

TRYING TIMES

Accomplished writer, director and producer Emma Lindley takes us behind the scenes of her new UK drama called Red River



All photos: Doris Zajec



The tide was rising fast. Every couple of minutes we had to move the boat up out of the water and the equipment out of harm's way. Time was running out and we still had to do the reverses on our main actor - that's if he had any room left to stand on the slipway as we approached high tide on the River Thames! It was our first day of filming on my new drama Red River, about a runaway child bride - and I was seriously thinking about running away myself... But, countering the challenges of filming on the river was the great pleasure of seeing it all captured beautifully on anamorphic - or to be precise, Master Anamorphic Lenses, mounted on the Alexa XT, thanks to our production sponsors Arri and Directors UK.



The scheme

My script had been selected for the Directors UK Challenge Alexa, a yearly production scheme open to all members in partnership with Arri. Abigail Berry of Directors UK explains the selection process, "We selected five shorts, which have been in production throughout March 2015. The projects chosen all have a distinct visual style or original story, with a clear sense of the director's vision." The winning productions receive free two-day use of the Alexa XT and a range of Master Anamorphic

primes, plus a generous lighting and kit allowance and production support from DUK and Arri. So we were off to a flying start!

A child bride

I wrote the script for Red River just before Christmas, inspired by a talk given at the Frontline Club by Human Rights Watch. The panel were asked what was the number one global issue they faced - they all agreed - child brides: very young girls forced into early marriage - often to much older men, raped and bullied into becoming wives

losing their childhood and right to an education in the process. This is a widespread practice across Africa, Asia and parts of Europe. What's more, despite a recent law making it a criminal offence, it's happening in the UK too. The Forced Marriage Unit recently reported 1,300 cases in Britain - one in eight of which are below the age of consent. Many more cases go unreported as girls are often taken abroad to be married and are then kept there against their will. Even if they are living in England, the girls are afraid to testify against their parents.

Despite the hard-hitting subject matter, I didn't want to make a

social realist 'kitchen sink' drama. I wanted to make something more ambiguous, an urban fairy tale about a runaway girl. I set it on the stretch of the River Thames I love, by Hammersmith Bridge, and where better to stage a hide and seek chase than on the houseboats moored there?

Filming on the river

I contacted the houseboat community and received a warm welcome from a moorings owner. We were able to climb all over a large houseboat with crew and actors in relative safety - and got some great shots of the river from the roof! I also had a long chat

with Martin Garside at the Port of London Authority about what we would be filming and where. The PLA issues the permits for all filming on the River Thames and, for your sake as much as theirs, they have to be sure your filming is safe and achievable.

As we discovered, the Thames is a fiercely tidal river and putting a 12-year-old in a rowing boat that is supposed to 'drift out' into the river was both the image I held onto as writer/director and the one that gave me several sleepless nights as producer...! We solved that particular problem with a hidden line on a weight and pulley system fitted onto our rowing

boat by master boat builder Mark Edwards at Richmond Bridge Boathouses. Our young actress Nikhita Mani pretended to row while the line pulled her magically - and safely - into the river. We then had our teenage rowing double row the boat further down river for our wide shot. So the river stunts needed careful staging, but the end result looks great on camera.

An Indian family

Casting director Shakyra Dowling found us an amazing cast to play our child bride Muni and her family. I didn't want the parents to just be 'the bad guys', I wanted to show a loving family who believed





they were doing the right thing. The role of Muni's mother, who grooms her daughter to be a child bride, was key in achieving that moral ambiguity. Casting Goldy Notay (Sex and the City 2, It's A Wonderful Afterlife, Amar, Akbar and Tony) as young British Indian mum, Madhuri, was the first step in creating a complex, modern

character rather than just a stereotypical 'bad mother'.

Goldy explains her approach to the role: "I researched the mothers, and with every case the fundamental motivations were 'they were securing a future for their child'. It seems barbaric for most of us to think that procuring forced marriages is the answer (especially when some girls are below the age of consent), but there are many Asian women (however modern) with some surprisingly conservative views. Honour is so heavily entrenched in the fabric of these families, that to challenge or shift that thinking is an explosive excavation. In Red River, the mother isn't demonised, but her actions aren't condoned either and this ambiguity allows for more of a discussion of the whys."

Equally important was that 12-year-old Muni's much older fiancé, Sami, played by Munir Khairdin (Hustle, Spooks, Silk,

Sherlock) was not just a sexual predator: "Firstly I wanted to avoid viewing him through western values. Secondly, my mum married when she was 15 and it was the norm for her generation. Marriage is seen as a union of two families and less about the two individuals getting wed. To marry a girl young was

seen as a blessing, and a way of reinforcing traditional values and customs. How the families are perceived by their community is of utmost importance. Izaat, or honour, is sometimes more important than love or individual freedoms."

What then makes Sami change his mind about his marriage to



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Muni? “Sami is marrying late and the wishes of his parents are to see him settled down with a young girl who is a virgin, can reproduce, and be trained in their way of life. London is also a major, major incentive as it opens so many doors for Sami. As far as he is concerned he is merely respecting his culture and community. Love is something that comes with time and getting used to being with each other. It’s not until he sees Muni look at him with complete fear that he sees that potential paedophile within himself. Looking at a woman with lust is one thing but looking at a child that way makes him very uncomfortable.”

Actor Simon Nagra (Holby, All in Good Time, Dara at the NT) plays Muni’s reluctant father Gautam and also asked some great questions that helped us define the family’s background and their reasons for marrying off their daughter. A final rehearsal with our young lead, Nikhita Mani (Cinemaniacs, CBBC) and her on-screen sister, played by Mia Rolfe, was a chance for them to meet their new ‘family’ and block through the scenes before what would be a very tight filming schedule.



Indian home, Indian bride

I was keen to find a great production designer who could recreate a British Indian family home and found a real lightning conductor for that world in Sam Sharma. Sam and her team scoured the shops and markets of Southall, London, to find just the right props, clothes and set dressing to convincingly convey an Indian family home. Sam was also charged with recreating an Indian bridal outfit for our child bride. Key to this was finding the red, highly decorated wedding veil featured heavily in our film. The final look was perfect - our

modern British schoolgirl Nikhita had been transformed into an Indian child bride.

Filming in the house

This was a squeeze, as we barely had room to swing a boom and fit our actors and the camera into the modern London flat we’d chosen to film in, let alone our fifteen-strong crew, but we managed somehow...! A great atmosphere prevailed as the cast and crew bonded and worked hard and very fast to shoot all the domestic scenes in one day. The lens changes were surprisingly quick, thanks to focus puller Daniel Anthony and our Arri Alexa team of camera trainees, who, I’m proud to say, are all also Met Film School graduates, where I often teach!

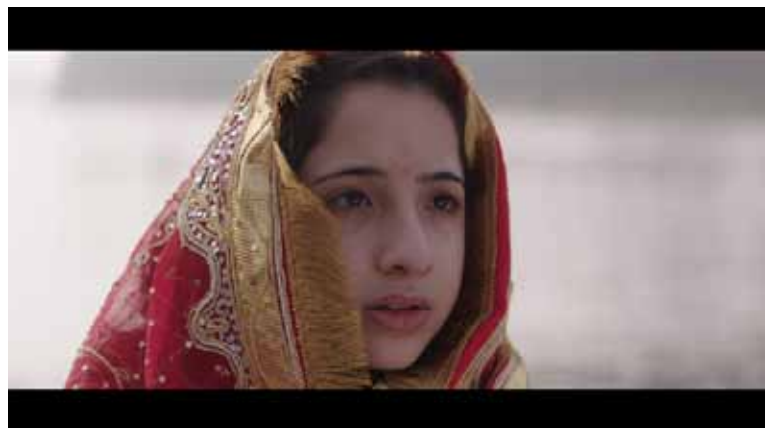
Picking up

Given the ambition and length of the film, we had asked for a third ‘pickups’ day with the camera and lenses, to film those moments that I knew would be time consuming - like the driving shots, the VFX plates for our giant red veil dream sequence - and some extra running shots for our riverside chase sequence. Added to that a final scene back at the house and we realised the only way to make our schedule was to film the actors playing the car scene as they drove us to our last location of the day! Thanks to their patience and some more glorious sunshine, we made it, and rolled on our last slate just as the sun set over Ealing.

In the edit

So now we’re at the rough cut stage and trying out music with our award-winning composer, Fraya Thomsen. This is always the fun part, when the hard work of the shoot is over and you start to see what you have, what the story has become - a film at last - but there’s still with some way to go. We have an amazing team behind us so I know it will be good - not perfect - for nothing is ever that. But, that girl has come to life, our runaway child bride has hit the ground running and has brought a lightness of touch, a sureness of foot I could never have imagined in the dark December when I wrote her. She has brought spring.

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SHOOTING WITH ANAMORPHICS

Red River's award-winning cinematographer Patrick Duval shares his expert tips on getting the most out of filming with anamorphic lenses

What's the attraction of shooting anamorphic?

PD: When you shoot anamorphically at 2.35:1, the normal representation of our world opens up and gives us an unfamiliar perspective, even on the most familiar of subjects. This is the joy of shooting anamorphically, the frame emphasises the horizontal field of view and gives endless possibilities for visual juxtaposition within the frame, foreground and background and extremes of frame left and right. A panning or tilting 2.35:1 frame seems to have far more visual weight than its 1.77 (HD) or 1.85:1 counterparts.

Why does the image look so good on an anamorphic lens?

PD: Technically, a quality anamorphic lens photographing on to an 'Open Gate' is producing

an extremely high resolution image, many times higher in quality than an image of similar aspect ratio produced by vertically cropping a 16:9 or 1.85:1 frame down to the equivalent shape.

How was it using the Arri Master Anamorphic lenses?

PD: The Arri Master Anamorphics are very special. They're very sharp and fast at T1.9, which combined with Alexa's native 800 ISO makes available light shooting achievable if desired and the depth of focus as shallow as you like. The barrels are beautifully engineered and scaled better than any focus puller could wish for. The bokeh (aka flare) that these lenses produce is gentle in contrast but quite complex - a great advantage photographing chase sequences

in backlit sunshine or urban low-key or night shooting. As the subject crosses the frame or the camera pans or tilts, highlights are broken into flashes of varying intensity that could be used to add dramatic effect. The current range includes 35,40,50,75 and 100mm.

Any tips for DOPs new to shooting with anamorphics?

PD: While being beautiful or exciting in different circumstances, the bokeh of the anamorphics occasionally needs to be controlled, as when a highlight occurs just above or just below the frame on a static shot. A broad band of flare can extend across the frame without careful flagging. If desired, the bokeh is increased in size by opening the aperture and decreased by closing it.

How does shooting anamorphic affect the way you compose the frame?

PD: Shooting on anamorphics fundamentally affects the way

you tell the story because you are giving the audience an extreme horizontal field to watch.

Elements of the story can be incorporated into a 2.35:1 frame together in a way that isn't possible using conventional aspect ratios. Conversely, a full figure shot is achieved on a much wider frame than conventionally. These attributes can lead to some really interesting foreground/background juxtapositions or camera movement. Symmetry is exaggerated, verticality is reduced but the panoramic becomes majestic!

How can you best use the ratio and lens qualities to your advantage?

PD: Do preparatory stills in the locations and storyboards if you can. You'll find that the ratio imposes another layer of required thought - amply rewarded of course. Use the limits of the frame and the gaps between compositional elements, rather than merely accommodating movement within it. ■

