

An Olympic challenge

Inspired by her grandfather's appreciation of whisky – and by her own love of swimming – *Nectar* has been a labour of love for writer/director Liz Crow. *Nectar* is the tale of a young man called Walter, a champion swimmer in the 1930s, who has an epiphany during the race that will decide his future as an Olympic hope. Walter also happens to be deaf.

Impressed by the potential of the screenplay and by Crow's track record, producer and script editor Abigail Davies joined the team, bringing with her 20-years of film and television experience. Her role was to draw together the practicalities of the production to enable Crow to realise her ideas in the most dramatic way possible. "Being a producer is not just about doing a job of time or money management," says Davies. "When you're casting a film or picking a crew, you're looking for people who will enable the project to be delivered in the most excellent, most meaningful way possible."

"Abigail has a way of asking the incisive questions and calling on me to justify my decision at just the right moment," says Crow, "with the result that I able to reach absolute clarity in how and why I'm weaving the wider narrative and every detail within it."

As *Nectar* is set in 1931, it was extremely important to have detailed research for the costumes, environment and attitudes. For

research purposes Wendy Coles from the Amateur Swimming Association gave Crow access to her own archive of swimming history, including documentary footage of a 1930s national swimming gala held at the location selected for the film.

Swimming strokes have changed since 1931, and the swimmers in *Nectar* had to adapt their swimming to the period style. Sports training was also very different in the 1930s, with no formal sponsorship and athletes having to fit competition and training around their fulltime jobs.

Alongside the tale of Walter as a champion swimmer, is a parallel story of him as a young deaf man. Just as Walter is under pressure from all around him to continue as a competitive swimmer, he is expected to fit in with the hearing world through lip-reading and speaking. As he journeys towards swimming for the love of it, he also works to claim British Sign Language (BSL) as his natural language.

Deaf consultant Lorna Allsop joined the production during the script development phase to advise on its historical and cultural accuracy from a deaf perspective. She also translated relevant sections into 1930s BSL, which was used by 50,000-70,000 people in the UK at the time. As BSL has evolved over the past 75 years, Allsop was tasked with researching period sign language and then teaching key actors to deliver their lines appropriately.

In the film, Walter wears a cumbersome hearing aid, gifted to him by the local community, which at the time was considered breakthrough technology. Unfortunately, hearing aids back then magnified all sound, so that the user received a cacophony of speech and background noise. The actual hearing aid used belonged to Allsop's father.

In *Nectar*, the elements of swimming and sign language are

entwined. The naturalness of swimming for Walter is mirrored in the naturalness of language and vice versa. "I wanted to show a disabled person in a situation where impairment is not the driving force," says Crow. "At the same time it is integral to the situation. Walter doesn't either compete or or stop swimming because of being deaf. However, there is a fluency in his swimming that is matched in his BSL and, if only people had listened, they may have known they were pushing him towards a dream that was not his."

During pre-production Crow had an opportunity to view high definition footage from another production and knew immediately that it offered the colour intensity and vibrancy – the almost tactile quality of the image – that she wanted for *Nectar*. She turned to cinematographer Terry Flaxton, who brought his HD experience and strong cinematic vision to the production.

"It was the quality and conviction of the writing, combined with the strength of Liz's vision and ambition for the film that drew me to the project," says Flaxton. "My role was to convey that vision through the camera."

With its clarity of image, HD leaves no scope for error from the art department. When your film is a period piece, that's a tall order, especially with a small budget. Fortunately, art designer Simon Hicks agreed to take up the challenge of turning Bristol's clocks back 75 years and creating a believable and authentic period backdrop.

For *Nectar*, two fully functioning 1930s pools had to be found and one of these had to be the right scale for the national championships. After months of research, Wiveliscombe Pool, near Taunton, was found for Walter's home pool. A small community pool, lovingly restored and managed by the locals, this was one of several delightful locations in the film. Here, as with the sets, no detail was spared. The art department



Attention to detail was crucial to the production, with not only period costumes and set-dressing, but also accurate British Sign Language of the 1930s.

repainted the cubicles and added period sign writing to the doors and walls.

The second pool, a huge spring-filled former quarry on the outskirts of Bristol, presented its own set of challenges. Archive footage from the 1930 showed the lake had actually been used for major swimming galas and gave the art department valuable information.

"It was a beautiful location in the first place, but there were a lot of things that needed to be well dressed. The pontoon that was already in the lake was covered in aluminium, which made it look extremely modern, and so that all had to be dressed and made to look like a period setting."

The large open space was decked with bunting, windbreaks, tents and deckchairs that would immediately convey a sense of spectacle and occasion. A second pontoon was transported from Pangbourne and assembled on location by the crew, then rowed out to the middle of the lake. Gale force winds in the middle of the night had the art department racing down at daybreak to make repairs.

"Thanks to Simon's attention to detail and AP Sue Fairbanks' ability to source anything from anywhere, entering the sets for *Nectar* was like travelling back in time," says Crow.

It was always our intention to ensure that deaf characters were played by deaf actors. This was of crucial importance to Crow. "The casting of disabled characters in the film and on stage is controversial. Roles are frequently filled

by non-disabled. My take is not so much that only a disabled person can play a disabled person (although they will bring particular knowledge and depth to the role), but that so few directors believe disabled actors can hack it in any role. It is necessary to bring in positive action and disproved this claim."

Finding the actors, however, was no easy task when the specification was so exacting. *Nectar* follows the main character at the ages of 17, 23 and 91 and the production team searched for two actors to cover this timespan.

Unfortunately, there not many professional deaf actors with BSL as their first language to cover this timespan. The first challenge was to find someone to play the older Walter. The team tracked down Ian Chandler, who had a wealth of acting experience, but also looked believable as Walter, a 90 year old man who refers to his whisky as nectar. Chandler brought sensitivity to his performance but, at the age of 70, he needed to be aged 20 years to play the role. Again, the unforgiving high clarity of HD meant the team did not want to rely too heavily on make-up, so, aside from the addition of a few wrinkles, Chandler rehearsed with the deaf consultant Lorna Allsop to make his BSL delivery that of an older person.

Interestingly, the actor Jacob Casselden, who played the young Walter, did not have much swimming experience before the shoot, though after a rigorous training routine with

three different coaches he has now set his sights on competing in the 2012 Deaf Olympics.

Nectar was shot on Sony HD F750 camera, supplied by Films at 59 (which also supported the short financially), and edited by Bim Ajadi, who has a background in broadcast television. Editing took place over a two week period using Final Cut Pro. Once the offline edit was complete, James Cawte completed the colourisation at Films at 59. The 5.1 audio mix was added by sound editor Brian Mosely and original music by composer Barnaby Taylor.

From the start it was the intention to make the production inclusive. This included involving deaf and disabled people both in front and behind the camera, working at all levels and a variety of roles. Crow gathered herself a crew that operated successfully in two languages and used various methods of communication (speech, sign and lipreading). BSL interpreters were employed and Allsop advised throughout on how to make the process accessible. In a sector where only two per cent of workers are made up of deaf and disabled people, *Nectar* was made up of 25 per cent.

"On one particular afternoon, I watched BSL and English communicators seated happily side by side, in what was the most collaborative and inclusive shoot I've ever been on," says Crow.

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70 year old actor Ian Chandler had to be aged to 91 for the role.

