

Gabriel tells the story of an Arc Angel who fights to bring light back to purgatory – a place where darkness rules - and save the souls of the city's inhabitants. By Rodney Appleyard

When I heard about the story behind the making of *Gabriel* I found it just as mind-blowing as the action on the screen. This is because the cast and crew never stopped believing in their dream, despite the warning that it was too ambitious.

Marching on without the aid of American dollars to provide it with the heart and soul needed to impress audiences, every member of the crew made lifestyle and financial sacrifices to create their own impossible dream.

A phenomenal amount of effort was put into making this film, says the visual effects supervisor, Steve Anderson. "There isn't enough Karma in the industry right now to make another movie like this straight away. We'd have to wait for a whole new generation to create that kind of spirit of good will again."

When he talks about Karma, he means that some of the most talented people in the industry were willing to offer their services for little money to allow Shane Abbess' and Matt Todd's vision come to life. The achievements are unbelievable.

For example, the film involves over 800 visual effects and a huge amount of physical effects too, such as explosions, prosthetic make-ups, rain, smoke, armoury and wind effects. Sony Pictures was so impressed with the sci-fi blockbuster that it decided to buy the movie after it was completed.

The birth of *Gabriel*

Director Shane Abbess and co-writer Matt Todd first came up with the idea for *Gabriel* in 2004 after they made a 15-minute short film in 15 hours. The name *Gabriel* was used in this movie, which provided inspiration for the feature film, as Abbess recalls.

"We loved the name and decided to build the script around this character. Matt and I wrote a number of drafts in which we detailed the back stories of angels, fallen angels and humans living in purgatory. I loved the back story so much that at one point I didn't even care about the actual script. We eventually teamed up with producers Kristy Vernon (who was working for Screen Corporation at the time) and Anna Cridland to work out how the film would progress."

Despite having budget restrictions, Abbess and his team refused to compromise on the movie's ambition, as Todd fondly remembers.

"When we started writing the story, we didn't inhibit our creativity by wondering how we were going to produce it. If you worry about budget then dollar signs are going to be passing by your eyes faster than you can blink. So we just blurted it out on paper. When people saw it they thought: "Wow!! That's a huge film!!"

Abbess chips in: "That was our problem after writing it. We said to ourselves: 'This is a fantastic script, but how do we make it?' We decided: 'Well, we haven't thought about that yet, but let's now work on it.'"

Kristy remembers too: "When I read the eighth draft, I thought: 'How on earth can we afford to blow up a soup kitchen?'"

Under the guillotine

Ironically, this seemingly impossible challenge was a big part of the fun involved with making *Gabriel*. Everybody talks about the experience of working on it as if they have been to war. They sound like they have been in the trenches, making unique sacrifices and going that extra mile for their fellow colleague. It is all inspirational stuff, as Abbess highlights.

"It's amazing what we achieved, such as filming in 26 locations around Sydney and the Hunter Valley, and including more effects than probably any other Aussie film has ever done before. You think about every scene being a night shoot, with fight scenes, made in the rain, with high stakes drama, love scenes and heaps of extras. The only thing we didn't have were pets and car chases. If you said about six months before we started shooting: 'Would it be worth it, bearing in mind the toll it took on your health, relationships, the fact that everybody said a film like this couldn't be made, especially in Australia, and you would put your head so far under the guillotine that there would be no way back unless you succeeded?' I'm not sure what I would have said. But we got to the magical city instead of crashing and burning, so now I can say, yes, it was all worth it."

Andy Whitfield, who stars as *Gabriel* in the movie, totally agrees with Abbess' assessment.

"The film might not be about religion, but it was definitely made on faith. I'd just had a new baby and thought about doing the responsible thing of being there for her. But my wife told me to jump in and have some faith. Everybody committed themselves and trusted it would work and we have been rewarded as a result of that."

Abbess adds: "It was like cogs in a wheel – you couldn't survive without the other. We are so grateful that everybody had the passion that Matt and I did. To get that army of people focused on that singular goal was like a miracle."

Many of the talented people working on the movie brought in their talented friends too. In the end, they had people who had been involved in many blockbusters. Over 600 people worked on the film since the birth of its concept. This included the lighting team that were on *Superman*; the fight director from the *Star Wars* mov-

THE MIRACLE OF MAKING
GABRIEL



Andy Whitfield in the lead role as Gabriel

The research for this impressive digital bullet scene in Gabriel was based on real bullets provided by armourer Johan Earl



ies and grips who had worked on every major film that has been made in Australia. Visual effects technicians from OmniLab and Fuel worked on the movie too; AudioLoc helped out with post production; Panavision and JVC also supplied discounted cameras for the shoots.

Dedication through the roof

The roof top scene, which is a major part of the end of the film, was the most gruelling of all to make. Abbess remembers how much commitment was provided by the main actors, Andy Whitfield and Dwaine Stevenson, who fight during this scene.

"When we started filming on the rooftop during the middle of November we thought it would be warm. We didn't think that at two or three am the wind would pick up and the chill factor would kick in. We were freezing, but the whole crew was rugged up, apart from Andy and Dwayne. In between shoots they were shaking uncontrollably, but as soon as we said 'action', they'd stop and perform really well. At one point though, Andy started to turn blue, so we got a thermometer from the local hospital. He nearly had hypothermia! We ended up stopping the shoot and got him to a warm place until the thermometer went up. That's commitment for you!"

Abbess says he also felt like everybody's psychiatrist on the set because he was conscious of lifting their spirits whenever they were flagging.

"I was always the guy at school who was never the best sports players on the team. But I see my job as the person who finds people that are better than me at things and put them together to create something amazing. I then sit back and watch."

Blending together visual and physical effects

Abbess was determined to make this film different from other Australian movies by making sure it was very stylish. The effects in the movie played a big part in creating this distinctive look.

"My big problem with Australian films is that many of them lack style. However, whereas most directors get to have 10 passes at a visual effect, we only had one. So I had to really focus on the most important scenes. The great thing about this movie is that most of the visual and physical effects are hidden. To be honest with you, I prefer physical effects to CG ones. When we first started I pledged to not use any digital effects at all. However, it was essential to use the technology for touch-ups and refining the shots."

Creating rain

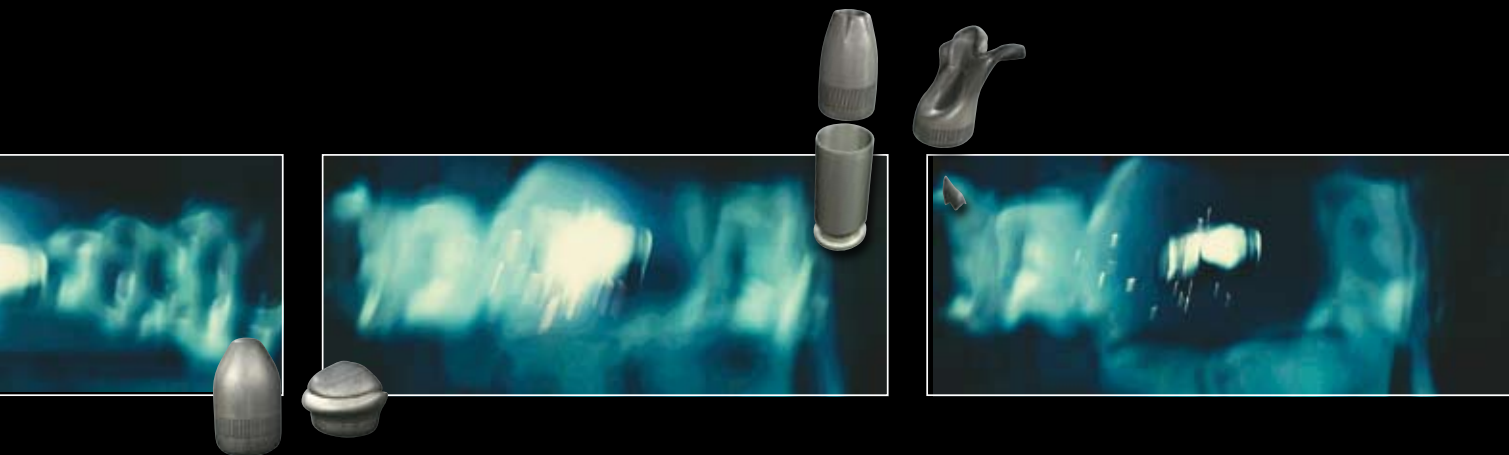
The rain in the movie is very realistic. Abbess recalls how it was made:

"We used three hoses with sprinkler attachments and a committed bunch of madmen standing on ladders, getting yelled at by the 1st AD because their spray wasn't being picked up by the backlighting. All the rain in the movie is a physical effect done on the day at around 3am. This made life very uncomfortable and cold for the cast and crew. We'd have preferred heated rain towers, but maybe next time. We tested it first in Anna Cridland's backyard."

Stunt scenes

Kyle Rowling, who has worked on the *Star Wars* films, was the fight director for the movie. Abbess worked very collaboratively with him to get some great sequences.





"I always storyboarded the scene heavily and would tell him the way I wanted to cover the scenes. He worked hard not only on choreography but also on performance within those sequences to ensure that it had feeling as opposed to just being a gymnastics display. The actors did all the fight scenes themselves and I know Andy suffered his fair share of cuts and bruises doing so. The approach was really old school."

Soup kitchen explosion

Johan Earl, the armourer for the movie, loves to blow sh*t up, according to Abbess.

"For the biggest one, we built a replica of a certain part of the film, which was two-thirds the scale of the original, and shot it on film at a reduced frame rate (the only shot of the movie not in HD). We then comped it into the original set. As for the smaller explosions, we just did them on the day."

Anderson matched the physical explosion into a 3D plate and added extra CG elements to polish it off. It was made using Fusion, Shake, Discreet and AfterEffects.

The introductory space sequence

Abbess wanted it to be like one of those video rollercoaster rides, where you sit in the capsule and it moves with the video screen, simulating speed and movement. Much development was done to preserve the sense of scale and density of the natural and fractal realm of space.

"The original sequence was a lot longer but it would've taken the next decade to render so I cut it down but it still works well. There

were also many discussions over physics and scale versus the environment with Tylney and Steve," says Abbess.

Steve Anderson worked on the previz of the sequence and locked off the camera move with Shane, whilst Tylney Taylor, with a background in Aerospace Engineering, went on to design the individual effects.

Matthew Graham, the post production producer for the movie, says that the single shot was sliced up into seven scenes, each consisting of up to 28 element and effects layers. "The most challenging part was the initial wormhole disc and the Nebulae later in the shot. With more than two million particles for the clouds in the opening wormhole galaxy disc, we used RenderMan for Maya, which rendered the frames in two minutes at full HD on one processor, while we were still able to work on the machine on other shots. The Nebulae were less forgiving and required a mixture of Mental Ray, magic and a little swearing from time to time. The overall renders took 14 days for that section. The Nebulae were built with geometry to emit carefully controlled fluids, which were then lit with coloured lights to create the desired effect of depth and volume."

Atmospheric sex scene

The "Sex scene" in *Gabriel* was shot in one of the many abandoned warehouses that were used as the make-shift studios. To create the vast expanding city through the lofts window, various physical elements and 2D mattes were used.

Anderson explains some of the techniques used, including the simulated rain. "We filmed milk being sprayed on and dripping down glass to simulate rain". "We sprayed so much milk that we still have got milk stains on my Mac Pro Box."

Abbess loved the use of broche lights in backgrounds throughout the film, to simulate the use of long lenses, allowing the audience to have a more intimate relationship with the characters. This was crucial to offset the grittiness of the city outside with the romantic soft mood inside. The sequence was a mixture of live action in front of green screen and some shots with practical glass with water running down.

Graham adds that some of the shots that were not touched up look like comps and the ones that are comps look natural. "CG should always be a last resort I think...Physical effects should always be the first thing you use because they are real."

Making a bullet fly in slow motion

The original sequence was shot on the final night of the original production, as Graham recalls.

"... Suddenly three cameras were pulled out of nowhere with moments to spare and they shot the living sh** out of the background, hoping they would have something at the end of it. Shane had this beautiful elaborate idea but we couldn't do it to the maximum because of budget-ary and time constraints. However, we did come up with this bullet idea in the end, which turned out really nice. The actual bullet was all CG."



Gabriel's DOP diary

By Peter Holland



"To say that *Gabriel* is a high concept film made on a low budget is true, but it's a little bit like saying the Titanic was a big boat lost at sea. The call came when I was in telecine, transferring the previous day's commercial. The voice on the other end didn't have a shred of doubt in his voice when he (Abbess) calmly told me that he was going to make a blockbusting, sci-fi action drama on a budget of a music clip. His pitch was just so ambitious I thought this guy doesn't just want to make a film, he wants to change the world! "When I read the script I was blown away. A lot of low budget scripts get sent out with the label "feature" attached to them, but rarely do they stand up and declare that they deserve the moniker. *Gabriel* was that rarity. I decided that this film was worth throwing everything at. My first problem was how was I going to pay rent and feed my family for the 10 weeks that I'd be working, effectively for free. Jane, my wife, decided that the best thing to do was give up our primo Bronte pad, with the unbelievable never to be found again huge deck."

"Jane would take our six month old daughter, move from Sydney to Melbourne and stay with her sister who had a real job and would feed them both. I would move in with a dear friend who had a large couch in a spare room in Marrickville. Sorted! No compunction about missing a third of my baby's life, or not seeing my wonderful wife for the duration. Next challenge. How can I get a crew and all the equipment we're gonna need for eight weeks, working 50% night shoots with rain and for no money? The deferment package that the producers were offering was a bonus, and this was essential in bringing on the quality and quantity of crew needed to see this film through and with the results we would all be proud of.

"Two weeks in and everything was going just swimmingly. The film had taken on a momentum of its own. It felt like *Gabriel* was a living and breathing, all consuming entity with an impetus of its own. Everyone had come to the realisation that what we were making here was what I had hoped from the beginning – really something quite special. But it was then that a US director called back a large amount of the talented crew we had recruited. After a round of frantic phone calls, we were able to fill some of those vacant shoes but the crew was now stretched thin and with a whole lot of night exteriors scheduled, it was going to be tough.

"During one memorable night on the rooftop of a twenty storey abandoned building, it seemed like the sinew that had bound us together might come unstuck. We had the challenge of lighting and shooting multiple scenes that required Steadi-cam to perform multi 360 degree takes, as well as three camera coverage of the penultimate fight scene between the protagonist and his nemesis. A big night of quick fast lighting was in order, but all we could muster were two new electricians who hadn't worked on the show before. The generator turned up late. We placed the lamps before the sun-set and the actors and the crew rehearsed in the dark.

"All the omens were foreboding, but the amazing thing is, we pulled it off! And that night we shot what was probably my favourite scene in the whole film. It had been a night of all hands on deck. No one escaped from that wet rubbery, filthy, rodent infested environment. Everyone on the producers to the runners helped with the messy, tired, yukky bump out after day break.

"Principal photography then finished and the father, now five kilos lighter, was re-united with his nine month old baby (who couldn't recognise him) and gorgeous wife (who loved his new svelte physique) with the realisation that we were now homeless. Eighteen months later and all the faith, determination and damned hard work by everyone has paid off. Sony Pictures International has bought the film, everyone is going to get paid as promised and Sony is planning an international theatrical release. The massive achievement that is *Gabriel* the film could only have been possible with the huge sacrifices and great skill by all the crew who volunteered to work on it. I believe this film stands as a testament to those amazing men and women who inhabit the Australian film industry. To all of you who came on for this roller coaster journey, I say, thank you."

Graham says that this scene was devised after the shoot. Anderson carries on the story. "We painted out the principal actors from the location footage to and recreated a blurred panoramic background for the camera move. We then had to model the bullet and even inscribe the language of the fallen angels on Asmodeus' bullet (that was for the fans). A lot of detail had to go into the making of the bullet and the gun too".

Kanin Phemayothin was responsible for the design and elements for all of the 3D bullets in the film.

Creating a fake city

Several scenes throughout the film show the gritty exterior of purgatory, most of which were created in 3D through 2D projection on 3D geometry. This is a remarkable achievement because they look so realistic and were done solely by Peter Reynolds over four months. The 3D environment was based upon Paris's cluttered streets to achieve the scattered layout, featured in the 14 second long city pull back shot. Fuel was responsible for tidying this and the final 2D composition of the shots after the film was initially finished.

Anderson and Graham shot a lot of photography around Darlinghurst and Surry Hills of dilapidated buildings and urban decay, which were used to texture the 2D surfaces and other matte paintings throughout the film.

Matching practical guns

Although armourer Johan Earl provides all of the guns and weapons, Anderson and Graham added CG elements to them too, as Anderson recalls.

"As well as adding a lot of muzzle flashing (gun fire from the weapons) we added a number of slider actions on the guns and 3D shells being ejected. These involved us going down to Johan's place and photographing a bunch of stills of his weapons and munitions, so that we could get the CG elements as accurate as possible."

The vast majority of the 800+ VFX shots were done at the temporary *Gabriel* Studios, which was set up and run by Steve Anderson and Matthew Graham. An extremely talented and dedicated crew came together over three months to make Shane's vision a reality on a minuscule budget.

For the people who enjoy this movie, you will be pleased to hear that it is the start of a three part story. Abbess and Todd want to see how the audience reacts initially to *Gabriel* before they decide on whether they want to go ahead with making the next two. For the time being, everybody who has worked on this film is still living the dream and each of them has a fascinating story to tell about their experiences. This is certainly a one off, but it would be great if every Australian movie was made with this kind of spirit. **SM**



Director Shane Abbess on set with actor Michael Piccirilli