

CASE STUDY: SHOOTING THE SHORT FILM **DEADSET**

Aidan Dickens is entering the Tropfest NZ 2014 short film festival with a short crafted specifically for the festival.

Viewfinder follows his progress on the shoot for a behind the scenes view.

ENTERING TROPFEST

I'm always looking for excuses to make something and I'd heard about the Tropfest competition while at Film School last year. I hadn't had a chance to enter then, so thought we should do something for this round.

THE IDEA FOR THE SHORT

I've always wanted to do a road trip story with two characters who are completely different sharing the ride. In this case we had a nerdy guy and a goth chick meeting in the middle of nowhere and a relationship evolving as they share the ride together. This story was originally more romantic but after my last film I knew we had to raise the stakes, so I evolved it into something a lot darker and grittier, which seems to be normal for my films nowadays.



THE SYNOPSIS

Marcus is a driving along a country a road when he sees Daria hitch hiking and picks her up. They are complete opposites but share something in common; they're both running away from something.

THE SCRIPT

I wrote the script and had Vanessa James as my script consultant, who really helped to hone it into its final form.

PREP FOR THE SHOOT

Normally I just use shotlists. I have done storyboards in the past but they are rarely very useful, so we stick to the shotlist. I usually do call sheets as well. Facebook is the best way to organise crew I've found, because you can create a group page, add all the crew and then post messages and updates that everyone sees, simple.



SCRIPT READ THROUGH

We did a script read through with cast and crew so we were all on the same page. Everyone needs to know the story so at any time they know what scene we're shooting and where we are story wise. It really helps to keep everyone involved as well so we work better as a team.

THE CREW

We have a small crew and it's made up of friends and family who love being involved and helping out. On this shoot we had myself as writer/director/producer, David Peterson as DOP, Holden Schade as Sound Op and Alex Arruda producing along with Vanessa James, who was also Production manager and script consultant, plus she also provided snacks and some really awesome homemade cookies. Then we had my brother Liam and my wife Milla doing clapper and assisting on different days, and Donna Rae doing makeup, which is hugely important for this shoot. We also had Michael Nicholas providing the generator, he's also one of the actors, and John Crews helped out as well, he is the founder of the Kennedy Park trust, which is where we shot some of the short.

THE CAST

There are three actors in this film, Rebecca Parr and Michael Nicholas are friends from previous shoots and the other was John Edwards, who I auditioned. My films require a lot from the actors and I use people I know can act well and pull off what's required. I like to try new people as well, and in particular when a character has a particular look, which in this case John had and it all worked out perfectly.

PAYMENT

Unfortunately no one gets paid - it is a small shoot with a micro budget. I do however give fuel vouchers to everyone as a form of payment, plus food, and I'll organise a big wrap party for it.



LOCATIONS

We had three locations this time instead of just one, which is what we had on my last film. For the first location we just used my bedroom, which worked perfectly. My house is very old and so it makes a really good filming location, which is why I've shot in there a few times. The second location is the road in Coatsville that Kim Dot Com lives on, this wasn't too hard to find; we just needed somewhere secluded. The third was the Kennedy Park tunnels and carpark in Castor Bay. We needed somewhere dark and spooky and I'd already met John Crews before when scouting for other films, so I contacted him and he said okay.

The film had to be just over six minutes in order to get the titles and credits in, so I had to be particularly brutal with the cutting.

THE GEAR

Our DOP David Peterson used the following gear:

- Camera: hacked Panasonic GH1 (mostly more often than not shooting at ISO200, 1/50th shutter speed, and f/2.8, but this varied of course a lot over the course of the shoot, though those were the most common settings overall I'd estimate) & Canon ELPH 100 (running Canon Hack Development Kit)
- Lenses: Vivitar Series 1 28-90mm f/2.8-3.5 Nikon F mount, and Panasonic 14mm f/2.5 pancake (plus cleaning equipment of blower and lens cloth).
- Rigging: monopod, fluid head, tripod, Varavon Sling Follow Focus, mini ball head, 2x quick release plates, suction mount, shoulder rig, flat sided IKEA egg timer, rope, screwdrivers.
- Reference sound: SG-108 microphone or on camera mics on occasion.
- With the most common setup being the GH1 with the Vivitar Series 1 on the monopod with a fluid head plus the SG-108 on the hotshoe, with 2x 250W worklights.



SOUND & LIGHTING

- Sound: Holden, the sound guy, used a Fostex FR-2 Field Memory Recorder that I bought off Trademe from a guy in Wellington. Interestingly enough it is the same one that was used on *King Kong* and *The Lovely Bones*. I also have a Rode boom pole and shotgun mic along with a deadcat.
- Lighting: 4x 250W work floodlights from SuperCheap Auto, with two mounted on each lightstand, many many meters of extension cords (with multi-way plugs too), plus two 60W desk lamps (so a total of over a thousand watts of light). Along with whatever ambient light there was in the setting, such as indoor room lights and sunlight. Also made use of a 110cm reflector (dual sided gold and silver).

MAKEUP

Donna is our makeup artist and used Minifies Stage Blood; Kryolan Fresh Scratch Blood; Ben Nye Bruise Wheel; Maybelline Charcoal Black Eyeliner; Wendy Hill Foundation; Thin Lizzy contour and a black lipstick.

A sheep gave birth in a paddock next to us while we were filming the first half of the scene which made everyone smile.

SHOOT DIARY

DAY ONE

Today we started shooting our Tropfest film. The scene we were doing was shot in my bedroom and it took us just over four hours to get it all set up. We had a list of 18 shots, all vital to the scene. As per usual with most shoots it took awhile to get into it, but after a few takes we started working like a well oiled machine. We did between three and eight takes per shot and managed to get the most out of our cast and crew. The main issues for me today were keeping the crew under control and keeping everyone focused.

I find that as a director it is invaluable to have a shotlist

done in advance otherwise you're basically feeling around in the dark trying to improvise the shots. We block through the scene and mould the shotlist to the action and the actors movements and the whole process becomes very organic, but it is imperative to have some idea of what the shots will be and how much you will need to get enough coverage of the scene.

I am a very actor friendly director and spend a lot of time working closely with the actors in order to create a believable performance together. Without the actors we have no film, so I place a lot of importance on the relationship with the actors. Having an idea about what through lines the characters have for each scene really helps, these can change as you go along and you have to be prepared to mould and sculpt the performance to fit the scene.

The lighting was very important for today's scene. David was the DOP on my last shoot and he's very good at lighting. We end up with very stylised, dark, shadowy, spooky shots. All of my films seem to have this look now and I really like it.

We used the notebook today. Lee Ah Yen designed it as one of the props in the film. Lee is an actor who's been in two of my previous films. He's a great actor and also a really good artist, and although there was no acting part for him in this film he still did all the drawings in the notebook we used, which looked amazing.

DAY TWO

Shooting on the side of the road in Coatsville proved to be less challenging than I'd thought but more complicated in terms of what we had to shoot. The shots required the driver to pick up a hitchhiker, which is easy enough in theory but finding the right spot to do it on a Sunday when there was a bike race was the challenge. We finally found the spot and started filming. There were many challenges with the car having to drive off and come back again for each take and watching for traffic and people when shooting.

Other challenges included the sound in the car, which our soundie Holden handled very well, and getting good shots. Apart from that it was mostly hassle free. A sheep gave birth in a paddock next to us while we were filming the first half of the scene which made everyone smile, we even got some footage. ►

The main thing I noticed with shooting outside in a car in daylight, versus inside is the lack of control over lighting. The day before we managed to create some beautiful lighting effects and an atmosphere that was strikingly beautiful, whereas outside in a small car we really had no control as all we could fit in the car was a camera operator, director and soundie, plus the two actors, so lighting really went out the window. Another challenge was getting the actors to do what I wanted them to do. This short has minimal dialogue and so the actors had certain actions to do that were very minimal, exchanging looks and one of them also had to drive on a windy road, so it was a bit challenging, but we got there.

We drove past Kim Dot Com's house around 20 times as we were shooting on that road and I promised the DOP we would stop so he could take a photo of himself in front of it, which was cool. Seeing the giant "Mega" on his lawn was definitely a highlight.

DAY THREE

Shooting in some old WW2 army tunnels in Castor Bay today proved to be more tricky than I had imagined. For a start there were builders next door who were nice enough to give some free power for our lights, but weren't able to be quiet while we were filming unfortunately. The contrast in the types of lighting in the tunnel and from the outside was also a big issue that we had to deal with.

Our DOP uses Hi Wattage work lights that have no barn doors. I was more used to redheads or any other type of traditional film lights, and so this was a bit of a change for me. The results speak for themselves though and we end up with some very unconventional and amazing lighting once again.

The main challenges today were the sheer amount of shots we had scheduled, which was about 22, and getting them all done on time. The tunnels are pitch black in some parts so we had to choose the right location where we could control the lights and justify the light source, which we eventually did. Echo in the tunnels was another big issue and the soundie once again came out on top for that one. We also had John Crews helping us out today by redirecting traffic while we were shooting in the carpark, and providing any help or assistance

we needed as well.

The crew and actors were on form today. I can't give these guys enough credit for what they've put themselves through for no money. The screen industry is changing, however as long as we have passionate people who are willing to work for free then high quality productions will still get made, and that seems to be the way things are going.

We finally wrapped after 10 hours of shooting and called it a day with a well rounded, if very tired sound 'yay!'.

EDITING

This part of the filmmaking process is always fun. I'm an experienced editor and always edit my own films and music videos, or whatever else I'm shooting, and this was no exception. It's taken me two weeks to do a cut I'm happy with and lock it off.

The biggest challenge with editing for a film competition like this is the time limit. For Tropfest it's seven minutes with titles and credits, which is tough when you want to

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convey a story about two characters and show the relationship growing and developing, and have a twist in the end that you want audiences to understand and appreciate. I found this particularly tough as the film had to be just over six minutes in order to get the titles and credits in, so I had to be particularly brutal with the cutting and make everything happen as quickly as possible without compromising the story.

We also have the issue of getting an M rated film for this particular competition, and since I've never had to think about ratings before on my films then this will be interesting. We have an F word, which may have to be bleeped, plus a shooting, a violent conflict, a bit of strangling, and a little blood. We shall see what happens with the final edit. (V)

