

# EMMA LINDLEY

## DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

We talk to Emma Lindley, a producer and director who's been enjoying career success on both sides of the pond...



Since graduating from film schools in Leeds and Poland, producer/director Emma Lindley has gone on to a successful freelance career in British and American television on BBC, ITV and Channel Four, as well as writing and directing independent short films. She's recently been off to Cannes with her first feature script, Anchor Baby. Emma took time out to talk to Digital FilmMaker about working in drama and documentary.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS MOFARDIN



Emma working on location

### Starting out

You trained in film production at the Northern School of Film and Television and the prestigious Polish National Film School in Lodz, where you directed *Secret Society*, a comedy drama about a housewife who takes up sumo wrestling and also a silent comedy on 35mm, *The Girl in the Reklama*. Tell us about your student experiences. "I enjoyed film school. I think I went at the right time. I'd done a first degree in drama, worked as a PA for a docs company for a couple of years and then made a short film, *Cora*, on 16mm that got me into the MA programme at the Northern."

For *Secret Society* (shot on 16mm), I had a great producer and DP, an interesting script from a writer on the course and we were able to shoot our final Sumo wrestling scenes at the Yorkshire TV studios in Leeds. At the end of the year we were offered a MEDIA scholarship to study in Poland for a year, which was a chance to study at the school where Polanski, Wajda and Kieslowski trained. Our main tutor was the wonderfully dry Andrzej Mellin, who told us on the first day that our films were 'very British...!'"



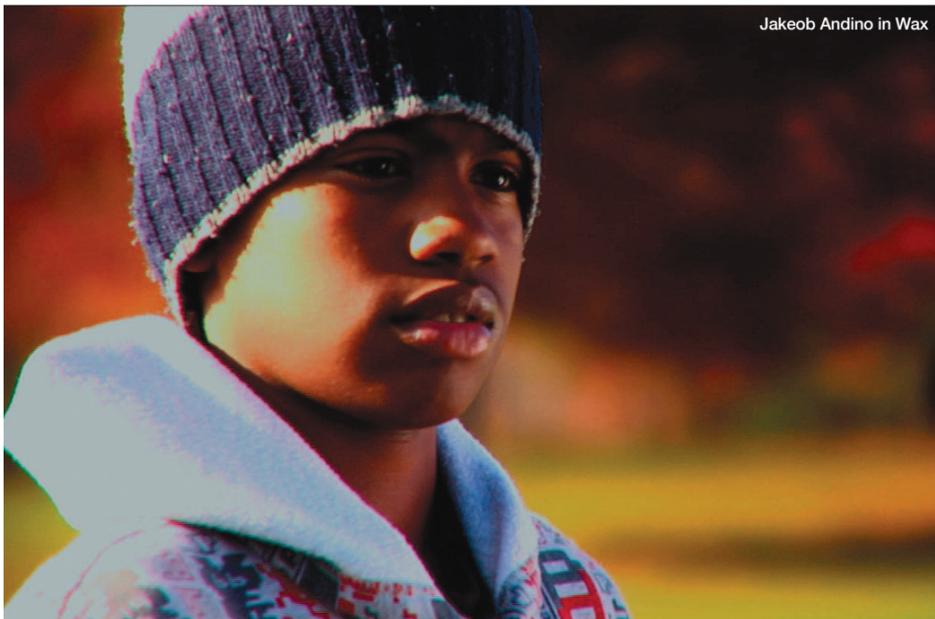
"We had to learn Polish for three months before directing our Polish-speaking actors and, even then, my directing had to be very simple - I remember I said 'Quickly', and 'Good' a lot! My editor didn't speak English either, but somehow that was easier because we had more time to understand each other. We found a huge old electricity factory as a location and shot on 35mm. The school had an amazing Foley artist called Henryk who created all our sound effects for us. The sound desk was very old and so you couldn't go backwards and forwards to 'drop in' when mixing. So the dubbing mixer mixed the

entire ten minute short 'live' and nailed it in a couple of takes. What was most valuable was studying with filmmakers from all over Europe, as it gives you a much wider perspective through which to judge your own work."

### Early influences

Shall we talk about your influences in terms of directors? We know you like Bill Forsyth, who made *Gregory's Girl* and *Housekeeping*. Are there any other directors or writers that you particularly admire? "I do love Bill Forsyth yes. I really love that kind of gentle comedy. *Ruby Sparks* was a fantastic film and I think *Moone Boy* and *Fresh Meat* are great on TV. I've been watching darker films recently while writing my new drama. I loved *The Hunt* by Thomas Vinterberg which, as well as looking beautiful, had a brilliant, economic script and a great performance by Mads Mikkelsen, and *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, directed by Sean Durkin, which was just really atmospheric and unsettling."

As a director, you have worked extensively in both drama and documentary, including drama series for ITV, children's shows for the BBC



Jakeob Andino in Wax

heavily formatted 'reality' show it's great to be directing the first series as you are helping create the format - so the structure, feel and look of the show - which will be the template for the rest of the series."

During your career you have combined TV work with independent filmmaking, producing and directing a number of your own projects, like the short drama, Wax. How do you manage the two? "I'm very proud of the work I've done in television. You can make some great looking programmes with very talented people and you have the resources and producing strength of a full company behind you. But independent filmmaking is where you make the work that is personal to you. I've directed several short films as writer/director/producer and written two feature films."

"My most recent short drama, Wax, came about because I was visiting friends in New

and 'reality' shows for American TV.

So, what kind of skills do you need to be able to do both drama and factual? "I guess I'm quite adaptable and I like doing both as they use different parts of your brain. The skills are similar across drama and factual - you're essentially directing the on-screen talent - whether they're actors or non-professionals, deciding where to put the camera, working with the crew to create the 'look' of the show, and telling a story. The main difference is in

the edit. With drama, you more or less get what you've scripted and shot, and the edit is more about pacing and emphasis."

### A different world

"With documentary, it can feel more chaotic shooting without a script, you have to make sure you shoot all the elements you need to build a story, so you still have an outline in your mind or on paper. And, with factual, you construct the story in the edit more. In a more



Jennifer Lim and Christianna Nelson in Wax

## WE HAD TO LEARN POLISH FOR THREE MONTHS BEFORE DIRECTING OUR POLISH-SPEAKING ACTORS

### TELL US ABOUT 'IN SEARCH OF FOOD', THE SHOW YOU MADE OVER THERE

"In Search of Food was a lot of fun to make as we got to travel round America with Chef Scott Pampuch, finding fresh produce on farms in Virginia, Colorado and California. The first series looked beautiful, and had a laid-back charm. The second series, which I inherited, had to keep those elements while being more of a 24-hour challenge show, so Scott had to say cook for 300 school kids with no money using only local ingredients. We had to rethink the look and pace of the show and storyline his adventures to help create tension. It was a fast-moving hybrid of cooking show, travel show and reality show, which of course many programmes are now. The cross-format



show has been the main story in factual programming for a while now, but what's interesting is how that plays out in drama."

Filming In Search of Food



York and I fell in love with the neighbourhood they lived in, Fort Greene, in Brooklyn. So I saved up some money and moved there for three months, sat in on some great screenwriting classes at Columbia and wrote a short script. Then I came home, earned some more money in the UK, went back later the same year and shot Wax with a small crew on a Sony Z1 with film lenses. We edited back in the UK."

### Across the pond

How does working for US television compare to working here in Britain? "It's a different business culture in America, but the skills you need as a director are the same. What I like about working in America is that people are very direct to deal with and very positive and dynamic. It's also a very polite culture, whereas we are slightly more informal here. So it's more about the language you use.

The Brits are generally more understated and don't like hyperbole. It's about adjusting your operating style to suit where you're working. There are already a lot of cross-genre drama series with documentary elements, so what's the next phase?"

Speaking of school kids, many of your films and TV shows have featured children (My Life: Big Brother, Who We Are, Cora, My Parents Are Aliens) - how do you get them to be so wonderfully natural in front of the camera? "I have worked a lot with children, probably because in my head I'm still ten years old! Kids take direction very naturally, so I just treat them as people. Sometimes they get tired or anxious, but then so do adults! It's about casting or finding the right child, just like when you're casting adult actors and about being clear with your direction. I think I'm attracted to stories about children; both my features have children in main roles, so I'm obviously working something out!"

And what are your feelings about shooting



The Women in Film and Television mentoring scheme

on digital as opposed to film? As a director you've done both. "Film always used to look better, but the Arri Alexa and other cameras are creeping up now and give you a similar look. I think the digital revolution has made filmmaking much more affordable, which can only be a good thing. When video first

exploded, DPs spent a lot of time lighting it to look like film, so it is with the new ultra HD cameras, it's how you use them to get the look you're after that counts, not the format."

### Good causes

Tell us about the Women in Film and Television mentoring scheme that you have recently taken part in. "It's been an amazing experience that I would recommend to any female filmmakers out there (sorry guys, it's just for women!). I was paired up with Emma Turner, who is a Senior Drama Executive at Fremantle Media, as my mentor for six months. As a freelancer, you don't often get to talk about your career, or plan it with someone else, so it was a unique opportunity to move forward. The other women on the scheme were a really talented and supportive group, a mix of writers, directors, DPs and editors, media lawyers and publicists. I've written about the scheme on my blog, which offers advice to writers and directors." - [www.emmalindley.net/blog](http://www.emmalindley.net/blog)

Can you tell us a bit us about the courses you teach at the Met Film School in London? "I love teaching and I learn a lot from doing it. I teach

Jennifer Lim in Wax





Directing in Poland



Emma with WFTV mentor Emma Turner



Emma and crew filming The Girl in the Reklama in Poland



## EMMA LINDLEY - CV

Writer/Director/Producer

### Comedy and Drama

- Anchor Baby (Writer/Director) Feature script (US) 2013
- Wax (Writer/Director/Producer) Short, Teale-Edwards (US) 2009
- The Misfit Club (Writer/Director) Feature script, Met Film 2004
- 24Seven (Director) Teen drama series, ITV 2001
- Brum (Director) Children's series, BBC 2000
- My Parents are Aliens (Director) Comedy series, ITV 1999
- Balloons (Director) Short, Channel 4 1996
- The Girl in the Reklama (Writer/Director) Short Polish Film School 1994
- Secret Society (Director) Short, YTTV 1993
- Cora (Writer/Director Producer) Short, Small George Films, 1992

### Factual

- In Search of Food (Producer/Director) Factual Ent series, Ovation TV (US) 2012
- My Life: Big Brother (Producer/Director) Single doc, BBC 2011
- Anatomy of a Closet (Producer/Director) Single doc, Ovation TV (US) 2010
- Who are We? (Director/Producer) Doc series, BBC 2010
- A Southern Belle's Guide to New York (Director) Doc short (US) 1998

directing, acting for camera and screenwriting on our BA and short courses throughout the year. I also teach a module on our MA, which takes you through creating a taster reel and pitch for a TV show or series. I like the Met because all the tutors are filmmakers, so it's a real community." - [www.metfilm.co.uk](http://www.metfilm.co.uk)

### Looking ahead

You have just finished writing the screenplay for a feature length thriller, Anchor Baby, set in the States. What gave you the idea for the story? "I read an article - I think it was in the New York Times - about a Mexican woman who

crossed the desert nine months pregnant, to try and have her baby in the United States and couldn't get across the border. And then I got the job directing In Search of Food, so put the idea on hold. But, I knew I wanted to shoot something in Arizona, and when I came back to England I knew this was the film I wanted to write. It's about a lawyer who finds an undocumented Mexican girl lost in the desert and tries to reunite her with her mother, taking her head to head with a corrupt local politician. So it's kind of a detective story, but it's also about loss, because everyone in the film has lost someone close to them and it's how they

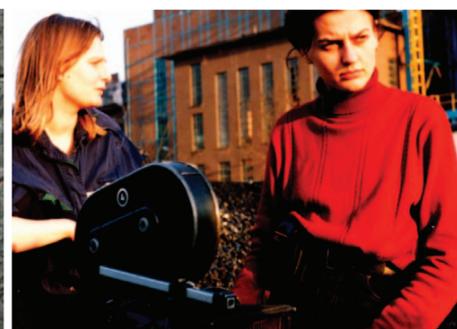
deal with that loss that defines them." And what's next for you? "The feature is taking a lot of my time right now. I'm working with a terrific script editor, while looking for a producer and I'm planning a recce to Arizona where it's set, to make some contacts on the ground later this year. I'm also directing a new short called Wink written by Joy Wilkinson, who wrote the recent BBC series Nick Nickleby. Wink is a short romantic comedy about shy people. I really like Joy's writing, it's very warm and funny, so I'm excited about working with her. I'd love to tell you the premise, but it gives the plot away so I can't!



**KEEP MAKING STUFF AND GETTING BETTER. LISTEN TO FEEDBACK...TAKE ALL THE HELP YOU CAN GET**



A scene from My Life: Big Brother



Directing Secret Society



I've also been off to Cannes for the first time and did some reporting back on that for Shooting People ([www.shootingpeople.org](http://www.shootingpeople.org)) during the festival..."

### Listen and learn

There are plenty of budding filmmakers out

there who are looking for a way into the business. However, with so many people clamouring for a piece of the action, it's a highly competitive place to be.

So, what's the best advice for new directors looking to make their first features and/or short films? "Just keep doing it. Keep making stuff and getting better. Listen to feedback and take all the help you can get. When you start making a film, you create energy and people are hugely attracted to that, and so people come forward with offers of help just when you need it. That's what you have going for you as a writer or director - you have an idea and you're going to make it happen, and that's always tremendously exciting to be around. Good luck with all your projects. Never give up!" ■

[www.emmalindley.net](http://www.emmalindley.net)  
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