



Anatomy of a Spot

Writer-director Dmitry Tolonen recalls the process for 'His Favourite Opera,' a one man crew commercial produced for the Brisbane-based Anywhere Festival.



Portfolio Magazine: perhaps you could introduce yourself and take us through your process for this spot?

DT: Sure thing. I'm Dmitry Tolonen, a writer-director - although I work on whatever I need to get a job done. My friend Paul Osuch, with whom I'd already worked in London, had created this fantastic new theatre festival concept in Brisbane and I planned to make a set of commercials for it.

The original idea was to combine the then popular 'flash mob' performances with an introvert character's private passion for singing. Also, back then, we were seeing some xenophobic trends emerging around the world, so I wanted to add a subliminal theme of not being so afraid of strangers in public places.



PM: Was this sparked by anything specific?

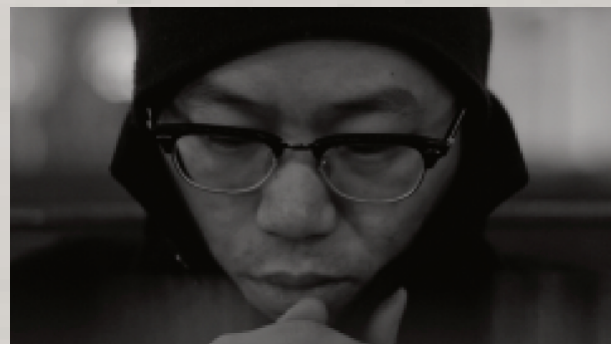
DT: No, but I think it's often good to subvert our dramatic expectations and provide empathy as a behavioural 'out' for characters. I conceived of this character, possibly a foreigner, in a church or shopping centre who looks or acts suspiciously to us and our female protagonist.

Instead of a terrorist or something, he turns out to be a shy businessman at a turning point in his sad professional life and it's his suppressed joy of operatic song which provides the emotional release needed to make changes in his life. Who says art can't heal - it's a kind of one-man private flash mob!

PM: How was the shoot and working with the actors?

DT: Producing this spot was pretty seamless. After scouting and tests, we managed to get St. John's Church in Helsinki for free for the day and the authorities were very supportive, based on my description and storyboards.

Then, happily, I got to cast the very talented Manuela Bosco and Bach Co Tran. They were great - really supportive as I set up each shot. Co himself trained as a director and was able to man the camera for a shot I was in (another actor had to cancel two days earlier so I stepped in). Manuela, an Olympic athlete who trained as an actor in Italy, was very gracious as I ran through the invisible VFX and sounds she needed to react to.



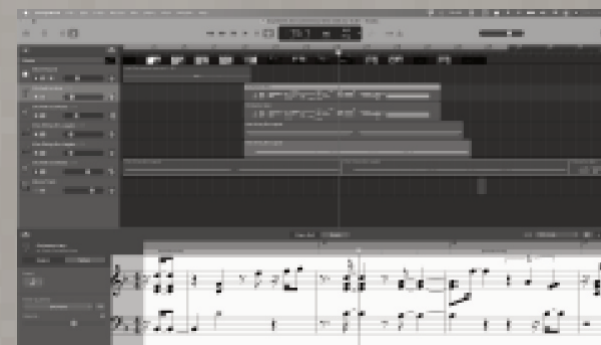
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DT: The shoot, including all visual effects, was all planned out, scheduled and storyboarded. The main visual effects involved using stock or shot footage of doves, which were to burst out of the businessman's chest as a visual metaphor of his joy. Doves - yes I know - they're a staple of such scenes, but I hadn't seen them done quite this explosively. The burst is quite sudden, almost like the Alien - or Mars Attacks! (laughs)

PM: Was it a lot of work?

DT: Not too much - mainly, it was about achieving the right pacing and feel to match the camera footage. So, like a magic trick, I did it in three quick cuts leading to the wide at the end. I composited in the colour bird footage, made it monochrome,



added grain to match the feel of the actor's footage, warped the birds from two angles and added a fake digital rack focus.

The spot was shot on a Canon DSLR and primes back in the day so I had to do a test for how its monochrome filters looked like with the colours in the church. Also, I hadn't done anything in slow motion, so I wanted to test that for the pacing of the edit.

Like everything else, the sound and music were hand-crafted. Foley was done at an empty car park and by the pier in Porvoo and the Handel piece was recorded simply in Garageband, trying to get it right, but also to sound 'a bit off.' I like little human touches and imperfections like that. The music is from a Handel opera, Rinaldo, which though popular when it premiered



caused a bit of a stir for some critics, who didn't like to hear a foreign language on an English stage, so it connected with our themes of live music and xenophobia in a light way. These are just fun hidden links - there's even a superficial Freudian id-ego-superego progression between the characters linked to the fear of the unknown in society, which is resolved positively!

PM: How was it received?

DT: By all accounts, the campaign and spots went very well and attracted a lot of audience for the season. 'Opera' ran all over Brisbane during the Anywhere Festival, from television, the festival site and social media to public places - it was even on the ferry in brisbane!