



# THE OPEN ROAD

XAVIER SAMUEL IS BUILDING AN IMPRESSIVE CATALOGUE OF POPULAR WORK, WITH **ROAD TRAIN** SET TO BE HIS LATEST BIG SCREEN EXTRAVAGANZA. BRENDAN SWIFT TALKS TO THE ACTOR AND THE TEAM BEHIND THE AUSSIE HORROR FILM AIMED SQUARELY AT THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET.



XAVIER SAMUEL (LEFT AND ABOVE) WITH SOPHIE LOWE

IT'S A BLAZING hot day in the middle of the South Australian outback and Xavier Samuel is not drinking his own urine. It just looks that way.

"I'm not that much of a method actor unfortunately," Samuel tells *INSIDEFILM* from Germany where he's recording dialogue for his latest film *Anonymous*.

It's a decision that David Argue – who also stars in supernatural thriller *Road Train* – was also grateful for when the 'apple juice' was thrown squarely into his face during a pivotal scene.

"It was a big discussion – we talked about it in pre-production for weeks," Samuel says.

It has been a big year for the young Australian actor in more ways than one. He's trained an army of vampires, been tortured by a high school geek and battled a killer truck – all in the name of art.

While this month's *Road Train* and next month's release of the

much-delayed *The Loved Ones* combine the grotesque with the humorous, it has been *Eclipse* – the third instalment in the *Twilight* vampire series – that has catapulted Samuel into the realms of Hollywood.

"I was back in Sydney and I flew to Vancouver which is where the director was, David Slade, and I flew there on a 'maybe' with me and four other guys and then I kind of had enough time to rush back home, get some clothes from Sydney, then start shooting in Vancouver – it was really, really quick.

"It's been a bit of a whirlwind but I'm trying to keep sane.

"It is a bigger experience than being on most Australian films but it's not really that different ... there just seems to be a bit more time and the camp fire is a lot bigger than it usually is."

*Road Train* – in which Samuel is pursued by a killer truck alongside Sophie Lowe, Bob Morley and Georgina Haig – is both like and unlike an Australian film.

Facing the same budgetary constraints that plague the local industry, the film was made on a shoestring budget of just \$2.2 million in South Australia's Flinders Ranges.

But its larger-than-life storyline, sweeping cinematography and pulsating score places it squarely amongst the teen-aimed horror films that dominate the US market.

It was first-time feature director Dean Francis who won over Samuel.

"He was really enthusiastic and he was talking about Dante and all this heavy stuff," Samuel says. "I thought this guy's really cool.

"The story is kind of absurd in a way: it's a killer truck terrorises a bunch of young kids who go camping. Knowing there was a comic element involved and that it didn't take itself too seriously was a really big thing ... and you get to work with really young talented actors as well."

The film draws on a long lineage of road films: Steven Spielberg's *Duel*,

Richard Franklin's *Road Games* and John Carpenter's *Christine*. It also eschews the type of *cinéma vérité* used in most other Australian horror films such as *Wolf Creek*.

"Cinematically, it presented a great opportunity to create a distinctive visual style which was still very much part of that genre," Francis says.

"I think there was a lot of mystery in the script. I saw a lot of David Lynch references and that sort of stuff to create a sense of unknowing and perpetual sense of malevolence throughout the story – I think that's a really interesting cinematic world to play with."

Francis – along with star Sophie Lowe – also lent his vocal abilities to the intricate soundscape created by Rafael May, which pulsates throughout the film's taut 87 minutes.

The "junky truckie music" is just part of a wave of sounds that don't stop once they begin, adding to the tension. "It's the Deep South but the Deep South of where?" May asks.



INSIDE THE KILLER ROAD TRAIN



IC FILMS' WARREN LYNCH.



ROAD TRAIN DIRECTOR DEAN FRANCIS.



## The Mechanics

**Budget:** \$2.2 million  
**Investors:** Screen Australia, SAFC, Screen NSW, private investors, Fulcrum Media Finance  
**Location:** Filmed in SA, Flinders Ranges  
**Cameras:** Red One supplied by Panavision  
**HD Avid Edit Facilities/ Digital Assembly/Grading:** IC Films  
**Music:** Rafael May Studios  
**Sound Post-Production:** Soundfirm Sydney  
**Travel Services:** Stage & Screen Travel

Francis worked closely with cinematographer Carl Robertson ACS, who shot the film on Red cameras supplied by Panavision. IC Films managed the workflow and also completed the grade, bringing out the rich colours and picturesque landscapes of the Flinders Ranges.

"I probably spent a fair bit of time really getting the blue skies and red dirt to do its thing but it was a nice experience," IC Films' digital colourist Warren Lynch says.

For producer Michael Robertson, the film represents the latest in a growing list of genre projects he is bringing to the market.

Unlike his first two writer-director driven features – crocodile thriller *Black Water* and shark attack film *The Reef* (to be released early next year) – the supernatural thriller was originally conceived by the producer.

First time Australian feature film screenwriter Clive Hopkins' (*The Bill*) original treatment fleshed out the idea and, with first time director Francis on board, the project was able to qualify for the (former) Film Finance Corporation's IndiVision funding.

While the film is stylistically at odds with both *Black Water* and *The Reef*, all three films share much in common: a small cast, as well as a tight shooting schedule and budget, ensuring the projects have every chance of making a profit.

"Australia is a scary place and that is what we're playing on in all three films," Robertson says.

"The real market for these films is overseas and Australia is like the icing on the cake if you can pull it off in your own territory... but the real money is from overseas sales."

# COVER STORY

The 2007 thriller *Black Water*, made for about \$1 million, made a small profit and *Road Train* has already sold to more than 30 territories including the UK and the USA (where it was retitled *Road Kill*).

A unique US distribution deal resulted in more than 8500 rentals of the film in its first weekend through Fangoria FrightFest: a summer promotion run by US horror fan magazine *Fangoria*, Blockbuster and international sales agent Lightning Entertainment.

"It's certainly the type of film that is far more accessible for overseas distributors particularly if the picture can generate genuine scares and thrills," Robertson says.

The Australian release however, is set to tread a well-worn path for the local horror genre: limited. It will open on less than 10 screens in South Australia and, if successful, will be followed by the eastern states.

Robertson is currently laying plans to create a vertically-integrated



COMPOSER RAFAEL MAY WATCHES A STRING SECTION RECORDING PART OF THE MUSIC FOR ROAD TRAIN IN HIS STUDIOS.



GENRE FILM PRODUCER MICHAEL ROBERTSON ON LOCATION FOR ROAD TRAIN.

company which will produce an ongoing slate of horror genre films for the mass market.

As for Samuel, filming two Australian horror films back-to-back was never the plan.

"I'm not a real horror film kind of fan really – it makes me a bit squeamish – but I like *Wolf Creek*, I like *Misery* and *Rosemary's Baby* and I suppose they're in the same genre," he says.

His next role in *Anonymous* – a political thriller about who actually wrote the plays of William

Shakespeare – is a sharp contrast to the teen-aimed fare of *Road Train* and *The Loved Ones*.

"My taste in movies is so broad that I don't have this grand plan that I want to be an action star or I want to play in horror films. You go from playing an evil vampire to an Elizabethan aristocrat you know – that's kind of the opposite end of the spectrum.

"I really wanted to follow up with something that was completely different because a lot of my training and background was in theatre and

Shakespeare so it was nice to kind of go and do something that I was really kind of passionate about.

"I don't really have any pre-requisites other than that it challenges me and kind of pushes me – projects that push you in a position where you can evolve as an actor and it's always good to do something that kind of terrifies you a little bit."

**Road Train is released in South Australia on October 21. Check out the INSIDEFILM website for the trailer.**



## RAFAEL MAY COMPOSER

### ROAD TRAIN

"Great soundtrack, combining monster rock with creepy electronica, and finally a haunting song with actress Sophie Lowe"

- EYE FOR FILM UK

### THE REEF

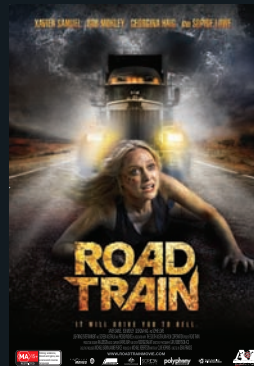
"He has a wonderful ear and he really brings another dimension to this film"

- ANDREW TRAUCKI (DIRECTOR)

### BLACK WATER

"Excellent music"

- URBAN CINEFILM



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