

THIS IS WHAT IT IS

SHORT SYNOPSIS

This is what it is reflects on love from the male side of the fence. Cass a self-confessed nostalgia junkie tries to come to terms with losing the great love of his life Kelly. Set over eighteen months we follow Cass as he at first struggles with the separation and the constant reminders of Kelly. His friends on the other hand do what friends do...drag him back out on the town. Six months later and Cass is bitter and out of control as he pursues every girl he comes into contact with. His memories of Kelly are fading fast. Finally 18 months have passed and Cass has a new lease of life and a new girlfriend and all is going well until he bumps into Kelly and is forced to realise that he is living a lie.

WRTIER, DIRECTOR, EDITOR AND STAR CRISTIAN SOLIMENO TALKS ABOUT THIS IS WHAT IT IS

What was the inspiration for this film?

It occurred to me that I was always in a mood to see a certain type of film that didn't exist. This film would be a sexy, tender, quite funny, modern love story that wasn't saccharine sweet. There are not many romances covered from a male perspective barring Woody Allen. There are definitely not many grown up masculine films about being in search of 'the one' which is what I wanted, after all I grew up idolising John Hughes films.

Separate to that, we wanted to make a low-budget film that broke the rules. We had a bunch of ideas that were stuck in development hell, which finally pushed us to come up with an idea to do a film that we could make independently. We made a choice that the film had to be set in a world that was our reality, so there are no car chases, shoot-outs, cops and robbers. As we started looking into that, we started asking where does this exist, and it soon became apparent that the genre that was most plausible to do this was romance.

I endeavoured to write something that fulfilled these criteria and, coincidentally, I was also dealing with the fall-out of a break-up while working on the script.

So how much of the film is autobiographical?

A lot.

While writing the film, did you also wear your director's hat and think about the actual filming of the script?

There were practical considerations to take advantage of. Locations that we could get hold of and could use in London, for examples bars and restaurants

we frequented often. Also there is an ethos when shooting low-budget films to shoot in as few locations as possible, but with a small unit I saw that we didn't need and decided to go the other way and shoot in as many locations as possible.

How did you cast your actors?

A lot of parts were written with certain people in mind and by the time I'd finished the first draft, we pretty much had a full cast who came and were at the first read through which was about a year before we started shooting.

The girl due to play Kelly pulled out at last minute and there wasn't anyone we knew that was quite right for the part. So we looked long and hard and we asked people we knew for recommendations. We didn't hold auditions because I don't like doing that unless I have to. We saw **Lorraine Burroughs** in a play that was at Hampstead theatre and really liked her. We all had a good feeling about her so we asked her to do it. I wanted her to play Kelly as someone that was likeable and ambiguous enough for people to project their own memories of lost loves onto.

Nick Cox plays Mario, he is one of those single guys who is out all weekend every weekend running around after girls, but at heart he is quite a romantic who has clearly never found love. The greatest love he has ever known remains a girl from school even though he never communicated this feeling he had for her. It's tragic. He had his emotional apex at 14. He is someone dealing with life not turning out the way he wanted it to be. Nick as an actor is fantastically funny, bright talented and I first saw him at Youth theatre and we worked together a bunch of times over the years.

Simon Sherlock plays Smudge, who at first seems like the prototypical single guy. Then you realise that he's actually in a long-term relationship, which is a really common thing and weird that it's not really explored often in movies. I met Simon at Youth theatre, as well, and we wound up signing up with the same agent and running into each other at auditions. He's had a strong career and I've always seen him as a young Michael Caine figure.

Jesse Lawrence plays Booth. This character is a fusion of a couple of old friends of ours: Grayson who is incredibly dapper and Alex who was very good at bringing in groups of foreign girls — There is a man like that in every functioning male social group. Aside from being a long time creative collaborator, Jesse is one of the best actors I've ever known, so was a natural choice. I'm really happy with what he did as he manages to be the perfect guide for Cass, exuding warmth without being insipid.

Roger Mensah (a.k.a IC3) plays Bruce who is sort of loosely based on cinematographer Bruce Melhuish. Bruce is not looking for girls; he has a warm honest forthright presence in the group. He sort of inherited the stammer that the cinematographer has, which the real Bruce has almost got rid of entirely now. It was a part that at first I didn't write with any particular actor in mind. Originally we searched for actors with a certain solid gravitas, then I started to worry that it would be cliché and slightly insipid. Finally we thought of Roger who we'd known for years, recently he has achieved great

success as a Jungle MC with the nom de plume IC3. Roger is a complete livewire an energetic, wild guy and we thought if we have a quiet character, maybe it would be better to cast a guy that would have this energy and make an awkward fit. It turned out much better than I imagined it.

Brett Allen plays the character George who is a slightly tragic figure. He takes Sunday football very seriously and it's the focal point of his life. Outside the midfield hard man image he's someone that has experienced great deal of heartache. He has been through a much harsher break up than Cass, but has a completely different way of dealing with it, his pain reveals itself on the football pitch. Brett has a great reputation for playing serious and intense characters in dramatic roles. Once again I've known him for many years and in life he's a tremendously funny guy and I've always wanted to see him do more comedy. So I conceived of that role for him to do that.

Fleur Cooper was someone we cast in a more traditional way. Ally was the one character for which we did hold auditions. It was **Lorraine** who put us in touch with her. It's a difficult part because you had to like Ally and think that she was wrong for Cass. it was a hard part for character to play, when we met Fleur she nailed it straight away.

Cristian Solimeno, if it's okay to talk about myself in the third person for a second, plays Cass. Believe it or not I wrote this part for myself! I wanted him to be an everyman, so he suffers from everyday problems, he says the wrong thing, it takes him ages to work out what he wants to be doing, he's not very good at doing the things that he would like to be good at doing. His problems are life problems, they're not specific to a job, or geographical area, they're problems that everyone can have.

So how did you find acting and directing?

It's quite a big jump to direct and be in something at the same time. There were real practical reasons for casting myself, for instance we knew that we would always have access to me, we would know that if there was enough scenes with just Cass we would not have any schedule clashes and my producer brain wanted an actor completely beholden to myself. It would have been a steep learning curve going to the long form as a director without having to act as well, so I just decided to jump in at the deep end. The first couple of weeks were quite agonising and I would go home and feel like my brain was melting out of my ear, gradually I got to the point where by looking at Bruce and where he was standing and the expression on his face I could 'see' what was in the viewfinder. I couldn't have done it without the common vision I had with Bruce.

How did you make a film with such a small crew?

Bruce Melhuish had been the DP on all of the short films that lafamiglia have made. He is someone I have known for years. I first became aware of his talent when I saw some of his stills photography. When we formed la famiglia, he came on board as the DP and general technical whizz. This is was his first feature film. Now, after doing several other shorts, he's just won an award at

the BFM Short Film Awards for Best Cinematography for his work on Much Ado About a Minor Ting, directed by **Jesse Lawrence**.

In terms of crew, we used a variable model. Depending on what we were shooting that day it might be just Bruce and me, on certain days, producers **Kaleem Aftab** and Jesse Lawrence would come and pick up slack, on others still more friends would come down. On more complicated days we would employ a much bigger crew and more 'typical' crew. Everyone had to be prepared to work outside their comfort zone. Kaleem as footballer Shalimar Chirp and Bruce as Kelly's drunk boss even make cameos.

Was it a smooth shoot?

The first stuff we shot was all the stuff with Cass walking around Bishopsgate and that proved a pivotal moment, because when I started to see the footage that Bruce was getting from a street scene it changed my idea of how to tell the film visually and increased my ambition. It was the day that my life as a filmmaker changed, the realisation of what was possible with just two guys and a video camera stealing footage here and there. Over that period we shot a lot, often Jesse would also be with us, and it was inhospitable much of the time. We were shooting over Christmas and I had a terrible chest infection but we were filming so much that I didn't have time to get antibiotics. It was, perhaps, the worst experience of my young life. On Christmas day, I was at my sister's place just shivering in the corner unable to move or speak and had such a high fever, but on Boxing Day I had to get up and drive to Watford to pick up costumes because the day after that we were shooting one of our biggest scenes at the Eve club. My problems paled into insignificance when Bruce discovered a gallstone blocking the entrance to his liver and despite having to go in and out of hospital and turning an alarming shade of yellow he continued shooting during the whole period. He is one tough bastard.

But overall because it was over such a long period the shoot went through different phases. At times it was something we looked forward to or at other times something we feared.

Now I feel that way about screenings.

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