



**Above:** Christopher Ross with Actress Georgia Groome.

# Escape on the Lo

"Critics and festival audiences have reacted to *London to Brighton* in such an amazing way that it's hard to remember the tough times on set", remarks British Director of Photography Christopher Ross about his debut feature.

Friends from university, Ross and Producer Al Clark bumped into each other at the 2001 screening of Writer/Director Paul Andrew Williams' *Royalty*, the short film on which *London to Brighton* was loosely based. Four years later, when Williams was looking for a DP, Clark set up a meeting with Ross. The DP was immediately attracted to Williams' "well scripted" story. "Although it's from the fairly well-trodden genre of British social realism, *London to Brighton* was different to anything I'd seen or read before," he says. "It is a very real moral tale about honour, responsibility, loyalty and revenge, told through the eyes of the film's few characters. Paul's take was that it was a thrilling character-piece rather than a thriller and our stance for blocking and camera placement of every scene would be determined by the actors' movements."

*London to Brighton* is a gritty portrayal of 30 hours in the lives of Kelly (Lorraine Stanley), a prostitute and Joanne (Georgia Groome), a young runaway. Bruised and hysterical after fleeing gangsters, they take the night train from the capital and find refuge at a friend's house in Brighton. But there's no respite after the gang catch up with them.

Ross and Williams agreed on a "philosophy" rather than a look for the film. "We wanted it to feel as true to life as possible," states Ross. "We emphasised the dramatic reality of locations with the lighting and documented the action with a 'casual observer' approach to camera placements. We didn't use any non-human viewpoints and every scene except one was handheld."

The pair gave careful consideration to the aspect ratio. "Paul and I wanted to shoot *London to Brighton* in 2.35:1 ratio, ideally 35mm anamorphic, because we felt it was important to lift the film away from its social realism roots and make it feel more cinematic. But after toying with Super 35 we couldn't get the numbers to work, particularly on two camera days," says Ross who finally decided to shoot in Super 16 2.35:1 ratio and produce an anamorphic release print.

Ross approached Molinare about potential pitfalls, but the only issue was the visibility of the grain. "From a technical perspective, when most cinemas convert from 1.85 to 2.35, they merely bring the top and bottom of the screen together and put a tighter anamorphic lens on the projector rather than open the screen up, so the screen size is actually reduced for anamorphic projection," he explains. "More significantly, the negative undergoes the same level of expansion for 1.85 as it does for 2.35, so we thought 'why not go widescreen?' and we did. As far as we're aware, it's the first time a film has been shot in this format in 16mm."

Ross originally considered using a selection of the slowest film stocks to minimise grain in the blow-up process. "I always knew I would use KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 for night exteriors, but after testing other stocks I decided against mixing them in case we got a disjointed grain structure. In the end we used 7218 for the whole film and rated it at 320 ASA to reduce the grain and burn a little into the negative. I've shot under similar conditions with KODAK VISION 500T 7279 and there's no way I could have considered 2.35:1 before the introduction of 7218."

Ross's lighting package included 2.5kW HMIs for daylight interiors and Kino Flos and Dedos for night interiors. "Night exteriors were always fun and a bit of a challenge. Sometimes we only used a Sungun, other times several tungsten units and, on occasion, just a miniflo and a bit of luck. My gaffer, Andy MacBrearty, found some great sodium-vapour Atlas-style lamp heads which we used to augment the street lights for the urban night exteriors and they worked like a charm."

A key drug den sequence at dawn, mid afternoon, dusk and night was shot over four days in a single-windowed 15 by 12 ft room. "For dawn, I used two 2.5kW HMIs spotted through the window with flags cutting the light to provide a low raking dawn sunlight, lots of atmos and a couple of practicals which were on throughout the set-ups as a kind of reference," recalls Ross. "I kept the sunlight off the actors' faces or used it as an edge and underexposed by about one-and-a-half stops. I softened the 2.5kWs for day scenes and flooded them a little, bringing their light onto the whole room. For dusk sequences which combined the interior and exterior, we took 2.5kWs all the way down to just a soft fill through the window, cranked up the practicals and augmented them with hidden Kino Flos, Dedos and zaps, plus one of Andy's homemade 'wagon' lights to simulate candlelight. The only trick was to keep the contrast on the low side so that when the drama kicked in at night we would still be able to crank it up a notch."

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# London to Brighton

In a key scene towards the end of the film two cars pull up in a field and everyone gets out and all hell breaks loose. "A 'moonlight' edge light would have been very wrong, so



I lit the scene as if the headlights and tail lights of the cars were the only source of light in the field," says Ross. "I used primary red in several set-ups around the car boots as a homage to *Goodfellas* and shot the rest of the scene in various forms of silhouette cast by the headlights of the car and two rigs of 1000W full spot par can pairs. We pulled the rigs over the set, to edge and side-light and used other par cans to flare the lenses."

Ross was concerned that four days wouldn't be enough for the grade, but with Molinare's Northlight scanner at 2K res, a Baselight grading suite with digital projection facility and the help of Tim Waller, Molinare's digital colourist, he "flew through it." "The advantage of Baselight 8 is that the whole film is right there on the computer, so if a set-up from the first reel is repeated on another reel you can switch backwards and forwards comparing and overlaying grades from one to the other. There are power

windows for mattes, vignettes and grads and lots of other tricks that can help pull the film together. Molinare worked on the effects shots while we graded the images, then the effects elements were added to the graded image and checked. The digital negative was burnt-out to an IN using Molinare's own LUTs on the ARRI Laser and the resulting IN was answer printed at Deluxe under Paul Dray's watchful eye."

"Post supervising a low budget feature film is always a challenge," states executive producer and post supervisor Gisela Evert. "But with Molinare's careful attention and professional support during the DI process, we were able to visually enhance the quality of the Super 16 negative. Tim Waller's grade with Baselight contributed towards the gritty narrative of Paul Andrew Williams's already harrowing story."

"Making *London to Brighton* was an uphill struggle for everyone concerned, as low budget films usually are, but its success is testament to everyone's hard work and determination," comments Ross. "From the director to the camera car driver and the great actors, everyone gave 110%. We've pulled off a film that's touched so many people and is so much more than the sum of its parts."

Director Paul Andrew Williams was awarded the Skillset New Director's Award for *London to Brighton* at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. ■

**Above:** (L to R) Boom Operator Paul Cornish Camera Trainee Emma Brown Grip Ferris Ferhat DoP Chris Ross and 1st AD Sarah Mooney.

**Left:** Director Paul Andrew Williams shows the way to the next set up.

**PHOTOS:** CHRIS BOYCE