

Sea

BY BROOKE HAUSER
PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS BUCK



In *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, director Wes Anderson spins a tale of revenge and extremely weird scientific research on the high seas.

Shitlick

PART I: SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

"When one man, for whatever reason, has the opportunity to lead an extraordinary life, he has no right to keep it to himself." —*Jacques-Yves Cousteau*

ANY SERIOUS *RUSHMORE* FAN WILL REMEMBER MAX FISCHER'S QUEST TO FIND the reader who scribbled this quote in the margins of a library book. Director Wes Anderson's fascination with Cousteau, the legendary oceanographer and filmmaker, began as soon as he was old enough to watch *National Geographic* specials. And like a brainy fifth-grader obsessed with geckos or sea turtles, he is prone to little educational spasms, such as the following, which occurs over lunch at New York's Bar Pitti: "Jacques Cousteau basically invented everything. He invented the Aqua-Lung. He invented scuba. He's the one who invented the submersible that exists today. You know, he's a great guy."

It wasn't until after college that Anderson wrote a one-page story titled "The Jaguar Shark," about a Cousteau-like explorer on the hunt for a finned beast. "In it, he had the mythical jaguar shark, 'a species so rare as to constitute a one-off mutant fluke,'" recalls Anderson's former roommate and sometime writing partner, Owen Wilson.

In the years since, Anderson, 35, has explored a few other arcane worlds—but none so bizarre as *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, which he wrote with Noah Baumbach (*Kicking & Screaming*). Shot in part at Rome's Cinecittá Studios and set largely on the ocean, the surrealistic comedy stars Anderson vet Bill Murray (*Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*) as the titular figurehead struggling to finish a documentary about the mutant shark that ate his partner, Esteban (Seymour Cassel). It also reunites other

key members of the *Tenenbaums* clan, such as Anjelica Huston, who plays Zissou's estranged wife, and Wilson, who plays a Kentucky pilot who thinks he is Zissou's son. New to the director's crayon-box cosmos are Cate Blanchett, playing a pregnant reporter covering Zissou (in an odd twist of fate, the actress discovered she was actually pregnant after fainting during a prosthetic belly fitting); Willem Dafoe and Jeff Goldblum, as, respectively, Zissou's doting German crewmate and gloating rival; and the Brazilian actor Seu Jorge, who serenades the crew with acoustic Portuguese renditions of David Bowie songs.

Coming in at \$50 million-plus (about twice the cost of *Tenenbaums*), *The Life Aquatic* is Anderson's most ambitious film. It's also his riskiest. "One of the things you could say about *Bottle Rocket* to *Rushmore* to *Tenenbaums* is that each one is more and more controlled," says producer Barry Mendel. "This movie is totally free-wheeling, and out of control, to an extent. I mean, we blow up a boat, we've got gunfights, fistfights, robberies. And I think, 'Wow, he's totally gone the opposite direction that he's been going for the last eight years of his life.'"



It has yet to be determined if that's a good thing. In the meantime, Anderson has been screening the film for private audiences, whose members range from director David O. Russell to magician David Blaine. In Manhattan, Anderson's brother Eric attends, wearing a royal-blue crewneck sweater emblazoned with a thin white "Z" for Team Zissou. At another showing, in Los Angeles, a *Rushmore* acolyte turns up with "Max Fischer" tattooed on her arm. Anderson hopes that *The Life Aquatic* will leave its own distinctive mark on viewers. But for now, he'll just have to hold his breath.

PART II: THE DEATH SHIP

Though it could be marketed as an action adventure comedy or summed up in a log line—man hunts for killer shark—*The Life Aquatic* is really a film about filmmaking, in the tradition of Federico Fellini's 8 1/2 or François Truffaut's *Day for Night*. "I kind of like the idea that [Zissou] was always waiting in the wings," Anderson says. "Owen's character in *Bottle Rocket*, he's trying to lead this group, mastermind. In *Rushmore*, with Jason Schwartzman, that's the character who's putting on the plays, you know? And that's what this guy is doing, too."

Orson Welles once compared a film studio to "the biggest train set a boy ever had." At times, like Zissou, Anderson was helming the most anarchic ship a director ever had. Among the hurdles he faced: building an ocean-floor forest inside a giant water tank; converting a World War II vessel into Zissou's boat, the *Belafonte*; and, with the help of stop-motion animator Henry Selick (*The Nightmare Before Christmas*), creating fantastical sea creatures, including the jaguar shark and a sugar crab. Anderson and director of pho-



WE ALL LIVE IN A YELLOW SUBMARINE Blanchett, center, interviews Murray on deck.

tography Eric Swenson also watched every water movie they could in order to discover techniques such as "dry for wet," in which underwater motion is re-created by lighting a smoke-filled stage. Still, nothing could prepare the crew for shooting on the Mediterranean during a tempest.

"On our first day we had a long trip to an island, and like 90 percent of the people were vomiting over the side," says Dafoe. Huston recalls, "The whitecaps were starting to come fast and furious." "It was to a point where you can't cry," says Matthew Gubler, Anderson's real-life intern, who plays Zissou's curly-haired assistant in the film. "You look out the porthole, which normally would be above the water, and you're seeing these black currents, and, you know, Italians flying all over the boat." When asked about the chaos, Anderson looks momentarily pained before responding, as if he, not the weather, were solely responsible. "I'm just glad no one died."

News of the production's troubles reached home when Murray, on leave to attend the Golden Globes ceremony, referred to it as "the death ship" when he accepted his award for *Lost in Translation*. "I thought it was a shout-out to the crew," Anderson says, and laughs. "Some people said to me, 'What was the deal with that?' And I said, 'What do you mean? He mentioned us in the speech. At least he didn't forget about us.' I felt fine until I saw Bill the day he

got back, and I said, 'Death ship?' And he looked kind of sheepish."

Whether Murray's comment was meant in jest is ultimately a mystery—as is the actor himself. "Bill is mercurial," says Huston. "He's capable of great heights of humor and also moments of deep silence." After half a year on location, Murray was both physically and emotionally drained from playing a character filled with "anger, confusion, competitiveness, and all kinds of wild things," says Anderson. But for every low, there was an exhilarating high. "I remember one day after shooting, we all wound up on the sun roof of a hotel [in Rome], and it happened to be Bill's birthday," Huston says. "A cake was brought out, and before we knew it he was serving every American tourist in the hotel. Hugging the wives and plying the customers with cake."

PART III: LA DOLCE VITA

Back at Bar Pitti, Anderson is inhaling a piece of tiramisu. Literally. Somehow, the topmost layer of grated chocolate has entered the innermost reaches of the director's nasal passages, resulting in a wheezy cough. Anderson still comes to this restaurant every day, nearly two years after he and Baumbach wrote the script for *The Life Aquatic* here. "If someone cared, they could go into Bar Pitti and find all the elements of the movie," Baumbach says. "There are a couple photos of Florence we'd stare at all day; a lot of things in the movie have come off the menu." Besides naming Zissou's island compound Pesce-spada (Italian for swordfish), they wrote a Fellini-esque scene in which Zissou tries to woo the reporter with a hot-air balloon ride and a glass of Campari.

A few innocent bystanders also made it into the film, including the café's bald owner, Giovanni, after whom they modeled Esteban, and Cody, a patron whom Anderson describes as "the sort of person who has the time to focus on lapels endlessly." (Onscreen, Cody is a mangy, three-legged dog.)

Ever since visiting Rome in 2001 to promote *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the Houston-born Anderson has been in what might be called his Italy Period. Everything points back to that boot-shaped peninsula, from the food he eats to the lifestyle he now emulates. On *The Life Aquatic*, he used Luchino Visconti's former hair guru, Maria Teresa Corridoni (who also styled for Fellini), as well as Oscar-winning costume designer Milena Canonero (*Barry Lyndon*, *Titus*). He even shot on the same Cinecittà soundstage on which Fellini built an artificial ocean for *And the Ship Sails On*.

Couldn't he have made this movie more easily in California, though, with the Pacific Ocean as a backdrop? "Yeah, yeah, yeah—for sure. Going to Italy to do it was crazy," says Anderson, his eyes large and moist-looking behind his new Italian contact lenses. "[But] the movies that are the strongest influence on this one, even if we'd shot it in Los Angeles, are Italian. You know, the thing about Fellini is they're very personal movies that he's invented out of nothing, and then he calls all of his favorite people together to be in them. I feel like that's what we're trying to do."

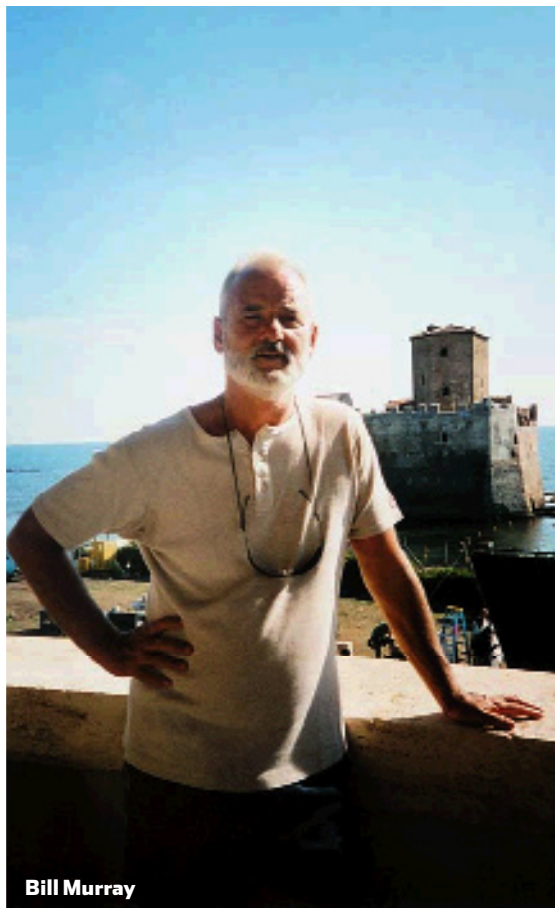
Thanks to Disney, cast and crew were able to do as the Romans do. Murray and Dafoe explored the city via scooter, and Wilson got to know the locals. "You couldn't go into a restaurant with Owen without someone saying, 'Ciao, Owen!' 'Oh, hey!'" says Anderson, who found himself acting as a bouncer at Wilson's first house party, after it got crashed. And, says Blanchett, when the director learned that she would be joining the shoot late, "Wes really sweetly sent me a photo diary of what they'd been doing so I wouldn't feel outside the loop. But strange photos—like the prop guys testing a flare, and Owen relaxing on the weekend."

As for Anderson, he learned how to unbutton a little and enjoy the moment, Huston says. "I don't know whether it was because we were out at sea and he got a tan and his hair grew, but one day I looked at him and thought, 'Oh my God—Wes got really handsome on this movie!'"

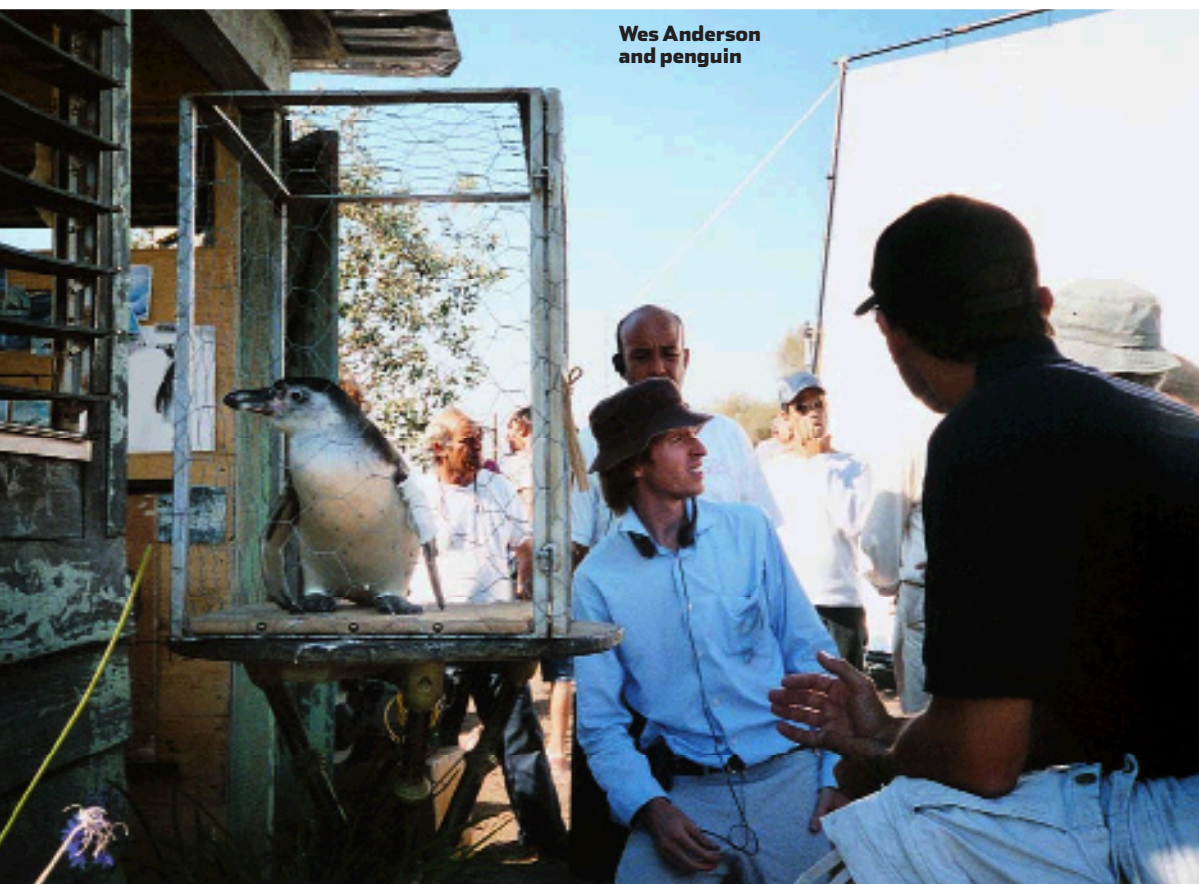
Hearing the compliment relayed, Anderson blushes. "Sometimes when I'm filming I get to a point where I can barely eat if things are crazy—but in Italy it wasn't like that," he says. "Everything about Italy is about making living beautiful. You know, it's less about work and more about living." ■



Anjelica Huston



Bill Murray



Wes Anderson
and penguin

That's Italian!

SOFIA COPPOLA TALKS ABOUT VISITING—AND PHOTOGRAPHING—SOME OLD FRIENDS ON LOCATION FOR *THE LIFE AQUATIC*.

What was going on when you took these photos?

I have no idea what's going on with the penguin. They had built that compound, I think, on an army base [editor's note: the location was the town of Anzio, site of a major World War II battle], and I was visiting and waiting for them to finish to have champagne and go out on the boat.

Bill Murray played a washed-up actor in *Lost in Translation*. Now he's playing a washed-up oceanographer in *The Life Aquatic*. Did you and Wes or Bill ever talk about these similarities?

No, we never did, but there's something fun about putting Bill in pathetic situations and watching him crawl to safety.

Anderson said that after six months of playing Steve Zissou, Murray was drained. But he looks pretty happy in this shot. How did he seem to you?

I'm sure it must have been hard to be away from home so long. For me, it was fun to visit them in Italy in this little town on the beach. We played cards and ate good food... and I think, at least for me, it's always nice to have visitors on a location far from home.

How long were you in Italy, and what was the best part of the visit for you?

I think I was there for a week. It was nice going to a little town I would have never gone to, and seeing them create this world that Wes dreamed up. The best part was having a great dinner in Rome and watching the Super Bowl all night.

When I talked to Wes, he seemed infatuated with Rome and Italy in general. So did Owen Wilson, who says he wants to move there. As someone who captured Tokyo so well, did you identify with their desire to be swept up in another culture?

I always thought, "He's doing it right—shooting in Italy!" Part of making a movie is spending a year in a place, so why not pick a good one, and you get to live and work there, which is so different from visiting. —B.H.