

DONE TO A TEA

Mark Brennan and April Kelley sit down for a cuppa to talk about their latest project, the charming new short called Tea for Two featuring Amanda Barrie and John Challis



Quirky new short film Tea for Two is being readied for release and it is, on the face of it, a quintessentially British curio. Written and directed by Mark Brennan, Tea for Two involves comedy, romance and a mystery twist. The film's executive producers include renowned baker Fiona Cairns (creator of Prince William and Duchess Kate's royal wedding cake) and James Webber who's an award-winning filmmaker. Production of the film took place over the winter and features a stellar British cast. Amanda Barrie (Bad Girls, Coronation Street) and John Challis (Only Fools and Horses, Doctor Who) star as the lead couple, supported by William Postlethwaite (The Suspicions of Mr Whicher), Abigail Parmenter



(The Longest Night) and James Hamer-Morton (The Fitzroy). It's been made on location in leafy Hertfordshire and the film will roll out pretty soon in order to coincide with the festival circuit. Key crew includes director of photography Lorenzo Levini, whose experience spans digital, West End, television and film

industries; Production Designer Rachel King, owner of RK Studio and Editor Carl Austin, co-founder of Pork Chop Pictures, who has been a professional editor on short films, music videos and corporate video projects for over eight years.

"Mark and I met at a mutual friends birthday and he told me about the story over some cocktails in a noisy bar," says April Kelley, producer and founder of Mini Productions. "Once he sent the script over, Sara (the other Mini) and I saw how much cake would be involved and we were sold! Cake aside, we were looking to do a comedy and Tea For Two had so much heart it was impossible to say 'no'."

"The short started life as a zero-budget project," chips in Mark. "Carrying on from the other

work myself and Carl Austin have done at Pork Chop Pictures. This time though we were keen to do something more substantial and try to raise our game. The film is about an older couple running a quiet tea shop who aren't quite what they seem. I've always found it funny how older people get away with odd behaviour because we're too polite to call them up on it. I felt there was some fun to be had there, especially if I added some method to their madness. I started tinkering with the idea just before Christmas 2013, when run ins with older relatives are most prevalent. I then re-drafted a couple of times after the holidays and a few weeks later had a finished draft."



Short and sweet

"I enjoy short films as their own art form and believe that many stories suit a shorter length," furthers Mark on why they went down the short format route. "Stories can always be expanded upon, but this one felt right to tell as a short film as it was an exploration of a relatively simple idea. It also costs less!"



whose skills of encompassing multiple emotions within one ping of an instrument is beyond me and the immensely talented Rachel King, our production designer whose eye to detail and endless energy was both inspiring and infectious.

"And this great talent was augmented by equally great kit... "We used RED Dragon with anamorphic lenses and the magician of a Director of Photography Lorenzo Levini," beams Mark.

"We went to Onsite for all our lighting and kit," adds April. "They were and have been incredible - we love them."

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"In Tea For Two's case it simply wouldn't have worked as a feature," agrees April. "It was made purposely to be a short. As for Mini, we're still wanting to expand our slate of shorts in different genres whilst we develop features along the side."

With both Mark and April having bulging contact books it was pretty straightforward to get things together for this project, with the crew falling into place with ease...

"It was a dream team many of whom we had worked with before such as DOP extraordinaire Lorenzo Levini and Heather Bradley - the only costume designer I've ever needed to work with," laughs April. "It was great to find gems of talent who none of us had worked with before; our make-up artist Samantha Allen who kept everyone (crew included) looking flawless with her airbrush gun, Roly Withrow our composer,

Plain sailing

This all sounds a little too good to be true, so did nothing untoward happen along the way?

"There was a moment when we ran out of Nutella," quips April. "But Sara and I managed to rectify that situation fairly quickly. In a similar vein, on our second day of shooting our RED Dragon faulted for reasons that nobody is really sure of, but this solution occurred quicker than the Nutella crisis. Our lovely focus puller, Chloe, came up to me and whispered the issue but in the same breath said, 'It's okay. Onsite are on their way with a new one'... Brilliant! And Mark had no idea this even happened."

Better still, both cast and crew must have had endless brews on the go seeing as the short was shot in a real life tea room! "We did," confirms Mark. "We filmed on location at the West Mill Tea Room in Hertfordshire. A lovely, working tea room, which we were lucky to have the run of for three



days. They're used to filming in the village as Foyle's War has also shot there, but I don't think the tea room owners were quite prepared for us hijacking their lovely tea room in the manner we did. We really turned the place upside down."

"Yes, that was another reason why this script excited me in particular because I knew straight away where I'd personally like to shoot," agrees April. "Having grown up in Hertford I knew the tea room and area really well. The owners, Joanne and Alex were incredible - safe to say we kept that sleepy little village wide-awake for a few days."



Tight fit

All well and good, but if you look at the stills on show in this feature you'll see that the location wasn't exactly big on space. "The tea room, while lovely, is tiny," confirms Mark. "Almost prohibitively so. When we first saw photos we really didn't think we could make it work in the space, but we chanced a visit on a recone anyway and just fell in love with the place. While April and I were sat with a tea thinking about how it could work, an old couple came in and actually ordered 'Tea for Two' so we took that as a sign!"

"From a producer's perspective, accommodation posed a problem initially..." furthers April. "When you're shooting long days out of London and your call time is 8am, you can't expect your actors and crew to be up and traveling from 4am... Fortunately, Hertfordshire had our backs covered, in particular Rigby's Guest House and The Salsbury Arms were superb at putting everyone up. Other



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than that, cake was the biggest challenge... It was everywhere and come the last day it was all up for grabs. Sara and I are still trying to get our wastelines back to where they were prior to the shoot."

The production team also bagged the name cast of their dreams too, so how had that panned out? "Well, we started with older actors," April explains. "Sara had a loose connection with John through a friend who had previously worked with him so we reached out to his agent. I knew Amanda's agent so contacted them. Amanda was in fact on a years break at the time, but once she heard John was definitely on board so was she, as we quickly found out they are old friends. The young cast members miraculously fell into place... Sara again, knew

William, having grown up in Shropshire and one day Mark sent through an actress he had found and said 'What about her?' ... lo and behold I knew her, Abigail was a friend and I swiftly kicked myself for not thinking of her in the first place and then it turned out that she knew William too - what are the odds! Moments like that remind you how tiny this industry is. And finally, there was the hilarious James Harner-Morton who Mark had seen in the improv comedy troupe Chuckle Duster and who also features in upcoming features The Fitzroy & Barjo."

Spending power

Money for the project was sourced via crowdfunding arrangement, which is a common enough approach these days but made





all the more sweeter by reaching the target amount needed to go into production. "By Pork Chop standards it was practically a Bruckheimer budget," laughs Mark. "Our last film cost around £40. This time we decided to run our first ever crowdfunding campaign and were lucky enough to hit our target, which allowed us to really step up our game. We also benefitted hugely from some very generous private investment."

"With Tea For Two we were lucky to have a film which had

potential hooks..." elaborates April. "Tea, cake, biscuits, vintage... So we decided to also seek private investment from those who could relate to the film and its hooks. This is when the wonderful Fiona Cairns came in, who has been superb. Pork Chop approached Fiona and her team and after charming them they agreed to meet with Mini as well and from there things really took off. Fiona didn't just invest but created a whole new cake especially for the film. We've

actually just screened the film to a private audience at BAFTA and have sent it for our crowdfunding backers to see. Now we're looking at festivals and are just keen to get it out there. BAFTA was an absolute delight, was great to watch the film surrounded by a new audience who appreciated moments that we had become accustomed to. As for festival time... We're preparing press kits and materials, whilst Pork Chop continue to charm their way into the hearts of festival organisers."

Cake time

Thanks to the seemingly straightforward shoot and less than problematic fundraising, all the team really need to do now is wait for further feedback on the film and get on with their marketing campaign... "The response at the screening was very positive," reckons Mark. "But with most things, especially comedy, everything is relative. It's not the arthouse cinema that some festivals and film-goers love, but I'm very happy with the



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film - however biased I may be!"

"We're excited," adds April.

"I think we can all agree that we created this film to entertain and to make others smile... Not to revolutionise filmmaking. Personally, I would love to see this film reach audiences who are rarely exposed to short films.

With television gold in the form of John Challis and Amanda Barrie it would be wonderful if Tea For Two could be seen on the telly, by those who watch the telly."

"There are some things I personally would have done differently with the benefit of hindsight," says Mark looking back on their latest project. "But I wouldn't change any of the work the cast and crew did. I

thought everyone was fantastic, I was really spoiled."

"I wouldn't let the Nutella run out," quips April with her thoughts on how to manage things in the future. "Besides that, nope, nothing else would be any different and I would do it all again in a heartbeat. It was a joy."

So what else have they currently got their filmmaking sights set on? "I'm co-writing a feature script with another filmmaker, Andrew Harmer, whose debut feature film The Fitzroy is currently in post-production," says Mark. "I'm very excited about that, plus some of my own short and feature projects that I'm working on too."

"We're currently developing our first feature," adds April. "The Promise of Peace, which is based on the true story of how my grandparents met. We have a short film shooting later this year. Edith, which we're producing alongside Fiona Neilson, directed by Christian Cooke and starring Peter Mullan. We're also preparing to take a play our theatre company, End of the Line created up to Hull Truck. We like to keep busy..."

And how would the dynamic duo best sum up this latest project of theirs? "The entire

experience has been such a pleasure I may retire now and quit while I'm ahead!" laughs Mark. "I love the team and I love what we've put together."

"Textbook," says April. "You're always going to have your obstacles with filmmaking, especially doing a short film, but Tea For Two was one of those projects where all the stars aligned, the ducks found their row and the universe wanted us to eat cake for three days straight. We're thrilled with the final film and even more thrilled to have found a team we'd like to work with again and again."

