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| **Director Darren Ashton’s dazzling new feature – Razzle Dazzle** |
| **Australian director DARREN ASHTON's low-budget feature *Razzle Dazzle* was warmly received at the Berlin International Film Festival in February, and will open across Australia on 15 March - a triumph for a film made for $2 million and shot on HD in less than 25 days. Darren spoke to the AFC's IndiVision Lab Director Megan Simpson Huberman.**   **Did you develop the project with a low budget in mind?**  It was a conscious decision to make *Razzle* as a low-budget film right from the outset. The film was based on a short story by Carolyn Wilson. I sat with Carolyn for a week or so and we developed a 25-page treatment. At all times we had low budget in mind. We kept bringing the story back to key locations - the less you need to move the better. We set over half the movie in a single location, Mr Jonathon's Dance Studio. Once we set the lighting there, Garry [Phillips, DOP] only had to do minor tweaks.   **What were the key decisions that allowed you to make this project - a musical with crowd scenes, dance numbers and kids - within the available budget?**  We had a cast of over 40 and on a lot of days we had 20 actors on set all participating in the scenes. There were two reasons we were able to bring this film in on budget: the production style and 'clever' producing.   *Production style* Right from the treatment stage I had decided on a mocumentary format. I enjoyed making the short film *The Extra* and I knew I could shoot fast and maintain the integrity of the comedy. So when it came to *Razzle* I knew I needed a cast that could play a scene 'live' from the moment 'action' was called until 'cut'. I seldom did camera rehearsals, and although this occasionally drove Garry a bit mad it worked brilliantly. The actors would run with a scene for the first time as we were shooting it. I also had two cameras covering the action at all times. In fact the hardest thing was not to revert to traditional filmmaking coverage, which is tempting when something isn't quite working the way you want it to. Ironically we never used any of the conventional coverage.  As opposed to *Thunderstruck* [Ashton's 2003 feature], I backed off as much as possible from contriving camera and performance. For example, the children *never* read a script or knew what we were doing from moment to moment. When Ben [Miller, actor] tells them to do something in a scene they're really doing it. Although some sections were choreographed, the general interaction of the children with the key cast happens for real. In effect they were directed within a scene by the other cast. When the children had lines I would literally tell them what to say the moment before we would shoot. I did spend a lot of time in rehearsals though, helping them create their characters.   On a practical level I had a brilliant 1st AD, Karan Monkhouse, who ran the set magnificently. Karan knew how we needed to work in order to shoot five or six minutes a day and she also had one of the best onset relationships with children I've ever seen. I also like to surrender to the 1st AD in terms of the practical elements of the production process. On a low-budget film the director doesn't have time and can't afford to worry about where they have to be or what's next.   *Clever producing* Actually, 'clever' might not be the right term. I'm sure Jodi and Andrena [Matterson and Finlay, producers] would call it something else - maybe crazy! Firstly we had a lot of enthusiastic private investors who had an emotional attachment to the film, most of whom were seconded by Andrena, and they provided a network of people that got behind the film. Belief in the project is really important to get the momentum going on a low-budget feature. Another important factor, which is as much a statement of belief in the project as a financial gesture, was that Jodi, Andrena and I reinvested 80 per cent of our modest fees back into the film. This is not simply a grand gesture - it demonstrated to cast and crew that we were committed to the film on all levels. This is especially important when you're asking crew to work for award minimums. It's for the film not for the bank account! We also had a Favoured Nations approach to the cast; all the actors were on a level playing field.   On a practical level, John L Simpson, our associate producer, recruited over 60 interns or volunteers, many of whom worked in very important roles, such as 3rd ADs and PAs, wardrobe assistants and in the camera department. Without that free labour we wouldn't have been able to complete the film. Because we developed the film from treatment through to production as a low-budget film it was always tailored to be made a specific way, so I really never felt I was compromised.  **What was the shooting format?**  We shot HD and it was perfect for the film. Originally we intended to shoot Mini HDV but the post path was unproven and it was too big a risk on a film such as this. I love HD. You have 30 minute tapes and you just roll. HD was also terrific for the way I wanted to play the scenes, where a scene would unfold and we would capture the action documentary-style. It was a really rewarding way to work.  **Let's talk about the actors. What was your rehearsal process and period?**  Firstly, we did a lot of one-on-one rehearsals or sessions. Because we were using interviews in the film I interviewed the actors in character and recorded them on DV. I asked a lot of questions that related to their backstory and their place in the world of the film. We looked at documentaries and people in an interview/doco environment to get an idea of where to pitch the performance tone. We also talked a lot about the characters and the scenes. I also had very experienced adult actors, much more experienced than me, so I listened to what they had to say about their characters or how they felt about a scene. The one mistake I made was that we did too much talking. I should have gotten the cast up on the floor sooner. We had two weeks of rehearsal, which in real terms is about six days and I didn't get the actors into scenes until three or four days out from the shoot. Initially I thought I'd like to go into everything from a fresh perspective, almost unrehearsed, but once we got on the floor a lot of things came out about the dynamics of the core ensemble that helped make the film better. Which is why you rehearse of course!   The children were a different kettle of fish. I gave them character books with a brief explanation on how to use it and a page of briefing notes on their characters. They then filled in their character books the way any actor might fill in the gaps when developing a character. I also gave them identity bracelets with their character names, which they wore for the entire rehearsal and shoot. On set I always referred to them by their character names. As a result I seldom had to direct the children. For example, Leanne, played by Lauren Elton, has a skin condition that requires her to scratch her head. I *never* had to remind her during four weeks of shooting. She developed an attitude toward it by working through her character book and the result was amazing. All the Jazzketeers did the same thing. It pays off, as your shoot runs ten times more smoothly if everyone comes to the set ready to go. I seldom did more than two takes. I also set up sessions for the key cast and their 'children' to spend time together to get to know each other.   **What was your shooting schedule and how did you achieve it?**  We had 20 days of principal photography, of which all but two were 10-hour days. I wasn't allowed a second of overtime. Not because the producers wouldn't let me but because the completion bond guarantor might step in the minute it looked like anything might go off track. That's how close to the wind you sail with a low-budget film. We also had five days of pick-ups or second unit days. This blew out to 15 but Andrena raised additional money to allow us to shoot the extra days!  The main reason we achieved the schedule is good planning and a great attitude. Simple things like a scene that was scripted as night would be changed to a day scene if I thought it didn't matter, and 90 per cent of the time it didn't. There was only one scene that I changed to day that I wish I hadn't. As a result it isn't in the film, so in effect we needn't have shot it. But you don't know that at the time. Two cameras on all days and up to four on the huge performance days was definitely a major factor. I also had an AFC-funded attachment, Myles Conti, who was invaluable. He directed a lot of second unit style pick-ups and set up a lot of stuff for me in advance - he was a lifesaver.   **What were the advantages and disadvantages in the way you worked?**  Advantages were it was fast, fun and unrelenting. Disadvantages were that it was fast and unrelenting. Sometimes you're not sure you've actually gotten a scene and you're moving on. But with a low-budget film there's no turning back, you don't have time to take any prisoners and that can be incredibly exciting.   **Did the choices involved in working low budget inspire you? Would you make a film this way again?** Absolutely. I love the 'just go out and do it' feeling you get from low budget. Even on a film with a big cast and big dance numbers there is a sense of intimacy you get that comes from low budget. Jodi and I are planning another low-budget film at the moment, which is purely based on the experience of *Razzle*, although it won't have as big a cast. No toys, no big set-ups, just a very intimate character-based film.   ***Razzle Dazzle* opened on 15 March, 2007 around Australia on 93 screens, including eight on the AFC's Regional Digital Screen Network.** |

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