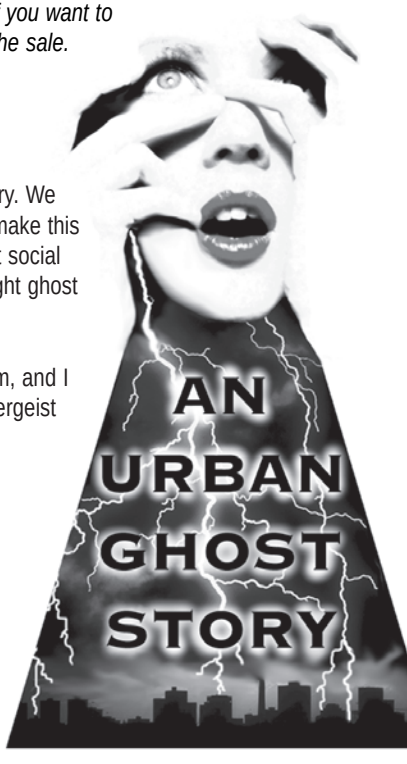
ACT 3
URBAN GHOST STORY

Chris and Gen completed White Angel *and after being arrested, spent two years as freelance journalists while they worked themselves out of debt. It was during this time that Living Spirit worked on the screenplay for their third feature,* Urban Ghost Story *and wrote the first edition of this book (UK edition). It's worth noting that in the few years between* White Angel *and* Urban Ghost Story*, digital technology had moved on so far that non-linear editing was the best way to edit, and digital features are being made on considerably smaller budgets than the £11k it cost to shoot* White Angel*.*

White Angel *is available on DVD in the USA, under the title,* Interview With A Serial Killer. *If you want to buy a copy, buy it from us at www.livingspirit.com so that we can make some money from the sale. If you buy from somewhere like Amazon, we will get zip!*



Q - How did the idea of* Urban Ghost Story (UGS) *come about?

Chris - I had seen a documentary on TV about a real poltergeist case and it was really scary. We had always wanted to do a ghost story but the genre felt overpopulated, so we decided to make this ultra real version of a paranormal tale. We originally said it would be like *The Exorcist* if Brit social realist director Ken Loach had made it. We wanted to capture that spooky feeling of late night ghost stories, where not too much happens, but because it's real, it's that much scarier.

Gen - I had some experiences with the paranormal as a kid, my grandmother was a medium, and I loved horror, so it seemed like an obvious choice. Right from day one we wanted 'real' poltergeist stories and experiences to be the focus of the drama in the movie.

Chris - Yeah, we even hung out with spiritualists and ghost hunters. It was heaps of fun.

Q - You swapped roles - why?

Gen - Chris directed *The Runner* and *White Angel,* and I directed *UGS*. When we left film school we agreed that we would split everything down the middle, directing and producing.

The original image put together by Chris with Photoshop conveyed Urban Ghost Story *as a horror movie. Printed on 1000 postcards for $100 it gave the film a glossy but cost effective presence in Cannes prior to shooting.*

We'd both wanted to direct and it's just the way that the chips fell that Chris directed *The Runner* and *White Angel.* So after producing twice I felt ready to direct.

Chris - In some ways it was a real problem for us. We had two movies behind us, and the first edition of this book (in the UK) which was doing well, but when people read the script for UGS and liked it, we then had to say oh, *'and Gen is directing...'* This was usually a problem as Gen had no real directorial experience, she was young and female, which all seemed to go against us.

Gen - This was all compounded by the fact that a lot of people didn't 'get' what the story was about. We had one company who was interested but wanted to change the end so the tower block was built on a gateway to hell - we just had to say, *'guys, you just don't get what we want to do...'*

Chris - One of the problems we just haven't managed to get over is that of development. We have searched high and low for scripts written by new writers and they are either very poor, or already snatched up by a bigger production company. That means we have to write ourselves, and that means we have to fund that too. And I don't care what anyone says, writing a great 120 page script takes months, maybe years if you can't work on it full time.

Gen - We were disillusioned about what we had made too. *White Angel* and *The Runner* were both genre films, and while *White Angel* was quite good, it still pretty much failed commercially. So we decided to just make a movie that we wanted to make, throw caution to the wind and just do it.

Chris - In some ways it has failed commercially again, but this time it's been a critical success which has meant some very exciting things are now happening.

Q - How much work did you do on the script?

Chris - We spent about 18 months writing but at the same time, we both had to do other work to keep afloat. It was a hard film to write because so much of it was just feel and not plot, it never was a film about a ghost being exorcised. The problem was always audience expectation of a ghost story. We knew the film wouldn't deliver the shocks that a main-stream audience would expect and that it was too paranormal for your average art film fanatic. So we just said, to hell with it, we fall between two posts, but it's a story we want to tell.

Gen - It was so frustrating to have sales agents tell us that there just weren't enough *'blue light'* scenes, or effects. That said, all the actors loved it because it had rich characters for a film that still had a commercial slant.

Chris - We were also taking a risk making the lead a 13 year old. What if she couldn't act?

Q - Why in a tower block?

Chris - We wanted an oppressive and interesting backdrop and a tower block just seemed like the obvious choice. It's cold, dark and scary.

Concept paintings by Alex Fort helped convince all parties at the table that the production was being helmed by a creative team with vision.

Gen - Glasgow seemed like a good location as the accents are so much more lyrical than say Southern English. I also liked the landscape, it felt dramatic, fresh and new. Setting the movie in southern England/BBC land would have been disastrous, it needed an edge.

(right) Just photocopying a 120 page screenplay on a low budget feature is costly, time consuming, not to mention back breaking. DP Jon Walker helps out just weeks prior to the shoot. (left) The tower block was conceived as a character in the movie, with a life of its own, organic and mechanical. It wasn't in Glasgow, but a short drive from the studios where Living Spirit were based in London.

Q - Where did the money come from?

Gen - We had produced a budget for £800k, set a date, and said whatever we had on that date, we would shoot with. We tried all the usual places but got nowhere - the usual answers were; *'we don't get what it's about...', 'It's too paranormal for us...', 'It's not paranormal enough for us...', 'Who's directing? She can't do it, she has no experience...', 'What about Chris directing instead, then we'd finance it...'*

Chris - It was really hard standing by your agreement when someone is offering you the money if I just cut Gen out of the loop and direct myself. It got Gen down a lot because she felt so devalued. So we stood by our guns, and no industry money came our way.

Gen - Just when we were about to crumble we got this call out of the blue from one of the investors in *White Angel*. His name is Dave and he said that he felt we had been in training on the other two films and now it was time to do it properly. He got a few of his friends together and collectively they put in £220k. This was great, we worked out that we could shoot the movie for that, quite easily actually, but continued to try and get more industry money. Dave then became our Executive Producer.

Chris - The money also meant that we could take an office at Ealing Film Studios in West London, which then meant we were taken seriously by the business... *'yeah, it's Chris here from Living Spirit, we're at Ealing Film Studios and blah blah blah'* - it just made us sound so much better. The room we hired was about the best value we have ever got out of anything - although we are situated next to the boiler room and when they switch on, the office makes a sound like the Millennium Falcon starting up and shudders continuously! It's just a great way to look bigger and more serious than we might be.

Q - Did you take the project to Cannes before shooting?

Gen - Yes, Chris did some artwork on the PC and we did some postcards and printed up a pile of scripts. We hawked it around but again, no-one seemed to understand what we were making and why. The best thing that happened was that we met David Thewlis and Amanda Plumber at a party, who were, weirdly enough, the two actors we wanted for the two adult roles. They both turned the film down eventually, but we did get the script to them and they did read it.

Chris - Cannes was great for getting in the mood, but for actually getting the film made, it didn't really help.

Q - What happened when you took the office at the studios?

Months of casting and sending out screenplays led to the very best cast we could have imagined. Left to right, Nicola Stapleton, James Cosmo, Heather Ann Foster, Jason Connery, Billy Boyd, Stephanie Buttle, Andreas Wisniewski and Elizabeth Berrington.

Chris - We had a friend called Carmen who had worked as a production coordinator on *White Angel* and she was between jobs. We convinced her to come and help out in the office for next to nothing and that made a real difference. Living Spirit suddenly had a consistent voice on the phone and it sounded like we had a secretary. Carmen acted as a filter, making sure we didn't get distracted by unimportant calls, and she also arranged heaps of production things too.

Gen - Because we had set a date, we had some cash and a script we believed in, we absolutely knew the film was going to happen. The only questions left were exactly how much money we would have when we got to photography, and just how good the movie would end up being. The freight train started to move down hill and we both knew it wouldn't be long before it would be impossible to stop it.

Chris - It was a great time.

Q - How did you get the cast involved?

Gen - I spent months interviewing actors. Cathy Arton, who had worked on both *The Runner* and *White Angel* stepped in as our casting director. She dealt with agents brilliantly which meant I only needed to see if the actor was the right person for the job. She made a big difference as she would always make interesting suggestions and find a way to get to the actors.

Chris - What was most interesting was that Gen seemed to make really good short lists, but because she was so close to it all, when she came to make the final decision on who would be the best person for the part, we all had to go by our gut instinct. I wasn't as involved in the casting, so when it came to decision time and there was a lot of *umming* and *ahhing* going on, I usually had a gut feeling based on fresh new impressions. Although Gen made a brilliant choice with Heather, the young girl from Glasgow playing the lead.

Gen - I went to Glasgow in Scotland and met about 100 young actresses whom Cathy, our casting director, had found. Heather was the 7th girl I saw and she just shone out immediately. Her dad was a cameraman too, so there was no need to explain how the business worked, they understood.

Chris - We had discovered that all sorts of laws exist for working with kids, all of which were a pain in the butt, so we moved the shoot forward so that we could shoot in the summer holidays and set a shoot date, August 18th. Then

Dave Hardwick, Executive Producer for Urban Ghost Story, *was the only person who believed in both Chris and Gen and the movie itself.*

we discovered that Scottish kids go back to school weeks before English kids - on August 18th, so we were just as screwed! So we had to adhere to all the laws and get a professional minder and all the rest of the stuff, which was very expensive.

Q - Did you have any problems with unions?

Chris - Astonishingly yes. BECTU, the technicians union blacklisted us. Even after blacklisting, they couldn't tell us why we had been blacklisted, even though we were named for months in their magazine. I asked them to substantiate their position, but they didn't, and never have. It didn't really cause much of a problem for us, just made us look like crooks.

Q - How much did you pay the crew?

Chris - About £100 a week, plus food. It's not much I know but everyone did it because they wanted to be there, everyone was getting a break - art directors got to do production design, gaffers got to operate camera etc. And because everyone was on the same money, there were no squabbles, no-one felt less or more important than anyone else - DP, production designer, runner, editor - everyone got the same deal and there was a real team spirit.

Q - But those aren't union rates?

Chris - Who said it was a union film? And what right does a union have to blacklist a company without backing up any claims? Then the thing with the agents happened. We were about a week from shooting when an agent called me and said to me - quote, *'you've just fucked yourself! I'm pulling my actors and you'll never work in the industry again - goodbye!'* I couldn't believe what I was hearing. How arrogant to think that they had the power to tell anyone whether they could work in 'their' industry or not. Then it happened with another agent and another. In the space of an hour, we lost most of our cast, except for Jason Connery's agent who stood by us.

Q - What was wrong with them?

Chris - The Personal Managers Association (PMA), is a group of agents in London who meet regularly behind closed doors. What transpired is that they had got hold of a letter written (for prospective investment) by our investor, Dave, in which he said Low Budget Films don't pay their deferred fees. It's a fact, deferred fee movies don't work. That's why we decided not to make UGS with deferments, but that just didn't matter. I couldn't even get hold of the PMA, they seemed to be more like a secret society than a group of agents who want to encourage new filmmakers. Anyway, the agents just didn't believe that we were not crooks and insisted that we make the film using the unionised *'PACT Equity registered low budget scheme'*. I just want to say clearly and categorically that because we were forced to use the *'PACT Equity registered low budget scheme'*, we ended up paying the cast 35% less than what we had anticipated. Even so, I was humiliated by the butt licking that I had to go through in order to get our cast back - but I did it.

To crown it all, a top agent who represented a major actor whom we had agreed would play a part in UGS then said, *'yes I know it's registered low budget, but... don't tell Equity and hire my actor as a producer then you can give them an extra £40k deferred fee as well'*. I had already been in hot water with Equity and as this proposed practice was strictly forbidden under union rules, I was damned if I was going to jeopardise it all again, so I just let it slide. Weeks later, this guy wrote to me with all sorts of wild accusations, again telling me that I would never work in the industry in the future. Where do they get these people?

Q - Did you get your cast back?

Chris - Yes, and you can imagine their faces when we told them that Equity, Agents and the PMA had collectively forced us to effectively negotiate their fees down by 35%!

Q - How did you find working with actors?

Gen - Because the production ran so smoothly, nights were early and days relatively short, tempers never frayed. Initially I was daunted by directing and thought that it would be obvious that I had never done it before, but no-one noticed so it was fine! I spent a lot of time talking to them about their characters and they seemed to get the idea that there was a cohesive idea behind what I wanted to get. And because everything had been storyboarded in great detail, I didn't need to spend so much time working on the camera.

Q - Did storyboards help?

Chris - We had never storyboarded before but this was a great experience. Weeks before shooting we could argue out the best ways to cover a scene. Gen would normally say *'I want to do this'*, I would say *'no we can't afford it, why not do this?'*, then she would say *'how about that way then?'* and before you knew it, we had the most creative and cost effective way of shooting a scene on paper. This didn't happen on *The Runner* or *White Angel* and it shows.

Gen - Alex Fort drew many of the story boards, but we ran out of time and stick figure sketches with camera placement diagrams took their place. It's amazing when you look at the boards then at the shots, just how closely they match. There were times when I turned up on location without any idea of what the location would look like. So I'd have to make it up there and then and looking back, these scenes didn't work as well as the ones that were storyboarded, they just weren't planned out.

Q - Did you shoot on location?

Gen - We couldn't afford to shoot in Glasgow, so we shot all the tower block scenes just down the road in West London. We used our tried and tested rule of finding all the locations as close as possible to the main unit as practical. Then we shot all the interiors on a set at the studios. Because we were shooting in London, the local council wanted thousands for us just to stand out on the pavement with a camera. So we just lied, told them we weren't going to do any shooting, then just did it. No-one ever had a problem and there was not a single complaint.

Q - How did you find working on a set?

Gen - First of all it was Stage 4 at Ealing Film Studios, which wasn't a sound stage, more like a big shed. And some days we were on the flight path with Heathrow airport so that every 90 seconds we'd stop shooting and wait for a plane to fly over, then when it rained we couldn't record sound because it had a metal roof. Other than that it was great. We cut a great deal with the studio which got us the stage, green room, production office, changing rooms etc., and there were on site bathrooms and a canteen so catering wasn't an issue. From a production point of view it was a dream come true. The actors liked it too because there was parking, they could go somewhere quiet to relax, and there were virtually no night shoots. Very civilised.

Q - What happened about catering?

(left) The beginning of the compromise. An unhappy Genevieve argues for her shots, against Chris who constantly says 'no, it's a half page scene, we don't need to do it in eleven shots!'

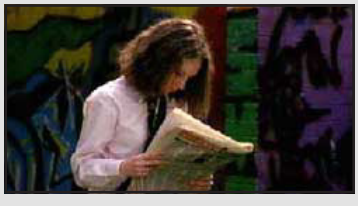
URBAN GHOST STORY STORYBOARDS

Sketched by Alex Fort

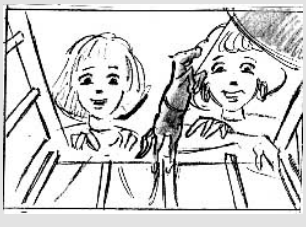
SCENE 7 - INT. NIGHT - LIZZIE'S BEDROOM
Lizzie sits up and looks around bedroom as she hears noises in the dark.

SCENE 5 INT. NIGHT - HALLWAY
Lizzie walks down the grim hallway in the tower block.

SCENE 65 EXT. DAY - WALL
Lizzie angrily walks along whilst reading the newspaper.



SCENE 42 INT. NIGHT - LIVING ROOM
Slow motion dolly into Lizzie and Alex sit on a sofa as a policeman kneels down to question them.



SCENE 12 INT. DAY - KERRIE'S FLAT
Lizzie and Kerrie look down into the cot where little Jack is asleep.

Artist Alex Fort worked with Gen and Chris to storyboard Urban Ghost Story. The storyboards allowed Gen to communicate to every member of the cast and crew, just what was needed throughout each day. It also ensured that what was shot would actually 'cut' once in the edit suite. Overhead camera diagrams were also used to illustrate where actors and the camera would move during a shot. Management of anywhere between 500 and 1000 storyboard images is an issue not to be underrated.

(Left) Stage 4 at Ealing Film Studios, West London. An effects stage with no real sound proofing. Ideal for Urban Ghost Story *as it was based at a studio facility, came with green rooms, production offices, storage, bathrooms, canteen, parking etc. It was cheap, BIG and all other locations needed were a short drive away. (Below) It may look convincing on film but it is just plasterboard, plywood, paint and wallpaper.*

Chris - Because we were shooting at the studios we were able to give everyone £5 per day and they could feed themselves at the canteen. On the very odd occasion when we were on location, one of the production team would go to the local supermarket and buy sandwiches and buffet type food and everyone was happy. Aside from tea and coffee, we always had cold water on tap because the stage wasn't air conditioned and it was the height of summer. With all the lights turned on what was supposed to be a freezing cold Glaswegian flat was more like a furnace and dehydration became an issue. In retrospect it's amazing how much we spent on water, nearly a thousand pounds!

Q - Who built the sets?

Chris - When Gen was casting, I was crewing. I met this wild guy called Simon Pickup who seemed to me to be bonkers. But he had extraordinary passion and a vision. I wasn't too sure about his vision, if it was doable, but I felt that if we were going to build sets, they should be as unique as possible. Simon designed a fantastic set for the film, and gave every ounce of energy in his body to make the film as good as possible. Mark Sutherland, from *White Angel,* came on board as the construction manager, and together they made it happen. A BBC designer came on set one day and proceeded to tell us that what we were doing wasn't the way to do it, it couldn't be done for the money we had, and it was impossible. Well Simon and Mark proved him wrong.

Shooting on a set meant an incredible degree of control over lighting, additional space, flying walls and ceiling for better access. In the pictures, the walls look laughably thin and you wouldn't ever believe that in the movie they look convincingly like two foot thick concrete. We also had a little help from the neighboring, bigger budget dumpsters that were on the studio lot. Many of the sets in UGS were built from junk pulled from BBC drama dumpsters. Many of the sets in UGS were built from junk pulled from BBC drama skips.

(top) A typical 2nd unit pickup. On the day, we were running late, the baby in the scene was tired and crying and it was unbearably hot. We ended up with no reverse shot of the store keeper, so the following day, the actor was brought back, a tiny set was mocked up and the 2nd unit picked up the shot.

(middle) Working with kids could present a nightmare scenerio. Fortunately, Heather Ann Foster was probably the most profesional cast member!

(bottom) Actress Heather Ann Foster aged 13 (left), with actress double Niki Ball aged 23 (right). We couldn't get a picture of them stood together wearing the same clothes as we only had one set!

Gen - The level of detail in the sets meant that we could shoot anything, and in close up detail. Walls could be moved, and there was a floating ceiling so lights could be suspended from above. The big problem was that it took longer to build than we expected, so they were still hammering weeks into the shoot. Just as they completed the build we had to rip it all down. One problem we found was that you need lots of space around your set so that you can get lights or a skyline backdrop far enough away to be acceptable. We built the set right up to the wall at times and that was a mistake. The more I think about it, I can't think of a single drawback to shooting on a set. I guess if there isn't time to paint and dress it properly, it might look a bit crap and then it's self defeating. Because you make the sets, everything is bigger, which means there is more space to work in and the actors aren't so restricted. If you look at UGS, it has to be the biggest council flat in the history of Glasgow!

One big problem, literally, was Andreas, who played Dr Quinn, was just too, well, big! And his head would often pop off the top of the set. We had a cunning solution which was to put him in a wheelchair, but that was a little too mad scientist, so we just got him to sit down whenever we could.

Chris - We also built a few tiny sets, just corners of rooms or walls. Again, this meant that we kept the equipment, cast and crew all in one place.

Q - How did you approach the style of the film?

Gen - With *The Runner* we'd gone for a glossy look, with *White Angel* we'd gone for a social realist look that ended up looking a lot like TV. For *UGS* we knew we would still have a limited lighting budget but more than we'd had before. Myself, Chris and DP Jon Walker, who had shot both *The Runner* and *White Angel,* all got together and decided on the 'look'.

Combined with shooting in a studio with complete control over the sets allowed us to create a style with which we were all happy. It's hard to quantify the look but we wanted it to look a lot like Luc Besson's *The Professional*. We wanted it to look cinematic and not televisual, so we used a lot of slow motion, long lens shots, fast cutting and ultimately, although this wasn't planned, put it through a bleach bypass at the labs. The costume and sets were another area that we wanted to control in order to create this look. Simon Pickup and Mark Sutherland, with their crew of die hard set dressers, had created this beautifully detailed set that just meant we could shoot in every direction. Early in the shoot a costume for our lead man was a problem. I hadn't had time to collabourate with costume designer Linda Haysman on everything as there just wasn't time or money. Actors often ended up wearing their own clothes which isn't always the best idea as you don't have much control and personal preferences start to come into play.

(left) Micro Set - To plug the hole that had appeared because of the opera subplot, we needed to shoot three new scenes with Lizzie listening to her walkman in the bathroom. The sets had long gone so Chris Burridge built a micro set, simply two sheets of plywood with tiles, a pipe and toilet seat that was screwed into a wooden box. The frame was kept tight and the illusion, helped by dripping water sound effects, was sealed.

Chris - On the first day of shooting with Jason Connery it all went well except I was unhappy with his costume. I thought he looked too dressed up and less like the bit of 'rough' I expected. This 'look' had been a compromise between what Jason was comfortable wearing, budget restrictions and what he had brought with him in his bag. As I was not literally at the coal face directing I was able to stand back and note that the costume was just not quite right. Gen had gone through the whole day and noticed the costume but because it was early on in the shoot and there were other seemingly bigger issues, it just didn't seem like an immediate problem.

This is where a creative producer is useful because the costume issue didn't seem too dramatic at the time but in retrospect it would have changed the dynamics and tone of the film and was actually very important. Linda adapted the costume that night after persuading DP Jon Walker to relinquish his trousers, giving the dressed down 'look' everybody agreed was right.

Gen - Ironically we ended up using these first scenes in the final cut of the movie to create a new story thread where Jason Connery's character comes back at the end of the film, sometime after the main story has finished. The obvious costume difference implied a change in character and a passing of time. Quite funny considering it was a screw up!

Q - You mention bleach bypass - what is this?

Chris - Bleach bypass is a process in the labs where the film isn't put through the bleach bath. It makes the blacks and dark areas of the film almost impenetrable and it adds a kind of rich feel to the image. It's very subjective and is only used in the theatrical version of the film, but it didn't half make it look great. *Se7en* used it in the cinema for instance.

Q - What did you shoot it on - S16mm or 35mm?

Gen - Even though we had £200k and could have afforded 35mm we chose S16mm. This was because we had a 13 year old girl in the lead and we didn't know if she would be a one take wonder or a take twenty six disaster. In fact she was fantastic. It was also because we had learned from our other films that coverage is paramount. It's a lot like the way Hollywood shoots films, we just wanted to burn stock like there was no tomorrow and we knew that if we shot on 35mm we wouldn't be able to do that.

Chris - We reasoned that audiences were not interested in whether a film was shot on S16mm, 35mm Kodak or Fuji, they were just interested in whether the story and characters were engaging. So we

George the handyman, a prominent character played by Richard Syms. During a test screening we discovered that the audience believed he was the father of a loan shark character who turned up later. This wasn't the case and we ended up having to cut the character to avoid this confusion.

let go of 35mm and embraced S16mm and truly did burn stock! It was the right decision and I know that the film wouldn't have been as good if we had shot on 35mm. We would have crisper shots, but fewer shots and diminished coverage.

(above) A large main unit and small 2nd unit ensured maximum coverage.

Q - Did you use a second unit?

Gen - Yes. One of the things that was different with *UGS* from our other movies were that there were an enormous amount of characters. That combined with the fact that our young actress was legally only allowed to work for a few hours a day meant that often we had to have two cameras running on set. The second camera was usually free and roaming and would grab snippets of anything interesting when it could. A lot of the time, Chris would be directing the second unit while I was on set doing the main unit, which freed me up to forget about doing close ups of newspapers or hands putting a cup down and concentrate on the drama and the actors.

Chris - The other advantage was that I was able to use a stand in for Heather (Niki Ball) and shoot large portions of scenes with her, then Gen would come in with the lead actress, shoot her close ups, then move on. Because we were cutting as we shot I was able to isolate sequences that needed a cutaway to bridge two shots that weren't cutting comfortably and then go and shoot them, or shoot a cutaway to help cut the middle out of a dialogue scene that wasn't quite working - basically invent tiny segments of drama to help with the overall pacing of the movie. Even though we shot for only four weeks, because we pretty much had two units going almost all of the time, it enabled us to nearly double the amount of shots that we were able to achieve had there only been a single main unit.

Q - When did you edit?

Gen - Because we had a budget we were able to hire an Avid which we installed in a room 50 yards from Stage 4 where we were shooting. Our editor, Eddie Hamilton, was fresh out of the corporate video world but loved movies. He appeared to have limitless energy and showed us a short film he'd cut called *Hallraiser,* about a mad axe murderer in a hall of residence at a university. We recognised a kindred spirit who was born from a love of *Star Wars*, so we gave him the job even though he'd never cut drama before. It was a brilliant decision because Eddie's technical expertise, creative knowledge, combined with his almost super-hero like energy levels meant that by lunch time each day he'd already cut the previous days dailies. This meant we could watch the scenes over lunch and plan how we would plug any holes or problems, or just feel damn fine about how good we thought it was looking. We also let the actors look at some scenes which boosted their confidence.

Chris - You have to be careful with this because one of the actors often became unconfident after seeing themselves. I don't know why because they were fantastic. The upshot of having this Avid and Eddie cutting away, aside from plugging holes in scenes, was that by the end of the shoot, Eddie had pretty much cut the whole movie. So within a couple of days of wrapping we actually sat down and watched the movie.

Q - How did it look?

Gen - Terrible. It was the most depressing experience of my life. It was a mess, all over the place, full of holes and it just didn't flow. My directorial debut was a disaster!

(left) Even though there were seven cameras on set, it was camera four, running at 250 fps, with a 500mm lens operated by Jay Polyzoides that was the one that produced the shot that gets the gasps in the cinema.

Chris - I believe all movies are like that and the editing process is designed to smooth everything out and fine tune the story. Editing is an interesting stage because when you think about it, if there's a problem with the script, the editor has to fix it. If there's a problem with the acting, then the editor has to fix it. Problems with the camera, then the editor has to fix it. And so much of post production is just making something that doesn't work into something that does work. And after a few drinks, the cut didn't seem as bad as we thought, but we knew we had a lot of work to do. We discovered there were a lot of holes we hadn't seen and we almost immediately planned a quick re-shoot weekend where we shot an extra 50 or so shots without any actors. These were things like exteriors of buildings etc.

Q - So you held test screenings?

Gen - Yes. The first one was with a few friends and whole sequences were still missing, like the car crash at the end of the movie, so it lacked punch, but we were just trying to find out if people understood the story mechanics that were going on underneath the hood of the film. We isolated a lot of problems and did another re-cut, then we had to plan the stunt sequence which Terry Forrestal co-ordinated for us. Once we had this footage and cut it in the whole movie came to life. To be quite honest, none of us expected the crash to be as spectacular as it was.

Chris - So we had another test screening, this time for a large group of 30 or so people who we didn't know. It was quite an eye opener as we discovered that all our friends had been, on the whole, fairly generous with their criticism. We weren't really interested in finding out whether people liked it or didn't like it. There's nothing you can do about personal taste, we just wanted to know whether the story was working and we discovered all sorts of problems.

Gen - I hated the screening because everything that I knew was wrong with it seemed to glow like a beacon. It was demoralising listening to what people were saying after Chris had stood up after the film and said to the audience *so 'tell me what's wrong with it?'* - after the invitation to tear it apart, they didn't lose much time. In retrospect this was brilliant because all the problems became apparent, and every problem had a solution, so we were able to go back and fix them all. So while the process might have been demoralising, in the long run it was the best thing to do.

Chris - We discovered all sorts of strange things. When you write a script and make a film, you create a kind of road map for the story, the idea is that the audience never knows what's round the next corner - the problem is that sometimes you think they're driving along one road when actually

(upper left) Stunt Co-ordinator Terry Forrestal takes charge . (lower left)To flip the car before hitting the stationary car a pipe ramp was bolted to the floor and greased up. Terry checks the trajectory meticulously as he will be in the car when it hits at 60mph.

they're off on a completely different road because of the way they've interpreted what they've seen. This happened in UGS with two characters - George was a character who was cut because everybody thought he was the father of the money grabbing loan shark. To everyone involved in the film it was an astonishing revelation that anyone could even consider this, yet there we were with thirty people all saying it to us. So we made some brutal cuts and George hit the cutting room floor. It was an important lesson to learn that no matter how confident you are in your own story, you need to show it to people to test out whether it's working on a purely mechanical level. Do they understand who is who and what relations they have and do they understand where they are being led by you the filmmaker. If they don't, invariably they get confused and bored and will fall asleep. And we've all seen films where we don't really understand what's going on, or something in the fabric of the story seems very odd, this is probably because you're thinking one thing when the director thinks you're thinking something else.

Gen - We began fine cutting the movie. Even though Eddie was like Buzz Lightyear with inexhaustible batteries, the whole process began to wear his enthusiasm down. Chris and I argued vehemently in the cutting room, often over frames, or the slightly different delivery of lines, and it was very hard work - not just exhausting but it was a spiritual and emotional marathon.

Chris - Because of the fact that three re-cuts of *White Angel* had happened in the past, each time vastly improving the film, I was adamant that there wouldn't be a single frame in the movie that wasn't absolutely essential. This of course flew in the face of what Gen wanted because she was so in love with the nuances and detail that would inevitably require a few extra frames here and there. Eventually we agreed on a cut and after a test screening we felt sure that it was the right one. It felt lean and mean and everyone was happy. I was sure that the horror of re-cuts as we'd had on *White Angel* would never happen.

We had a test screening for some industry people at Polygram. They came out and said it was good but it was too slow. I just couldn't believe it! I'd argued so aggressively to cut, cut, cut! I was sure there was nothing in there that could be taken out. But I knew from experience that even if you're sure, you could be wrong. I went to see Gen, who was recuperating with her family... *'they're all wrong!'* she exclaimed, *'but what if they're not?'* I argued. For eight hours we fought until Gen dug her heels in explaining that it's her art, her film, and nobody was going to *'fuck with it!'* Some time later, I'd secretly arranged for Eddie to drop by to argue the case for a recut of the first 25 minutes, the part of the story with pacing problems. Gen was still opposed, but intrigued to see what would happen if we did cut 15 minutes. An hour later and we'd done it. Having been away from the movie for a few weeks it was incredible to see how baggy it was. The three of us sat in the cutting room with our jaws on the floor saying *'why on earth did we leave all that junk in? - I can't believe we didn't cut it out before - It's so much better - Oh my God... !'* That's the cut that we released, short at 86 mins, but we felt it's better to have a well paced shorter film than a long baggy affair.

Q - UGS uses a famous bit of opera, why and how did that come about?

(above) Danielle Da Costa, stunt double for Heather Ann Foster, wearing oversized costumes and wig, prepares to make her leap from the 13th floor whilst attached to a fan descender.

Gen - We knew we had to get the key sequence at the end of the film right. The car crash formed the pivotal question in the audience's mind, *'what happened?'* - it was also the moment that Lizzie remembered just what did happen, as she faced death falling from a window thirteen floors up in her tower block.

Chris - We broke this out and did it eight weeks after the main shoot. We knew this one would be hard and fast and wanted to have as much energy as possible, plus half of it was a night shoot. It was shot over two days with seven cameras, some running in extreme slow mo. When we got the footage back and Eddie cut the sequence together it was jaw dropping. It was at that moment that I said, *'I don't know how or why, but we should put opera over this sequence, how can we do it?*' I found an old opera CD and I listened to all the famous tracks, until I heard one that seemed perfect. We put it on the Avid and watched it with the pictures. There was stunned silence as everyone in the room knew that we absolutely must use this opera music.

Gen - The challenge was to work out a way where we could plausibly use this music without it being self indulgent. Perversely this worked in our favour as part of the screenplay's problem had always been what reason was there for Lizzie to conveniently remember *what happened in the crash?* at the end of the movie. We used the opera as a kind of acoustic memory that Lizzie has, and when she finally hears it in all it's glory, it triggers a series a mental flashbacks. We then shot three new scenes to explain it's presence.

Chris - Again this shows that with low budget films as you don't have enough money to write the script and go through as many drafts as is needed, you end up being forced to shoot before you're actually ready. The secret to making this work is to treat the editing as yet another screenplay revision and not be afraid to go back and re-shoot or invent entirely new characters, subplots, scenes etc.

Q - How did you do the joy riding car crash sequence?

Gen - Terry Forrestal, the stunt coordinator on *The Runner,* came back to do *UGS*. He now had even bigger movies under his belt and he really did it as a personal favour. There were two sequences - the car crash and the high fall out of the tower block. From a stunt point, the car crash was very dangerous but essentially a fairly run of the mill stunt, a car hits a pile of sand, flips over, skids to a halt and explodes. You could probably see this kind of stunt in a TV drama. The reason this sequence worked so well in *UGS* and why it looked much more impressive was because of the quantity and the diversity of coverage. We had seven cameras, all running as fast as they could so that they would slow down time on screen (slow motion). The main camera was on a very long lens about quarter of a mile away and this was running at nearly 300 fps, which meant that when the car flew through the air it slowed down so much that visually it looked stunning and smacked of John Woo! It was a very exciting night and even though the crash seemed to happen over just one or two seconds, it felt like an eternity before Terry was pulled from the wreck.

The mix of spooky story, urban setting and social realist with a slash of Hollywood treatment made Urban Ghost Story *an odd movie. A hit with the critics, film festivals and Hollywood executives, all of whom respond to it's unique qualities, but a failure with international sales as buyers just don't know what label to put on it, Ghost Story or Social Drama?*

(right) Directing is a physically rigorous job. Lack of sleep, mental exhaustion, severe backache, poor diet and a crisis of faith are common. (below right) Nightmare compromise.The pharmacist heist scene - it's the first day of shooting, it's the hottest day of the year, the location is a tiny pharmacy with customers coming in and out, there's no air conditioning and the lights make it like an oven, you are behind schedule, the baby is going mad... and it's a really complicated scene. It was eventually shot hand held and the sheer spontaneity of the way in which it was filmed actually helped the scene. Second unit picked up a missing shot the following day and the scene was saved.

Chris - Then came the explosion with special effects man Dave Beavis. He had a limp which was vaguely worrying considering he was blowing something up for us, but we knew his credentials and felt confident. We set up all the cameras as he rigged the car to explode. Just before we started the cameras I asked him *how far away do we need to be safe?* - he coolly took three paces back and said *here's safe*. So we called action, the cameras started and Dave pressed the button - BABOOM!!! - I was hit by a blast of heat and then my hair stood on end as I watched a wall of flame come at me with terrifying speed. I glanced over to Dave who was casually scratching his chin as though nothing had happened. I looked over my shoulder at the crew but they weren't there, they were twenty yards away, and running! There were a lot of expletives. None of us had any idea how big the explosion was going to be, but whatever we had imagined it was at least three times bigger. It was a splendid experience! As Jason Connery put it, *'how unlucky for Lizzie to steal a car only to find that there are 40lbs of semtex in the trunk!'*

Gen - The next day we had to do the high fall out of the building. What was supposed to happen here was Lizzie was to be holding on to some pigeon wire attached to the side of the building thirteen stories up, the wire would give way and then she would drop - again coverage and slow motion made this scene work as well as it finally did. In fact this wasn't as dangerous in terms of stunts because the stunt girl, Danielle, was on a very thin cable and was dropped several floors as the pigeon mesh came away from the building. Still the moment that she came away and dropped was absolutely riveting. Even though you know it's a stunt and she's on a wire, and that there's a crash mat at the bottom, it still looks like somebody jumping out of a twenty story window! Two people screamed involuntarily which helped seal the tension on set. There was a guy walking his dog some forty feet away who hadn't seen the film crew and looked round when he heard the commotion only to see what he thought was a young girl falling out of a thirteenth floor window and screaming! We had to stop him ringing the emergency services and calm him down with a cup of tea!

Chris - In Cannes a couple of people came up to me and said *'how did you do that stunt... with the crash and falling out the window that must have cost at least half a million dollars?'* I wryly smiled and said yes, it was a small portion of our budget that was well spent. In fact this entire sequence, with Union rates, including paramedic and the emergency services, the fire service, six extra cameras, pyrotechnic effects, location fees, cars to crash, special wire rigging etc. all came in under £20k. Sure it's a lot of money but for what we got it was the best money we've ever spent.

Q - What did you learn directing UGS?

Gen - It's so exhausting! You have to keep your mind on everything all the time, constantly thinking on your feet. The other thing that surprised me was the physical rigors of directing. Unlike producing, you never have a chance to stop, there is always a line of people queuing up to ask you questions and the only time that your brain can actually stop is when you switch off the lights to go to sleep, even then your mind is buzzing over the days rushes and thoughts on the day to come.

The most disappointing thing about directing is the constant compromise that you have to suffer, camera movements are never quite as good as you visualise, actors deliver performances differently from the way you imagined and there's just not enough time, money or daylight to get what you want.

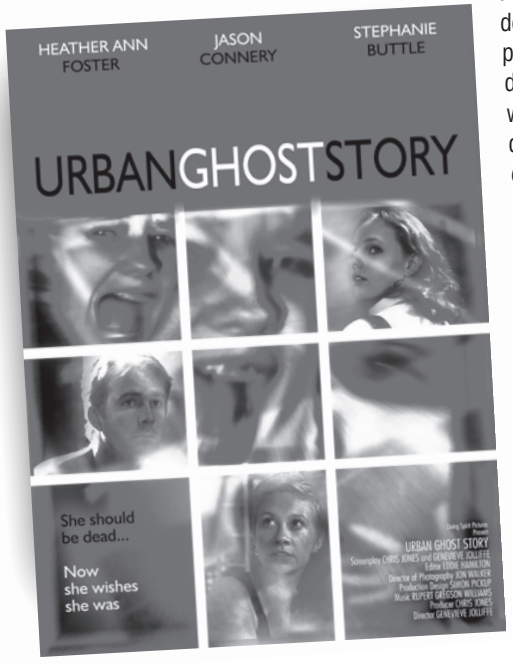
Chris - There was a funny moment on the first day when I was driving Gen home, She was very depressed and I said *'what's wrong?'* and she said, *'the actors, why couldn't they just act... better?'* First days are always dreadful, and actors tend to do things differently from the way you imagined, but that isn't necessarily bad work.

Gen - In a strange sort of way these compromises become your allies because it allows the other creative people around you, as long as you have chosen carefully, to flourish and bring something new to the movie. We tried to work with the most talented creative people we could find and then let them loose within rigid parameters so that they could produce their best work but at all times it stays true to the spirit, vision, story and style of the movie. There are times when the compromise is difficult to swallow but you have to ask yourself if I go for another take or another shot is it really going to improve what I want? It's easy to go for take after take in vain, hoping that the camera move will somehow get better or the actor will somehow do it differently. There's no hard rule here but I learnt to trust my instinct and not to waste time on something if it isn't working. I knew that I had a second line of defence in the form of Eddie in the cutting room, and he could work wonders with those scenes that I didn't think were working, as long as I had enough coverage.

Chris - Gen always says to me that there is one scene in the middle of the movie that she hates and regrets the day we shot it because I forced her to shoot it quickly the way that she did, because we were so behind schedule. Again with no rules and just opinion, there is no answer aside from the fact that Gen tends to forget about the other times where compromises were made and the compromises didn't show. You have to accept that some scenes will be disappointing and you'll end up hating them.

Q - Did directing ever get the better of you?

Gen - Yes, two thirds of the way through the shoot there was a day that I got so overloaded, stressed, hungry and frazzled that I became sick and I had to stop for a few hours and go and lie down. Fortunately because Chris is also a director and close to the project it was just a matter of him stepping on set and continuing to direct one full scene so we didn't fall behind. Interestingly, although we're not going to tell you what scene it is, you can clearly detect a different directorial style and strangely when I saw it I thought *'My God! That scene's great, I wouldn't have directed it that well!'*



Chris - Then again when I saw some of the scenes that Gen did I said *'My God I wouldn't have done it that way and it works so well!'* Interesting how other peoples interpretation is surprising and that surprise makes it better.

Q - Chris, how did you approach producing?

Chris - My approach to producing was very different from that of Gen's during *White Angel* and *The Runner.* Gen had taken the

The poster for Urban Ghost Story *wasn't at all what we expected, but it was different, suggested there was more to the film than just a spooky tale, and it was bold. The red hue made it stand out when fly-posting and everyone seemed to remember the name of the movie.*

(left) It looks great in the photos and on TV, but Cannes is often exhausting, hot, sweaty, and downright expensive.

(below) Chris, with fellow film maker Simon Cox, try to sell a concept to Troma, agents for Killer Condom. *Their movie,* The Breath Of Death - The Killer Fart.

(bottom) Jason Connery was 100% behind the movie and spent much of his time in Cannes promoting Urban Ghost Story. *On this occasion he is doing a live link for Euro channel Sky News. Getting your cast behind your film is extremely valuable because journalists are always up for an interview with an actor, they're just prettier than us film makers!*

weight of production on to her shoulders and had taken every single problem as a personal challenge. I on the other hand, being lazy, decided that I would delegate everything, and I mean everything. I had a really good team of production people around me and I told them that the only time that I wanted to hear from them was if we were about to be shut down, somebody was going to die or there is some impending disaster, otherwise, they would fix it. I also developed a peculiar condition called producers cramp which manifested itself in the inability to sign checks! Because I didn't pay anything until after the shoot, I didn't have to keep track of money, and because I didn't have to deal with the thousands of production problems that occurred, my brain stayed clear. Consequently I was able to keep tabs creatively and I became for want of a better description, the cast and crew therapist. Crew members would regularly come to me and bemoan some compromise or condition that they had had inflicted upon them and I would say *'there there, I understand and I care'*. They'd get it off their chest and we'd get on with it. I didn't realise how important this role was in terms of team building but it meant that everybody's gripe was heard and if something could be done about it, it was. Consequently from a production point of view, I wasn't stressed, I could deal with *real* problems in a level headed way and everything ran pretty much smoothly.

Q - Were there any major problems?

Chris - I don't know, the production team dealt with it.

Q - How did you get the music for UGS?

Gen - Harry Gregson-Williams had done the music for *White Angel* and then went to Hollywood to do movies like *Armageddon* and *Antz.* As *White Angel* had been Harry's first feature film and because of personal contacts we really wanted Harry to do *UGS* and Harry wanted to do it too. Unfortunately, the meagre music budget we had was severely outweighed by Jerry Bruckheimer and *Enemy of The State*, so Harry had to graciously bow out, but did suggest his brother might do a good job.

Chris - We decided to have a look at a bunch of other composers but bizarrely enough Rupert, Harry's brother, was indeed the best choice. He tapped in to the style of

music that we wanted, something contemporary and upbeat. It was important not to give it a Hollywood thriller sounding score and equally we couldn't just pack it with Brit pack band songs. I think the music is one of the strongest elements in the film because it is so left field from what you would imagine from a movie called *Urban Ghost Story,* set in Glasgow, and yet it seems to work so incredibly well.

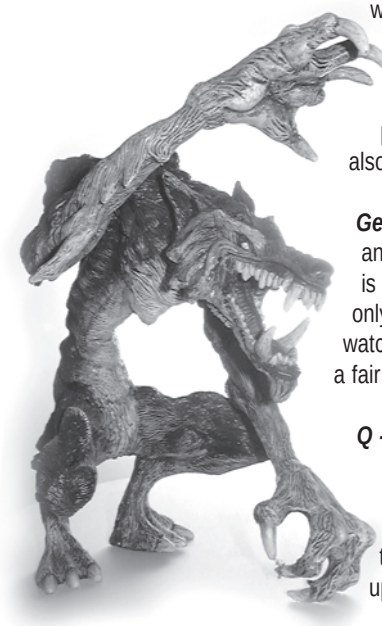
Gen - We were also very specific with Rupert about where and how much music we were going to use and in comparison with our earlier films there isn't that much music in the whole movie, probably around 25 minutes. The music was composed of samples, electronic instruments and wherever possible, real performers. We recorded it over Christmas and all of us all got very severe food poisoning from a dodgy curry. The last thing you want to do when you're up against a deadline is to spend a day chucking your guts up, it's not what you call creatively inspiring.

Q - So you completed all your post production. When did you start to talk to sales agents and distributors?

Chris - After we'd recut the movie, we set up a screening in London, with high hopes because we knew that *UGS* was the best film that we'd made. One thing that had surprised me during earlier screenings is that at the end of the movie, people were in tears because they had found the resolution emotionally moving. We never expected people to cry at the end, but the combination of Heather's performance, the lighting, the music and the story worked so well that everybody started sniffling. We were starting to get a sense that the movie we had made actually looked like one thing, i.e. a ghost story, but was actually another thing, i.e. a story about guilt and redemption. This dichotomy was at the heart of the problems we were going to have as we tried to sell the movie. *'Is it a ghost story? Is it a social realist drama?'* We always said that it was a ghost story in a social realist world and that was it's unique position.

Gen - So the distributors watched it, all smiled and passed on it because they didn't know what box to put it in. In the absence of any good reviews or press they also didn't know whether people would take to it or not. Only one company was interested, Stranger Than Fiction, who were already acting as our sales agents for *White Angel*. We were very excited because they were about to sign a deal where they were going to have an influx of cash, which meant that they would have a high profile at Cannes and our movie would be their number one product.

Chris - We had run out of cash and the labouratory processing bill meant that we owed the lab about twenty grand. We were eager to get sales so we signed with Stranger Than Fiction and they began putting together all the bits. A design agency put together a poster, which was not what either of us had imagined, yet it seemed really fresh and original and we liked it a lot. So we went with it. It was bold red and very eye catching, which meant that when we fly posted in Cannes, it really stood out. The poster definitely worked for the movie and it also conveyed a sense that there was perhaps more to this than just a simple spooky tale.



Gen - We'd already cut a trailer for *UGS* which we liked, but Stranger Than Fiction asked for another one, and this time they said *'make it look like Die Hard with ghosts'*. So Eddie, who is already energetic to start off with, was caffeined up and locked in a cutting room for a day only to emerge eight hours later, eyes bloodshot and hair crazy, explaining *'it's done'*. We watched it and somehow Eddie *had* made it look like *'Die Hard with ghosts!'* It wasn't exactly a fair representation of the film but it was big and ballsy.

Q - What happened when you took UGS to Cannes?

Chris - We wanted a big push at Cannes so decided to take a few friends down with us, all of whom had worked on the film. All in, there were six of us and we were determined to make sure that everybody in Cannes had heard of *UGS.* Every morning we would go up and down La Croisette and fly post anything that didn't move - cars, telephone boxes,

railings, Hollywood movie posters. Within a few hours they'd all have been taken down because it's illegal, so in the afternoon we went and fly posted again. The posters were just the red coloured image that we had decided on for the film and its simplicity and boldness really worked in our favour. After a couple of days everyone we bumped into would say, *'Oh yeah I've heard of that film Urban Ghost Story'*. It was very labour intensive and damned hot but worth it.

Gen - We had three screenings which we tried to pack - the first was hard, but the second and third were full and the buzz on the street was that UGS was a cool movie. We approached every company and gave them an invite to come to the screening. It's really hard work knocking on so many doors, sensing rejection, but it has to be done.

Q - Did you pitch new projects when you were there?

Chris - One of the fun things we decided to do was to see how far we could get by talking the talk. Myself and fellow filmmaker Simon Cox decided to give it a try. We went to the Noga Hilton Hotel, targeted the companies who make and sell American style B movies, swaggered in, pitched, told them that we had half of the $2m budget already in place. Of course we didn't but it was really an exercise to see how far you could get with bullshit. Within an hour, we had an Anglo-Canadian co-production for a science fiction thriller that we hadn't even written, budgeted at $2.2m, to be shot in Wales and post produced in Canada. Clearly we couldn't pursue this because we didn't have the $1m that we claimed we had, neither the screenplay or even the desire to make it! But it did show how quickly you can put something together if you have something that you want to do and a bit of cash. We also dropped in on Troma, who had their new movie, *Killer Condom.* Over dinner that night we came up with a concept for a new movie for them and the following day went and pitched it. It was called *The Breath of Death the Killer Fart.* We'd already constructed a story that held water. The guys at Troma got excited and again we talked the talk, but really didn't want to make an end of the world movie about an evil doctor and his Killer Fart potion!

Gen - One major distinction from our previous Cannes visits is that because we had a film that was screening, we were perceived as credible filmmakers. We were invited to parties and dinner and got to hob nob with fairly important people on a more level playing field than we'd ever experienced before. One of the reasons we also got a lot of coverage was because Jason Connery also came down to Cannes and worked very hard with us to get as much good press and exposure as possible. It's really important to have positive and constructive support from your cast as they represent the glitz that Cannes is really all about.

Q - Did you sell the film?

Chris - Yes, one far eastern company from a small territory came to look at the trailer that Eddie had cut, the one that makes it look like *Die Hard.* They got very excited and bought the film on the spot. A couple of months later we

(above) Concept paintings by Alex Fort for the Werewolf movie.

(over page) a six inch maquette sculpted by Phil Mathews all helped illustrate what Gen wanted to achieve with the werewolf movie.

(right) Another Hollywood project that appeared was The Crow Part 4. *Chris and Gen met with Ed Pressman for* The Crow *franchise and pitched a concept about a blind samurai nun. They liked it a lot, suggested some changes, but like so many projects, they passed as they didn't see a female Crow as viable.*

discovered that they were going to do a 15 print theatrical release and we were opening against *Armageddon!* It was *Urban Ghost Story* vs. *Armageddon!* I started to wonder whether the guy had actually seen the film. A week later I discovered that he hadn't and when he finally watched it he had a bit of a panic attack because it wasn't the horror movie he thought it was, and that even worse, *'it wasn't even in English but in Scottish!'* The next contact I had was when he asked me if I wanted to buy back 15 prints as he was unable to open the film.

Q - Did you premiere the film at a film festival?

Gen - We chose Edinburgh as our World Premiere because UGS is a Scottish movie, the people at the festival liked the movie, Jason lived quite close and the timing was right. We wanted to make a big impact and from the outset wanted to promote ourselves as filmmakers as well as the movie. We wanted the whole world to hear about *Living Spirit Pictures, Urban Ghost Story, Chris Jones* and *Genevieve Jolliffe.* We hired a publicist who cost us a couple of grand but in terms of what we got it was well worth spending as we had full pages in daily newspapers, excellent write ups in magazines and plenty of TV. Because of the work load in the office, Chris decided to stay behind in London for the first couple of days while I went ahead to do the press. As soon as I stepped off the plane it was interview after interview and before either of us knew it, the story ceased to be about *'Chris, Gen, Living Spirit* and *Urban Ghost Story'* and became *'hot new attractive female young film director makes startling debut film*.'

Chris - Suddenly Gen was everywhere in the press and I was mentioned in the fine print, if at all. It was the first time that either of us realised just how the world views the filmmakers, the producer is ignored and the director is given all the credit. Everybody thinks that the director is the only person who made the film. Whether they've heard of the auteur theory or not, they believe it. Sure the actors acted in it, but the producer, writer, editor, cameraman etc - were all pawns in the director's grand view. It's sad because there is so much creative talent involved and yet only one person is recognised.

Q - How did the screenings go?

Chris - We had a great response and Q&A session afterward. But then something else happened which neither of us were prepared for. As we were being whisked away from the theatre my cell phone rang. It was an agent who had seen the film and wanted to meet up with Gen. Then the phone rang again and it was another agent again wanting to meet with Gen. On the one hand it was exciting because this was a fantastic opportunity and at last we were being taken seriously by the business, but on the other hand, it was a real downer as clearly they were only interested in the *'hot new attractive female young film director who made a startling debut film'*. The positive press had really worked for Gen, but not for me. Whenever an agent would even consider me in the equation, they'd take a look at *The Runner* and *White Angel,* then say *'well they're not as good as UGS, clearly Gen is the one with the talent'*. Of course they aren't as good, we didn't know then what we do know now and the next film we make will be better than UGS! It's common sense. But they and the industry in general, just kept on coming back saying well we don't care what you tell us about collabouration, Genevieve is *'the hot new young attractive female film director who made a startling debut film'.*

Gen - It was difficult because we are both filmmakers and had hoped that one day we would get agents and a chance to move into the bigger playground. Here was this opportunity for me, but it was quite clearly for me alone. It caused a lot of friction between us.

Q - So did you sign with an agent?

Chris - After meeting several agents, Gen met up with one back in London and they got on like a house on fire. She really understood what Gen wanted to do with her career and seemed like she could open doors in Hollywood. Within days, and out of the blue, a FedEx landed on Gen's desk. It was a big studio werewolf movie budgeted at $15m, and they were looking for a hot shot new director. They'd seen *UGS* in Hollywood as we had a print out there. We can only surmise why

they liked it, but it's probably because it felt like a unique slant on a ghost story. So Gen read the script and got back to them and before anyone knew it she was on a plane to LA being given the red carpet treatment.

Every film will have it's premiere. Make the most of it as it will probably be one of the best nights of your life.

Gen - We put together some concept sketches and asked Phil Mathews, an old effects buddy from *White Angel,* to mock up a werewolf model. Armed with this I marched into the office of the studio head and did the talk. The moment I landed and had my first meeting in LA, I started to get calls from all the other studios wanting to meet me. Hollywood seems to be constantly in search of new talent. The project still hasn't been made, with either myself or another director, and may never happen. I think this is part of the way of Hollywood movies, so many films seem to so nearly happen but falter before the final hurdle. This has happened several times with other projects too. It's really frustrating because I put all my personal projects on pause while I threw everything at these movies and at the end of the day you just have no control over your own destiny. It was also difficult because the opportunities were clearly for me and whenever I tried to bring Chris in, it just seemed to weaken my position.

Chris - When Gen got back from LA we had to have a heart to heart and accept that she was going to go first and that wherever possible I would be standing right behind her on her coat tails. I had to accept that that was the way the business works and because Gen and myself had gone through so much over the last few movies I knew that come hell or high water I could trust her. If you're in a film partnership with another person, I can't stress how important it is that you have a very frank and open minded discussion about what will happen if one of you suddenly gets an unbelievable opportunity, but that opportunity excludes the other. Gen and I had many unpleasant arguments which really boiled down to my frustration at the fact that other people were marginalising me as a filmmaker. It was out of Gen's hands and I just had to come to terms with the fact that we're a partnership and that if she's going to get an amazing opportunity then hopefully I will be there for the next amazing opportunity. No matter how we looked at it we just couldn't turn away from Hollywood over the question of who gets the glory and who gets to go first.

Gen - A few months later we went to LA to present ourselves as more of a team and pitch our personal projects.

Chris - This was amazing because we'd spent so long complaining that we were ignored by the film industry, and there we were sitting in DreamWorks pitching. It became clear that the only thing stopping us from making a movie was the fact that we didn't have a fabulous screenplay that was ready to go.

Q - Did you meet Steven Spielberg when you were at DreamWorks?

Chris - Yes. We had a wonderful chat.

Gen - You said *Hi* and he said *Hi* back!

Q - So is it that easy to get to meet people in LA?

Gen - Yes and no. If you've made an interesting first film you can take advantage of their perception that you might be the next Tarantino or *Blair Witch.* Ideally this is the point at which they will say *'so what have you got next?'* And you'll put that

120 page script on their desk. They'll have seen the film because they have their own 35mm screening rooms and they'll say *'we can see from your film that you have talent but this film is too small for us, what have you got next?'*

Chris and Gen in the Hollywood Hills prior to their meeting at DreamWorks.

Q - So you are starting to meet more important people who could help your career in LA?

Chris - Yes, since we've started to schmooze with more important filmmakers we've found ourselves in a strange new world. Once we were taken out for dinner to the poshest restaurant that I'd ever been in. I needed to go to the bathroom so I excused myself and went to the gents - as I walked in I was hit by opulence, the bathroom was polished marble. While peeing I looked at the urinal and said to myself, *'this has got to be the nicest urinal that I've ever peed in, there's all this water sprinkling down, it's made of marble and oh look there's even coins in the bottom'*. I look over my shoulder to see a row of normal urinals and realised with horror that I was pissing in an ornate fountain!

Q - How about people in the UK film industry?

Gen - Before I knew it, I was sitting at a table next to Nik Powell at the First Annual British Independent Film Awards for which I'm nominated as Best Director and Chris is nominated as Best Producer. We're up against films like *Elizabeth, Nil by Mouth,* and *My Name Is Joe*. We had no expectations and we didn't win, but it was another indicator as to how slowly and surely we were working our way into the British Film Industry. The deep irony here is that just as we're breaking into the British film industry both of us can't help thinking about Hollywood.

Q - Did you take UGS around the festival circuit?

Gen - Because *UGS* is an original film it started to get invited to heaps of festivals. Being a hard up filmmaker, when you get offered an all expenses trip to somewhere like Korea or Australia it's hard to turn it down, especially if you love travelling. I spent a good part of eighteen months in airport lounges, sat at dinner tables with important dignitaries, many of whom I don't even know how to pronounce their names. This all sounds great but the problem is that I haven't spent the time I should have spent on writing my next screenplay and whenever anybody says *I've just seen Urban Ghost Story, what's next?* I had to fall back on *'I'm writing and I'll let you have a copy when it's completed'.* I would have been in such a good position if I could just drop that screenplay on their desk, there and then.

Chris - It became a running joke. Whenever Gen went to a festival she'd spend the week before pontificating about how much great work she'd do on her screenplay while abroad in those foreign exotic lands, writing on her laptop and generally living the lifestyle of an ex pat creative.

Gen - Of course when you're on the plane you're asleep and when you're in an exotic place you want to go out and sample exotic food and drinks, see the world and meet the people. The last thing you want to do with your five days is work hard on that screenplay.

Q - Do distributors see the film at festivals?

Gen - Yes and there's no reason why, if you're so motivated, you couldn't cut some kind of deal. If you want to do this though, you really need to think about contacting all the distributors before the festival, sending them flyers and press

packs, even a DVD trailer, then when you get to the festival you'll need to do fly posting, a lot of press and make sure that you have both NTSC and PAL tapes and DVD's for distributors who missed the screening. Don't leave this to your sales agent or it might not get done. You'll also meet other filmmakers and possible future work partners.

Q - Is it hard to keep going?

Chris - Fitting everything in is a real problem because amongst developing your new projects, dealing with sales and distribution, going to film festivals etc., you have to do things like answer the phone, do accounts and empty the waste paper basket, never mind have a life! Making a film generates an enormous amount of stuff to deal with and you shouldn't underestimate how much hassle that is. If you can find someone you can trust, delegate as much as you can, because the window of opportunity after you've finished your film can be short and you mustn't be tied down by the hum drum day to day of running a business. You need to be out there pitching and selling yourself as aggressively as possible.

Gen - This problem is exacerbated by the fact that you'll probably be broke and not able to pay an accountant to do your books, and then you have to do stuff like meet with the bank manager because you need a loan. All of this crap is labour intensive, stressful and generally counter-creative.

Q - How has UGS done?

Chris - It took us a while to secure a UK theatrical deal. At UGS's first Cannes market, Germany bought the film and a few other much smaller territories were snapped up too. Unfortunately our sales agent Stranger Than Fiction was not supplying us with the financial information that we needed so we were finding it very difficult to keep tabs on how well or how badly the film was doing. We had calculated that they owed us over £30k and it was becoming very frustrating because STF were not making contact with us - no return of phone calls and no response to faxes.

The sales agent/distributor dynamic with new filmmakers always seems to be fraught with discontent. Every low budget or new filmmaker we have met has complained about their sales agent and distributor. I think it's fair to say that selling a low budget film is very difficult and that unless you make something fiercely original or blisteringly good it's unlikely that your project will financially succeed. Even if you have made such a good, film there is still a very good chance that it will fail.

Eighteen months after the first sales, we finally got a meeting with Grace Carley who had by then left STF. I think she felt bad about what had happened, and I know there was some serious mismanagement that was out of Grace's hands. No one seemed to know what had happened with our film. No one would produce accounts or contracts and we eventually just had to sever ties. STF did legally give us the film back and we received a few thousand pounds from them. The problem is if you don't know which countries they sell your film to, what are you going to do? There was no one left to take legal action against and so we cut our losses.

Gen - We then made a deal with Lise Romanoff of Vision Films in California to handle all our world sales. She actually sends us checks. Admittedly not big ones as STF seemed to have done so much damage previously. She also sends us a report via FedEx ever 12 weeks detailing deals, the balance and a check if there is one due! So we now seem to have a reputable sales agent representing the film.

Chris - One thing new filmmakers tend to get very upset about is making sure that they have everything contractually tied up. It's just worth stressing that even if you have a strong contract, if somebody wants to breach that contract, or is forced to breach that contract by their own circumstances, they can and may well do so. A simple example of this is with our sales agents STF who, even though they were contractually obliged to supply us with information, simply didn't.

Gen - Again, it's a common story that the filmmaker ends up in some kind of dispute with the sales agent or distributor. It's very sad when you consider that every other person in the filmmaking process, from the camera rental companies to the

actors, the caterers to the dubbing mixers, have all bent over backwards with their generosity to help you make your film only for it to end up not getting the exposure it deserves because there are so few sales agents and distributors to go to in order to sell your film. It really does beg the question why not sell the film yourself?

Q - What have you learned from UGS?

Gen - When opportunity knocks you've got to be ready, you mustn't be distracted. If you're in a filmmaking team be prepared to face an imbalance of reward and remember the producer doesn't get the attention. If Hollywood is interested, have your next project ready. Don't have too much fun travelling the world with festivals. Get on to your next screenplay and your next movie. We've both learned that you need certain things, talent not being at the top of the list, but energy and enthusiasm being of paramount importance, original ideas and the ability to tell familiar stories in a different way, but probably the most important factor is your ability to get on with people and nurture your contacts. One strange thing is that you've probably spent years being ignored by the industry, then suddenly you're considered for twenty fully funded films where you'll earn more in ten weeks than you have in the last ten years. It's a quandary. Do you accept the first one that comes along or wait for the right one? It's difficult when you've been struggling for so long. Also you can't wait too long as people will lose interest in you.

Chris - One important thing is that UGS was a film that we wanted to make, not for a market, but for selfish personal reasons. Thereby it's unique and interesting, and that's what seems to get people excited. They don't want this movie, but they do want you to make one for them. We were also very lucky as we found Dave, our Executive Producer, who was the only person with the vision and belief and the ability to equip us so that we could make the movie. Without Dave we might still be on the phone and sending scripts out.

Gen - It's been echoed by other filmmakers that we've interviewed in this book, but if there's one thing you should do, it's MAKE THE MOVIE YOU WANT TO MAKE! Sometimes I wonder if making films is actually a curse. The strange thing and this is something that some people just don't understand, is that we just have to make movies. I've often thought of what it would be like to have a more normal job with a regular pay cheque, especially when I had those days of running out of coins for my electricity meter and water leaking through my living room ceiling into my cold downtrodden London flat. But whenever I lost the faith, I'd go to the movies and the magic that happens on the silver screen is like a drug, I'm elated and addicted all over again.

Chris - Filmmaking isn't taught, it's caught! If filmmaking was a sport, it wouldn't be football, swimming or the hundred metre dash, it would be a marathon. More than anything, I've learned that going the distance is the most important thing. Some of your friends and peers will be able to run the marathon as though it's a hundred meter dash, the very lucky ones get helicoptered to the finishing line, many of your friends will fall by the wayside exhausted and disillusioned, but if you've got the stamina you'll make it to the finish and anyone who makes it to the finish, is a winner.

Q - How did the film finally do with UK sales?

Chris - You would think that we should have had our quota of bad luck wouldn't you. We made a deal with a company called Visual Entertainment, for a UK theatric and Video/DVD release. They gave us the whole spiel, how

they were going to do amazing things blah, blah, blah! We went to their offices, large and plush, and they had some other good titles and we felt confident they were the ones for us. A date was set for the theatrical release and a plan made. We would release on two prints only and move them around the country. We would target specifically the theatres we wanted and work hard at getting great, localised PR. We had an excellent publicist who got us tons of coverage and reviews, most of which were glowing. I don't think we even got a single bad review. We opened extremely well in central London, and had a packed weekend. We also did well in Glasgow too. We were held over for a second week in both cities. One thing that worried me though was that I was doing everything for the release and the guys at Visual were doing very little. Every time I made a request they gave me an excuse. I was concerned that the poster was not strong enough, but they refused to do a new one for instance. And they asked me to handle all press too.

A week into the release, they told me they were so happy, they wanted to rush the DVD out. That seemed odd but I let it go. We made a great DVD with tons of extras and really cool documentaries, and we put a lot of effort into it. But all the time, Visual were screaming to move the release date forward! I was starting to smell a rat. The DVD was released and five days later I found out that they had gone bust, taking our money with them.

Gen - There we were again, having done everything, only to find the distributor going under and leaving us with nothing.

Chris - What was most upsetting was the fact that one person at this company had really seduced us, been our friend, and when the shit hit the fan, didn't even bother to call to tell us. In time I have dug around and discovered that there is an elusive character behind this company and many other failed video distribution companies. I can't name names for legal reasons, but he is as elusive as Keyser Soze!

Gen - A new company came to our rescue, ILC. Time will tell how we get on with them. We got the TV rights back and immediately cut a deal with David Wilkinson at Guerilla Films, who then made a great deal with the Universal Channel here in the UK. Then, believe it or not, before we got fully paid, the Universal Channel went under! Universal!

Chris - David, being the excellent distributor that he is, managed to control the damage though, and cut a new deal with the Sci-Fi Channel and ultimately we got back pretty much all our losses.

Gen - No matter what we seem to do, the awful truth is that whatever we got upfront is all we ever seemed to get. Due to this, you do ask yourself, why not self distribute? At least then, you're the one in charge. There's a lot to learn when you self release a film, and that can be a benefit of doing it, IF you have the time to devote to it and the incentive.

Chris - I guess that we all want to make films and not necessarily distribute. It's much more fun working with actors and cameras, dreaming up ideas and sitting in a cutting room etc., than it is shipping DVDs or arranging for trailers to screen in a theatre three weeks before the film opens, or keeping inventory of your VHS stock. We want other people to do those jobs. The problem, it seems to me, is that bar a few honest small distributors such as David Wilkinson at Guerilla Films, you just can't trust anyone. David is now releasing both *White Angel* and *Urban Ghost Story* on DVD for us in the UK.

Q - Did UGS see a release in the US?

Gen - The film was picked up by a New York distributor, Panorama Entertainment, who wanted to start with a small theatrical release and then hopefully move to more screens around the country. Panorama wanted to focus on getting the film out to US film festivals, so we could drum up the publicity and then through that we'd get interest from the theatres. Not being in the US at the time and the fact that it would be very difficult to handle the campaign from London, we decided to follow their strategy.

In our contract with Panorama, we had a clause that the film would be released in three of the top one hundred markets. We thought that this would be fine and we all hoped that this would certainly be beginning with either New York or LA - both, however extremely tough markets to open in. The film was released in Monterey (supposedly a very independent market), Savannah (we had played in the film festival there) and somewhere in Louisville, Kentucky. With the first release in Monterey, I was told that there was a publicist on the case, but when I flew out to California a week before the release, I discovered that no publicity had been done for the film and in fact it was opening that Friday and nobody had been contacted. I immediately flew up to Monterey and started trying to get interviews all over the place, trying to persuade the press to put it in the next day's paper - anything to try and publicise the film so people might know something about this movie rather than just seeing the title up in lights. But, it was too late. The limited press that there is in Monterey did do several articles, but they came out several days after the release, and of course the figures on the first night and the consequent two nights are vital to whether a film is pulled or not. We were pulled. With Savannah, we received more press as reviewers had seen the movie at the Savannah Film Festival. We had positive reviews, but we had very little in the way of paid print or radio advertising and the film was pulled. In Louisville, I found out that the film had screened before I could get there, so it was gone before I had a chance to do anything. The theatrical release was very disappointing.

Chris - Panorama told us that they were having difficulty with the film because, as it was Scottish, it was deemed to be a 'foreign film' and therefore exhibitors were not interested. Both Gen and I were burnt out with dealing with the US release and combined with what we were still experiencing in the UK, we could not handle the thought of fighting for a better or longer American release. A mistake maybe, but very difficult to deal with constantly when you're in a country miles away.

Gen - I was also in the process of moving to the US and that in itself was eating up much of my time. There soon came a 'shouting match' between Panorama, ourselves and our investors as we tried to do the best for the film. People wouldn't talk to each other, it was kind of ridiculous as though we were back in nursery school. Panorama then told us that the 'right' deal had come along, one that offered the same type of benefits as the other company. We thought it sensible for the movie and for our investors to continue on the path we had started out on. The deal took several months to get into place and finally we nailed it down. April 27th 2004 *Urban Ghost Story* saw its US DVD release. Finally it's out there!

Chris - And a year and a half later, we finally got some money in from the DVD release! We both fell off our chairs we were that surprised! It's actually done pretty well but with fees being taken off for advertising/marketing etc. and then commissions, it's not a huge amount, but the point is, we actually got a cheque!

Q - So what is next?

Gen - I've been out in LA for a while now and I love it. When I first came over I got a big US agent on board, ICM, from whom I hoped to get work. However, after a year and only a few meetings, I was incredibly frustrated. I was a small fish in a big pond and the larger clients took precedence over me. However my agent did come up with a good solution. She introduced me to a manager who had fewer clients but a fair amount of clout. He would handle my day-to-day meetings and pretty soon he got a production company to pick up one of my pitches. That was my first experience of doing a pitch to the studios. We spent a long time refining a very precise 20 minute pitch to go out on the town. It was great fun to do in terms of meeting people and letting people know that you're out there, but was again frustrating when you realise that you really do need to have more credits behind you to get anyone to buy straight off a pitch. The same response came back each time - "I love it! So when can we read the screenplay?" So I had to make a decision…is this the one to start writing? However, there was something to consider on this…the movie pitch was a horror that went back to the '70s way of thinking - it didn't pull any punches and had a shocking ending. An ending that seemed too much for the studios sensibility at this time. So, do I start writing this screenplay knowing that it might be difficult to sell to the studios? Or do I focus on something new that would not have as many problems? Wanting to persevere in the studio system, I opted for something new.

I've always had an idea to do a vampire movie with American cheerleaders because, well, they are kinda like vampires. I wrote it with my now husband, who was my boyfriend at the time, and we had it done within three months! Then I had a

falling out with my agent and we parted ways. But my manager hooked me up with a new agent, who when I met, I knew in my gut that he was the best person to represent me - and the two of them took the script out onto the spec market. My agent and manager split the town up into certain territories, meaning studios and funding bodies. All the producers we sent it to, loved it and took it to their territories but unfortunately they passed, mainly because it was a mixture of horror and comedy and they were confused on how to market it. But fortunately, one producer wanted to work on it with us and after doing a bunch of rewrites, a table read and getting some actresses attached, Warner Bros. optioned it. They wanted an experienced writer to come onboard to polish it up and fortunately the person who we thought would be the only person in the world that we would want to rewrite our movie, got the gig! As the director I got to oversee the rewrite which was a blast, a huge learning experience and an honour AND I made a great friend in the process! Now we are waiting for Warner Bros. to give it the greeenlight. Many scripts get picked up by the studios but will they actually make the movie? It's always hurdle after hurdle…and as you continue to work on giving the film life, it can drive you mad waiting. So, we moved onto writing the next one. If only we had a stack of scripts already written, it would make things soooo much easier!

Q - How was your experience with Warner Bros.?

Gen - Fantastic! I'm lucky to have a great producer behind me who's persistent and in love with the project. Not only that, we have a great executive at the studio who got the movie from the get go. Many filmmakers worry about the film being taken out of their hands by a studio and having no control, but my experience has been the contrary.

Q - How different is the LA world from the UK?

Gen - There are two main differences. First, in the UK, if you make one type of genre movie, that doesn't necessarily pigeon hole you into making that kind of movie. In LA, they like you to stay within a certain genre because they know what they're getting for their money. The only way you can move from genre to genre is to either have a lot of power or make one of your films be a combination of genres (which can be difficult to sell) and move to the other genre script after that. I found this out when I tried to get a romantic comedy script going, but I kept hearing 'aren't you a horror director?' So, I started coming up with more horror ideas, which I'm a great fan of anyhow, and all of a sudden more doors started to open. I suppose there is one other way to get out of a certain genre and that would be to make a movie independently again, but then again once you go for a studio picture, they'd probably pigeon hole you into that genre! The second major difference is that in the UK I struggled hard against a 'can't do' attitude, whereas in the States, everyone wants to make a movie and everyone says, "I love it!" Even if it's a bunch of bullshit, it's at least easier to get out of bed every day when you are talking to people with a positive attitude.

Q - What advice would you give new filmmakers out there?

Gen - Make sure you have the ideas coming, one after the other! You need to be constantly pushing product out onto the marketplace and not to get tied up trying to set up one particular project that is proving difficult. You never know which one is gonna hit or is right for that moment. Also for those out there about to embark on your first studio meeting - remember to be prepared, be passionate and know your vision inside out. Producers and studio execs see that passion and feed off it. Also take as many meetings as you can - get to know people and build up your relationships with them so that they soon know your name inside out. And lastly, don't expect to be an Oscar winning filmmaker over night. It will most likely take a lot of time and for numerous reasons but remember it's those reasons that will make you ultimately a better filmmaker. Just remember to keep the passion and the determination and you will succeed.

Chris - What I have learned is that now, after three features, it just isn't worth going through the hell of making another film unless the screenplay is great. That's not true for everyone. I think a new filmmaker with little experience should throw caution to the wind and just go do it, in a smart a way as possible of course, but make the movie now. How else can you learn? Very recently my father died, and I became acutely aware of how short life is. So get on with it, and that's for both you and me.