



ARIZONA

From an idea in rainy London to the location scout of a lifetime, writer/director Emma Lindley shares the development of her brand new and as yet untitled US indie feature...



February 2014

I'm standing at the US/Mexican border, outside a soup kitchen for recently deported Mexican and Central American immigrants. Our guide points at a distant figure up on the hill above. The drug cartel scout is watching us through binoculars.

How did I get here?

I was in Arizona to research my new feature film. It's a drama about a New York lawyer who finds a ten-year-old Mexican girl in the Arizona desert and struggles to reunite her with her mother, taking her head-to-head with a corrupt local politician.

Why this story?

I had been carrying around an article from the New York Times for a year or so. It described how heavily pregnant Mexican women were walking across the desert to have their babies in the United States, to give them US citizenship. Arizona had passed a tough new law increasing police powers to arrest undocumented migrants, and questioning the right of these so called 'anchor babies' to becoming fully-fledged Americans. It seemed like a good story, but a job directing a TV series in the States kept me away from writing it. When I got home to London I sketched out a treatment and a few rough scenes.

I had another, more personal, reason for writing this story. My mother had died recently and I didn't know how to process my grief and come to terms with what had happened and so I found a story about mothers and daughters. So my main character, the lawyer, Amy, becomes a woman grieving for her own mother, and determined to reunite this girl with her mother as a way to try and solve her own feelings.

From treatment to first draft

I showed the treatment to a friendly producer in London who said two things that stayed with me. He said, 'You need to write the script so someone will fall in love with it and want to produce it.' And, 'You need an American producer.' I knew he was right on



Nogales on the Mexican side of the border

both counts. I had been writing the treatment piecemeal in my spare time, but knew I had to make a commitment to writing the first draft. So in January 2013, I took two months off my directing and teaching work and started the script - and a writer's blog, stating my intention to nail the first draft in that time.

I found a great script editor in my friend Kira-Anne Pelican (www.filmscribe.co.uk). A UCLA trained writer and script analyst, she has a great eye for structure and understanding of genre. Kira-Anne

was supportive of the story and brilliantly precise in her notes. So I wrote - and rewrote. And a couple of months passed... (you know the drill).

Finding a US producer

In the meantime, I was preparing to go to Cannes for the first time with fellow mentees on the Women in Film and Television Mentoring Scheme (<http://www.wftv.org.uk/mentoring-scheme>). At Cannes, I hung out in the American Pavilion (www.ampav.com) and went to several of their (very good)

producer and director panel events. It was at one of those events that I noticed a cool looking woman next to me in the audience. 'I like your dress,' I said. 'I like yours', she said politely. We chatted a bit, swapped cards and that was it. Back at home I looked her up and discovered she was Christine

Walker, of New Globe Films, and producer of some of my favourite films including *Factotum* with Matt Dillon, *American Splendor* with Paul Giamatti and *Howl* with James Franco. So I sent her a one page synopsis for my feature.

A month or so passed. Christine read the one pager, liked it and



asked to see the script. I rewrote the script again (between other jobs) before I sent it to her. And kept writing while I waited to hear. By now, a few friends (writers and the friendly producer) had seen the most recent draft, so I was fielding comments from a number of sources on the next rewrite. In November I heard back from Christine, she really liked the story and was interested in coming on board to help me develop it further.

A trip to the States

I had been planning a location recce and research trip for a while so the timing was great. I could combine a script meeting with Christine in LA with my longed for Arizona road trip and make sure my story was accurate and reflected real events happening on the border. Which is how I found myself a couple of weeks ago, staring up at the Mexican hills, wondering whether that distant kid in a hoodie from the cartel could see the whites of my eyes.

Here's what we did on our Arizona recce... Location scout

I wanted to see the famed Arizona landscape with its deserts, mountains and big skies - of

course for visual inspiration, but also so I could visualise the logistics of my final act set in the desert borderlands - what would the final desert rescue and shoot-out scenes look like? My friend Doris and I visited almost all the locations in the script and were shown even more by friends we made along the way.

Photo shoot

The main image of the film for me was this young Mexican girl walking out of the desert. A friend of a friend, Mary, was a teacher in an Arizona primary school so I asked if she knew any Hispanic pupils interested in acting. I had bought a Sony compact camera (the Cyber-Shot DSC-HX300) with a big Zeiss zoom lens, that turned out to be ideal for both close-up candid portraits and landscape photography. Mary and I drove our girl (and her Mum) to a local National Park, which had the perfect blend of desert and mountain terrain I was looking for. And, just like that, she became Elena...

Finding the real world of my story

I needed to see if events in my script were going to be reflected in the reality on the border.



Immigration is the hottest political debate in the US - everyone has an opinion on what should be done, but no one can agree. I met and interviewed people on all sides of the huge metal fence that divides Mexico and the States. I had written about undocumented migrants, the ranchers whose land they crossed, the Border Patrol agents and immigration lawyers. Now I was meeting the real thing. As always, the reality was more fascinating than anything I could have imagined. What I found was that there were no simple bad guys and good guys - everyone

is struggling in a system that is overwhelmed and, in many ways, broken.

Hundreds of thousands of migrants cross illegally into the United States from Mexico every year, but what I hadn't realised was how tightly controlled all the people smuggling is by the cartels. Migrants pay an average of \$4,000 each to come across but are often abandoned by their 'coyote' guides during the long journey and left to die in the desert or the mountains. Even if they are taken across, they are most often immediately picked up, processed



Canyon Lake and the Superstition mountains

and then dumped straight back over the border by the Border Patrol. If they are reoffenders (or even if it's their first time) they could be held in detention for months before being deported to Mexico.

Often deported in the middle of night with no money or possessions, migrants are often left many miles from their original town or village in Mexico or central America. We visited the soup kitchen for deported migrants run by the charity Kino Border Initiative (www.kinoborderinitiative.org) on the Mexican side of border town (and key crossing point) Nogales. There was a woman there who had been deported for not having the right papers after fourteen years



living and working in the States with her three children. She now had no way back to her family who were stuck in Arizona, while she was trapped on the Mexican side of the border.



Saying grace at the soup kitchen

Drama v documentary

As I talked to people I realised many of them thought I was making a documentary. There are many similarities - you are meeting real people, hearing their stories albeit for research only - and my experience of producing TV documentaries definitely helped me contact people and set up encounters. The difference this time was that I wasn't recording any interviews. Many conversations I had were off the record, with people who wanted to remain nameless. Even taking my notebook out made some people jumpy, and with good reason. So I listened very hard and tried to understand what was going on, and made notes in the middle of

the night about what I'd seen and heard that day.

You might think Jim Chilton, who has a ranch on the border, would not be sympathetic to the thousands of migrants crossing his land each year. But I found him compelling as he explained his own struggles - not just with the damage caused to his cattle and water supply - but the real physical danger he and his family faced from the people and drug smuggling cartels operating on his land. He supports a work programme for migrants, but only after the government has secured his part of the border effectively.

I felt very involved with the all people I met in Arizona and fascinated by their personal experiences. I trust that when I sit down to rewrite the script, I will sift through all the stories I've heard and the things that matter will rise to the top. I'm hugely grateful to everyone who helped us on our trip and I feel like the film has taken a huge leap forward as a result. Watch this space to find out what happens next as (after another rewrite!) we go in search of name talent for our lead roles....

If you'd like to find out more about my work to date or about setting up a shoot in the States, you can contact me at info@emmalindley.net. To follow our progress with the film, you can check out my blog located over at www.emmalindley.net/blog or follow me @emlin32 on Twitter. Thanks for reading and good luck with all your projects! ■



The future film location of Bisbee

TEN TIPS FOR A GREAT US RECCE

1. Know why you're going

Sounds obvious right? But there are many different reasons for doing a scout at this relatively early stage of development. Don't try and do too many things at once. Is it a teaser reel shoot or a script research trip? Are you raising finance or meeting potential filmmaking collaborators? You can combine some of these goals into one trip, but be aware you'll end up going back later anyway so keep it simple - what needs to happen now to move your film forward?

2. Set it all up before you go

I only had ten days on the ground in Arizona, so I had to make every day count. I had been in touch with organisations and people for months before whose work touched on the themes in my film. You need time to build relationships and to make sure you can meet up/gain access on the days you'll be there. You'll also need a long lead in time if dealing with government bodies. For example, the Department of Homeland Security requires at least 4-6 weeks to process filming or research requests from foreign filmmakers and you will have to submit a lot of information, including a script and proof of a distribution deal as they get so many requests. Other bodies are easier, but still need prior notice.



... And tell them who you are

Have a one page synopsis, or at least a pitch paragraph, explaining who you are and what the film is about. Establish your credentials as a filmmaker and show you are serious about the issues you're writing about and have done your research. Be specific about what you are asking people for and when you will be over. If they can't help, ask them to suggest someone who can. I have always found Americans to be especially willing to help with a politely worded request.

3. Contact the local film office and filmmakers

The Tucson Film Office put together a web page of locations when I approached

them and also holds lists of local crew and companies online. Most cities have film offices like in England, which can be very helpful in advising on filming permits too. I met with a local production company who were very helpful with on the ground for contacts and information. Social networking can unearth local filmmakers who can share advice and skills, which are all invaluable when considering how and where/when to film.



4. Plan it like a shoot

Once I had my dates and contacts set, I drew up a schedule, much like a filming one, detailing where we would be on each day, whom we would meet and their location and contact details. This was my bible when we were over there, and allowed us to move quickly from place to place and keep in touch with our contributors while on the move. Unless you are planning a longer stay in a country, time is of the essence to get the most out of your trip. Although do....

5. Leave room for adventures!

I deliberately left a couple of days free near the end of the schedule to allow for meeting new people or hearing about a great location I didn't know about. Many people we met put us in contact with other people who could help us, so having some flexibility in the schedule meant we could go and meet them. You also need some breathing space, to just sit and absorb the landscape, the people, and the world of your film.

6. Be considerate

As is the case when making a documentary or indeed a low-budget drama, your contributors are doing you a huge favour, so always be quick to accommodate their needs, to thank them and let them know if your plans change. Follow up with a thank you email and keep them updated with the progress of the project and any press they feature in. Americans are generally very polite, so don't be casual or off-hand about your

work or theirs. Value their time.

7. Watch your budget

I brought a friend to drive our budget hire car and we booked apartments through airbnb.com, which saved money and led to meeting some great local people too. There are also lots of cheap motels. Petrol is, of course, really cheap in the States, so a road trip is a good value way to scout locations. The dollar to pound exchange rate also makes the States a relatively cheap place to visit for British filmmakers and if you're just taking location photographs or shooting test footage on your own camera, your recce costs can be easily managed. BUT...

8. Be prepared to spend some money

Nobody wants to hear this, but the reality as indie filmmakers is that we frequently subsidise our own films and especially the development phase. Even by keeping costs low, your trip is going to cost you, but it's a great investment in your project and in yourself as a filmmaker. You can also put it against tax further down the line.

9. Tell people what you're doing

Do as much press as you can around your trip - blogging, podcasts, posting photos on Twitter and Facebook before, during and after your trip. This is a great way to engage people with the story of your film. And, of course, you can always film your crowdfunding video while you're on the road...

10. Have fun!

A very dear friend reminded me to have fun as I set off on my trip. With all the stress of planning it, I was forgetting the most important thing - I love my job. I love travelling. And I love working in America. What's not to love about a road trip that also moves your project forward and feeds your soul? It's an experience you'll never forget. So get started...

