

A woman with red hair, wearing a blue diving mask and snorkel, is swimming underwater. She is wearing a light-colored bikini with a red and white patterned waistband. She is also wearing black diving fins. The background is a dark blue, deep water environment. The title "BLACK WATER, WHITE DEATH" is overlaid on the image in large, bold, white and black letters.

BLACK WATER, WHITE DEATH

With the nail grinding thriller *THE REEF*, producer MICHAEL ROBERTSON gleefully throw actors GYTON GRANTLEY to the sharks... with singularly

writer/director ANDREW TRAUCKI and ZOE NAYLOR, DAMIAN WALSH-HOWLING and terrifying consequences. BY ERIN FREE

Four people float on a calm, crystalline ocean under a blazing hot sky. They're alone, lost, and stranded, and what little hope they have for survival is slowly, inexorably starting to slip away, like the salty water that slides between their cracking, moisture-ruined fingers. Then they see it slicing through the water: a black fin that cuts across the ocean and then cleaves into their very souls. With even more cruel certainty than the appearance of a scimitar-wielding Grim Reaper, it tells them that they're about to die... and die horribly. Then, before they even have time to suck in a desperate breath, the shark is upon them, a marauding mix of razor sharp teeth, relentless power, and calculated frenzy...

Welcome to *The Reef*, a cunningly devised low budget Australian thriller that applies the thumbscrews with almost sadistic expertise, tapping into the kind of fears that anyone who has ever waded into the water off their favourite piece of coastline knows all too well. Despite the primal, fascinating fear that Australians have of sharks, however, no local filmmaker has previously seen the potential of letting them loose on the big screen. "It is surprising but not unusual that the Australian feature industry has not picked up on Australian catastrophes and other danger-type stories," says *The Reef*'s veteran producer Michael Robertson, obviously smelling a little blood in the commercial water. "Sharks represent a 'media frenzy' and shark attacks always seem to make the Australian and international headlines...so I'm sure that *The Reef* will be able to capitalise on this."

The man sounding the cinematic shark alarm is writer/director Andrew Traucki, who appears to be intent on establishing himself as this country's foremost proponent on movies that feature small groups of people being menaced by terrifying, predatory animals. His debut feature, 2007's drum-tight thriller *Black Water*, tracked four people being stalked by a killer crocodile, and served as something of a warm-up for *The Reef*. With a slightly bigger budget to play with, and a now more assured grip on the essentials of genre filmmaking, Traucki ups the ante brilliantly, using a minimum of blood and gore – but a maximum of behind-the-camera invention – to craft a thriller of limited means but impressive tension. "It was logistically a bigger, harder film," Traucki says. "Thematically, it's in the same milieu as *Black Water*, and that's because I knew that I could write both those scripts. I also like the whole survival instinct concept. I'm just drawn to the 'What would you do in that situation?' scenario because they're both based on real situations. I find that pretty interesting. I'm quite happy that I've done these two films, but I don't want to get pigeon holed as the 'creature feature' guy."

It also turns out that *The Reef* has been gestating since before the similarly themed *Black Water* even went before the cameras. Traucki had read about a shark-related incident off the coast of Townsville in the mid-eighties, and it had clawed its way into his head and refused to leave. "A trawler went down and people started swimming to land and a big shark started stalking them," Traucki explains of the incident. "It was pretty nasty. I read that story about ten years ago, and it just stayed in my head. If something stays with you for that long, there's got to be a reason. Firstly, what would you do? Would you stay on the boat? Or would you swim? Then secondly, once that animal's there, and just the horror of having to go through that... what could you do? I'm a bit of a surfer myself, so the horror of sharks is always in my head. It doesn't stop me from surfing, but it's always in my head. Anything that can eat you is a big thing in people's heads because we still have this primal instinct not to get eaten; it's in our genes. We're such a coastal country; we all live on the coast and it's all about going on a beach holiday. Sharks are very prevalent in our consciousness, and by the fact that we've sold *The Reef* to 105 countries, they obviously are around the world too."



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Using the Townsville incident as a jumping-off point, Traucki's script runs off the same central riff, but frames it with surprising depth and sensitivity. Without sacrificing pace or suspense, Traucki takes the time to let his audience come to know and like the quartet that will ultimately face off against one of Mother Nature's most gruesome foot soldiers. Seafarer Luke (Damian Walshe-Howling) is preparing to deliver a yacht to Indonesia, and is joined on the trip by his good friend, Matt (Gyton Grantley); Matt's girlfriend, Suzie (Adrienne Pickering); and Matt's sister, Kate (Zoe Naylor), with whom Luke was once involved in a romantic relationship. Along with Luke's deckhand offside, Warren (Kieran Darcy-Smith), the trio set sail, tragically unprepared and unaware of the horrors that await them. Just as Luke and Kate are about to rehear their old romance, the boat's hull is cracked on a protruding jut of reef, and the yacht capsizes. The terrified group is suddenly faced with two equally dangerous propositions: wait adrift atop the sinking boat with only a slim chance of being rescued, or swim for the closest piece of land twelve miles away, and take their chances with whatever might be lurking below the ocean's surface. While Warren decides to cling to hope atop the boat, Luke, Matt, Suzie and Kate take the second option, and plunge into the uncertain waters which are rising around their stricken yacht.

The Reef's narrative engine might be its people-in-peril plotline, but it is fuelled by something just as important: character. It's a long held cinematic fact – though one not always adhered to – that for a thriller to really work, you need to actually *care* about the people being threatened.

If an audience doesn't care about a thriller's characters, they'll be less likely to invest in the film emotionally, and the thrills will fall flat, no matter how expertly they may be engineered. Luke, Matt, Suzie and Kate are likeable and real, with just enough flaws and foibles to make them interesting. When brought to life by *Underbelly* alums Damian Walshe-Howling and Gyton Grantley; one time *McLeod's Daughter* Zoe Naylor; and busy TV drama actress Adrienne Pickering (*Rake*, *Home And Away*, *Headland*), they quickly become four people that you really don't want to see get ripped to shreds by a shark. "Because this story is halfway between reality and fiction, I didn't want really big names, not that I could have afforded them anyway," Traucki laughs.

Though obviously sold as a genre film, the actors were more than pleased to see that the script had a fair amount of meat on its bones in terms of character and motivation. In the course of the film, Zoe Naylor gets to hit every point on the emotional map – fear, grief, stoicism, shock and sadness – and the actress delivers a fine performance in the film's most challenging role. "Even though this is a genre film, Andrew wrote a very honest script," Naylor says. "It was such a challenging and rewarding gift for me as an actress to have a character that went through such a loaded and harrowing experience, even though it was quite exhausting at times. I certainly experienced a complex range of emotions on a daily basis. Delivering an honest performance was very important to me. I read countless extreme survival stories to help inform the choices I made. I sought out extra drama texts that gave me new tools and insights to experience organic fear as we were generally reacting to nothing. I found it equally tricky to try to map the objectives and arc for the character in serving the whole story. I had to trust my intuition and follow my heart."

Gyton Grantley (*Beneath Hill 60*) brings his usual abundant charm and likeability to the role of Matt, a straight-up nice guy always ready to do the right thing. "It's good to have strong characters," he says of *The Reef*'s people-first credo. "It really feeds the situation a lot better. It's not just about, 'Oh, there's a shark! Be scared!' In terms of my character, I'm there with my girlfriend and my sister, and a guy that I strongly admire. There are a lot of very close connections there, and that really plays into the drama. Andrew has a very different way of tackling genre. It's easy to say that *Black Water* is just a crocodile movie, or that this is just a shark movie, but Andrew approaches things from a slightly different perspective. He has a real sense of vision, and a real passion for his stories."

The film's strong performances were forged during a rehearsal period which allowed the actors an opportunity to experiment and find their way into their characters in a manner rarely afforded them in a low budget genre film. TV regular Damian Walshe-Howling (*Blue Heelers*, the upcoming Steven Spielberg production *Terra Nova*) steps up to the plate as the heroic Luke, an emotionally conflicted character who literally finds himself in over his head, despite his intimate knowledge of the ocean. It's another strong performance from the reliable actor. "We did a week of rehearsals, and depending on who the director is, that can be really beneficial, especially in terms of making sense of the script and the characters," says Walshe-Howling of how he built up his character. "More importantly, those rehearsal periods are great for getting to know each other, and for working out the relationships in the film. That will always, to whatever degree, filter through to the work, and especially into the trust that you'll have for each other. We did a lot of blocking for the water sequences too, and worked out a lot of the continuity of the film, especially with regards to camera angles and how everything would all lock together."

Walshe-Howling had no trouble locking together with his co-star, Gyton Grantley. Since working on the first season of the groundbreaking TV series *Underbelly* –



where they both played sociopathic killer criminals – the two have become good friends, regularly spotted at Sydney’s hipper nightspots and both calling the glitzy, actor-friendly, beachside suburb of Bondi home. “We just had a natural friendship build between us very quickly,” offers Walshe-Howling. “We had a ball together, and we were excited about working together again. In terms of the acting, there’s a shorthand there, and you help each other out too. You might be struggling in a scene, or wondering where it’s going, and the other person can tip you off, or offer a suggestion. It’s very satisfying working with friends.”

When FILMINK asks Gyton Grantley about working with Damian Walshe-Howling again, the bond of friendship between the two is obvious. “Damian is a little older than me, and I consider him to be quite a wise and grounded human being,” Grantley says. “I look to him for advice now and then, and I felt a lot of confidence knowing that he was there with us. There were a lot of complications and obstacles that we had to get through while we were shooting *The Reef*, and it was great to have him there for support.”

Those complications and obstacles largely began and ended with what has proven to be a nightmare for many filmmakers: water. From the budget blow-outs on 1995’s *Waterworld* right back to the growing madness of 1962’s sea bound *Mutiny On The Bounty*, filming in and around the ocean has long been a guaranteed source of aggravation and emotional and financial devastation for directors and producers. “It was hell,” laughs Andrew Traucki. “At the time though, I was quite smug thinking, ‘Oh, I shot *Black Water* in a swamp; how hard can it be?’ With the weather, we had to reschedule every day, because everything’s moving the whole time. My script constantly got wet, even though we tried to waterproof it three times. Finally it was waterproofed, but then the pages would stick.

I couldn’t get to the actors quickly. When the shoot finished, I was so happy to be in the edit suite where I didn’t have to worry about what the weather was going to be like that day! The shoot was really, really difficult.”

Zoe Naylor is quick to agree. “This was the toughest shoot that I’ve ever done,” the actress says. “We shot six days a week, ten hours a day, in the water. Our skin re-defined the word ‘prune’ and we found ourselves peeing in our wetsuits just to keep warm. Being exposed to the elements for that long, accompanied by the gruelling nature of the script, was demanding. At times, we were dropped out in the middle of the ocean and left there to swim. As soon as they yelled cut, I can’t tell you how quickly I wanted to get out of that water! My mind was playing tricks on me regularly. We had a safety officer at all times, but there were a couple of times when the sky became gloomy, and the water a little calmer, and you just couldn’t be sure what was lurking beneath the surface. It didn’t help that they had the largest Great White ever caught in Australia frozen on display in a shark museum just down the road. Plus, that shark was caught just across the way from where we were shooting, off North Fraser Island.”

According to Naylor, the water shoot also affected the performances, and the ability of the actors to maintain character and bring new things to the table. “Once we were in the water, there wasn’t a lot of room to move given the time, budget and shooting constraints,” she explains. “That was quite testing at times because naturally discoveries are made only once you’re fully in the scene and playing the stakes at their true level.”

Though shot in the warm, sunny climes of Queensland’s Hervey Bay and Bowen, the constant time spent in the water sent the actors’ body temperatures plummeting, despite the fact that they were floating around underneath a hot, baking sun. “You don’t realise

that when you’re in the water for eight to ten hours, no matter how hot it is outside, you just get cold,” says Gyton Grantley. “We were getting sunburnt and hypothermia at the same time! It did get very uncomfortable, but it was all for a good cause.”

Despite being a keen and regular swimmer, the waterlogged shoot was also a minor problem for Damian Walshe-Howling. “I took it on as a total challenge,” he says of *The Reef*’s unconventional shoot. “I love doing that. I’ll follow that up, however, by saying that it was fucking gruelling.”

Walshe-Howling and Zoe Naylor were put through the ringer even more when they both suffered painful injuries on set. Naylor copped a coral cut on her foot, which became infected and then had to be cut open and cleaned. “It did mean that I had to have a couple of days off though, which was a godsend,” the actress laughs. Walshe-Howling was hit a little harder when he stepped onto a poisonous stonefish. “They shoot poison like an injection,” the actor explains. “It was the most excruciating pain. We were just walking along the beach on this beautiful day, and I just felt it and went, ‘What the fuck was that?’” Walshe-Howling had to endure a 25-minute trip to hospital via ambulance, receiving pain killing injections all the way to dull the stabbing sensations rolling up his leg. Because he features in just about every scene of the film, production had to be shut down briefly while he recuperated. “I love the ocean, and I was back swimming the next day, but I can’t say that I wasn’t a bit more reticent when I got back onto the set,” Walshe-Howling sighs. “The whole experience was wild, but I really enjoyed it.”

Producer Michael Robertson, who has dabbled in acting himself, has nothing but praise for the cast. “The actors were the first out there each day leading the charge,” he says. “They were great, and their performances are right up there...they were a wonderful group!” Zoe Naylor

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concur: “Thank goodness that all the cast and crew had a great sense of humour, and we were able to laugh, at least, whenever we could. I can’t tell you how grateful I am to all of the cast members. It was truly an ensemble piece, and everyone was incredibly generous with their energy and time.”

While the actors had to deal with spending entire days up to their necks in water, along with the skin-splitting presence of stonefish and protruding coral, director Andrew Traucki and producer Michael Robertson had to contend with equally foreboding combatants. As a rare Australian foray into genre filmmaking, *The Reef* will be competing not in an arthouse market, but in a decidedly mainstream one, where they’ll be going head to head with the big fish in the cinematic ocean, namely American blockbusters. “It’s always going to be difficult,” says Robertson, “but that’s what’s exciting and fuels my passion for filmmaking: coming up with something that is that ‘point of difference’, that small Aussie film which finds an audience both within Australia and overseas.”

Andrew Traucki, however, can’t help but see the tough side of making these kinds of films. “In Australia, it’s very hard to do genre movies because everything is in opposition to the American system,” he sighs. “They do it so big and so hard, and it’s hard to compete, so we end up doing these, if not arthouse, at least less mainstream films. I’m in opposition to that. I just want to make films that people will see and enjoy, so I suppose that I’m a bit of a populist. I’m in that strange situation where I sell well overseas, but it’s hard to get screens here, which is purely because Australian exhibitors feel that Australian thrillers and horror films just can’t compete with Hollywood. *Wolf Creek* proved them wrong, but that had a lot of heat around it because [American producers] the Weinsteins had done it. With a film like *The Reef*, you can’t go to the arthouse distributors, because they’ve got their niche, and the big guys have got

their niche, which are mainly American films. So there is a problem in the middle ground for theatrical releases at least. It’s tough. There comes a time when as a filmmaker – because I poured my heart into promoting *Black Water* – where you go, ‘I’ve done my job. I’ve made the film. It’s somebody else’s job to go and sell it.’ I can keep on doing this stuff, but I don’t know if you’re going to be listening to me or not, and I should be working on my next one. I’ve made the film – if you can sell it, great; if you can’t, that’s life, I suppose. But I’m happy with what I’ve done because otherwise you can get a little bitter.”

History has shown – in both cinema and battle – that when you’re faced with a big, seemingly invincible enemy, the only way to fight back is by abandoning traditional methods of warfare and finding new ways to fight. The new form of cinematic guerilla combat is the internet, and *The Reef* embraced the technology right from the get-go. “*The Reef* was the first feature film to set up live streaming from the film location,” explains Michael Robertson. “Those who logged on could actually see the scenes unfolding from ‘action’ to ‘cut.’ It was like being there. Plus, our online marketing presence is something that we have been promoting since the early stages of financing.”

Andrew Traucki concurs: “The internet is the cheapest way that you can market anything,” the director says. “Australian films don’t have much of a marketing budget, unlike American films. Budgets on Australian films are usually really small. I’ve been across online stuff for a while [as well as filmmaking, Traucki has produced websites for companies such as Yahoo! and Fairfax Digital], so I like to try and do something online. With *The Reef*, we had 10,000 people logging in during the shoot, and everybody onset could talk to their friends as it was happening. It was like getting your DVD extras there and now, so that worked really well. We did really good virals for *Black Water*, and I hope to do really good virals for this one as well.”

In this battle of genre filmmaking, Michael Robertson believes that Andrew Traucki himself is the film’s principal weapon. The producer worked with the director on *Black Water* as well, and he backs him 100%. “Andrew Traucki has an inherent understanding of genre-style filmmaking,” he says. “He is a writer/director who knows the ebb and flow of genre storytelling. He knows when to bring on the ‘scare’ and when to hold back. His films always deliver.”

Finally, you can’t make a shark movie without at least considering the legacy and long, dark shadow cast by Steven Spielberg’s seminal 1975 masterpiece, *Jaws*. “*Jaws* is like this god,” Traucki laughs. “It’s this huge monolithic film which triggered the whole blockbuster thing. It’s impossible to compete against, but of course we’ll be compared to it. Straight off the bat, let me say that *The Reef* would never try and aspire to be *Jaws*. There’s also [the low budget 2003 US shark thriller] *Open Water*. *The Reef* is a lot more action-packed than that film. We’re somewhere between *Open Water* and *Jaws*. It’s somewhere in between those two in terms of its sense of reality and style. What you really need is a gripping story. It all comes back to story. With a genre film, it helps you to market and maybe raise finances because people understand them better than if you have to explain that it’s about a more abstract concept. But ultimately it comes down to story. The good thing with *The Reef* is that people read it and say that it’s a page turner. They want to know what happens at the end. That’s the hook: what happens? Who’s going to survive, and how are they going to get out of this situation?”

There’s only one way to find out, but you’ll have to get back into the water for the answer...

Additional reporting by Dov Kornits.

***The Reef* is released on March 17 and will be reviewed in the next issue. ■**