

Short Takes



In *Little Favour*, one of two recent short films shot by James Friend, BSC, Iraq war veteran Ace (Benedict Cumberbatch) helps his commanding officer by hiding his daughter.

Shooting Back-to-Back Shorts

By James Friend, BSC

Although I'm no stranger to either features or television series, I've recently found myself behind the camera for two short films. Each presented its fair share of challenges and opportunities, and as I consider how my collaborators and I approached these projects, I must tip my hat to two mentors who have supported and inspired me for many years: Paul Wheeler, BSC and Phil Méheux, BSC.

The first short, directed by Patrick Viktor Monroe, was *Little Favour*, which stars Benedict Cumberbatch as Wallace, a.k.a. Ace, an Iraq War veteran suffering from PTSD. Seven years after returning home, Ace is unexpectedly contacted by James (Colin Salmon), his erstwhile commanding officer, who now finds himself in deep water with a criminal organization led by Logan (Nick Moran). Having saved Ace's life on the battlefield, James calls in the titular favor, asking Ace to hide his daughter, Lyla (Paris Monroe).

The film marked my first time collaborating with Patrick, who kindly notes, "My vision for *Little Favour* depended on a collaboration with a cinematographer who understood much more than the technical aspects of filmmaking. A deep understanding of the [characters'] inner mood was necessary. James had to be able to evolve as I evolved through the journey toward [the film's] completion."

For my part, I was thrilled with Patrick's script. I hadn't read anything like it in a short format before; it was well paced and well

suited to our current time. When we got the green light for the shoot, Patrick and I were both on other projects, so the majority of our preproduction work was done late at night. We extensively storyboarded key scenes, knowing that we would be working under strict time and location limitations during our four-day shoot.

Faced with those restrictions, I approached my usual team for the film, and I was ecstatic when they all jumped in with equal enthusiasm. Fabrizio Sciarra operated the A camera and Steadicam, with Danny Bishop on the B camera; we were also joined by my longtime gaffer, Sol Saihati, best boy electric Genki McClure, and rigging gaffer Aldo Camilleri.

The film is set entirely at night, which was both visually exciting and technically challenging for a short film with our limited resources. Our camera package included two Sony F65s, which our rental house, Movietech, had recently acquired. Having worked with the F65 before, I was aware of its staggering resolution, which I was keen to reduce, as I'm not a lover of super-sharp imagery. My lenses of choice for the project were Leica Summilux-C primes, partnered with Cooke S4/i primes for super-wide and longer focal lengths when shooting outside of the set. (After principal photography concluded, we also used a Red Epic MX for a few pickups.)

Sol and I put the cameras and lenses through their paces, lighting some test scenes entirely with candlelight and shooting at ISO 1,600, then screening the footage in 4K resolution on a theater screen. The results were stunning. The F65 is a great system that affords a lot of control with an impressive dynamic range. ➤

All images courtesy of the filmmakers.



Top: For the film's finale, Stage 1 at Elstree Studios served as the abandoned warehouse where Ace and Lyla (Paris Monroe) are held by Logan (Nick Moran) and his gang. Middle: Friend lines up a shot. Bottom: The flame from a lighter serves to introduce Ace's commanding officer (Colin Salmon) in the short's opening scene.



For *Little Favour*, we opted to shoot full frame and then crop to our desired 2.40:1 aspect ratio. With the camera's mechanical shutter set to 45 degrees, we captured Sony Raw Lite at 25 fps to 256GB SRMemory cards.

The film called for a lighting style with a large amount of backlight, which can result in unwanted flares if you diffuse optically. So, with digital-imaging technician Pablo Garcia (who also served as the film's final colorist), I decided to add some softening and diffusion digitally. In certain instances, though, I also used a Schneider True-Streak Blue filter, which creates quite an interesting flare on the highlights in the frame and also added a degree of cosmetic softening. (We looked at adding these flares digitally, but found an unconvincing lack of interaction with the flare when the camera was in motion.)

For the film's finale, we shot in Elstree Studios' Stage 1, which served as an abandoned warehouse where Ace and Lyla are held by Logan's gang. The scene contains a lot of action, including a gunfight, which we captured from a 30' Technocrane and a Steadicam shooting 360 degrees. Working closely with production designer Russell De Rozario, we rigged practicals along the walls to give us background highlights. It was vital that we keep our light off the walls to help disguise the fact that we were on a soundstage. ➤





Top: The second short film, *Instruments of Darkness*, is a retelling of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with Sean Bean in the title role. Bottom: Friend captures a medium shot of Bean.



At the time of our shoot, the F65's workflow was still relatively new to the industry. We would not have been able to wrangle all the data and maintain our shooting ratio without the expert team at Mission Digital, who provided us with an on-set grading system that included two SR-PC4 readers, each with 10GB Ethernet PCI cards; a 10TB mini-SAS array (where we kept our working copy); and two external G-Speed RAID drives as secondary and tertiary backups. (Mission Digital also provided LTO-5 archiving.)

The on-set grading system proved invaluable. In between setups or during our lunch break, I would work with Pablo to grade what we'd already shot. Pablo rendered our grades in ProRes 4:2:2 HQ and performed a thorough QC before sending cards back to camera. Pablo notes, "Thanks to Laura Castelli and Ezequiel Sarser from

Assimilate, we created a very consistent color pipeline. I was running the full version of Scratch, and I had an FSI monitor nicely calibrated by Mission Digital."

It was a luxury to view polished dailies, and it gave everyone on set — the director, actors, producers and crew — a real buzz. This system was also beneficial because I was unable to attend the majority of the final grade due to filming commitments in Bulgaria; thanks to the on-set grade, I knew the look was already well established. As Pablo relates, "The re-conform process was one of the smoothest I've ever had. Mission Digital cloned the on-set lab's operating system into the grading suite, so I was using the exact same project as [I was] for the dailies, and all of the dailies grades could be automatically applied to the timeline provided by editor Nigel Galt."

With both production and post

wrapped, I'm relieved to hear this from Patrick: "I could not have asked for a better partner in the process. James' willingness to guide me where needed — and, in turn, to follow — made our collaboration something I am eager to repeat as soon as possible."

The second short, *Instruments of Darkness*, was directed by Vincent Regan, who conceived the project as a way to raise funding for his upcoming feature, *Enemy of Man*. The feature is to be a retelling of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, with Sean Bean in the title role.

As Vincent relates, "We decided the most effective way to gather material for a promo was to shoot selected scenes, and then edit selected shots over Macbeth's famous 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' speech. I knew James' work on *Ghosted*, and I was very keen to use him on this promo."

When you start out with a story as widely known as *Macbeth*, it's critical that you enrapture the audience from the get-go. You need them to be surprised by every twist and turn to ensure their investment in Macbeth's journey. Accordingly, Vincent and I agreed that the project demanded a dramatic period look.

As it is a period piece, I was keen to shoot on film, but the constraints of our budget wouldn't allow it. Instead, we shot with a single Red Epic MX, recording to 64GB RedMag SSD cards with 8:1 compression, and framing for 2.40:1 with



**Top: Duncan (Charles Dance) rides on horseback with the sunset behind him.
Bottom: Stunt coordinator Steve Dent provided the horses.**

Cooke S4 lenses; I'm delighted with the resulting visuals. Working with colorist Lee Clappison and a FilmLight Baselight at London's LipSync Post, we later added film grain in the highlights to help achieve a celluloid look.

We were fortunate to work in the beautiful Hedingham Castle in Essex for our two-day shoot. Although visually stunning, it was somewhat headache-inducing in terms of access, since most of our scenes were shot on the second floor. We lost a lot of shooting time just getting our equipment up the stairs. "James assembled an impressive kit for us," says Vincent. "Dollies, Steadicam, even a crane." Danny Bishop was once again on hand to help with the operating.

"We had no money, but had to gather together some serious elements," Vincent adds. "We called in a great deal of favors. [Stunt coordinator] Steve Dent provided horses on our first day and stunts on the second. [Armorer] Terry English brought his armor up from Cornwall.

"The day before our first shoot day, it snowed," Vincent continues. "The castle location looked fantastic, but as the snow continued to fall, I realized the shoot was in jeopardy, as my cast and crew had to travel out from London the following morning. Mercifully, the snow ceased at midnight, the roads were passable, and everyone assembled."

Two feet came to rest on the ground, but it passed; afterwards, for the remainder of the shoot, we had beautiful sunshine. I love these moments of alchemy, when a potential production problem turns into something visually stunning.

Inside the castle, we lit predominantly with real flames, taking advantage of our lenses' T2 aperture. A lot of the time we had the actors hold their own torches, which we used as their key light. Of course, there are problems that arise with real flame, not least the need for proper ventilation. Additionally, flame bars can be quite noisy. Luckily, for scenes that would play under Macbeth's narration, we were able to shoot MOS at 48

fps, which gave us the opportunity to use as much practical flame as possible. Gary Dodkin, our production sound mixer, was an invaluable asset to the overall film and, indeed, to me, as the final mix betrays none of the noise from these light sources.

To supplement the fire, I rigged 40 100-watt bulbs — dimmed right down for a warm color — to an 8'x4' sheet of wood and wired them to flicker generators. This worked well for wider shots, but because most of the cast wore reflective armor, we could clearly see this static source in closer shots.

We also used very small tungsten and MSR heads, delicately mixing the sources for our day scenes to emphasize the fire, and candlelight to add a soft texture. We further controlled the quality of light with 4'x4' diffusion frames.

One particular moment stands out in my memory of the shoot. We were losing the light, and I made the huge gamble to do a unit move to the far end of the estate in order to get the sun setting in the back of the shot. When you're working with horses and armored costumes, everything moves much slower. But we managed to have Charles Dance (as Duncan) on horseback, with a glorious sunset behind him. Looking through the viewfinder, I knew we had captured something very special. Indeed, this was one of the most satisfying moments of my career so far.

Both Vincent and I saw *Instruments of Darkness* as a great opportunity to experiment with the look we would employ on the feature film. Fortunately, it was an experiment that paid off. The short showcased Vincent's intentions, and all funding for the feature has now been met. As I'm writing this, Vincent tells me, "We start preproduction for the feature this month, and I can wholeheartedly say that without the promo, we wouldn't be in this situation. It was an invaluable tool for attracting investment, and it was beautifully shot by James — who will, of course, be shooting the feature." Good news for me! ●