

War Lost

I want to write a dark, moving and thought provoking short film set in a rural village during the World War II air raids in Britain.

Influences: *Stand By Me*, *Whistle Down The Wind*, *The Iron Giant*, *E.T. - The Extra Terrestrial*, *Leon* and *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas*.

This idea ties together themes from my most popular shorts - war, abandonment, death, family and overcoming fear.

Back in 2014, I started thinking about a story from a child's perspective set in wartime Britain, that could involve some kind of time travel or ghost – basically a magical element that would elevate the real life drama through the fantasy, like *Pan's Labyrinth* or *The Devil's Backbone* or even my previous short – *The Infectious Imagination Of Henry Bramble*.

I read a couple of children's book set during WWII. One was set on the Channel Islands, where Nazi's invaded and occupied for a good chunk of the war. I hoped in this 'world' I would find far more dramatic and dangerous situations for children than I would back home, but in fact life on the Nazi occupied islands, although hard in terms of rationing, was in some ways safer than living on mainland Britain (Unless you were hiding a Jew, which I was not keen to explore as this has been covered many times before on film).

The next book I read was set in the outskirts of London during the air raids. I loved the sense of oppression from the skies above – A constant blanket of threat that lay above the day-to-day struggles of ordinary life. I found the night raids themselves were unbearably tense and yet relied almost entirely on sound rather than expensive visuals. This made it an ideal 'world' for a first time feature film or relatively inexpensive short

In the book, a nice bunch of kids end up fighting a gang of not so nice kids and in doing so symbolise the real war going on above them. I absolutely loved this concept, but the story itself was too gentle and not dramatic/magical enough for the cinema. It needed some oomph! So I thought about what would happen if a slice of the real war came crashing into their world.

I placed myself as a child in the middle of the battle of Britain and tried to imagine what would be the most scary/exciting thing that could possibly happen to me. The answer was pretty clear - For me to come face to face with the enemy. This was the magical aspect I was looking for. And the only believable way this could happen in Britain was if he literally fell out of the sky in a smouldering Messerschmitt. That image alone excited me!

I toyed with the idea of how and why a child would want to protect the enemy, or perhaps how they could be groomed into helping them unintentionally – The film *Whistle Down The Wind* sprang to mind and I immediately became excited and frustrated at the same time. Although this indicated that I was emotionally and dramatically on the right track, I didn't want an audience to make any connection that might devalue the originality of this story.

Finding a valid reason for helping the enemy, brought me around to thinking about truth. Propaganda on both sides promoted a very black and white view of the enemy. In reality though, morality and humanity were often found in the darkest of places. I was intrigued by the idea of a story that could explore what happens when social brainwashing through propaganda conflicted with genuine humanity.

Ideas started flooding into my head and I quickly realised that there were potentially half a dozen stories I could tell within this basic premise, but it was about finding the most original, surprising and moving one that was true to me! – I knew if I could find my voice in these ideas, I could touch audiences deeply, which in turn could create the kind of career opportunities I had been striving for.

Over the next week I pondered over many possibilities but eventually committed myself to a basic premise that I developed into a thirty-page screenplay. However when I read it back it felt empty, lacking any of the heart-felt drama that I had hoped. Disappointed and frustrated I abandoned the idea to concentrate on completing a new draft of a fantasy feature I was developing.

A few months later I found myself applying for a BBC New Director's Scheme and while updating my CV pondered on whether to keep this screenplay listed as recent written work. I started tweaking the short blurb to make it more powerful and stumbled on an idea that revealed one of the reasons why I had struggled to write the film I had wanted to make. I wrote the following

“An abused 12 year-old WW2 evacuee finds solace from her isolated existence by helping an injured German pilot escape Englan and return home to his family.”

But then I changed the ending to

“...and return home to his desperately ill daughter.”

As soon as I did this I realised that I had solved the giant hole in my plot. I had originally made the pilot promise to the girl that he would return to his family because she saved his life, but I couldn't work out what life-threatening injury the German pilot could have that a 12-year-old, through a simple action, could prevent without he need for further medical attention. Not only that, but the very idea was unconvincing and flawed. There was no guarantee that he wouldn't just hand himself in. But if the pilot had a daughter who was gravely

ill back in Germany, he would not want to get caught, because by the time the war was over she might well be long dead.

Discovering that this loving father would do anything for his child resonates with the girl's own desire to be reunited with her parents, safe from abuse. She would do absolutely anything to help this man get safely back to Germany and risk her own life in the process. Suddenly the concept came alive again and I was able to write a new draft that worked and this time would emotionally engage the reader.