

The Secret of Eel Island

Charlie Gauvain Producer 2006

"Never film with animals or children," they say, "What about animals, children, stunts and water?", I reply. With a cast that included a tame otter, magpies, a horse, goat, parrot, chickens and live eels and the two leads being 8 and 11 we had set ourselves a challenge. We set up castings for the lead children in Cambridge, Ipswich, London and Norwich and in the end there was no question as to who the leads should be, and both were local. Elysia Lukoszevieze from Norwich, Sapphire, had never even been to an audition before, but her innocence and confidence shone through. Luke Ward-Wilkinson, Scott, already had an agent in Cambridge and a long list of credits, but had never played a lead like this.

The locations were so crucial to the film and since there isn't a real island of the size we were looking for we had to shoot the interior of the island on the beautiful wildlife reserve just south of Norwich called The Ted Ellis Trust, with the exterior of the island filmed in Suffolk. The decision that Sapphire should live on a houseboat moored in the middle of a clearing in a wood was scripturally perfect. Logistically it was a nightmare. Moving a 2.5 ton boat into a clearing in the middle of the wood, at least 50m from the nearest vehicular point and without damaging the reserve was impossible. So we bought an old boat, chopped it into pieces, physically carried it into the clearing and rebuilt it.

And the tree house? It needed to look as though it was 60ft in the air, so the ladders and first platforms were placed in a massive tree by tree surgeons (apparently John Ellis' favourite tree in the reserve), whilst the top was built 10ft off the ground by our magical art department. And so it went on. And when the shoot began, so did the rain. The wettest August in 100 years or at least it felt that way. Continuity being paramount with 13 episodes each one taking place over a day, or two at most. The Secret Place where Sapphire lived only got the right light in the afternoon, so we could only film then and couldn't shoot location by location. The otter might be tame, but it didn't do what it was meant to (you might have guessed this!) and filming on water necessitated safety crews, which often needed to be called on with only an hour's notice as the scheduled changed and changed again. To be fair those 39 days were not the happiest of my life. We lost perspective on what we were doing and even whether it was any good. It was only after we finished and started seeing some of the episodes coming together that it started to feel worthwhile again.

A year later and we made it, the series looks wonderful and the feedback has been fantastic. Everything has been done in house, from the casting, production, editing and polishing touches such as the music. We've made it work here in East Anglia, in Norwich and we're really proud. We think it's magical and my children have already become the first fans. Let me know what you think? charlie@eyefilmandtv.co.uk