

## **From dragons and Butterflies to opera singers – the origins of Rosetta**

The idea for Rosetta came about as so many ideas do, as a sudden inspiration. “What if you lived next door to an astronaut or a prince ousted from some far off kingdom or a failed intellectual – and you didn’t even know who they were?” The idea intrigued me for some time during the early months of 2001, but I kept it in the back of mind. During the spring 2001 I was producing the Ugly Bug Ball short which kept me busy. But even then I was casting around for a new feature length project. To a large extent I had my CG fill first with Kingdom and now with Ugly Bug Ball. Any new film had to be CG free with a relatively quick turnaround during postproduction. I was in no mood to spend a year or so standing over the shoulder of the special effects guys rushing to get shots completed. Then in July 2001 the premise for Rosetta presented itself as a good candidate for a very low budget film. The two years of fighting to produce Kingdom was not something I wanted to repeat readily. Yet the irresistible desire to produce a new film was overwhelming. Once you’ve made one, the urge to produce more films is undeniable. Many people will tell you it cannot be done, but here you are, new feature film in hand and the world at your feet... or not as the case might be. The thing with filmmaking is there will always be another. As a creative you cannot dare say “it’s my best work”. It may be your best work to date, but there should always be other ideas bubbling underneath the surface. I call this ‘mental diarrhoea’.

Formal Rosetta story notes were first jotted Tuesday 10 July 2001 – consider this the birth date of the project. From there the months rolled by, my time divided between working on Ugly Bug Ball and researching opera anecdotes. A brief holiday gave me enough time to finalise the Rosetta story chronology. Personally speaking this is one of the key stages in the process of writing a screenplay. The chronology is a synthesis of researched notes, ideas and snatches of dialogue all being melded into a directly accessible chronological timeline when written on paper. In this way each key scene, character introduction and plot point can be placed and their overall impact gauged for best effect. I find this a useful approach as it (usually) prevents the screenplay developing ‘logic bombs’ where you inadvertently write yourself into a corner or create a situation with no reasonable outcome.

This synthesis process coupled with several weeks intensive writing produces what I call Draft 0 (zero). In other words the entire screenplay, spellchecked and ready for critical analysis to iron out the myriad of problems IT WILL HAVE! Rosetta’s draft zero was completed on Thursday 1 November 2001. Revisions continued throughout November until draft one was passed to my good friend Venetia Barton for her opinion. Venetia is an editor and editors usually have a keen eye for story details. In early December 2001 true to her word, Venetia provided many insightful comments though she did not like the material per se, though her comments regarding Rosetta’s dialogue were enormously useful for the re-drafting process.

### **Pre Production**

Then on Thursday 6 December many of the logistical issues behind Rosetta started falling into place and it was then that I committed fully to the project as my next film.

Issues stopping the project moving forward were the availability of DVCAM tape stock, audition rooms and securing the cast and crew. One by one these issues were addressed. On Friday 7 December I finally managed to get a one to one meeting with Andrew Jones the Managing Director of a major Leeds electrical retailer. Andrew very graciously brought me into his office, sat me down and let me pitch the Rosetta story. Then without batting an eyelid he said 'yes' to sponsoring the DVCAM tape stock for the entire shoot. Andrew if you're reading this now – I still can't thank you enough for believing in me and the project and helping us to do something so extraordinary. The momentum was picking up now. A crew call was posted on Shooting People, the filmmakers email digest on Sunday 9 December. There was an excellent response and the first official crew meeting was held in the Wharf Bar, Wellington Street in Leeds on Thursday 13 December 2001. Surprisingly crew members nominated themselves for their own specialisations from day one. Everybody was quite specific about their roles.

As the momentum picked up the organiser in me suffered a new attack of "listitis". It's a condition which causes the afflicted to produce dozens of lists containing dozens of items which must be addressed in order to get the film rolling. My diary for late 2001 is full of notes and lists starting from early November. Another piece of good fortune occurred just in time for Christmas 2001 when Owen Carey Jones kindly agreed to loan the shoot his wide range of lighting equipment and tripod. Owen was enjoying some commercial success with his debut feature Baby Blues and like me he is a Yorkshire based filmmaker. Director of Photography (DP) Sally Kumar was selected to shoot Rosetta on 21 December. Sally showed a willingness to learn and give in return; also the presentation of her work demonstrated attention to detail and a desire to take on new much bigger challenges.

### **Auditions**

To make life easier you must be well organised. Where possible try to use two rooms for this important task. Use one for a reception or waiting area and the other to audition in. Use assistants to greet actors (you will be too busy auditioning) and offer them tea/coffee/water and biscuits. Have lots of bottled water and cups available. Bring the actor through to the audition area and introduce them to the others actors they will be reading with plus your assistants. Remember the actors might look calm, but they are actors and probably nervous as you underneath. Film the auditions – but make sure the actors sign release forms for this purpose. Explain what you want them to do during the audition and the character they will be reading. Have another actor(s) read the other characters. As a director or producer you need to focus on the nascent performance – do not get involved with reading the dialogue yourself. Above all else let the actors feel relaxed and encourage them to make suggestions and explore the character. The auditioning process is exhausting; by the second day of auditions for Rosetta I was drained. For the director there is a lot of repetition and explaining to do, it also helps define the characters in one's own mind.

### **Production**

Casting got underway officially on Thursday 10 January 2002. The auditions were again held in the Leeds film school building in Queens Square (it has recently moved to Leeds Millennium Square). This time round the auditions were filmed on miniDV

for later analysis. This proved an invaluable aid in just watching an actor in non-real time to see how they moved and observing their subtle nuances. None of the actors was given a prepared text as I wanted to see how well they could read from cold; also how they responded to change and improvisation. A few actors squirmed when their characters had to say the “F” word as part of their dialogue.

On the 11 January two actors failed to show up. This caused a minor amount of irritation with another actor booked to read lines against them. A good lesson learned here – if actors say they want to be involved in the technical side of the film I personally would be reluctant to use them. Experience has now taught me they are not committed enough to their trade. They can learn the ropes on someone else’s production – not mine. If you get a gut feeling about someone either as an actor or crew member and you do not like that particular gut feeling – do not use that person. Make sure your actors can fully commit to your shoot irrespective if you are paying them or not. This means they have NO OTHER JOBS during your shoot. A bit harsh? Not really, I have seen the results first hand of principal actors on my shoot yawning and not knowing lines because they were at a part time work in the previous evening. As the Producer/Director I have learned you must be harsh but fair to avoid this. The film will live for many years after the tribulations of principal photography have faded into distant memory. The audience will remember that actors less than sparkling performance for all the wrong reasons. During production a tired actor will slow the shoot down more than any crew member behind the scenes. If the actor cannot remember their lines – because they have not learned them (that part time job again) or are just plain flagging, the shooting has to stop to accommodate this. Time moves on and the shooting day respects no one!

As a general rule if you are shooting on a femto-budget, make sure the crew and cast know to have a good breakfast before coming on set. Sounds silly but its not. If there is no provision to feed people, well they will get hungry very quickly. Blood sugar levels will drop and performance starts flagging. Yup, this also happened on Rosetta. Once again the crew were pretty much bomb proof though I probably had more time to address them as a body and point out such issues. The actors were never assembled as a whole unit so it would be easy to forget to mention the breakfast rule. ‘Oh you’re an actor, but you can’t face breakfast in the morning - that’s fine, just don’t let me see you flagging on my set when we work together!’ On a no/low budget film these basics will assist the shoot in running smoothly. Of course all this comes as hindsight for me...

On Tuesday 13 January Alan Bucknall the editor and I discussed the editing system and the approach we were planned to take. All indications looked like Rosetta would have more footage shot than Kingdom. This would cause a problem with the edit systems 90Gb of storage. Today that figure is laughable, but even a few years ago large hard drives were still relatively expensive.

More casting on Friday 18 January. The alarm bells were ringing mildly at this stage. The start of shooting was looming but I still did not have a convincing Rosetta or Eddie the main male lead. I did want to use a black actor for Eddie especially as Paige Phillip had already been cast as Eddie’s screen daughter. Paige is a very talented actor with a great career ahead of her. Finally on Friday 25 January – the weekend before commencing principal photography I cast Dan Martell Gardiner as Eddie. The

following day I cast Louise Graham as Rosetta alongside BB Wellsted as motorcycle mechanic Beth. Louise had seen an article in the Yorkshire Post newspaper describing my desperate search for a leading lady. On Sunday 27 January, Gisela the Non-linear editing machine gave up the ghost and broke down. We were off to a flying start!

### **The shoot**

Principal photography commenced on Monday 28 January 2002 in The Polar Beer record shop Leeds. The crew were assembled early but we could not get into the location as the owner did not show up until 8:30 AM. A freak hail storm had everybody cowering for cover. Unbeknown to the production the arcade which houses Polar Beer Records also houses a very noisy ornamental clock. Can you see what's coming? Every 15 minutes this clock would chime, necessitating a break in shooting to work around this extraneous sound. The original actor booked to play the Dame Marilyn Baker role pulled citing the offer of paid work. In my book once you commit to a project you word is your bond. I would never want to work with that actor again or recommend them to other filmmakers. Luckily a Kingdom alumnus Stephanie Greswell was cast and she delivered a pitch perfect performance. The first day of shooting wraps at 6:30 PM

We're off...

The following days are a focused battle to get good coverage and multiple set ups. Sally Kumar proved to be an excellent choice and works incredibly hard to service my needs as Director. In fact the whole crew gel very quickly and people work really hard to make the shoot happen even at this very early stage. I am keen not to abuse the crew's good wishes and vigour and try to ensure there is time for lunch and breaks along with sensible evening wraps. Martin Buchan and Maggie Marsden shoot their scenes in the record shop. Both actors are consummate professionals and are a joy to work with. Days like this move fast as I have time to shoot coverage from many angles then consider additional shots in the remaining time. My method of creating shot lists soon falls into a pattern of working on the scenes the night before (story boards are too limiting for non-effects work) compiling a list of shots I want. Then on set the following morning, the crew is briefed so everybody knows how each scene will be shot. We finish all scenes at Polar Bear records slightly ahead of schedule. Yippee!

Thursday 31 January and the unit moves to Eddie and Rosetta's screen house for a big portion of the shoot. The atmosphere is relaxed. The building is quite and a great place to work. Because the kit is being kept there overnight some items can be left set up. In this location, I have time to think and really get the shots I want. Having a First Assistant Director would not really help the cause on this shoot as the crew is fairly small and the location is self contained. It's like filming in your own house. This feeling of calm permeates everything. The shots of Rosetta tapping her feet to Eddie's various music tracks is filmed on that Thursday afternoon on a improvised low level camera rig.

Monday 4 February – spent a whole morning shooting the dinner party scene with the Adrian, Marzelle, Sylvester, Eddie and Rosetta characters. My little TV monitor starts playing up and the problem is later attributed to a faulty power supply unit (£45 pounds to replace – ouch).

On Tuesday 5 February, casting continues during the shoot when I cast Irvine Theaker to play Mr Kaminski, Eddie's mouse loving neighbour. Wednesday 6 February, a long day today – two major scenes interspersed with two minor scenes. Surely a career flipping burgers has to be more desirable than this right now!

Thursday 7 February – Rosetta's surprise birthday scene. This entailed using seven actors. Everything I've ever said about not needing a First AD – I now retract. It's like herding sheep. The actors all want to go in different directions. Eventually I get the coverage I want although I was never really happy with the shot of Paige Phillip shouting "Surprise" as she leaps from the other room.

We pack in four key scenes on Friday 8 Feb. First scenes with Irvine Theaker. He's brilliant and gives the exact tone I'm looking for. Continuity person Richard Dilks heads off to Edinburgh after the 5:55 PM wrap. The Gayle Farnell character is still not cast, but there is only one person I want for this role - Leigh Gardner (WISDOM's voice in Kingdom). Leigh agrees to appear and another piece of Rosetta's huge jigsaw glides into place.

Saturday 9 February -Will Young wins Pop Idol. I don't know why I was watching it.

Sunday 19 February – Louise Graham rings to cancel Monday through to Wednesday. She says she's ill. I hold an emergency crew meeting. The choices are clear;

- Put schedule on hold for the sake of one actor
- Cut Rosetta's part
- Reschedule

Only the second option is viable and I seriously begin to re-jig the story to introduce Rosetta's long lost daughter Francesca. This re-write shifts the onus onto the new character without destroying the film's emotional angst. Besides, getting this huge project rolling just to have it shut down seems like a wasted opportunity which I am not prepared to let happen.

"Ken what happened to your last film?"

"Oh I had a few problems and lacked the will to sort them out".

Not likely to happen any time soon.

Tuesday 12 February – I found an empty room in the film school, deconstructed a copy of the Rosetta screenplay and started a major re-write. Through the re-writes and various changes the screenplay is now draft ten. On Sunday 17 February I had the producer's unenviable task of informing Louise I had rewritten the screenplay and excised her role. Its this or the whole film collapses.

After this major alteration, the rest of the shoot runs very smoothly in the main. Luckily the prime crew remained on board with the new addition of Gordon Linton as the Boom operator. Helen Grady was cast as Rosetta's screen daughter Francesca. Helen immediately impressed me with her insights of the character and her ability to bring subtle traits to Francesca. Going with my gut feeling, Helen pretty much had the part within ten seconds of me meeting her. I wish all casting was this straight forward.

Wednesday 27 February – shoot Sam Chapman and Sarah Henson in a verbally brutal scene just outside Leeds city centre. Sam absolutely nails his character “Fly” the drug pusher. Sarah is also tone perfect and gives an insight into her talents for later scenes.

Friday 1 March – filmed in plush Leeds restaurant Casa Mia. This was a location I did not expect to get so it was doubly joyous to be shooting in there. The staff made no concession to our shooting and continued making noise. Much of this audio can be smoothed over in post, but its not ideal. Carlos Cogul who played the Snooty waiter has a GBP62 pound train ticket. Ouch again.

Monday 4 March – filmed key scenes with Stephanie Greswell’s character Dame Marilyn Baker in Gilly Careys’ plush penthouse flat. What a location. Thanks Gilly. Does the film do it justice? There is a surprising amount of wind noise which our microphones pick up. Clive Aitken supplies GBP1700.00 pounds worth of audiophile turntable for the scene where opera critic Stephen Le Graf (played by Anthony Berowne) listens to his newly acquired Rosetta vinyl.

Onwards...

Tuesday 5 March – filmed opening scenes in Leeds Malmaison doubling for a directors club in London. In the afternoon we shoot long scene with Stephanie Greswell and Helen Grady. Stephanie’s character reveals historical details about Rosetta’s life to an unsuspecting Francesca (Helen).

Monday 11 March – key climatic scene altered as Dan Gardiner fails to show up on set. The scene is hastily reworked with Helen Grady playing against Sarah Henson and it works marvellously! The crew don’t miss a beat. Sarah even does ‘business’ with a flower prop that we capture in one long take. High wind noise means a lot of audio tweaking in post.

Tuesday 12 March – Alan Bucknall borrows Julian Butler’s Sony DVCAM deck to begin batch digitising footage to the edit suite.

Wednesday 13 March – Scenes with Dan and Paige in Leeds central library.

Major fall out with one crew member on Thursday 14 March – I’ll live and the only important thing is getting the shoot completed in an unfussy, professional manner. The crew stand by me – obviously I’m not such an ogre as is being made out.... Later that person removes themselves from the production. They are not missed.

Monday 18 March – Excellent shots of Paige climbing the spiral staircase on location.

It’s wrap day; Friday 22 March – Louise Graham returns to shoot a sequence for Francesca’s dream. Wrap day feels anti-climatic but it should be this way. Overall the drama and tensions were played out for the viewers benefit on screen, not behind camera. An informal wrap party is held at my place. I’ve been promising the crew ‘beer and sausages’ since day one and today I come good.

Monday 25 March – some second unit work with Helen Grady and Sally Kumar shooting. We film scenes of Helen’s character leaving her London home to visit

Leeds to find Rosetta. Mercedes Benz of Harrogate kindly agrees to supply a sporty Mercedes coupe – then forget to actually turn up! Luckily after a few phone calls Dirk the driver arrives in a new car and these final shots are completed.

Louisa Bertolatti a contact I made through Shooting People provides some background scenes shot in her native Italy for inter-cutting. [The airports X-Ray scanner gives the tape massive drop outs but Alan Bucknall cuts around these.]

### **Post production**

The edit progresses. I leave Alan entirely to his own devices. Actually I'm enjoying the break and the fact that someone else is worrying over the footage. What does begin to occupy our minds though is the growing problem with the lack of hard drive capacity. Finally it reaches a point where I must contact my original business angel investor James Ritchie (who serves as Associate Producer on Rosetta) to see if he can help secure new hard drives. Sure enough James pays us a visit, assesses the problem and agrees to cover the cost of the extra hard drives we need. In one fell swoop this allows the production to more than double the NLE's storage capacity to over 300 Gigabytes.

Friday 17 May – Episode II Attack of the Clones opens in the UK.

Monday 17 June – I sit with Alan after he shows me his first working cut of Rosetta. He has nailed ninety percent of the story. Now its time for director and editor to work together. Between Friday 28 June and Wednesday 3 July we continue to work on the fine cut. Alan could turn the consumption of coffee into a new Olympics sport! A corrupt file causes Gisela to crash several times until the culprit is found (a shot of Helen Grady walking into her kitchen after Sarah Henson's character robs her) and redigitised.

I work by myself on a new Rosetta intro montage into the small hours of Tuesday 23 July. Persistent Gisela NLE problems cause delays until they are finally cured on Sunday 4 August.

Thursday 8 August - Miramax ring to say they would like to see Rosetta! They saw a listing in Screen International's production listing.

Francesca's dream sequence took 21 hours and 40 minutes to render.

Friday 16 August – Rosetta intro scene pickups with Emma Marsden as Tessi Fernado and Marco Sarias as Young Claudio Bergatti standing in for the original actor. Because of their strong resemblance, nobody notices the two actors playing Young Claudio are different people! The second floor of Leeds central library stands in for an Italian hospital circa 1960. Adam Myers an ex-film school colleague kindly helps out.

Tuesday 20 August – Additional pick up scenes with Dan Gardiner. The final CG shots arrive on Friday 23 August from Arif Majothi at Dark Raven Digital. These CG shots and the final picture elements are cut in by 1:50 AM Sunday 25 August. Yes that's right - Sunday AM! However an interlace problem with the CG footage

persists. When shown on television the shot possesses a distracting flicker. The effects shots have to be reworked. The amended CG shots are collected on Saturday 31 August and I'm up until 1:40 AM the following morning cutting them in.

Friday 13 September – Yet more pick up shots of Rosetta after she is upset and rushes out of Eddies record shop. I travel over to Scarborough and spend the day shooting Louise Graham who very easily slips back into the role.

Monday 7 September – Rosetta is completed bar minor tweaks to the credits roller. The film is screened to Sally Kumar, Alan Bucknall and Gordon Linton. A unanimous vote says the scenes with Claudio Bergatti “stink” and need to be re-shot. The re-shoot is scheduled for November 5. A new Claudio (Martin Brooke-Taylor) is cast. Martin’s acting contribution is fabulous and the film now has the emotional oomph put back in.

Rosetta: Prima Donna Assoluta is finally completed on Tuesday 12 November at 2:11 AM The following day it is printed to DVCAM tape for archive.

Friday 31 January 2003 – The black tie gala premiere of Rosetta: Prima Donna Assoluta is held at the Leeds Metropolitan Hotel.

Footnote: Whether your film is a roaring success or fails to sell even one copy, you will have learned many invaluable lessons. Cherish this experience. These lessons cannot be learned from a book or by talking about making a film.