

WILD AND FREE!

AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL FAWCETT & CLARA PAIS



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Savage Witches is a recent film written, directed and edited by Daniel Fawcett and Clara Pais that premièred on the 21st September at the Cambridge Film Festival. It is a kaleidoscopic foray into the imagination, which follows the magical adventures of two teenage girls in their search for freedom from the disciplinarian and all too “grown up” world around them. They speak in unison looking straight to the camera saying

*Let's not spend our lives
trapped like all these slaves,
They cannot see how fake they are,
going around in circles
to reinforce the lies.
They dance like in a bad ballet
and over-act like in a primitive play,
Jailers and inmates all of them.
Let's break free, like wild creatures!
Like Savage Witches wild and free!*

They are transported on a journey of magic keys, secret gardens and witchcraft conducted through a plethora of visual imagery and experimental effects.

Clara Pais and Daniel Fawcett are both members of the One+One editorial team, so I already had a sense of what I was going to see. I had seen clips, impressive clips I might add, and heard much talk about it from both of them. I had seen hand-painted photographs in their office, part of what seemed like a painstaking process of making a small segment of the film. I would come in regularly to find them editing some fantastically colourful and creative sequences on the laptop. I was expecting to be impressed.

There is nothing quite as unnerving as sitting in the cinema, watching a friend's film and waiting to be im-



pressed. Suddenly, while sitting in the cinema, I couldn't help but feel that the film was somehow going to disappoint. I imagined all their hard work falling to pieces. "Oh my God! I know it..." I thought "they are going to mess up somehow. It will be all fantastic imagery, but with no real substance" I continued to fret and as the film started I was obsessively looking out for the inappropriate effect, the lag in pace. But as the film progressed I felt increasingly seduced by the abundance of the visual delights. Each sequence was like a tasty morsel cocooned between more tasty morsels. I constantly wished I could rewind the film and watch a whole segment all over again. Collage! Animation! Montage and more. Each scene was so well crafted and so innovative. The whole thing was crammed with texture and colour. I got that feeling you get when you go to the art gallery and you just want to glide your hand over that rippled canvas; touch and plaster your fingers over everything. I soon realised that this film was not lacking content, the form was part of the content. The young girls' search for freedom overspilled and had coloured the whole visual process.

There was obviously a lot of work that went into this. Could you tell us a bit about the different effects, styles and methods you used?

That's a great response, a few people have also commented on having physical reactions to the film, not just wanting to touch it but that the film affected them physically somehow, this is fascinating. We wanted *Savage Witches* to be a film that almost bursts out of the screen and crosses over into life, we never felt that it was a passive thing to watch a film, physical reactions are good, the best films make us want to leap out of our seat and take action.

Making the film we wanted a process that was tactile and hands on, we didn't want to be at a distance, just telling other people what we wanted and letting them do it, we wanted to be involved with every part of the process from making props and sets to operating the cameras ourselves. We also found ways to affect the texture of the footage as we wanted to explore the material side of the image as well. This started by simply questioning what kind of camera we wanted to use and what could we do to the footage to make it work for us, we ended up filming with a bunch of different cameras – VHS, DV, HD, Super 8 and stills cameras. A lot of the footage went through a few layers of processing, for example, the VHS footage was transformed by projecting it and cranking up the colour settings in the projector, then re-filming it off the wall with an HD camera, the result is that incredibly rich quality of colour and blurry edges like an impressionist painting.

We also made animations for the film which sometimes would originate from still photos, other times from drawings or photocopies and even footage from which we would export each frame of a sequence, print it on paper, hand colour it then scan it back in. The burning sequence was made like this. We got right in there, inspected every frame. Working with single frames really alters your understanding of how films are made, we got right under the skin of the process of making a film.

Sound and music are intimately tied up in this project, they really add to the feel of this film. There are so many strange and unusual sounds there. Could you tell us a bit about this collaboration process?

The sound design was created by Simon Keep and the music by Fiona Bevan. For the soundtrack the music came first, as soon as we had a locked edit we sent the film to Fiona. We discussed with her the structure and the ideas behind each scene and then we left her to herself and she started creating the music, we wanted her to be as free as possible and put music where she felt the film needed music. Fiona was very interested in finding ways of recording and processing the music that mirrored



what we had done with the image. She then sent us this and we discussed with her what worked for us and what we weren't so sure about and she went away and built upon that. It went on like this, a back and forth process, until it was finished. Some things were finished very early on like the music for the end sequence, there wasn't a rough version of that, it was first take, we loved it so much that we kept it as it was. I think Fiona wanted to polish it up a bit, she even recorded an alternative version which was much slicker, and even though it was stunning it lacked the raw strangeness of the original which better suited the scene.

The sound design was the very last creative part of making the film, everything else had been done and committed to. *Savage Witches* was shot completely silent, we recorded the voice-overs in a studio while we were editing but the rest of the sound was created by Simon. We went through the film building the sound scene by scene, layer by layer, using a lot of recordings from his sound archive which he has been building for years, but we also recorded a lot, all the footsteps you hear in the film were recorded in the studio, Daniel did Gretchen's and Clara did Margarita's, we even did the footstep sounds for the chickens!

The film never adopts the pretence of realism. There is something fascinatingly artificial and theatrical about it. During the film we hear the actors describing their characters, at another point we hear them describing their frustration with the process and in another scene we see a storyboard rather than live action. In these moments the process intrudes into the "illusion" of the film and yet it still remains theatrical from start to finish. Why was it important that the process appear in the final product?

For us cinema is not about trying to make the audience believe that what they are seeing is real, that these girls are really witches etc, it is about what we can discover and understand through the play of making films. We are all actors, we play the directors, the girls are playing at being stars, you are playing the critic – it's all a game, but that doesn't devalue it, games are how we learn, discover and explore life. There didn't seem to be much difference between constructing scenes and documenting the process, the material was all there at the end and we presented it in the way that seemed to be most truthful. You could say *Savage Witches* is a documentary with fantasy elements rather than a theatrical film with documentary elements.

How do you think the actors coped with the process? Do you think this is the sort of film they expected?

Something that happened early on in the workshops with the actors was that we realised that the script was starting to become a hindrance, we found that the more the girls knew about the film and what they were doing the less interesting their performances became, so in order to capture the feeling we wanted we took away the script and we kept them in the dark from day to day about what they were doing. This was incredibly frustrating for them and drove them mad. But what this did was it made them hungry to know, they couldn't hide this feeling of frustration and lack of control, the feeling of searching for meaning and purpose, this is exactly what we wanted these charac-



ters to be about. So reality and illusion blended to create the truth of the situation. There were moments when they were very angry at us throughout because even though they had been told that the film would not be fixed to the script but would evolve and change as we went along I don't think they believed how far we would take it. For this type of film scripts can be a real hindrance, once people have seen them they cling on to them with dear life no matter how much you explain that it was just the starting point. I am sure the same thing would happen with producers or funders if we had to deal with them. We have no preciousness over the script, for us it is just a starting point, the first expression and the first steps of the exploration, it is a map of the territory we wish to explore but it can express very little of what it is to be out in the wilderness!

There are a lot of implicit references to mythology, the history of witchcraft and, I think, children's adventure stories. How did these things shape the film?

This is something which really evolved during the making of the film because the film developed in a way that was both following intuition and going through careful intellectual reflection. A lot of the symbols that we use in the film came unconsciously and their purpose and place either evolved or became clear to us only later. Things seem to always be dictated in part by the material in our unconscious, while making the film we tried to be as receptive as possible, to let those things flow and come out a bit more freely.

We are very interested in myths because their language is symbolic and what we find appealing is that symbols are used not as dead-ended or closed meanings but as doorways to ideas and experiences, something that can be both the instigator and the guide in our journey. The initial script had much more conventional elements of witchcraft and magic, in the beginning these were brought in as a device that we could use to break open the filmmaking conventions we were exploring, magic as an instigator of transformation both within the narrative and in the process.

There were also a lot of more personal symbols, things that we associated with our own experiences and memories. But we felt it was important to go deep into what purpose these symbols were serving, where they were taking us, and remain receptive to the changes that presented themselves to us which eventually revealed the bigger themes and the more universal currents in the things we were already exploring. Myths and magical stories are usually seen as superstitions, simplified ways to see the world or escapisms more appropriate for children, but they go much deeper than that if we are willing to open ourselves to them, they use symbols and structures that are as old as humankind and therefore are intricately connected with human psychology, that is why artists and creative people

in any area strive to foster and protect a childlike mind, both receptive and imaginative. A receptive mind is a potential for transformation, a change, an expansion of understanding, for real magic to take place!

In many ways the story appeared to play a secondary role to the visual experimentation. How important was the story to the overall film?

Savage Witches started with a script which had a fairly conventional narrative, it had a lot of the scenes which you will see in the finished film but there was a lot more explanation and going from A to B. As soon as we got a clear

understanding of what was at the core of this exploration, what its purpose was, then it became clear that some of the elements of the script had served their purpose and were no longer needed. Even when we had the script we intended to let this film follow the narrative of ideas rather than that of story, we wanted to celebrate the things we love about cinema, the play, the illusion and the artifice, the language of symbols and even though we love story-based films for this project it wasn't about telling stories as much as it was about constructing narrative, looking at those pieces that make up a story and taking them a part.

The film was also very poetic. In the literal sense, you had written a lot of poetry for this. There wasn't really dialogue in the conventional Hollywood sense. But also in the visual sense. It was like a montage of visual poetry. What drew you to this poetic approach?

Cinema has been around now for about 120 years and in that time it has been focused primarily on storytelling. Of course there have been those filmmakers who explore its other qualities and potentials but they are certainly in the minority and are always classed as outside or somehow alternative to 'real cinema'. One of the reasons cinema has maintained a fairly narrow focus is because it has until recently been very expensive to make films, this therefore has meant that those who control what is created are those who control the money. Early on it became clear that audiences responded well to story-based cinema and the money men of course responded to this by funding more story-based films until the industry was well and truly established and people's idea of what cinema is was well and truly tied up with storytelling. Times now are changing and the tools for making films are available for very little money and are easier to use than ever before. This should be the start of a rethinking of what cinema is about, various new languages of cinema could emerge, but before they do we have some serious work to do. The industrial approach to cinema is very much ingrained in our minds, even filmmakers making films outside of the system without money and without anyone telling them what to do still obey the rules of the system and the form of the industrial film. It is time to dig into this, explore and de-construct these conventions and see what else cinema could be. We don't have to discard things simply because they have come to us via industrial filmmaking but it is a time to question what they could be within a new form of cinema. And when we talk of form we are not only speaking of the film itself but of the process and world that surrounds it, the structure of cast and crew, the relationship to technology, distribution and the exhibition of the film. We arrived at the poetic approach out of questioning and experimenting with a form that felt right for our exploration at every level, if a story film was the best means then we would have done that.

One of the things I really liked was that the film was subtitled "A Motion Picture Exploration". The idea of "Motion Pictures" brings to mind the golden age of Hollywood, with allusions to its archaic charm, its aim to entertain and its commercially driven agenda. But the word "Exploration" brings to mind the opposite: the experimental avant-garde. Do you feel like you are living somewhere between both these worlds?



I don't know where we fit in and I don't think it matters much, whenever we talk to critics they want to know which boxes we fit into, we love all kinds of cinema and art and draw upon anything that excites us. We love 50's and 60's Hollywood, Douglas Sirk, Westerns, Technicolour movies like *Duel in the Sun*, *Johnny Guitar* and the films of Powell and Pressburger but we draw just as much on underground filmmakers such as The Kuchar Brother and Jeff Keen and people like Fassbinder and Jarman. Possibly the biggest influence on *Savage Witches* has come from the Czech New Wave film *Daisies* by Věra Chytilová, when we first saw *Daisies* it was a revelation, we found a form that was what we had been searching for!



What do you think you are trying to say (in the strong or weak sense) with this film? What is your “message” to the world.

We do not have a fixed message, *Savage Witches* is an exploration of cinema, of personal ideas relating to creative freedom and our relationship to the world around us. We tried not to consider too much how we thought the audience would respond and focused on creating our perfect movie, the movie that we wanted to watch and the experience we wanted to live through. Through it we have explored many ideas and at this point we have a certain reading of the film from our own point of view, but certainly this will evolve as it has done during the making of the film, the film allows our understanding of it to evolve and our ideas to change and this is exactly what we wanted. The hope is that if we make a movie that we are really happy with and truly believe in then there will probably be other people out there who will like it too. Audience reactions are something to be very careful about, really it doesn't matter if someone likes or dislikes the film, it matters more if we haven't made a film we believe in. We are not seeking outside confirmation that we have done OK, we love *Savage Witches*, after 18 months of living with the making of this film it is such a joy to watch it on the big screen, it has surprises for us and even now it reveals things to us that we had not known previously. We have been on a wonderful journey and the film is our way of presenting the results of this journey to an audience, and we hope that for the audience there is something in the sounds and images that is of use in their own journey.

Daniel, in the first issue of One+One you wrote a manifesto where you declared “My independence is better than your independence”. I have heard a lot of talk recently about *The King's Speech* as an independent film and that seems far away from my image of independent cinema. Clara, you have also written on the work of George Kuchar and Stan Brakhage, both of which seem to be advocating a different kind of filmmaking. One+One and The Underground Film Studio have grown simultaneously with the aim of encouraging a different kind of independence. What do you believe this independence is and where do you see it taking you?

Maybe what we are talking about here is freedom. We believe freedom is to be at peace with oneself and to be at ease with the world. We have found that through making art, specifically movies, we can experience a peace within ourselves, it is not about making products on the search for money or fame, it is about our personal exploration of the world. The independence element comes into play as a result of this, we cannot be on a truthful exploration if we have to pitch our film to bureaucrat funders who want us to explain who the audience is or summarise our movie in bite-size marketable statements, this stuff is crushing, it damages the mind, it distracts you from what is really important and stops you making the right decisions. If you spend enough time dealing with these people you'll start thinking like them, you'll find your inspiration suddenly becomes simplified and marketable, you can tick all the boxes and bamn you are in their club, sucking up after money and craving for fame, asking permission, that's the worst, we live in a world where you have to ask permission for everything, it's disgusting. It is important to remain independent simply to protect your own mind and energy, there is always a myriad of ways to do things and it's much more interesting to explore all of these than having to ask permission to do things. We make films on our terms, life is too beautiful and rich to waste time with all that nonsense.

Funding at the moment is very difficult. With all the cuts it is hard to know what is going to happen to the film culture in this country. What was your budget? How did you get funding? And how do you plan to continue to find funding in these uncertain times?

Cuts or no cuts the funding situation in the UK is terrible, the BFI just like the Film Council will have you jump through hoops and sell your soul for very little in return. You cannot be funded by these people and have creative control over your project, you have to choose. Making a film takes a lot of energy and quite a bit of time, *Savage Witches* took 18 months. Life is too short to spend 18 months on something and then feel unhappy about it at the end, for the kind of cinema we are interested in making there is no way we could do it with those kind of funders and come out happy at the end. We crowdfunded our film, people would make small donations towards the project if they liked the sound of it and had some cash to spare. These donations are not financial investments, they are simply giving it as a gift to support the project, we don't want to take any money from anyone who doesn't believe in us or the film. In return for the donations we give small gifts, tokens of appreciation such as posters, screening invites etc. This is the future of funding, the films' creators must be free. *Savage Witches* cost between four and five grand to make, start to finish, half the money came from sponsors and the other half we scraped together and put in ourselves. No one was paid and the film was made as a non-profit film, any money that turns up as a result of the film will be put into the next project. We try to have a minimal relationship to money, it's not that interesting, it comes and goes quite easily but rather than claw after it we prefer to focus on creating the film, we use what we have available and make that work. The filmmakers who desperately chase money and spend years waiting to make a film because they need more are wasting their lives, it's not worth it, making art is all about transformation, cinema is magic, anything is possible, with or without a pocket of jingling coins, let the coins and cameras roll!

How can people see this film?

We have lots of screenings coming up, the film will be available on DVD sometime in the next year, the best thing to do is keep an eye on the facebook page, we post all the info about screenings on there.

What do you plan to do next?

Our next film is called *The Gun That Killed Cassidy! Or: How I lost my mind and came to my senses*. It will be a strange and beautiful journey out of the cinema to the end of the world, we haven't made it yet so anything could happen, it's very exciting.

For more articles and information about the projects of *The Underground Film Studio*,
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