



Writing is on the wall for doco maker

Solicitor and part-time film maker Michael Travis tells *Steve Hart* how he got into producing documentaries and why it's hard work cutting a professional career in the movies

Michael Travis probably always had an eye on a movie making career, which is why he did a conjoin law and arts degree at the University of Auckland. While his day job is working as a solicitor, most of his spare time is spent either behind the camera or in front of a computer.

He has been making movies since 2001 and recently returned from a working holiday in London where he shot footage for a documentary about street artists and a psychiatric hospital's rehabilitation art project.

"I have a lot of stuff that I am working on and so am busy doing that right now – pulling it all together," he says. "I followed the street art scene quite a bit in London and have a lot of footage.

"I also did a lot of recording at the Bethlem Royal Hospital in its arts therapy division. So I guess there are two projects on the go right now – I'm pretty full on."

Michael says his movie making often goes ahead of any deal to show it. Like most video producers, his passion keeps his projects alive and if they get a chance to be shown at festivals or on TV then that is a bonus.

"I tend to make videos about things that interest me and hope that eventually someone will pay attention," he says. "In London people from Babelgum.com saw a short I made about street artists and commissioned me to do a longer piece for them. From that I got a few other jobs."

Michael says making a living as a video maker is tough because there are so many

Portraying the afterlife in *Exit Strategy*.
Photo: Warren Prasek

people doing it.

“Not only that but the traditional channels of distribution have changed so much that there is greater access, but at the same time videos lose their value – certainly in what people are willing to pay for content.

“You have to be creative these days in how you generate an income from your video work, and that can include having movies sponsored. You have to think outside the box.

“I have been looking at ways I can make movies full time and still pay my bills, and there are no real easy answers to it. I keep coming back to the old story which is to try and make a feature for not very much money and then get enough money back from a distribution deal to be able to make the next one, and slowly build the business. So I am just lining up for the day when that comes together for me.”

With dSLRs now able to record broadcast

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quality footage and camcorders becoming cheaper and more advanced every six months or so, is that good for people trying to make a serious living from the videomaking industry?

“For the industry, I don’t know. But it has been great for the amateur moviemaker. It has been a great equaliser for people wanting to create quality content,” says Michael.

“The first film I did in 2001 was shot on an old Hi8 analogue camera and there was a complex process in digitising the footage so I could edit the video with my computer.

“The next camera I used was digital but was a single chip model. Then I got a 3CCD Sony and now you can get an HD camera quite cheaply or use a stills camera – you can get some amazing footage out of those.

“DSLR cameras are best for certain kinds of projects such as music videos and documentaries, but if people can find ways to

Michael on set recording a music video for Jo Morris, Brighton, using a tracking rig.



use them then you can really compete with expensive equipment.”

Michael’s first movie, shot with the Hi8 camcorder, was a full length parody of the movie *Aliens*.

“I had some friends who were doing spoof movies at university, I liked what they were doing and wanted to do one myself,” he says.

“I picked a film that I liked and rounded up people I knew who wanted to be involved and had a lot of fun making it. The first cut was 85 minutes.

“It was an odd way to start making videos but then I ended up cutting it into a much shorter version and that won a bunch of prizes at festivals and competitions. Then I was officially hooked. It was a big learning curve though.”

With an early success under his belt Michael set about doing something a bit more serious – this time a short called *The Devil’s Library*, an eight-minute movie based on the story *Dinner with the Devil* by Jesse Reklaw and Amy Luther. It went on to win a bundle of

awards.

“We did something interesting with the sound for this movie,” says Michael. “I had a music producer friend who was always interested in playing around with film soundtracks, he was able to produce a soundtrack that helped create an eerie ambience.

“He did some interesting things because I had quite a lot of jump cuts in the film and he placed sound effects at these places that really add something to the whole movie. It made the movie unsettling for viewers.”

Like most movie makers looking to attract more work Michael has a showreel, but says he doesn’t really know what to do with it.

“I know I should be posting it out to companies, but haven’t got around to doing that yet. Partly because I hear that sending it out is easy, getting people to watch it is the hard part,” he says.

“To have a chance at getting your work watched by someone in the industry really means knocking on their door and sitting with



Graffiti artist Avian Security outside the Brick Lane Gallery, London, for the movie *Free For Wall!*

them while they watch it. Then they can put a face to the name and start a relationship. Otherwise they probably won't even watch them."

However, while in London he was able to hand his showreel to some top directors at a string of one-off seminars at the British Film Institute.

"You can go along, listen to established film directors being interviewed and then the audience gets a chance to ask questions," says Michael. "Some of them flee at the end of the night, but most hang around to meet people."

It was at events such as this that Michael was able to hand his demo reel to people such as Terry Gilliam and Werner Herzog.

"You get a real rush meeting people such as these," says Michael. "You never see them in New Zealand but it is quite easy to find them in London.

"I had these dreams that I'd hand them my showreel and then hear back from them. So far the phone hasn't rung...but you have to be realistic. Who knows if they even watched it. It's an honour just to make contact."

Michael has never done any formal training in movie making. He is totally self taught, and – like most of us – has achieved success with raw talent, unbridled enthusiasm and learning tough lessons from the school of hard knocks.

"I spend a lot of time with the camera, I

think I have a reasonable eye and try to get some novel compositions," he says. "But I have always been a fan of films, hence my conjoined arts and law degree.

"But the film papers were more theory based than practical, I learned how editing developed to become an art form in itself.

"I always had this idea that editing was a really simple process where you just stuck scenes next to each other on the timeline and that was that. But I know now that editing is the real heart of film making. You have this footage and you have the film in your head and when you get to the point of editing it you realise you can make a hundred films out of that footage.

"It has been the editing process that has taught me how to shoot video, particularly with documentaries. When I shoot docs now I make sure to get a lot of coverage so there are a lot more editing options."

Michael says getting experience is the only way to learn, and that means seizing any opportunity to shoot or edit.

"For many years I would never say 'no' to an opportunity to pick up the camera," he says. "So if anyone wanted anything recorded then I'd jump in and do it. The more experience you get the better you can become."

Michael says the hardest part of being a film maker is finding an audience.

Special lighting treatment for lead actress Amellia Kapa in *Lift*.

Improvising a dolly shot for the opening sequence of *Lift*.



"There are people who make amazing films but if you don't go out and get them screened then no one sees them," he says. "There is so much coming through the distribution channels that to stand out can be difficult.

"Babelgum is a good example, they run film contests and get an enormous volume of stuff sent in...so video makers have to find ways to distinguish themselves.

"I think a lot of the people who have been successful in film have been very good self promoters. We all like to think our work will sell itself, but I understand now that there is a lot more to it than that."

To help get his work an audience Michael hired a hall, sold tickets and had a mini film festival where he and his moviemaking friends showed their work to a paying audience of supporters.

"We got some local sponsors, made some adverts to play between our films and that was a really great event, it created a buzz and helped us show our work," he says.

"But even creating a dedicated YouTube channel, getting subscribers and using social networks can do this just as well.

"However, when you get your film screened somewhere then that is a great feeling. Especially if you can walk away with an award or some recognition of your work."

Nevertheless, Michael says when people

watch his work he gets a bit worried, thinking they may not like it or that it isn't good enough. Something that haunts most people in the world of arts and entertainment.

"You have to have a thick skin sometimes," he says. "But people are fairly forgiving, especially other film makers, because they understand how tough it is to make a movie and how much work is really involved.

"And the fact that you are getting off your backside and doing anything is a minor miracle, let alone getting it out and screening it somewhere."

Michael's advice to anyone with an idea for a movie is to go and do it.

"Use any gear you can lay your hands on and start making your movie," he says. "If someone asks you to film their band then go and record it, if someone asks for help to edit their school project then pitch in and help out. Because anything you can do will add to your experience.

"A lot of the top people I met in London said being successful is all about getting yourself out there, getting the practice. So my advice is to push for every opportunity to further your career."



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An actor in one of Michael's movies goes the extra mile in makeup.