

## One Life Stand

### Origins

With between 70 and 80 features made in the UK last year, why did a micro-budget movie shot on a camcorder attract interest from both the media and the industry? Well, everybody loves a good story and the story of making One Life Stand deserves the telling.

At the beginning of 1998, whilst working in Berlin on another feature project, I wrote a draft of One Life Stand. It was written in four weeks, but unlike other scripts, it was a shooting script - with no description of place or action, just a series of set-ups and dialogue. This was intentional, since from the outset, One Life Stand was conceived of as a micro-budget movie, so I didn't have to dazzle financiers with my writing skills. The story centres on Trise, a loving but deluded mother, who unwittingly propels her 18 year old slacker son into a career as a male escort. It's the type of plot that lends itself to interiors with few characters and was written very much with a low budget in mind, one that definitely precluded midnight car chases.

Simultaneously I began work on a personal documentary project, based largely on film archive footage, with contemporary material shot using a Sony VX1000 camcorder. With my partner, we investigated some of the very first low-cost NLE systems and decided to have one built by a UK company, CVP Imaging Solutions, which we subsequently shipped from the UK to Germany. Impressed with the system, I immediately and successfully cut a 52" documentary.

On my return to the UK at the end of 1998, several thoughts occurred to me. Having attempted to make a feature film by following the industry wisdom, by the beginning of 1999 I found myself caught in a legal wrangle with the Berlin producer and more importantly - no closer to getting a movie made. It seemed to me that after over two years in Berlin, the only positive thing I had was the documentary project, which was nearing completion - and the screenplay of One Life Stand.

### Hoop jumping

As every film-maker knows, there will never be enough money in the system - be it public or private funding - to satisfy demand. This is particularly true of any aspiring writer/director trying to get their first feature off the ground. But during my two years abroad, a few things had emerged which informed my decision to embark on One Life Stand. First, was the changes in technology, making it both affordable and achievable to be completely self-sufficient. Second was an awareness of the first DV features, proving the commercial and aesthetic viability of DV.

I had already scheduled a shoot in Glasgow, estimating that the script could be shot in 25 days on location. In October 98, I gave the script to a freelance producer, Karen Smyth and asked her to put together a budget, bearing in mind that there would be only a minimum crew - I would take the roles of DP and editor, in addition to writing and directing the project. To her credit, Karen accepted the novel approach to the production and arrived at a workable five-figure budget.

At that point Karen also tried to persuade me to apply to the public funders, but from the outset I refused, deciding that my underwhelming track record in attracting money to my scripts precluded an approach to potential funders. Another reason was time - I wasn't prepared to sit it out for months only to find the project rejected. I figured One Life Stand would be made on a micro-budget - or not at all. Press go

In March 1999, pre-production began. Over a period of six weeks, we put a budget together, scouted locations in Glasgow, hired the necessary crew and held auditions at the local film and video workshop and the Pierce Institute, Govan. For the six lead roles, I auditioned around 80 people, plus around 50 others for non-speaking/supporting roles.

Having secured the cast, the budget would only allow for four days rehearsal, which took place at the Pierce

Institute. Rather than gather the entire cast for a read-through, I opted for a more intimate and personal approach, bringing in only one or two actors at a time and working through the scenes with only basic blocking. All of these sessions were taped, as were the original auditions.

Shooting began on the 10th May and was scheduled according to my original plan - by shooting in blocks and by locating several sets in as few places as possible, the schedule proved to be manageable. It also occurred to me that the reduction in the numbers of crew - mainly in the technical departments - speeded up the process. I shot four six day weeks, sticking rigorously to ten hours day, which pleased everybody.

Another important advantage in using this method was the amount of material shot. MiniDV is one of the cheapest mediums around, costing around £5 per sixty minute tape. On average two and half hours was shot each day, which was then copied onto safety tapes each day after the shoot. This allowed the day's work to be reviewed.

Prior to the shoot, I gave myself two fundamental rules - that the finished product would be black and white - and that camera movement would be limited in favour of static frames, with a sense of motion and rhythm created in the edit. Having learned the limitations of the camera, there were good reasons for these decisions. First, the colour stability of the miniDV format is not entirely reliable and second, by opting to shoot static, the instance of video artefacting would be minimised.

Also to save time and costs, there was no video assist on location. To that end, the picture was composed entirely through the viewfinder. With the exception of the very few day exteriors, every scene was lit. My preference was for soft, reflected lighting. The list was minimal - the equivalent of a documentary kit - comprising one blonde, three redheads, a 6'x6' silk and several sheets of polystyrene. That and an imaginative use of pracs.

Another important, but inadvertent advantage of the shoot was intimacy. On a conventional commercial or drama shoot, it is often the case that upwards of 20 people are standing behind the camera. On One Life Stand we found that in the interior scenes, often only two people were present with the actors - me, on camera, and my partner, Owen, on sound. We soon found that this approach was appreciated by the cast. Having eschewed the role of a continuity person - for reasons of budget and to save time - I brought a miniDV recorder on set (Sony GV-D900E). The recorder meant that I could show the actors what had been shot, as a way of fine tuning their performance. The recorder also allowed us to check continuity, which, given the exorbitant cost of polaroid stock, made for a considerable saving.

## Audio

The method of recording audio was an area where we were forced to innovate. Having tried but failed to recruit a sound recordist, my partner Owen, who previously had only recorded sound on the documentary, very reluctantly agreed to take on the job. We decided that in spite of the static nature of the shots, we preferred not to chain the sound to the camera.

Anyone who has used a VX1000 knows that the audio capability is limited, due to the lack of XLRs. And while it was possible to fit an adapter to connect a mic and a mixer to the camera, the set-up can become unwieldy. However when we decided to hire a DAT recorder, we were astonished to find the hire charges over the shoot period were greater than the cost of purchase - so we bought one and only hired a Sennheiser 416, a couple of radio microphones and a boom pole.

In retrospect, our inability to hire a sound recordist was probably fortuitous, given that most of the locations proved extremely noisy and would have been anathema to a professional recordist. But by anticipating how the sound would be processed during the post-production, Owen arrived at a unique solution which would influence the way location sound was eventually recorded.

We had already used a piece of audio processing and editing software, Cool Edit Pro, on the documentary with great results. So, in spite of the noisy locations, Owen recorded sync sound in the usual way, but as a backup, he also had the actors perform clean takes of the dialogue, without any accompanying action in

effect it was ADRing on location. Wildtracks and ambiences were also gathered as on any conventional shoot. To ident both the picture and sound, I used a slate, with all of the takes end-boarded. In post, the camera sound was used as a guide. When a basic scene was cut, we referred to the DAT masters, which had been transferred to CD and MiniDisk for capture into Cool Edit Pro. The waveforms from the camera sound were then matched with the DAT sound waveforms to provide frame accurate sync. It's worth mentioning that this process involved an extremely complex logging procedure for both video and audio, and where the audio proved totally useless, dialogue was replaced with alternative takes or wild tracks.

### Post script

From the outset, One Life Stand was intended as a movie aimed at theatrical release. I did not consider it as an attempt to make television. For me, in spite of the technical limitations, it was always planned for cinema exhibition.

Over the last couple of years, the quality of tape to film transfer has improved greatly, but at the time of the shoot, we had not broached the issue of striking a 35mm print. Normally when a DV shoot is planned for a film transfer, the lab will often advise on the optimum camera settings or the aspect ratio.

It's here I confess I broke the rules - I shot using the 'wrong' shutter speed, the 'wrong' aspect ratio - 16:9 - and more than once I failed to keep the gain low enough to prevent noise when shooting in low light situations. My rationale for this was more bloody-minded than sensible - all I knew was that I wanted to create the best possible pictures, regardless of what any lab would advise. Fortunately I would be proved correct in my assumptions, demonstrating that you should only do what you have proved for yourself. So on June 7th, after 24 days shooting, OLS wrapped - on budget and one day ahead of the proposed schedule. We had a great party, with free drink supplied by product placement!

In total, fifty hours of material were shot, but before I could start the edit, we had decided to respond to urgent requests from several major distributors. Within a week, I cut a trailer/promo which was then graded and mixed, complete with music and titles and finally outputted to BetaSP, reasoning that we would not be doing ourselves any favours by transferring down to inferior VHS.

To prepare for the months of editing ahead, an additional 18GB hard drive was installed in the computer, to give a total of 36GB of video drive space. At this point I had only a rough idea of the final duration of the movie, but the partitioned video drive allowed for roughly two and a half hours of unconverted DV material.

The edit system incorporated Fast DV Master Pro as a capture board, with in-sync Speed Razor 3.51 as the editing software. In addition, for around \$300, I installed Film FX2 to electronically replicate the tonal range of Eastman Kodak Double X film to provide a baseline for picture grading.

Logging the material took around six weeks, but as an exercise proved extremely useful because it helped me to become familiar with the material. Scenes were numbered, with a record of each take and a description of the shot. Similarly, the sync audio was logged to match the picture logging system, with separate notes for wild sound/FX etc.

We concluded that the unorthodox route for audio had succeeded. Our failure to hire a sound recordist meant that not only had we saved money on salaries, but we had been able to anticipate what post-production could bring to the process. By recording clean dialogue-only scenes, what Owen was doing was, in effect, a crude form of ADR on location.

By the end of July 1999 I began the picture cut, where I found that the strategy of shooting static set-ups paid off, with about 90% of the takes useable. Rejecting time-consuming convoluted camera movement, in favour of shooting many more statics offered increased choice in the edit. That - and to their credit - the consistency of the actors' performances also helped the cut. During the edit, I also began to work with Bobby Henry, a composer and producer whom I had previously worked with on promos. Bobby had never scored a movie, but I respected his work enormously and commissioned him to create the music for the movie.

Unlike other film projects, which are usually scored by spotting to strict cues at the final stages of the edit, I spent four months with Bobby, working in a very organic way to build the score, often throwing out ideas that didn't sit comfortably with the cut, particularly in the dialogue-heavy scenes. After a process of trial and error, we began to agree on themes and arrangements and by October/November, final recording took place. Then we had a great piece of luck. For various reasons, not least the issue of ownership of the movie, we had decided not to apply to public funders for completion monies to put the movie to film. Since we had no serious approaches from potential distributors, we were stuck. Puzzling over how to screen the finished movie, we became aware of Digital Projection, a UK company, part of the IMAX Corporation. As one of the few companies designing and manufacturing high-quality DLP systems, we contacted Mike Hood, then Marketing Director of Digital Projection with a view to testing sample scenes.

After outputting some sample scenes to tape, Digital Projection conducted the tests and agreed to screen the movie for us at the cast and crew in Glasgow. Initially we had reservations but were assured by DP that by changing the projector model, increasing the brightness and contrast, we could successfully screen in the theatre we had chosen the Glasgow Film Theatre, one of the UK's most successful independent cinemas. With each frame rendered to black and white, the first cut came in at 2 hours 36 minutes, too long to fit the Digibeta we planned to output on.

With the date locked for a cast and crew screening, we had four weeks to lose 40 minutes, complete the audio and add titles. By working round the clock, we finally outputted the movie to Digibeta in order to meet a deadline for a final picture grade and ARC at The Farm in London. It's worth mentioning here that The Farm were great Perry Gibb did a brilliant job of the grading, given the obvious limitations of the material. The movie was completed on January 14th and screened before the cast and crew on January 15th at the Glasgow Film Theatre, the ever first digital feature screening in the UK.

### Happy Endings

After completion in January 2000, One Life Stand played its world premiere at the Rotterdam International Film Festival. From there it went to New York, where at the Silicon Alley Film festival, it won Warner Bros Best Picture, with a Special Jury prize for Maureen Carr, the lead actress.

Since then the movie has played at numerous international festivals and in August 2000 made its UK premiere at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, where it was greeted with stunning reviews and public acclaim. In October 2000, One Life Stand won Best Achievement in Production at the British Independent Film Awards and in December, was awarded Best Writer, Best Director, Best Film Performance and Best Film at the BAFTA Scotland New Talent Awards. I was also awarded the Scottish Screen Outstanding Achievement Award.

But while One Life Stand has attracted huge acclaim and garnered awards, no distributor has been found. It's a hard sell two hours long, black and white and with authentic Glaswegian accents. But the fact is - it was never made for release, despite being the UK's first wholly digital feature. The movie was made for many reasons to see the script on screen, to work with actors, as a calling card par excellence and to test the technology. But mostly I made the movie because I love what I do and I believed in myself enough to do it. The movie will get a release one day at a five figure budget, any distributor with enough imagination cannot fail to make money from it. Having tested the movie in front of international audiences, there are some changes worth making, not least shortening it. The movie also needs to be transferred to film. But until a distributor makes a realistic offer, One Life Stand has little prospect of reaching its audience. Despite this, I say 'It's not what it cost, it's what it's worth', because as experiences go, you couldn't put a price on it. And Hollywood? Well, as a result of winning the New York prize, One Life Stand was screened digitally at the Warner Bros lot in June 2000. Bemused at the screening of a \$50,000 movie, the executive who watched the entire two hours was fulsome in his praise, but didn't exactly throw a three-picture deal my way. Still, in the two weeks I stayed in LA, I managed to kick a lot of doors open, which was the whole point.