'Invisible': A rousing all-round thriller in virtual reality

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In this image released by Conde Nast Entertainment (CNE) Jerome Sable, foreground from left, Doug Liman and Julina Tatlock appear on the set of "Invisible," a scripted sci-fi series in 360-degree virtual reality. Its first season of five six-minute episodes is now available on Samsung VR as well as the Jaunt VR app and on desktop browsers. The series will also be distributed on The Scene, CNE's digital video platform. (Conde Nast Entertainment via AP)

Here's a series that aims to break rules in every direction.

Though it unfolds in 360-degree virtual reality, "Invisible" is a scripted tale of sci-fi corporate treachery that draws from a century's worth of 2-D filmmaking lore.

"Invisible" will feel familiar to any fan of melodrama: It tells a straight-ahead story of the wealthy and ruthless Ashland family, whose grip on the global economy has been clinched by certain family members' ability to make themselves invisible and wage mischief with this tactical advantage.

The first season of five six-minute episodes is a co-production of Samsung, Jaunt, Conde Nast Entertainment and 30 Ninjas, and, sponsored by Lexus, is available free.

But even as it lets viewers roam its panoramic 3-D canvas, "Invisible" spins out a narrative governed not by each viewer but by its filmmakers.

The "Invisible" producers have declared a few of the VR "rules" the series defies in favor of mainstream Hollywood technique: Never move the camera. Never cross-cut between scenes occurring at the same time. Avoid split-screens. And keep the camera poised at a normal eye level. (Instead, at one point, "Invisible" hovers overhead for an aerial shot while, at another moment, it plants the viewer gazing up from a freshly dug grave.)

The basic moviemaking tools embraced by "Invisible" lend a comfortable feel to the newfangled world of VR it inhabits.

"It had to happen," says Doug Liman (director of such Hollywood blockbusters as "The Bourne Identity" and "Mr. & Mrs. Smith"), who for "Invisible" teamed with his 30 Ninjas producing partner Julina Tatlock and with Oscar-nominated screenwriter Melisa Wallack ("Dallas Buyers Club").

Originally, the project was envisioned as a graphic novel. Then the idea struck to tailor it for VR.

"There's stuff that VR does really, really well, like games. But the scripted things I've seen are pretty god-awful," Liman states flatly. "That just made the idea more appealing to me: I thought, 'I could really fall flat on my face here!'"

There would be no mega-budget, like he was used to for his features. No superstars like Matt Damon or Angelina Jolie (though his capable "Invisible" cast includes Sofia Black-D'Elia, the femme fatale in HBO's "The Night Of").

"Everything about VR is different," says Liman before swiftly backtracking: "If scripted VR was going to work, we knew we were going to have to bring in some of the vocabulary from traditional storytelling."

Like edits. "Real life is boring," he says. "If you want to be a storyteller anywhere, even at the dinner table, you better edit out the boring parts and get to the good stuff."

Meanwhile, he says you have to keep the viewer on track story-wise through the potential VR morass of sounds and images.

"I liken VR to being on a subway car, where there are conversations going on all around. You could eavesdrop on any of them. But for someone who wants to tell scripted VR, one of those conversations will be essential—and it has to be so compelling the viewer will be sure to zero in on it and on those characters."

How to spare the viewer from distractions? It all comes down to writing, staging and performances, Liman explains.

But that's easier said than done.

"There was a lot of humility in our trying new things," says Tatlock, who describes how the 20-day shooting schedule (with locations including New York, Los Angeles and Port au Prince, Haiti) were divided into four- or five-day segments, each followed by a production hiatus. "We would process the footage to see what worked and didn't work, then absorb those successes and failures when we resumed shooting."

Through this continuous learning process, "it would be wrong to say that we didn't worry that VR is a new medium. We were obsessed with it!" she says. "But we tried not to let it constrain us. We wanted to tell the best story possible: a propulsive thriller."

"Our goal wasn't a proof of concept for VR," Liman agrees. "It was to tell something fun and entertaining."

All that, plus leave the viewer hankering for more: The season ends with a tantalizing cliffhanger.

"I feel like 'Invisible' has crossed the line from the gimmick of VR to involving you enough that you lose yourself in the story," Liman says. "You know you're wearing a headset. But I hope you forget it's VR."

  More information: Online: www.jauntvr.com/