

Sky high

Writer and director Emma Lindley is back to talk about the production of Sky High, her latest project shot in and around London

Photographs by Doris Zajac

The Treetop Walkway towered above us – 18 metres high, two hundred metres long, 400 tonnes of rusted steel. An aeroplane flew above, seeming to graze its very edge. It had been my dream to shoot up on the Kew Gardens' landmark since I'd first seen it a few months before. Now we were here, filming my new short drama, Thin Air. As we climbed the 118 steps with the kit – (the lift was broken) I reminded myself the walkway was built to flex slightly in the wind so it doesn't break. Designed as a way

to view the treetop canopy, it was a stunning setting for the climax to our film.

Casting and rehearsals
In Thin Air, a mysterious woman, Paula, appears at the family home when eight-year-old Stephen is home alone, and invites herself in. Who is she, what does she want and is Stephen in danger? I wrote the script for my good friend, actress Wanda Opalinska and her son Rafal. While Wanda is a very experienced and successful actress (Peaky Blinders, A Monster Calls), Rafal is only 8 and had never acted for camera before. They have a very close bond, which helped immensely during rehearsal and filming. What was it like for Wanda to play opposite her own son? "As his mother, it was wonderful. As an actress, it was a very interesting experience. You become aware of the small, quiet ways in which

you inhabit the space around each other: the quick glances, the unconscious leaning in towards each other. That closeness. There's an unconscious, unspoken level of communication."

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Careful planning
We held a read-through and rehearsal on location at my family's home, with Wanda, Rafal and our third actor, Gordon Peaston. The read through helped me spot any lines that might need tweaking and to test the storyline on three very smart actors who helped create the backstory for the characters with me. What attracted Wanda

to this family drama? "I liked the ambiguity of the script, the fact that little about the past is explicitly stated. Nothing is spelt out about any of the characters either: you have to fill in the gaps, which I find really satisfying. It treats you as an intelligent audience." As adults we discussed the characters and their backstory. More importantly for Rafal, as a young actor, was for him to get familiar with the set and for me to block the main action with him before shooting. How did Wanda help Rafal prepare for his role at home? "We talked about the fact that we wouldn't be ourselves on film: we'd be pretending to

"DOP Beatriz Sastre created a beautiful mood board in response to the script"

be other people. This is because Rafal had been worried about shouting at me and swearing in front of me. We discussed that it would be okay for him to behave like that as Stephen. Wearing a costume helped him with that, too. We were careful to talk about 'what Stephen would do' or 'Stephen's clothes'."

Finding the look

Director of photography, Beatriz Sastre, created a beautiful mood board in response to the script, suggesting a soft, filmic look influenced by films like Paris

Texas and Martha, Marcy, Mae, Marlene. We were all inspired by the ethereal photography of Gregory Crewdson where the natural world outside is clearly seen through the windows of subtly-lit domestic interiors. Inside our house, I was keen to feature the green of the garden through

the windows of the kitchen, to set up the journey the characters later made into the woods. We agreed on a muted colour palette of pinks, brown, greens and blue. Our production designer, Natalie Duval, co-ordinated all wardrobe and set design within this colour range. We were aware the clothes had to pop against the leafy green exteriors as well as the interiors so added a flash of yellow in Rafal's coat and a plum coat for Wanda. We shot on the Alexa Mini, and, thanks to the generous support of Arri, their fantastic Master Anamorphic lenses, which were perfect for capturing the huge length and breadth of the Treetop Walkway. Beatriz used a polariser, glimmer glass and ND filters along with soft, bounced lighting in the interiors to create the soft, filmic look we were after. We hired an Easyrig to let her go handheld to

create a subtle, floating sense of unease.

Pre-production

The key issue for me when setting up the film was to secure permission from Kew Gardens to shoot on the Walkway, which involved liaising with their media department about dates, times and fees. We were allowed to shoot on a weekday in the early morning before the public arrived, which gave us great control. As we only had two hours at Kew to shoot a whole sequence, we did several photo reces there before filming and I carefully storyboarded and shot listed it all. We also had to apply for a child licence for Rafal from his local council, who proved very helpful once we'd sent them the details of the shoot and satisfied their requirement for a chaperone, as

Rafal's father, Roland kindly came along to look after him for the whole shoot.

The shoot

Filming at my parents' home in Brixton was relatively straightforward as it was large enough to fit everyone in, although I think we broke the record for the number of crew members you can get in a hallway... My main concern was to make Rafal

"One of the great pleasures of this film is seeing the subtle layered performance"

feel comfortable as his very first scene was on the street with crew, camera and passers-by all staring at him. Luckily, the



scene required him to look a little anxious! With me directing, his mum acting opposite him and his dad just out of shot encouraging him between takes, he did really well, and once we were inside the house, he started to really enjoy himself. Rafal has a special quality on camera, an honesty, that I always love about child

actors. It's not sophisticated, or clever, it's just true and it rings out when you see it. One of the great pleasures of this film is seeing the subtle, layered yet equally truthful performance from Wanda meeting this freshness from Rafal. As real life mother and son, they quickly found their groove. Wanda commented, "It was a very special

experience to be on set with him and share the small tricks that you pick up as an actor (keeping an eye on your continuity, making sure if you eat sweets that you pick the most plentiful ones, in case you have lots of takes). That sense of collusion was lovely. Emma has the ability to create a relaxed, friendly and focused atmosphere on set: a really calm environment for actors, which I think is especially important with children."

Rich rewards

We had a lovely, very talented crew - many were graduates of Met Film School, where I teach, which gave it a great sense of community as most of us already knew each other. The second day of our shoot was all exteriors - the car park at the Barnes Wetlands Centre, and then a wooded trail off the Thames Path near Putney,





where we had to trek for quite a while to find a spot not covered with Sunday walkers, buggies and joggers... Rafal and Wanda played their argument scene to perfection against a beautiful backdrop of trees. What was lovely to see was how Rafal's confidence was growing through the shoot - by now he was hitting his marks perfectly and coaching his mum on her lines! Rain almost stopped

play but we shot our final scenes in light drizzle by the river and wrapped in time for tea in the car park. Most of our work was done, 80% of the film was in the can (or on the cards), but I knew we still had a final morning left for the Kew shoot.

In the edit

I was delighted to reunite with my old friend and excellent editor,

Alex Morgan, who cut my previous short *Red River*. Alex is quick, honest and great fun to work with. He has great feel, cutting for pace and energy and with a sharp

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eye and ear for performance. He suggested I shoot a pre-title scene introducing Paula before she appears at the house. I had discussed an opening sequence

set in a motorway underpass early on, but had abandoned the idea. Now I realised he was right, we needed to tease her as a character. I wanted to find a location that visually prefigured the Treetop Walkway. Alex suggested a high-arching concrete bridge over four lanes of traffic, near our White City edit suite. It proved perfect, so was added to our final day's filming.

The Kew shoot

I woke up early on the morning of the Treetops shoot – we only had two hours to get everything – so I wanted to get there early. The wind rustled the trees outside



my house and I couldn't help worrying about conditions up on the Walkway. We gathered the crew outside the gate under overcast skies. Amy from the Kew media team welcomed us in and drove us across the park in a golf cart, something we all got oddly excited about. Finally, we were below the walkway with the camera. 8am and the clock ticking. As we set up for our first shots, a heavy burst of rain came down, forcing us into a nearby tunnel. Would our shoot be a wash out? As the actors arrived for their scene, and with Wanda's nail polish still drying, the rain gradually eased. With one eye on the fast moving clouds, I blocked the action with them. It was the emotional turning point of the film and so we had to take time to get it right and shoot enough angles to build the tension. Luckily the overcast look



Directing children

One of Emma's specialities is directing children and young people, from hit TV series, *My Parents Are Aliens* and *Brum*, to CBBC documentaries and her award-winning short, *Red River*. Here she shares her tips for working with children on camera.

1 - Treat them the same

Don't talk down to kids, talk to them as you would any actor, they're quick on the uptake and only need a brief chat to get it.

2 - Show them the kit

Children are often interested in the equipment, so let them look through the lens or sit next to you at the monitor, show them the boom and explain what you're doing. It helps you bond and they then know what's involved.

3 - Block key action

With younger children, it helps to block the action of key scenes a few days before you start filming – preferably on the actual set. They remember actions really well, it helps the lines stick, and lets you work more quickly on shoot.

4 - Keep direction simple

Avoid long explanations and just remind them what they want before the scene and check they know the point of the scene. Shoot full coverage and more than one take to give you more options in the edit.

5 - Work with the parents

Your best allies on set; the parents know what their child needs, and want them to succeed, so will do everything they can to help. If a child is upset, tired, hungry or unsure, let their mum or dad look after them. If lurking parents are a distraction for young children, keep them available but just out of their eye-line or, conversely, off camera but near the actor you want the child to look at...

6 - Shoot in story order

For younger children (8 and under) this really helps them hold the story in their head and remember their lines. Older, more experienced child actors can

jump around more to suit the schedule.

7 - Keep dialogue simple

Younger children may struggle with overly clever 'adult' lines so try and keep dialogue simple and natural and be prepared to change a difficult line. Around 10-12 years, children can handle more sophisticated dialogue. Girls are generally better at sight-reading than boys at this age, although every child is of course different. Ask parents to practice lines with them at home beforehand.

8 - Respect child working hours

Kids do get tired and may suddenly crash after going all day, so don't overwork them. Schedule regular breaks by alternating them with scenes they're not in, call them late and finish with them early. Use stand-ins for lighting if they need a break off set. Check the legal guidelines for the maximum hours your child actor can be on set and on camera and, with your AD's help, make sure you stick to them.

9 - Casting children

Some child actors already have agents you can contact directly. Mandy.com has a section for child actors. Casting directors can help you find new talent and drama schools can invite you to a workshop to see their students. Don't discount the drama teacher at your local school too. Self-tapes can be a useful option if children can't travel to a casting.

10 - Apply for a child licence

You need to apply for a filming licence from the Local Authority where the child lives, including details of where and when you're filming with them. Allow around 3 weeks for this to be approved and keep a dialogue going with the council through the process (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-for-child-performance-licence>)

11 - Keep it fun!

Don't let the stresses of filming affect the atmosphere on set. Keep things light so children can stay relaxed and do their best work. Always praise them after a take and explain clearly any changes you need.



worked for the scene on camera. And then, magically, as we started to shoot Wanda and Rafal's ascent up the winding staircase to the Walkway, the sun came out, giving them a perfect backlight. The low autumn sunlight stayed with us as we shot all our scenes out of the Walkway, high above the treetops, in our element. We finished on the dot of 10am – our time was up – but we had the sequence.

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And finally

I remember asking Wanda what Thin Air was about, and this rings true for me too: "It's about coming to a reckoning with your past and perhaps discovering something about yourself there. About unexpectedly having to come to terms with what you've done... Realising that there are relationships there that really do matter to you and that you need to hold on to: you don't necessarily have the emotional skills to do it, but you're trying." As we begin

work on the score with talented



composer Thomas Farnon (Wonder Woman, Tarzan, The Crown) I can see the end in sight and I am so grateful to all the kind and clever people who have helped us make this film. You can follow Thin Air on Twitter @ThinAirMovie, on Facebook at ThinAirFilm and director Emma Lindley at @emlin32 and www.emmalindley.net

A child's-eye view

I also decided to ask our young actor, Rafal, for his take on our shoot... What was the best thing about filming? The cakes! I really enjoyed working with my mum as well. The people were really nice and it was great to be able to touch the cameras and see how they worked. I enjoyed yelling across the treetops at Kew too.

What was the worst thing? Doing it over and over again. I was surprised you had to do that in a film. I didn't think there would be that many people on set – there were so many! They were really nice though and very friendly.

What was it like working with your Mum? Really fun! I liked when we were sharing things. It was really different to normal – when Mama had to shout at me (in the film) – I didn't like that. And I didn't like shouting at her. It was hard to remember that she was being someone else and not my mum.

What helped you believe the story/get into character? The story made me feel sad, because of what has happened to the mum and dad, so I didn't really want to think about any of that – I just tried to do my best. I felt like I was someone else. Stephen was different to me. He looked after himself at home and I haven't done that.

What would you say to other children who might want to act in a film? Give it a go! You'll sit around a lot and have to do things again and again – but there will be cakes. ■