

# FAR FROM HUMBLE 'PI'

It's taken 10 years, four tigers and one gigantic water tank to bring the epic novel 'Life of Pi' to the screen. Will audiences be swept away? Elaine Lipworth visits the set

**I**t's a humid day in June 2011 and I'm in the terminal of an abandoned airport in Taichung, in west-central Taiwan. No flights have taken off here for seven years but the place is buzzing with activity. In the terminal itself people bustle in and out of production offices and a costume department filled with sumptuous sari silks in vibrant colours. The nearby hangars, once empty, now contain sound stages, and out on the runway is a vast wave tank, surrounded by giant green shipping containers piled on top of each other. This is the set of *Life of Pi*, the film based on Yann Martel's 2002 Booker prize-winning novel about a shipwrecked teenager adrift in the Pacific for 227 days with only his three chosen religions (Hinduism, Christianity and Islam) and a brooding 450lb Bengal tiger for company.

Despite selling nine million copies and attracting the usual interest from producers raiding the bestseller lists for potential box office gold, Martel's novel was one that almost everyone in Hollywood, including the film's director Ang Lee, agreed would never make it to the big screen.

"I fell in love with *Life of Pi* when it came out and I remember thinking, 'This should *not* be made into a movie'," says Lee. "I knew how hard and how expensive it would be. Water, kids and animals: it seemed like an impossible mission." The exuberant Taiwanese film-maker shakes his head, as though he is still incredulous at the task he ended up undertaking, and bursts out laughing.

But the movie had a champion: Elizabeth Gabler, head of production at Fox 2000, who was captivated by the book and, determined to see it adapted, embarked on what she describes as "the biggest gamble of my career, definitely the most challenging". Before she could convince Lee though, she had to win round a sceptical Martel.

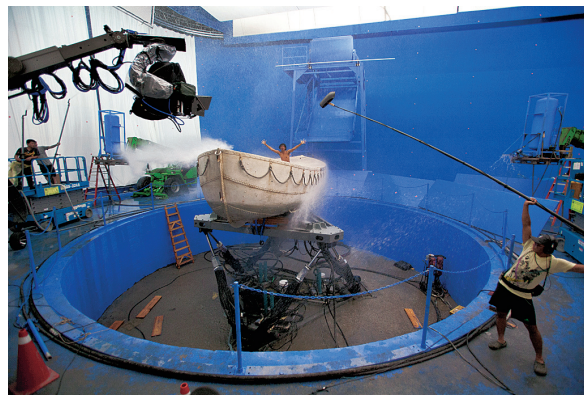
"I thought the idea was insane," says the author. "How do you translate a 320-page novel into a 210-page screenplay for a two-hour film without losing something? It is easy to write a sentence like 'the ship sank' or 'there's a boy in a lifeboat with a tiger' but could I imagine the boy and the tiger on the screen together in a way that would be credible? No." He eventually came around and the studio acquired the film rights.

Directors came and went; there were early talks with M Night Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense*), and more detailed discussions with French film-maker Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Amélie*), before Gabler contacted Lee. He wasn't interested. "I spent eight months trying to convince Ang to do it," says Gabler. "Frankly I knew that I needed the movie to be accessible to mainstream audiences and to be sophisticated. Ang has done it before." Four years ago the director finally signed on for the 3D epic. With a screenplay by David



## 'WE ARE LEE'S HANDS'

Seventy per cent of *Life of Pi* was filmed in a wave tank in Taiwan; when director Ang Lee wanted a certain type of wave, the technicians delivered



Magee (*Finding Neverland*), which would eventually be revised 170 times, and a rumoured budget of £76 million, the project got under way.

"Step by step I got seduced into it," says Lee who speaks in broken, but colourful and highly expressive English. Why the change of heart? "I like to feel scared," he says. "I like to tackle subjects I don't really know what to do with. I spent a year doing pre-visualisation, I made a cartoon movie, a moving storyboard so they can see how the whole movie would play out. Then after numerous meetings about how to shoot it, we decided to do it in Taiwan of all places." He chuckles. "Taiwan is not a place that makes big movies. This movie would be impossible to make in Hollywood, it has to be international."

Seventy per cent of the film has been shot in the wave tank. The biggest ever made for a movie, at 100ft by 200ft, it holds 650,000 gallons of water and has 12 motors that replicate the conditions of the Pacific Ocean. I watch the film's star Suraj Sharma standing on the lifeboat that's bobbing in the tank. Wiry with matted hair, and wearing billowing grey pyjamas that were once white, he loses balance, falls into the water and emerges laughing.

"It is actually as though we have carved out a section of the ocean," says technician Charlie Wu. "We have total control, not just of the waves, but also the lighting. [The tank is open to the sky but can be covered over with silks for film-





ing night-time scenes or to give different lighting effects]. “Ang wanted the waves to be like characters, so we see them as monsters during a storm and then at other times they are gentle and peaceful. The motors suck up the water and spit it back out at the correct time. The water pounding on Suraj is real and the movement of the boat is random and natural, so it is very realistic, rocking from side to side or up and down. We are really like Ang Lee’s hands. He tells us he wants a specific wave form and we push the button.”

**Sharma was picked by Lee out of 3,000 hopefuls.** “I had never acted and didn’t know how to swim. I had never even seen the ocean before,” he tells me later, back on dry land. “I had never been out of India.” He has cycled around the airport to meet me in a hangar. (He turned 18 during filming and the bicycle was a birthday present from Ang and the crew.) He parks and sits down beside one of several fibre-glass lifeboats that have been built for the film.

With big, dark, soulful eyes and his hair now neatly combed, he’s wearing glasses and is dressed in a *Life of Pi* T-shirt over shorts and red trainers. He went along to the audition because his brother was trying out for the role. “He promised to buy me lunch. I was waiting for him and the casting director came up to me and said, ‘you look about the right age you should just audition too’. And I thought I might as well.” Lee was immediately impressed.

Sharma learnt how to act from his director. “Ang helps me weave emotions into my brain just by saying a few words that act as triggers, like: ‘Richard Parker is dying, what are you going to do?’ It’s more about how he looks at you than what he says. I kind of map the scene in my head so I have a sense of how the tiger is going to react. I imagine he is in front of me. ‘There is Richard Parker.’” He points a finger into the air. I’m told later that Lee himself sometimes acts as the tiger, bending down on all fours in the boat and nudging Suraj overboard.

As well as getting to grips with the seafaring skills Pi employs on his voyage – using solar stills to distil salt water into drinking water and catching flying fish – Sharma also went through rigorous training in the tank and the gym prior to filming. “They would tie weights to me and I had to

go underwater and hold my breath for five minutes. I could not come up until I got to the other side of the pool and I had to pull myself on a rope. It was hard.”

Lee walks over from the sound stage and ruffles his star’s head. “I hope you are not saying anything bad about me,” he jokes. Director and star have built a strong rapport, forged months ago in India where Sharma’s parents entrusted their son to his care. “Suraj’s mother performed a spiritual ceremony and made me his guru,” says Lee. “Suraj lay face down and touched my feet, to show that he would totally listen to me. I was very touched. I have promised to watch him for as long as I can, to my best ability. But that is a big burden.” The director, who is 58, has boyish features and twinkling eyes that give him a youthful appearance, despite the salt and pepper hair. “But if I hadn’t found that soulful face I couldn’t have made the movie,” he continues. “He’s a natural. Once I found him I think ‘please God make this work.’” And with that he heads back to set.

“When you’re around Ang there’s this aura of calmness,” says Sharma. “If he walks in the room everybody stops going crazy. You know Ang’s here, so everything is going to be OK.” The next day Lee is filming with Indian actor Irrfan Khan (*Slumdog Millionaire*) who plays the older Pi. Now a theology professor, settled in Montreal with a family, Pi relates his fantastical story to a struggling novelist, in scenes that are used as a framing device for the film. Originally Tobey Maguire was cast as the writer, but Lee subsequently decided that the *Spider-Man* star’s face was too well known; Maguire was replaced with British actor Rafe Spall.

“Pi is reflecting on the earlier part of life in India and his life-changing journey,” says Khan, sitting in a cluttered book-filled living room (Pi’s home in Canada) that has been created on the sound stage.

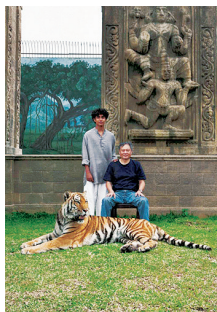
“As a boy Pi was never conditioned by one set of values or one religion. Curiosity and questioning were instinctive for him. The story is apparently about a boy and a tiger. But what you take from that story is up to you because it deals with so many things: with innocence, faith and nature. Pi is still trying to seek answers to those difficult questions about life: why are we here?”

They are questions which fascinate Sharma. “I was just a normal kid from Delhi before this film,” he says when I meet him and Lee again in Manhattan shortly before the release of the film. “My life consisted of a routine: wake up, go to school, get shouted at by teachers, hang around with friends, come back, play football for hours, eat and sleep.”

Sharma says his own experience making the film mirrors Pi’s epic voyage. “It has completely altered my perception of life. I believe that even though everybody has bad times, human beings have the strength to overcome anything.” That said, he has no immediate plans to act again and is now reading philosophy at Delhi University. “I would like to work on film sets somehow, I love it, maybe I will direct someday like Ang,” he says. At the end of his own four-year journey, Lee says he is “exhausted and relieved”. “I really felt like I was adrift with the tiger and now I feel exactly how Pi felt when he finally reaches the Mexican shore at the end of his journey. I am proud of what I’ve done.”

*Life of Pi* is now an Oscar front-runner following rapturous praise when it came out in the US last month; several critics have described it as a “masterpiece”. “This might sound odd to you but I don’t know what I did to deserve this,” says the director. “I can only say it is karma. There must have been something I did in my last life that enabled me to do this for a living and the longer I do it the more I have found that I am a slave of the films not the master. They seem to go their own way. I don’t really do much; I’m like the medium. They direct me,” beams Lee, shrugging his shoulders and making the whole thing sound as easy as Pi.

*‘Life of Pi’ is released on December 20*



**SOULFUL FACE** Suraj Sharma, above, with director Ang Lee and a Bengal tiger used in the film, was picked out of 3,000 hopefuls at the auditions in India. Top, Sharma in the film as Pi

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