

# Surviving Thailand

A director's peek into overseas television production



**I**t was 2002. The setting amidst which Cord Keller directed the fifth season of the wildly popular, American 'reality television' series "Survivor" is a pristine island called, Tarutao, "the island of old," located off from the southern coast of Thailand's Satun Province.

Keller had already directed this adventure-game show in locales such as the Marquesas, Africa and Australia. Still, especially while the production was in its staging phases, he was feeling overwhelmed by the logistics in filming 13 episodes of "Survivor Thailand" at a national marine park being watched over by gun-wielding pirates, a handful of park rangers and cave dwelling sea gypsies.

Likewise, a freighter load of trials and tribulations were unloaded onto Survivor's crew throughout the four-month production. From tackling diplomatic relations with the Thai government, scouting, acquiring permits and transportation, setting up an island village that supported a "small army" of personnel, to the interfacing of Western and Thai cultures, each posed a unique challenge.

"It was hard to imagine how we were going to wrestle this thing to the ground...how we were going to do it," said Keller, while perched comfortably in his spacious yet practical condo overlooking Chiang Mai. "It was unbelievable, the challenges we had to overcome.

"We had to move everything onto an island that had a tiny little dock. There were lots of considerations, and the solutions were not generally cheap."

\*\*\*

"Survivor" began as a game show derived from the Swedish television series, "Expedition Robinson," created in 1997 by Charlie Parson. The version Keller directed premiered in 2000 on the American broadcasting network, CBS.

This show's first 11 seasons rated amongst the top-10 most watched in North America. It is commonly considered the leader of American reality TV because it was the first highly-rated and profitable reality show on broadcast television in the US and deemed one of the best shows of the 2000s. It is entering its 25th season.

“Survivor” basically involves 16 to 20 contestants who are divided into teams called “tribes.” In a desolate environment like Tarutao, they must provide food, water, fire and shelter for themselves while competing in ‘reward’ and ‘immunity’ challenges requiring strength, agility, problem solving, teamwork and willpower. A common style of challenge is an obstacle race which involves amassing puzzle pieces throughout the course.

One episode of “Survivor Thailand” consisted of a reward challenge involving tribes choosing one castaway who served as a guide, while the others were blindfolded. The blindfolded tribe members carried their guide in a palanquin, while he or she assisted with navigating the course in-attempt at retrieving their respective, tribe-colored bags. The first tribe which collected all of its bags and completed the course won. The reward? A lantern, fishing line and hooks.

At the end of each episode, the tribe that lost assembles at the “Tribal Council” and votes off one of its members.

The series concludes when only three contestants remain overall. They face interrogation by “The Jury,” comprised of the last seven members bootied from the game. It is this jury that determines which contestant is awarded the US\$1 million prize.

Keller referred to Survivor’s game design as “a brilliant chessboard of strategy.” And the key to cultivating its audience appeal was [and continues being] producing “a cinematic approach to storytelling” involving comprehensive, well-schemed camera setups and procedures for delivering intricate story lines that continue enthralling millions of viewers.

This grand blueprint relied on extensive rehearsals involving look-alike contestants, as well as the use of “second-unit shots” that “fill in the blanks” regarding the overall game-challenge, as well as revealing what was taking place off-camera. An example would be say, if a contestant lost a key during the game, a related re-enactment scene would be staged and filmed.

“Rather than look at this as purely a sporting event, we tried to look at our players as characters,” said Keller. “We had a larger story to tell, such as what was happening between the characters – the chemistry, who’s forcing others out, making the power play. That was the thrust of the drama...the dynamic that was driving the show.

*“Forty armed men said, ‘If you try to take anything off from this pier, we’ll shoot you.’ All of a sudden, we’re being held up for ransom by these pirates, basically.”*

“[The video production] was like a moving chessboard, constantly moving,” added Keller. “So, it took a lot of effort, a lot of planning and a lot of mistakes.

“By the time the second season was finished in Australia, we had a working protocol that was in place, how to set it up, how to shoot...how to cover this game,” said Keller, referencing a well-oiled machine. “We had a great crew, on every level. By the time we were in Thailand, we were the best around.”

\*\*\*

Regardless of geographic location, an initial endeavor prior to filling any frames with footage involved leaping over the diplomatic hurdles.

Keller said that, “Once the show became a phenomenon, we always went right to the government to get their support...We had a certain cache. Countries understood ‘Survivor’ as a way to promote tourism. Obviously, this is an interest the Thai government had.

“One of the issues is they, because the production was a sensitive issue being on a national park, wanted to see what was going on,” he added. “No one was allowed to see what was going on, so it was a real political game” keeping them at bay.

Speaking of obstacles and politics, “I can say that when we started in Thailand, it was during the rain in the middle of monsoon season, and we just got clobbered [weather-wise],” said Keller. Likewise, garbage from land washes into the sea, so “Even if we could go to the island, we had to cruise at a snail’s pace because there were so many obstacles in the water. It was a mess we didn’t anticipate.”

“Another mess” involved placating the gun-wielding pirates taking interest in the overall well-being of Tarutao, which served during the 1930s as a penal colony for political prisoners.

These marauders were following the footsteps of prisoners and guards who, during WWII, joined forces in pirating the area after the Thai government ceased supplying the island. Apparently, they sank 130 ships, often killing everybody on board, and operated with impunity for three years prior to being eradicated by British forces at the war’s end.





Keller and his production posse fortunately steered around any fatal confrontations. However, “They tried to shut us down. Forty men said, ‘If you try to take anything off from this peer, we’ll shoot you.’ All of a sudden, we’re being held up for ransom by these pirates, basically.”

“There was no way we could force the issue. We had to give them something. We always knew that. It was just a matter of how clever we could be to give them something that wouldn’t cost us more than we were willing to pay.”

Solution? Hire the freebooters to assist with removing the 30 metric tons of rubbish that was amassed on the island. “We pulled so much garbage off from that island...We filled barge after barge after barge.”

Furthermore, the island was in the eye of the worldwide media; therefore, maintaining security was certainly a priority. So, why not have the boat-going bandits execute 24-hour security patrols and prevent tourists and media from getting onto the island? Needless to say, this strategy worked effectively.

Actually, nearly everything regarding

*“Production is like the military. There is a certain chain of command and expectations. And if you work with people who don’t abide by these things, the whole thing breaks down, and it’s total chaos.”*

the show involved a veil of secrecy. Contestants – prior to being brought to the island in two boats, with the men in one and the women in the other – were strictly prohibited from interacting with each other, even while the Thai military was schooling them on surviving in the bush. Call sheets were even dispensed as needed and then recalled.

“We took everything seriously,” said

Keller. “The crew was not allowed to eat or drink in front of the contestants and was forbidden to talk with them.”

“We wanted to create a fantasy world,” he added. “And the contestants very easily fell into it. For the most part, they would adapt to this world. So we wanted to keep this world intact as much as possible.” And accomplishing this involved transforming a region of the island into a “tent village.”

“When we set up, we basically setup a small town that supported over 250 people,” said Keller, adding that this is how many were on his traveling team. “What does a town need? It needs energy. It needs food. It needs transportation. It needs sanitation. The list goes on...For most people [in front of the television], it’s hard for them to imagine that on the other side of that camera is a support system” that’s managing all aspects of the production.

“When we’re living together for four months, producing television under incredible pressure, we have to have complete support. Even though we’re living in tents, we still have to make sure that we have toilets that are working, water



that's drinkable and telephone service, internet and electricity."

Likewise, a warehouse, transportation and energy systems as well as a repairs unit were built in respective sections of the camp. There was an administrative office area for the creative team such as the producers, designers and executives in another. And don't forget the kitchen and entertainment sectors – all of which required a significant amount of resources.

"I can't even tell you how many tons of stuff we shipped all over the world," said Keller, adding that the production primarily used its own gear.

"We had already established our protocols," he added. "I had the [video] shooters that I wanted to work with. I didn't want to train new guys, so we kept the same primary crew. What we drew in locally were services such as security, infrastructure, transportation and production assistance. And this was a considerable number of personnel [about 100]."

"So we had a fairly large footprint, not only in the amount of crew but also how we affected the local community. A

lot of food had to come in to feed all of these hungry mouths, lots of material for our sets and camp."

Regardless of Survivor's production requirements, respectfully maintaining the natural environment topped the priority list, and extensive measures were taken accordingly, including recycling the water used.

"We took a lot of steps to minimize our output and make our camp sustainable," he added. "We tried to be good campers and leave the place the way we found it. I was really proud of that effort."

The overall environment of "Survivor" called for a delicate melding of business and culture. Likewise, Keller also worked closely with Thai personnel such as an assistant director and production assistants. Although there were professionals on-hand to bridge the cultural gaps, "The biggest issue was getting the best out of our Thai crew," he said.

This does not insinuate that the Thai staff weren't dedicated or talented. It was mostly a matter of work culture.

"Some of the most successful producers take no prisoners," said Keller. "They don't mess around. They'll be sharp with you, let you know how you messed up. And this did not work with our Thai counterparts. So, there was a huge learning curve for our management to understand that they cannot deal with Thai workers in the same fashion" as those from the West.

"We had to impress upon [the

non-Thai crew] that it was important to maintain sanook, keep a smile on our face, to not point out problems but point out the good parts...to not criticize, to never raise your voice. So there were things that were really important to introduce to our crew and emphasize during the months of shooting.

"Production is like the military," he added. "There is a certain chain of command and expectations. And if you work with people who don't abide by these things, the whole thing breaks down, and it's total chaos."

\*\*\*

Keller revealed that although producing the show in Thailand rendered "considerable savings" – as opposed to in the US; or "Survivor Africa," which allegedly cost CBS about US\$43 million – the pocketbook was not the primary consideration.

Thailand was chosen for "Survivor" because, beyond the fact that Tarutao – comprised of mangroves, caves, pristine beaches, soaring cliffs, mountains and lush jungle – was an ideal setting, "There are very few countries that are as stable and welcoming in Asia as Thailand.

"So any show that's going to want the Asian look, they will not be going to Burma, Vietnam, Indonesia or Malaysia, they're going to come to Thailand" and make it look like the others. Furthermore, "There has been a [long-standing political] history of collaboration between the US and the Thai government, so it's remained a relatively easy place to do business."

Keller – who had also directed "Unsolved Mysteries" and produced the famous, "America's Most Wanted," among embarking on additional high-caliber professional endeavors – has taken a break from showbiz to finish writing a book about his year-long trip around the globe.

However, while he chalks-up "Survivor," which earned him an Emmy Award and two additional nominations, as "old history," he maintains that it was "a pretty amazing experience" overall and "an opportunity of a lifetime."

"Yeah. It was a lot of work but a lot of fun..."

**E**

