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DIGITAL VIDEO

Kenny shoots for the stars

CLAYTON JACOBSON'S DEBUT FEATURE HAS BECOME THE HIGHEST GROSSING AUSTRALIAN FILM AT THE LOCAL BOX OFFICE IN THE PAST THREE YEARS. THE ACCOMPLISHED COMMERCIALS AND SHORT FILMMAKER TOOK AN ALL-DV APPROACH TO THE MAKING OF KENNY, AS OUTLINED IN THIS INTERVIEW WITH DIGITAL MEDIA WORLD'S BILL DAWES.

The story of *Kenny* is a remarkable one, a film that grew from one simple idea about a Portlaoi professional into Australia's record-breaking cinema release of 2006, one that has grossed more than \$7 million at the Australian box office. (The DVD launches on December 6).

From Melbourne's Jacobson family, Kenny is an amazing ensemble piece that testifies to their diverse talents. Brothers Shane and Clayton are the star and director respectively, although Clayton does feature in an on-screen role as Kenny's effete urban-dwelling sibling. Their father, actor Ronald Jacobson, hogs a good deal of screen time as Kenny's not so proud dad, and Clayton's son Jesse plays Shane's son in the movie. Assorted wives, uncles and aunts and family friends appear in roles throughout the production.

Clayton Jacobson graduated from the Swinburne Film & TV school in the mid-80s. He commenced his career as an editor working with directors such as Jane Campion (*The Piano*), Richard Lowenstein (*Dogs in Space*), Paul Goldman (*Australian Rules*), Andrew Dominik (*Chopper*) and John Hillcoat (*The Proposition*). He has directed high profile music videos for likes of INXS, John Farnham and Jimmy Barnes, in addition to television commercials and documentaries.

Over recent years, Clayton has been responsible for a series of award-winning short films squeezed in between his "day-job" directing large budget local and international commercials. However the first time *Kenny* had the chance to be immortalised, Clayton did not have a 35mm film crew handy, just his trusty Sony PD100 DVCAM camcorder and brother Shane, who played the character of the much put upon Splashdown operative.

"Over the years while I have been working towards my first feature film, my brother Shane has been national manager of an event lighting and event management company. He had spent many years working alongside the guys from Splashdown, so he knew them personally, and over a period of time he told me so many great stories about the way they spoke and the way they defended themselves and deflected the slings and arrows from others.

"One day I was just sitting there and I thought God, this is a great idea for a film.

"I am always interested in subject matter that challenges or in this case embarrasses people. You can always bet your bottom dollar that there's something underneath that says more about themselves and society, more so than the person they're turning their nose up at.

"I thought this was a great opportunity for some humour and there was a character that I saw in there with my brother that was just really appealing. We never had any intention of making it as a feature. We didn't even have any intention of making it as a short to be completely honest."

It should be noted that in addition to his skills as national general manager of a lighting and production company, brother Shane had a growing profile as an actor and comedian. Kenny marks his first lead role in a feature film.

"The character of Kenny is based on a number of people in the toilet plumbing industry as well as strong character traits from Shane and my uncles and father. At first I simply grabbed my Sony PD100 and said, 'Why don't we document this?' So he brought along his Premier Lighting truck and we went out and work-shopped it literally on the road. Strangely enough some of that original work-shopped footage is actually in the film (the opening sequence of Kenny in the truck wearing a dark blue shirt).

"The character developed from there."

"I got a call while I was playing around with this footage from Paul Harris of the St Kilda Film Festival. He asked if there was anything I'd be putting in that year, so that became the incentive to say well I've got a deadline now.

"The more we got into the process the more we infused bits of our own family history into the story and Kenny's character. Our uncles and extended family have a particular turn of phrase that is quite unique today - it's very old Aussie slang from the second world war period and it's very colourful. You don't hear it that often, only when you are at Christmas parties or at your uncles and aunties."

The Jacobson vernacular is immortalised in such notable on-screen quotes as Kenny's observation that something is "as silly as a bum full of Smarties."

Kenny started out as a short film. Through Shane's



connections with Splashdown, the actual Portaloo company profiled in the film, Clayton was able to incorporate a series of major outdoor events such as The Melbourne Cup, Calder Park Street Drag Racing and the St Kilda Festival. What otherwise would have required a lot of costly and complex location planning became simply a matter of Clayton and a small crew tagging along behind an overall-clad Shane with a Sony PD150 camcorder (By this stage things had moved upmarket from the PD100).

"Whenever I got the chance to break away from doing ads I found myself doing projects that were the complete opposite of the discipline I had to develop as an advertising director," said Jacobson.

"After shooting 35mm car ads with brilliant DOPs and technicians who have worked on every major Australian film, I went for the complete opposite. Just grab a video camera, get some actors, keep it as simple as possible and just work on getting those real life spontaneous moments that I was starved of."

After completing the 47-minute version of *Kenny*, the director was unsure of just how the film would connect with audiences.

"I honestly thought half the audience would walk out based on their prejudice of the subject matter alone but they didn't as it turned out, they loved it."

They loved it enough to see *Kenny* awarded the Festival prize for Best Comedy as well as the People's Choice award at the 2004 St Kilda Film Festival.

Splashdown owner Glenn Preusker arranged a complimentary screening for the company's staff and friends. Encouraged by the overwhelming audience reaction, A couple of Glenn's friends present at that screening offered to invest in the Jacobson Brothers to transform the short into a feature.

"In the space of 24 hours I went from having a short film to suddenly having a potential investor happy to put money into it as a feature.

"At that stage I was not convinced we could extend the short to a feature as we were pretty thrilled with the short as a fully realised piece. Also I was nervous that Glenn's friend's money may not be recouped, at that point we were talking in excess of a million dollars. I was convinced the process would need to be simpler and cheaper."

"So Glenn asked what sort of money are you talking about and I threw a figure at him and he said well I can give you that, and the very next day we were up and running.

"It was incredible even to us because the truth is when Glenn first said 'Why don't we do it as a feature?' I said to Shane I don't know if there's a feature idea in it. The short was really 50 minutes long, and I said to Shane, I reckon we've kinda nailed it.

"We went to Glenn's house to talk him out of it and while we were there we heard about the "The International Pumper and Cleaner Expo in Nashville Tennessee." I decided *Kenny* has to go there, there's something in this. Then it was amazing



how many ideas flowed on from that one moment, like, he'll fall in love, and immediately we had our second half.

"At that stage we were thinking we could just create a second half as we only needed another 30-40 minutes, but it never works out that way and we ended up restructuring the whole thing

← (continued on page 21)

Kenny was shot DVCAM at 4:3 aspect ratio on Sony PD100, PD150 and MD170 camcorders. It was edited in Final Cut Pro 5 by Clayton Jacobson on a PowerMac G5 (1.6 GHZ, 2GB RAM) and co-edited by Sean Lander with additional editing by Michael Collins. All editors used Final Cut Pro with identical digitised QuickTime rushes, so all that needed to be interchanged was project files (often via drag and dropping on iChat AV).

"Often if I'd have a sudden brainwave about a scene I could quickly edit something together, get Clayton on iChat and show him what I'd come up with. After viewing the idea we would discuss it's merits, and whether or not it worked or needed adjustments. Having this kind of freedom really gave us the opportunity to explore many possibilities with the post production of Kenny," said Lander.

For the second half of production, after Splashdown came on board with funding, Clayton gained a 60" Plasma monitor. A \$1000 Acer DLP projector picked up from OfficeWorks provided digital dailies. The final cut was exported as a TIFF sequence in 16-18 minute film spools, and supplied to Digital Pictures on a RAID drive.

Digital Pictures "Online" editor Chris Dea worked in standard definition to apply the various transition effects. He dropped in visual effects sequence that were created at Iloura VFX and then applied rackings for the aspect ratio crop.

"Rather than taking the tight 1:1.85 (academy) strip slice from the centre of the 4:3 material, Clayton noticed that many cinemas actually over project and had at least a foot of image falling off the top and bottoms of the screen. He decided to compensate for this, and save some precious resolution by only taking a 1:1.66 slice out of the 4:3 image," said Rachel Knowles, dp Producer.

The 1.66 Standard Definition version of the film was then exported from Final Cut Pro to dp's TIPSdp workstation for uprezing to High Definition.

Tony Poriazis, dp's Digital Film Supervisor, oversees the process from receiving the native video images through to

film record on the digital pictures Arri Laser Film Recorder, and lab supervision.

"Clayton's passion was infectious and drove us to further develop our existing TIPS proprietary image processing system," said Poriazis. "We achieved some amazing results."

Aliasing was further minimised, resolution and sharpness was enhanced, and most impressively, some chroma cross hatching totally disappeared with some extra TIPS R&D from Iloura's Alan Fairlie.

For the colour grade, dp Senior Colourist Justin Heitman found that converting the SD up to HD first was beneficial.

"One of the main issues when grading projects acquired on tape is compression. Obviously the greater the compression the less control you have in the grading process. An example would be isolating colour ie: if you wanted to enhance an individual colour or change its hue, to isolate it is quite difficult as the compression doesn't allow much separation from the other colours," said Heitman.

"As luck would have it, Kenny's top was one of those colours that just don't transfer well from video to film colour space. Even on the raw footage Kenny's top would shift from flouro green to dark cyan. Also the transition from Kenny's skin tone to the edge of his top didn't compress well on tape. So when trying to balance his shirt across the scenes I was getting break up in the colour transition.

"Fortunately for me we had a team of people working on ways to minimise aliasing and compression issues which helped the grading process immensely.

"As the latitude of tape is so much less than that of film, I wanted to stretch out the range as much as possible. So I decided to turn off the video clippers. After all they are there for DVD release and I could always do a second pass to legalise it back. So I did exactly that and by doing so I got to bring the blacks down the whites up and play around a lot more in the mid tones.

"I've found grading tape (linear) for film out (log) is more "film like" when grading in the "mids" area of the image, as film has such a beautiful roll off at each end it doesn't work well to push the top and tail off tape.

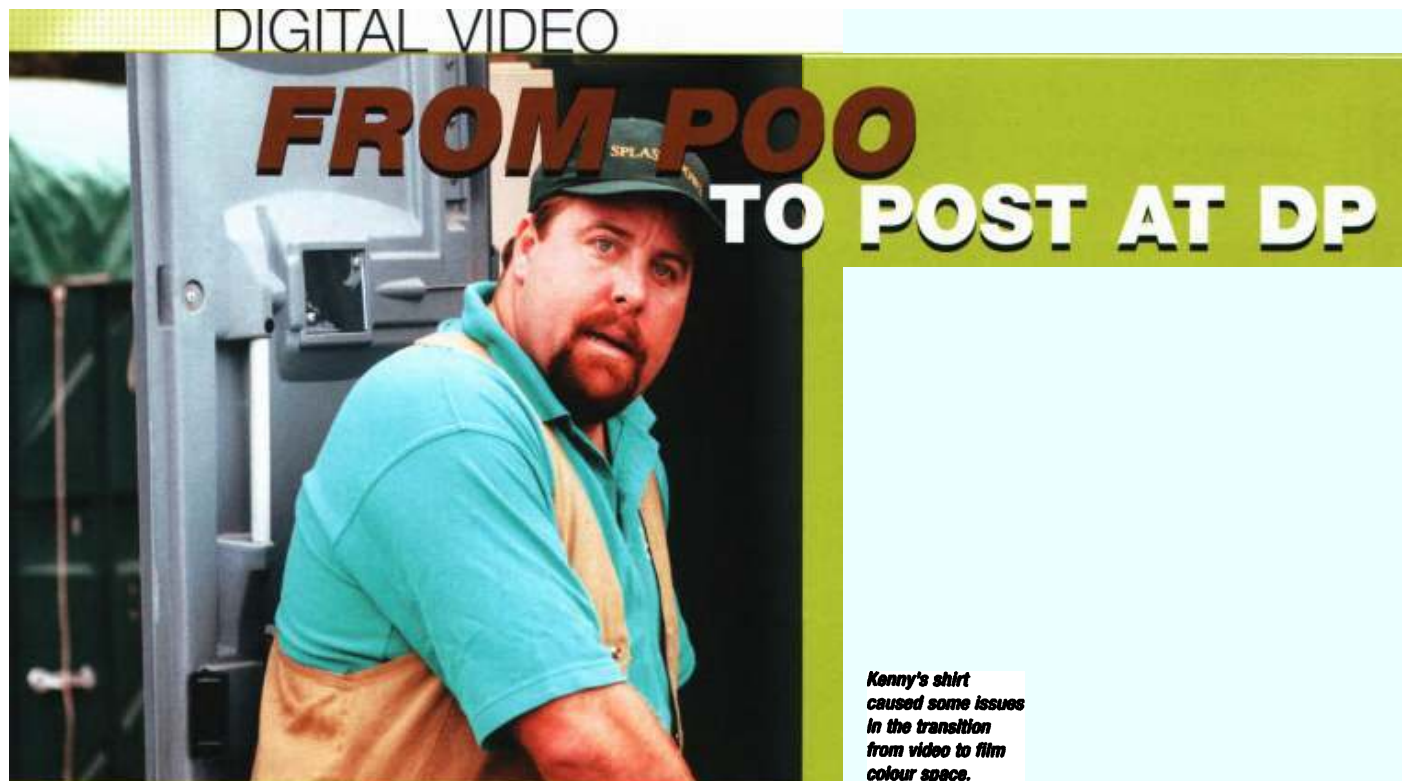
"As Kenny is a doco-style film, my part was more to balance it out, help some of the "issues" of DV and create a few moods which weren't achievable with the location lighting. By putting some R&D into it, Clayton continually pushing the "what if" boundary and a team of people all hooked on making this shine, we came up with a very acceptable product which we are all happy to have been a part of."

The grade was done in dp's 2K Reality suite, tape to tape HDCAM SR to HDCAM SR. This suite also has a colour management LUT system which, combined with wedge film record tests, ensures that the grade seen on the HD monitor is identical to what is seen on the 35mm print. The final image processing step was to convert from "linear" HD video space to "log" film space (more rendering). Following this the final HD 1.66 frames were shot out to 35mm, within the 1.85 academy, via digital pictures' Arri Laser Film Recorder.



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"So we were up and running the next day and I went off and bought a PD170, so I was stepping my way up, after I'd already made the first half on a PD150. At that stage there was an option to reshoot everything on 35mm. We talked about that and that was a very real option. But we realised there was going to be no way known we were going to create the intimacy and have the freedoms of wandering around the events. You walk into an event with a 35mm camera and you become the event.

"My preference would be for 35mm wherever possible, although of late I've been seeing results where it's hard to really tell in many instances. But also there are some freedoms that come along with shooting digitally that you just can't have with film. I guess I am a purist in terms of loving film but that's slipping. I don't hang on to the love of film just for the sake of it.

Most of Kenny was shot with a small crew of about four. Clayton would operate handheld trying to remain as

inconspicuous as possible while Kenny wandered through events with the Splashdown crew.

"I shot most of the film from the hip because I found that every time I held the camera up to my eye people became self-conscious. It's like a gun being pointed at you. And if I held it up to my eye when I was walking around a festival I knew what was going to happen. I had a lot of good takes ruined by kids putting their hands in front of the camera, saying "G'day mum."

"I bought myself a small high-precision 9" monitor on Day 1 of shooting but quickly realised it was a waste of time. It just slowed us down. We were with a real toilet company, so when they yanked those hoses out of the toilets and jumped on the back of those trucks they were off & we had to keep up with them so I needed to travel light."

All monitoring on location was done via the camcorder's LCD flipout.



"I wanted to move fast and I wanted to keep a really strong sense of spontaneity so I didn't go for hundreds of takes. When it came to covering an event I was never quite sure what would happen at an event, so I had to be ready to capture a moment if it happened. Because people thought Shane was real and he was with an actual toilet company I had to be ready for the odd chance where someone would come up and interact with him.

"None of these moments made it into the movie, because usually it was pretty uninspiring, they'd just be asking if there was more toilet paper or stuff like that.

"The hard part was trying to keep the amount of footage down because I knew that I'd have to cut all this stuff together.

"Most documentary ratios, if its film, are about 50-100:1, but if its tape its somewhere between 50-200:1. I think I clocked up about 400:1 because every day I was filming an event and I also had two cameras. My co-editor

editor Sean Lander was shooting on a PD150 so we were swapping between a 150 and a 170. There is a slight difference between them but I just didn't have the money to get another 170.

"Sean's job initially was just to document the process of making the film. But he has a great eye and was capturing terrific alternative moments so he quickly became 2nd Unit cameraman."

THUNDERDOME

The truck racing sequence at Melbourne's Calder Park Raceway was the one huge set piece in the film that called on all of Shane Jacobson's skills as an event manager. With his background in professional lighting, Shane was able to arrange 10 huge generators to light a space about twice the size of the MCG.

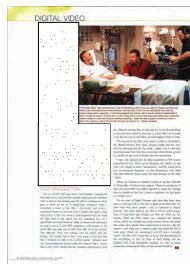
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Clayton Jacobson directs brother Shane in a scene from Kenny. Audio was acquired using the camera mics and a 10-year old Micron radio mic for Shane.

"In many ways the film fits into the Dogma rules," said Jacobson.

"There were really only three scenes where we used lighting. I always tried to choose locations that were well-lit. My personal opinion is that DV cameras love fluorescent light. There are some scenes [in Kenny] that I think look absolutely beautiful. One of these is a final scene with Kenny in a phone booth and it's just lit with a little 12K light that I had and the flouro and I still look at it and think that its every bit as beautiful as 35mm. But it has to be a big close-up to do that. The hardest thing with Kenny was wide shots, so I always tried to make sure there was a point of focus somewhere."



This sequence required four stuntmen working under the supervision of Nash Edgerton and 150 extras made up of friends of the cast and crew. All of the crowd shots were composited in by Digital Pictures, the only effects sequence in the film.

"I knew I only had one night to nail the Thunderdome sequence, so I got together seven of my director friends who all owned PD170s and said 'Guys you are all coming along to document the evening and you are all 2nd Unit Directors.'

"I ended up with eight cameras filming different stuff that night. It was an amazing evening. One person got given my original PD100 and that poor bugger spent the night running around from one cameraperson to the next, capturing little choice moments from everyone else's camera, transferring it onto his PD100, then he would race over to me and spot check that everyone was getting the right stuff. So I could stay in the truck and work with the actors while they were out shooting exterior shots.

"It was a hell of a challenge for Iloura and digital pictures to strip in the crowd at the back of the truck sequences because it was DVCAM and it was handheld and it was shot at night. It took them a week to track this stuff but they did a brilliant job and no-one would know that the trucks were just driving around an empty stadium. I knew that people would assume it was real because it doesn't feel like the kind of film that would have effects. So I knew I would get away with it.

"We shot for about a year and then we cut for about a year and a half with some reshoots whenever we needed. The good thing was we got to go back to events like the Melbourne Cup three times and do pickups."

POST-PRODUCTION

"We cut on FCP and then when I had finished I transferred that material as a QuickTime. Initially digital pictures did their stuff to remove the aliasing and fix colour compression, then gave it back to me as a QuickTime. However when I reinserted it back in the film I discovered that when I compared frames we had lost a bit of quality. We spent a long time trying to find out where it had happened and all roads led right back to me which was the outputting of it as a



"The hardest thing about shooting Kenny was not anticipating what I knew was about to happen, because what reveals most mockumentaries or documentaries as being fakes is that you are immediately aware that the camera knows what's happening. If something happened off camera I had to wait for Kenny to acknowledge it before moving the camera. The hard part was also being able to convey what action was taking place around him without cutting to a wide shot and just revealing everything. I broke the rules a couple of times just to sort of wink to the audience a little bit but for the most part we stuck to it." - Clayton Jacobson.

QuickTime file from Final Cut. What we discovered was that if we spat it out as a raw TIFF sequence it held quality so the entire film was spat out as TIFF files stills at 25 per second. The difficulty there was making sure we hadn't lost any frames. The bottom line is that I was aware of the fact that that I wouldn't be able to do a full-on grade, because once you start pushing the colours with DV, it doesn't like it. I knew that at very best I would find the common denominator of all

the different settings that we had and try to match everything to that and that would be the look. It wasn't like I try to push it too far one way or the other, it was bringing it back to base.

"The success of the film owes much to what a wonderful a job Digital Pictures have done. Shane's acting and the story and the directing and all that aside, I spent a lot of the time worrying about how this film would look when blown up and as a result we put a lot of money into the soundtrack.

"I have this opinion that the film experience is 70% sound dependent for me. That's not to denigrate the visuals, its just that I see visuals as more "information" and the sound gives you an emotional signature to that information. One need only play different music under the same footage to see what I mean



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“When we realised we needed to blow it up from DVCAM to 35mm film, I looked at my options. There is a system in LA that uses about 800 G4s linked together to upres the footage that we looked at that but it was so expensive we just knew we couldn’t do it.

“So we went to Digital Pictures and what they have been able to come up with is every bit as good as the tests that I’ve seen from that other system. I am so indebted to Digital Pictures, they have allowed the film to live so much longer than if it had been spat straight out from my Final Cut Pro system. When the DVD comes out, compare the deleted scenes, which are straight out of my system, versus the actual film where they passed their wand across it and it’s a big eye opener. I still walk into a cinema today and think by God it looks great. People are assuming it was HD and it certainly wasn’t. The film has a look that is in no way detrimental to the storytelling, in fact the style of story telling and the finished look work beautifully together. It’s why so many people are convinced the film is real and not fictional.” 