Calligrapher Teaches City Students, Recreates *National Treasure* Documents

By Steve Simmons

Posters for the new *National Treasure* sequel show Nicholas Cage, torch in hand, in front of the title's "Book of Secrets."

That document, along with historic diaries, maps and even bits of papyrus, were created by calligraphy artist DeAnn Singh, who also teaches beginning and intermediate calligraphy classes for the Beverly Hills Adult School.

While she loves her work and students, she finds the "showbiz "work "fun and creative. I like making things up and seeing them on the screen."

Singh created all the documents used in close-ups for the adventure film, including the missing 18 pages of John Wilkes Booth's diaries that figure heavily in the plot line.

Singh studied facsimiles of Booth's actual diaries "to see exactly how he wrote. You can see that as he got more agitated it showed in his handwriting."

She made 100 copies of the main or "hero" pages of the dairy, since they get burned in the story, and the scene required numerous takes from various angles.

On the famous missing page of the diary, she put fireproofing on one side and "77 glue" on the other. "That side burned fast and the other didn't, so the stuntman could pull it out of the fire."

Upon meeting, Christian Carmago, who plays John Wilkes Booth, Singh said, "I guess when you're famous I'll sign all your autographs."

The film's "Book of Secrets" is a hidden document started by George Washington and seen only by successive presidents. Singh studied samples of all the presidents' handwriting to replicate their styles.

For Washington, she used the same type of pen he would have used (she collects antique writing implements) and iron gall ink, and for authenticity with each president, she used materials and tools they would have used.

According to Singh, Harry Truman had the worst handwriting while Washington had the best, with "writing most like calligraphy."

Her reproduction of a letter from Queen Victoria was on rare antique paper of the period — also part of Singh's collection.

HISTORICAL PROPS —For the film *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*, Calligrapher DeAnn Singh created illuminated manuscripts, Egyptian hieroglyphics on papyrus, and even George Washington's map of Mount Vernon.

This letter too, ended up in the fire.

"But it was okay, because Ed Harris was doing the burning," Singh said. "As far as I'm concerned, he can burn anything he wants to."

Singh herself has "always liked handwriting, from when I was little. I was always attracted to letter forms." Since then she has studied the art and apprenticed with master calligraphers.

She is president of the Los Angeles Chapter of the Society of Calligraphy. The group recently hosted Donald Jackson, "The Queen's Scribe," who created the St. John's Bible, the first handwritten English Bible in the last 500 years, Singh said.

In her classes, which resume Jan. 7 at the El Rodeo Elementary Scout House, Singh teaches "all kinds of calligraphy, book binding and paper art, scripts, the history of scripts and calligraphy, and even watercolor," she said.

Whether they want to do invitations, study the art more intensely, or just improve their handwriting, "my students get really good," Singh said. One is now a county calligrapher who has written a book on the subject.

"With calligraphy we get to to say what we want to say; it's a powerful art," said Singh. "We spend time with poetry and literature. If you're going to spend the time writing something, you don't want to spend it on something frivolous."

With 30 years experience, Singh says she can teach calligraphy to anyone. "You just have to have patience," Singh said. "I have all the patience that anyone needs, they just have to have it for themselves."

The trick, she says, "is how you hold the paper."

AWARDEES–Actress Halle Berry (left) and actor Daniel Day Lewis will each receive "Desert Palm" awards at the Jan. 5 black-tie awards gala during the Palm Springs International Film Festival.