

The Waiting game

Extending the growing ties between the film production communities in Australia and India, *The Waiting City* drew on the best of both. **Stephen Bruel** reports



Location recordist Paul Brincat working on *The Waiting City*

THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN FEATURE FILM

to be entirely shot in India is set for release in early 2010. *The Waiting City*, starring Radha Mitchell (*Finding Neverland*, *Pitch Black*) and Joel Edgerton (*Star Wars: Episode II and III*), is a mystical-infused love story set against the intoxicating, epic backdrop of Kolkata (Calcutta), India. Incorporating location and music recording in India, with the music production completed and the final film mix done in Sydney, this is a truly international film.

According to writer/director Claire McCarthy (*Sisters*, *Cross Life*), filming in India was an emotional experience: 'It's impossible not to be affected by this place and, certainly, the characters in *The Waiting City* are totally transformed by the people here and their powerful homeland,' she says.

With a long-standing artistic collaboration with McCarthy that stretches back many years, composer Michael Yezerski relished the challenge of producing a score that was appropriate for both cultures depicted in the film. Apart from the score, it also features the songs of the poet Tagore as well as traditional prayers and ragas. 'It is a Western film score (which reflects the outsider perspective of the protagonists) that begins to absorb elements of Bengali music as the film progresses (in line with the characters' acceptance of the place),' Mr Yezerski observes. 'It was very important to Claire and myself that we featured and celebrated the musical traditions of Kolkata.'

As is the case in so many independent films, Mr Yezerski saw his role expand to undertake all the music recording and pre-mixing. He then sent stereo stems to Christo Curtis (*Mao's Last Dancer*, *Daybreakers*), one of Australia's premier music mixers, for the 5.1 music mix. 'While they were shooting the film on the fourth



Making music – Tajdar Junaid (music advisor, instrumentalist), Yezerski (composer), Gholam Fakir (singer), Sandip Samaddar (singer, multi-instrumentalist)

floor of the hotel in Kolkata, I was in my hotel room on the third floor jamming around with local musicians and literally turned my room into a recording studio,' he says. 'Working with local artists Ruhaniyat [Taj Junaid, Sandip Samaddar and Satyaki Banerjee who played traditional West Bengali instruments such as the *khomok*, *aktara* and *dotara*], I recorded a repertoire of Bengali folk songs as well as some separate percussion and string elements on my laptop.'

Mr Yezerski's hotel room recording studio consisted of a 15-inch Mac Pro running Logic, Ableton Live and Sibelius, an Apogee duet and a couple of microphones. 'I've always liked Apogee converters and bought a duet as soon as it arrived in the marketplace,' he explains. 'For me, this was the perfect way to capture the beautiful, raw performances of the musicians in a less than perfect recording environment. Kolkata is one of the loudest cities in the world and we did not have the means to hire large studios on this project.'

The musical elements recorded in Kolkata consisted of traditional *dotara* (closest to a mandolin) and *khomok* (a string drum) patterns, which he was then able to fuse with new motifs and themes that he was writing. 'It was vital not to be exploitative in any way so the

elements I recorded in Kolkata were not musically substantiative, that is I did not want to go in and steal melodies and/or songs and pass them off as my own,' he says. 'Rather, what I was collecting was a series of sounds and musical elements that would hopefully pique the audiences' interest when they jumped out of the score.'

When it came time to score the film a few months later at Nylon Studios in Sydney, Mr Yezerski was able to take several of these separate musical elements and fuse

them into the score. Furthermore, two of the traditional songs that he recorded on location were actually used in their entirety in the film – 'Ekla Cholo Re' and 'Ek Din Bhaube Elen Mohammed', both performed by Ruhaniyat. 'I am fortunate enough to have access to some of the best string players in Australia so I felt confident enough to write for them in some slightly unusual ways – at least in the world of film music,' he says. 'This included applying Indian techniques of plucking and bending strings to the Western notation as well as alternative tunings.'

Mr Yezerski's set-up at Nylon Studios consists of a multi-core Mac Pro running Logic, Ableton Live (slaved to Logic) and Sibelius, with various hard and soft synthesizers and a collection of favoured plug-ins from Universal Audio (UAD), Neve, Camel Audio, Ohm Force and Logic. 'I love the UAD plug-ins as the warmth and punch that they can deliver is perfect for a film score (where the musical layering can be minimal and each sound should really shine through). I particularly like the UAD transient designer and the Neve selection. You can also achieve some pretty interesting musical effects right out of the box with Logic software and plug-ins.'

He used AKG C414 large-

diaphragm condenser and 451 small-diaphragm condenser microphones to record most of the instruments and vocals on this film. 'The 414's sound great on everything and the 451 works particularly well on plucked instruments— it sounds great on acoustic guitars.'

For Mr Yezerski the opportunity to visit and work with artists in Kolkata was an amazing experience that he will cherish. 'It opened my eyes both as a composer and as a human being,' he reflects. 'The musicians were humble and extraordinary, from the sublime voice of Gholam Fakir to the artistry, generosity, knowledge and enthusiasm of Ruhaniyat, I encountered an amazing pool of talent that deserves our attention.'

Supervising sound editor Andrew Plain from Huzzah Sound (*Knowing*, *Death Defying Acts* and *Jindabyne*) was responsible for the dialogue and participated equally in the sound design with the other editors, William Ward (effects) and Cameron Grant (atmospheres). Huzzah was given a six-week edit and four-week mix schedule to complete the audio production.

For Mr Plain, the task of picking through the different location recording tracks and piecing together the most audible parts of each was challenging. The team spent a good deal of effort cleaning up the dialogue tracks, relying heavily on the iZotope RX audio restoration plug-in. 'Virtually all the location recording involved multitrack recording (the sound recordist used a boom microphone and several radio microphones) for every scene as the filmmakers wanted an authentic feel for Kolkata. Therefore there was minimal crowd control, allowing the actors to blend into the real street life, resulting in a lot of noise in the location sound recordings and often



Satyaki Banerjee being recorded in a hotel in Kolkata

the sync dialogue was hard to understand.'

Another challenge was recording the automated dialogue replacement (ADR). As the main film stars were in the US, and because of the need for Bengali language, any crowd work would have to be done in Kolkata. 'The director, Claire McCarthy, travelled to the US and recorded Joel Edgerton at PMI Studios in Pittsburgh, and Radha Mitchell and Samrat Chakrabarti at Buzzy's Recording in Los Angeles,' he says. 'The crowds and local Kolkata actors were recorded in Kolkata by Kshitij Rajkumar under the supervision of Tess Joseph who had worked on the shoot. The large amount of local crowd ADR that they collected greatly enhanced the energy and flavour of India that is so important to the film.'

For the effects and atmospheres, the editors tracked material from around the world that had been recorded in Kolkata to ensure the film's authenticity. These sounds supplemented the extensive wild location tracks recorded by the film's location recordist Paul Brincat (*Star Wars II/III*, *Mission Impossible II* and *Superman Returns*) from Sydney-based Salty Dog Sound.



Re-recording mixer Peter Purcell and Deluxe StageOne Sound's Sam Hayward

As production sound mixer on location, Mr Brincat records actors dialogue, stereo atmospheres and effects tracks on portable equipment. This involves mixing boom and radio microphones. Brincat decided to make his kit entirely mobile (off the shoulder) due to the amount of location moves and having to work within the city streets. He used his Sound Devices recording set-up – including a 744T hard drive four-track recorder, 422 four-channel mixer and a three-channel mixer all in a portabrace bag. Mr Brincat also chose a Lectrosonic radio microphone system involving a six-way coupler receiver and 411 hybrid transmitters. For microphones, Brincat opted for Sanken Cos11 lapels, and Sennheiser MKH60 and MKH 50 for boom and dialogue. 'The Lectrosonic radio system has great reliability – which is something that is relied on in the field,' he reports. 'Also reliable is the nicely compact and light Sound Devices recorder and the Sennheiser microphones. Reliability is the key.'

After editing was completed, re-recording mixer Peter Purcell (*Australia, Happy Feet, Brides of Christ*) became involved. It was his responsibility to take all the edited and composed sound components including dialogue, FX, atmospheres, Foley and music, and mix these together, working closely with the director and sound supervisor/designer to produce a theatrical discrete 5.1 final mix. 'I completed the pre-dubbing of dialogue, FX, backgrounds and Foley stems on a Digidesign Control 24 using a Pro Tools HD system at Huzzah Sound, saving mixes completely in automation and taking these (along with a heap of hard drives and files) into Deluxe StageOne Sound for the final mix,' he says. 'It is unbelievable what we can now achieve on these smaller rigs in smaller rooms, though you have to be careful, mix very wide stems and have a decent monitoring system and studio to mix in.'

Mr Purcell undertook the final mix at Sydney-based Deluxe StageOne Sound, along with Sam Hayward (Deluxe staff re-recording mixer on for the final), and Glenn Butler, the re-recording engineer who maintained the room and equipment. And what an impressive room it is...

At the centrepiece of this Dolby Premier certified main stage sits a 72-fader dual-mixer configured Neve DFC Gemini Digital Console with 410 input channels, Encore Plus Automation v5.1, and with the option of 48kHz or 96kHz operation with real-time sample rate conversion. This console is the largest and most advanced in Australia, and controls six Pro Tools HD3 systems on the stage for record and replay/editing, allowing over 1,500 Pro Tools tracks



StageOne Sound

feeding into 352 discrete outputs on playback systems for dialogue, music, FX, Foley and backgrounds and up to 96 record inputs. For video it has HD graded MJPEG-A QuickTime supplied by EFilm ingested and playing off a Pyxis HD NLV, projecting onto a 10.1m x 4.2m THX Ultra Certified MicroPerf X2 Screen (no welds) through a DCI compliant 2K Barco DP100 digital projector.

'The DFC was straightforward to get up and start mixing on – a real console that sounds superb. The automation is seamless and solid, the EQ and dynamics absolutely right, great metering, excellent desk architecture with nice stem assignment and pre-dub master fader solutions, no downtime,' Mr Purcell says. 'Along with the six HD Pro Tools systems, this is a great combination and it would have been difficult to finish this mix on such a tight schedule without the large number of discrete inputs available on the Neve.'

For Mr Purcell, the success of the final mix is not down to technology alone. Working on *The Waiting City* gave him the privilege of working with an inspired and experienced sound crew that led to the high results achieved. 'Without well recorded, cut and delivered tracks, it does not matter what the console, outboard or plug-ins are, as you will not get the opportunity to mix good sound and tell good stories,' he opines. 'With this all in place the equipment and technology can then allow you to find and use the right solutions. With the range and affordability of both outboard gear and plug-ins these days, it is easy to get wrapped up in a mess of plugged in processing.'

The plug-ins he used on this project included the iZotope RX noise reduction plug-in that '... worked miracles and improved the transparency, reduced colouration and minimised artefacts that working with these types of processors typically cloud the audio with'.

He also used a Lexicon 960L multichannel digital effects system, as it is 'nice to work with, has an easy interface, great delays, it's good on dialogue and exteriors and indispensable for source music and getting it around the room in 5.1'.

theatrical release is highly technical and requires critical standards and disciplines that must be respected by using the right people, rooms, and providing adequate budgets. 'Of course you need a room and monitoring that you can understand and trust and Deluxe StageOne Sound has built a beautiful sounding stage,' Purcell said. 'With film monitoring that has to be heard to be believed, it means that what you are listening to truly represents the work put in and we can trust the result.'

The Waiting City may portray Australian actors embracing Indian culture on the big screen, but behind the scenes the audio production crew, particularly the film's composer, were just as mesmerised. The film further establishes the growing relationship between Australia and India's film production communities – *An Indian Summer* and *Salaam Namaste* being other recent examples – working together, respecting and supporting

each other as they tour each other's backyards to produce films.

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