

# Miracles At Work

Australian movie *Gabriel* proves that hard work and gumption, rather than a big budget, are what makes a great movie.

By Danny Chan

*Gabriel* tells the story of an archangel who fights to bring light back to purgatory – a place where darkness rules – and save the souls of the city's inhabitants. The movie's director Shane Abbess is all too familiar with the concept of purgatory, described as a temporary condition of torment or suffering. Making the movie had, in Abbess' own words, taken him to "hell and beyond". Just like the protagonist in *Gabriel*, Abbess can also be considered a warrior, but in the filmmaker's approximation, when it comes down to battling the odds and making sacrifices necessary in accomplishing one's mission.

According to Abbess, *Gabriel* was the movie that "everyone said could not be made." From the get go, the hands-on director knew the odds were stacked unfavorably against him and his gung-ho team of collaborators. For starters, they were attempting to make a major feature film that had all the ingredients of a wide-release Hollywood blockbuster – all except the budget for making one.

Asked exactly how tight a budget, Abbess was non-committal, except to reiterate:

"Tight. Very tight. The exact details probably won't be released for some time yet but when they eventually are, people are going to be gobsmacked. I think it'll change the way people think about independent cinema in this country and what can be achieved. That said, I'm also not sure many people will be dumb enough to tackle a beast like what we did. I know I look back at the budget and think 'wow'. It took a lot of crazy, dedicated people to make this work with what we had... and perhaps a few miracles as well."

Like most film projects, *Gabriel* started as a casual conversation but gradually snowballed into something that had to be done.

Abbess explained, "I was developing another project which was going



through development hell, when actor Dwaine Stevenson and I started talking about doing a movie involving the Archangel Gabriel. At that point I called Matt Hylton Todd, my writing partner (who also appears in the movie) and we decided that this had to be a really ambitious independent movie. Our approach was to hit the industry with a sledgehammer, and so began the long journey."

## Gathering Talents and Momentum

The idea of doing a dark dramatic/action

genre film about angels stuck, and the writing duo (Abbess and Todd) began throwing up new concepts as they went along, motivated by the enormous challenges that lay ahead.

"I really liked the idea of doing a huge little movie. We had almost everything working against us but I was determined to make this film no matter what. The thing I didn't fully realize when I pitched the project to prospective cast and crew was that I really would need the help of angels because this project took me to hell and beyond and now I'm just waiting for the bit where I'm supposed

to come back."

Todd and Abbess were accustomed to this working relationship. By the time of conceptualizing *Gabriel*, the duo had already achieved significant success with over 20 short films, music videos and TVCs. Their production company, Redline Films, was responsible for such notable works as *Under Eight*, *Breaking Point*, *Better Daze*, *Morning Sunshine*.

Abbess then enlisted the producing skills of Anna Cridland and Kristy Vernon who together, helped to assemble the team of talented people to make the movie. As the project and script progressed, James Michael Vernon of Screen Corporation approached Abbess with a view to his company's involvement. After negotiations Screen Corporation, became commercial advisers, sales agents and executive producers of *Gabriel*.

"At this point we knew *Gabriel* was really going places." Commented Abbess, "With Anna and Kristy and all our combined contacts involved, the movie started to gather momentum at an incredible pace. This was also the point where a lot of people told me that the movie was impossible to shoot as it had 26 locations, was almost always raining, involved lots of effects, big fight scenes,



01-05: Scenes from *Gabriel*, the movie "everyone said could not be made."





Camera department



Shane Abbess

extras and high stakes drama. This was not a typical Australian movie."

## The Right DOP – and Camera

The technical and logistical requirements of making this movie grew more daunting by the hour. Abbess still had the problem of finding the right camera to give him the unique look he wanted for *Gabriel* and then a crew that would also help to realize his vision.

"We needed to find a camera and post production pathway that could fit within our budget whilst also delivering high production values. With the ideal of screening this film in cinemas, we had to make sure we could get a picture and sound quality that would stand up."

Abbess went out and tested every 3CCD camera on the market to get a real idea of obtaining a progressive movie look. "At our budget range, the standard wasn't that great."

The cameras that he saw – those priced within his affordability range – largely disappointed him until he discovered the JVC GY-HD101E at a digital media festival.

"(The camera) was, quite literally, a revelation. I saw that unlike all the others, you could pull focus, set focal points and change lenses. It was excellent in low light and shot in true progressive. At that point we also saw the tests of *Endurance Island* and were hooked. It was a no-brainer, this was the best HD camera on the market in its range bar none."

In the meantime, Abbess had to find a DOP to justify the attributes of the camera. "This is when the angels of fate stepped in and Peter Holland's show reel came across my desk. Out of the 50 show reels I'd seen, Peter's was by

far the best. I called him immediately and grilled him as to whether he could get the crew, light the movie the way I wanted, go guerilla and start right away! Luckily for me he said 'yes' to all of the above."

With 12 years experience including TVCs (Mazda, Kellogg's, ANZ, Lancome, SBS, McDonalds), Music Clips (Youth Group, Grinspoon, Evermore) and documentaries (Discovery Channel, Lonely Planet, ABC), Holland acknowledged the size of the task and the quality that was required.

He said: "Shane was straight to the point. He knew what he wanted and would accept nothing less. As soon as we got the camera we put it through the most intense testing. Fortunately I'd seen the GY-HD101E at SMPTE and knew this was a camera that was going to change the film industry due to its progressive shooting, calibrated lens and amazing size-to-quality ratio. I also remember not having the budget to rent a PNS adaptor or extra lenses and having to make do with a wide-angle adapter. The first time we did a 35mm blow up there were a lot of people wondering if the GY-HD101E was too good to be true until they saw the result. It was stunning; everyone was amazed by the result. We now knew we could take *Gabriel* into cinemas!"

With the input of the producers, Abbess and Holland set about making sure that all 26 locations were able to be low-lit correctly and thus use the GY-HD101E's capabilities to the maximum. Holland and his crew took the next 5 weeks to create controlled lighting situations allowing the 'movie look to work'.

Abbess and his DOP went for the dark and edgy mood for the movie. Abbess describes it as "slightly comic book

with heavy visual influences from *Blade Runner* and the first *Highlander* film".

Abbess continued, "that first shot was magical. It just worked. The camera was brilliant. It looked great. It looked cinematic. We did lots of long lens, dirty frame, hand-held shots and with the GY-HD101E being so compact we could get it into places that other cameras would never have been able to."

Holland said, "We made subjective rigs for the GY-HD101E including one where we bolted it onto a knife. The size and weight allowed us to do things we simply could not have done with other cameras. This wasn't traditional shooting. There were lots of hand-held and steadicam shots and the operators were delighted with the GY-HD101E. We were able to avoid the jerky DV look and motion because the camera can be shoulder mounted making it as smooth in every situation."

Abbess concurred: "I like a hidden handheld look and love shooting drama long lens with dirty frame. We attacked the action sequences with fresh perspectives and ideas and I'm really happy with the end result. Our art department and production designer Victor Lam, really worked hand in hand with us to achieve the look."

With the shooting completed, editor Adrian Rostirolla using Final Cut Pro, completed the cut in 6 months and Abbess and Post Production Producer Matt Graham tackled the challenge of 800 FX shots, big sounding music score and a complex sound design.

At this point Screen Corporation showed the movie to Sony Pictures. "Soon I was flying to LA to sign the deal with Sony and the rest is history," said Abbess.

## The Real Battles

*Gabriel* has been described as the best independent feature film to come out of Australia since *Mad Max*, the high-grossing movie starring Mel Gibson. A gothic action drama starring Andy Whitfield (movie debut), Dwaine Stevenson (*Small Claims*, *The Nothing Man*) and Samantha Noble (*See No Evil*, *Court of Lonely Royals*) *Gabriel* tells a story of the battle between good and evil set in Purgatory.

For Abbess, the battles took place both on and off camera, particularly on the sets that were quickly put together for practical rather than ergonomic reasons.

"The conditions that the cast and crew faced were incredibly hard. There wasn't a single creature comfort typical of most sets, to be found," Abbess confessed.

"Our makeup trailer would be anywhere we could find a power outlet to plug in a hairdryer. The producers would not only run the shoot but also spend 6-8 hours a day catering."

Abbess averaged 2 hours of sleep a night for the entire 9 weeks of the shoot. Everyone involved in the movie was stretched beyond their normal capacities, and had to multitask outside of their normal duties.

"Given the budget, everyone was working with a lot of faith and love, in the hope that the project would become something, because nobody was there for the money."

Budget constraints did not only represent cutbacks on manpower and sleep, but most important, it made the actual filming process even more arduous than it already was. Abbess' initial shooting targets also suffered as a consequence.

"I'm very specific when it comes to coverage and framing and like to design sequences well in advance. I turned up in the first week of shooting aiming at 30 setups a day and 40 shots but averaged 15-18 setups a day and about 25 shots. We had to wait a lot for the art department because they were understaffed and we'd often still be finishing sets off as we were shooting them."

Despite the adversities he faced having to shoot on a shoestring budget, Abbess does not believe in a movie-making system that is over-reliant on government handouts.

"We don't have a major studio system looking after us so people still rely heavily on the government drip which I think is often detrimental. When you have to work and raise the money privately yourself, you understand the true value of every dollar and the need to keep an industry afloat by making more commercial fare. I think actions speak louder than words anyway, which is why you'll see more films like *Gabriel* in the not too distant future."

On hindsight, one wonders whether *Gabriel* would have been made differently, given a more generous budget. Abbess replied emphatically: "Of course. The soul of the picture would remain the same but you'd just get more stylized moments and execution. That said, I'm very happy with the end product. Hopefully if we get to do the two sequels, that'll happen." ♦



Andy Whitfield



Samantha Noble



Dwaine Stevenson