

DOP Dan Freene ACS



Soul Mates

A TV Comedy with The Bondi Hipsters

PHOTO Patrick Stevenson



Adrian & Dom (Nick Boshier & Christian Van Vuuren) breaking all the rules of conduct in a Bondi yoga class. Photo Patrick Stevenson

On the drive home after a very long day shooting a TV promo, my agent calls asking if I can meet the VanVuuren Brothers in an hour. "The who..?" I reply. "The Bondi Hipsters..." my agent goes on... "They want you to shoot their new ABC comedy series."

Six weeks, and many long nights later. We are 100 years in the future with a half robot half man shooting laser cannons at Hitler, in the Neopaethic Era throwing poop at Cavemen, and in the 1980's, assassinating bunny rabbits. All part of a very strange and wonderful new ABC TV comedy show called *Soul Mates*.

Like many of my esteemed colleagues, I cut my cinematographic teeth in a world of commercials, short films, and features. In my short career, I have managed to have a pretty good run in these fields, and it would be fair to say it has only been the last handful of years with both the local and international television productions really lifting their shows to the next level, where I have actually seriously thought about spreading my aspirations into the world of television.

With *Soul Mates* being my first TV show, there were some things I needed to get my head around right from the very first day of pre-production. In the first hour of the first day of pre-production whilst chatting with the first AD, Jeremy Grogan I realised I needed a truck load more prep time than I was granted for the show. It was quite confronting actually. In fact I was overseas shooting a commercial in Asia prior to commencement, and I literally got off the plane at 0700 on Monday morning and went straight to the production office.

Soul Mates was made up of six half hour episodes. 180 minutes total. Due to cut backs the shooting schedule was dropped from five to four weeks. With virtually zero overtime.

Left: Christian Van Vuuren as Rocky in *Cavemen*.

This equated to 50 hours per week, not a second more, over four weeks. Essentially, for those of you who have shot features, it's like shooting two x 90 minute feature films in the time the most frugal of small Australian features are granted, with two weeks of pre-production, so you can see the challenge.

The Bondi Hipsters characters are best friends, Adrian and Dominic, played by Nick Boshier and Christian VanVuuren, along with Christian's brother Connor who writes and directs. They had huge success with their You Tube Videos created a few years ago where the boys play the two moronic "hipsters" living in Bondi. Along with all the generic Hipster traits of silly beards, thick rimmed glasses, and lots of Hipster irony, their online videos had huge success giving them a large regular online audience, which very much helped to encourage the ABC, and Screen Australia into funding this six part TV Comedy show.

Soul Mates was broken into four worlds, and each world features two characters who are partners or best friends. *Cavemen*, "set around 50,000 years BC, made with very simple almost cartoon like coverage, similar to the *Flintstone* cartoons of the 70's and 80's. *Kiwi Assassins*, a heightened cop action/drama designed to feel something like the *Lethal Weapon* franchised movies in the early 80's, *Time Travel*, set in a travel office a hundred years in the future that offers holidays to any time period which we covered much like the TV show *The Office*. And *The Bondi Hipsters*, set now, in a hyper real, and 'Hipsterfied' Bondi. Apart from *Time Travel*, which was a built set, the other three worlds were all practical locations, all to be dressed and designed in their corresponding period.

I spent the bulk of pre-production looking at locations, as

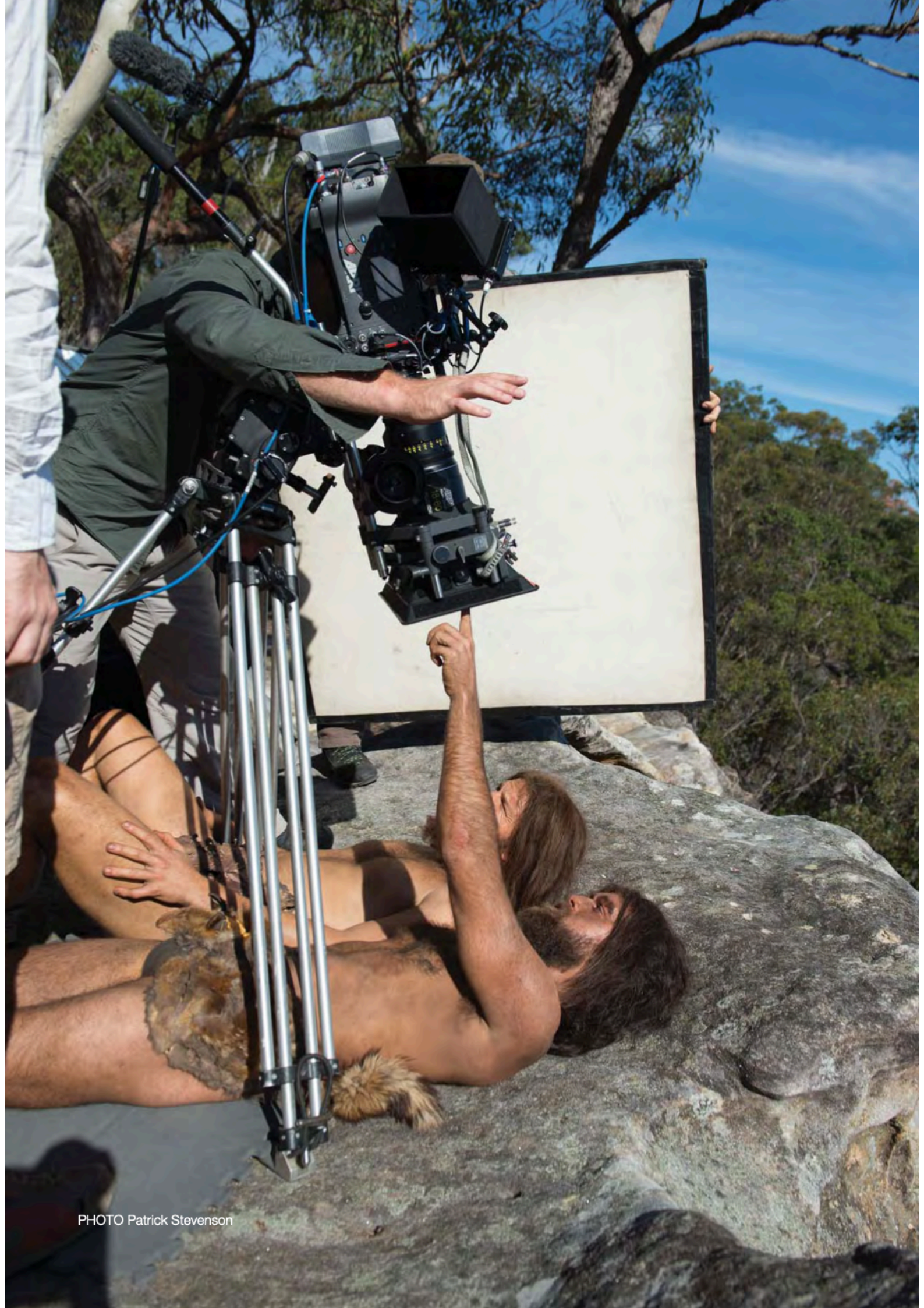


PHOTO Patrick Stevenson



The Bondi Hipsters Adrian, Dom and new girl friend Kelly hanging at a fashion bar. Photo Patrick Stevenson.

there was something like 26 of them all over town. Even though this was my first TV show I have shot several features and hundreds of commercials so I had some idea of what we needed from the locations to move quickly and get a good looking show. Most of the location decisions were made prior to me starting, and from speaking with other more experienced Cinematographers I have heard this is pretty normal practice, even on much bigger and more expensive shows. In my opinion I think we are often pulled onto long form productions way too late, resulting in production changes made only once we start seeing the pitfalls of the ones already chosen. I have a philosophy with locations, and that is that the right location always exists, we just haven't found it yet. Anyhow, over a few Sundays, and long nights of searching the city, we eventually found the right locations, and yes, they looked a lot better, saved us time, and in turn meant we had much better coverage and a better looking show.

For a Cinematographer the four worlds that made up *Soul Mates* made the show incredibly fun to shoot. Each part of the show required completely different coverage, and quite varied lighting styles. For me the most fun was the *Kiwi Assassins* world. The two cops, Roger Blade, and Terry Thing along with their superior, a beastly woman in Mum, are from the "Ministry of Defense" in New Zealand, and have come to Australia to take back what is rightly owned by New Zealand. Their first mission is to bring 7 year old acting protege Russell Crowe back to Auckland. Bad accents, giant gun fights, training montages to synthesised 80's electro tracks, stunt driving, this was a lot of fun to shoot... In fact almost everyday the boys had the entire *Soul Mates* crew doubled over in laughter. We even had to make a two hander a VFX shot, and shot the boys separately as they just could not keep a straight face through the scene! Photographically, it was also really cool as we wanted it to look and feel like an 80's American

Cop film. Lots of depth, long lenses, smooth camera moves, considered coverage and raking moody lighting made this just awesome fun to shoot. It also had the most night work, which I prefer to daylight, mainly because you have full control over the scene. Areas you don't want to see you can just let fall into darkness, and I like to use more modelling and mood to help direct the audiences eye.

The *Bondi Hipsters* world is set now in a hyper real Bondi where our two 'Hipsters' are trying to start their own Fashion Label. Nick and Christian had this world very well figured out as they had been playing these characters for a few years now, and yes, they are also extremely funny. Compositionally, Connor and Christian wanted the coverage to be shot very square on, almost in the vein of Wes Anderson films. Very close eye lines, and absolutely no over the shoulder coverage. In fact we very often covered scenes straight on, and then any subsequent coverage would come from square leg, or 90 degree's. It seems simple until you get into larger groups of characters, as you end up shooting square two shots in between groupings of people with the line crossing between each of the characters. So, in theory you need two singles of each person on both sides of the line, so the coverage can get complicated very easily. The edits worked beautifully, so there was never any great concern, but it keeps you on your toes. The lighting and colours in this world are pretty hyper. Lots of reds, pinks and vividly saturated colour. Really poppy looking, and over all mostly brighter in tone compared to *Kiwi Assassins*. In fact one of our style guides was for it to look like a glossy tabloid magazine like *Hello*, or *Who Weekly*.

Cavemen was shot very quickly. In fact we shot 71 scenes in three days. And believe it or not it was originally scheduled to be a two day shoot. The coverage was exceptionally minimal. Generally a two shot, and two singles, mostly from a pretty



Finale of a musical interlude with Dom singing about buying a bag of coke. The whole crowd sing the chorus. Photo Patrick Stevenson.

static camera. The gags in *Cavemen* play out very much like the cartoon strips we used to read in newspapers, and most of those comic strip laughs can be told in three or four frames. It made for very fast comedy, which juxtaposes very well with the longer more complex story lines of the other worlds. The location was just north of French's Forest on a rocky outcrop. We had great weather, and as we shot in winter we had full days of lovely low Sydney sunshine throughout each day. Sydney winters are just great for exterior shoots as you have no problems with ugly toppy harsh sunlight like we get faced with in Summer, and our winter sunlight is crisp and has a lovely warmth. I used some Ultra bounces and poly in the hand, and a light Hampshire 12 x 12 scrim for close ups and mids. In fact I only used lights on the night work, which mainly consisted of two flame bars, and a M18 Bounced into a 4x4 Poly as a moon source. I kept the whole thing very simple. One thing that worked for us was the heavy makeup the boys were wearing as cavemen made them very dirty, brown and rugged looking. It's also set 50,000 years so I was very cautious of adding any artificial light that looked out of place.

The last world and the hardest for us to get right was *Time Travel*. The set was built in one of the Callan Park Film buildings. The space was OK, but needed a lot of dressing, painting and building to get right. The budget on the show was really tight, and by the time we got around to shooting *Time Travel* we were out of time and probably out of money. Karen Harborrow the production designer and her fantastic team were working around the clock trying to have the set ready for us. After the first day shooting in that space it was evident we needed more wall builds, more flats, and some more dressing to get us through the schedule, and have a *Time Travel* world that was going to do the show justice. It was a bit of a scramble but in the end half way through day two we were all sweet.

The world of *Time Travel* is set 100 years in the future and everything is turned on it's head. Single white males are a minority. Everything on planet earth is recycled, people use their thumb and pinky finger as mobile phones, and the two boys have a somewhat awkward relationship as Rob is sent back from a management retreat as a part man part robot. called Roboss. Nick Boshier spent five days in that robot suit which had a motorised go kart base for when we wanted it to wheel around, and just a wooden base on wheels for small movements when we were in on tighter shots. It was a complex world, with a lot of VFX hollow screens which would later be super imposed. The hollow screens could be opened by a *Time Travel* staff employee drawing the rectangular screen with their fingers. It would then light up, and come to life. For this screen we used LED light panels that we would wind in or out depending on the screen activity. Aside from this we had two *Time Travel* portal gates that flashed and zapped when people entered or returned, and laser beams that shoot out of Roboss when he goes into attack mode. It kept gaffer Russell Fewtrell, and Best Boy Roger Scott extremely busy. The coverage for *Time Travel* was to look something like the British TV Show *The Office*. It's a live handheld like, long zoom lens coverage. We had two ARRI Alura zooms, the T2.6 18-80mm and the T2.6 45-250mm, and we actually mostly used them on the O'Connor heads but totally loose. In shot we would push in on the zoom for funny lines or looks. It works really well for dry ironic comedy, and makes for very fast coverage. It's not really my preferred style of coverage but for this type of humour it was perfect. The two zooms worked well to cross cover too, as both lenses gave me a 45mm, and an 80mm. So I could get a midshot at 45mm, and a medium close up on the 80mm.

Another thing I learnt from making a show like this is that the humour is king. Often, as a Cinematographer I think we sometimes can get a little over precious regarding the



Terry Thinge (Nick Boshier) is caught Mid fight. Kiwi Assassins. Photo Patrick Stevenson.

complete control of the image. This is a good thing, as our standards should be high, however I think it can sometimes hinder the content, and one thing I have realised over time is it's better to have a funny interesting and captivating scene that we may not be 100 percent happy with, than to have something beautifully lit, perfectly composed but with no humour and no soul.

The VanVuuren brothers really wanted *Soul Mates* to stand out from the crowd. Their aspirations were really high, and the gags involved a lot of props, gun fights, VFX and really zany performances. As the Pre-production time was limited, I only really had time to shot list the Caveman world with the directors Connor and Christian. So, I had to learn very quickly how to cover a scene just from watching a rehearsal. Connor, and the boys would rough out a block, I would stand back with my B camera operator Simian Bryan and discuss the

shots I figured we would need. We may then change the block a little, and work it to camera. This is quite different for me as generally I like to go through shot lists and storyboards very thoroughly prior to the shoot commencement. I found this new fly by the seat of your pants coverage really refreshing. I think it gave us more fresh ideas, and made our production days very efficient. And when shooting 8 - 9 minutes per day, efficiency is king.

All in all *Soul Mates* was one wild ride, and for my first TV show it was a bit of baptism of fire. I had a fantastic crew behind me, and with Nick Boshier, Christian and Connor Van Vuuren really pushing the limits every day, no matter how hard pressed we were for time, each day really was truly enjoyable, and hey, I reckon any working day where the whole set is infected with raucous laughter is a good one.

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