



Race against time

Shooting a new biopic about TE Lawrence's final years held a particular urgency for its Lymington cameraman

WORDS: Duncan Hall ♦ PHOTOS: Courtesy of Mark Griffin

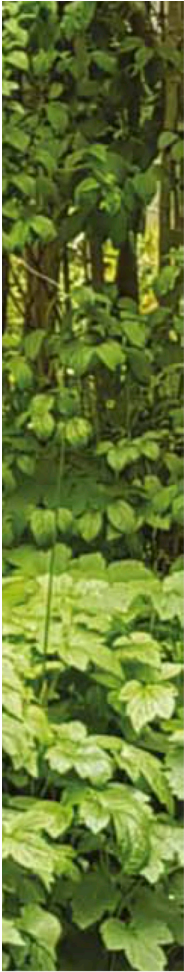
As Lymington cinematographer Simon Lawrence was making award-winning British biopic *Lawrence After Arabia* last year he didn't know whether he would see the final movie.

In March 2017 Simon, who also worked as cameraman, focus puller and assistant editor on the low-budget movie, was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer sarcomatoid mesothelioma, and given only three weeks to live.

Earlier this year he celebrated the third anniversary of his diagnosis and is penning a self-help book *Dare To Live* about his experiences. "I've certainly messed around with their statistics," says Simon, whose condition has remained stable since a course of chemotherapy in June 2017, although he has been warily keeping an eye on the spread of coronavirus. "I have been writing about the mind, and how to keep a strong mind, for 25 years. Dealing with a death

sentence like this has shown the mind is stronger than the body."

Simon first got involved in *Lawrence After Arabia* in late 2017 when he met director, writer and producer Mark Griffin through a mutual friend in France. "He said he had this script that he'd spent six years writing," says Simon. "As soon as he said it was about TE Lawrence my ears pricked up." Starring Bournemouth's Tom Barber-Duffy, *Lawrence After Arabia* focuses on the heroic figure's final years in Dorset



ABOVE: Simon Lawrence filming on set *Lawrence After Arabia*

RIGHT: Simon Lawrence (front left) and director Mark JT Griffin (front right) on set

and explores the mysterious circumstances surrounding his death on a motorcycle.

Lawrence had been an interest of Simon's since he first came across a plaque to the enigmatic character in a café in Wareham in the early 1980s. "We did a readthrough of the script over dinner," recalls Simon of that first meeting with Mark. "I knew I wanted to film it."

Simon has worked in the film industry since 1997. Having grown up in Australia he returned to the UK, his birth country, in 1977 and worked as a photojournalist. Among his TV credits are motoring programmes with Granada TV and Channel Five as well as a brief stint on the BBC's *Top Gear*. Between 2003 and 2009 he filmed with Professor Lord Robert Winston's charity The Queen Charlotte's Appeal in Cuba, India, Egypt and Jordan. *Lawrence After Arabia* is his first fictional feature.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone like Mark before," says Simon of his director/producer. "If he says he's going to do something he goes off and does it. He always finds a way."

Using Simon's camera equipment and following a very low budget, by October 2018 the pair were filming in Bordeaux, which was standing in for Morocco. When they came back to Dorset the decision was made to film a week at a time once a month for Simon's health. "It took four months," says Simon. "We really crammed it all in."

As well as newcomer Tom the cast includes Hugh Fraser, best known for playing Poirot's comrade Captain Hastings,

Michael Maloney, fresh from a starring role in the BBC's *The Trial of Christine Keeler*, and the voice of Brian Cox, whose wife Nicole Ansari-Cox plays Sarah Lawrence.

Lawrence After Arabia has already won best film awards at the Los Angeles and Florence Film Festivals. It is shot in many of the locations where Lawrence lived, including Lawrence's rural home Clouds Hill in Dorset, which is now owned by the National Trust. The filmmakers even went as far as using the same cart which carried his coffin to his grave in the funeral scenes. "We

digital age," admits Simon. "We are more of a niche film, so we want to go to the cinemas where people will appreciate what we've done.

"There has been talk about a documentary about the making of the movie, and about the conspiracy side of Lawrence's death. It has been so full-on since we started filming we haven't had an opportunity to sit back and talk about getting something done." Instead Simon has been writing, with a new book *Words To Live By* set for release at the end of May. "It's the second volume of a book I wrote in 2012/3 about

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were trying to be as authentic as possible," says Simon adding they used verbatim notes from the inquest after Lawrence's death. "It is a bit unusual in that we talk about the conspiracy side of Lawrence's death," adds Simon.

Following September's preview screenings the film is due for a limited release, but Mark is in discussions with Netflix and Amazon Prime to see if it can be released digitally, as well as looking at markets in the US, Australia, Italy, Spain and France. "It has been quite a learning experience for all of us in the

inspirational stories," he says. He's certainly a good authority to consult. "I was reasonably fit when I was diagnosed," says Simon, who thinks the seeds of his illness may have been sown in Oxford while investigating asbestos as a research technician in the late 1970s.

"I was 57, my body was in fairly good condition, I'd never really been ill. I'm really careful with my diet and take lots of vitamin tablets. I now try to walk as much as I can – I'll go up to the marina and look out over to the island when I'm in Lymington." 🐼

Good to know

Prior to the coronavirus shut-down preview screenings of *Lawrence After Arabia* (12A) accompanied by a director's Q&A session were set to be held in May. They have now been rescheduled to follow a red-carpet launch at the Lighthouse Theatre in Poole on Friday 18 September. Hampshire screenings include the Malt Theatre in Lymington on Thursday 24 September (lymingtoncommunity.com/movie-trailers) and the Hanger Farm Arts Centre in Totton on Monday 5 October (hangerfarm.co.uk) Visit lawrencethemovie.com For more on Simon Lawrence's film work visit simonlawrencefilms.co.uk Find out more about his books at w2lby.co.uk

