

The Letter - Interview with the writer and director of the short film, Nicu **Nicu is based on a true story about a boy who was trafficked to London and forced to steal.**

Why did you choose to make a film on this topic?

I chose this topic of human trafficking as I'd seen some news reports, read a few articles and I was quite blown away by all that was happening, really. I google searched 'human trafficking' and 'films' and stumbled upon an anti-human trafficking charity [unchosen.org] that were on the look out for films that were spreading the word about human trafficking. I wanted to make a short film for a charity that utilized all my skill set, really. And so what inspired me particularly was the huge number of children that were being trafficked and this really resonated with me and I made this instant connection with a story that had to be told. And this connection to it really spurred me on to research more.

Did you know much about human trafficking before making the film? What research did you do for the script?

I didn't know too much about human trafficking, so the anti-human trafficking website that I found was quite informative and it had lots of case studies - quite harrowing, true accounts of people's first-hand experience of being trafficked and it was quite upsetting to read - to know that this type of stuff was going on in your neighbourhood - on your doorstep. Amongst all these case studies and statistics, one of them really stood out to me and it was about a young boy - and it really, really resonated and I really connected with this story. I also felt incredibly sad about it and I thought, 'What difference can I make?' and that was the start of the connection to telling Nicu's story. If you're making films, it's really important to find some kind of connection that you can really understand and get - and hopefully that will translate into your film piece.

Why did you use the letter?

I chose a letter, not necessarily because I thought that Nicu could write, but more so that it's the kind of thing that makes it feel very personal, very expressive and these are his innermost feelings that he's sharing and the only way he could, in fact, share was by writing this letter - because I'm thinking he didn't have a phone to contact them, he had no contact with his family. So, this imaginary letter was a way for him to, kind of, express all this kind of stuff he was feeling and thinking and experiencing. Also, I think a letter can represent like a stream of consciousness, where all your emotions are, kind of, poured out there in words.

How long did it take you to shoot the film? And post production? Did you choose the music?

We had about a day and an evening to film Nicu and an afternoon in voice over. But before that there was probably around two weeks worth of prep [preparation] and pre-production, with writing the script, doing a little storyboard, an animatic to go through timings, booking your film crew, getting your permits from the council to film on the streets, putting posts on casting agents' websites - looking for children that fit the bill. In fact we used a different child for the acting and a separate child for the voice over. Getting a bit of a Romanian accent was quite important to me, which was quite tricky to find, but we got there in the end. We probably had a few days to edit, and then I had another half a day to give it a nice grade and make it look polished and finished. And then we had probably about a day in audio [a sound studio] to score it with the music that I'd chosen from a library network of music who kindly waived their fee for the music for this charity film. And all the people who were involved, so from the production

crew, the cameraman, the assistant, the producer, the actors, the parents – they did it on a voluntary basis. I think I paid them with food and refreshments and maybe some contribution to their travel. The editing side was an old colleague that had his own post-production facility. He donated the editor's time, the sound engineer's time. You'll be surprised that once you start making a film that is for charity, lots of people do want to get involved and do their bit, too.

What do you want people to learn from your film?

I wanted people to learn from the film that it's happening, it's on our doorsteps, it's on a street around us – that these children could have been sent for this so-called better life – and look what they end up with. They didn't plan for that – their parents may not have planned for that either, but they are so desperate that this is as good as it gets for them.

How do you want the viewer to feel?

I wanted people to feel sad and try and understand these situations more so. And I think the statistics at the end are quite hard-hitting also and eye-opening. I love that when you are watching a film that you take something out of it. And if it's touched you emotionally in any way, then as a filmmaker then you've kind of done your job – if that was your aim.

Do you now understand so-called 'street children' differently after having made *Nicu*?

I mean, even myself when I've been at the traffic lights with the car and a little kid or a mum comes with the fairy liquid bottle [dish washing soap] to try and clean your windscreen – and you're like, 'It's alright. It's already clean.' It's like 'Get away! Get away!' Now I may be a bit more patient with them and understand that that's their livelihood – that's their day's work – and if they don't take back money, then God knows what will happen to them. So, it's opened my eyes in that way – to see these people in their everyday situation.

Do you have any advice or guidance for filmmakers – especially for young filmmakers - who want to make films for a cause?

My advice for young filmmakers that want to make films on this type of subject matter or for charities - start by really thinking about what you want your message to be. What do you want the viewer to take out? And, really work hard on that script and what it's going to tell the viewer, and prepare like crazy because that's the hardest part, I reckon. All the prep [preparation] work, and getting it right and getting your script right and your structure, and what your messaging is. And the filming part is the easy part because you've done all the planning and the prep beforehand. Above all, enjoy yourself. Enjoy every part of the process and have fun with it. And make sure you have that connection, otherwise, if you don't have that connection how is the viewer supposed to have that connection with what you make. So, good luck!

Acknowledgements

The NO Project would like to thank the director of *Nicu* for this interview. This content is solely for non-commercial, non-profit educational purposes to raise awareness of human trafficking and modern slavery. Please contact info@thenoproject.org for authorized use of this interview.

To view *Nicu*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcBLq6P5pkY&t=16s>