

Once Upon a Time on the Set with John Huston

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I have dined out for years on my story of being on the set when John Huston directed the short film, [Independence](#), shot in 1976 by 20th Century Fox for the [US National Park Service](#) in Philadelphia. The film starred Ken Howard as Thomas Jefferson, Patrick O'Neil as George Washington, Anne Jackson as Abigail Adams and Eli Wallach as Benjamin Franklin.

At the time, I was doing a course in Museum Studies at Independence National Park and the course leader asked me if I would like to represent the Museum on the shoot. I guess I was supposed to make sure that none of the priceless historical antiques were damaged. Of course, I agreed, simply to be present during the filming.

I was particularly remind of that time in my life when we were moving through pre-production and into the shoot of the award-winning biopic, [Rufus Stone](#). In some ways, Huston's production staff had it easier, because their locations were all within a few city blocks of each other and the furnishings already correct and in place.

On the other hand, we found that making our short film in rural Dorset and being true to two time periods (1950s and present) and our research on ageing, sexuality and rurality was not so easy. The myth of rural Britain is that it is comprised of restored thatched cottages, stately homes, and an Aga in every kitchen. Missing in the myth is much of the poverty that exists, the isolation, the downturns in and disappearance of 'village life', including scarce resources like post offices and even pubs. No one seems to walk in villages anymore; the car is King.

Many of the locations we scouted were several former workers' cottages combined into one dwelling, their brickwork or whitewashed plaster scrubbed to within an inch of its life, thatch roofs plopped on top, and then the rear roof incline given that 21st Century country house necessity, several skylights. Because part of our film represented the countryside in the 1950s, these dwellings become particularly problematic for us to film. Still, we got there, after several weeks of location scouting. The team came up with some great places that really had the feel of the story. We strongly believed that the locations would tell the tale as much as any dialogue.

First sighting: John Huston

The scene: Independence Hall, Philadelphia

Characters: Members of the Continental Congress; men in white hose and wigs abound

Everything was in place to film the scene, the actors near the front of the Hall near the famous desk. Cast and crew were ready, equipment in place, waiting for John Huston to arrive. The doors opened and in he came, escorted to a period chair set up just behind the camera with one of the Hall's antique side tables next to it. On it was a Martini shaker, a glass and an ashtray. Huston took a moment to look through the lens of the camera without

saying anything. He then sat, took a cigar out of his jacket pocket and lit it, sipped at his Martini and shouted, ‘Action!’”

Needless to say, smoking, let alone drinking, was forbidden in Independence Hall. Somehow, Huston must have received a governmental dispensation. Since he had said ‘Action!’ I figured I couldn’t interfere; too late to exercise my lightweight, supposed powers as representative of the Museum, even if I had been brave enough to object.

After a few days, the interior scenes finished and filming moved to exterior shots outside of Carpenter’s Hall, with horses and carriages to manage through the narrow cobble street. There was much use of fog to give the scene a kind of period authenticity. I love a bit of theatrical haze so was quite excited by this effect.

On the next to the last day of the shoot, there was an unscheduled meeting of all cast and crew called for early morning in Independence Hall. We all gathered as requested. Huston made his entrance. This time he went to the front of the Hall and leaned against the table where the Declaration of Independence was signed.

A hush fell over the room as the bright lights placed in the south-facing windows replicating natural daylight were turned on. Huston began by telling the cast and crew that the production had run out of money to finish the film. He then continued his speech, peppering it by mentioning the founding fathers by name, the historical importance of the film and a bit on his love of show business thrown in for good measure. He appealed to cast and crew ‘as Americans’ to work for another day and a half, no more, for no pay. The assemblage applauded his speech at the finish and agreed to work on and film for free until the project was completed.

I learned my role of Executive Producer for Rufus Stone on the job. I knew from the beginning that a big part of my job would be making sure that the Research Councils’ money is wisely spent. The second part was insuring that our film represented our three years of research on ageing, sexuality and rurality as truthfully as possible.

Turning research into a professional film was a big gamble on my part. I had been convinced of the possibilities of it for some time, but then it was time to face the reality of it. One thing I learned in the process is that small details matter: they can best represent the research ‘findings’, but also can be the first things that are overlooked or ignored in the creative rush of making a film. For this reason, I needed to pay attention to decisions around locations, casting, costumes, interiors and so forth to insure that the details rang true to what we had uncovered in our investigation. It would have been easy to ignore them in the heat of filmmaking. My job was to convince the filmmakers that they were not.

Art and Science are strange bedfellows. Or so it would seem. I have always believed, however, that the impulse to investigate and produce scientific discovery is the same compulsion that moves artists to create. For this reason, I was willing to gamble with our research, the Research Councils’ money and our film.

Who best to translate the excitement of discovery to an audience but an artist? How better to take sometimes dry and tedious data and transform it into story and action? Who better to help us to achieve impact on a wider public with our research findings than those who are capable of entertaining (‘instilling interest or consideration in an audience’) through art?

These were the premises behind our filmmaking efforts. A side benefit was that through the process we acquired some additional skills as academics as well.

When Huston's filming was done, the crew and cast packed up and gone, the Museum Director and I made an inspection around the Hall. The historical antiques were all in good nick, the room clean and tidy. We then took a stroll outside of the Hall. On the south side of the building where the banks of lights had been stacked on scaffolding two stories high to create a daylight effect streaming through the Georgian windows, we noticed something. The heat of the lights over several days of shooting had burnt off several layers of the official, historically correct, Independence Hall Colonial White No. 3 paint from all of the window frames.

I guess I was too busy getting caught up in the Hollywood of it all to notice this disaster.

Details, Kip. Details.

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