

Island of the Arts



BY BILL DAWES

A ghostly reminder of South Georgia's whaling past.

The remote Antarctic island of South Georgia has been a lure to many over time. Captain Cook and explorer Ernest Shackleton are two notable visitors, while for much of this century it was home to an industrious band of Norwegians and a thriving whaling industry.

In the 1980s South Georgia achieved a brief moment of infamy as Great Britain and Argentina battled over possession of the inhospitable island during the Falklands War.



The makers of the documentary *Antarctic Oasis*, which screened on ABC TV in March, were attracted by the idea of taking a group of four visual artists to document the pristine natural environment, abundant wildlife and evidence of the island's fascinating human history.

In an ambitious undertaking, director and writer Ivan Hexter set sail from the Falkland Islands with four Australian visual artists, Martin King, Mitchell McAuley, Mike Nichols and Jay Watson.

Still photographer Jay Watson also undertook the role of director of photography, shooting the artists at work as they drew and painted the island and its wildlife.

Watson's research into video cameras that had the compactness and durability for arctic situations took him to Sony's HVR-A1P. He liked the images the HDV camera could record on its single 1/3" CMOS chip and the ruggedness of the body.

Watson was initially impressed by the quality of the HDV images achieved from such a small compact camera, which included a 10x zoom.

"Before we got to South Georgia Island we had to go for a wild ride on a boat, it was almost a week sailing on wild

Shooting on South Georgia Island with the A1P, Watson found the HDV camcorder handled high levels of natural light, although it did get quite grainy in dark interiors, e.g. shooting interviews on the boat.

mountainous seas from Falkland islands, yachts, some of which we captured from the deck for the documentary," said Watson

"It was perfect for the environment," he said, "although the small size did have a trade-off in that it was hard to keep it rock-steady in buffeting winds & wild storms."

Watson had actually visited South Georgia island previously, when he had shot some footage using a basic domestic camcorder, although none of that was used for Antarctic Oasis.

"I knew I had to get back there," he said. "This time I was able to capture all the fascinating history of the island, the whaling and the wildlife came through in great multi-layered program.

Watson adopted an uncomplicated approach to shooting the documentary, using the camera's LCD panel for monitoring in the field and the camera's external microphone for audio.

"I was looking for the best in-camera HD look. There were no filters used and we only did a bit of colour tweaking in the night shots, what I was really trying to do was represent the island and the environment in the most natural possible way."

The artists and crew crew slept aboard their yacht while staying at South Georgia island, where Watson kept a PC running Canopus Edius to preview footage ingested from HDV tape after a day's shooting.

Watson, who has shot and edited a number of documentaries using Final Cut Pro, was introduced to Edius by Hexter, who utilises the system at his own production company, With Direction (www.withdirection.com.au).

"Having worked with Edius for four years and been through its various upgrades & transformations, it just goes from strength to strength," said Hexter.

"It's a rock solid stable editing platform - you can throw lots of file types at it in the one timeline, not that we needed it to do that for this show but stability was a big issue

"This was a pretty straight up and down documentary, managing 25 hours plus of material and knowing you could do that confidently work all day and not have a crash.

"The edit went on over six months and there were only two crashes, which is a great complement to the way in which this software has been designed and integrated to work on a PC platform."

The ABC did not call for a HD master so the program was edited in Edius at standard definition, and delivered to the broadcaster on Digital Betacam.

Even though the documentary had a limited budget and called for SD deliverables, Hexter was please to make the extra step to HDV.

"The ABC weren't interested in a hidedef finish so there was no compulsion to do that even though we were keen, I knew the SD release could be improved on.

Artists Left to Right- Mitch McAuley, Mike Nicholls and Martin King at the Grytviken whaling station, South Georgia Island.

"In the process of putting the artists together its hard to know how they're going to go about their art, one of the fascinating things about putting a group of artists like that together is seeing how other artists work

"All of us learnt from each other in looking at how we used the environment and how that changed through the whole journey. It started out as an artist's journey but the environment, the island, the wildlife and the whaling station came through as most dominant." - Jay Watson.



"The Great thing about a place like south Georgia is the wildlife is so inquisitive , they really engage with you if you are peaceful and quiet and stay low," - DOP Jay Watson.

"Here's the question, what constitutes HD? With an evolving technology like this ultimately resolution quality can be measured on various devices but at the end of the day it either looks sharp and fabulous or it doesn't!

"We'd love to do a hi-def version for international networks."

Hexter is keen to pursue future documentaries on the arts-adventure theme in the footsteps of Antarctic Oasis.

The accessibility and relatively affordable of high quality HDV and editing production tools is essential for Australians pursuing a career in documentary production, which is largely dependent on supplying content to the ABC.

"In this country it is impossible to have any sort of real livelihood based on documentary production. I challenge any of the doco makers in Australia to say they are working towards their retirement fund through documentaries," said Hexter

"Currently the ABC is producing a lot of their content in-house, but their proposed outsourcing push should work in favour of the independent sector."

"The reality is you do the things you do through love and passion, but low cost digital tools such as we used for this documentary provide incredible freedom for program makers."

