

Mistaken Identity Comedy

Julian Friedmann discusses the '25 Words or Less' initiative with Brock Norman Brock of Vertigo.

JF: What would you say distinguishes Vertigo from other independent film companies?

BNB: I don't know that this is a quality that only Vertigo has, but Vertigo certainly has energy. Some production companies identify projects and go around looking for money in order to make them because they think they must be made, but here we're completely driven by audience.

We develop very little that we don't actually make; we don't have a slate of scripts sitting around that we are trying to perfect before we go out to raise finance for them. We generally make films within a year of beginning development. If we don't think we can get into production within a year or so, we would normally revert the rights. We don't sit on things.

JF: How do you tend to get the scripts that you are making?

BNB: We get them in much the same way as everybody else does: people submit them to us and we go out and talk to people, particularly directors. We are fairly director-driven and will seek out directors we're interested in and ask them if they



Someone called Mourinho's dog a bitch.

have an idea for a film.

JF: Would you develop an idea rather than wait for a finished script?

BNB: Yes. The writing and developing of the script should be seen in the same light as any other problem that you need to sort out in order to make the film. For example, we have a very rough script now but we'll pencil it in for production nine months from now, giving us nine months to sort out all the problems that include casting, finance, getting the crew and sorting the script out. We don't wait for the script to be perfect before we green light. We green

light as soon as we've made the decision that we want to make the film.

JF: You said you were largely audience driven so how do you decide, when looking at a project, that it will find a big enough audience and how do you find that audience? How are the decisions made within the company?

BNB: There are five partners in the company and they and myself sit down and make a decision. Between us we have wide experience in marketing and distribution and that experience informs any decisions we make.

JF: So you are basically gambling your judgement? Do you have investors you have to satisfy?

BNB: We have taken money from the UK Film Council for *Waz* that Tom Shankland directed, which screened in Cannes. Up to that point, the money was all sourced privately. Every film we have made over the past four years has made money and some have made a great deal.

JF: What is the budget range of the films you have made?

BNB: The legend is that *The Football Factory* cost half a million to make and that was the first film that Vertigo did, *Waz*, was more traditionally financed: we had money from the UK Film Council and from the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission. That budget was three million. In between, we have just finished shooting Simon Ellis' first film called *Dogging, A Love Story*, which was made for well under one million.

We are now developing something else with the UK Film Council, a first film by Sam Walker called *Bad Dog*, and that, too, will be well under one million. We're quite happy to make films at that budget level,

that is ranging from £250,000 to £1 million.

JF: *London to Brighton* was supposed to be very low budget...

BNB: We didn't make that; we picked it up to distribute. When I make a film at a particularly low budget level there are various considerations, the first being whether it is a story that can be told with

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that budget. It's asking people to put their money but their time and their dedication where their mouths are. We'd much rather have a first-time editor, say, and pay him £500 a week to make a film and he'll be doing it because he wants the chance and he's committed to the film, than pay a very highly-respected editor who requires three grand a week and then

has to rush off after four weeks because he has another job to go to. It's also about the attitude of people in the team.

JF: Are your films consciously aimed at a relatively young audience?

BNB: Nick Love has traditionally had his core audience, which is the young male audience. He's about to do *The Sweeney* for Fox that will have a much higher budget and will be primarily aimed at that audience. On the other hand, we have just finished making and will distribute *Sparkle*, Neil Hunter and Tom Hunsinger's next film (they did *The Lawless Heart*). That's for a traditional UK independent audience.

We also think that the female audience in this country is under-provided for - think of those American films like *Monster*, the J.Lo films, the Heather films - there is a young female audience for popcorn movies. The only one we've done here is *Bridget Jones*. So why can't we make films like *The Football Factory* for the ladette culture?

JF: What's the development process?

BNB: Emma Hartley, as the development



executive, takes part in all the discussions. We also work with outside producers who can bring us something, and we will do co-productions with them, but we don't need to have a unanimous view on a film. If one of us feels strongly enough about the project and really wants to do it and no one else feels strongly enough to say 'Over my dead body', it gets done. There are differences of taste between us.

JF: With regard to the '25 Words or Less' scheme with the UK Film Council, what made you decide to do comedy?

BNB: We decided to provide a device so it is comedy involving mistaken identity. As a general rule of thumb, British television comedy tends to be very funny and groundbreaking, whether you're talking about *Peep Show* or even going back to *Fawlty Towers*. Young British comedy tends to be quite gentle and not really laugh-out-loud comedy. We tend to lack a high-concept, character-driven, laugh-a-minute comedy like they have in America, with some notable exceptions like *Mr Bean*. Furthermore, you can make comedy as low-budget; you don't need a big budget to make something funny.

What we're looking for is mistaken identity because it is a device with which you can build an entire story. What we don't want is observational, social comedy based on a bunch of people talking. We would like something where you will go home and tell your friends that there was one gag which was really, really funny and then they'll tell their friends. That happened with *Meet the Parents*.

JF: Is there any budget restriction?

BNB: No, because if we were to get something that was absolutely brilliant and was a huge-budget film, we would be mad to pass it up. I should also say that the million pound *Vertigo* film is not necessarily a film that someone else could do for a million pounds because we do many things in-house. We don't include producing fees, for example, so that releases fifty or a hundred grand of the budget already. We do much of the post-production in-house and certainly put more of that million pounds on screen



Pebble dash

London To Brighton: Vertigo

than other companies might.

We also give the directors and the writers a bigger and more significant back-end than they would have if they took a higher fee upfront and because we also distribute films, we can assure people more realistically that this back-end will actually mean something. Obviously if the film is not successful, there is no back-end

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for anyone, but if you make a film for half a million and it says in your contract that you will be getting money from profit, then it's transparent.

JF: This is an interesting model from an independent and you've presumably seen the news about Hanway and Celluloid Dreams? Do you see this as the model for the future: that middlemen are increasingly cut out and there is more vertical integration? Does that increase the chance of everyone involved sharing in the success if there is success? And from where do you tend to get most of your finance?

BNB: I do think it is a model for the future although it is also a model from the past because it is not a million miles away from what the studios do, except they do it on a much larger scale, not only in terms of being able to maximise the value of the money, but because they are already planning the marketing campaign from the first day of talking about the script. What Hanway and Celluloid offer through merging is a strong international sales operation, which will aggressively pursue international sales of a film and also finance through pre-sales.

We are doing a similar thing on a smaller scale. The wheel doesn't have to be reinvented again when you sell a film and it makes it easier to target the audience.

JF: Are your sales and distribution people involved in the decision to green light a film and is their input fed back to the writer and director?

BNB: They're certainly part of the process. Rupert Preston is involved in making the decisions; he comes from a distribution background and it is he who informs our decision to green light a film. We won't do a film that we don't think will make money. We won't do a film if we think its future is only on the festival circuit. There's nothing wrong with films on the festival circuit and those films serve an important purpose, but that's not what we do. ▶

We focus very early on the potential audience for a project and if we believe in the project, we will make the film. Sometimes we end up making films people think are crassly commercial, such as *Dirty Sanchez: The Movie*. But film is popular and is about the audience. There is an art in finding the audience as well.

JF: Why do you think we don't make that many commercially successful British films? Do you think the British film industry is becoming more aggressive and is trying to compete more now than it has done in the past?

BNB: There are many reasons, including the fact that easy tax money has gone. Britain used to have a more commercial cinema in the 1950s, for example. But there are some interesting economic models to look at, so if you take the music industry for instance or the art industry, Britain is right at the centre. There is no mutual exclusivity between commercial and artistic integrity. British art is all about the glamour and the sexiness of money and commerciality, and music is as well.

We tend to look down our noses still at commercial films in this country but the younger generation today do so less. Film, though, seems to be holding out in a way that music and art aren't.

JF: Has the downloading of music and increasingly of films democratised access for the ordinary viewer, and is it scaring the old-fashioned film-makers and distributors? Is it going to make them realise that they have to select projects that audiences are going to choose to watch even if that choice is expanding so much? How much is the change in the technology of distribution and exhibition affecting the way that Vertigo thinks?

BNB: Everyone is waiting to see how that question is going to be answered over the next year or so. The way things are now, from a short-film point of view, is that technology is already here and people are making little films off their own backs that are being seen.

The technology to distribute feature films is still in its infancy but there are people who are making films on mobile

phones and suddenly they have very large numbers of viewers around the world.

We're doing a MySpacemovie with MySpace and Film4 that is called *My Space Movie Mash Up*. MySpace subscribers will be submitting their short films; we'll choose a winner from a shortlist and the script and the casting will be done within the MySpacecommunity. This is the kind of halfway house between doing something completely online and doing it in the existing way. It's a step in that direction.

JF: When you're looking at an idea or indeed a script, do you have any preconceptions or ideas or advice about how to write a script that will work for a broader audience but which will not cost a great deal of money?

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BNB: Well, one of the obvious things is not to write a period film but that said, especially if you are talking about comedy, it doesn't mean that it has to be set in a studio flat with a bunch of unemployed students sitting around talking. Big production values are not necessarily helpful to comedy. Something like the *League of Gentlemen* film was a big-budget film but I think the production values took away from the immediacy of the comedy; it became like a glossy film and the comedy was drowned. So perhaps I'll take that piece of advice back: why not make a period comedy? You can have cardboard cutout backdrops because with comedy you can do all sorts of things. Comedy is one of the easiest things to judge because if it makes you laugh, it's good.

You have to think about whether you can do what is on the page for the given budget. Crowd scenes are always expensive but the writer should not think too much about it. I think low-budget is more for producers to think about and what we think about as low-budget today

is actually quite high. *London to Brighton* was made for a very small budget even though it looks like it was made for a higher one.

The risk involved with a £500,000 film is significantly less than the risk involved with a £1.5m film.

We've done all our films on HD. We have worked with directors who came in originally saying that they would not work on HD - being cinematographers they would only work on film - but they've come away happily in the end. We show what we have done in the past, blowing HD up to 35mm, shooting with a film lens on the HD camera, and in the end they're very happy with it. That's not to say, though, that we will never work on film.

JF: How many films a year do you envisage making?

BNB: Last we made four films and we'll make a least four next year if not six.

JF: Your turnaround time seems to be much shorter than most companies?

BNB: They are because we have an idea, get it written and make it. We don't have a long development period and then go out and see if we can raise the finance or find a distributor. We try to bring the writers and directors into the development period as part of pre-production. So although you might not be paid a great deal of money to spend six months in perfecting your script, since we shall be shooting in nine months, all your energy goes into making sure that the script is ready. Generally we're not playing with other people's money so there is a tendency to just roll your sleeves up here. Nick Love started writing *Outlaw*, which has just been released, only a year ago and already it is out in the cinemas. It helps that he is a great writer.

JF: Traditionally writers or their agents look for around 2% of the budget as the purchase price. Do you have a rule of thumb for what you pay writers and what the back end is likely to be?

BNB: For the '25 Words or Less' scheme, we're applying the standard model where there is a two and a half percent payment on the first day of principal photography.

In general we don't do it like that: we usually do a deal with the writer whereby they have some sort of payment up front to cover their living expenses and enable them to eat, not a great deal of money but £10,000 or £20,000 or whatever. We've also done deals quite frequently where the writer gets 5% of the film's net, not of the producer's net, and everything goes into the pot including soundtrack, merchandising, everything.

Furthermore, because we distribute our own films and in future will be selling our own films, there are fewer steps along the way for inflated expenses to be taken out, leaving much more left in. It's basically 5% for the writer from every pound immediately the film is in profit, and this is clearly specified in the contract.

There will always be people who will not like the way some companies do deals but generally we find that people who have made a film with us want to make another film with us. Mike Dowse who made *It's All Gone Pete Tong* with us, is now doing *Blue Movie* with us based on the Terry Southern novel. Kubrick wanted to make this novel for years and now Mike Dowse is doing it with us.

Tom Shankland did his first film *Waz* with us and is going to do his next film, *The Day* from Paul Andrew Williams' script, with us. So it tends to work. For a writer who is starting out, who is looking to establish himself, it is a great opportunity because if we make a decision, in general the film will be made quickly rather than be sitting in development hell three years later.

Even if a writer receives £75,000 for a first draft, a high proportion of such films aren't made. If you want to have more creative input and you perhaps want to direct something and not be treated like a writer for hire, then this approach is attractive.

JF: How many people work at Vertigo?

BNB: There must be about 25 at the moment and the company's been going for four years. Many of the scripts that went into development elsewhere in the British industry four years ago are still in development. But the film industry always has to face treacherous waters: tax dollars



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Put me through to my agent!

can suddenly change like a house of cards.

JF: What is the pattern of your finance?

BNB: It has been mainly private money in the past. A company called Rock Star Games who did *Grand Theft Auto* put money into *The Football Factory*. They made their money back so we can go to them with projects. We did *The Business* and *Outlaw* with Pathé. They did so well

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out of *The Business* that they said we must have *Outlaw*.

So we can choose from different sources of finance and we generally don't have to go shopping our films around.

JF: Do you think that your ease in finding strategic financial partners is helped by the particular vertical integration you have here? You seem less reliant than many independents when it comes to having to go out and find a sales agent or a distributor. Pathé is a distributor, so who handles the films you do with them?

BNB: On *Outlaw*, Pathé wanted everything although on *The Business* we

divided things. So at a certain level, what you are suggesting is true - it becomes attractive - but above a certain level, there's competition for the strategic partners.

JF: I suppose that it's better that two distributors want a film rather than none?

BNB: But we won't ever have a film sitting around not knowing who will take it, although we have taken several films for distribution which had been in that situation. In the past we have not had a great deal of money to acquire films because most of our money went into making films. In future we hope to be able to actively acquire films for distribution.

JF: What are your final thoughts for the '25 Words or Less' applicants to your mistaken identity comedy competition?

BNB: I'd be keen to urge the writers not to think too much about the budget and to allow the producers to think about whether or not it can be done. I worry that if writers are thinking that this has to be low-budget comedy, we shall have two people sitting in a bedsit for 90 minutes, which will hamper the writer's imagination and their cinematic thinking and that would be a shame. I'd rather they thought more about making it high-concept funny, laugh-out-loud funny, rather than gentle and quirky.

JF: Thank you very much.