

Australia – the movie

Australia's biggest movie to date had the country's postproduction industry buzzing with Baz and chasing the cut. **Stephen Bruel** reports on the epic effort of three local post houses



Supervising sound editor/sound designer and Big Bang Sound Design owner Wayne Pashley

LIKE THE COUNTRY, EVERYTHING

about filmmaker Baz Luhrmann's latest movie – *Australia* – is big. The Au\$150m budget makes it the most expensive movie ever produced in Australia while the cast features a *Who's Who* of Australian actors. Similarly, the number of Sydney-based audio postproduction facilities and staff enlisted, and the range of pro audio equipment used to help the Luhrmann team pull the film together are unprecedented.

As the film's director, it is appropriate that Baz Luhrmann appreciates the role of audio postproduction in the constantly evolving process of movie making: 'The real act of making the movie happens when you bring together all those disparate pieces – the film, how you will use music, the sound, how you will structure it and how you will restructure it,' he says on the *Australia* Facebook site. And restructure they did. Talking to those directly involved in the project, the consensus was pretty clear – the sheer scope of the project coupled with the high energy levels of its director and the way he likes to work resulted in long hours, many hands on deck, and an overall sense of 'chasing the cut' as they worked hard to keep up with the edits that rolled in.

One of these elements, automated dialogue replacement (ADR) was engineered by Soundfirm ADR recordist Andy Wright, whose background is predominantly in post, having worked on *The House of Flying Daggers*, *Somersault* and Mr Luhrmann's *Moulin*

Rouge. In addition, Soundfirm's previous involvement on all of Mr Luhrmann's films to date made the studio a logical choice and gave a sense of what to expect: 'Hugh Jackman was in town for re-shoots so we recorded ADR for a particular scene,' Andy Wright says. 'The next day, they re-shot the whole scene.'

A number of the location voice recordings had technical issues with the quality including background noise from wind machines and props, as well as inappropriate reverb and echo. 'The actors were brought into the studio over a two-month period to re-record their dialogue on a line-by-line basis as assessed by the supervising sound editor [Wayne Pashley],' Mr Wright says.

Getting such big stars as Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman back into the studio is not always easy, given their work and overseas commitments. 'One challenge for us was to record Nicole's ADR from London or Nashville,' Mr Wright continues. 'We used professional-quality ISDN phone lines connected between our studio and Nicole's location to record audio, and also hook video up so the pictures she saw were in sync. The quality was so good that you would think she was in the next room.'

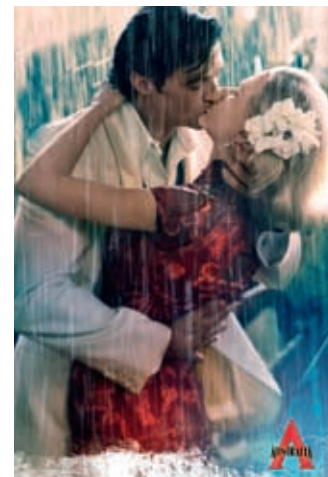
He recorded the ADR using a Neumann KMR-81 microphone into a PreSonus MP20 mic preamplifier. This was then run straight into an Apogee Rosetta 800 for 48kHz/24-bit analogue-to-digital conversion into a Pyramix DAW connected to a Smart AV Post 8 console. Mr Wright

also ran the pictures through a Pyxis system developed by Fairlight, and monitored the sound through JBL speakers. 'The KMR-81 shotgun microphone is fantastic for ADR as it produces warm sounds up close for a crying scene, and has good depth for matching shots further away if an actor is at the back of a room, and matches those used on set,' he says. 'For ADR recording – and, in particular queuing the actors – we find that the Pyramix and Pyxis combination works best. The Smart AV console pretty much controls everything in Pyramix and works brilliantly.'

He applied two ADR recording processes for the film – the sync method and the 'parrot fashion' – dependent upon which method best suited the actor. The sync method involves getting the actor to watch the pictures on the screen and try to get their speech to match as closely as possible to their lips and speech on screen. Mr Wright then used the Pyramix editing functions to manipulate the audio by stretching words and moving syllables for a closer fit. Parrot fashion involves playing back the original audio through headphones and getting the actor to repeat the line straight after hearing it. Pictures are not used, and the actor uses the rhythm of the speech just heard to directly mimic it. 'Hugh has a musical background so was able to tune into the rhythm of his speech so the parrot fashion worked best for him,' Mr Wright says. 'Bryan Brown, on the other hand, prefers the sync method.'



Australia movie promotional poster



Nic and Hugh

Supervising sound editor/sound designer for the film and Big Bang Sound Design owner Wayne Pashley was responsible for the entire soundtrack for *Australia*, including ADR and sound effects. Having worked as a sound effects supervisor on Luhrmann's earlier film *Strictly Ballroom*, and with credits including Lorenzo's *Oil*, *Babe* and *Happy Feet*, he was another wise choice.

For the ADR process Mr Pashley dealt directly with the cast and worked in the room with the performers while Andy Wright did the recording. 'Having assessed both the interior and exterior dialogues, a lot of it was dirty and had to be recreated in the ADR room,' Mr Pashley explains. 'Andy [Wright] did the engineering and I was in a directorial type role with the actors, trying to get the best performance possible.'

Another challenge for Mr Pashley was the indigenous element of the film, and trying to stay true to the regional dialects of the time. 'The language is Mirrawong and there are only about 20 people in the world that can still speak it,' he says. 'We had a lot of help from the Kununurra language centre which provided advisors to help teach the cast how to speak it. Furthermore, David Gulpilil's character, King George, spoke Arnhem, so all of the chanting and indigenous songs had to be re-recorded in Arnhem.'

For sound effects, Mr Pashley went on location in the Kununurra region and recorded horses, cattle, 1940s army trucks and all of the atmospheres and environment sounds that were to be used in the film. For this he used a SoundField B-Format 5.1 surround field microphone and recorded the atmospheres onto a Sound Devices 744T digital four-track recorder.

'I went out into the salt plains or riverbeds, captured these great Australian sounds and brought them back into Pro Tools,' he says. 'Using the surround zone software that comes with the mic, I could process these recordings into whatever format I wanted – stereo, 7.1 and so on – and started to create the sound library.'

In order to make the film sound as authentic as possible, all atmospheres were recorded in the correct geographical regions. Responsible for the Foley as well, Mr Pashley could ensure quality control. 'We did not borrow from sound libraries, and all sounds for this film were all re-recorded, right down to the saddles, whips, guns, clothes and crocodile boots,' he says.

Keeping this authenticity flowing musically was the responsibility of the film's supervising music editor, Simon Leadley. As head engineer and partner at Trackdown Digital, he has worked on *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Master and Commander*, *Happy Feet* and *Moulin Rouge*, and has an impressive CV that also includes recording demos for Australian bands INXS, Midnight Oil, The Saints and The Models in the 1980s. His knowledge and appreciation of Australian music, and music in film, would be an asset on this project. 'My first job was to work with the music supervisor Anton Monsted and Luhrmann and spot the movie in its assembly form,' he recalls. 'This involved looking for places in the film where music would be added – for example, choosing to underscore moments of 'tension' in a particular scene. I would choose an appropriate piece of music from the large film score library we have on hand as a temporary piece. This allowed Baz to create a mini film for

in-house screenings and discussion featuring music.'

Mr Leadley reveals that that they used music old and new at this stage of the process in an attempt to find the 'voice of the movie': 'For example, when there is a scene featuring a whole lot of cattle, there is no point trying to fit a modern piece of music to it as it just won't work. Generally

speaking, the musical language you would associate with those sort of pictures has been etched into our minds through previous films.'

Once Mr Leadley and the rest of the team had decided on where music would be placed, and what type of music this should be, music composer David Hirschfelder was enlisted to write the score. He is one of Australia's leading music

composers for film having worked on *Shine*, *Elizabeth* and *Strictly Ballroom*. 'We set Hirschfelder and his Logic programmer Jason Fernandez up in a room here at Trackdown for six months to compose the music and to make it easy for Luhrmann to have regular input,' Mr Leadley says. 'During this period, I was supplying the latest cuts and audio guides in the correct format, creating click tracks and generally keeping a track of our progress.'

For Mr Leadley – who is used to working in the more orthodox sequential fashion of writing first, then recording, followed by editing, mixing and finally mastering – the scale of the project and the constant new cuts coming in meant a change to his approach. Another challenge was the different formats he had to manage. 'Luhrmann likes to work in a creative and fluid way and this challenges traditional workflows,' Leadley said. 'We had all aspects of the music production process happening at once in an effort to keep up. We were recording orchestras on the sound stage here at Trackdown on Pro Tools, mixing audio at the Sydney Opera House on a Euphonix mixing console and Hirschfelder was working on a Logic system. It was quite an involved process.'

Additionally, Simon Leadley enlisted Shawn Murphy to score and record the orchestra for the film. Mr Murphy had worked previously on *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and with Leadley on *Happy Feet*. He recorded the orchestral parts separately to be as flexible as possible and to keep up with the ongoing edits. 'We recorded separate woodwind, strings, brass and percussion parts,' Mr Leadley says. 'This allowed us to keep separate musical lines going through a scene, for example a brass line, with the option to drop everything else.'



Andrew Mayer (assistant), Nick Breslin (ADR supervisor), Fred Paragano (ADR mixer) and Brian Calhoon (recordingist) at the SSL C300 HD desk at Paragon Studios in the US, working with SSL C300 console on *Australia*



Soundfirm ADR recordingist Andy Wright working on *Australia*



The film's supervising music editor, Trackdown's Simon Leadley

Due to the scope of the project, Trackdown was also involved in ADR recordings. Similar to Soundfirm, Trackdown needed to record Nicole Kidman from Paragon Studios near Nashville in the US and opted to use Source-Connect. 'A cheaper option than ISDN lines, Source-Connect records real-time studio quality audio using existing T1, DSL or cable,' Mr Leadley says.

Managing and backing up such a huge amount of digital data (60Gb of recorded material was produced daily), identifying and storing the latest cuts and communicating this to the team presented yet another challenge. 'We had large Raid drives and used FireWire 800 for transferring and storing data in the minimum time possible,' says Mr Leadley. 'Google Docs also allowed the three different teams in three different locations to keep their data synchronised via a spreadsheet system.'

While the equipment was important, it was the people involved and the talent they brought that was the most important element of the film. 'I am constantly amazed by what we can achieve when we have our backs up against the wall, but a great team at

Trackdown to support me was an imperative,' Mr Leadley enthuses. 'I can't stress how important the people are in a venture such as this. It is all too often that we focus on the equipment, but for me the equipment does nothing without someone driving it and those people are the most essential ingredient.'

Given Baz Luhrmann's fluid and creative workflow and the challenges this presents, the scope of such a project and with real deadlines, it is hard to disagree with these sentiments. The postproduction for the film was completed on 17 November 2008, the day before the world premiere in selected locations around Australia.

Australia not only captures the spirit of this huge land and its people, but also showcases the world-class talent in the local film and audio postproduction industry.

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