

The past and present of Los Alamos came together to make *Oppenheimer*

Enlarge / Cillian Murphy in *Oppenheimer*.

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Christopher Nolan's newest film, *Oppenheimer*, grossed over \$82 million domestically over its opening weekend. It is perhaps Nolan's most significant project yet: a biopic of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, also known as the "father of the atomic bomb."

To preserve *Oppenheimer*'s historical accuracy, Nolan and his film crew shot at the Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) in Princeton and Los Alamos, two places where Oppenheimer worked. Because the film was shot near the real-life campus of Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), the opportunity arose for LANL researchers to join the film as extras. These interactions gave the scientists a more personal experience with LANL's rich legacy and created a deeper level of detail for a movie that critics have called "a supersize masterpiece."

Bringing in the extras

LANL's inception began hastily, as the demands of World War II forced the US government to rush to create a facility for nuclear weapons development. As *Oppenheimer* shows, it was renowned engineer and science advocate Vannevar Bush who led

the charge by working with several military personnel to birth a top-secret nuclear effort called Project Y. As Project Y developed into what we now know as the Manhattan Project in the early 1940s, Oppenheimer was appointed the first director of LANL. In the middle of the New Mexican desert, Oppenheimer and a team of brilliant scientists worked on developing the world's deadliest weapon.

To stay true to the story, Nolan shot various scenes at Ghost Ranch (the site of Georgia O'Keeffe's former studio), about an hour outside Los Alamos. Nolan also worked extensively with various researchers at LANL to better understand the institution's birth during World War II. "It obviously tells the story of the birth of the lab in a very dramatic way," explained LANL Director Thom Mason, who was not an extra in the film. "It's great to see it told, and it certainly has generated a lot of interest in the lab and a lot of interest in northern New Mexico, which is a beautiful location. And that [beauty] comes across as well."

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While most scientists would no doubt feel uncomfortable with a film crew poking about in their laboratories, a handful of LANL researchers were interested in participating in the film. And like most projects in Hollywood, the recruitment process was secretive and roundabout, a clear parallel to the actual Manhattan Project, which had its own culture of secrecy.

"A friend of mine at the time was a labs liaison for the Manhattan Project National Historical Park," elaborated Richard "Mouser" Williams, a LANL technical staff member who was an extra in *Oppenheimer*. "So he was the one who gave the director [Nolan] a tour around the relevant sites at LANL. And he made me aware that this [being an extra] is a thing that could be done. He got me hooked up with the company to be an extra."

To get his part, Williams had to submit a photo and show up on

set. Once he got the call, he took two days off for filming and drove to Ghost Ranch. "There's a scene where Oppenheimer is addressing the townspeople after the bomb at Ghost Ranch," explained Williams, "which is a little unsettling to see because I'm in the audience for that. So there's a wide shot of 400 people appointed as extras, and I'm one of them."

While Williams enjoyed having a small role in the film, he said it was hard to find himself when he watched *Oppenheimer* in a theater. "I was lucky in that they asked if anyone would be willing to carry a kid on their shoulders," added Williams. "And there were four or five kids on standby for this. So I figured out I'd make it easier to find where I was in this giant shot, so I had a kid on my shoulders. This made it more fun to see me in the film at the theater." Williams also mentioned that several of his fellow labmates were involved in these scenes, and he spent most of his time viewing the film trying to find them.

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