Spotlight: Jill Bilcock

Written by Daniel Butler
Monday, 28 May 2012 06:18 - Last Updated Sunday, 28 October 2012 06:56

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Editor Jill Bilcock has come a long way since editing her first film on her kitchen table. She has worked with some of Hollywood's most revered directors: Sam Mendes (*Road to Perdition*), Baz Luhrmann (
Strictly Ballroom
,
Romeo + Juliet
and
Moulin Rouge!
), Shekhar Kapur (
Elizabeth
) and P.J. Hogan (
Muriel's Wedding
), to name a few.

 Bilcock stepped into unfamiliar territory with her latest endeavor – the upcoming horror-thriller and Troy Nixey film, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*. Producer/writer Guillermo del Toro's fantastical visions, coupled with the ease-of-use of the Lightworks system, helped her confidently approach the new genre and find her pace and rhythm.

       What influenced your decision to become an editor?
 It was by sheer chance. I was an art student at the Victorian College of Arts in Melbourne, and they introduced a film course into the curriculum. At the end of the course, I was employed by the Australian film director Fred Schepisi and he allowed me venture into whatever aspect of film I wanted to explore; he said I could be a director, a cinematographer, whatever! I started as a producer, but then tried editing and I absolutely fell in love.

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I read something about you cutting your first film on your kitchen table. Can you elaborate?
Well, it was a five-minute film for our course. My subject was on human rights – I used to be quite politically active. We didn't have any equipment – not even a camera. I bought my own 16mm Bolex. I had all the film spread out over a table and was just splicing it together. I used reversal film, so I was holding it up to the light and cutting by eye. We didn't even have anything to view it on!

I also did a lot of the editing in camera. The 16mm Bolex had the ability to rewind so that I could do dissolves and fades in camera and also stop motion so I was able to animate static material.

What has been the most challenging aspect of your editing career?
Finding personal expression through each different director I've worked with, all while trying not to impose too much. All directors have their own way of seeing things, so it's the transitional period from when you first start collaborating to finally understanding their sense of story, style and directorial ambitions.

When did you first start using Lightworks to edit features?
The first time I used Lightworks was in 1994, when I was working on the romantic comedy I.Q. in New Jersey. Coming straight from cutting film to non-linear editing – the Lightworks system was designed specifically for this transition. It has a speed controller that was like a KEM or a Steenbeck. I was able to feel in control, as Lightworks complemented the thought processes I was used to before non-linear editing, when I was cutting film. Lightworks is a film program, which just happens to be run by a computer. It's not like other systems [such as] computers adapted to edit film.

Lightworks' ease of use helped me edit films like Moulin Rouge! [in which] music is a major part of the story. I honestly don't think I would have been able to cut them without Lightworks. You aren't adding frames by numbers or stopping abruptly. Its simplicity and minimal use of the mouse and keyboard allow for a better editing workflow.

Your newest Lightworks-edited feature is the Troy Nixey horror-thriller 'Don't Be Afraid of the Dark'. How did you work with Troy and Guillermo del Toro to define the tone?
Troy, being a first-time director, was something not new to me, having worked with many directors before in this situation. It was great to have his energy and enthusiasm and his fresh take on interpreting the script.

Since editing horror was brand new to me, Guillermo was able to provide me with some really great insight into the rhythm required at times by holding longer onto shots like "the little girl walking barefoot past the creatures."

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What was the typical day like while working on 'Don't Be Afraid of the Dark'? Can you give me a sense of your workflow?
We filmed the entire film in Australia, on 35mm. We developed the film overnight, then telecined and synced to HDCAM. We would view dailies first thing in the morning in the cutting room on an HD projector for Troy and Guillermo. We would then digitize the dailies and break [them] down to edit on the Lightworks.

Where did post-production editing take place?
On the go. Lightworks is very transportable, so we did the majority of the cutting in Melbourne and occasionally we would go visit Guillermo in New Zealand and take it with us there.

There are a lot of nightmarish creatures in the film. What was the VFX process like?
Prior to post and during the shoot, we had to do a lot of collaborating on the previsualization because of how the creatures needed to be integrated into the live action. We were all working together in a studio environment. Our edit room was set up next to the pre-vis guys and the shooting stages were minutes away. We were all able to exchange ideas and discuss problems freely with Troy, the DOP, Oliver Stapleton; and the production designer, Roger Ford. It was quite convenient having that available.

After the footage was shot and the scenes were edited, it was sent to Iloura, a VFX facility in Melbourne. They did a great job on generating the finalized imagery. After the shoot [and] during the post process, we all linked via cineSync from all over the world to finesse the final product.

With VFX, and the progression of technology in general, how do you envision the editor's role in filmmaking evolving?
It doesn't matter how technology progresses – editors are still the ones that generate ideas and imagination, and create that sense of rhythm I've referenced. Obviously, visual effects will become more realistic and advanced, but we still have to bring our individual creativity and sense of story to each film we work on, even decades from now.

You've worked with some amazing directors. Are there any others that you would like to collaborate with on future projects?
Scorsese. I love how he interprets things so individually and brings such a lot to his work in post – and he uses a Lightworks! I also admire Thelma Schoonmaker immensely.

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Why do you think some editors are reluctant to switch to Lightworks?
Through ignorance of producers thinking they have limited choices when it comes to equipment. Also, in the past there was fear of a lack of technical support when Lightworks was smaller. The deal will often have been done before the editor has been hired. This has resulted in a lot of editors already having been channeled down a different path. I have tried the obvious alternatives and know their advantages and disadvantages. I wouldn't be interested in a film if they told me I had to work on a different machine.

What are your thoughts on the Lightworks Open Source initiative, and users having the ability to download it for free?
I think it's a brilliant idea – it's a way to generate buzz… It's truly a great system to work on. Thank you Jill!

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