
Interview with Shaun Farrington

By Keith M. Johnston

Shaun Farrington is the founder and creative director of Zealot, a creative marketing company with offices in Sydney, London and New York. For over twenty years, Zealot has specialised in trailer, TV spot and promo production, and has won Key Art and Golden Trailer awards for international film campaigns including *Man on Wire* (Marsh, 2008), *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009), *A Single Man* (Ford, 2009), and *The King's Speech* (Hooper, 2010).

This transcript is an edited version of a forty-five minute interview conducted at the Zealot offices in London, on Wednesday 21st November 2012.

KMJ [Keith M. Johnston]: Starting with a personal perspective, how did you get into all this, what was your route into trailer production or creative work?

SF [Shaun Farrington]: Mine was an unusual one, in that founding the company, initially in Australia, and coming from Australia, it was a very, very niche - there were no other trailer companies there, so I... had a production company that made more mainstream television commercials as a director, and happened to shoot a top and tail for Columbia-TriStar for their (in those days) video rental spot, so we'd cut what we would call the doughnut, the opener and the closer, and then every month they had to update with the latest video releases coming out - and as well as shooting that, they then said could you just cut each month, the TV spots, the TV commercials - and from there, we sort of got a reputation for cutting films down into marketable pieces, and then someone came to me and said "we've got this weird sounding film called *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1994), we need to cut television commercials for Australia", and I said sure... in Australia it got a lot of kudos for us, and then people started coming to us... asking us to cut feature film trailers, and that's when I realised that, hey, this is actually combining all the things I really love - which is storytelling, creating emotion and feeling out of some kind of visual piece, and working with film as opposed to the shitty dog food commercials... so, that was really it, really, I fell into by accident - I always loved film, I wanted to be in film, but trailers was not

something I set out to do, but I realised it answered all the things I wanted to do.

KMJ: As creative director of Zealot, are you still hands on in trailer making?

SF: I'm hands on in that I'm in the edit suite every day with people, definitely, and I feedback on trailers and working through scripts and all that, but I used to physically edit as well, in the early days when we got into trailers... but I haven't cut for ten years now. But it really helped me as a creative director having that ability to be very practical and know the ins and outs of it as well.

KMJ: Before we get into the specifics of the trailer as a product or an art form, can you give me a bit of background on Zealot?

SF: The two main hubs are London and New York. New York is servicing LA, effectively, anyway, as well as New York, and London sort of serves the European territories... [the Australian market] didn't justify having people on the ground, and also the reality of working in a market where there's a lot more competition, a lot more day-to-day interactions with trailers and people doing trailers, just means the quality of talent we can access in America and here in terms of employing great people - scriptwriters, designers, editors - is much greater. So, the New York office mainly does U.S. domestic trailers working with, mainly the high-end independents, so your Focuses, your Weinsteins, those kind of companies - a lot of domestic trailers, but also a lot of international, what we can film sales promos for the film markets, where the films are being sold to distributors - so working with, you know, Fox International, Film Nation, high-end international sales agencies, Focus, people like that. And the UK does exactly the same here, although we probably do more sales promos because the London hub is a real base of the international side of the business, where you create a promo in order to sell films to the world market, because there are cultural sensibilities that you have here, whereas America is much more American domestic focus, so they would probably do 70% trailers, 30% promos, and we probably do the reverse of that - oh, and TV commercials for films as well.

KMJ: Is Zealot therefore known for its independent work? Is that a niche you chose to pursue?

SF: Yeah, I think we did pursue it. I think when you work with... well, we are now starting to cross over and do studio work at Universal, at Fox, but all of our passion was kind of what I would call the high-end independent - so, the kinds of films like *The King's Speech*, *Shame* (McQueen, 2011), those kind of films, *Blue Valentine* (Cianfrance, 2010), that's where we wanted to position ourselves. I guess we didn't want to turn into a studio production line, where [you've got] lots and lots of editors cutting across one project - we like the fact that our creatives stay focused on a project, get that ability to do that work from beginning to end - and just the type of films we like to go and see are the kinds of films we work on. Yeah, films like *An Education* (Scherfig, 2009), films that break out and do well, certainly we don't want to work on films that aren't recognised and aren't seen, 'cos that's not the goal, but films that are made for a thinking audience is something that appeals to us.

KMJ: While I don't want to put words in your mouth, do you think that means you can do more creative work than you could in studio-based trailer production?

SF: I don't know if the work's more creative, I think you have more creative freedom as individuals, as a company - I mean, I think the end results of the studio process is incredibly robust, incredibly creative, if you have fifty different editors all working on a trailer, the final versions that come out of that pipeline at the end are going to be amazing, but the *process* may not be as satisfying for the people involved, because they might end up going "oh look, I put those three shots together there at the end, you know, and they used my little bit of music there," whereas for most of us, if we see a trailer on the screen we can generally say, well, we worked on that for quite a while, and that's ours... although... I was going to say you could explore more creatively, but no, I don't think so, I think that studio trailers... are incredibly creative and clever, it's just a different form, really.

KMJ: I suppose I was wondering if you could push the boundaries more..?

SF: Oh, look, you definitely can - no, that's true, you can - I mean, you can, you can do things that you would never get away with on a mainstream film because it would just alienate too many - if you're going for a certain type of audience, you can probably... test the waters more with some different forms and ideas, but having said that there has been some phenomenally good creative trailers for big mainstream blockbusters that, you know, throw all the rules out and do something

completely amazing - and the advantage they have over the smaller independent film is ultimately the independent film will most likely have one or maybe two trailers in total - the North American domestic, and there might be an international version. Whereas, you know, if you are doing a big studio blockbuster you could be going out with three or four - the latest Bourne film [*The Bourne Legacy*: Gilroy, 2012] had a really good teaser trailer. If you're only doing one piece of marketing - if you had one shot at the marketing, producing one trailer, you probably wouldn't even go with that, because it's too risky, it's too narrow - but if you've got five or six trailers in the market place that can be one your arsenal - so, you know, there are pros and cons, I think...

KMJ: I suppose I was thinking of the *Blue Valentine* trailer [produced by Zealot], which is mainly built around Ryan Gosling singing a song, with images cut over that, just felt - to me - like a different approach?

SF: Yeah, it is... And that's a good example, you know, that is a great example where we were probably able to do something adventurous - but, to be honest, if a studio had that same film - and that film had lots of strengths and lots of challenges, and the challenges were it could be perceived as bleak, or cold, or potentially depressing, you know, and people on a Friday night don't want to go out and be depressed - then finding a way to make it melancholic but still have a charm and, you know, they may have ended up in the same place. And, I mean, *The Social Network* [trailer]... they used one track, which was, I think, that choir of school kids singing 'Creep'... and they used that for the whole thing, and it had a pretty unusual structure too, with a whole load of Facebook stuff up front, so it broke rules, and I guess you'd see that as a mainstream trailer, so... a lot of its dictated by the film - the difference is, if you're working on studio films, they do tend to follow certain rules themselves and subsequently as a result the trailers probably follow, whereas you know, something like *Blue Valentine* probably wouldn't pop up so often.

KMJ: As we're talking about approaches to trailer production, is there a traditional process you go through either when pitching for work, or being asked to work on a particular film?

SF: Oh, yeah, definitely... there's no magic to trailer cutting. I mean, there is magic as in the guys who sit in the suite, ultimately they've either got that ability to really create something special, or they haven't - but in terms of the process, if you follow the process and you plug the right people into that process along the way, you will end up with a reasonably

good trailer no matter what. If you approach it haphazardly, without that sort of process and experience, it's easy to get lost... while there's a lot of creativity goes on within the process, the process is very structured from brief to script to first cut, first work in progress cut, internally reviewed, to the point where a cut is presented to the client, to the way we approach feedback, and then move forward... when we hit a hurdle there are certain protocols we follow, you know, which is to spread it out over another team... there is literally a very rigid creative process which it all hangs off.

KMJ: Other, older, trailer makers I've interviewed have described trailer production as having an element of autonomy about it - do you think that's accurate, or has that changed over the years?

SF: I think it's probably changed - I know when I started in Australia, which was probably, what, fifteen years ago, and that was probably the equivalent of what the industry here was fifteen years before that! And you did have autonomy, because the options... I mean, you had the film editors having a crack at the trailer when they finished cutting the film, people cutting in their front room on a Steenbeck - literally, it was that kind of, 'oh, we've got to do a trailer now'. But now it is a business, and there's companies all around, and there isn't truly autonomy because, you know, your work is part of a pretty big production line, and you're one of the cogs on that, you happen to be at the end of it, but you've got a client [who is] very switched on about what they need and what they want... you work very closely with them to meet their needs and goals alongside trying to be as creative as you can. So, no, I don't think so any more, I think it's probably changed - and I know what you're talking about, because when I started, it was much more... it was just a bit more of a frontier land, you just tried things, you tested things out...

KMJ: In terms of Zealot's work, are you pitching for specific jobs or are you now at a stage where people, companies, will come to you, commission you for a job?

SF: Ninety-nine per cent of the time, it's a commission... we will target certain projects that we would like to work on, and potentially pitch on them, or target certain clients, studio clients or whatever that we think we'd really like a chance to work with them, and the best way is to go in and put our money where our mouth is and say, we'll show you what we're capable of so that you'll consider looking outside of your current stable of people that you use - BUT, ninety-nine per cent of our work is

straight people coming to us, commissioning work - a huge amount of repeat business... in reality, the industry's not that big... once you get known, it just becomes about word of mouth and your type of work.

KMJ: Going back to that idea of process, what are the different jobs within trailer production? What strengths do you need, and what is the crossover between the different jobs within the industry?

SF: Different jobs? Basically, it's a team... [at Zealot] we basically have a producer who's across the job - his job is to manage it and liaise back and forth with the client - we have scriptwriters who come up with the 'voice of God' lines or whatever, the structure... and they're not just limited to the trailer script of whether it's graphics cards saying certain things, they contribute creative ideas, creative fodder to the process - we have music supervisors who help locate appropriate music - then we have graphic designers who are working out the look of the cards and any title elements, certain effects - but... you know, where the rubber really hits the road, is what we call creatives, but they're editors as such, they're the guys that sit in the edit suites, day in, day out, physically drawing all the resources that that group of people bring into that room and putting them together, and hopefully producing something that runs for two minutes and...works! Everything we do is feeding them assets to see what they do... if the editor's not able to actually string it together in a way that finally, really, works, then you got problems...

KMJ: Obviously, you're overseeing all of this activity now, but when you talk about that group of people - music supervisors, designers, scriptwriters, creatives - where does the process start? If someone comes to you with a commission and wants a trailer made for 'X' film, where does that process begin?

SF: We all watch it, and we all sit in a room, and we brainstorm, and talk about it, and we dissect it and, you know, we go through a series of silly little games like 'sum the film up in a sentence', you know, 'what is it we're actually selling', what's the key story line, story arc, who's the key character, we just, we do a lot of film analysis, really, but we do both the analysis of the film as a film, but we also do the analysis of what the film wants to be, or can be, or should be - and we also talk about, you know, a lot of what/who the audience is, what they look like, how they are, what's going to make them go and see this film, and what are the elements that we are going to be able to put forward...

KMJ: And some of that material will be given to you by the client?

SF: Absolutely - it varies, you know, some clients are very prescriptive, you get a fantastic brief where they're "we've market tested this film, this is our demographic, this is our audience, these are the kind of cinemas we see it in, these are the comp films that we like that we see it working in a similar way" - you get those kind of briefs that really nail down, "we don't want to show this character, we don't want to show this storyline, we want to avoid any reference to alcoholism", whatever it is. Then you get the other brief which is basically "here's the film, you know what you're doing, go for it" - and we get everything between...

KMJ: For you, then, what does a trailer have to have to be effective?

SF: I think the main thing is that it has to make you feel something, I mean I always say that... does it make you feel angry, happy, sad, cry, it's gotta evoke some kind of emotion, emotional response - otherwise, it's just information. That's what... we're striving for here, you want to reach and touch someone, and know that they actually feel something. Because then you really connect with them. Otherwise, okay, I get it, it's a drama, there's these characters, they do these things... so what? It's more like "oh, that poor woman, and oh my God, and will she make this, and what will happen?" *Oh*, I care - you know, that's a trailer, that's what it wants to be about.

Or, if it's a comedy, did I burst out laughing three times? Has it got three killer gags - "have you seen that trailer where the guy does that? Go watch it". You know, job done. That's what it's about.

KMJ: You talked earlier about the importance the editor, and the role of the soundtrack. Are there other, basic, elements that a good trailer needs?

SF: No, that's it really... you can't underestimate the value of music, I think it's probably one of the biggest things. There's so much borrowed emotion and credibility comes with the right piece of music - that's the key thing.

I mean, the other key thing, and I talk a lot about this, is does the film have trailer moments? In fact, I think we approach the business cock-

eyed in that, at the script development stage, they should probably bring in trailer marketing experts... or tell me in your script, you're telling me it's a comedy, show me your three killer trailer gags that I'm going to put in the trailer - oh, I'm not sure that one plays too well and that one... look, go back and rewrite until you've got the three punchy short gags that'll work in the trailer. Great lines, you know, "you had me at hello" - if it's a comedy-romance - where's your "hasta la vista, baby"? These are the things that - if you can't instantly go into the script and find them, it's very hard.

So, the things that you really need are a film that has, what I call, trailer moments - and not all do - but the best way we can make this thing feel impressive is sound design and music, alongside the editing.

It's not just the music - there's a whole language now about trailers that allows us to condense two hours into two minutes and understand it... in the course of like five seconds, you're cutting possibly ten shots together that are from all different parts of that film - well, three of them are not, three of them are meant to be continuity, then there's another scene, and we use dips to black, we use whooshes, little cymbal effects, there's all these little punctuation language things we've developed now in sound and vision that allow you to watch and know "I'm not meant to think that that person is talking to that person, there's two different scenes" - so, sound design is a huge thing, it's a combination of dips, first, to wipes, dissolves, and sound effects, which make no logical sense whatsoever, but we have a whole language of them now. As viewers we've become accustomed to them, so we can watch a trailer - otherwise, it's like reading a page with no full stops, paragraphs, or commas, you know? The sound design plays a huge part in editing.

KMJ: Given most trailers are produced before the film's score is completed, how do you find the right music for a trailer?

SF: Ninety-nine per cent of the time, the score is no good for the trailer, might work in the front act or middle act, but very rarely, because the score is so designed to do a different purpose, it's to set up scenes - music in trailers is the absolute heartbeat, the foundation, whatever, so invariably whether the score's done or not, the reality is we can't use it.

So, there's a combination. There's brilliant guys who write great stuff we use; there's great libraries; and occasionally you can find the ability to purchase a commercial track, so the Phillip Glass track for *The King's Speech* - not a track that was even in the film - it was the right piece for that trailer.

KMJ: Given your experience, from working on *Four Weddings and a Funeral* to now, what have been the big changes over the last twenty years, both in terms of the industry, or how trailers look?

SF: Oh, for me the big change is the digital stuff, I think most industries are the same, and ours has been hugely affected by it... when I started cutting those things, we were operating, we were cutting on three quarter inch tapes, it was all linear, you had two soundtracks to work with, you'd keep going down tape generations as you'd try to change different things but, of course, you couldn't just ellipse a shot, pull everything up, you had to re-cut down to that - it was a nightmare, and so your creativity was incredibly restricted by what you could physically do. You had to imagine your dissolves, you had to imagine your supers, your card, your graphics, you had to imagine your dips to black, you had to imagine what all the tracks would sound like combined together because you could never hear them - you know, these guys just have no idea what it's like.

Having said that, the result is we're seeing trailers and things that just are so creative. I mean, you know yourself, but if you look at a trailer even - I remember recently thinking "oh yeah, *The English Patient* (Minghella, 1996), that'll be a really good comp reference for a film we're working on", but if you watch the trailer... it's slow, it's very simple, and by today's standards we'd all just go, oh that looks dreary, but it's because we're so used now to seeing and hearing five or six different sounds coming at us, while there's an image with a graphic over the top, and if one shots held for more than three or four seconds in a trailer, we'd be like 'what's going on?' [But as] we put this material out there, and people get more used to watching it, things just happen faster - it's like, if you jumped in a car in the twenties, you're going along at eleven miles an hour and you're thinking 'oh my god' and now, if you jumped in and you were doing a hundred, you'd have a heart attack. You know, you just build up to these things.

But, yes, the digital thing, both on the vision and the audio side, is just incredible, you know? What we can do in suites now with the visual effects, it just blows me away. But in a good way, because... it is a really great example of technology... *allowing* amazing creativity. And also I think what's really good, is you're seeing these guys coming through - I got a young guy here, I employed two of them in the last two years, who've come through at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, sitting at home re-cutting trailers of their favourite films on a bit of kit that they can have in their bedroom... they get these incredible training grounds, so they get really good.

KMJ: Given that, do fan / home-produced trailers have an impact elsewhere, in terms of how trailers are being produced? Is there a problem that five or six fan-produced trailers will pop up on the Internet while produce the “official” version?

SF: I know what you’re saying. That doesn’t worry me because the fact is... millions of people will watch ours *and* those five or six - ten years ago, I would work on a trailer, it would be in the cinema for five, six weeks, it would be on the front of a rental VHS for... six months in the dusty section at the back and then they’d all get trashed, and then it would cease to exist, pretty much... when we wanted to watch comp trailers for, well, what would be a good reference film, you couldn’t get hold of them - you’d go to VHS shops and try to rent videos that you hope might have a couple of good trailers on the front because of that film being what it is you might see a trailer that has some reference to it - now, these guys [will be]... looking at the latest trailers [online]... again, it’s just technology feeding creativity.

KMJ: Linked to that notion of the digital, do trailer producers need to take account of the multi-media, multi-platform world that we’re now - apparently - in?

SF: I think so - and I think they are... more trailers are seen over the internet than they are in cinemas, for a start, but we are creating specific materials now for the internet - it’s still really finding its way, you know, all these new technologies. There’s no question that we recognise this is an amazing conduit to get in front of billions of people round the world to promote your film, so, if you want people to really pay attention to that, you need to give them a reason, so there’s lots of people playing around with lots of ways to try and create something with bits and pieces of things that drive viewers to then go and see that film, or whatever.

So, we are doing more about that, but it’s still, really, you know... I think no one quite fully has it hooked... it’s still very hit and miss. If you create a trailer, you know where it’s going to screen, you know what it’s going to do, how it’s going to work. You create something... this idea of creating a viral campaign is a real fishing trip, a real fishing expedition. Because the sheer nature of something ‘going viral’ you can’t just pre-plan that, it either does or it doesn’t, so you can create something that might have the capacity to, but you can’t make it or force it... I think it’s created amazing opportunities for us... More people are talking about trailers, re-cutting trailers, thinking about them, arguing about them, trying to come up with

clever ways to get them seen on the internet... it's great.

KMJ: For me, over the last few years, it's been interesting to watch trailers start to have a popular value, people actually searching out trailers, storing them, re-watching them...

SF: Absolutely. They are as close as they've ever been in history - as you said - to being identified as an art form in their own right. And I think they truly are... we've understood commercial art for years... people go "okay, that was created for a commercial purpose, but it warrants its place in a museum", or its the Citroën DS car, it doesn't matter - it had a purpose, a utilitarian purpose, but it is a beautiful piece of creative art, and I think trailers have that potential.

You can watch two minutes, you can engage with characters, you can laugh, you can cry, you can get the hair up on the back of your neck, you can feel something - now at the end of the day, that's what a film is doing, it's just doing it in an hour and a half... the trailer tries to give the audience a similar experience albeit in a very small bite-size piece, but that's an art form. If you can get someone to watch a trailer and, by the end of it, have a tear roll down their cheek, I don't see that that's any less creative than if you've managed to do that in a film that took an hour and a half.

KMJ: Has the creation of industry-level awards helped foster that sense of trailers as an art form? Has it legitimised the trailer?

SF: I don't think so. The only way... it's been legitimised is because the public, people, genuinely enjoy watching trailers... I don't think that many people know about the trailer awards outside the industry, all they know is "what's the new trailer up on Apple trailers today?" They don't know whether or not it won an award, and they don't care - it's either cool and they e-mail their mates, send links, or it's not and they couldn't give a toss... [about the awards] like most industries, it's a nice thing to recognise your peers, but that's what it is.

KMJ: Are the people working in trailer production in the industry because that's what they want to do, or is it a stepping stone to something else?

SF: It's shifting, you know? Much more now people come to trailers as an end, as a creative end to itself, this is what they want to do. Ten, twelve years ago, you used to get "I really want to be a director but I have to pay the bills and this is a really good creative solution for me" - but less and less of that now. You certainly very rarely get people doing it on the side... it's not like it's just a way to pay the bills... For most people it's their full time job and it's where they want to be, full stop.

KMJ: As we wrap up the interview, then, what do you see as the main challenges facing you as a company in the industry? What are the challenges for you, moving forward?

SF: Look, I just enjoy what I do. I would like the business to grow bigger, work on more diverse product - but just building on what we're doing, really. I don't have any great aspirations to change the industry or change what we do or fundamentally do it differently. I'd like to grow the business wider, just so it has a further reach so we get to work on broader product, more product, because I enjoy it.

KMJ: In terms of the individual trailer makers here, are there challenges they've got, things they want to do, things they want to try out, do more of?

SF: I think everyone enjoys working on films that - look, when you work on a *King's Speech* or something and it becomes a really mainstream film, that's probably what we really aspire to do, that's the goal. The more you're being asked to work on the kinds of films that have potential to go super-wide and recognised... because the guys like going to a cinema and there's their trailer playing in front of... in every screen in the multiplex, seven days a week; if you're working on smaller films, that happens less... you work on a *King's Speech* and everyone saw the trailer, everyone knew what they'd done, and they're proud of that.

KMJ: So there is still a desire to see these trailers on the big screen, even with the rise of people watching on the internet?

SF: Well, even the internet - it's just about being in mainstream consciousness. We work on a range of films, from quite small niche, which you know will have a very finite number of people ever see it, and we work on films where you look at the number of hits and you think,

wow, that's incredible, so it's a bit of an ego thing. But I guess if you're going to put your heart and soul into something, just like filmmakers, the goal is that more people will see it, the better... it feels more worthwhile for the effort... so yeah, that's it...

KMJ: Shaun, thank you very much...

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