

# 1963 The Birds:

It's more than 40 years since Alfred Hitchcock terrorised world cinema audiences with **The Birds** — his Oscar winning horror movie.

40 years. So most people will not have had the thrill of seeing it!

But this year German Sat.1 TV audiences are in for a shock. Marauding flocks of large terrifying birds with eye-gouging beaks and skin tearing claws

in a deadly battle with hordes of airborne killers. Alexandra is pregnant with her first child. She is the only one who recognises the warning signs. She alone tries to avert disaster. But the odds are stacked against her. Not only are she and her husband involved in a stressful house move, nobody believes her warnings! Her husband, colleagues and friends find it easy to discount her agitation as hysteria. Brought on by her condition...

would be our perfect partner; we contacted him in January and got his immediate interest."

"Four months later our cosseted 75 strong batch of baby crows hatched out and were soon in training. In June they were flying! We would watch them performing all kinds of tricks. It took about five months to get them 'word-perfect'. Of course, from the start we



will scare them witless. The TV drama **Die Krähen** (The Crows) is not a re-make of Hitchcock's film, but Producers Robert Stiemerling and Martin Ganz are quick to admit he was their inspiration!

The storyline has a familiar ring. We are near Berlin. A lorry is transporting a flock of crows specially bred for scientific study to another site for further

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experiments. The driver crashes his lorry and the birds escape into the wild. Not a big problem. Just a few birds accidentally released back into their natural habitat.

But what's this? Before long Alexandra, a young veterinary surgeon, notices unusually aggressive behaviour in some crows near her home. She realises the inhabitants of Berlin and the surrounding area could soon be engaged

The 90-minute TV thriller, directed by Edzard Onneken and filmed by Director of Photography Jochen Stäblein, BVK, presented some intriguing challenges. Where — for example — do you find a flock of crows? And, having found them, how to train them in the finer points of film-acting?

Producer Robert Stiemerling explained how.

"We needed an animal trainer. We had this complex story. What we

didn't have was any reference to another recent drama involving filming with birds. Manfred Büttner of TVT/Visual Effects had the answer. Manfred told us about Jean-Philippe Varin of Jacana Studios with whom he had successfully cooperated on Jacques Perrin's remarkable Oscar-nominated documentary **Winged Migration**. It was obvious. Jean-Philippe

had to conquer their stage fright. Crows live in colonies, and just one frightened crow will automatically scare all the others. So we had to train them to perform fearlessly in front of cameras! We separated the birds into groups, according to the degree of intelligence they displayed during training spells."

"Each group had its own trainer. We had seven trainers; each one trained 10 birds. They used acoustic and light signals and rewarded their trainees for each performance. The schooling included flight scenes, attacks against people, group behaviour and communication. Overall, the birds were performing brilliantly."

OK so far; but what about filming them? DP Jochen Stäblein, BVK takes up the story. "Normally I prefer Kodak VISION2 250D film for television movies. It's fast, and easier for me when changing locations. No need for CC-filters. But for this tougher, more varied project I chose Kodak VISION2 100T, 200T and 500T

# 2006 The Crows

tungsten film stocks to get the best grain and resolution combination for the VFX work."

"The most exciting scene we had to colour correct was the film's climax, which we shot by day-for-night. A multitude of crows alights in a field brightly lit by moonlight. Because of the superb grading done by the post-production company TVT we were able to

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shake, because of the extra resolution you give them."

"We combined the actors and crows in scenes together in several different ways. In some shots we computer generated all the crows. In others we have inserted real

high light output from small power inputs makes them the perfect accessory for the Steadicam."

"Our prepping was very thorough. Director Edzard Onneken fixed most of the bird attack sequences in storyboards



create a realistic look by combining shots of real crows with CGI-birds together in a dark 'night-time' background."

"We shot most of the movie on Super 16, but there are several scenes filmed with a moving camera that needed 3D tracking for the VFX work. Of course the more detail you give the tracking software, the more accurate your results will be. So we decided to get the extra detail we needed by doing the Telecine in HD. The disadvantage of an HD Telecine on Super16, however, is that film grain increases significantly compared with PAL. We avoided this problem by filming on Super 35 Kodak VISION2 to get maximum detail combined with scarcely visible grain. This way we were able to reduce the tracking costs in post-production while getting better results."

"Even if you choose to downsize all the shots to PAL you get the extra benefit of more creative freedom during the VFX work. The post-production guys can easily correct minor faults, like slight camera

crows from shooting green screen plates in France and in others we combined both real and computer generated crows to get the most realistic look possible. Of course there are some actions real crows would never do. That's when the CG crows replace their real counterparts. All the plate elements, real and computer generated, were then combined and colour corrected in Inferno, Shake and Combustion - the software TVT Post-production use for their VFX work - to match the live action plates with the actors."

"While working with my gaffer Martin Frank, we mainly used 12K Dino lights in combination with small HMI-daylight units. Although incandescent lights need bigger generators, Dinos with CP60 bulbs are easier to handle on location to create a light sunlight effect on longer distances."

"For the women in the main cast I usually like to use a filler light on camera. Now we use bright LED light panels. Their

before we started shooting. In a key scene a swarm of crows viciously attacks guests at a garden party. We needed a fast camera move from a high super-wide shot down into a close up of the actors. We considered several existing systems such as FlyingCam, Camcat and Spidercam, but it was the Buff Connections stunt crew who finally constructed an effective aerial ropeway. Two industrial cranes and a wire between them up to 180 ft high carried a gyro-stabilised ARRI SR3 on its flight down to ground level. It worked perfectly. But unfortunately there was more expensive work for the VFX post-production company: they had to paint out one of the cranes frame-by-frame"

**Die Krähen** is produced by Stream Films AG and co-produced with GFP Zweite German Film Productions Medienfonds and financed by Sat.1, SevenOne International and Warner Bros. Entertainment. It is funded by MBB Medienboard Berlin Brandenburg and IBH Investitionsbank Hessen. ■

#### Above (LtoR):

DP Jochen Stäblein, BVK, preparing to shoot a scene for *Die Krähen*.

Flying camera rig.

Producer Robert Stiemering

A crow alights on a baby's pram.