

FUJIFILM behind the camera



THE LANGUAGE OF THE CAMERA

AN INTERVIEW WITH
GAVIN STRUTHERS

It would be, admittedly, a bit of stretch to call it 'art imitating life'. But when Gavin Struthers was recently shooting *Outpost*, a new British horror-thriller set against the backdrop of the Kosovan war, he may just have experienced the odd sense of *déjà vu*.

His earlier visit to Kosovo was, as the say, the real thing: at the end of the 90s, Struthers was working on a documentary called *Helena & Slobodan*, charting the forensic investigation of a notorious mass grave in an area where the Serbs were still razor-wired off from the Albanians.

To make the comparison with *Outpost* even odder, for the feature film the conflict was actually being recreated far away from Eastern Europe - in a Glasgow studio (Film City, the old Govan Town Hall) and on location in the bitterly-cold midwinter Scottish countryside near Castle Douglas, Dumfriesshire.

However, with an "adrenaline-fuelled, gore-filled" plot involving a group of army mercenaries battling Nazi zombies, the storyline - compared with the 'torn-from-the-headlines', distressing reality of the documentary - was, smiled Struthers, suitably "far-fetched".

Far-fetched perhaps, but the film, which is currently in post-production

following a 'wrap' almost exactly a year to the day after being first conceived as just a five-page outline, is already generating considerable 'buzz' thanks to the internet.

This is due in no small part to the transatlantic appeal of the leading man,



tough guy British actor Ray Stevenson, who has a considerable messageboard following in the States after the success of two series of the epic teleseries *Rome* in which he played the no-nonsense soldier Titus Pullo.

Stevenson co-stars in *Outpost* with Julian Wadham, Richard Brake, Michael Smiley and Enoch Frost. It's the feature directing debut of Steve Barker for whom Struthers has lit almost all his projects - including shorts and music promos - since they were first introduced by one of *Outpost's* producers, Kieran Parker (who was at university with the cameraman), about eight years ago.

Struthers - who has also worked on long-running television drama series like *Holby City* and *Shameless* - clearly revels in their ongoing collaboration: "Steve is a real film geek - I mean that in a good way - who really knows his stuff and knows what he wants to see. It's the greatest thing for a DP to have a director like that who will allow you to add your own experience and also give you a chance to pitch in with your own ideas. He'll then separate the wheat from the chaff, as all good directors should.

Struthers, who'd used Fujifilm for a couple of test commercials he'd mounted some years earlier as well as *Flyfishing* in 2002 (his first of, to date, three features) also decided to opt for the stock when it came to *Outpost*.

"Steve's desired palette was almost monochrome. Any colours he wanted to see were generally autumnal - greens, browns, very deep blacks. However, on top of that, there was one colour, red, he really wanted to ping out especially in one particular sequence. Because red is such an opposing colour to what Fujifilm's palette most famously works with, it picked out the red really well. It really zings, while the other colours are quite muted by comparison.

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Photo main: Cinematographer Gavin Struthers; above: some of the cast of *Shameless*

GAVIN STRUTHERS

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“We shot using mostly the Eterna 400T with also a bit of the Eterna 500T. I also shot without correction because I like that look. There was another, more practical, reason in that we were shooting in the middle of winter and our daylight didn't last very long and there'd be times when we were fighting the light, so I need a stock where I didn't need to correct. Also I knew we'd eventually be going through a DI.

“I have to say that I was delighted with the stock especially in a scene at the beginning of the film when the soldiers go down into a bunker they've just discovered. Steve wanted it lit by just glow sticks so Phil Brookes, the gaffer (“whom I first met on *Shameless* and was a real find”), and I came up with some little 8 watt Fluori tubes.

“The whole sequence was lit by just five of these tubes with the artistes lighting it themselves walking round the set. It was a real test for the stock and it pulled it off brilliantly,” noted Struthers.

There has been a strong practical element to Struthers, born in Manchester but raised in London, ever since his days studying film at Portsmouth University. Most of his contemporaries wanted to be directors but he opted instead for cinematography, which meant that he was in demand straightaway shooting their projects.

Then, following a frustrating period while he tried to break into the industry only to be told that with his experience he was rather too overqualified to be just a runner, he decided to pitch a documentary to Channel 4, via a number of production companies, about a medical assistance organisation he was working for in order to clear his student debts. The result was a two-parter in the prestigious *Cutting Edge* strand.

“They not only bought the idea off me but I also got to shoot some of it – and the money from that helped pay for my first year [of three] at the National Film & Television School.” At the NFTS, he won a Freddie Francis Scholarship and even had the great man closely mentoring him on a 35mm short film, *Ghosthunter*.

After film school, he gravitated mostly towards documentary working on BBC series like *Your Life In Their*

Hands and *Airport* before getting a chance finally to cut his teeth properly in drama (“where I always really wanted to be”) on a soap, *Night & Day*, and then Sky One's popular soccer-themed *The Dream Team*.

This is turn led to call “out of the blue” from BBC's long-running *Holby City* where he'd been asked for by an old NFTS colleague, director Fraser Macdonald. After being cleared by producer Johann Knobel, Struthers joined the team working with not only Macdonald but also about eight other directors over the next six to eight months.

“Documentary had taught me how to operate a camera and tell a story: you were covering the scene and editing it in your head at the same time. You'd be producing the cuts to make the editor's life easier, giving the cut-aways, making them interesting and constantly thinking about the pace of the scene,” he said. “You use the language of the camera in documentary as much as you do in drama.”

That said, Struthers added, *Holby City* was, in fact, very much “a hands-off affair for the DP. You sit at a monitor, have your iris control and there's an operator operating the camera for you. Conveyor-belt TV? Yes, there are probably early to mid thirties' set-ups a day and absolutely no room for being precious. You have to try and get it right first time. If it's not quite what you wanted to see, you'd bite your lip and think to yourself, ‘it's only one scene, which is maybe on the screen for 30 seconds,’ and then make sure you got it right the next time.”

For *Shameless*, Paul Abbott's hit creation for C4 about the colourful life and times of the Manchester underclass, Struthers role was, and remains, strictly “hands-on”. After three successful series, it was felt there was time for some change in the production set-up. Producer Knobel moved from *Holby City* to *Shameless* and took Struthers with him in a general shake-up of heads-of-department.

Returning to his native Manchester, Struthers lit and operated the eight one-hours of series four and is currently ‘prepping’ series five on which he will do half of the 16 episodes.

“It's a very tiring job,” he sighed. “Ironically, the digibeta camera kit, once it's got all its bits on, is a lot heavier than, say, a Super 16 camera kit or, for that matter, an HD camera kit. I'd say that about 90 per cent of the shooting is hand-held and you really begin to feel the weight of this thing on your shoulder. I had to visit the chiropractor twice just to have my neck clicked back in.

“Is it more relaxed that *Holby City*? I wouldn't say that; *Holby* is actually easier to film because you're not operating. But *Shameless* is certainly more fun, which comes from the subject matter.”

Any survey of Struthers' career to date wouldn't be quite complete without at least a brief mention of, in between *Flyfishing* and *Outpost*, his exotic third feature credit. This is the yet-to-be-released *Young Alexander The Great* – one of a number of working titles currently jostling for final billing – which he shot for Lebanese-American director Jalal Merhi.

“We used this amazing studio in Egypt, outside Cairo, called Media City [“the largest film production studios in the Middle East, 10 minutes from the Pyramids”, proclaims the blurb]. It's about four times as big as Pinewood and has fantastic free-standing sets.

“There was a fantastic crew who didn't speak a word of English so you just to communicate with your hands – but they could do anything. The camera equipment did, however, bother me because the lenses were scratched so we persuaded Panavision to ship out some equipment including cameras with Primo lenses. I can't knock doing this film because it was such a great experience.”

Meanwhile, as *Outpost* continues to ‘buzz’ its way to the big screen later this year, Struthers returns north to record the ongoing estate battles between the Gallaghers and the Maguires in lovely downtown Manchester. ■ QUENTIN FALK

■ *Outpost* was originated on 35mm Fujicolor Eterna 400T 8583 and Eterna 500T 8573





Photo main: Ray Stevenson in *Outpost*; above l-r: a scene from *Holby City*; David Threlfall, director and star of *Shameless*; Gavin Struthers with light meter; Director of *Outpost* Steve Barker and Struthers at monitor; *Outpost* intensity