

DIGITAL **FilmMaker** ISSUE 49

YOUR NEW GUIDE TO INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING



### SHOOT TIME

Top tips for getting the best from your crew

### Just for kicks

The endless challenge of working to a tight budget

### Q&A

Filmmaking professional Emma Dark tackles another crop of your questions on kit and much more...

### The dark lady

Heading behind the scenes of Emma Dark's Salient Minus Ten

### Wild frontier

We follow an intrepid filmmaking twosome travelling the world

### Professional edge

Martin Moore explains how he built a new career shooting video

### KIT TO GET STARTED



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**PLUS:** DIRECTOR INTERVIEWS / LOCATION SHOOTS / PRODUCTION ADVICE  
NEWS & LATEST KIT / STUDENT PERSPECTIVE / FILMMAKING TIPS & TRICKS

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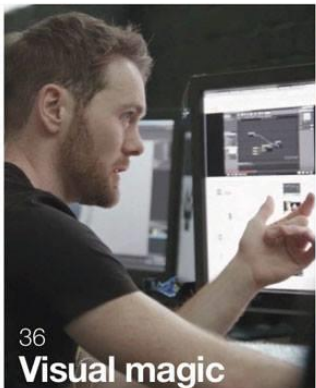
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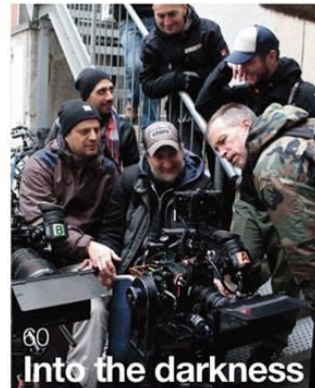


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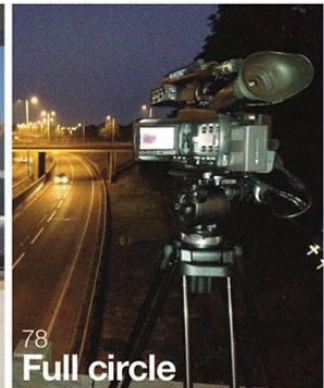
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# Just for kicks

The cast of a new project called Dead Meet pick over the bones of production and explain how independent filmmakers can make their movie happen with the right motivation...



Image: Aaron Botham - Full Circle Photography



"Dead Meet is an action-comedy short film with a lot of ambition and not a lot of money - a situation most independent filmmakers can relate to," says Daniel J. Brant, director of said new flick. "Usually, if you have an ultra-low budget and few resources, people warn you to stay away from difficult



*"You don't have to select an A/B-lister to get a better budget or draw an audience"*

or expensive genres like action. But we had a few creative ideas for how we could keep the cost down and yet still get our vision on screen and we thought this might be of interest to DFM readers."

#### Cool collaboration

"I believe Dead Meet will be

of interest to readers of Digital FilmMaker because it is a great example of several of the best aspects of independent filmmaking," agrees Francesca Louise Wright, actor in the role of Cleo and associate producer. "You can have a kickass multifaceted female protagonist and an unknown actress playing her - you don't have to select an A/B-lister to get a better budget or draw more of an audience because a producer wants a particular person. You can make your own choices about crew/cast/location without outside



teenagers so when I 'borrowed' my dad's camcorder, it was fairly obvious what we'd try to film! Incidentally, that was how I learnt to edit and plan my shots so shooting action taught me a lot about filmmaking."

"I've been fortunate to act in a variety of indie films, both feature and short length, web based, TV pilots and commercial projects," adds Francesca. "I try to pick diverse roles that contrast, which I can really get my teeth stuck into. I was heavily inspired by watching series like Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Alias while growing up, and so when the screenwriter and director Daniel emailed me to see if I'd be interested in playing Cleo the assassin who is trying to 'get her man' I was thrilled! And the concept art and hilarious quips certainly drew me in too! I had just finished working on Enter the Cage with Dean when we started filming Dead Meet, and actually recommended him to Daniel as the stunt choreographer, just from my initial audition for the former. I'm happy how it all worked out!"

#### Fighting talk

There's lots of violence in the film, which is something that Francesca took too like a duck to water... "I'm on the smaller side stature-wise," she grins. "But I have experience and a BADC qualification in stage combat, as well as training in various martial arts. Right now I'm addicted to Jeet Kune Do with Kali/Escrima weaponry work, and my instructor Scott Witham really helped me train up for the film. It's rare to get offered a role that allows me to utilise those skills. Especially a character who actually has an interesting backstory, personality and super-objective as well. I think there's an assumption that if a woman can fight or is particularly independent that she's cold or tough and doesn't have more to her than that. I saw and hopefully played Cleo as a woman who happens to kill



Just for kicks

people for money because that's what she is good at and what she has fallen into life-path-wise. Nonetheless, she is someone who is complex; she has a code of ethics, she can still care about people and she has a sense of humour."

#### Screen challenge

Dom says the film has two very distinct narrative elements, the date and the action. "My job was to ensure the visuals fit those two tones," he explains. "Grounding the reality of the date and amping things up when the fists and the guns started flying. I'd previously done quite a lot of steadicam/gimbal work and was feeling fairly nimble, so Dan and I set about choreographing some big 3D camera moves so that the camera was never resting during the action scenes. In the world of

action-comedies subtlety isn't a must. Combining any genre with 'comedy' always gives you a get out clause as a DOP to be slightly

*"The total budget for the film was about £1,200, which is nothing in the grand scheme of things"*

more audacious with your camera moves and shot sizes. We just had fun with it really, anything we could think of was a viable option. Naturally, we sprinkled in some slo-mo for good measure."

#### Juicy storyline

So, what's the film about? "It's an action comedy about a female hit woman," says Francesca. "Or assassin as she prefers to

be called... who has decided to mix it up a little and go on a date with someone she has met on a website. The lonely life of living out of a suitcase in hotel rooms, jobs by herself and her only real interaction being with her handler Charlie on the phone has taken its toll, and she is a someone who really doesn't need to worry about the guy being a mad axe murderer! Unfortunately, her work life comes a callin' and her attempt at a social life goes array when her next target turns out to be at the very same time and pub as her date. As you can imagine, hijinks ensue! I don't want to give away more than!"

#### Little cash

The total budget for the film was about £1,200, which is nothing in the grand scheme of things. "I had a tax rebate, which I decided

to use to fund the film and most of the money went on location hire, production design, catering and expenses for cast and crew," reckons Daniel. "In my mind, they were the elements that were going to contribute most to the film's value - the mis en scene and keeping the cast and crew happy. I've seen too many filmmakers splurge well over half their budget on equipment hire and neglect everything else. It's really not worth it because an audience doesn't care what camera or lenses or lights you used. They care about the story, the performances and the world that's being shown to them, so they're the things you need to invest your resources (both time and money) in - stuff your audience can actually experience." "We were very lucky to get a lot

influence or interference. You can get a lot of interest in and help with your project even if it's on the lower budget scale if you have a great idea, the effort and determination to see it through, and you simply ask. There's



your readers what can be done with a camera and enthusiasm," confirms stunt choreographer and actor Dean Williams.

#### Shaping up

Prior to this project, Daniel had been directing music videos, shorts and low-budget fiction since he graduated from university, ultimately trying to build up to a feature. "One of my favourite projects I was involved in was a short-lived Twilight Zone-esque web series called The Collector's Room," he says. "Which I co-created and directed two episodes of back in 2010. Dead Meet was kind of a return to form for me, though, because the first things I ever filmed were action sequences. My friends and I used to train in martial arts and watch Kung Fu movies as

creative vision of someone who didn't let budget, equipment or logistics stand between himself and his goal of making a 20-minute action movie," adds DOP Dominic Ellis. "The film was a collaboration of numerous people with different backgrounds all pulling together to create something fun." "It's a film that looks great on a shoestring budget and will show

*"The film was a collaboration of numerous people with different backgrounds"*

real artistic freedom in it, I hope reading about it will inspire others to pursue their ambitious and maybe more unconventional ideas for films and projects." "The production of Dead Meet is the story of group of individuals coming together to realise the





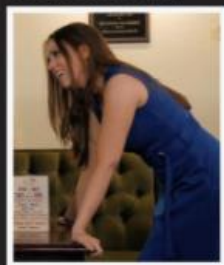
of help and people offering their services on expenses only," adds Francesca. "We actually had a bit of trouble location-wise: firstly trying to get a large enough bathroom, which looked how Daniel had imagined for the main fight sequence, and then finding the right pub to fit that which was located elsewhere and available for a week of straight filming on not much money. We are grateful to Dorchester Village Hall and Burghfield SCC! Hopefully they'll get a kick out of seeing how the film turned out."

"I can't even remember if I sent Dan all of my petrol invoices," chuckles Dom. "It was very much a case of grab whatever we had to hand and have as much fun as possible. Almost all of my gear is secondhand, so we had access to a gimbal and some Arri lighting that I'd recently bought on the cheap on eBay. Both of which were a good 50% of their new counterparts. Rental prices aren't

very friendly for self-funded or no budget, so I usually recommend trying to buy something already covered in scratches then either sell it on afterwards or keep it for the next project."

#### Dependable kit

With the tiny budget being used to put stuff and people in front of the camera, kitwise it was very much a case of what Dom, Cassie, Graeme and Daniel could pool between them.



"Most of the film was shot on a Panasonic GH4," says Daniel. "Partly because it was the camera Dom owned at the time and partly because the smaller form factor was going to help when

**"We had a Ronin stabilizer for the bar scenes and gunfight, which was great"**

shooting the action sequences - particularly the bathroom fight where space was minimal. The micro 4/3 sensor was also useful for the action scenes because it's easier to keep moving objects in focus with a smaller imager. A few pick ups were shot several months later with my JVC GY-LS300, which I didn't have at the time of principal photography. Everything was shot in UHD - that way we could reframe or stabilize

a little in post if we needed to and deliver a nicer HD image - with the exception of the slow motion shots, which the GH4 can only record at 1080. We had a Ronin stabilizer for the bar scenes and gunfight, which was great because it added a lot of production value and a Hague pipe dolly for tracking shots. Lights were a mix of Dom's Arri tungstens and my cheap and cheerful LED panels. On the audio front, we used a mix of boom mic and radio lavs for backup and, because we didn't have the XLR module for the GH4, we recorded dual system sound and synched it later in FCPX."

#### Quality footage

"The film was shot in 4K on the Panasonic GH4 with the Lumix 12-35mm and 35-100mm f2.8 zoom lenses, purely because that was the equipment we had access to at the time," agrees Dom. "It was lit entirely with three

Arri fresnel lights (150w, 300w and 650w), a pop-up reflector and a couple offcuts of poly board salvaged from a previous shoot. Upon arrival, the main pub location turned out to be incredibly dark. Because we were shooting day for night we couldn't show any of the windows, which made motivating light sources a real problem. We really could have used a couple more lights (probably a couple of 1ks) to bounce off the back wall and/or ceiling just to bring the whole exposure of the room up a few stops. The fresnels were too hard to light the actors with directly, so everything was lit either by bouncing the 650w off a bit of

**"I suppose I was also trying to prove to myself with the action as well and make a point"**

polyboard (gaffer-taped to a light stand) or by firing two lights off a white reflector. The film was subsequently shot at ISO 800 at f2.8. That ruled out shooting in Panasonic's Cine-Like D profile as it's noisy at the best of times and everything was about a stop and half under exposed as it was. Rather than trying to shoot super flat I decided to try and dial in our final look in-camera and rule



out too much grading in post in fear that the image would just fall apart. I ended up opting for Cine-Like V as it's quite contrasty and has a nice filmic desaturated look to it. We then fine-tuned the profile to taste and tried not to touch it too much in post."

#### Tricky issues

"Dead Meet is definitely the most complicated project I've ever directed," reckons Daniel. "Mainly because of how specific the structure of the film needed to be and how complex some of the action sequences, particularly the bathroom fight were. I think we were definitely trying to challenge ourselves with this one. I



suppose I was also trying to prove myself with the action as well and make something of a point about the way most filmmakers shoot action. Most directors adopt the now-ubiquitous shakycam style for action scenes, full of jump cuts and disorientating close-

ups and, in my opinion, they really shouldn't. They justify it by saying it reflects the intensity and confusion of a real fight. But they don't actually want a real fight - they want a movie fight with cool choreography, great stunts and exciting visuals. But, it's not exciting for an audience when they can't see what's going on, it's nauseating. What you really want to do is have controlled movement with the camera, keep the audience orientated and showcase the skill and technique on display. Also, most filmmakers will make the mistake of shooting action the same way they shoot dialogue - with coverage. They'll shoot a master of the whole scene or a big chunk of it, then they'll go in for over-the-shoulders or hip shots, grab their close ups, any special shots they want and then hand the whole lot over to an editor to turn into something. But, not only does this result in a lack of shot variety, it also means most of your angles aren't selling all the techniques very well, meaning you have less usable footage in the end. The best way to think of action is as a sequence or montage, rather than a scene and plan each shot in relation to the one before and the one after. So, each chunk of action is choreographed with the camera angle and movement to sell it and you know where





the edit points are. This way you only need to shoot one great angle for every bit of choreography and make sure you get the overlap techniques (the ones you're going to edit during) in both angles. It's better for the performers because they only have to concentrate on a handful of moves at one time and really nail them and it results in a continuity of movement you don't get when shooting coverage. It annoys editors, though, because there's very few creative options for them, but in my opinion it's worth it."

**High points**

Francesca says she has acted in about 25 films at this point in her career and various other projects for screen as well as a few theatre productions. "There has been a real range in genres and roles as well as budgets and scope," reckons the actor. "I work as hard as I possibly can on all the roles in which I'm cast and I'm proud of Dead Meet. I certainly look back on the filming with fond memories - the cast and crew involved are all hard working and down to earth. You really have to pull together and field more responsibilities when working on smaller budgets, but as long as everyone does their part and looks out for each other

that's another thing that's great about it. Teamwork for the win! Cheesy as that may sound."

"Because filmmaking is, thankfully, now my job, and I operate primarily in the commercial side of filmmaking, I tend to consider my portfolio as my best looking adverts and music videos," chips in Dom. "Short films and features therefore have always been a fun way of keeping my creative filmmaking juices flowing. I've subsequently tended to gravitate towards horror projects as they're somewhat of a personal interest. I recently worked on James Moran's (Severance, Tower Block, Cockneys vs. Zombies) latest short film, Bloodshed, and am shooting an upcoming horror feature, which secured funding from a proof of concept screening in Cannes. Dead Meet was not only a great deal of fun to film but is also a welcome addition to my growing shorts/features CV. There is always something to learn on a set and getting to work with a lot of fight choreography has been great because it carries over to so many other possible genres, particularly horror."

**Festival trail**

The film is now finished and the team are



currently submitting it to festivals. It'll also be viewable online in due course they say. "I'm quite pleased with it and feedback from those who've seen it has been very positive, which is nice," beams Daniel. "I tend to be my own worst critic when it comes to these things, so I nitpick and look for all the flaws, but I forget that an audience doesn't see all the little mistakes or missed possibilities that I do. They just see what's there on screen and take it for what it is. And, if their comments are critical, it's worth noting that they're usually judging your film on the same scale as professional features and TV shows, which is often a good sign that you've managed to do most things right at least! "It may sound bad to say this, but it's one of the few I've worked on that I've actually enjoyed watching," agrees Francesca with a chuckle. "I really hate seeing myself act. I love acting but I get very critical and think 'Oh, I could've done this' or 'Ohhh, I should've done that' and

overanalyse my performance and think about what I should work on for the next project, rather than get swept away by the story and actually enjoy the viewing experience. It's been enough time since I played Cleo that I got to sit back and relax, and not think 'huh, I wonder why the director picked this take'. I think it's simply good fun."

**Golden opportunity**

Given Dead Meet is a twenty

minute short, the team concede that commercial options are limited and they doubt they'll see a penny back. "But the main aim for this project is to get it seen," reckons Daniel. "Aside from sending it to festivals we think it might do well at the genre shorts and action film festivals too. We're going to push it on our social media channels and see if we can't get a bit of viral activity on it. We're also sending out a link to the film to various filmmakers and

movie blogs to see if we can get any reviews or press from them. The hard part of being a filmmaker in 2017 is that there's so much choice out there for potential audiences. Do they watch a blockbuster on Blu-ray or a twenty minute short on YouTube? Bingewatch a Netflix series, or a three thousand strong playlist of cat videos? Getting them to even acknowledge that your film exists is hard enough without convincing them to take time out of their day to watch it as well. Word of mouth and peer endorsement are about the only things that work consistently, which is why social media plays such a key role in getting your film out there."

*"Aside from sending it to festivals we think it might do well at the genre shorts festivals too"*

"Personally, I'm making use of social media," says Francesca, nodding in agreement. "I studied acting in LA where marketing is a huge part of the industry and it really drilled into me the importance of things like business cards, a good website, and even Twitter/Instagram these days. A few critic friends of mine have watched and will be reviewing too, so we're grateful for them. A nice article in Digital FilmMaker Magazine is pretty darn good promotion too, so thank you!"

