

Al Giddings has enjoyed a 30 year career as one of the world's premier underwater filmmakers. His past credits include *The Deep*, *Never Say Never Again*, and *For Your Eyes Only*, as well as several documentaries. In 1989, Giddings served as director of underwater photography for *The Abyss*, the underwater adventure epic written and directed by James Cameron. Giddings and I talked about the trials and tribulations of filming under 55 feet of water in a 7.5 million gallon tank.

**Q:** You were the director of underwater photography for *The Abyss*. What were your specific responsibilities?

**A:** I was responsible for the crews and the underwater photography of course, but we also – our company and I – were involved with Cameron early on during the planning of the shoots.

**Q:** I read that you designed some special equipment just for the shoot.

**A:** This film was, I guess, 10 technical layers beyond anything that Hollywood had ever done before underwater. I think of *The Deep* probably as the next most complex shoot. However, *The Abyss* engaged all sorts of sophisticated top-side shooting equipment, and the film was approached as a responsible top-side unit would shoot on a sound stage.

**Q:** *Premiere* magazine called the shoot the most grueling in several decades. Do you think that's accurate?

**A:** I think that there's never been a shoot quite like this. And the physical demands were really extraordinary. Imagine that we used 8,000 scuba bottles in 12 weeks, and again approached it as a top-side unit would approach a sound stage shoot. And to do that, I designed and built an underwater filling station, and that filling station allowed us to spend up to 4 or 5 hours submerged twice a day. So we'd go to work at 8 am and go beneath the surface and start our day and set up our shots and do our lighting. As people ran low on air, they could turn to the filling station, plug in and top off at 40 or 50 feet. And so we'd surface perhaps at noon or 1:00 for lunch, have an hour break, go back in at 2:00 or 2:30 and surface again at 5:00, 6:00, 7:00 in the evening.

**Q:** Did any of the cast or crew members have difficulty being underwater for such lengths of time?

**A:** Well, let me clarify that. We're not really talking about the cast so much. The people with incredible exposure were those who were involved in the technical end of it, directing and actually shooting: myself, Cameron, the lighting guys, and so on. And the actors, principals, would come in

and out of the exercise based on their smaller portion of that particular day.

**Q:** *The Abyss* showcases a lot of high technology. To what extent are the gizmos and contraptions in the film authentic?

**A:** A shocking and wonderful element of *The Abyss* is the fact that we *did* shoot it in an underwater set. However, the set was 72 million gallons of water, 55 feet deep, 200 feet across, and in fact, we approached the underwater shooting with the same concerns that I normally would have in let's say a Bond shoot in open ocean. We had decompression and applied all sorts of technical, new, innovative gear. However, the underwater system was huge and the illusion complete. At times, I'd look through the view finder and drift from view finder to my personal thoughts because what I was seeing was on such a huge scale that it really felt as if we were in deep ocean.

**Q:** What about the submersible oil rig and the diving suits and the capsules? Do those things really exist?

**A:** All of that equipment came from the commercial diving world, and very early on, reading Cameron's first draft story, I was convinced that it wasn't from sort of the Hollywood special effects department – that the equipment and support gear would come, but from the commercial diving industry. So the people that designed and actually built the helmets were people that I contacted who were in the commercial diving, deep sea diving world. The submarines came from Phil Newton's company, Can-Dive, in Canada, one of the biggest oil support groups in the world. The submarines were full-up working submarines. The helmets were redesigned but based on systems that were used in deep water. And, in fact, all of that equipment had to be something more than just sort of technical Hollywood equipment in that it had to be full-up life support equipment.

**Q:** What was the most difficult aspect of filming underwater in the 7.5 million gallon tank?

**A:** Probably the length of time that we were submerged and involved. Again, 9,000 cylinders in 12 weeks is a clue to the physical end of it. No one shot was, you know, sort of life threatening and a cliff hanger, but we just sort of ground away for three, four months, six, seven days a week, twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day. That was the most difficult element of doing this shoot. The same thing spread over a year, which certainly wouldn't be reasonable considering budget and overhead, would have been much easier.

**Q:** What was the most frightening incident that occurred during the shoot? Were there any near

disasters?

**A:** My interpretation, no. We cover the principals with safety people and train them to a point where we just sort of disallow the possibility of physical disaster or some giant accident. And that kind of coverage isn't totally related to safety; it's related to a degree to psych. We want the actors to make the mental transition from survival to script. The only way they can do that is with terrific coverage and a total feeling of comfort on the bottom. So although at times they did long swims and the safety divers were held back to finish the shot—you know, they might have felt a little bit uncomfortable, there was never any situations where, and I'm not sort of ducking this, where we were in a life threatening situation.

**Q:** The making of *The Abyss* seems in some ways

almost as exciting as the actual movie. Are there any plans for a documentary?

**A:** A documentary was done, and I think that you'll see that either on Fox or on one of the other networks.... And you're right: it was an extraordinary picture with respect to technical elements, and the making of it was—or the living of it was—about as exciting as the actual film on the screen.

**Q:** How do you like the finished film? Did you accomplish everything you set out to?

**A:** I don't think you ever realize a hundred percent. A number of things were cut and, for reasons of budget, not completed, but I think that we certainly raised the level of underwater image-making substantially. The next picture will be hard pressed, I think, to show scope and vistas in a more spectacular way than *The Abyss*.

© 1989 - Randy Parker

**Related Review:** [The Abyss](#)

<http://www.emusements.com/randy/RRI/>