

THE METHOD

What it takes.

BY JON HURWITZ

Jake had hopes for an Oscar the year after next, which would cement his position as a bankable star. They'd reported him getting \$20 million for this movie. He wished!

He wrote the field equations on the whiteboard at the back of their practice film set, and this time managed to get halfway through the second line.

"No!" His technical adviser, the exacting Doctor Daker, flared his nostrils and ran a hand back through his prematurely white hair. "What did we say about using covariant derivatives?"

According to the script, Jake needed to write equations while simultaneously speaking lines, then duplicate it exactly in close-up. A foreign-language Oscar perhaps, he thought, looking at the board. He went back to the previous term and added in the semicolon to Daker's satisfaction before carrying on. He had three months before filming started to master the character of an obsessed scientist who invents a subspace drive, and by then he needed to think like a physicist as well as write like one.

Daker was tutting again. What now? Learning lines was never this tough.

"Perhaps you should start over," Daker suggested.

Jake took a deep breath. *Best Actor Award*, he told himself.

Jake had covered the whiteboard behind him in symbols that he now almost understood. In front lay a mass of parts that Daker was explaining. What did he just say?

"Are you seriously telling me real physicists make their own equipment?"

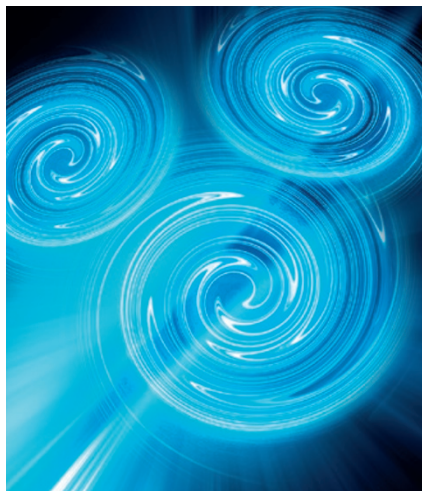
Daker laughed. "Sure. It's cheaper to fabricate parts from a 3D printer and we don't normally get access to a Hollywood production budget."

"What about these?" Jake surveyed the improbable components.

"I bought the cyclotron and the mass separator for the film, but most of the other stuff I've made over the years. There are some big-ticket items coming I could never have managed, including the superfluid cooling injectors. It has to look impressive for the cameras, right?"

"Can you teach me how to make some of these?" If a real physicist did it, Jake wanted to do it at least once for the experience. He needed the emotional memory to draw on.

Daker's nostrils flared. "First we should



get you assembling the parts you're going to work with on set, no?"

"OK, but let's make something later. I need to know this stuff." Jake wasn't as difficult as his reputation suggested. You got it right or you didn't, and he preferred to get it right. Surely that wasn't so hard for others, he reckoned, even when it was damned difficult for himself.

Daker fussed as Jake bolted the injectors to the 3-metre carapace, precisely opposite the inlets.

"So you're a method actor? Stanislavski, right?"

"Method yes, but Strasberg."

Jake's fingers moved more certainly now that he understood how the larger pieces would have to fit together. He might have to slow it down a bit for the performance. Reality differed on screen; you found the truth behind the truth.

"Strasberg's method is better for scripted Hollywood," Jake explained, still working. "You go to character motivation, rather than asking what would I do?"

"Good," said Daker, as Jake finished tightening the last bolt. "Time to hook up the power."

Jake hardly noticed how nervous Daker looked. This was a step further than they'd previously gone and he concentrated on connecting the wiring.

March came and filming started. The practice set had been dismantled and shipped

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to the main studios, where they'd rebuilt it with gaps for the cameras. Other spaces were filled by the

director, the technicians, Daker and even the producers who had come to watch the first day's shoot.

In his trailer Jake was becoming Doctor Han Selig, inventor of the subspace drive, a role that leaned on many of Daker's mannerisms, adding the hyper-realism only a method actor could bring to bear. They'd be filming interior scene 25, the completion of the drive, where Selig switched on his invention for the first time.

Jake walked from his trailer to the set and stood before Selig's engine, his life's work. Of course he was compulsive, even obsessive; how else could he achieve anything worthwhile? Han Selig would show them what it took to be extraordinary.

"Action!"

He coupled the power plant to the main drive connectors, appearing hesitant, and flipped the switch. The 2-tonne engine bobbed up as it had in preparation and he allowed a small smile of triumph to grow, one he'd practised many times to ensure it would match the close-up they'd film next. He ran a hand backwards through his hair before lifting the engine bodily upwards another metre, where it remained, hovering in mid-air.

He was too busy being Selig to react to the surprise on the watching faces.

Doctor Daker had high hopes for a Nobel. As he watched, mirroring Jake's triumphant smile, he fingered a 20-year-old rejection from *Nature* magazine that he'd brought with him to sweeten the moment. "Unprovable physics has no place in a peer-reviewed journal," that's what it said, as did rejections from other journals. How could he get proof? "We cannot support experiments based on unpublished physics," the grant committees had written.

Daker could never have afforded the nearly \$2 million needed to prove his theories, but he had raised the much smaller sum required to hire a great scriptwriter.

The cameras recorded the first moment his engine rose in public and Daker hoped they'd captured the equations from the whiteboard. It probably didn't matter, he concluded after a time. He may have published first in Disney, but when word got out, surely *Nature* would reprint. ■

Jon is an IT analyst living in London. Educated in physics and bioinformatics, he writes science fiction for his own amusement and in the hope that it amuses others.