

Ex-BAFTA Projectionist Tim Higham tells the fascinating tale of how he produced a fantastic film about an eccentric projectionist who fantasises about life on the other side of the silver screen - how unusual is that?

The Adventures of George The Projectionist



Midnight. Late November 1999. Three glasses of whisky gone, or was it the five? After ten years as a projectionist, I had completed a few short films using my trusty Bolex 16mm camera and had long since abandoned the idea of studying at film school. Under the premise that making my own films was a much better way to learn about the art of making movies, I had just put the finishing touches to my latest four minute epic, 'The Final Filament'; a short film about a film show that is cancelled due to the failure of a light bulb in the ladies lavatory, starring my fellow BAFTA projectionists. I was now desperate to make another film, but not another short film, why not a long film?

Starring the people I knew and the locations I already had access to; my place of work, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts in Piccadilly, central London, with its projection box, and cinema. I had the perfect film set. The only other 'minor' hurdle was that of producing a decent script. The main character in the story had to be George, my fellow projectionist, by now an old hand at performing in front of the camera as well as behind the projector. And the plot would have to be influenced by both my and George's real life passion, the movies, along with a story that includes both the production and the presentation side of the industry. There has to be romance as well, so I decided that the fictional George should fall in love with a beautiful Italian actress he sees every night on the silver screen. And, similar to my own story, show the struggles of a first time director in his bid to complete his debut



Author, film-maker and projectionist Tim Higham in the BAFTA projection box.

feature film. And so was born 'The Adventures Of George The Projectionist', about a cinema projectionist who dreams of a life on the other side of the silver screen, only to become entangled in a mad Italian director's secret filming of a crazily combined remake of Cinema Paradiso and Pulp Fiction! Time for another glass of the single malt, and to start searching for that old word processor that I knew was in the loft somewhere.

The next morning, at work, during an extremely boring conference, I set about planning the production. The only way to shoot the scenes would be between all the various bookings that BAFTA took during the days and evenings - conferences, presentations and the multitude of film screenings. I decided that in order to avoid any problems with the management, it

would be a good idea to keep quiet about the production of the film, apart from telling my immediate boss, Keith Jordan, the then Head of Technical Services, who was extremely supportive, and without whom I could not have completed this mammoth project.

I finished a basic script at the beginning of January 2000, which was only about 50 minutes long, but I was in such a hurry to start shooting I thought I could write the rest as we went along, which didn't really turn out to be the best course of action. Thinking that the whole project would take a couple of years at most, I'd already started planning the premiere and all the advertising and publicity for the end of 2002. How wrong could I be! Now the latter half of 2007 and the DVD is just released!

I had no money for the production, so immediately broke one of the golden rules of filmmaking - that is, not to put any of your own money into the project. So, after succeeding in my application for 3 credit cards (or was it 4 or 5? I can't remember), I started wondering how much film stock I could get for free. After some research, I found approximately 250 production companies in the central London area alone, most within walking distance of Piccadilly, and spent about 2 days delivering letters by hand to each one asking for any spare film stock they might have - I had also calculated the money I could save by not posting anything! Within a couple of weeks, and after a lot more walking, I ended up with donations of just over 12,000 feet of usable 16mm stock - so, off to a good start. And I knew John Glee-

Left to right: Where the ideas began to take root - the view from the BAFTA projection box: Hidden star of the show - the Vic 8 in the BAFTA box : The Auditorium of the Princess Anne theatre at BAFTA where some material was shot





From top to bottom: George's boss Mr Harris at the projector - played by BAFTA projectionist Chris Harris; Tim filming the Vic 8; Antonio editing; Stefania and Giorgio

son, the man in charge at Colour Film Services laboratory, who was a very great help to me with the processing.

Realising that I could not afford a professional editing system I decided to do everything the old-fashioned way and buy a Steenbeck machine on which to cut the film. I found one for about £400, and installed it at home in my cellar. It turned out to be an excellent investment - this marvellous machine never let me down, and, I thought, was far superior to any digital system; after all, if you lose a frame or two of film on the Steenbeck, it's bound to be on the floor or somewhere you can find it - if you lose something in the computer, it'll be floating around in cyberspace for ever more.

Eventually, the basic story came to fruition - George the projectionist gets increasingly bored with both his job and his boss, Mr. Harris (played by Chris Harris, another fellow projectionist at BAFTA) at our fictional 'ArtHouse Cinema in Regent street'.

George leaves one day for France in a bid to change his life and meets a woman in a Parisian bar with whom he falls in love. Sadly, however, he returns to London after losing contact with her, only to become entangled in the mad Italian director's Cinema Verité style film production, which happens to have taken over George's workplace in his absence. In the end, George finds himself showing the film at its premiere and is in for more than a few surprises.

So, filming commenced, with odd scenes or parts of scenes shot here and there between screenings at work, and by the end of 2002 I had transferred only about a third of my original script onto celluloid. Another problem I had was that I was inventing new characters and ideas for scenes at the same rate that the filming was progressing - now the movie would never be finished.

All the main characters are played by people I knew at the time, with the exception of Stefania, played by Semeli Economou, who I found through an ad I placed in a local drama college; she brought along all her acting friends and of course I immediately started writing parts for all of them. One of the main characters, Andrei the Russian immigrant, is played by Andrew Byron, who arrived by chance as an extra for a party scene we happened to be shooting one evening. When I met him and discovered that he spoke fluent Russian, I created the part of Andrei Basilashvili, who finds work at the cinema and, like George, also dreams of a life on the silver screen. I decided that the opening of the film needed a bit of excitement, so I wrote some scenes portraying Andrei's journey to England, in which he hides in the undercarriage bay of a jet airliner from Moscow before falling out and parachuting to earth. Then, after a slightly less eventful trip to the job centre, he becomes a cleaner in George's cinema.

As with everything else in the film I built almost everything I needed, and this scene in the undercarriage bay was filmed at home on my

living room floor (while my wife happened to be away for a while staying at her mother's!). All the aircraft parts were constructed out of bits of wood and metal, and the entire scene was built up with various shots from a real Cessna light aircraft over Biggin Hill aerodrome, people parachuting over Headcorn airfield in Kent, and other shots taken at Heathrow Airport, Wimbledon Common, and inevitably the BAFTA rooftop in Piccadilly. This I used for Andrei's close ups where he was rigged up in a makeshift parachute harness, with some straps and loads of gaffer tape, and suspended from some metal poles borrowed from behind the screen in the BAFTA theatre.

To make the film more unusual I decided that all the main characters should have a dream sequence, each being inspired by the actor's real life passions - Chris's dream is all about sausages, and George's dream should be about steam trains, the beautiful Italian actress he sees every night on the silver screen, and of course, film projectors - in particular the two Cinemecanica Victoria 8s installed at BAFTA.

His dream involves him climbing a ladder 'through' one of the projectors, which I filmed with a series of double and triple exposures involving George and his pyjamas, projector parts, lenses, spools and gear wheels. All filmed 'in-camera' to avoid any costly post-production effects. There are many other in-camera effects throughout the film, especially involving the projectors and their workings; one example being where the projector catches fire. I filmed George and the projector, and wound the film back in the camera before going home to shoot some flames in my back garden at night. There are also many shots done stop frame, or one frame at a time, some of which can be viewed in the film trailer on our website. One in particular, a handheld tracking shot involved me walking over the tops of all the rows of seats in the cinema auditorium, starting with a wide shot on the stage and moving rapidly to a big close up of George's face. You can also see a speeded up scene of both projectors while George is running an entire feature film, including changeovers, shot one frame every 15 seconds, to compress the whole two-hour sequence into about 20 seconds.

Shots of inside the projector lamp house were needed for the Pulp Fiction - Cinema Paradiso style gangster chase, where the bungling gangsters hide the 'drugs' (icing sugar wrapped in cling film) inside the projector. I constructed a lamp house interior at home in my cellar with sheets of metal and a 500W stage light bulb, and whilst shooting at 64 frames per second in order to slow everything down, injected some flames into the set up to recreate a projector lamp house fire by using a match and a deodorant aerosol can - not something I recommend doing again! Various shots also include either George showing a film, or close ups of the projector gate or lens, so I shot sequences as normal on 16mm, had them blown up to 35mm, and then laced them up in the projector to be re-filmed. This was all rather tricky but

ended up working very well with the projector running at 24 fps and the clockwork camera running at (approximately!) 24 fps.

The finished movie is now shorter than the original version that went to the negative cutters. After 2-3 years of editing and building up the structure of the film, there followed about a year of hacking bits out of it, so the film is now down to 79 minutes, from what was an extremely confusing director's, or should I say, projectionist's cut original of 95 minutes. This first version had about 1100 cuts in it, which according to the neg cutters was well above the average of 900 cuts for this length of movie. And with the chaotic style of filming it is not surprising that it took nearly 5 years to complete. There was no crew to speak of; just me and my camera and a cassette recorder to capture a guide track for the dialogue post-synching - all done, of course, in between film bookings, whenever anyone was available, and at odd times after work and at weekends. Fortunately, the shot continuity is pretty good, as George managed to retain his youthful character throughout, despite him approaching his 'free bus pass' era!

I also managed to complete the movie just before major refurbishment works at BAFTA saw new seats installed in the theatre, bigger lamp houses on the Vic 8s (as far as I remember they had 3k lamps when installed in 1997 and after lots of experimentation and the addition of 3 bladed shutters this went up in stages to 5k for the 213 seat - now 227 seat - cinema). The decor in the rest of the building also changed



Clockwise: Star of the show George Warner - projectionist with so many dreams to fulfil! Tim posting drugs into an old Ernemann lamphouse - believe me, it's part of the story! George on the projection room floor as Tim films another unusual scene

quite substantially so I was lucky to complete the project when I did.

Finally, after many more months of work, and resorting to a computer for the sound clean up and picture grading, the DVD is released, complete with director's commentary and some deleted scenes - available from our website www.ggproj.com as well as a few select shops in London.

And what next? 'The Return Of George The Projectionist'? Well, I'm not sure that George would want to go through all that again, and can certainly say that any future projects will be done with a large crew and some proper finance, and hopefully won't take 94 months from start to finish! Now, where's that bottle of Talisker...

Tim Higham



Buy one for Christmas!

world of film-making - can we detect something autobiographical behind this creation from projectionist Tim Higham? Somehow (and you are never quite sure how from the cunning

way the film cuts between different times and places) George the projectionist gets involved with a mad Italian film director who is filming 'Red Carpet', described as a combined remake of Cinema Paradiso and Pulp Fiction. I could have believed all that, but then Sir Sydney Samuelson turned up in a Hitchcock-like cameo role, so was I watching real life, or fiction? I watched the whole 79 minute movie (a bit too long, but so was Harry Potter!) on the excellently produced DVD, and was conscious of having a grin on my face for most of the time - how

could projectionist Tim Higham have packed so many mad ideas into just one film, or perhaps that should be two, because of the 'film within a film' theme?

With so many 'tongue in cheek' scenes that you risk never being able to talk again, and a phenomenal range of musical clips, from opera to ballet and pop, including Gilbert and Sullivan's 'I am the very model of a modern film projectionist', which we might just get around to singing at the CTC Christmas party, the whole thing is great fun, and the many shots of projection equipment in various states provide a magnificent extra bonus for any Cinema Technology reader.

The DVD is only £9.50 including postage from www.ggproj.com and I am sure that none of our readers would be disappointed to receive this in their Christmas stocking.

Well done to Tim Higham and his team.

Jim Slater

Although other, perhaps more esteemed reviewers (we know who you are, Mr Hühndorf!) have come up with impressive quotes like 'Elements of Godard and Truffaut', I have to sum up this wonderful film as 'totally mad', and you may be sure that they won't be using that on the billboards!

It wasn't as though the pre-publicity hadn't forewarned me, with promises of a story of a middle aged projectionist in love with an Italian actress he sees every night, but only on screen, and his dreams of entering the