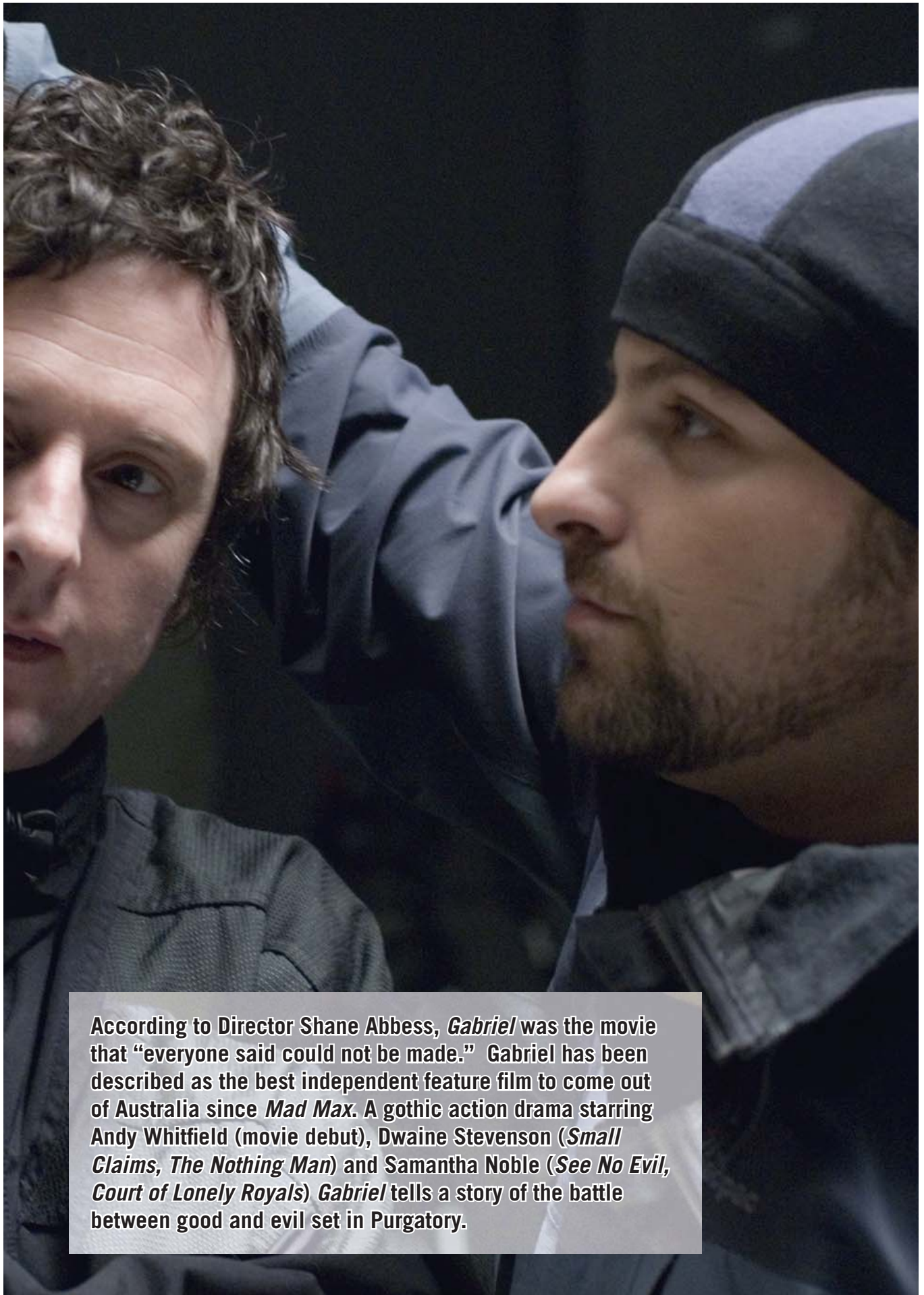


Onset

Gabriel

*Director of Photography:
Peter Holland*



According to Director Shane Abbess, *Gabriel* was the movie that “everyone said could not be made.” *Gabriel* has been described as the best independent feature film to come out of Australia since *Mad Max*. A gothic action drama starring Andy Whitfield (movie debut), Dwaine Stevenson (*Small Claims, The Nothing Man*) and Samantha Noble (*See No Evil, Court of Lonely Royals*) *Gabriel* tells a story of the battle between good and evil set in Purgatory.

onset

Shane Abbess explained, “I was developing another project which was going through development hell, when actor Dwaine Stevenson and I started talking about doing a movie involving the Archangel Gabriel. At that point I called Matt Hylton Todd, my writing partner and we decided that this had to be a really ambitious independent movie. Our approach was to hit the industry with a sledgehammer, and so began the long journey”.

Todd and Abbess were working as their production company, Redline Films (*Under Eight, Breaking Point, Better Daze, Morning Sunshine*) where the duo had achieved significant success with over 20 short films, music videos and TVCs. With his extensive experience, Abbess already knew many of the tricks he needed to employ in order to shoot a great idea in a unique way. Abbess then enlisted the producing skills of Anna Cridland and Kristy Vernon who pulled together the team

of talented people to make the movie. As the project and script progressed, James Michael Vernon of Screen Corporation, became commercial advisers, sales agents and Executive Producers of *Gabriel*.

“At this point we knew *Gabriel* was really going places.” commented Abbess, “With Anna and Kristy and all our combined contacts involved, the movie started to gather momentum at an incredible pace. This was also the point where a lot of people told me that the movie was impossible to shoot as it had 26 locations, was almost always raining, involved lots of effects, big fight scenes, extras and high stakes drama. This was not a typical Australian movie. I tested every 3CCD camera on the market to get a real idea of what we could expect from a progressive movie look. At our budget range, the standard wasn’t that great. When I say we tested every camera on the market I mean every one. None could do what

we wanted until I went to the Digital Media Festival and saw the JVC GY-HD101E which was, quite literally, a revelation. I saw that unlike all the others you could pull focus, set focal points, change lenses, it was excellent in low light and shot in true progressive. At that point we saw the tests of *Endurance Island* (Reality Check) and were hooked. It was a no-brainer; this was the best HD camera on the market in its range bar none.”

“I ordered the GY-HD101E through JVC dealer Panavision but due to its popularity they had sold out in Australia and had to wait to receive the camera. There was no question we would wait; the GY-HD101E is that good we would not have shot *Gabriel* with anything else. In the meantime I had to find a DOP who would be as good as the camera and who could find a crew to match. This is when the angels of fate stepped in and Peter Holland’s show reel came across my desk. Out of the 50 show reels I’d seen



Peter's was by far the best. I called him immediately and grilled him as to whether he could get the crew, light the movie the way I wanted, go guerilla and start right away! Luckily for me he said yes to all of the above."

Peter Holland acknowledged the size of the task and the quality that was required. "Shane was straight to the point. He knew what he wanted and would accept nothing less. As soon as we got the camera we put it through the most intense testing. Fortunately I'd seen the GY-HD101E at SMPTE and knew this was a camera that was going to change the film industry due to its progressive shooting, calibrated lens and amazing size-to-quality ratio. I remember not having the budget to rent a PNS adaptor or additional lenses, in fact we could barely scrape the budget to rent a wide angle adapter. The first time we did a 35mm blow up test, there were a lot of people wondering if the GY-HD101E was too good to be true until they saw the print. It was stunning; everyone was amazed by the result. We now know we could take *Gabriel* into cinemas"

Holland then set about making sure that all 26 locations were able to be low-lit correctly and thus use the GY-HD101E's capabilities to the maximum. "It was important for me to keep a wide aperture and allow some drop off in focus". Holland and his crew took the next 5 weeks to create controlled lighting situations allowing the 'movie look to work'.

"That first shot was magical. It just worked. The camera was brilliant. It looked great. It looked cinematic. We did lots of long lens, dirty frame, hand-held shots and with the GY-HD101E being so compact we could get it into places that other cameras would not go. We made subjective rigs for the GY-HD101E including one where we bolted it onto a knife. The size and weight allowed us to do things we simply could not have done with other cameras. There were lots of hand-held and Steadicam shots and the

operators were delighted with the weight of the camera. We were able to avoid the jerky DV look and motion because the camera can be shoulder mounted making for smoother operating. It really was a very flexible camera. After 3 weeks we decided to get another GY-HD101E and JVC were helpful in making this happen. Their service and support throughout the entire shoot was brilliant."

In hearing so much about the production of *Gabriel*, AC took the time to delve into what went down on set with DOP Peter Holland, over a cup of tea and resulted into insight from the cinematographer's perspective....and some insight into Peter himself!

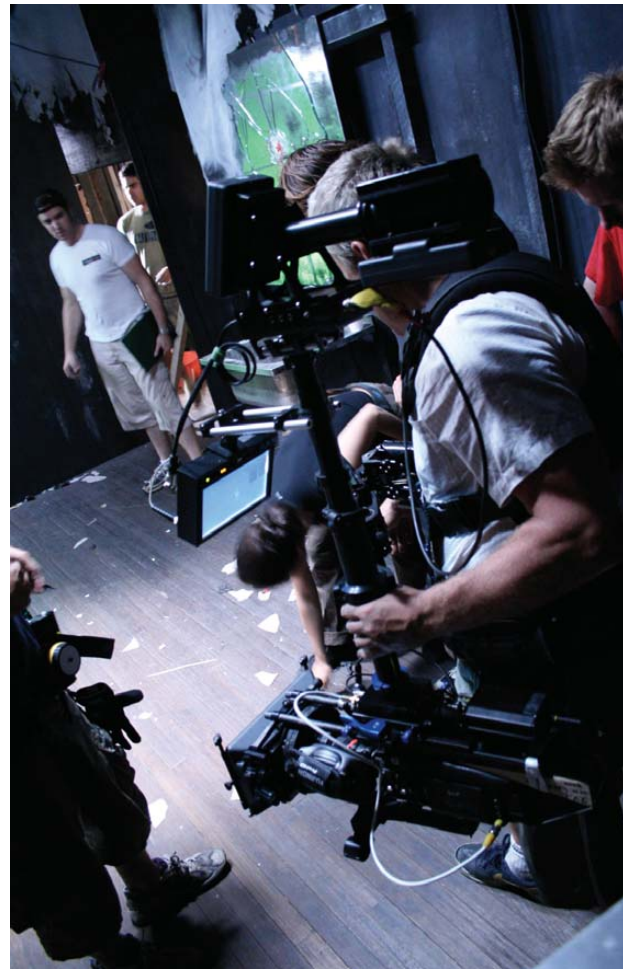
AC: In your own words what's the basic plot of Gabriel?

Peter Holland: It's a classic western; it's the avenging warrior coming back to the semi-abandoned town that's been taken over by an evil entity and his band of bandits. The hero warrior collects his warriors that have been dispersed and they go into battle together. The hero warrior discovers that the leader of the evil entity is his nemesis and there is an ultimate fight between them. There is a damsel love story in there so I can sum it up as a modern gothic western in a very classic structure.

AC: You said one of your reasons for doing the film was that it was a great script. What was great about it?

PH: It's a fantastic emotional character journey. The main character Gabriel was so well fleshed out that you felt for his character and could be sympathetic to his darkest moments where you experienced his hatred and rage and then his love and redemption later on in his journey. At the end of the day it is an intelligent film with great shoot'em up scenes and great visual effects and who doesn't want to see that kind of great action movie!

AC: What did you enjoy most



about working on this film?

PH: I had a profound sense that *Gabriel*, although a deferred film and shot on the smell of an oily rag, would go theatrical and would pay its crew. I wouldn't have done it otherwise. I was always knew this was going to be a film that was going to go places, not collect dust on the DVD shelves or possibly never be finished. Everyday for me was exciting, and Shane and the cast were phenomenal. Andy Whitfield and Dwaine Stevenson were so cold on the rooftop, that Andy almost went hypothermic in the raining cold roof scenes.

AC: How much pre-production time did you have, and how did you spend it?

PH: We had very little pre-time. I only got the call to do the film about 3 weeks before 4 weeks of pre-production and most of that time was spent securing and scouting locations. The nature of *Gabriel* was that if we had had all the money up front to make the film, we would have been able to book all the crew

and locations and do things in the proper order, but as we didn't have any budget things would fall over all the time. If we didn't take the ball and run with it when we got the chance we never would have got to filming it. This continued all the way through to post; it was never funded so nothing was ever structured in the classic sense.

We were waiting for Panavision/ASC to take delivery of the JVC camera. So I only got my hands on it pretty close to shooting, around 2 weeks out, but I still managed to do all the testing I wanted and a short print test.

AC: For a typical day shooting how many tapes did you shoot?

PH: For a typical days shoot with sometimes 3 cameras, doing about 26 set-ups a day and remembering we purposefully shot a liberal amount of differing set-ups per scene, I think the shooting to screen-time ratio was around 30-1 or a little less. This may sound like a lot, but when you shoot a film of this style and scope, with lots of fights and multiple cameras you up your ratio quite considerably.

AC: There were 26 locations, which was a lot for the film, was there a particular challenging one?

PH: Every location was challenging as at every location there was no ambient light or sources. Either we shot at night or we shot day for night. In a way that's kind of fantastic as you get a totally blank canvas to work from. I think the rooftop location was the most challenging, because of the stairs, the cold and the scope of those scenes and all in the pouring rain for a week and a half with a very minimal lighting package and small crew.. Convincing crews to turn up the next night on a filthy vulcanised rubber roof in cold rain was challenging.

AC: Did you have any timing issues with the locations?

PH: The art department, because of the mean budget,

didn't have much time to do their preparation and often we had to work around them while they finished painting and putting stuff together but we managed to work through it.

AC: Did you have any logistically difficult scenarios?

PH: Everyday, trying to muster an army to work for free, through the night, in the rain and for no money with sometimes questionable catering. Our Gaffer; Paul Johnson supplied the lighting package and gaffed the first 2 weeks. He was instrumental in helping to achieve the look I was after and also encouraging his regular crew to come on board. Our Key Grip: Colin Bishop. supplied a ute package and was a pleasure to have on-set. My Focus Pullers were Rupert Ananda-Brown, Rebecca Lean, Rod Vidal Dawson, Hugh Rutherford. All were fantastic and all stepped up to operate when called, plus we had two awesome steadicam operators Andrew Johnson (A.J) and Steve Johnson who did outstanding work.

AC: How did you crew the film?

PH: With 7 weeks of raining night shoots, it had to feel like a big film. After working in the Sydney industry for a while, I searched through my little black book and phoned everyone I knew and convinced them to come onto the film and put them into a pool for each department. I had four camera assistants on rotation, so they would do 4 days on and 4 days

off, but the deal was that if they had a paying job that came up they could take it and we would get someone from the pool to work their shift. This also worked really well with the Grips and Gaffers until *Superman* came back from hiatus and stole almost our entire electrics team, so there we were up on the roof doing the ultimate fight scenes for three nights with an electrics crew of two. Everyone chipped in and helped and we got it done. We also didn't have an office because the producers were also doing the cooking, so I would have to get on the phone first thing in the morning after watching the rushes and tee-up the crew for the following night shoot, then phone the producer's answer phone with the crew list, to make the call sheet for the next night. The support that those professional technicians gave to get *Gabriel* was phenomenal.

AC: For you in the film is there a "money" shot?

PH: There is one scene that I am particularly proud of and it may not stand out for other people when they see the film. It's towards the end of the film when *Gabriel* and his nemesis are having the ultimate fight and there is a steadicam scene around some silos. It goes for about 4 minutes and we shot it in 3 single continuous takes. The sun was coming up and we had forty minutes to light this whole scene doing multiple figure of eights with two actors going around the silos and camera looking in



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every direction. Timing was critical. I think we managed to get three takes in before the sun came up. It ended up that all three takes were intercut, but it still has the feel of the single take. I am particularly proud of what we were able to pull off in the limited amount of time so proficiently.

AC: Your lighting was inspired by Film Noir, was that your direction?

PH: Shane wanted a universal film, not something that was typically Australian; the actors don't have Aussie accents, any particular national flavour or visual colloquialism. I put forward the idea to style it like a color noir film but with muted colours and a palette that progresses through the film in proximity to the source of the power of the fallen. Where the arcs have been dispersed in the outer perimeters of the city, the power of the fallen doesn't reach there, so it is cold with lots of blue and green tones and even darker than the city. As you get closer to the city it is much warmer and hotter with burnt umber and red tones.

The Noir inspiration came from the idea that the light is struggling to penetrate purgatory. So where does the light come from when there is

no light. My feeling was that God only lights with one source and there should be no three point or backlight lighting in purgatory. We made sure there was almost no backlight on any of the characters in purgatory, and if there was we made sure it wasn't glossy. Applying two point lighting instead of three point, meant that instead of using three lamp units to light the shot, we only used two, which saved on set-up time and hire costs. It also gives the film that graphic novel feeling that there is a lot of dark and shadow in the scene, so you have to search out the detail, which isn't apparent everywhere which draws you into the picture. The JVC aided us in that in a way, which I wasn't initially expecting. It helped us with that look and it could be something that's quite unique to that particular camera.

AC: How did you view the rushes; did you have input in the process?

PH: The rushes turnaround wasn't the best system and we didn't have an editor dubbing the rushes and sending them out. So it was left to other people who were working on other things at the time. We would sometimes get them the next night or even two nights later, when we would receive a bundle of very low resolution DVDs so it was very hard to check for critical stuff such as focus or artefacting. But this was the nature of *Gabriel*. You could never get frustrated with the way *Gabriel* was being made, because that was the way it had to be made. You couldn't whinge or whine about it, we'd actually get on with it and work through it. We got tripped up a couple of times but managed to recover.

AC: With the nature of making Gabriel, you worked with a number of First AD's, how was that on-set?

PH: For the Assistant Directors it was very challenging trying to manage when you are trying to get the cogs working together when you're dealing with very experienced industry people and some less experienced departments. I think it was

decided after about week 3 that we needed to bring a kind of strong figurehead in, to try and get the ship working properly and as a slicker more cohesive unit. They employed the first person on the shoot, "Bob", who came out of semi-retirement and he yielded an iron-rod and thoroughly scared everyone and they all jumped to attention. But he was a sweetie and was great and managed to harness the momentum that had already been built and got us all through to the end of the project fighting fit.

AC: You speak highly of Victor, the Production Designer, in how he achieved the look of the film, why is that?

PH: He has the wonderful ability to work on a cerebral level and is a very creative visionary guy, but also very hands on and energetic. When I first met him he had drawn some wonderful mood boards for the sets and costumes and they really resonated. He was extremely receptive to any discussion and a great collaborative partner and was really conscious of designing for the camera.

AC: Considering there were many visual effects scenes in the film, did you have to consider camera angles based on animatics?

PH: There were about 800 visual effects all up and no animatics.

In the second phase of shooting that was done after the principle photography, that we called pickup week, we did a lot of the chroma key elements.

We actually worked backwards from the usual method. All the plates were computer generated and created after the element/subject, chroma shoot. We would record camera elevations, angles, lens sizes, lighting specs and perspectives. All the shots that should have been shot on a motion control rig and high-speed cameras such as the bullet cam were done tele-organic on the steadicam. They were executed in a very low-fi way and it was amazing what Matt Graham and his post-



