

Panavision in focus

Anna Howard
South Solitary



Anna Howard's film resume has the perfect mix of solid 'apprenticeship' items going back fifteen years of shooting everything from short films through commercials, series, docs and telemovies as well as features. The latest project to be released, Shirley Barrett's 'South Solitary', was shot on 16 mm film and is now ready for audiences both local and overseas. Opening film for the Sydney Film Festival, it has lush visuals and an authentic Australian mood to its story-wise and visually.

Q. Why the decision to shoot on film and not with digital media?

A. By the time I came on board with the project the decision to shoot 16mm had already been made.

Q. As a period piece set in 1928, the film has an authentic look for its time. Can you tell us about the choice of camera, filters and lights that achieved this?

A. I would have liked to have shot South Solitary on the Arri 416 which is the latest Arri 16mm camera. The viewing system is very good and would have helped enormously due to the fact that we were shooting a lot in low light situations. But unfortunately there was not a 416 available and due to budget we decided to go with the Arri SR3.

The only filters that we used on the production were colour correction filters. Lighting was an interesting area.

Since all of the night scenes are lit with lanterns only we used a lot of small sources 1k zips, 300 and 150s and used flicker boxes. We also shot several scenes using Chinese lanterns on boom arms. For the lanterns themselves we had 12v lanterns and also 240v lanterns.

For the interior of the lighthouse we used a 5k through the rotating lens of the lantern room.

Q. The lead characters, eccentric and craggy, don't really inspire the word 'glamour' to the shoot, but there's a richness to the range of images you have achieved. What was your response to that challenge and how did you get there?

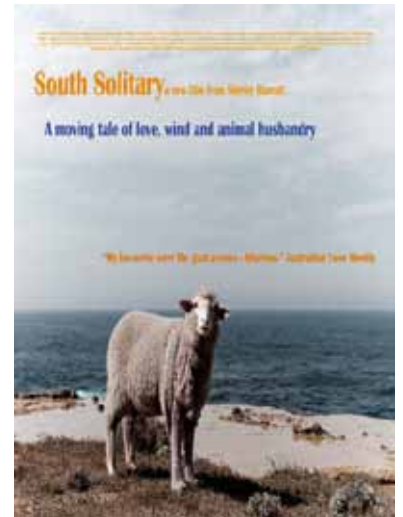
A. I think the film achieved its richness not only through the cinematography but also the Production and Wardrobe design and the beautiful colours and textures that were in the landscape.



Top, Anna Howard in the lantern room of the Cape Nelson Lighthouse.

Below, In the Cape Nelson Lighthouse.

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Q. South Solitary is a real lighthouse. Why the decision to shoot in Portland at Cape Nelson and not at Coff's Harbour?

A. The decision to shoot at Cape Nelson was made partly because the cloudy and unpredictable weather was suitable for the story of the film, overcast, raining and cold with wild seas. Unfortunately we spent a lot of time shooting the interiors to avoid the perfect blue sky summer days.

The landscape of Cape Nelson was also a major contributor to shooting there.

It has those high clifftops, magnificent teatree groves and the ancient volcanic ground with extraordinary rock formations.

Although the film is set on an island, Cape Nelson certainly worked for the remoteness and illusion of being on an island.

Filming on a real island was prohibitive as far as the budget was concerned.

Q. The light down in Cape Nelson, Portland is usually full of contrasts – the massive blues of Aussie skies, gloomy greys and stormy seascapes which were part of the script. But there were weather problems. Sunshine for most of the time. How did you get around the lack of rainstorms?

A. As I mentioned we were plagued by weather problems. We really wanted mainly stormy skies and just the occasional sunny afternoon.

Apart from shooting interiors there was not much we could do. Some scenes were not as critical as others for cloud so we were forever rescheduling. In fact I don't think we shot one single scheduled day on the entire shoot.

We couldn't wait for weather, we only had a 6 week shoot, and it was also impossible to build large frames with sailcloths etc. because of the wind.

Initially I spent time with Al Hanson, my grader at The Lab in Sydney, and we played around with skies in pre production. I was pretty confident that we could make the skies look cloudy but the contrast was really the difficult part.

Q. And waiting for the dailies? Was that a challenge?

A. Rushes were a challenge. It's always more difficult when a film is shot on location. We also had a slow turnaround due to our location. Unfortunately we were not set up very well for screening rushes on location so I did rely heavily on Neil Wood who transferred the rushes at Digital Pictures in Melbourne and I also kept in close contact with Al Hansen.

Q. Lighthouse accommodation is not traditionally a big space. Was it important to contrast interiors with the massive exteriors and what was your approach to choices of lenses etc. to establish that feel?

A. Choice of lenses was the most important factor to me when it was decided to shoot 16mm. I had used the Arri Ultra16 lenses on a job in New Zealand and was extremely impressed with their sharpness. Blowing up to 35mm it is imperative to have the best lens resolution as possible. The Ultra16s have that and are very good wide open, we shot around T2–T2.8, to try to maintain as little depth as possible.

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Shooting against white skies was also a concern for lens flare but the Ultra16s were brilliant. Panavision had the lenses shipped in from Germany as they were not available in Australia at the time of shooting.

Q. What was your favourite lens for the shoot?

A. The lens I used most was the 18mm.

Q. Any specific process and timing instructions you had for this overall appearance?

A. I spent as much time as I could with my grader Al Hansen. We looked at a whole bunch of stock tests. I was very concerned about losing definition in the skies so we worked on that.

Because we shot 16mm I rated all the stocks one stop slower to get a good neg. I also wanted to see the amount of grain that we would get on the blow up. The 50ASA was remarkable but because we were in such a restricted area for the lighthouse interiors and the film is set without electricity, hence lanterns, I had no choice but to also shoot 500ASA.

Al did a lot of grain reduction tests and I think in the end the film finished up with a rather silky feel.

Because of the beautiful natural colours of the location and the sympathetic design we didn't put any colour grade on the film apart from matching shots and scenes.

Q. Shooting in such a remote and dynamic location, what steps did you take to make sure you had everything you would need? It is a long drive back to the nearest Panavision office!

A. I made several trips to Cape Nelson and also Cape Otway so by the time we shot I was prepared for what equipment was needed.

Some times it was a challenge as the schedule changed endlessly.

Q. Over the years you have worked with some of the best known DOPs in the world. Dean Semler, John Seale and Peter James to name just a few. How important has this been to you?

A. I have been extremely fortunate to have worked as a 1st and 2nd AC for 16 years with so many fantastic DOPs.

Apart from my training they are all still so generous in sharing their knowledge. I don't think I have done a film yet were I haven't rung any number of other DOPs for tips on various things.

Q. Your next project is ... ?

A. At the moment I am shooting block 3 and 4 of the ABCs new series 'Rake'.



On location at Portland, Victoria.