

Snakes on a Plane

Snakes on a Plane filmmakers speak with REPTILES magazine.

By Russ Case

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Snakes on a Plane and REPTILES magazine. Courtesy New Line Prod.

Just keep telling yourself that that is an inland taipan that's menacing actor Mark Houghton - and not a Florida kingsnake. Courtesy New Line Prod.

Snake handler Jules Sylvester (left) and director Richard Ellis heft Kitty, an 18-foot Burmese python that terrifies passengers on Pacific Air 121.

Courtesy New Line Prod. In the summer of 2004 movie and TV reptile handler Jules Sylvester told me he was providing snakes for a movie called Snakes on a Plane. Since then, the movie has become something of a media juggernaut. On the brink of the film's U.S. release and with much Internet hoopla in the form of numerous fan-created blogs (including www.snakesonablog.com) and websites (including the official one at www.snakesonaplane.com), some are predicting that "SOAP" is going to be a monster hit for New Line Cinema.

The plot: Samuel L. Jackson plays an FBI agent who is flying a witness from Hawaii to Los Angeles to testify against a Mob boss. The villain has arranged to have 400 venomous snakes (and some constrictors) released during the flight in an effort to kill the witness. A storm brews up, there's turbulence, the snakes are released, and pandemonium ensues.

I spoke with some of the filmmakers to get the scoop on this much-anticipated movie and to find out what was required of both the actors and the snakes.

In the Beginning, There Was Just One Snake

In 1997, producer Craig Berenson bought the underlying draft to a script called *Venom*, about a venomous snake terrifying passengers on a plane. "I thought this was the all-time greatest concept," Berenson told me. "Take two of the biggest fears people have, throw them together at 30,000 feet and see what happens." Studios passed on it, though. "I think because of *Anaconda*," Berenson said.

In 1999, Berenson was working at a production company, and "on Friday afternoons we would have a margarita hour and throw out ideas. On this day I threw out snakes on a plane. All the women in the room went ewwww and all the guys went ohhhh. Every single person in that room had a visceral response to the idea of snakes on a plane, and that's gold."

Writer John Heffernan was Berenson's assistant, and he was given the assignment to write a new draft based on the idea of snakes on a plane. "In the original script," Heffernan said, "a single snake gets loose and there happens to be a Steve Irwin/Indiana Jones type of guy on the plane. Then I got to thinking — take 500 snakes, put them on a plane, release them over the middle of the Pacific Ocean with nowhere to land and past the point of no return. Then the snakes start getting into the electrical systems of the plane, they start biting people, people start freaking out — it just jelled into this high concept that was too irresistible not to write."

The revised story was shopped around. "We sold it to Paramount," Heffernan said, "and were developing it there for a few years. Then the tragedy of 9/11 happened, and no movie studios wanted to go anywhere near anything happening on an airplane at that point." Paramount later decided to opt out, and the story was purchased by New Line Cinema, hot off the success of *The Lord of the Rings* films.

Why Would Snakes Attack?

Because snakes avoid confrontation, I asked Heffernan why the snakes in the movie are attacking. "We found that if they were let loose on a plane they would try to find a dark corner to hide in rather than attack people," he said. "So we needed some sort of stimulus to make them do the damage that they were going to do."

"We talked to [reptile curator] Russ Smith at the Los Angeles Zoo and bounced a couple ideas off him. He pretty much signed off on the idea that it is at least possible — not plausible, but possible — that one could use a pheromone to excite the snakes. That was good enough for us, and we could use that for a plot device to make the snakes go nuts."

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On the airplane's cabin set, Jules Sylvester and Richard Ellis try to get a Boelen's python to emote properly.

Courtesy New Line Prod.

Gerard Plunkett gets wrapped up while working with Kitty. Sylvester commented that although the actor was a real trooper, he thinks Plunkett may have "just about pooped his pants" while filming this scene. Courtesy New Line Prod.

Computer generated snakes were required for hairy action sequences; Kitty the live Burmese pretty much crawled around and looked intimidating. Here, Sylvester and others finagle the python into the cabin's overhead lighting system.

Courtesy New Line Prod. "What got interesting was researching the different types of venomous snakes — cobras, vipers, etc. — and what their venom did to people," Heffernan said. "You have all these different snakes and they bite different people. How are we going to communicate what the symptoms are and what snake bit them, so the FBI agents on the ground can get the correct kind of antivenom to treat them if and when the plane ever does land? We tried to keep it faithful to reality."

The film has humor, but don't expect *Airplane!* with snakes. "You need some comic relief," Heffernan said. "Think about the industry we're dealing with. I hate to fly because you feel like you're being led into a gulag — they make you take your shoes off, the seats keep getting smaller and the stewardesses have all got an attitude. For me, half of it was poking fun at the airline industry. Everyone's in a bad mood at the beginning of the movie even before the snakes get on the plane! But as soon as the snakes get loose on the plane it goes into total horror thriller mode."

The Director Has a Ball

I was happy to hear the movie's director, Richard Ellis, owns a snake. "We have a ball python," he said. "Actually, it's my son's. He had gone to the pet store and got this snake. He had it in a glass terrarium, and he had little white mice in a cage. I said, 'You've got to be kidding me. Your mom is going to flip out.' And she did, because she was afraid of snakes." The snake was promptly returned to the store.

"A couple days later," Ellis said, "we were out by the pool when my son and his girlfriend came out and began walking back and forth in front of me and my wife, looking really sad and holding signs that said, 'Snakes are people, too.'" Permission was granted to get the snake back.

This was three years ago, and I asked Ellis if his wife has yet warmed up to his son's python.

"Not totally, no," he said. The fact that she sometimes finds snakes in their Malibu home, on property where rattlers are sometimes found, probably doesn't help.

Ellis is a former stuntman and second unit director whose most recent directing effort was the 2004 thriller *Cellular*. He replaced original *SOAP* director Ronny Yu (*Freddy Vs. Jason*) after Yu left the production due to creative differences.

"I read the script," Ellis said, "and thought it was a really great concept because it's got two of people's biggest phobias: flying in the middle of a huge storm with turbulence and snakes. Putting people in the position where they're trapped and they can't get away from snakes is kind of cool."

Ellis also heard that Samuel L. Jackson was interested in the movie. "I had a meeting with Sam, we shared the same vision for the project, and we were off and running.

"When we were going out to actors," he said, "a lot of them weren't taking the movie seriously [because of the title]. They thought it was a joke and wouldn't read the script, so we tried to disguise what it was." The movie's title was then temporarily changed to *Pacific Air 121*. "Sam and I always knew we were going to go back to the original title," Ellis said, "but he was a little upset during the filming because he felt we should be calling it what it is."

Jackson was right, of course, because the title *Snakes on a Plane* became a catalyst for the tremendous fan response the movie would later enjoy, providing millions of dollars' worth of free advertising.

Enter the Snake Handler

Obviously, the filmmakers eventually needed some snakes. "Jules' name came up as being the best in the business," Berenson said. "We talked, and he said, 'Craig, I was born to do this movie.' And he was!"

"I also said that this was the finest movie that's ever been written," Sylvester said. "I gave a bid on what I thought I could do and what I thought I couldn't do, had a couple of meetings, and it was on."

The script was reviewed page by page, and Sylvester indicated which snake scenes could be done with live snakes and which couldn't be. He always has the snakes' safety in mind when determining what they can do. "Snake crawls through air vent — OK. Snake crawls out of person's shirt and bites her in the eye — no," he said, giving an example. This read-through helps determine where computer-generated imagery (CGI) would be needed.

The studio initially requested two hundred live snakes, but Sylvester recommended more. "I suggested at least four hundred because I have to make sure the snakes get a break. You always have to double what they suggest.

"Snakes get tired, then they've got to eat, then they've got to s—," Sylvester said. Because of this, if one gets tired a lookalike can be brought in to finish its scenes. This keeps the snakes fresh and lively, not to mention healthy.

When the time came to head to Vancouver, Canada, where filming took place, Sylvester carefully packed all of his corn and other rat snakes, milk snakes ("of every possible variety"), kingsnakes and about 200 garter snakes into a long cargo van. There were about 450 snakes in all. He also brought his mangrove snake. "He's a mean one," Sylvester said, "but he was just too good to leave behind. You take him out and he strikes about 4 feet up. He really wants to hurt somebody."

Crossing the U.S. border with 450 snakes went smoothly. "As long as you've got your paperwork in order," Sylvester said, "and as long as you don't have any endangered species, you just go through [the list of animals with] Fish and Game and say there's this, this and this." I asked if the inspectors opened all the containers, and was told no. "It's the paperwork they're looking for. If you say you've got corn snakes, then they believe you've got corn snakes. But you don't want to screw up — try and pull some bull and you'll be taken down."

On the Canadian side all went well, with one exception, according to Sylvester. "They found an apple, and went, 'Ooh, what's this apple?' And that's the thing they got ticked off about."

Serpentine Stars

Sylvester hired Brad McDonald, who provided additional snakes that would have been problematic for Sylvester to bring across the border "without 10 zillion paperworks." These included a cobra, a western diamondback rattlesnake and some pythons, including an 18-foot Burmese named Kitty.

During the three months they were needed on the set the snakes resided in a state-of-the-art snake room, measuring 60 by 25 feet and built near one of the soundstages. "There was a lock on it, and we put nasty pictures of people bleeding and dying on the front, and people stayed away. It was great!" Sylvester laughed.

Venomous species were used, but for scenes with the actors harmless snakes doubled as deadly species. "The Boelen's pythons were gorgeous snakes that were very gentle, and they looked poisonous as hell," Sylvester said. "Milk snakes stood in for coral snakes, and Russian rat snakes stood in for basically anything. A Florida kingsnake very vaguely stood in for an inland taipan." Sylvester expects the reptile fans in the audience will notice this switcheroo, and he asks that you please refrain from spoiling the reality for others (my words, not his).

Nearly 500 live snakes were involved in the filming, "but you only see 50 at a time," Sylvester said. "The garter snakes ended up being given away to Canadian pet stores. They were just too small and too wiggly. You'd never see them — they'd go zip and be gone."

Producer Berenson remembered a startling moment. "Jules was getting an albino cobra angry, and it's looking at him and following him. It was freaky. It was on a plane seat, and all of a sudden it opens its mouth and buries its fangs in the seat and is pumping the seat as if it's pumping venom into it. We all jumped out of our seats when we saw it smack the seat."

"The albino cobra was so ticked off," Sylvester said, "that he was staring himself down in the window of the aircraft, like, 'I see you, I'll kill you!' Then he got so mad at me he bit the cushion and wouldn't let go." Eventually it did, satisfied that it had killed the cushion.

Corn snakes were used the most. "They're hardy, not too big, not too small, lots of multicolors, they climb, they crawl, and they're nonaggressive," Sylvester said. "They're great for putting on extras, who then had to writhe around. The snakes must have been thinking, 'What the heck are you doing?'"

Director Ellis enjoyed the snake experience. "It was a blast even though it was complicated. We had a lot of action with mayhem and people running around, and you wanted to make sure that you never harmed a snake. We also had to make sure that we got back as many snakes as were put out there, because the snakes were trying to go everywhere."

Writer Heffernan said, "I thought the snakes were cool. I liked them. I have a little bit more of a problem with spiders and bugs. That might be the sequel."

Director Ellis got to handle Kitty, and I asked him how he liked interacting with a huge python for the first time. "It was cool. You don't find a lot of those in Malibu."

Ensuring Safety on the Set

"The actors were great about working with the snakes because a lot of them weren't really comfortable," Ellis said. "So we got real reactions out of them. As soon as we put the real snakes out there and they were getting up like they were going to strike and stuff, I'm not sure if [the actors' reactions] were acting or it was real, but it looks real."

"I had a long chat with the actors before we got started," Sylvester said, "and I said, 'If anyone has a problem with these snakes, please say so now. This is not an ego thing or about how brave you are. It's about how we're going to look after my snakes. This is all about my snakes because, honestly, I don't give a rat's ass about you guys. I worry about my snakes. I'd rather you ruin a shot than tread on one of my snakes. Act, by all means, but don't touch my snakes.'"

"They were really good about it," he said, "because we had lots of rubber snakes on the floor and they were stamping on those, and whacking them with trays. I said, 'Just remember which ones are live and which ones are not.' Whenever there were stunt guys running and falling it was on rubber, and the live snakes were taken off the ground and placed on top of the seats."

Sylvester and his team "take what they do extremely seriously," Berenson said, "and when we used live snakes they were right there so that if anybody was having an issue they could deal with it. Jules was so funny. He said, 'I have to implore you all to please make sure the set is plugged, with no openings. At the end of the day, I don't want to have to account for 100 snakes and only have 97.'"

"What was really funny," Sylvester said, "was when all the extras would be sitting in a line of airline seats when the director would yell, 'Cut!' There'd be 30 or 40 snakes on the extras, on their laps and by their feet, and I couldn't climb over the seats to get them. It was like passing popcorn and hot dogs at the ball game. I'd say, 'Could you please pass those three snakes? Thank you. Just pass them down the row, please.'"

I was unable to interview Sam Jackson because he was out of the country, but the film's production notes quote him: "The first day I showed up I went to see the snakes and see how they were dealing with them. They were doing a test of when the oxygen masks fall down, and they were dumping a big bucket of snakes on a guy's head. It was fun to watch the snakes hit him and then go into his pockets and down his shirt. I was OK with that, but my agent said she didn't want snakes within 20 feet of me." A clause was put in Jackson's contract stating this.

When I asked about the clause, Berenson said, "I think the agents were fearful that the actors were going to be around venomous snakes. The irony was that Sam's interaction with the snakes was less than others' because he's the one who's directing everyone to get away from the snakes."

Though Jackson didn't come into contact with any live snakes, "he was fine with the snakes," Sylvester said. "He came into the snake house several times. He thought they were pretty fascinating."

The presence of snakes certainly changed the atmosphere on set. "There was always this thing where people were really paying attention," Ellis said. "They stopped playing with their Blackberries the minute they knew the snakes were coming on board, especially Kitty."

The SOAP Phenomenon

The cottage industry that fans have created around the movie is amazing. "The fans are known as snakesonaplaniacs," Heffernan said. "There are about 200 different kinds of T-shirts, bumper stickers and SOAP bracelets. New Line couldn't be happier and was smart enough to let this thing grow and let the fans do their own thing. You'd be amazed at how many hours people have spent making Photoshop posters, movie trailers and songs. It's great because they've taken the movie and made it their own."

While snakes are once again being promoted as scary creatures in a movie, hopefully a fun time can be had by all when the film opens on August 18, including snake fans who recognize that the "coral snakes" are really milk snakes. (Parents should know, too, that the movie is rated R.)

A talk with Jules Sylvester wouldn't be complete without asking him about upcoming film projects. A Ben Stiller comedy

called Balls of Fury (it's about ping pong), recently needed a lizard, and he just finished Casino Royale, the new James Bond film. "I worked with a reptile on that, and that's all I can tell you because otherwise I'll have to kill you. It's a doozy." That's got me wondering!

In closing, I have a message for REPTILES readers from writer John Heffernan: "To all you reptile fans," he said, "you'll get to see some great snake action come August 18. And if I didn't get everything scientifically right, don't hold it against me too much, please."

Richard Ellis has a message, too: "Go and see the movie 20 times."

Do so, and you will have joined the ranks of the snakesonaplaniacs.