

Accident**Interview with the film-maker: James Leech****Could you describe your way into making short films? What is your background? How did you start off?**

I was initially drawn to film-making about 15 years ago through an interest in animation. At that time, animation in this country was very strong and there were several directors producing very interesting, thought-provoking, and challenging short films, funded in particular by Channel 4. Sadly it is no longer the practice of Channel 4 to produce such work. This change took place around 1999, while I was a student at the National Film and Television School where I was studying Animation Direction.

It was part of the curriculum at the NFTS for animators to do workshops in, among other things, live-action directing. I think I was inspired more than anything by these workshops and learned an enormous amount in a very short space of time about character motivation, establishing relationships on screen, the creation and sustenance of dramatic tension, best uses of the camera, and so on. We were also encouraged to experiment, and use mixed formats. So by the time I came to make my graduation film *Instrumental*, I was extremely keen to put the skills I had learned in live action into practice. Which I did, mixing media and doing a lot of post-production work, painting in effects on the live-action footage, and frame grabbing. I found the experience of working with actors extremely rewarding.

A special interest of mine is finding for whatever film I'm making an unconventional narrative and visual shape when possible, in order to remove it somewhat away from the obvious social realism style traditionally associated with the type of subject that I find most interesting. A very important part of the process is carrying out visual research.

How did you come up with the idea for this film?

One day I was in the street near my home in west London, when I saw an accident take place; a man of foreign extraction was hit by a car which failed to stop, and he died as a result. For me, the shock of seeing someone's life slipping away, along with the sheer routineness of calling the emergency services to control events, became sidelined by the attitudes of the crowd that gathered to watch, and their attitude toward the victim, as well as to each other.

I went home and wrote the script straight away; almost just putting in script form what I had witnessed that day. What is fictionalised however, is the point of view of the main character who takes us through the story, and his moment of decision at the end.

The idea was for a multiform narrative, addressing the ideas of moral and social ethics, xenophobia, and missed communication. The film's thematic build-up is around responsibility to others, desensitisation to suffering, and the increasing distance between people as an acknowledged part of the fabric of contemporary life - themes that I am very much interested in.

How long did you spend working on this project? How long did the filming take? And how long the post-production?

I wrote the script for *Accident* relatively quickly for me, in about a week. And once funding was in place we began casting for the characters, which took about a week. Once we settled on the actors, we began looking for locations, filming took just two days, from there, the post-production, sound design, editing and final grade took about three weeks. So, apart from the time we spent waiting for the film to be funded, aside from the script being written; it was about five weeks from the final draft of the script to delivery to Film London, who funded the film.

How many people were involved in the filming process?

On the actual shoot itself there were, apart from myself, the cinematographer and his assistant. Plus numerous people involved in various different roles from first assistant director, to make-up people.

In the actual planning of the shots, and how the camera would operate. I worked with the cinematographer and the producers to make a storyboard as a kind of framework of what we would see at what time.

How did you cast people? Did you do a lot of readings/screen tests to choose them?

We were extremely lucky in that we were given support from Candid Casting, who gave us a great deal of time and support by contacting actors for us to screen-test. We had about a week of interviewing, and then viewing tapes of those we screen-tested.

The actors came to the audition, the producer Hugh Welchman and I discussed briefly with the actors their characters; firstly how they saw the character, then who we believed the character was. We did a bit of ad-libbing, and then a read-through of their lines, which we taped. I wanted to see if they felt the lines were right for their character in that situation. We only spent five to ten minutes with each actor, to get through as many as we could. I found that during casting I was able to decide almost immediately who was right for which part and who wasn't.

I found casting an extremely interesting process; it can make lucid deficiencies in the script, or in the characters motivation. For example, for the main character, the young man who leads us into events. We saw as many as 20 actors in one day. I watched the tape back on the first night of the casting session, where we got the actors to read through the first scene. It occurred to me that the opening few lines needed to be rewritten, as it seemed implausible that anyone would be that hostile at the start. However on the second day of casting, the actor we chose for the part, David Cooper, came in. David showed an intensity of feeling in the way he delivered the lines. By speaking and not shouting, by holding back, I believe he absorbs the viewer's interest very well. David made the character not only plausible, but more interesting by what he didn't say.

How difficult was it to film in an East End London street?

One of the demands we had of the location was that it was relatively busy but not too much so that we would have dozens of onlookers waving at the camera and getting in the way. In my experience crowds of onlookers can be difficult to contend with.

The intention was to get a sense in the film of the busy city going by, but also on a practical level we knew that shooting in the street would mean we would have to contend with some disruption which would put pressure on us time-wise.

The location we chose was on the fringes of the City and therefore noticeably quieter at weekends, at the same time it did have passers-by, and as it was a very hot day we were guaranteed some people that we could cheat as our crowd of rubbernecks, which naturally meant fewer paid extras. The local residents were contacted prior to the shoot, and warned of any disruption; they were also asked that if any of them wanted to put in an appearance in the film they would be welcome to do so; thankfully some did. They were very kind and helpful. Members of the public stopped at the sight of the blood-stained body and we were able to catch on camera their genuine horror.

The only difficulty we encountered was that our policemen (actors) were stopped by passers-by and had offences reported to them.

We'd really like to know if there were any ideas for events or characters that were in the original script, but that you didn't film, or scenes or dialogue that you filmed then either didn't use or cut substantially - and reasons in each case for doing so.

As I mentioned before, the original script was 15 minutes long and written with no concessions to budget. The film was made for a small budget and ended up being ten minutes long.

In the original script there were several characters, such as a group of builders, one of whom used the event as an excuse for being late back for work. A motorcycle pizza delivery boy was in the original script also; he was negotiating his way through the crowd calling out the name of one of them. This it was decided had to go, as it was reiterating what other scenes in the film are doing. For that reason and of course for reasons of budget, it had to go.

In the original script, towards the end of the film, the police had to push everybody back to the pavement in order to let a fleet of cars (about three cars, carrying VIPs), with tinted windows pass indifferently by the body; with the paramedics working to resuscitate the man. All the while the road was blocked to ordinary motorists.

Also at the end of the original script, the young man who is faced with the moment of choice at the end, while he is making his mind up, I wanted a wind machine to blow refuse around in the air and in post production would have added the sound effect of a policeman mentioning the arrival of a helicopter, and the sound of a helicopter landing to take the body away.

The VIP cars and the wind machine would have taken us a lot of time to set up, and on a small budget and a two-day shoot; we had to be ruthless. These elements weren't absolutely necessary to the point the film was making, therefore they both had to go.

There were one or two lines from the crowd cut during editing. But the most important scene we had to cut was of the man in the white shirt who attends to the injured man. After the ambulance crew take over, the white shirt man is given his jacket by the police and he discovers that his wallet and his mobile phone have been stolen. This scene we filmed at the end of day 2 as the light was failing. Although the performances were good, and the scene played out well; the light was considerably dimmer than in the scene it would have followed on chronologically from. Although we tried in post-production to match the light as much as possible, we simply couldn't. So reluctantly we had to lose this scene.

How do you finance your short films?

Accident was written in summer 2002; after it was completed, BreakThru films, who I work through, applied for funding with the Cinema Extreme fund. We came close to selection for that, but it was rejected finally for budget reasons. Their thinking was that the film would be too expensive for the budget they were offering (around £30,000). Some time later, we applied to Film London's PULSE scheme, which liked the script enough at least to discuss with us how we could make it for far less; approx' £10,000.

We struck a compromise, which meant me rewriting passages of the film; reducing the characters and some narrative points in the film. This included rethinking some structural and logistical elements which I believe make the film stronger. For example, in the original script I had three patrol cars turn up at the scene of the accident, the main character watches as they deal with the onlookers. It occurred to me that one car would be adequate if shot properly, and we could use 'blackouts' to imply time elapses and when we come out from black, the police and/or the ambulance crew could already be there.

What was your budget and how did you spend it?

The budget was under £10,000 and we spent every penny. Pulling in favours from just about everybody we knew, and in some cases on bended knees to people we didn't. The cast worked for the equity minimum. For economy reasons we made the most of those people that naturally gather around a film shoot to see what's going on, and we used them as our onlookers. The crew mostly worked for nothing, or the bare minimum, just to acquire the experience of being on a shoot. This is where being a student at the NFTS came in very useful, as I was able to interest people I attended with, now talented professionals, in cinematography, editing and so on to work with us.

Money really does not go far. Aside from the big expenses like casting, equipment hire, and catering, there are the small hidden expenses; everything from having photographs of possible locations taken to getting people to the shoot so early in the morning, to fake blood. As for the phone calls, faxes, emails, petrol, taxis, and everybody's time, I think if correct rates were paid then the budget would have had to be several times more.

Your film was funded by PULSE - what difference did that make?

Originally the script was 15 minutes long and the narrative span of the film was bigger. Once the PULSE scheme became involved it was clear that the film had to be reworked and modified for budget reasons. It was clear that we could afford only two days shooting; this was a worry for me.

However I think that when we are forced into compromise over things, then somehow doors open ideas wise. I realised my writing and my vision for the film could have been more economical in terms of story telling, and that sections could be cut out, sections that were not really contributing enough to the overall story and to the point I wanted the film to make. This I think we did without really damaging the narrative ambition of the film.

I think that the PULSE scheme was interested also in subject matter that says a lot about London urban society; though I think this film could have been made in any major European city. It simply

uses London as a laboratory for testing the harshness of the circumstances in which individuals fall victim.

Do you think there is a moral or a message in your film?

I hope so, I think apart from the fairly obvious ideas that the film tries to encourage the viewer to consider. The overall statement I wanted the film to make is where we are going as a society. For me *Accident* is about the failure of personal ethics within modern society, and communication: interpersonal, familial, sociological. I believe that the film does present these questions in a broad spectrum.

Do you have any current and possible future projects, for example a feature film?

I am currently working on a feature film script with BreakThru Films entitled *Happy Hour*, a low-budget London crime drama.

Can you name a few films that inspired you?

I think the very best films have something profoundly important either political or personal at stake in them. These dynamics are important, but I think in themselves they are worth little if the viewer doesn't particularly care about what is happening. I think the true master of high-stakes drama was Alfred Hitchcock; in particular *Vertigo*, *Rear Window* and *Shadow of a Doubt* - my three favourite films.

More recently a film that made a very profound effect on me was *Code Unknown* by Michael Haneke - a provocative and complex film, the central notion of which is the failure to communicate. This film was a big influence on my writing a couple of years ago and I think the theme of whether or not to intervene, and the wider implications of doing so, are clear to see in *Accident*.

What tips would you give students wanting to make their own short films?

My tip would be: watch great films; the classics, from John Ford to Fellini. Try to identify and extract what is at stake in them, and whether or not that is something that interests you enough to write a script of your own, about a situation, if possible, that you have some experience of. After all, there is no such thing as a bad or too simplistic idea for a film. It's about what happens on the way. *The Bicycle Thieves* for example, is about a man whose bike gets stolen, but look at what implications that act has on his life - personally, socially. There is so much in the balance; so much meaning and emotion ripples outward from that one simple event.

The reason I mention all this is that funding bodies receive hundreds of scripts from film-makers wanting to make films. To have the best possible chance of making your film you need a great script. I'm afraid I can only offer the advice that aspiring film makers probably already know. By that I mean apply to all the funding bodies available to you, local and national ones.

I think a great idea for students of film to do would be to shoot a simple scene, preferably something the student has written themselves. Perhaps a conversation at a table involving two people. This could be done very easily and for very little cost on a DV, or for that matter any camera, and using in-camera sound; just to demonstrate an understanding of drama. This could be helpful especially if a funding body likes a script but is concerned that the student has not enough film-making experience.

This is something that if I was a tutor I would definitely organise as often as possible, as I believe that it is something that it is not possible to do too much of.

And be prepared to rewrite.
