

Rupert Baynham & Bertrand Desrochers about A BRIXTON TALE

We're shouting at them: don't do it!"

Leah has a talent for visual arts, documenting her life with clips and stories shot with her small handycam. One day in the streets of Brixton, she catches the introverted Benji in her lens and sparks are flying between them. His powerful presence will lift up her next cinema project; her promoter at school sees a bright future shining on the horizon. But Leah's portrayal of Benji is driving a wedge between the two, as Leah isn't able to face the consequences of her ambition. Meanwhile Benji's best friend Archie is taking a turn for the worse... .

A *BRIXTON TALE* tells a grim story; not a film about life in one of the colourful districts of town, but about the impossibility of escaping it, crossing the unbridgeable gap between different lifestyles. Filmmakers Rupert Baynham (scriptwriter, UK), Darragh Carey (director, Ireland) and Bertrand Desrochers (director, Canada) come from three different countries and met at the London Film School. In Zlin, Baynham and Desrochers attend the first live festival screening of their

debut film together, celebrating their happy reunion with an interview.

Can you briefly outline the genesis of this film in a simple timeline?

Bertrand Desrochers: A *BRIXTON TALE* is based on Rupert's graduation script. After graduation we made a few short films together, and then thought doing a feature film would be easy; "it might take us about a year..." That wasn't exactly correct. We spent a whole year finalising the script. In November 2017 we had a crazy 18 day shoot; undoubtedly the most intense period of my life. We used all the production money for the shoot, so we needed to find more, turning our poor scriptwriter into a producer. Then the pandemic came, which created an extra challenge for the three of us, living in different countries. But here we are, living the dream at the Zlin Film Festival! Last time when I met Rupert in person, he was still single; now he is a father!

How difficult was it to overcome the Brixton slang language barrier?



Rupert Baynham & Bertrand Desrochers

Desrochers: I lived in Brixton while working a whole year long with people from the estate, who got involved with the writing or the acting. When the shoot began, people from the community were with us both in front and behind the camera.

What makes this story so different from most other suburban cinema?

Rupert Baynham: I went to a quite *Hogwartsy* public school, where everyone seemed to be obsessed

with street culture, with films that were gritty and edgy and street. They would put on the accent and wear the clothes but they would be terrified being seen on a Brixton estate. The film is about that gaze, about looking at this world and fetishizing it, but not understanding the implications. Leah falls into that trap, exploiting the community through her eyes and her lens. It's not about the grim lifestyle, more so were we interested in how privileged people fetishize it. We



were interested in the perception of gangsterism, rather than in gangsterism itself.

I asked Rupert a few days ago to suggest to me one nasty question that would really piss you off, and this was his suggestion: What gives you, as a Quebecois, the right to film a story set in Brixton?

Desrochers: It's a legitimate question though. Quebec has a tradition of people making socio-realistic films in their own backyard. One of the reasons why I went to study in London was to get in contact with other countries and make films not only about

my siblings and parents.

Money has been an issue for this film.

Baynam: It has taken us three years to finish post-production, because we spent all the money on the bloody shoot, without leftovers. We have been pulling a lot of favours.

Desrochers: The budget was so low that we only had 18 days to shoot. When we came in we had 100 scenes written, and when we came out we had 89 scenes captured. Almost every day we had to re-write, considering which scene we could remove while still telling the story.



Baynam: As a writer I was upset. The opening scenes, introducing us to Leah and her world simply disappeared.

The gaps that we might find in the script are exactly the gaps you had in the budget?

Desrochers: From one scene to another we had these ellipses in the storyline; something has happened, and you have to figure out what it is. It challenges the audience to try and understand what happened. You can tell a simple story but since you're not giving away all the information, you make the audience work for their meal. The gap in the budget forced us to go even further down that road.

When the protagonists need the advice from an outsider, Leah turns to her art teacher...

Desrochers: Usually we see the mentor figure as someone giving the right advice. But what if a mentor turns out not to be right? What if Yoda is giving bad advice? Leah looks up to her teacher, who is the kind of person she wants to become herself, someone who has made it in the arts.

... Whereas Benji turns to his cousin.

Desrochers: Dexter Padmore (playing Benji's cousin Darius) was one of our

script consultants; he told us about his darker past, when he told the people who walked in his footsteps: "Don't make the choices that I made; I don't want you to make the same mistakes." Our young characters are often in situations in which they can make choices, and they definitely make the wrong ones, in front of our eyes, while we're shouting at them: don't do it!

Then there's Archie, the third side of the triangle. I recognised his archetype so well from my youth. There was always this kind of guy around who was fun to hang out with, until it turned out he had a special talent for messing things up. Craigie Middleburg looks like the kind of guy that is tiresome to work with.

Desrochers: Not at all. It was all in the acting. Craigie is also big into magic. One of our producers saw him in a music video and told me: this is our man! Together they form a trio for whom life is nothing but fun and games. Until it all starts going downhill, and Benji is losing his best friend. We don't pick up on it, it's somewhere in the back of the narrative. This is Benji's and Leah's story, but it can't be told without Archie's downfall, which is directly connected to it.



You make it sound like “following your instinct” but I guess there might have been a certain cinematographic strategy behind all this.

Desrochers: Kristof Brandl is a brilliant young cinematographer from Montreal; this was his first feature. Working on the script for a year, we collected a file of references, watching hundreds of films by directors like Kieslowski, Fassbinder, Lynn Ramsey... We deconstructed scenes on private Vimeo – the angle, the camera movement, the lenses – and developed our own vocabulary that we later shared with the cinematographer, the production designer and with the whole team.

This sounds like a pretty random question, but I can't get rid of the image of that poor fox. Where did he come from?

Desrochers: You can't script a fox like this! Lots of foxes are living in London. One day on the set, this really poor fox came out, I think it got burned. We started filming it, but then never picked up on it again. Until the editor watched all our footage. He realised this fox belonged somewhere in the film, and found the right place for it.

Lily Newmark (playing Leah) is a



rising star, but what about Ola Orebiyi (playing Benji)? He is really something! I was stunned by the closing scene. Nothing happens, but everything is there in the way he walks.

Baynham: We were the first ones to give Ola a job, but in 10 years he'll be playing blockbusters. We grabbed him before he became too big. It wasn't us – with or without us, he would have gone up anyway. Now he got a role in CHERRY (by the Russo Brothers) and in LIMBO (by Ben Sharrock). I should have asked for his autograph.

Desrochers: They both worked in very different ways. Leah is more of a method actor, always in her character, whereas Ola lives such a transi-

tion throughout the movie, that the most important thing was to tell him every time where exactly we were in the story. We had to speak to both of them in a different language.

This film says something about cameras being everywhere, intruding in our privacy.

Desrochers: One of the story consultants from Brixton told us: “On the estates, there are cameras everywhere, watching us all the time. You can make a TV series about our lives based on that footage.” We explored the relationship between the image of yourself that you put online and the person you really are. You build up a persona, selecting the images of something that you want to be and

then you try to imitate that person to try and become that person that you've created online. There is a dialogue between the person you are, the person you want to be and the image you've created. This is what happens to Benji. He is not a gangster, but by being represented as such, he becomes something that he is not.

I was often impressed by the sound of street noises in the background. We do not only see how the city is alive, we can also hear it.

Desrochers: Screen Scene is a superb Irish post production studio. There is this time – quality – money triangle, and there are only two variables you can choose. We wanted quality and we didn't have the money so we chose to use time. This is why it took us three years. Screen Scene was willing to help us, but since we didn't have the money to make them deliver tomorrow, we had to fit our project into their schedule. Everybody involved in this project has really put their heart to it and went further than they were expected.

–
Gert Hermans
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