

# Between a Rock and a Hard Place

## – OR HOW TO SHOOT A WW2/HORROR FILM IN 15 DAYS

On the eve of D Day 2 WW2 Kiwi commandos come across a German bunker with unworldly happenings. Director and co-writer of *The Devil's Rock* Paul Campion shares the realities of low budget filmmaking.

### Where has your fascination with horror come from?

I think it must've been growing up watching *Dr Who*, *Blake's 7*, *Space 1999* etc. It was always the episodes with the monsters that I wanted to watch over and over again. I was always into sci-fi, fantasy and horror, the two earliest films I can remember watching on TV were *Jack the Giant Killer* and *King Kong* and some of the old Ray Harryhausen *Sinbad* movies. I also remember every now and then there would be a series of old black and white horror films late at night and I'd always pester my parents to let me stay up and watch them.

### With a background as an illustrator is the visual appeal of an idea that comes to you first or the story?

Always story first. That's why I wanted to become a director in the first place, to tell entertaining stories. The kind of stories I'm drawn to generally have strong visual elements though, and I really want to move up to bigger budget fantasy/sci-fi films, where there is more scope to create bigger and more fantastic worlds. I'd love to make some historical epics as well, I find the whole visual and historical research process fascinating, and I'm currently developing a WW2 true story/action film.

### How did the idea for *The Devil's Rock* come about?

Very quickly. I was screening my short film *Eel Girl* in Guernsey (in the Channel Islands in the UK) in

Nov 2009, and the local newspaper interviewed me. One of the questions was 'did I know anything about Guernsey's history of witchcraft?' – which I didn't, but that peaked my interest enough to learn about the Bad Books, books of black magic that were supposed to exist in the Channel Islands (they do in fact exist, and the one in our film is based loosely on a genuine 250-year-old book of black magic I found in a vault in a library in Guernsey). Then on the same trip I saw one of the WW2 German fortifications, and straight away thought it would make a great setting for a horror film. I just put those elements together and came up with the basic premise of an Allied commando discovering a Nazi attempt to summon up a demon. In fact apart from the demon, almost everything else is based on a certain amount of fact.

### How did you work with Paul Finch and then Brett Ihaka on the script – what were the major challenges in the storyline?

Paul Finch and I had been working together on various other feature film projects, so we already had a good working relationship. Previously he'd been the sole scriptwriter, but for this script I co-wrote as well simply because I had a better understanding of what we could and couldn't do with the budget. We worked as a tag team, I wrote the initial story and treatment, then Paul fleshed it out further, then I'd go in and tweak things for budgetary reasons, such as the action and the elements that would require makeup effects or visual effects. Eventually Paul and I hit a bit of a

wall, particularly with the amount of dialogue, so Leanne Saunders, the producer, brought in New Zealand writer Brett Ihaka as a fresh pair of eyes. He was able to strip out a lot of dialogue and really improved the opening sequence in the tunnels by splitting up the Grogan and Tane characters.

Overall we only spent six months writing the script, as the film had to go into production by a certain date or we would lose a lot of our key crew to *The Hobbit*. We would've love to have had more action, but there's only so many times you can have the main two characters fight each other or chase each other down the same tunnels. We could've easily said 'let's not rush into this and spend another year working on the script' but when the finance is all there and all the cast and crew are ready and waiting, sometimes you have to take the opportunity and just get on and make it, learn from it and move on and hopefully make more.

### Is making a low budget horror film a genre in itself?

It's definitely not a genre in itself. People make low budget horror out of necessity rather than choice, and because you have those budgetary restrictions you have to try and solve problems creatively, rather than financially. Some of the classic horror films *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Evil Dead*, *Re-Animator*, and three of the most lucrative: *Saw*, *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* were all made with incredibly small budgets, but I doubt if any of the filmmakers consciously decided to make a film with as little money as possible, they just made one with what they had. The one advantage of making low budget horror is that there is always a market for it. And horror doesn't work when you throw huge budgets at it – it needs to be raw and visceral with physical effects over flashy CGI.

**What was your first conversation with Rob Marsh, cinematographer?**

'We're shooting a period WW2 /horror film in 15 days with extensive makeup and visual effects with only this budget and I want the cinematography to make it look like a film that cost millions more, and we can only afford to pay you this amount, will you do it?'

**You worked with a fairly new production designer and art director – did you have a clear idea of what you wanted to achieve?**

Mary Pike the production designer and I have been working together for a few years now, going back to my short film *Eel Girl*. We'd already been working on two other feature film projects that I was developing so we've got a good working relationship. It was the first time working with art director Zoe Wilson, but I completely trusted whomever Mary wanted to work with. The production design brief was fairly simple – just try and make it look as close as the real thing in the Channel Islands really, but more creepy. I spent several days in Guernsey doing research on the German bunkers there and the German occupation as a whole. There are two completely restored bunkers that we used as our blueprint. From then on the challenge was really just the budget, trying to make it as slick as possible. As with the cinematography, and everything else about the film we were aiming high, trying to make a film that was punching way above its budget level.

**What was the main challenge on set?**

Shooting it in 15 days! We were shooting eight pages of script per day. Just shooting enough

coverage and trying to make each day was a challenge in itself. We couldn't have pulled it off without the hard work and skill of the cast and crew. We shot with two RED cameras as much as we could, and a steadicam or hand-held. We made a conscious decision not to use dollies as it would just take too long to work with them. For our lead actors Craig Hall and Matt Sunderland, some of the scenes we shot would be four or five pages of solid dialogue, so they had a mammoth task just learning their lines, especially as they only got the script two weeks before we started shooting. Generally we only had time for one or two takes on each setup and there are a couple of long dialogue scenes that were shot in just one take.

**As a director how did you approach each day on set?**

Just trying to survive it really. It was my first feature film so it was a huge learning curve. I was definitely too hands-on to start with, by the end of the shoot I'd learned to step back and just concentrate on the story and the acting and let the crew take care of everything else. I'd make sure I was usually first to arrive each day, so I could have 20 minutes or so on my own in the empty set just working through in my head what we were going to shoot that day. I'd storyboarded about 70% of the film, so I had a pretty clear idea going in of how I was going to stage the action, although in the end there wasn't time to refer to the storyboards as we had to move so fast, it was just a mad dash each day to get enough coverage. I'm proud of the fact that we

only worked a 10 hour day, made each day and only did six hours overtime on the whole shoot with no pickups (apart from a single 1 second vfx shot filmed in my kitchen), although it did get a little hairy at times. At one point the producer was instructing me to try and shoot scenes with just a master wide if possible, as we were running out of time even trying to get coverage.

**Once you were in the edit, what did you learn about your directing?**

Trust my instincts more. There were a lot of shots I didn't get due to the time constraints. Just individual inserts that would've helped lift the visual storytelling. But there was so much pressure just to shoot enough coverage and make the day that we just ran out of time and I had to make a decision to drop them. Looking back I should've fought harder to get them, just found an extra five or 10 minutes somewhere, and that's something I'll definitely do next time, as we would've used every one of those shots in the cut and the film would've been better for it.

**What do you think is essential for a first-time feature director to know?**

Never stop trying to improve the script and get as much feedback on it as possible. If nine out of 10 people are telling you part of it is crap, then it probably is. Then surround yourself with the most experienced cast and crew you can, and just let them do their jobs. ●



Director Paul Campion

