LUCKY COUNTRY

Toby Wallace Photo by Jules O'Loughlin

JULES O'LOUGHLIN ACS RECENTLY WON THE 2008 IF AWARD FOR HIS CINEMATOGRAPHY ON *SEPTEMBER*. HERE HE TELLS NICOLA DALEY A LITTLE ABOUT HIS UPCOMING FEATURE FILM *LUCKY COUNTRY*.

ND: Tell me about your life before you became a Director of Photography?

JO: I worked in the futures market for about 10 years and during that time I put myself through law school. I thought that one day I might become a lawyer. I spent a lot of my free time rock climbing, mountaineering and traveling but always with a stills camera. When I got married in 1996 my wife and I went backpacking for two years through South East Asia, Western Asia and the Middle East. It was a fabulous opportunity to immerse myself in my photography. My wife claims that sunset and the magic hour, the most romantic times of the day, were usually solitary affairs for her, as I was off somewhere taking photographs.

Photography was something that I really loved and that I was into for many years. I became very interested in cinematography in my early 20s after seeing Jack Cardiff's work in *The Red Shoes*. I started reading books about cinematography and became totally engrossed in the craft but I had a career in the financial markets, and I felt reluctant to throw it all away. It was during those two years of travel that I really took stock of my life and realized that a passion was better served as a career rather than a hobby. Living a life of quiet desperation was not an option. I turned my back on the futures market and enrolled in TAFE. The following year I gained entry into AFTRS.

It was at AFTRS that I met Alister Grierson (directing) and Leesa Kahn (producing) and the three of us worked on a number of short films together. I felt lucky at the time to have gained entry into AFTRS but in hindsight I think it was good luck that I went through with them. A year after leaving AFTRS we had been green lit on our first feature *Kokoda*.

The following year, 2006, I shot *September* with another AFTRS graduate, Peter Carstairs. *In Her Skin* followed in 2007 and *Lucky Country* in 2008. The latter two films will be released this year. I've been pretty lucky – getting into AFTRS and then shooting *Kokoda* soon after graduating. The springboard was *Kokoda*, which got a bit of attention; it wasn't just a little film. No matter what people thought about it, whether it was good or bad, it was iconic and it got a lot of publicity.

I do tend to think you make your own luck. You have to be open to the opportunities. When the door opens you have to charge for it.

ND: How did you come to work with Kriv Stenders on Lucky Country?

I had never met Kriv before. I was heading to LA as there were some potential projects happening. Then I got a call to say Kriv Stenders wanted to meet and talk about a project. When we met I was immediately intrigued. I came away thinking this guy is really interesting, he wants to do some really ballsy stuff on this film. Normally the Cinematographers are trying to push

the boundaries and the Directors are saying 'No' and being conservative – but Kriv really wanted to push the envelope. So I went to LA and a few days later I got a call saying Kriv wants you to do the film.

ND: How did you start the visual dialogue with Kriv?

JO: We started talking over the phone and I put together a visual pitch document in order to build a visual road map. I asked his opinion on various things. The two words I like to hear are Yes and No. 'Yes' I love that and 'no' I don't like that: to me it means the Director is in control and knows what he or she wants. There was stuff that he was willing to explore and some stuff that he wasn't keen on. That was a good indicator to me that he had a strong voice, and whilst he was very collaborative and open to ideas, he knew in which direction he wanted to take the film.

ND: Tell me about the story of Lucky Country?

The film is about a young family struggling to survive in an unforgiving country around the time of Federation. The mother dies in childbirth, leaving the father to raise two children. They are pioneers – they have no idea about surviving in the bush, the father is quite hard on his children, and of course he is still getting over the death of his wife. One evening three men ride to the homestead. They have just returned from the Boer War and one is badly injured. They are looking for lodgings for the night. The three men end up staying and the story really is about the shift in the family dynamic that follows. There are tragic consequences. The film is a very Shakespearean story.

ND: What genre is the film and how did you think about that in your planning?

JO: In one sense the film is a Western but it's also a psychological thriller. Kriv wanted to have a predominantly hand-held camera. The camerawork starts out as very controlled and then ramps up as the drama intensifies. He really liked what I had done on *September* and he wanted to bring that style into *Lucky Country*.

As far as the genre, there was nothing inherent about Westerns that dictated to us how the film should look. For instance Kriv didn't want to shoot scope, which at first I was not totally convinced of. I tend to think that when it comes to cinema you need a great reason not to shoot scope. To me 2.35 IS cinema. Kriv wanted *Lucky Country* to be about the landscape of the face. He told me the core of the film is all about people. For that reason he thought 1.85 would be a better fit for our particular story. He didn't want to make a conventional kind of Western and, truth be told, after the first initial discussions we never really spoke about *Lucky Country* as a western. It is a psychological drama. Kriv wanted more of a gritty kind of feel, more of a modern naturalistic slant.

The references that influenced Kriv on *Lucky Country* were European films, in particular the French film *Calvaire* and the Soviet era film *Come and See. He* was interested in exploring

Jules O'Loughlin Photo by James Geurts

Eamon Farren (sitting), Hanna Mangan Lawrence and Jules O'Loughlin Photo by Jules O'Loughlin

unconventional choices that make the audience sit up and go 'Wow'!

In the film we utilise shift and tilt lenses and we use them in quite an extreme way. For example, the father in the film (played by Aden Young) gets tetanus from a nail in his hand, and he develops lockjaw. He has terrible spasms and is wracked by pain. So we used the shift and tilt lenses as an extreme point of view for his pain and suffering. We then took this a step further and used the lenses to convey the father's psychological state of mind when he is being terrorised by one of the three visitors.

ND: Tell me about your approach to the lighting?

Having worked on *Kokoda* and *September* I learned a lot about exterior light and how to control it. I don't like very harsh Australian sunlight on actors, so as much as I could I wanted to control it. We had a lot of exterior work on this picture and in very mixed conditions. At times it was very challenging especially with our small crew.

As far as day interiors were concerned, it had to be lit. I was shooting the day interiors on slow stock (50 ASA) and the cabin, which was purpose built for the film, had small windows and very dark walls. The lighting strategy was to light as much as I could from the exterior so I had light coming through windows and doorways and then supplementing if needed from inside.

A lot of the film takes place in the cabin at night. These scenes were shot during the day with windows tented or hard blacked. These night interiors were lit by a combination of kino, china balls and firelight depending on whether the characters were using their 'fat' lamps or merely the fireplace for illumination. We wanted the interior of the cabin to have a different feel on each night we were there. For the characters the cabin was a pressure cooker and I wanted to reflect that with the lighting.

The cabin was a really small space to work in with only one floating wall. We had six cast in there to cover, as well as the crew. The parlour was the main room in the cabin that we shot in and every time we shot in there it was difficult. We called it the 'parlour from hell'.

The interiors, despite having a naturalistic feel to them, are very expressionistic in the sense that there are deep, dark shadows. There had to be a sense of danger in the shadows. The film is a psychological film, it's a bleak film and this was of course reflected in the lighting design.

ND: How about lenses and composition?

JO: I chose to shoot with Primos which have a slightly softer look then say Ultra Primes, which I had used on *Kokoda* and *September* and Cookes, which I had used on *In Her Skin*. The thing to be careful of with Primos is flare – especially when shooting Super 16. After a few flare issues, I had the lenses hard matted which solved most of the problems. There was some vertical flaring with some of the exterior shots that we really liked. It gave the shots an ethereal quality. We tended to use longer lenses a lot. We wanted to stack the frame up a little bit more and reduce the depth of field. Once again it's the

Jules, Director Kriv Stenders with director's viewfinder
Photo by James Geurts

story - it was about the faces. It was about concentrating on the characters and letting the backgrounds drop off.

We also utilised some speed warping effects. The ramps were used to accentuate Aden's lockjaw spasms. The speed ramps were also used to illustrate Aden's character's spiritual connection to the land. In the film he has this sixth sense and can tell when things are about to happen - the land would speak to him. There are moments in the film, when he stops and listens and has profound experiences, and we did some speed warping to illustrate these. He is just standing there looking up at the trees and by ramping his perspective we created a really powerful moment in time: the blink of someone's eye that happens at 50fps as opposed to 24fps. Some of these moments are really subtle and the audience doesn't pick up on them immediately, but they create an intense atmosphere.

ND: How did the operating work – did you share with Kriv?

JO: Kriv and I shared the operating on the film. Kriv has a

Horse Cam Photo by Jules O'Loughlin

Aden Young Photo by Jules O'Loughlin

cinematography background and he operates on a lot of his own commercials and on two of his features. It was a discussion we had when we first met and I said no worries. He's a good operator and very instinctive with the camera.

ND: Did that help you share a common language?

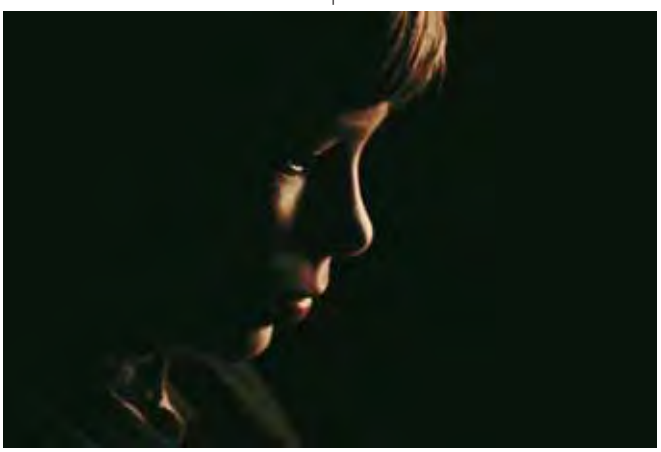
JO: Yes it did. He is very particular about how he likes to frame so it's one thing to talk about it but when you see it in action the style falls into place very quickly. He is a very good operator; he was always making really great framing choices.

ND: What format did you shoot on?

JO: Initially we were talking about shooting HD but I'm not convinced about shooting HD for period films if the film is to be theatrically released. For the small screen, yes, not an issue, but not for theatrical release. I think the digital format affects the audience as much as colour choice or camera movement. On the big screen digital looks like digital with all of its synthetic characteristics. An audience may not know whether they are watching a movie originated on film or digital but subliminally it will affect their viewing. To pull it off successfully you need almost total control over your lighting and a seamless post pathway. With *Lucky Country*, where we had to shoot very quickly in really tough lighting conditions, I believe that digital was not going to cope that well with all those different elements. So we had the choice of HD or Super 16 and we opted for the latter. We got a package from Panavision which was an SR3 and an SR2 for backup. A set of Primo 35mm lenses, a set of 35mm shift and tilts and an Angenieux HR 10:1 zoom.

ND: What film stocks did you shoot on?

JO: I was concerned about the grain with Super 16 mm so I used Kodak 200T for night interiors and exteriors and Kodak 50D for day exteriors and day interiors. 50D is great for interiors as long as you can achieve the light levels required and has a really fine grain structure and it has good contrast which I like. The thing about Super 16 when going to 35mm is your exposures - they have to be rock solid. If you underexpose you are getting into dicey territory with the neg. If you are OK exposure-wise, then resolution is the next thing that causes headaches and I think that comes down to lens choice and shot selection. If you want lots of wide shots of fields in overcast conditions i.e. lots of depth of field in flat lighting, then your images will start to fall apart. Super 16 blown up just doesn't handle that kind of stuff well. Treat it well, however, and the results can be stunning. Ideally, I would have loved to have shot on 500T for my night work, but I just didn't want to go there with 16mm. The finished film will have a very contrasty look, with rich, deep blacks and a lot of shadows – vision that lends itself to the drama – bleak and pale.



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