For the past few weeks, a massive water tank plopped in the middle of the Paramount Pictures lot in Hollywood has been the site of intense secrecy. Security guards patrol the perimeter of the menacing structure, which has been hidden from public view by giant blue sheeting and towering scaffolding.

The secrecy is no different at a warehouse lot miles away in the City of Commerce, where a huge replica of a rusting supertanker deck has been erected for a movie being shot.

"Forget any hopes of seeing what's being shot in there," said one source. "They are being exceptionally careful about that set. Everyone is very paranoid at this point."

What is unfolding at these two locations is the final weeks of filming of Universal Pictures' "Waterworld," a "Road Warrior on the water" adventure movie starring Kevin Costner.

While closed sets are not unusual for big movies, Universal officials are concerned that continued speculation in the press about the troubled production and its soaring costs—already at \$160 million according to sources close to the film—only serve to hurt the picture before it is

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finished and in theaters.

Rampant press reports of morale problems, crew firings, reckless spending and the personal troubles surrounding its star have some at the studio fretting that the movie is already tainted goods in the public's mind.

Tom Pollock, chairman of Universal's motion picture group, said he hopes the film is judged on its own merits. "Yes, the press is distracting," he said. "The filmmakers are doing a terrific job. Under very adverse circumstances, they are getting this movie done."

After months of principal photography off the Big Island of Hawaii, shooting shifted back to Los Angeles, where the project remains mired in delays and cost overruns. Some close to the production say the total budget will easily top \$200 million once the cost of marketing the picture and making prints is counted. Already, "Waterworld" is the most expensive movie in history. It was greenlighted by the studio at \$100 million, as MCA president Sidney Sheinberg confirmed earlier to *The Times*.

Universal officials declined to comment on the film's current costs.

"Even if this is a blockbuster, it would be very tough for Universal to make its money back," says one production executive. "Maybe if it does the business of 'Jurassic Park' [which brought in \$357 million in the United States and Canada]. But remember, the budget on that movie was \$57 million."

Universal and Costner have put their reputations on the line, hoping the film will be ready for release in late July, although skeptics abound. The film began shooting in Hawaii on June 27 and is not expected to wrap until mid-February at the earliest.

"My gosh," said one source close to the film, "that's eight months. You could have a baby in that time." (The normal length of production is three to four months, though physically difficult movies like "Jaws" and "Apocalypse Now" are known to have labored much

longer.)

Pollock conceded that the movie is behind schedule, but declined to be specific. Sources say it is weeks behind. The studio chairman said Universal still expects the production to wrap by Feb. 10. Since post-production generally takes 18-to-20 weeks, many expect it will be a tight squeeze for Universal to complete the movie in time for a late July opening.

That means post would have to be fast and furious to finish by summer," one Universal producer said. "The latest bet is that this movie will come out in late summer."

While summer playing time is crucial to a film's box office, a late summer release like "The Fugitive," which opened on Aug. 6, 1993, and grossed more than \$180 million, can still perform strongly.

Another source suggests that if the film misses the summer altogether, "we're dead. . . . This is a summer movie."

Editing on "Waterworld" has already begun, Pollock said, but he added that contrary to some reports, the studio at this point does not plan around-the-clock editing to meet the late July release date.

"My recollection is that when 'True Lies' didn't wrap until the end of March, or beginning of April, they didn't have any trouble making a July release. The question isn't all or nothing," Pollock said.

Directed by Costner's close friend Kevin Reynolds, the movie also features Dennis Hopper, Jeanne Tripplehorn and Tina Majorino and is set in a post-apocalyptic future when polar ice caps have melted, submerging the earth in water. Costner plays Mariner, a part-human, part-amphibian who rescues a woman and child from a man-made atoll being attacked by marauders and embarks on a search for fabled dry land.

Costner's character is a ragged loner with long, wet hair that befits a man who is sailing the seas on a trimaran. He is a man of few words and for much of the script is not particularly endearing, especially to Helen (Tripplehorn) and Enola

(Majorino).

"It is not a typical Costner movie," Pollock said. "It's not a typical action movie. We expect a PG-13 rating. Most action movies are R-rated because they concentrate on the number of killings. We believe there is a strong story between the Mariner and Helen and Enola."

The script itself, however, is filled with action, the ingredient that captures the biggest summer audiences.

The screenplay by Marc Norman is based on material by Peter Rader and David Twohy ("The Fugitive"). Joss Whedon ("Speed") was then brought in to punch up some scenes and dialogue. But even his work had Costner's heavy hand, sources said.

And, while Reynolds may be the director of the picture, production sources say it is Costner who has had the most say. In fact, they note, Reynolds has avoided being difficult and just wants to get the production over with—as does everyone at Universal.

Aside from the grueling shoot, Costner himself has been mired in personal troubles. In the midst of filming in Hawaii, Costner's wife of 16 years slapped him with divorce papers while stories surfaced about a hula dancer seen leaving his residence on the island. Since then, the tabloid press has had a field day, running stories about Costner's alleged philandering.

Costner desperately needs another hit. His last three movies have not performed well at the box office. "A Perfect World," which also starred Clint Eastwood, brought in \$31.1 million domestically, while "Wyatt Earp," Costner's biggest stumble to date, grossed only \$25 million. "The War," in which Costner took second billing to Elijah Wood, took in only \$16.5 million.

It is no longer a joke when people quip that "Waterworld" could become Costner's Waterloo. Others have labeled it "Kevin's Gate," a reference to the 1980 Western "Heaven's Gate," which seriously crippled the old United Artists studio and is often cited as the biggest movie fiasco ever.

According to producers who have pictures in the pipeline at Universal, "Waterworld" has become a giant distraction for that studio's chief honchos.

"This movie has, in many ways, frozen the corporation for a year," one says. "The reason is simple. It's forced everybody's attention on keeping this movie in tow and distracted their concentration on everything else."

But Pollock disagreed. He said the real distraction is dealing with negative stories in the press about "Waterworld," and noted that Universal is releasing 19 movies this year and has 10 others either shooting or in pre-production for 1996—a figure that is on target.

He also noted that the studio already has extensive merchandising plans for "Waterworld," from an attraction opening at its Universal Studios Tour theme park this summer, to toys sold by Kenner, and various interactive games.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, the cast and crew have been hard at work on various scenes. They have filmed a model of an underwater city in a tank in Long Beach as well as various scenes at the Paramount tank and in the tanker in Commerce, a model of which will later be blown up in the Mojave Desert. Second unit filming is still under way in Hawaii.

And on the Paramount lot, the "Waterworld" production has made it difficult for studio employees to find parking spaces. Actor Mel Gibson, for example, was 20 minutes late to a meeting with Paramount studio chief Sherry Lansing one day because he couldn't find a parking space, while an infuriated producer, tired of the constant disruptions, complained: "You can't imagine what this is costing everybody in time—and that's money!"

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