CRAFTING THE WICCAN TRAILER

From early inception, Wiccan has grown into a production aimed at network or download television. This is a high concept character drama within a historical setting that seeks to tell a story of people caught up in extraordinary events that, though terrible, were not unexpected for the period. Working closely with the concept creator, (Valerie Oliver) I put a spin on the events to give a darker meaning and embellished Val’s idea for the central conflict in the story.

Once the initial script had evolved through several drafts and I’d written a prequel script to tell the story of what happens before the main event, a new pilot emerged that utilized sections of the prequel and combined them with the original pilot episode to create a new story: deeper, richer, and more engaging.

I created the series bible for the original pilot episode and from that central document – yet it wasn’t enough. Val made contact with Ed, a producer in America, who suggested we make a trailer to promote the script, a “calling card” if you will.

The stage was set- we were making a trailer.

1. Initial script.

The story of Wiccan begins, without giving too much away, with the theft of a box containing information that falls into the wrong hands. That one act drew me more than any other- if the story began with that act, then why not use that act for the trailer? After all, that one act should introduce the audience to the wider story, and thus it became appropriate to use that event to promote the series to production companies and investors to raise the budget to make the series.

Rather than take a section from the original draft script, I retold a section to make the trailer script, running in total to just on three pages in length. In film and television, the base rule of thumb indicates that one page equals one minute of screen time, so we had our guidelines- we were to make a trailer no more than three minutes long to effectively tell anyone who saw it all they needed to know about the story.

1. Setting.

The story is set in an English peasant coastal village in 1590 and tells the story of Rachel, a powerful witch living in a Christian community who, when faced with the inevitable destruction of her village, turns to her arts to open a door for help. The problem is, she can’t control the events that follow.

You may think it strange that a witch is living in a Christian community but in the Elizabethan times, almost every village had a wise woman or witch. The church didn’t mind because the witch came with everyone else on Sunday and prayed to the Christian God and put money on the plate when they had it. Puritanism evolved around this time, and this fascinating era marks the beginning of the end of witchcraft as an “open” way of life in our history, but in 1590 there were as many villages who persecuted witches as there were villages who ignored them, used them, and turned to them to cure ailments. In fact, medicine was so barbaric in England, many preferred using the witch.

One court advisor to Queen Elizabeth I was once asked: “where does the spiritual heart of England lie?” He answered thus: “the nobility boasts that they are profoundly Protestant, after the fashion of our glorious Queen; the gentry is Protestant until it becomes necessary to become Catholic to protect their necks, and the commoners don’t care if they are Protestant or Catholic as long as they survive, and use as many pagan practices as they will. They see no harm in praying at Church on a Sunday, then consulting the local witch to cure a headache.”

1. The story of the trailer

The script calls for Rachel to complete a magical ritual in her cottage. This summons a storm, wrecks a ship upon the shore, and she is first at the scene that sunset to realize in horror, just what she has done.

1. Economics

Films cost money- and we did everything to a tight budget of £750.00 ($900 - $1000) in total. While we would love to have had CGI and a cast of thousands, economics always takes priority, so the script was written to balance economic limits with the practicality of shooting a dynamic and engaging storyline.

Consequently, certain things had to go.

They say never work with children or animals, but I’ve heard filmmakers also add “background noise, overhead planes, cars, mobile phones and the weather” onto that list. Therefore, the initial thought in the trailer script was either a) tell the story with recorded sound or b) don’t record any sound at all, film in silence (therefore it doesn’t matter what the background noise is) and ADR voices over the top.

The second option costs less and allows more control over the story. It also fit my needs in another way.

The story is comprised of three scenes: 1) Rachel’s ritual, 2) Rachel scours the beach and rescues Luther (a former witch-hunter and swordsman), and 3) Rachel tends to Luther in her cottage, and they have a conversation about who he is and why he was on that ship. That was the first draft scene I wrote for Val back when we began collaborating on the project, and it seemed appropriate that this is the very scene to be used as the trailer.

Therefore, this fell into place: film 1) and 2) live, then record the conversation from 3) and use that as the audio track over the events in the trailer- thus you don’t film 3) at all, but you record it.

The script written, it was time to go to the next stage- usually done in heist movies by a montage called “assembling the team” to catchy music.

1. Assembling the team (play any music you want when reading this bit)

So there I was, standing on a balcony in Paris, surrounded by five sharp-suited professionals planning the job. No, wait, that’s “Inception”- we were three people in a pub off the Rainford bypass. Less glamorous, but still essential.

Tim Follin was first- the cornerstone of the entire production. Tim used to create soundtracks for Amiga computer games early in his career, got into advertising as a cinematographer, and came on board with a high-spec D-SLR camera. His initial thought- film in High-Definition (which allows slow motion) or film in 4k, which doesn’t? I asked him to plan for both. Tim and I discussed, proposed, and factored as much as we could, and he wanted to bring in Amber as producer.

Amber Hooker is a rising star: talented, gifted, and both lives and breathes health and safety considerations and came on board with a ton of unseen work in the planning stages. It’s testament to the success of the project that Amber did so much behind the scenes to narrow down the options and help us create our plan- because if you shoot without a plan, you’re dead. At that meeting we identified that the beach scene was the most problematic, so we would focus on that one first and then follow with the ritual scene at a later date. Filming out of sequence is nothing new, after all.

It’s easy to attend on the day and think “that went easily” but anyone involved in this process knows how much work has gone into the planning stages in the quiet hours, days and weeks before the shoot so that the day itself does run like clockwork – and even then there are hitches!

Tim introduced Amber to me at a Starbucks off the M61 – again, not as romantic as a balcony in Paris, but beggars can’t be choosers. One very useful production meeting later and we were set. We needed two locations- a beach, and a Tudor period cottage.

While I started asking around for help on the acting front, Amber put out an advert for the cast and a Facebook request ended up attracting contact by way of a random phone call late one night from a great actor named Marcus.

With our initial intention being to film in February, we did a location scout in January, and I introduced them to “the beach location” in the freezing cold. The blustery wind blew surf from the waves; the damp sand squelched underfoot, and water seeped in through a timeworn pair of walking boots I wore for the day. The Alpha site location was perfect, and nearby we found an equally good Beta site with a view of a building that could double as the village church in the final (pilot, not trailer) script.

Then delays set in. Filming schedules, availability, there was a host of reasons, and as each became sorted out, February passed into March, and April came and went. We finally settled on a Sunday shoot and originally planned to go through the night. However, as the shooting day approached, Tim changed his mind about the night shoot and wanted to shoot “day for night” instead- a process by where you film in the day but can alter the palette to make it look like night in post-production.

1. Props and preparations

At this point, Jayne enters the story. Jayne, (or “Mad Jayne” as she is affectionately known) is a loveable eccentric and former head of a theatrical wardrobe department. She’s done costumes for me before and set about this one with enthusiasm sometime in the February (once we realized we would never keep to that original shooting date). Jayne researched the period clothes, and we both came to the same conclusions:

This is a story about peasant villagers in Elizabethan England.

Peasant clothing hasn’t changed that much from dark ages to medieval to Elizabethan.

They’re a coastal village who no doubt forage on the shoreline, fish, and gather what they can.

So if you’re hanging around on the beach, you wear shoes for church and probably a few other times in the week, but the rest of the time you’re going barefoot. So for cost and historical accuracy, shoes went out of the window, and all Jayne had to do was focus on the costumes.

By this point, my list of villagers and sailors had grown to around twelve (although two dropped out just before and one on the day), so Jayne had her list of approximate sizes emailed to her from each person directly and she did a fantastic job of coordinating everyone. Sadly, we ended up with two costumes too many, but hey- that’s the nature of the beast.

Enter Catherine.

I’ve known Cath for years; she’s a fantastic friend and a gentle soul- she also has a wonderful sword collection including two period rapiers that would fit perfectly. Cath agreed to lend me one of the rapiers for the shoot (to distinguish Luther as a swordsman and not just a sailor) and her husband Rob threw in a walking staff for Rachel to use as a prop.

When I arrived to borrow the sword, her house has such a collection of finely gathered items that I fell in love with the contents and asked her if we could “borrow the contents of her home” for the second shoot- the ritual in the cottage.

1. A view to a kill.

Part of the trailer involves the concept of “Wrecking law”- if a shipwrecked upon the beach, the locals were allowed to take what they want as long as God had taken the crew. If any of the crew survived, the locals were forbidden to salvage by law. So before the militia arrived to secure the wreck, any villagers would make sure the crew had gone to God- whether the crew wanted to or not. This was a sad and brutal fact of the period- not all villages did this and no doubt plenty of sailors joined in the looting to remain alive, but it’s a factor of this story, and it makes great filmmaking.

In short, there’s a lynching scene pivotal to the trailer.

My first selection of “guy to be killed” unfortunately couldn’t make it due to personal reasons, so I turned to DC. Not the comics, but he’s no less of a hero.

1. Dave Cairns- the hero.

I have a degenerating back condition (in real life, not in the story), and I know too many Dave’s, so when Dave Cairns came on the scene, he became christened “DC” for short. He was my personal trainer who has single-handedly kept my back from getting worse, a fantastic friend, an adopted little brother, and we’ve studied, researched and trained together in historical sword fighting techniques for years. We’ve also done archery together, and the occasional evening’s knife-throwing (at targets, not each other!)

DC stepped in when I asked, “Dave, can I kill you on film?”

He thought for a moment, mulled over the thought, and came back with “when?”

I told him the date, he shrugged, and said: “nothing better to do on a Sunday- might as well get killed for a living.”

DC became an integral part of that one shot from that point on. He would be our drowned sailor, the victim of a lynch mob, and we discussed basic choreography regarding what sort of shot I wanted.

When we got to the day, DC went further. Way further. I identified four of the extras as the lynch mob, and he said to them in a quieter moment “we’ve all come a long way for one chance to film this right, and make it look great. I say we give them the best we can do.” So DC choreographed his murder, talked them through the violence, toned down some ideas, amplified others, and for a guy who has never worked on a film set, he produced a fight sequence worthy of any I’ve seen in professional cinema.

DC also helped me with a vital piece of preparation: the torch test.

The villagers would run down to the shoreline approaching darkness so that light would be an issue. The solution? They carry torches, of course! Every good lynching party needs lights!

So the method: take a stripped down branch, wrap a long piece of cloth around three times, nail each end in place, then coat / smear it with beeswax and finally immerse it in white spirit. Hold away from your body at 60 degrees, and light with a match.

The white spirit burns, the beeswax maintains the flame, and you get a significant effect from the torch. I have a facebook post with that video on my page.

1. Enter the Actors.

Pam Ashton came to be a friend through an earlier project of mine, and when I approached her to play Rachel, she asked if I needed anyone else. Pam not only supplied Roger (who brought three lads with him, two of whom murdered DC) but she also brought me Carl Ashcroft, an actor with an increasing portfolio of work on television. I had my Rachel and my Luther. Yes, I cast on belief without seeing anything other than internet showreels and various pieces they put on Facebook, but that was enough. When people join a project with conviction, you have to trust, but be prepared to guide.

I had my two lead actors, I had ten extras, Tim, and Amber, Jayne would bring the costumes, myself, the props were coming together, location scouted and secured, and we had our date. The trailer was on!

1. Logistics

How do you feed around 15-20 people on a beach? We had the advantage of Kris and Ian, who live around the corner- two long-standing friends prepared to lend their kitchen to assist on the day. Finally, my wife, Kay, came forward and drove down on the day with Tash, my youngest (who would appear in the production when Kay pointed out that in a peasant coastal village, it would be a barefoot child who discovered the wreck and eagerly summoned the village to the plunder).

With hot dogs and homemade soup on the menu, water urns full of boiling water for tea and coffee, and multi-packs of water, wipes, crisps and fruit for the day, we were almost ready.

1. Safety first.

Talent release forms were obtained from the internet and printed off for each cast member to sign. You read the words, have actors sign the line and on the day we only had one refusal. The words of the form specified that there was the potential for serious harm even though everyone knew we would be on a beach and DC would be the only person “at risk” by nature of the lynching scene. However, the chance for sunstroke, trips, accidental falls or choking on a hot dog had to be covered, so the form asks actors to sign the indemnity waiver to release the production company from any such liability. After all, if you choke on a hotdog on my set, can it be the fault of the filmmaker?

We live in a culture of litigation, and there has to be some recognition of personal responsibility. No writer or filmmaker wants to be involved in a situation where someone stubs their toe and sues you for thousands. Come on, people! Get real!

1. The day of the shoot!

The day arrived. Transport arranged, we went in no particular order of vehicle and met up at the location. Unfortunately, the beach was a little…. “crowded.”

After some negotiation with Tim and Amber, they elected to switch to the Beta site. This was, after all, in their hands. As a writer, you have a vision, expectation, but you also have to step aside on the day and hand over to the technical team.

So a delay for about four hours while we waited for the tide to go out, the tourists to disappear and eventually, at around 6.00pm, we started.

We brought our own debris, planks of wood, and I even ordered a barrel from America to be a prop. Bodies littered beach as Rachel (Pam) picked her way along checking the pulse of the dead. Suddenly, the village caught up. She found Luther, discovered him alive and helped him from the beach before we filmed the final sequence, the discovery of the box.

Hang on a minute- the box? Where’s the box? I’d lost the damned thing! In my eagerness, I’d forgotten the box so, in a moment of inspiration, I dumped the tea bags in a plastic bag, and used the box of Yorkshire tea wrapped in a costume as the “box” of the story. Necessity really is the mother of invention.

After food, we finished the final few non-violent shots and turned to the main piece- the arrival of the villagers and the lynching of the sailor.

Setting three torches alight, you realize that the beach is the safest place to film because if the white spirit drips down the handle (we had a flame stretching down to the actors’ hands) you just drop the thing on the floor and kick sand on it.

Now for the sequence: Tim wanted the child at the back, but I persisted- Luckily, Tim is a fantastic man to work with, and he listens to your view before he makes his decision. Now with child and granny in front, the villagers emerged onto the scene from a cut away at the edge of the beach. One group made for the wreck, while the other saw the moving sailor and descended, enraged, on DC to beat him bloody, drag him back into the sea, and try to drown him. It wasn’t enough; a final blow sends the sailor to oblivion, and they held him beneath the encroaching waves.

Eight takes, each full-on from start to finish with Tim filming from distance to close-up, and we were done. Jubilant, enthusiastic, we quickly gathered up everything to leave the beach as we found it but had time for one last portrait shot with granny and Tash cheerfully holding burning torches (they weren’t given them in the shot).

It was a long day, but a successful one- and I had the following day off work to recover. When you put your energy into filming, the next day I always find my energy needs time to recover. But filming wasn’t complete, we had done the main day’s work, but one scene and the ADR voice recording was to follow.

1. First draft

Tim sent me the first draft within 72 hours The footage was amazing, and his decision to shoot in 4K was worthwhile. Every detail stood out, the definition outstanding, and the reactions on the actor’s faces superb. He had some material he couldn’t use, some he decided created continuity problems (sadly, the close-up of the plundering party also showed the lynching in the background as intended, but it didn’t work as well as we hoped and regrettably became unusable) but that was a lesson for next time.

Of course, you can’t show it to people, because the whole point was to create a trailer for the industry alone and not for general viewing- so it’s a bit like having a Christmas present you can’t show your friends. Satisfying in itself but there’s also a frustration (we did eventually show it to a couple of people at the second shoot to great acclaim, so they could get the idea that all their hard work paid off).

It was during a meeting with Tim where we discussed and edited part of the footage from the first draft (back to Starbucks – I’ll get on that Parisian balcony one day!) I suddenly said, “what we need is a stone barn, or wooden building, or old wall. Get your car keys- we’re going location scouting.”

We spent two hours driving the country lanes near my home village and settled on an excellent location: Fir Tree Farm café, Kings Moss, was a successful business recently sold by its landlords to a younger couple. Tim went back the following day, made friends with Rachel and Paul (the owners) and secured the location for no cost if we filmed on a Sunday afternoon after 5 pm when they closed. All that remained was the shoot.

1. The final shoot

When we arrived the landlord heard the words “film crew” and appeared from with a question about payment. Now this is an Indie production, we don’t have any money, and if I worked for Speilberg, Michael Bay or Scorcese, I’d have been happy to pass him onto ‘legal’ and have arranged a settlement. But it’s a self-funded production, and we didn’t have money to burn, so I shook his hand and said “I’ve arranged payment with Paul: he’s feeding us, and we’re paying him for it” which he accepted. I had already agreed on this with Paul, who was more than happy to fill three pots of tea and provide doorstop butties with thick-cut bacon for the cast and crew (as well as grilled vegetable and cheese open top sandwiches for the vegetarians).

On the final day, Catherine and Rob came into their own with a range of props including (but not limited to) jars, containers, bowls, dry rushes, a Moses basket, rolled up carpets, creatures suspended in jars of liquid (toads, a bird, mice and an octopus) preserved birds feet and a shriveled frog that, at the time of writing this, might make the final cut!

I provided the candles and spent hours burning them down to different lengths to get wax dripping down the sides (modern candles don’t drip that much so some invention was required) and finally, I provided a significant amount of table salt and herbs for Pam to use in her ritual.

Enter Baz, one of my oldest friends (known him since I was 12) who agreed to take photographs from behind the set whenever Tim wasn’t calling “Turning…action!” Tim doesn’t call anything: it’s more of an understated gentlemanly murmur than a call.

The final touch? Incense. Burning Frankincense at the back end of the table creates beautiful smoke trails in the candlelight (all 16 of them!) to give an effect of a Pagan witch at her ritual.

Baz even commented at one stage at the detail of it all. In one shot, I held a modern table lamp with reflective silver material behind it to add light to the set. I was no further from Pam than you are from reading this on your laptop or computer- but the camera angle shaved me out by 2” so I would not be seen in the final take.

With the shoot wrapped, we broke for the bacon and resumed for the voice recording. Now Pam and Carl sat aside a table with the script- rehearsed under my direction, left alone to practice and finally, when we were ready, Tim sat with a microphone and recorded each in turn to get the best effect.

Wood pigeons are a pain, by the way. So are aircraft.

Finally, we were done! Except Tim wanted one final shot. He had an idea to use a box Catherine had brought for one more shot, and a pair of hands to open it. I tried my wedding ring: too tight.

“Baz, you wearing your wedding ring?”

“It comes off, why?” he asked, pulling the item from his finger.

“…You’re hired!” I grabbed him and thrust him towards Tim for the final, intimate shot of a pair of hands opening the box. Baz handled it like a professional: first time on a film set, first time acting, he took my direction once and then ran with it. Three, maybe four takes later, Tim had the perfect shot.

So there we had it! As I write this, Tim is editing and, in his usual understated way, said it looked “great!”. I’ve seen this before. The first draft of the beach shoot, amazing in its’ detail, he described as ‘okay’, and this was ‘great’ so when we see it, I’m wondering how good it’s going to look. I saw a bit over his shoulder during the process, and it looked amazing from there (one beautiful pull-focus of the candles started the scene).

That’s it: the story of the shoot. Hope you enjoyed it.

Jacob 11/7/16.