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Mike Valentine

*Underwater
Cinematographer*

You wonder, sometimes, how things link up. For example, how is a scuba diving suit connected to the likes of household names such as *Dr Who*, *Casino Royale*, *Trainspotting*, *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, *Basic Instinct II*, *Atonement* and the latest Ridley Scott/Russell Crowe epic, *Robin Hood*? Whilst on paper there’s not an obvious association, I know I’ll find the answer waiting for me in a small Chelsea café. A large gregarious Welshman, fizzing with energy, is talking in an animated fashion on a mobile. He is the renowned and much respected underwater cinematographer, Mike Valentine.

Interview by Roz Lunn
Photos courtesy of Mike Valentine

It’s been more than 20 years since film director, Nicolas Roeg, gave Mike Valentine his first break filming Oliver Reed and Amanda Donohoe in *Castaway*. “I was in the Seychelles for almost two months, shooting and directing all the underwater sequences from a script that contained only two lines of description. The result was more than six minutes of screen time, something I still feel lucky to have achieved at that time” Valentine grinned. This achievement was remarkable because Valentine had just given up his “safe” day job as a senior sound technician with the BBC to work as a freelance underwater cameraman.

“I found it ironic that my first professional job was in the Seychelles, because this was where I first experienced scuba. In 1977, during a holiday there, I noticed a sign saying ‘Visit the Underwater World

for US\$20’. It was the best 20 bucks I have ever spent. I was instantly hooked. So, as soon as I got back to the UK, I joined the United London Hospital Diving Group—a local BSAC (British Sub Aqua Club)—and learnt to dive. The thing with diving is that it can really bite you, and I soon discovered I wanted to share this new world with as many people as possible. The obvious answer for me was to start making underwater films, so I stole a friend’s camera for a couple of weeks, one which had been used by Cousteau on some of his underwater documentaries, and off I went.”

Eventually, armed with *Silent World*, Valentine knocked on the door of BBC Acquisitions and showed them his 6.5 minute Red Sea mini epic. After shooting another ten films, he was given an offer he couldn’t refuse, to take his underwater expertise to the Seychelles to work on *Castaway*.

“Diving is an incredible sport, and



profile

something that I dearly love. When it comes to work, the diving I do is completely different. I've often noticed that recreational divers think that they can get into the film or television industry because they dive. It's not quite that simple.

"Diving is just the means of getting to work. I dive whilst other people catch a train. It's what

you do when you get to work that counts. In this day and age, it's never been easier for someone to pick up a video camera and shoot underwater and call themselves a director of photography or a camera operator," said Valentine. (A director of photography, or cinematographer, is the chief of the camera and lighting crews on a film, and therefore

responsible for achieving the artistic and technical decisions related to the image).

What matters

"At the end of the day, whilst you can use technology to help achieve an improbable shot, the one thing you can't buy, skip or fast forward, is experience. This is such an important thing, and

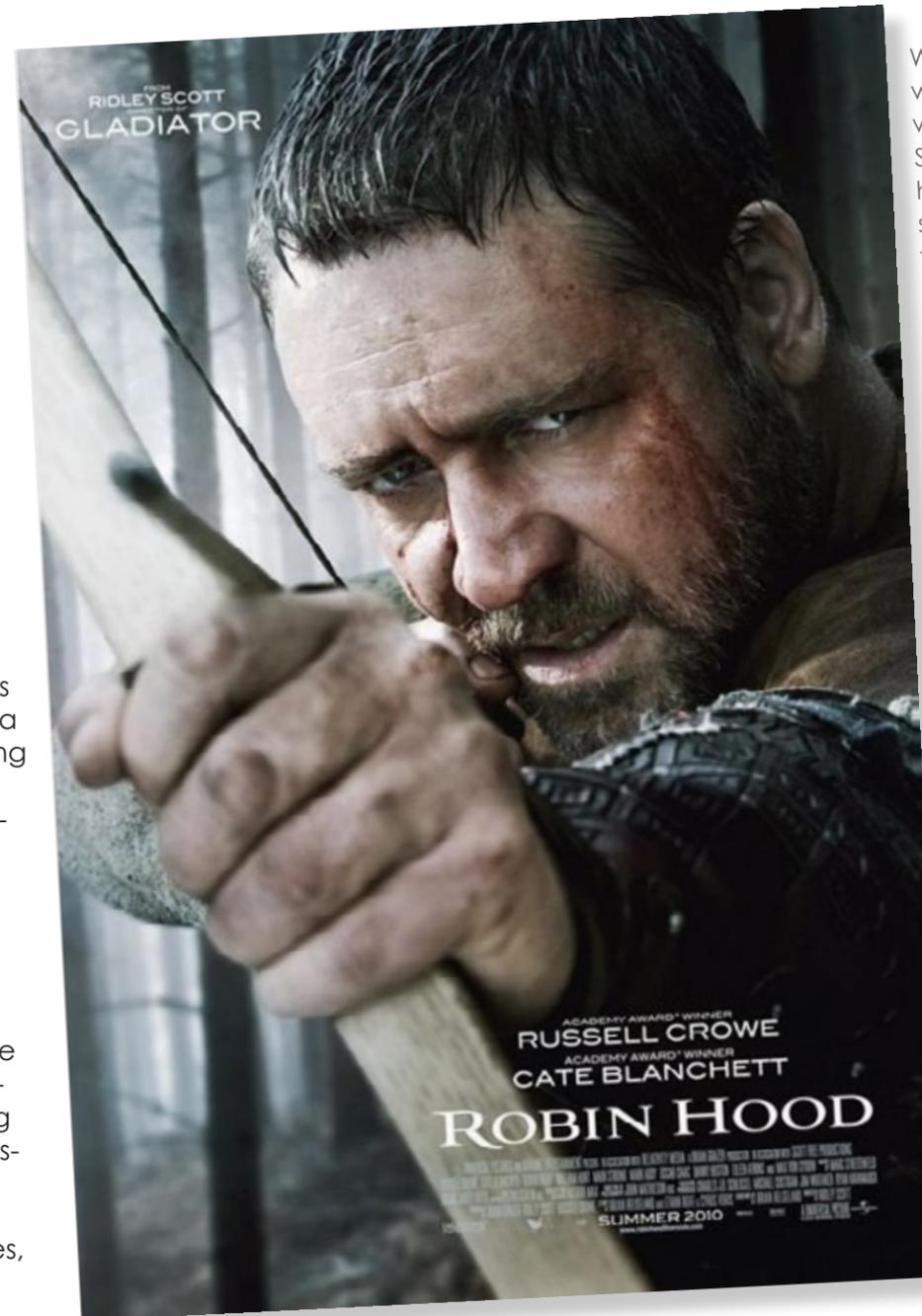
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good production teams know and appreciate that in the long run—having experienced personnel will save them money. It's not uncommon for me to have a meeting with the producer during pre-production and for them to remark that, "We've storyboarded the sequence, but we don't know how to shoot it, and we don't think it will work.

"Therefore, experience is an invaluable tool in my job. I not only have to work out how we will physically achieve the image desired, I have other major considerations, too, such as ensuring we stay within budget and timescales, logistics, and most importantly, actor and crew safety. After working on over 80 features, I can still say that every day we go to work is still fun, because I feel that we are still unlocking the door of the underwater world and sharing its beauty with as many people as possible," said Valentine.

"We"

"I say 'we' and I do mean, We. I could not achieve what I do on my own. I am part of a very strong team, and it's the only way we could do what we do successfully. You've watched us work, Roz, and observed that not all of our team scuba dives. Instead, we're split between top-



We're now working with Ridley Scott on his version of the Robin Hood story starring Russell Crowe



side and underwater. As you know, on the surface is Françoise, the underwater co-ordinator. Her job is mentally stressful, as she has to deliver the shot list. This means that she will talk through and rehearse every single shot with the whole crew before it happens—the topside crew, me, the artist(s),

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the cable wrangler and the safety divers. It's imperative for a safe and successful shoot that everyone is relaxed, understands, and is happy, mentally and physically, with what is about to take place. When you look back at some of the more complicated sequences we've filmed, such as Daniel Craig and





Eva Green in the lift, which fills with water as the Venetian house sinks in *Casino Royale*, you can see why having a strong underwater co-ordinator is key.

"Sat alongside Françoise is the first assistant cameraman/focus puller, and next to him, the second assistant cameraman/clapper loader. And again, they are also crucial personnel. When you consider that the resulting footage will be blown up many times to become an enormous

image on a cinema screen, you can understand why so many people are involved in the camera department. Effectively, I point and shoot the image, whilst the first assistant cameraman ensures that the image is always sharp by remotely controlling the lens focus. Can you imagine if it's a tiny bit out of focus on a monitor, just how ghastly it will look on a huge screen at the Odeon Leicester Square? Then the second assistant camera-



Two of the 80 films on which Valentine has worked (left). Valentine in action on set (below)

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man is responsible for loading the film in the magazine, noting down what lenses were used, how many takes, etc, whilst working to the instruction of the first assistant cameraman. And then, the camera itself costs several thousand pounds, so you need both the first assistant cameraman and the second assistant cameraman to work together closely and ensure that all runs smoothly topside,

and that the housing is well-sealed, so that it does not flood.

"Meanwhile, underwater, I have a safety/cable wrangler diver with me monitoring my air and ensuring that I don't get tied up in cable, whilst every actor involved in the sequence has their own personal safety diver. Hence, you can see why I say 'we'. We've a solid team ethic where everyone understands and respects each other's position, and we all watch each other's backs," said Valentine.

Long days

"The film industry has traditionally long days, so that you get the most of the light. Consequently, a typical day for us will be to arrive at the

Mike Valentine

studio, or on location, at 7:30 am, in time for breakfast. Prep starts at 8:00 am, and we are in the water by 9:00 am. Four hours later, we will climb out for lunch. Then, at 2:00 pm, we are back in the water until 6 or 7:00 pm. So, diving for a living is not only mentally demanding, it's physically demanding, too," said Valentine.

Believe me, the producer doesn't come around to ask if the dive team and I are warm enough.

Shooting Robin Hood

"We're now working with Ridley Scott on his version of the *Robin Hood* story starring Russell Crowe. Obviously, at my age, I want to be as warm as possible, so decent suits and

thermal underwear are high on the list for my team and I. When you are working on a big budget feature, believe me,





Mike Valentine hangs out with a few extras on the movie set

confidence. Normally, the artists we work with have very little experience, so we need to train them for the shoot. A good example of this was Keira Knightley and *Atonement*. In one of the sequences we filmed, she had to hang in front of a blue screen for about four hours. Although she was a bit nervous at the beginning to be underwa-

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ter, the temperature really built her confidence, and she relaxed, which made for a successful shoot for all. "Instilling confidence and trust in an artist is vital. We were brought in to shoot a complicated sequence with Nicole Kidman in *The Hours*. The idea was that her head was stuck inside a tree root, and of course, her hair was terribly tangled up. We got her 'comfortable' and then added Fuller's Earth to the water until we had about three feet of visibility. She then held her breath for 15 seconds, as I slowly tracked the camera into her face. The result was amazing. At first, you see nothing. Then, it's like a painting revealing layers, and finally, you see Nicole 'dead' underwater. "She climbed out after the take and

our job properly. We'd put an actor into a very challenging and potentially dangerous situation, and very safely achieved a realistic shot that the audience truly believed and embraced.

"I really get a kick out of achieving a shot where the audience never even considers any of the problems associated in getting it," said Valentine. ■

the producer doesn't come around to ask if the dive team and I are warm enough—it just doesn't happen. So, we all need to be responsible for our own hydration, safety, fitness and stamina. None of us can just climb out of the water after an hour, because we've had enough, or we're cold, and it's not uncommon for us to be in the water for eight hours. You see, we're in the water longer than anyone else concerned with the feature. We're first in because we need to get the shot lined up. After that, we're filming the actors. Then, in between acting takes, we could also be filming anything from model ships to explosions and checking how shots look. As a result, we're always the last out of the water as well. Getting cold is not an option.

"I guess part of being the most effective 'we' also means having the best and latest equipment (in test) at our disposal. Consequently, we don't dive

any old piece of equipment. Having the right kit, which we know will consistently perform—so we can forget about it and get on with our job—is important to us," said Valentine.

Warm water

"It does make a change to film outdoors, because most of the filming I do these days is at Pinewood at the purpose built underwater stage. Ironically, this tank brings its own set of problems, because this time, we're working in very warm water of approximately 30°C/90°F. When you are filming babies through to Sharon Stone, keeping them at 30°C keeps them confident to work underwater," said Valentine.

Instilling confidence

It's funny, temperature not only has an impact on breathing rates, dexterity and one's ability to think and act effectively, it also greatly influences

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