

# Mongol

The Early Years of Genghis Khan



The Mongolian ruler Genghis Khan remains one of the most legendary and controversial figures of world history. In the early 13th century he laid the foundation for one of the world's largest empires by uniting the feuding tribes of Central Asia. In recognition of this achievement, Mongols continue to worship him as the father of the Mongol Nation. Others, however, remember him as the ruthless, warmongering conqueror who annexed China, Persia and Russia, and even had ambitions in Europe. The new film *Mongol* tells a lesser known side of the story – that of a little boy named Temüjin, who endured tremendous hardship before becoming the first ruler of the Mongol Empire, later to be known as Genghis Khan.

Director Sergei Bodrov Sr. (*Prisoner of the Caucasus*, *Bears Kiss*) felt a strong connection to this tale of a young man fighting to fulfil his destiny: “*Mongol* was a very personal film for me,” he says. “I very much related to Temüjin’s plight. Many historical accounts describe Genghis Khan as a monster and mass murderer; but I wanted to show a different man, a man I admire because he overcame the most dire and hopeless circumstances to become the leader of a nation and the ruler of an empire. Let’s not forget, the Mongol Empire was a highly organized and efficient empire with an early form of an administration. That’s why, to this day, Genghis Khan is much more to the Mongols than the founder of Mongolia. They still worship him like a God.”

Bringing this incredible story to the big screen was a challenge, even for a filmmaker as experienced and recognized as Bodrov. The international co-production, involving Russia, Germany and Kazakhstan was shot in China and Kazakhstan with camera equipment supplied by ARRI Rental, Munich. Behind the camera were two DoPs: Rogier Stoffers (*Character*, *Quills*) and Sergey Trofimov (*The Peshawar Waltz*, *Day Watch*), who shot the mass battle scenes. Communication and logistics were of vital importance in making this method of working a success.

The majority of the film was shot in Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region in Northern China that borders Mongolia and is actually home to more Mongols than Mongolia itself. “It was a complex decision to shoot there,” recalls Bodrov. “A lot of it had to do with budgetary considerations, but first and foremost it was important to me to shoot at the original locations in Inner Mongolia,

the cradle of the Mongolian culture and the heart of the old Mongolian empire. Also, we had heard a lot of good things about filming in this area, in terms of the availability of personnel.”

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The production had to hire two people for each position, one Russian and one Chinese; additionally they had crew members from Germany, Japan, Ukraine and Mongolia. Consequently, there was need for a team of about 30 translators and on occasion the melting pot of cultural mentalities did lead to some friction. “We had to pay our dues,” continues Bodrov. “But the fantastic locations and our extremely professional crew helped us make an exceptional film with breathtaking images at a reasonable price.” With a smirk on his face, he adds: “We are more or less experts now on filming in China and could teach expensive seminars.”

Of course the shoot wasn’t just taxing on the crew. On location in these remote areas of Inner Mongolia the ARRICAMs, ARRIFLEX 435 and 235 cameras were subjected to exceptionally harsh conditions. “We had to deal with extreme temperatures and with a lot of sand and dust,” says DoP Sergey Trofimov. “We had to clean the equipment constantly. But the ARRI equipment performed exceptionally well, even under these extreme conditions. I believe these cameras speak for themselves.” ▶



▲ ▶ Filming of the third battle

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Sergei Bodrov was also aware that reliability was an absolute priority for the camera kit. “I have always worked with ARRI equipment and it would have been a mistake to use anything else,” he says. “Especially in our high-risk business, it is extremely important to rely on partners who are 100% trustworthy. ARRI was definitely the right choice for such a logistically challenging shoot. We were filming in the most remote locations and the equipment had quite a journey to get

there. Everything was flown to Beijing, where the shipment had to pass customs; then, after an additional 4-hour flight to a small provincial airport, the equipment had to go on a 12-hour car ride before reaching our location in Inner Mongolia. A lot can happen on such a long journey. At one point, half of the cases arrived wet; we had to dry and test everything, but it all worked perfectly.”

Another challenge was finding a way to view dailies. The exposed film had to be

taken to a laboratory in Hamburg and the processed footage sent back to China. “Obviously it was an issue that we couldn’t view what we had shot,” says Trofimov. “The first dailies made it back to China three weeks into the shoot. The second set got there two weeks before we wrapped. It was very risky. The suspense was great, but when the dailies finally arrived, we didn’t have the time to properly check them; we just did a rush screening.”

The look of the film was determined by the fact that it interweaves two emotionally contrasting storylines, but also by the key role played by the landscape. Sergey Trofimov explains how they decided on a visual approach: “We just went ahead and storyboarded

everything, at least the part that I shot. That’s when we realized that several compositions didn’t fit into the story and we had to make some adjustments. The main story is quite simple; it is the story of a young man, a story about his life, his friends and his enemies. The images were therefore kept rather simple in terms of composition. But then there is also the B-story, the romance. We decided to use Cooke lenses, which are a little softer than the Ultra Primes and therefore more appropriate for the love story. The battle scenes were another issue altogether. We shot them mostly hand-held, but the rest of the film was made rather conventionally, using a lot of dolly and static shots. We wanted to show the beautiful landscape and not distract from it with attention-grabbing camera work.”

During postproduction, the main tasks were to blend the various storylines which were shot at multiple locations and to create a homogenous and consistent look. Trofimov himself supervised the colour grading process of the entire film. A rough cut of Rogier Stoffers’ footage had been colour graded already but the fine-tuning was Trofimov’s responsibility. “Rogier Stoffers’ footage wasn’t shot differently,” he explains, “it was just a different part of the story. Working this way allowed me to analyze the role each part was to play in the film ahead of time; then I went ahead and figured out how to proceed. On one hand the landscapes, such as the steppe and the mountains, had to play an important part. On the other hand we were dealing with various intense and different

emotional states. This required very sophisticated colour grading because it was important to find a balance between continuity and differentiation. I hope we found the right way.

In every regard – creatively, technically, politically and personally – this was a valuable experience,” concludes Trofimov. “And I believe that the end result will meet all expectations.”

*Mongol* received its world premier at Toronto International Film Festival in September 2007 and its European premier at Cinema Rome Film Festival in October 2007. ■

*Bastian Prützmann / Andrea Rosenwirth*