

Kësulat: A tale of two hats

GTC Awards Officer **Mari Yamamura**'s first documentary feature film as DoP was to be a fascinating and moving project re-enacting the personal story of actor Jimi Tihofsi's early life in war-torn Kosovo. The film would also be the directorial debut of Alan M Trow, BSC, and had been more than 10 years in development, as Mari explains.



In May 2016, I had the opportunity to shoot my first documentary feature *Kësulat*, with the director, Alan M Trow, BSC, in Kosovo. When I first met Alan 18 years ago, I was a focus-puller and I have always admired his lighting. It was, therefore, an honour when I received a phone call from him a couple years ago to ask if I would like to shoot his feature. Alan is a renowned cinematographer but *Kësulat* would be his directorial debut.

Kësulat is set during the Balkans War between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs in the late 1990s, but the film is as much about their strong bonds and friendship as the conflict. The title means 'Hats' and signifies the two peoples' different styles of traditional dress, in particular their headwear. The story centres on Dragan, a Serbian teacher, who lives with his wife Slavica and father Milan, the only Serbian family in an otherwise Albanian village. Alban is the local doctor, who befriends the family and treats the sick, ageing Milan. Meanwhile Besnik (played by Jimi Tihofsi) is full of anger over the Serbs who murdered his father. He joins the Kosovan Liberation Army. As the doctor continues to visit the Serb family, tensions build and when Serbian forces invade the village, the families are split apart. The film is the brainchild of Albanian Jimi, who wrote and produced the film as well

“

Many people I met on this shoot could tell me their experiences first-hand and I sensed that the scars of the conflict are still very much alive in people's minds.

as appearing in it. The story is based on his personal life and what he and his family went through and he had always wanted to tell this story to a wider audience at some point. Alan came on board back in 2007 and they would then work together developing the project over 10 years.

Fresh memories

When Jimi first arrived in the UK to pursue his career as an actor, the most common question he was asked was: "How can one kill one's neighbour?" *Kësulat* is an honest, heartfelt

attempt to understand what happened between these two sets of people and why they would go through such an atrocity after living side by side as friends and neighbours for so long. This certainly resonated with what I heard on set from other crew members. Many people I met on this shoot could tell me their experiences first-hand and I sensed that the scars of the conflict are still very much alive in people's minds. The roadside flags we drove past every day during our 45-minute journey to and from our digs were an omnipresent visual reminder of this bloody history. I was also told that the people whose faces are engraved on roadside stones were those who were tortured before being killed.

The two countries are still suffering, even now, but one thing I found fascinating about the local crew was that almost every one of them was a film-maker and they all had a pet project on the go. Film as an industry is not very well developed in Kosovo, therefore everybody does everything from producing to directing, shooting and editing. A 'DIY' spirit of film-making is very much prevalent and many people want to tell their stories about what happened to them personally as well as to their country.

A grim but beautiful location

The main location where we filmed was a small abandoned village in Kosovo, which was ideal for our film, as it provided all the different buildings and exteriors for the various setups in a close vicinity. It was surrounded by beautiful countryside – but the natural beauty of the place is in stark contrast to its history. This whole village was abandoned because of the war and the buildings have stood empty ever since. It was in these rather desolate surrounds that our shoot took place – but I think this just added to the authenticity of the film.

The film consists of material from several sources, including archive footage and interviews. I filmed the dramatic reconstructions for the story, which took just under four weeks to shoot in the deserted Kosovan village.

Remarkably, Jimi and Alan had travelled to Kosovo some 10 years earlier for this project to shoot some documentary. Alan explains: "In 2007 Jimi and I, plus former camera assistant Gary Horton, made a trip to Kosovo, taking with us an ARRI 235 kit (kindly supplied by ARRI Media) and a few rolls of Kodak 35mm stock (at that time I expected to complete the film on 35mm but the subsequent 10-year gap and budget changed that). The plan was to shoot a teaser promo to help us raise funds. I shot a little documentary footage of a demonstration in the capital city, Pristina, but primarily we shot sequences with some of the Kosovan actors I had cast on a previous trip. I had been so impressed by the faces and look of the country that I contrived some scenes that hadn't yet been worked out in the script. I would use the device of the 'two hats' of the title as a visual metaphor and one of the opening shots in the film is of an old man holding and then dropping two hats. This was one of the original 35mm shots which was later scanned. There was also a shot of children running across a bridge carrying the bright red Kosovo flag, which set the emotional mood for the film."

Local crew and conditions

Being a low-budget indie, the shoot was not without its challenges. We had to negotiate every necessity and things tended to take much longer



Crew huddling around the stove waiting for the rain to stop

than expected to organise. There were power-cuts twice a day, every day. Not only was this my first feature, but it was also in a foreign country. I quickly learned a few words in Albanian and tried my best to communicate with the sparks in their own language. Luckily, this worked a treat. They even began to adapt to our working style after just a few days and all worked very hard for us. I had a gaffer and four sparks. We had a flatbed dolly and one of the sparks would double up as a

“

The old-fashioned lights were actually very appropriate for our story and even added to the rustic nature of the film – the artists looked beautiful illuminated by them, their sculpted faces showing the history.

Camera trainee, Engjëll, with the clapperboard for an emotional scene when Dr Alban leaves his father for good





Exterior scene when the Serbian army invades

grip whenever we had a tracking shot to do. I generally found the Kosovan people very hardworking and warm at heart.

In terms of equipment, we ended up procuring all the kit locally for both lighting and camera. This meant we could get all the crew included at a reasonable rate. Only Alan, the camera operator, Kevin Rudge, and I were from the UK. We used one of the only three ALEXAs in the country and the only set of Zeiss Super Speed lenses. It was reassuring to have a trusted and robust ALEXA in an area where there was no immediate access to a rental house if anything went wrong.

Originally, we had a quite a few night scenes planned, so I wanted fast lenses to cover myself. Unfortunately, I noticed during prep that the back of the 35mm lens was covered in fine scratches, which did cause some problems, particularly when shooting against the sun, but we basically had to work with what we had or there would be no film. It seems the norm in Kosovo is that there is no insurance for camera equipment; instead, the rental house supply the kit with their own camera assistant and this acts as their insurance.



L to r: focus-puller Kris Alimeri, camera operator Kevin, producer Jimi (acting in this scene) and Mari looking through the camera

Alan's directorial debut

I think most experienced cinematographers get an urge to direct after a while and I certainly had been looking for an opportunity. So, when *Kësulat* came along I was very keen to do it. I met up with Jimi Tihofsi, the Albanian writer, in a coffee bar off Oxford Street. He had a couple of pages of storyline – not really a script at that stage – and a passion to make the film. What he didn't have was any film-making experience – or any money! He had approached a couple of potential directors and one had suggested maybe finding a cinematographer who was looking to direct. Bingo!

I knew the script needed a lot of work, but I agreed to visit Kosovo with Jimi. We stayed in Jimi's house, in the countryside north of the capital Pristina. The large house had largely lain empty during the war, but bullet holes in the walls testified to the proximity of the fighting.

I met up with Jimi's extensive family and became fascinated by the culture and way of life. I had filmed in Romania, so had experienced Eastern European culture, but this was very different. The people, their faces and their surroundings were so emotive, with the hardship and torment of such horrible events there beneath the welcoming smiles. So the decision to take on this film was not difficult.

Having shot the 35mm scenes which I cut into a promo, we then spent a lot of time working on the script. At that point I hadn't really addressed the nitty-gritty of how I was going to shoot the film. I think I sort of assumed



Alan shooting 35mm promo footage for *Kësulat* in 2007

I would shoot and direct but the major turning point was when we decided it should be in Albanian (and, where appropriate, Serbo-Croat). So, then the notion of directing, lighting AND dealing with two foreign languages seemed a bit crazy.

Once it became obvious we would be shooting digitally, I decided I would like someone who really knows how to work in that world. I've known Mari for a long time and always been impressed by her attention to detail, her skill and her way of working. She really knows the ALEXA and has a good eye. Mari was a great choice to light *Kësulat* and I think she should be proud of it. I must confess I found it difficult not having my eye to the lens all the time, but camera operator Kevin Rudge has been with me a long time and he had also worked with Mari. It was a great team.

Realising the vision

Once we got a generator going all day to compensate for the power outages, we managed to get into the swing of things. Prior to the shoot, Alan had mentioned some reference films to watch, such as *The Tin Drum*, *2046* and *The Revenant*. He also thought of shooting *Kësulat* in black and white at one point. I took the films to be not necessarily a visual style reference, as they all had quite a different look, but more a

reference for the feeling and mood he wanted to portray – this is all about the people trying to survive in their situation. I tried to tap into Alan's thoughts as he developed his ideas on this film, hoping that I would be able to reflect them in my lighting.

I was very aware that Alan's lighting background underpinned his directing but he generally let me do my own thing and was very encouraging, telling me to enjoy it – which I did! I wanted to show the villagers' lives in as honest and naturalistic a way as possible in their environment. There was one scene for which Alan and I initially had quite a different vision; this was where Dragan and Slavica spend their last moment together before she departs for safety, leaving Dragan and his ill father behind. I had originally imagined a passionate love between the two characters played out in the declining, dilapidated environment, but Alan wanted this to be a more warm and glamorous brief moment for the two characters. My job was to achieve Alan's vision, so I was happy to change my plans. In the end we used a warm, hard light source, off camera, to create the effect.

Alan discussing how to shoot a scene in which an old man is shot



MARI YAMAMURA

Capturing unique moments.

ZEISS LWZ.3 21-100mm



Visit
ZEISS at
B.V.E.
Stand #L30



Compact and lightweight design ZEISS Lightweight Zoom LWZ.3

The ZEISS Lightweight Zoom (LWZ.3) strikes the perfect balance between weight, size and optical performance. Combining a rugged, splash-proof housing with a weight of just 2 kg, the LWZ.3 is the ideal lens for shooting high-end documentaries, features, TV shows and corporate productions. Its outstanding optical performance delivers razorsharp images, vibrant colours and excellent contrasts.

www.zeiss.com/cine/lwz
consumer.optics@zeiss.com
01223 401450

// INSPIRATION
MADE BY ZEISS



Lighting

We had a reasonable amount of lighting gear on this shoot, although the fixtures were all quite old. We had a selection of HMIs, the biggest a 4K; various tungstens; and a couple of 4x4 Kino Flos. The HMIs, which I used most of the time as a daylight source, had a rather strong green cast and all by differing amounts. This was noticeable on the skin tones, so I quickly had to work out how much minus green gel to put on each light. We also had plenty of flags, scrims and frames, which was good, because we needed them.

I did dream about the new Mole-Richardson 10K LED light you can plug into a household socket but this was not possible and nor were we blessed with any new-generation, fancy LED lights with bicolour or dimmer function; however, in hindsight, I think these old-fashioned lights were actually very appropriate for our story and they maybe even added to the rustic nature of the film. The artists looked beautiful illuminated by them, their sculpted faces showing the history.

One of the benefits of working with Alan as the director was that each time he sought an exterior location, he would choose a perfect spot. As an experienced cinematographer, he was instinctively aware of where the sun was at all times, making my life so much easier.

Kevin Rudge, our camera operator, joined us a week later due to another commitment – he had also been a mentor to me when I first started in the industry, and it was Kevin who had trained me as a focus-puller years ago. Once the three of us got together, it was like old times. We became regulars at the local café near where we were staying. There, we would reflect, discuss the next day and enjoy our dinner after the shoot. We were there for so many nights we tried almost everything on the menu at least twice (except for Kevin, who is a vegetarian).

In the current climate, where similar conflicts happening around the world, I hope the film gives people something to reflect on about our history and cultural enrichment. Now the

“

Not only was this was my first feature, but it was also in a foreign country. I quickly learned a few words in Albanian and tried my best to communicate with the sparks in their own language.

important thing is to get the film out to a bigger audience. *Kësulat* had its world première in Pristina, Kosovo, last year and has had further successful screenings across the country. The UK première was at BAFTA last November and it will be screened at this year's Hay Festival.

Fact File

GTC member **Mari Yamamura** stepped up as a DoP after working as a focus-puller on TV dramas and commercials for 14 years. She shot her first feature *Kësulat* in 2016. In the same year, her short piece *Gwynfor* was selected for BSC New Cinematographers Night screening. Her other credits include *Doctors* on BBC ONE.
m: 07971 885325, w: yamamura.co.uk

See more about *Kësulat* and clips: www.kesulat.com
Alan M Trow, BSC can be contacted on: alan@alantrow.com