In the details.

Blue Spill's Anthony Brownmoore uses Autodesk Smoke to deal with the Devil in *REP 5091*.

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>   Partner / VFX Artist
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Image courtesy of Blue Spill

Summary

Anthony "Ant" Brownmoore (ne Brown) and Allison Brownmoore (nee Moore) have been doing this for a while now. It's been the better part of a decade since the VFX artists first met while working on a kid's show, and a half dozen years since they got married and took each other's name. The couple has been very busy freelancers for much of that time, Allison working as a motion graphics designer on a wide variety of film projects in the UK and US, and Ant working "here, there, and everywhere" in London's post production industry as a sought-after VFX supervisor, lead compositor, and more. With their professional lives growing increasingly hectic, the Brownmoores decided to officially form their own VFX and design company in 2012. A quick look at the company website reveals a wealth of past and present film, documentary, television, and commercial projects.

But like all truly great film projects, Ant's latest and greatest success got started mainly because he didn't quite know what he was getting into.

Clocking in at just over 20 minutes, *REP 5091* is a darkly humorous short film that provides a fresh and funny take on the time-honored theme of a desperate man making a deal with the Devil. Dissatisfied with his workaday existence, lonely

bachelor Martin Jones (Robin Holden) meets in his swanky London flat with "Douglas" (Daniel Abelson) a.k.a. "Rep. 5091" from an unnamed "agency" promising to help Martin achieve a better life. Slick and eccentric from the outset, Douglas' satanic qualities are gradually revealed through both the men's conversation and a wealth of highly polished visual effects.

Together with director (and old friend) Rob Smith, Ant formed a production company called A Beard and A No Show to create the ambitious short. It would be the first film for both men, and in addition to handling the film's plentiful visual effects using Autodesk® Smoke® software, Ant also wrote and co-produced the film.

"*REP 5091* started as a side-project, but it quickly grew legs and became a monster," he says. "Rob and I were getting lots of work, but it was not particularly creative stuff. We just decided to come up with something of our own and run with it. I also knew that the latest version of Smoke was coming out, and I knew this project would provide an ideal opportunity to get to know the new Smoke while telling our story. It did not disappoint."

Indeed, what began as a fun way to show off their particular creative skills would quickly grow into a long, dark road full of technical and creative

challenges for both the men and their crew. Never fear, however: there was a light at the end of this tunnel, and all souls remained the property of their original owners.

The challenge: Descent into Hell.

In the beginning, both Ant and Rob saw the process of making REP 5091 as relatively simple. Both men had worked on much bigger projects, after all. How difficult could a labor of love like this possibly be? Confident in the way only first-timers can be, "the beard" (Ant) and "the no-show" (Rob) imagined a couple actors sitting and talking in someone's front room while being filmed with Digital SLR Cameras.

The blissful naivete of that vision was quickly shattered when our filmmakers had the good fortune of meeting Director of Photography Emma Dalesman. "Emma smacked us round the back of our heads for being so stupid, then went off and got Panavision to donate proper cameras. She also put together an incredible crew. I don't know what would have happened without her."

Unfortunately, Emma wasn't able to get everything for free. As the project began to take on a life of its own, Ant and Rob suddenly realized why top-quality films cost money to produce. Fortunately,

the intrepid (and very funny) duo were able to rustle up sufficient cash using the crowd-sourcing site Sponsume.com. To drum up extra attention, they also created a website, as well as Facebook and Twitter accounts for the film.

One somewhat unexpected challenge came in the form of the 2012 London Olympics. With spectators arriving from all over the world, London flat-owners were renting out their homes to foreign visitors, not lending them to short film productions. As a result, REP 5091 ended up being shot in the foyer of an advertising agency meant to represent Martin's flat. It was the physical constraints of that location that would make Ant's visual effects work in Smoke all the more vital to the success of the film.

"It was a great space for our shoot, but because it was a place of business, we couldn't really change the physical aesthetic of the room," says Ant. "There is a shot of Douglas looking into a mirror, for example, that became problematic because we couldn't put a mirror up without damaging the wall. A lot of things like that had to be replaced with CG and effects, so the VFX process ended up having an interesting balance of the spectacular and the problem-solving."

The Solution: Paradise Regained

"Initially, the visual effects shots were written into the film both as a way of revealing and reinforcing this character's satanic powers, and as a way to showcase our effects expertise," continues Ant. "As the production progressed, however, Rob and Emma kept coming up with cool ideas that we could add to the mix. Stuff like: 'Oooh, wouldn't it be cool if the bookcase burst into flames' or 'It would be so cool if his coffee started to boil.' More than that, however, the effects ended up helping

us solve a wide variety of potential problems. The phrase 'Ant can add that in later' became a very popular one on that set."

And when they said "Ant can add that in later," they knew what they were talking about. A proud and inveterate problem-solver, Ant has long been known to create what he likes to call "kitchen table effects" for particularly pesky problems. Two scenes in REP 5091 requiring some boiling tea and a burning business card proved fresh meat for his unorthodox skills.

"Because he's the Devil, we wanted the tea in his cup to bubble up in his hand," says Ant. "We tried to make it a practical effect by running a tube into the cup and blowing bubbles, but the tube kept slipping out and making a mess. Similarly, there is a scene with a business card that burns up in Douglas' hand. In the end, I was able to film some bubbling tea and a burning post-it note on my kitchen table. Smoke gave us these great compositing tools right in the timeline that enabled us to cut down our time filming on-set by doing it all with visual effects."

Another crucial scene in the film involves a game-show like segment in which Douglas describes the lives available to Martin in exchange for his immortal soul. Ant initially wrote the scene as more of a shopping channel look which would have been shot live on the set with various props and a digital display. Due to the circumstances, however, Ant ended up doing a full greenscreen shoot and CG set build:

"We were really lucky that our VFX capabilities meant we didn't have to abandon our story or our vision, but that we could morph and adapt it as we went along. It was a huge problem-solver," he says.

Going into what he knew would be a challenging project; Ant took what many would consider an extremely brave step when he elected to use a pre-release version of Autodesk Smoke. According to him, however, his decision was based on both experience with and excitement about the newest version of the video editing software.

"I knew from experience that, as our project advanced, so would Smoke," says Ant. "I knew that new features and stability would be added as we went along, and that we would get the job done in Smoke."

A big part of Ant's confidence in using Smoke also came from the integration of the node-based compositing toolset, ConnectFX:

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"Knowing that the ConnectFX toolset was in Smoke made me positively certain that our film could be made almost entirely within Smoke," he says. "When I heard about ConnectFX, I thought: this is the future. I need to know this inside and out. REP 5091 gave me the ideal opportunity to do that. I think every second clip on my timeline has a ConnectFX on it. We ended up using it for all kinds of set repair and compositing work on shots that aren't even big visual effects shots."

Perhaps most incredible is the fact that the film was finished in Smoke, and entirely on Ant's MacBook Pro. That sort of portability proved particularly helpful during the final grading stage of the project when DP Dalesman discovered a potentially significant problem in one of the scenes.

"The film had gone to the grade, and Emma called to tell me she'd noticed a hole in the set," says Ant. "There was a shelving unit that had come apart, and you could see lights coming through from the background. There were roughly five setups of that shot. In the past, we might have just let it be at that point, but because I had the entire film on Smoke in my MacBook, I was able to pull it up, fix it, drop a ConnectFX node on all the associated shots, and bang, it was back in the grade in no time. That is a workflow I have never seen before. It's funny, because people look at me like I'm mad when I say I did the whole thing on a MacBook Pro, but it saved the day."

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