

## **MASH UP**

### **DIRECTOR'S NOTES**

Before I wrote Mash Up I knew that I wanted to base it on one of the many fantastic but true urban stories that I'd either heard of or experienced myself. These true stories included crazy ones from the 1970's when my very young parents lived in a very violent and racially intolerant Ladbroke Grove, to ones connected to my younger brother, Rene and his stoned circle of "expelled from school" friends. In the end I settled with Rene's generation - a generation where both the drugs and violence seemed even more potent than in my own.

The two main narratives of Mash Up – Robert visiting his mentally ill friend and Robert getting high and only then realising he's been stabbed are based on two separate stories that I was immediately attached to. I simply found a way to link the two together and this formed the foundation of Mash Up.

The Mash Up script went through something like 20 drafts. The supernatural elements featured strongly in the early drafts but were refined and streamlined as the drafts progressed.

I also always looked for opportunities to increase the humour and there is in fact a layer of dark comedy that runs through the entire piece.

There was a process of feedback to the script from both B3 Media (the manager's of the UK Film Council's "Blank Slate" scheme) and an external 'script consultant' whom I never met. But most of the script changes were generated in-house through working closely with my boys at La famiglia and they pushed me to create the tightest and most exhilarating story I could.

It was important to me that Mash Up not only be a strong urban story but also one that looked slick. I was impressed by the way films like City of God dealt with real life urban tales in an incredibly vibrant and exhilarating way and I wanted to go in the same direction. Bruce Melhuish my Director of Photography brought some great ideas and had a real handle on the technological aspects of digital cinematography.

From the start I had a clear vision for the look and shooting style of Mash Up, which I discussed at length with Bruce. So in the beginning when Robert steps out of a lift and walks along a council block landing to visit Awat, I wanted to create as much tension as possible, which I believed could be achieved through locking off the camera and having Robert move slowly and uneasily through the frame. In this I was really influenced by David Lynch and the way he can magnify unease by having the characters react to tension by moving and talking in an overly measured way. In fact I sat down with Bruce and played him a couple of scenes from Lost Highway to illustrate the point.

The outdoor scenes and the smoking and drinking session, on the other hand, I wanted to be shot much more naturalistically with lots of hand held camera movement and pans between the characters as they interacted. I think this simulated documentary realism works particularly well with the fight, with the camera panning and struggling to capture the violence as it unfolds.

However, still wanting Mash Up to look as 'slick' as possible I did try to insert some tracking type shots, using a wheelchair kindly donated by the mother of the producer, Kaleem Aftab.

Although these didn't have the desired effect we found we were able to produce smoother moving shots by fastening the camera to a steadying type device and moving around on foot.

Another strong influence on Mash Up was Chan-wook Park. Listening to the joint Director/DP commentary over the movie Oldboy, I was struck by the deep consideration Park gave to things like colour temperatures and the idea of having a single symbolic colour that can define a film. I tried to apply a similar approach to Mash Up and chose green as my defining colour as it was the colour of the most important prop in the film - the bag of marijuana that Death uses to entice Robert at the end of the story. We also found that our camera responded well to greens. Therefore, as well as using green gels and lamps the film is dominated by green props, green items of clothing and green location backdrops. Both Bruce and my Production Designer, Yasmin Al-Naib, were also fans of Oldboy and fully in tune with the green colour scheme of Mash Up. So for example, Yasmin applied a green mould look to Awat's bedroom walls, which really helped us when we did the colour grading in post.

But I think one of the main reasons for Mash Up being (in my humble opinion) a visually interesting film are the strong locations that the characters move through.

Not only is a car breakers yard full of deathly symbolism but it will instantly raise the production values of any film. Likewise, if you're going to shoot the characters cycling back and forth over a bridge why not choose a beautiful one? It's only likely to add to the production.

Having said that, my overall vision for Mash Up was not picturesque back drops, but moody ones. It was important to me that classically urban landscapes feature as much as possible, which is why the fight scene is set opposite West London's landmark Trellick Tower. I also pushed for the lift and landing scene to be shot in the infamous Heygate Estate in Elephant & Castle. I love the brutal architecture and Soviet scale of these council blocks, and I reassured my team by making a number of visits and pre-warning the tenants of our intention to film. It was worth the effort because the location is impeccably urban and the walkway that Robert disappears down looks endless and really contributes to the uneasy atmosphere that Mash Up opens with.

The casting director, Jayne Collins, brought us a number of fine young actors when we held auditions for the four teenage leads and as an ex actor it was a bit strange being on the other side of the casting coach. I was really nervous for them!

Michael Lawson caught my eye early on as he was bang on 16, appeared streetwise but yet had sensitive and slightly quirky qualities that I thought could bring something extra to the role of Marlon. Finding a suitable Robert was a bit more problematic. Based on a real life kid, it was important to me that the character stank of under nourishment, under privilege and no future. I also wanted the kind of timeless English face that would look equally at home as a member of Fagin's pick pockets as he would wearing a track suit and roaming a council estate. It was important that the characters and their accents were as authentic as possible but due to the lack of young working class actors I came close to casting boys who, although very talented, were just not from Robert's world. Enter Bronson Webb.

Although I wanted to put Bronson through the same rigorous improvisation audition that the other actors had suffered, he was already such an accomplished actor my team assured me

that a face to face meeting would be the correct protocol. And what a face: Bronson is a guy who loves life and loves to live it and this personality shows all over. Although in his early 20's Bronson instantly understood Robert's stoned, teenage vacancy and was able to replicate it effortlessly. But perhaps most importantly, Bronson had impeccable lumpen-proletariat qualifications and was actually from the same West London estates as the real life Robert.

The two leads looked great together and Bronson took Michael under his wing a little bit, running lines with him and spending down time together in his car. Even when they got a little pissed off with the shooting schedule, they were a pissed off unit, and no doubt this bonding came through on camera and made their friendship believable.

For the roles of Yusef and Awat we had some good options but in the end settled on two non actors, Ali and Abdi. The two auditioned together in an improvisation that had us all in stitches. Cristian Solimeno - Producer, helped me devise a series of improvisation scenarios for the various parts, so that the actors could really have a chance to shine and show their personalities. Cristian gave all the actors going up for the part of Awat, specific instructions to act 'crazy' in the scenario created for them. However, they were all a bit restrained, apart from Abdi who really went for it in a way that we all found a bit disturbing. From Somalia, Abdi was also the only East African that auditioned and I think his presence gives the film a lot of weight.

Likewise, although Ali's appearance in Mash Up is fairly brief, I think he makes quite an impression and was able to be the bully that we glimpsed in the audition. For the fight he also told Michael to throw his punches as hard as he could, which Michael did, and the scene really benefits from this. Ali is also the producer of the grime track that features in Mash Up.

For the role of Death, I cast my Dad. Previously Death was a half man half crow figure but this had proved to be a sticking point with make up artists and special effects people we talked to. And so, in the spirit of David Lynch, we decided that rather than getting bogged down in prosthetic make up, why not just cast a 'weird' looking guy instead? Being my dad, Loz Invicta is obviously a rather dashing and handsome fellow, but anybody who shaves their head and eyebrows and has 20 maggots stuck to their face is bound to look weird and Loz did this, and did it with relish. He was really game and I was excited at how frightening he was. Also, our blood obsessed, Moldavian make up artist, Rodica Maclaine, was quite full on when applying the Death face and this no doubt gave Loz something to work with and helped his performance.

The 'Spice Girls Crew' that attacks Robert in the film, were all local Ladbroke Grove youths. Originally, I had scouted around drama classes full of budding young actresses but again it was really important that the kids were as raw and authentic as possible and by hanging around the various local youth clubs instead, I was eventually able to secure my gang.

There is nothing I've experienced that is quite as stressful as shooting a movie, not even stepping into the centre of a ring and touching gloves with a wide eyed nutcase intent on knocking you spark out.

It seems strange that movie making should be so stressful, especially on a short, but I suppose most movies are characterised by the same time pressures that can put a strain on relationships with the crew and cast. You're just basically under relentless pressure over quite long periods, and that produces a mental type of exhaustion that you have to fight through. In

theory, the more prepared you are in pre-production, the less pressure there should be during the shoot and I think that's generally true although you always have to be prepared to think on your feet in case something goes wrong. Basically, film making, in my experience, is a pretty macho kind of pursuit and you have to be a bit bloody minded to capture the shots and performances you want.

As a director you are usually thinking of three things at once, when you shout "action" - the composition of the shot, the performances and the next shot. And in a scene involving a couple of actors it's easy to make the mistake of helping one actor who is making obvious mistakes but overlooking the other actor who appears fine but is actually making subtler ones, that in the end may adversely effect the scene just as much.

More generally, there are so many variables on a shoot that it only takes one little thing to go wrong, like an actors shirt going missing, and suddenly you're running over time and behind schedule.

But the Mash Up shoot was thankfully free of any irreversible fuck ups. Although we had about 4 months of production the actual shoot was only scheduled for 4 days. I had slight reservations about this because although in theory this was enough time to get all our scenes in the bag, there was no buffer or comfort zone; it was basically back to back action. The actors found this quite tiring but when we explained that 4 full on days were surely preferable to 7 nine to five ones, I think they agreed. And in the end 4 days were long enough for me to get all my shots and maybe there is something to be said for time pressure situations forcing the best out of a crew and cast. Plus we actually work pretty quickly and at our best, La famiglia is more of a mobile guerrilla unit than an occupying army. Bruce places strong emphasis on using natural and practical light sources and our shoot was spared the hours of waiting that a DP lighting his scene usually creates. Also, a major strength with shooting digitally is that even in under lit conditions, the camera will retain a lot of information that can be brought to light in post. I was a little sceptical of this but Bruce reassured me and I'm glad to say he was right.

It has to be said that over the shoot every member of the crew and cast were absolute soldiers. I haven't seen Kaleem (Kaleem Aftab – Producer) work so hard since secondary school and he transformed into the Superman of Producers. If anything went wrong during production the buck basically stopped with him and in ensuring everything ran smoothly, he barely slept a wink over the 4 days. Cristian operated in a 1<sup>st</sup> AD kind of role, helping to find solutions to problems that cropped up, making sure we didn't run over scheduled time and generally having my back. And Bruce was able to consistently capture beautiful compositions under incessant pressure.

I did story board most of Mash Up, which helped Bruce understand my vision for the film but the longest scene in the story – the drinking and smoking session in Marlon's bedroom – was not story boarded and we had to compose the shots as we went along. This was virtually the last scene of the production and as we ran out of time towards the end I focussed entirely on the performances and left it to Bruce to capture the action. I made Bronson and Michael just run continually through the last, finding stab wound/phoning cab company, sequence and Bruce shot their singles and was also free to pan between the two of them. To inject some urgency into Michael's performance I even had Cris on the other line, playing the contrary Kosovan mini cab controller, and I think this worked.

In post production I cut an initial rough cut of Mash Up before Cristian, the official Mash Up editor, came in and performed his magic.

He was really attached to this idea of Death having wings, which the character had done when he'd been a half man half crow type creature, and he was convinced we could generate them in post. And generate them we did, using a very creative approach that had Bruce painstakingly at work on hundreds of separate frames over the space of a week. In fact Mash Up is littered with special effects, designed by Cristian and Bruce.

Once we were happy with Cristian's edit, we spent another couple of days doing the colour grading and sound mix. Although quite painstaking, this is also a very exciting period for any director because it is here that we can really see our baby stop crawling and start to run.

Mash Up is a production that brought the best out of La famiglia and I have to say, I am very proud of the film.

Jesse Lawrence  
DIRECTOR