

Resistance: Behind the Scenes

Written by Liz Crow

Drawn from real events, the *Resistance* drama tells the story of Elise, a patient who sweeps the institution. She doesn't speak and staff assume she does not comprehend; but she watches. She watches buses filled with patients leave and return empty. When it's her turn, she knows what's in store. Incarcerated it appears there is little she can do. But Elise will resist, in the only way she can.

The character of Elise Blick (played by Lou Birks) was inspired by a brief account in *By Trust Betrayed* by Hugh Gregory Gallagher of a woman, recorded only as 'EB', who made her bid for escape. Other characters emerged from snippets of information and anecdote, photographs at the killing centres and contemporary disabled people.

The script

The biggest challenge for Writer-Director Liz Crow in writing the script was how to go beyond the historical logistics of Aktion-T4, to make the audience *feel*.

A visit by the writer and actors to Germany to two of the killing centres was crucial to discovering the emotional truth of the history. Photographs of disabled people murdered by the Nazis were displayed on the walls of the crematorium and took the victims beyond statistics into flesh and blood. As producer Lou Birks says: "This only happened seventy years ago and the personal stories that we heard and the photographs of the people that we saw looked like you and me."

The script drew on improvisation sessions with actors. Amelie's experience during selection on the ward came directly from an improvisation where a blind actor was uncertain whether she had been selected and her response shook to the core everyone assembled. It became a must for the script.

Holocaust research revealed the pattern of inmates' days, including the importance of food, which was often a topic used by concentration camp inmates for distraction and survival. In *Resistance*, the inmates' reminisce and dream of a banquet,

contrasting sharply with their conditions of starvation, privation and threat. This scene introduces the inmates, reveals their relationships with each other and hints at their dreams and fears. Food also plays a part in the staff celebrations to mark the dispatch of their 1000th inmate to the killing centres. The comfortable lives of the staff are played off against those of the inmates.

Defining the story is ordinariness of people caught up in extraordinary circumstances. The staff are striking in their ordinariness – ignorant, cowardly, self-interested but not, for the most part, intrinsically evil, just like so many of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Crucial to their involvement in Aktion-T4 is their belief in the inmates as ‘other’: separate and dispensable.

The Orderly is the one exception; bigotry and callousness define him. In contrast, the Medical Director is acting on conviction, his apparent reasonableness making him a chilling character. He is cocooned by bureaucracy and efficiency; his selection of inmates for ‘dispatch’, is casual. The Nurse is the one member of staff harbouring doubts, without yet finding courage or tactics to take action.

In *Resistance*, it is the inmates who represent ‘normality’ and the staff who live in a twisted world. Whilst Aktion-T4 was supposed to be a secret, the inmates know what lies ahead. Despite or in spite of this, they carve out a kind of existence, supporting each other, forging alliances, searching for survival strategies. Each time the staff enter the inmates’ space, they scatter the inmates’ order and create chaos.

In *Resistance*, the staff are nameless whereas, in the script, all the inmates have names. Liz: “A lot is known about the major perpetrators of Aktion-T4 (even though few were held accountable), but most disabled people remain unknown. I wanted to turn the tables and give the individuality and identity – life – to the victims. Historically, they were labelled as defective, dead ballast and useless eaters; in the film, it is their humanity that shines through”

If Aktion-T4 is a history that has hardly been told, the fact that disabled people resisted is scarcely recorded at all. Yet, in that most hopeless of circumstances, it happened. Elise’s resistance is at the core of the film: her watchful, unspoken appraisal of what is

in store and her canniness in plotting an escape. But resistance is also the woman who hums a nursery rhyme for courage, the man who fights back, the woman who shouts “No’ with body and soul, the man who tries to make himself invisible. In Aktion-T4, it was disabled people’s acts of resistance that communicated the injustice to a wider world until that world had to take notice.

Dramatising such a subject matter was no easy task. “It took me three days to commit anything of the Orderly’s speech to paper”, says Liz, “because I couldn’t bear those words to come from my pen.” She turned to ‘tasteless eulogies’ from the internet for help to remove the block.

The cast

Separate casting sessions were held in London and Bristol for inmate and staff roles. Actors travelled from as far as Newcastle, Colchester and Dublin. Through improvisation, everyone involved began to realise how profound were the history and lives they were attempting to portray. For disabled actors and crew, the casting sessions brought home how personal the history was.

Liz Crow: “There was a moment during the casting of inmates where I looked around the room and realised that, in the wrong time and place, every one of us there would have fallen to the Nazis. Although this wasn’t spoken, it was clear, that everyone there had picked up on how personally connected they were to the characters they were playing.”

Because the material was emotionally so demanding, particularly for those making the trip to the killing centres in Germany, the team took on Michele Taylor, a psychotherapist and disabled person, as ‘Listener’ throughout the production.

The actors produced work of ingenuity and truth. In the case of the inmates, they drew deeply on their own experiences of both impairment and discrimination to bring their characters to life. For Lou Birks, playing Elise was a particular challenge. For a character who scarcely speaks, Elise’s internal world must be made visible and Lou played her with a magnificent intensity as set apart and ever watchful.

Lou Birks: “I tried to bring my own experience to Elise and to carry an aspect of my own experience of mental health within her. In that state I can’t quite trust what is real; there’s a lot of terror and a continual screaming in my head. I tried to bring that in for Elise, leaving her to exist in that terrifying place of madness. Ultimately, that’s what saved her: deciding to believe that her own ‘madness’ was, in fact, reality.”

The inmates represent different characters and their reactions to their situation differ accordingly. Jamie Beddard (Otto) and Sophie Weaver (Bertha) chose to approach their characters in very different ways.

Jamie: “The way I played my part was in isolation, there was no bonding. It was like hell and in hell you can’t be connected.”

Sophie: “The character that I played was one that did connect with other people and tried to raise spirits. It was like making the best of now to make it easier to face whatever might come.”

A rehearsal day was held for inmate actors. This day of intense improvisation was an opportunity for the actors to get to know their character, backstory and the institutional conditions the inmates inhabited, as well as a chance to build relationships between the different characters.

Pre-production

Resistance is set in a ‘holding’ institution. This was a residential centre used to contain disabled people before they were ‘dispatched’ to the killing centres which formed the final stage in the Aktion-T4 process.

Liz Crow and Production Designer Colin Williams were to tour dozens of locations in and around Bristol – disused hospitals, stately homes, segregated schools and domestic properties – in search of a convincing institution. Having found a location that covered most of the scenes in the script, the arrangements came crashing down a few days before the shoot, sending them back on the road. Running out of options, they paused near Claremont School and, in one of those happy accidents of filmmaking, they found their perfect ‘look’. Inmate areas of the institution were

provided by Southville Methodist Church and staff areas were shot in a beautifully wood-panelled basement of a domestic property.

Assisted by Art Director Dave Paul, Colin worked with these disparate locations to make them believable as a unified institution. With a tiny budget but great attention to detail, they transformed the locations with carefully selected props to breathe life into the look of the film and, give the actors an environment in which they could immerse their characters. Props ranged from a vintage wheelchair and crutches purchased on eBay, to a large syringe scrounged from Colin's dentist and all manner of period items borrowed from friends' sitting rooms and attics.

Another big challenge for the art department was locating a vintage bus like those used in *Aktion-T4*. Long hours spent surfing the internet established that there were two buses in the UK that fitted the specification. Remarkably one of those was Bristol-based and due at a vintage bus rally on Bristol's harbourside the following week. Owner Mike Walker proved amenable to entrusting his newly refurbished vehicle to the production and the deal was sealed. The bus would come back to haunt the production at a later date.

Costumes were the final touch to complete the look and these were overseen by Pia Pispa assisted by Deborah Ford. Charity shops and car boot sales and Pia's own collection provided a collection of vintage inmates' clothing which was then stained with tea and 'distressed' with scissors and sandpaper for the vintage look. The staff wardrobe was assembled with particular attention to period detail, with the help of a local military historian and collector who advised on insignia and loaned the production original uniforms. A nurse's uniform could not be found anywhere, so Debs stitched late into the night to craft one out of two cotton bed sheets.

The shoot

The five-day shoot took place in early June 2008 in Bristol, coordinated by Assistant Director Bob Blunden. It was a rollercoaster of a week, as most shoots are: constant problem-solving, emotional intensity, long hours and never enough time. The demands of a film shoot are huge; for *Resistance*, they were

magnified by the subject matter, but there was strong sense of everyone giving their all because it *mattered*.

It was also a surreal week: surrounded by look-alike Nazis – intimidating women and men in uniform who, between shots, relaxed into smiley, approachable people. Lunchtimes saw Nazis seated side by side with disabled people, eating their lunch in unlikely camaraderie before launching back into throwing their fellow actors onto the bus or pinning them to the ground in an armlock.

An old favourite of Roaring Girl Productions, Cinematographer Terry Flaxton lit and filmed the production with immense skill and artistry, assisted by Focus Puller Alex Byng. Shot on digibeta, for most of the film the camera was tripod mounted, changing to handheld for scenes with the greatest intensity and chaos.

Day 1 saw cast and crew thrown straight in at the emotional deep end, with the first scene to be shot being the selection of inmates to go to the killing centre. Lindsay Carter (Hannah): “The scene overtook me with the realisation of terror and hopelessness, but also defiance, in the fact of selection. Hannah felt very real to me and I carried her gently with me throughout the process.”

This scene, along with the bus loading, was heavily influenced by the photographs that covered the walls of the crematoria at the killing centres and was shot in close-up portrait style to focus on the humanity of the individuals.

Through most of the film, the frame is composed to that, unlike the staff, the inmates never fully occupy the space, always remaining at the edges, until the bus loading scene.

The bus loading scene was shot mid-week and, thankfully, the weather held. Filming was on a site with three schools, where Recordist James Harbour was forced to do battle with the sound of three different sets of lunchtimes and playtimes. The day was physically and emotionally gruelling for the actors. For inmates, it meant going through the exertion and trauma of being loaded into the bus time and again. For the staff, it was wearing to occupy roles of such inhumanity.

When Jamie Beddard (Otto) was repeatedly hauled to the ground, it became almost unbearable to watch and there were gasps from

the crew, until “Cut” was called and he broke the tension with slapstick to a round of relieved applause.

The last shot of the exteriors day was the last shot of the film, with the camera perched precariously on a first floor window ledge as Elise sweeps a gravel path across the screen. All the elements came together to create an exquisite abstract painting, perhaps ‘the shot of the film’.

Throughout the week’s shoot, looking at Lou Birks playing Elise, the pain and tension were visibly etched on her body. Lou: “Elise lives in such an internal world, it seemed the natural step to approach the performance by staying in character throughout the shooting days. I didn’t even respond to my own name during that time.”

The staff party was the final day of the shoot. Elements of the day were taken up with roving camera capturing party scenes of conversation, drinking and dancing where, every so often a glimpse of the portrait of Hitler hit the crew with what the film was all about. When it came to the Medical Director’s (David Collins) speech and the Orderly’s (Canice Bannon) burlesque eulogy, no one could be in any doubt.

Liz Crow: “The Medical Director’s apparent reasonableness, presented so eloquently, was chilling, and the Orderly’s eulogy, delivered in his drunkenness and perfect pacing, was both obscene and precisely on the mark. As I watched that scene, I suddenly saw how atmosphere can be experienced separately from content and carry people along; I almost understood how ordinary people can get swept up in such events and still absolve themselves of responsibility.”

Post-production

Resistance was paper edited by Liz Crow, before first assembly on a Mac G5 Quadcore with Final Cut Pro. This was followed by three days of editor time with Terry Flaxton, spaced over a couple of weeks. This built in reflection time that enabled Liz to move from a literal translation of the script to an interpretation of the story as filmed.

Liz: “So much of filmmaking focuses on the shoot, but it is only when you get your material into the edit that you begin to discover what story you have to tell. It’s nerve-wracking to watch the rushes and to see that first assembly but on this film, although I knew there was an enormous amount of work still to be done and a few knuckle-chewing gaps to be filled, I felt this was one that was going to come together.”

Music for the film was composed by Claudio Ahlers and Barnaby Taylor, strongly influenced by German composition. The waltz in the dormitory scene gives a sense of longing and rhythm to the lives of the inmates, sharply interrupted by their reality. The nursery rhyme Hoppe Hoppe Reite inspired a theme that ran through much of the score,. Mixing childish play with an underlying sinister tone, this thread is drawn through the gramophone music at the staff party and into the terror and chaos of the bus loading.

Post-production facilities were provided by The Engine Room in Bridgwater and undertaken by Studio Manager Will Bix. This included grading the film on Magic Bullet using a desaturated bleach bypass effect, mixing the sound to include birdsong recorded on location at the Hadamar death centre, and producing the audience access elements (audio description, captioning and sign language) for the final film.

Will’s greatest challenge concerned the vintage bus which was a newly repainted green, rather than an historically accurate grey. With its high value, the production team decided they couldn’t risk painting the vehicle grey so, with fingers crossed, it was postponed until post-production. In post, the green of the bus was separated from the rest of the frame using a matte drawn around it. This area was then desaturated and superimposed back onto the film. This was done in Photoshop, frame by individual frame, 1200 in all. Will has since been renamed The Bus Man.

Liz Crow: “After ten years in gestation and nine months in production, there is a stage of letting go. I realised towards the very end of post-production that I could scarcely bear to watch any more – that I no longer wanted to see the selection and bus loading. Faces in the films continue to haunt me outside the edit suite and moments continue to get me every time I see them. The film is complete.”