



Life in Locations: David Broder

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David Broder has almost died for his art – surviving a helicopter crash in Morocco and an unplanned overnight stay on a live volcano in Tanzania with 120 other crew members. He is a location manager, with a background working in the capital and across the world. He is also one of the creative minds behind *Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones*, *Spider* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. [*Son of Rambow*](#), one of his latest projects, can be seen in cinemas from 4 April. We ask him about his experience on this feature and his career to date...

What's your personal opinion of Son of Rambow – did you like it?

I loved it! I knew Garth and Nick very well, I'd done some commercials and promos with them a long time ago and then did Hitchhikers' Guide with them. I know them socially anyway - it's like going to work with friends. It's a great atmosphere. The film itself was very personal to Garth. I'd read a draft a long, long time ago. I was a bit unsure about the script to start with, until Garth explained some sequences to me which made me laugh - it's very precise the way he wanted to shoot it.

It's one of those feel good films that doesn't come along that often. It has a British wit about it. Lee and Will (the main characters), they form this magic little bond. It's not just about family values - it's looking at things through a child's eyes. Both sets of parents are not really there for these boys, so they find each other. It has high production values for a film of that scale. And it has lots of great jokes in it. I haven't met anyone who doesn't love it.

When did you come on board?

I was the first person they employed. We got together and did a breakdown and talked about where he (Garth) was from in Essex and I suggested some places that I knew out more towards Hertfordshire. We were looking for the 'heart of England' feel. There is an area that starts after Hemel Hempstead and goes out to Berkhamstead/Tring - the start of the Chilterns. The landscape becomes a little bit more dramatic. The colours are slightly different. The greens are a bit deeper, which sounds a little pretentious in a way, but it really does come across on the screen. Some people may know this – there's a little weather system, that London is part of, it's protected by the continent. It does change the look of the landscape. The geology changes. In fact, the UK has the most diverse geology of any country in the world. Basically you're on the edge of the continental shelf of Europe. It has this diverse geology that creates slightly different looks and tones.

Tell us more about some of the locations you found...

I found this school called Ashlyns School, in Berkhamstead, that was a foundling hospital built in 1911. It had a great look to it, an old feel to it and lovely long corridors. We wanted a reality to it – you needed to believe it was a comprehensive school. We didn't want Grange Hill, we didn't want Hogwarts – we wanted something in the middle. One of the opening shots, one of the few crane shots in the film where the little boy is dropped off by the family and Garth drew a visual and I found exactly what he wanted. It needed to have gates, with the school in the background and then wings and playing fields in the foreground. It tells you everything you needed to know in a single shot, a single second.

What was the trickiest location you had to source?

The power station was the most difficult location to find. Ideally you want everything within the M25 or just outside – we were based at Elstree which dictates that north-west circuit into Hertfordshire. I did an internet search. He (Garth) drew a cooling tower with the two main characters in front of it. I found this one called Richborough. You could see it from the motorway 20 miles away and I just knew it was right. We hadn't budgeted to take the crew away and the cast of children that need chaperones. It was difficult to do, but the location dictated this.

On locations the writer may put something in that just isn't achievable, but you just work with the director and designer to come up with ideas. I always try and steer the director and designer towards believability. Away from the fourth wall thing, where you're entering into this alternative reality of film-making it's a shame if the location jars and people think 'that couldn't be right'.

Is location management predominantly a logistical role?

In the recce stage it is more creative - it becomes more logistical the closer you get to shooting. When you are shooting it is a logistics role. It's a 50/50 – you need to have a foot in both camps.

Do you tend to work with the same people again and again?

Yeah, I've built up teams over the years. My assistants stick with me for a while and then most of them go on to become

location managers. You work with people you trust and I'm hopefully good friends with most of the people I work with.

Besides the people surrounding you there must be key equipment, such as a vehicle, mobile phone, digital camera, laptop, that are necessary within this role?

You need a decent digital SLR for the stability of the shot. I tend not to use tripods – there are the old tricks of leaning against walls that I've taught a few people. If you're doing a period drama or a presentation to studio heads then you need to use lights and do a professional job. You can take as many shots as you like and then edit them out. I now use a photo share website – [SmugMug](#), some people use [Flickr](#). It makes photography accessible – that's the future.

Do you use the [Film London Directory](#) to source locations?

For things like London landmarks, views of London – I needed some stuff recently of the Swiss Re building for an American producer and Film London is the first stop for that. If you need a shot of the Tate Modern you should go to the Film London website and that's what most location managers do.

Do you ever call the locations department to brainstorm an idea?

Of course, I'll call in and speak to Susie Williams, or the locations folio service Akshay provides is great. I think most location managers are aware of this service and use it.

You used some London locations in *Son of Rambow* – was this for convenience?

They were just right. It wasn't schedule driven. We used the London locations because they were good. We used a hospital in Battersea which has been used for some TV dramas – called Bollingbrook. We used an empty B&Q at Hangar Lane. As we were based in Elstree we were able to dip in and out of London for various things.

How big was the locations team for this film?

Three in all – myself; Sam Leek, who was the Assistant Location Manager; and I had a Unit Manager, Bobby Prince.

With long hours working in production, you must form bonds with the people surrounding you – so do you spend time with them outside of this setting?

I try and avoid just socialising with film people – I like to get back into the real world. It can be quite insular - when you're working on a big film that becomes your life and it's often very difficult, when it finishes you have real withdrawal symptoms.

I've done amazing films and you can live this amazing adventure. I had my own helicopter and my own plane at times in Kenya for *Tomb Raider 2*. But you come back, and the friends that you go to football with are just not interested, because they cannot relate to that. They'll listen to it for 5 minutes and then their eyes will glaze over. It's like anything – it's interesting for a little while, but it's like an alternative reality. Don't live film. Do that as your job – if you work in it and you're a success you're very lucky and that's why lots of people want to do it.

What do you do for fun?

I garden and I cook, I go to the football, I paint and I do a bit of writing...And I play with my kids.

I hear one of your children was in one of the feature films you worked on?

In *Eastern Promises* the story centres round an orphaned baby. As a location manager you spend a lot of time in the creative process with the director and the production designer, and you end up talking about normal life, as well as the film. They were aware my wife was pregnant. She was born three days before the film started shooting in November 2006. In the script we needed a new born baby which can be very difficult to get licensed – for health and safety reasons. David Cronenberg, the director, asked to see a photo of Ella - he thought she was perfect and asked if she could be in the film.

Have you ever been in a film?

When I was at college I was in *Full Metal Jacket* as an extra. I was one of the guys at the training camp. I worked with Stanley Kubrick. It was good to be part of - I did it for a few weeks.

Do you have a favourite director or film?

Barry Lyndon is my favourite film, by Stanley Kubrick. I like *Singing in the Rain* as well as a complete contrast. Recent films I think *Master and Commander* is amazing – and I don't know why they haven't made another one. I kind of like all sorts of films.

Finally, do you have any general advice for people trying to break into the industry?

Try and be an art director, try and be an assistant location manager, try and be an assistant director. Get experience, get out there, you earn money at the same time. You'll find your way and you'll meet different people. You'll have to do free films - don't expect to be paid straight away. Go on [Mandy.com](#), work on student films, shorts and find out what's happening. It is hard to get your foot in the door. You have to make awkward phone calls, but that's just what you have to do. The opportunities are there. Stick at it. Work hard. You have to make tea and you have to have a driving license. Have energy and intelligence. Ask the right questions and know when to keep quiet.

A [profile of David Broder](#) can be found on The Internet Movie Database, including a list of his recent film credits.