

## **Casting authenticity: working with student actors to re-create reality**

CILECT conference - WORKING WITH ACTORS. HFF, Munich 17/19 November 2015

Professor Christopher Morris  
Falmouth University.

### **Start with screening:**

#### **1:24 – Fog of Sex INTRO**

Set up project

- A short animation. Would not address the breadth of experience or maximize impact.
- Documentary – on solid ground/safe territory – Voices would be gathered and used in their raw form - but the interviews that were beginning to be collected were promised anonymity.
- Drama – In the early stage of research gathering I thought that re-interpretation of the gathered voices would be a possible way forward. Spoke with the writer Owen Sheers.
- Drama/Documentary – As the weight of voices mounted it became abundantly clear that I had to find a way to allow the voices – unaltered – to speak. Dramatic interpretation (the mixing of stories) would in the end water down the potential impact)

The form of the drama doc was and is fluid. However, the notion of actors reconstructed voices – actors recasting the documentary interviews in a hybrid form was the way I have chosen to take the project forward.

The final project – a drama documentary, 60 mins in length, a website.  
Funding – a lottery bid led to a 50K budget.

I made initial interview based films for website featuring the academics – then we began to look for the stories for the 60 minute film.

People engaged with the academic study and were introduced to the idea of the film – Respondents to the study were asked if they would like to take part in a film project – and we had a team of researchers looking for stories. (Student led researcher team)

Interviewed 14 sex workers – 9 scripts chosen, transcribed. Transcriber's were told to faithfully add in all intermation. eg/exact words/pauses etc.

The initial research films were then deleted – and from then on I was only working with text.

The interviews were cut and in some cases, sentences were re-ordered for clarity, but all the words in the film were taken from the original research interviews.

Initially thought I might make a straight drama – but the interviews were so good I decided on drama doc form – led by the words contained in the interviews.

TEST SHOOT –

I needed to answer a number of questions – which would help dictate the form. Could I hold attention with monologue? Could inexperienced actors be convincing? What would drama reconstruction look like?

So, chose a segment of script – worked with an actor who was a recent graduate and completed a test scene in a day shoot.

TEST proved concept – now I wanted to hear/get feel of full script.

Everything depended on performance.  
I wanted to produce a highly visual piece....

NEWPORT READTHROUGH.

I needed to HEAR the words go through the blood, bones and mind of actors.

Working with volunteers from performing arts (who had the script for a day or two), I assigned parts on a semi random basis. I chose certain people to read for certain parts because I'd met them – spoken at length and had full discussion about the stories and watched them as a group.

Producers took notes.

From this session – three actors impressed.

The search for the cast:

We then put adverts out through SPOLIGHT and received over 2,000 applicants.

I think this says something about the paucity of good roles for young female actors.

These are good roles – some would put you on screen – in monologue style for 5/10 mins. Although our film covered a subject of a sexual nature – there was to be no sex or nudity in the film, there was light/shade and depth in the piece. It would be thought provoking not provocative.

Castings: were held in Cardiff, London and Newport. With around 50 potential actors. Virtually all actors were recent graduates.

I began by talking to them at length about the part – **this was the most important part of the process** – they're views/insight was key

Potential actors were sent the FULL script and were required to choose the part they would read for – by placing the responsibility on the actor to 'choose' they're preferred part, we got interesting juxtapositions between what we expected they'd go for – and what they did but also where their empathy lies – vital. One actor was asked to read for another part.

Choices were made on:

- Realness/ordinariness/ naturel-ness also. Embodiment – not in looks - but in spirit.
- Need people with no track record.
- Intelligence was the overriding factor in the casting – their understanding of the person – the dilemma – the matter of fact nature – the life – the stigma – the reality
- If I found myself transported back to the original research interview – and lost sight of the script.

The 9 parts were cast. 5 recent graduates and 4 current students. One actor had no formal training.

1st half of film made up of 5 shorter stories – but last 30 mins of film carried by two actors – key appointments.

Lucy (playing Anna). Studied Fine art at Oxford – and no acting training. Fierce intelligence in her reading of the porn story – but I saw potential and asked her to read Anna.

Peta (playing Posie) Casting her was a real risk – she was a YII acting student – never been in front of a camera. I was advised by producer against casting her – but something was speaking to me. Vulnerable, a daughter-like qualities.

## REHEARSALS

Actors never saw the original filmed material – I'm the only person with the full picture. I gave them an idea of their circumstance but nothing else. I was the conduit – both as interviewer and director.

## STOP ACTING.

Technique was to talk about the character – not to how to act it. I don't know that – I make documentaries – I have a nose for authenticity perhaps. When things worked, we noted it – and I allowed them rope to go where they felt comfortable.

I've never used the word VERBATIM with this production – faithfulness to ever umm and err was less important to me than authenticity of voice.

Stillness was important.

All rehearsals done one to one. Very much chats and discussions. It was these discussions that were key to unlocking performance.

Allowed them latitude to play in words – verbatim not a word I've sued – performance and authenticity – interplay.

I was to become an actor in my own film and had to re-watch the original filmed interviews. My presence in the film was vital – for interaction.

## THE SHOOT

Make-up and hair dept. had to be reminded that this must appear like a documentary and that their function was different to the usual fiction norms.

Costume – actors were encouraged to use their own clothes. They felt comfortable and real.

Schedule designed around screen time for actor delivery.

Two styles – doc interview recreation – in which the actors were talking directly to me – and reconstruction sequences where they talk into the lens. The first felt like documentary – the second technique felt intimate and the audience as witness.

Takes would be long – running through the whole thing or big sections – even if there were mistakes or passages which were not great – we'd carry on – or stop and pick up.

Little to cut away too – so delivery had to be spot on.

Actors did not interact with others. First time many of them met was at the cast/crew screening.

Shooting style geared to maximise acting time – no camera movement, no complex shots.

The fact that many had not been in front of a camera before was an asset – the uncomfortable nature of the situation was caught on camera in the interview sections.

During the shooting my role as a participant in the film was to provide someone for the actors to interact with – in this way I could throw them curved balls by

interrupting or asking the questions (they knew were coming) in a differing order so that their reactions were fresh or appeared natural.

REVIEW

*“The considerable talent in front of the camera weaves a watchable web of empathy-invoking conviction and charm. It doesn’t seem to matter what humanity they were asked to perform: confident naivety, strong-hearted fragility, or optimistic regret. It seems a cliché, but there were occasions on which I had to remind myself that the real sex workers were not on screen”.*

\*\*\*\* The Metropolist Magazine. Phil Sutcliffe-Mott.

EMAIL from one of the sex workers – on seeing herself portrayed by an actor (Lucy)

*“I feel very privileged that even though i daren't tell people what i do, that you have told my story for me. That feels very empowering. I am so grateful that you took my story so seriously and i can see that in the film...and its something i will carry with me for a long time. And basically i just want to say that it means a lot to me.*

*I have found a lot of comfort having my story told and actually knowing the film was being made has played a really big part in helping me deal with the secrecy which drives me crazy. Because in a way lots of people do know about my other life now. And i cannot describe that feeling.*

*I am really glad and privileged that I shared my shit with you”.*

	The team	The actors	The film
Pre Production	<p>Advert – 2,000 replies</p> <p>Paucity of good roles</p> <p>Interesting the way people/women advertise themselves.</p> <p>Interviewed 14 sex workers – 9 scripts chosen and boiled down.</p>	<p>Need people with no track record.</p> <p>Student crew, student subject – looking for recent grads- and students</p> <p>Students found in read through – to hear the script in voices.</p> <p>Intelligence was the overriding factor in the casting – naturel-ness also. Embodiment – not</p>	<p>Originally a drama based on the interviews – but the interviews so strong in themselves that we decided to keep it simple. Use the words – actors.</p> <p>The script was prepared so that we intercut across themes.</p>

		<p>in looks but in spirit.</p> <p>If I found myself transported back – and lost sight of the script.</p> <p>Castings: Cardiff, London and Newport. 50 ish...</p> <p>Potential actors send FULL script and required to choose the part they would read for – this way we got Interesting juxtapositions between what we expected they'd go for – and what they did but also where their empathy lies – vital. One person was asked to read for another part.</p> <p>Newport student reading through – I chose certain people to read for certain parts because I'd met them – spoken at length and had full discussion about the stories and watched them as a group. 3 emerged.</p> <p>Virtually all actors – were first timers. 1st half of film made up of 5 shorter stories – but last 30 mins of film carried by two actors – key appointments. Lucy – studied Fine art at Oxford – and no acting training. Fierce intelligence in her reading of the porn story – but I saw</p>	<p>For the shoot though I broke it back down into coherent individual scripts.</p> <p>Everything depended on performance. Wanted to produce a highly visual piece....</p> <p>All rehearsals done one to one. Very much chats and discussions. It was these discussions that were key to unlocking performance.</p> <p>Actors never saw the original material – I'm the only person with the full picture. I gave them an idea of their circumstance but nothing else. I was the conduit – both as interviewer and director.</p> <p>Reaction of real people to their portrayal...see below.</p> <p>Keeping make up and hair dept at bay.</p> <p>Costume – a lot</p>
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		<p>potential and asked her to read Anna. When ...  Read Posie I was transported. REAL RISK – a YII student – advised by producer against – but something was speaking to me. Vulnerable, a daughter-like qualities.</p> <p>TRUST - massive</p> <p>STOP ACTING.</p> <p>Sat in taxi with the actor – about to enter a house to have sex. Before the interview sequence I reminded her of those feelings.</p> <p>Technique was to talk about the character – not to how to act it. I don't know that – I make documentaries – I have a nose for authenticity perhaps. When things worked we noted it – and I allowed them rope to go where they felt comfortable. I've never used the word VERBATIM with this production – faithfulness to ever umm and err was less important to me than authenticity of voice.</p> <p>Stillness was important.</p> <p>The REAL words definitely connected with the actors – real</p>	<p>of their own clothes used.</p> <p>Schedule designed around screen time for actor delivery.</p> <p>Me being in film was vital – for interaction.</p> <p>Two styles – doc interview recreation – talking to me – INTERVIEW and reconstruction sequences where they talk into the lens. INTIMATE</p> <p>Takes would be long – running through the whole thing or big sections – even if there were mistakes or passages which were not great – we'd carry on – or stop and pick up.</p> <p>Little to cut away too – so delivery had to be spot on.</p>
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		performance.	
Production	During shooting my role – for actors to interact with – threw them curved balls – interuupting.	Allowed them latitude to play in words – verbatim not a word I’ve sued – performance and authenticity – interplay.	Actors did not interact with others. First time many of them met was at the cast/crew screening.  Shooting style geared to maximise acting time – no camera movement, no complex shots.
Post production			Editor urged me to keep them as individual stories.
Distribution			The flexibility of delivery outputs is key. Long takes and simple shot structure – the film was always devised so that it could be broken down into shorter individual stories. BBC 3 have commissioned a series of themed shorts – money, stigma, security, etc), The full film will be broadcast on the Community Channel and possible radio and also theatre?

Directed by documentary filmmaker Christopher Morris and based on exhaustive research interviews, FOG OF SEX (a 60 minute drama/documentary) brings to the screen, real life testimonies of students currently working within the UK sex industry.

This collaborative film made by Newport Film School and The Centre for Criminal Justice at Swansea University, recreates the stories of nine female student sex workers. To preserve anonymity the sex workers are played by actors, all the dialogue however is verbatim, drawn directly from the interview transcripts.

Over 2000 professional actresses applied for 9 roles and this presentation will explore in detail the casting process, which in the end resulted in 5 of the roles cast to student actors who had never before performed in front of a camera. Documentarian Christopher Morris explores his process to re-create reality.

*"The considerable talent in front of the camera weaves a watchable web of empathy-invoking conviction and charm. It doesn't seem to matter what humanity they were asked to perform: confident naivety, strong-hearted fragility, or optimistic regret. It seems a cliché, but there were occasions on which I had to remind myself that the real sex workers were not on screen".*

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Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M5Ajq2koMo>

Morris will show short clips from the actual casting sessions and the final film.