

Triumph over the Hitchcock hoodoo, or just plain bad luck

Factual producer wins praise for suspense film on a shoestring

by Claire Barrett

When William Mager was awarded £2000 from the Hitchcock Production Fund to make a short film, he didn't realise what he had unleashed.

With just three days to shoot *Stiletto* – a 15 minute darkly comic thriller that pays homage to the master of suspense – the *Ghost of Hitchcock* played a mischievous cameo role.

'The night before the shoot, my first assistant director was hit by a car,' explains Mager, a producer/director in BBC factual. 'The star, Beth

Winslet, was ill with flu and sinus infections, and when we did start shooting her first dialogue scene, a council truck pulled up outside the café in Balham where *Stiletto* was being filmed and started power blasting the tarmac for the rest of the afternoon, rendering all the sound unusable.'

Somehow, though, the team,

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that included a worthy 11th hour replacement AD with credits on *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Superman* to his name, shook off the jinx. The resulting film was premiered this month at the National Film Theatre as part of the Film London shorts event and has now been submitted for the international festival circuit.

'Having just seen it on the big screen with a live music score, beautiful cinematography and so-so direction, it was definitely worthwhile,' judges Mager, who has spent

his evenings and weekends for the last six months crafting the piece.

While cast and crew gave up their time for nothing, a more unlikely hero came in the form of David Blunkett who, when the project was running short of cash, stumped up a £2000 interest free loan to enable its completion.

A former *Watchdog* AP and *See*

Hear producer, Mager's film making talent hasn't gone unnoticed. The director, who was born profoundly deaf, won the Rising Star award from the Chicago Institute of the Moving Image for his 2002 short film, *Waterfront* (a spoof on the famous car scene in Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* using disabled actors) while his 2004 short, *Grandad*, was screened on BBC Two as part of its Christmas season.

Now Mager's been accepted for one of four places on the BBC's drama directing course, of which Ridley Scott, John Boorman and Jon Amiel are graduates.

He regards his deafness as no hindrance to commanding a set. 'I have to be clear who I need to speak to, be it the DoP, first AD, producer or actors,' says Mager, who relies on face to face speech and lipreading. 'One of the *Stiletto* actors said they enjoyed working that way. It made them feel a bit more valued and part of the process than hearing someone shout 'Do it better' at them from the darkness.'



Bit of a Hitch: William Mager's short film is the latest success for the talented director