

Vancouver Island Lighthouse

For the last year *Lighthouse* has been more like a ship in distress: stuck out in the middle of Hurricane Development, tossed around by the shifting currents of creative control, lost at sea when the funding fell through, leaking cast, crews and keys the longer it drifted.

It finally found land on the Southwestern tip of Vancouver Island, near Sooke. There, a 70-year-old lighthouse projects a beacon warning ships away from its craggy shoals, where wind and waves crash against the 80-foot cliffs overlooking the Pacific.

This is the scene for the "modern yuppie fantasy/Hitchcock thriller/romantic gothic ghost story" *Lighthouse* has become. That's how director Paul Tucker describes the movie, which evolved through several drafts into a "standard horror flick" before Tucker rewrote it.

Leads Ryan Michael and Deborah Wakeham play a yuppie couple ("I hate that word" says Wakeham) who suffer a crisis in their busy lives and decide to take a month away from the crowded city to figure their relationship out in an isolated automated lighthouse, accessible only by boat. After they get dropped off, by bad guy actor Stephen E. Miller, they have "vivid" dreams about a tragic love affair that took place 60 years before between the lighthouse keeper's wife and a shipwrecked sailor. It ended when the two lovers were murdered by the jealous lighthouse keeper. In waking hours, those ghosts slam the shutters and possess the yuppie couple's souls, leading to the history-repeating climax.

On set, after 25 days of rain, hail, constant wind and changing lighting conditions, the crew of 50 scramble to set up the next shot while the sun is still out. Up in the lighthouse DOP Tobias Schliessler hand-holds the 35 mm Arriflex, following the actors through the trap door, into the lighthouse crown, panning to the view in one complete shot. There is only enough room for one or two lights, the focus puller, the actors, the director and himself. Many of the shots they do in one take, no rehearsal. Others they have to repeat over and over again to get a right match to the previous scene.

"The light changes on us every five minutes," says Schliessler, "trying to match the scenes is really hard... it's one of my hardest shoots. We've been quite lucky getting what we've got. It should have been shot at twice the budget during the summer."

Erin Films was planning to shoot *Lighthouse* during the summer for \$2.8 million in association with American video distributors Vestron. A dispute over the script led to the reduction of the budget to \$1.7 million, a six-month delay in production, the loss of the

original cast and crew and the rewriting of the movie.

After 10 years living the fast-paced life of a CBS executive, director Paul Tucker was looking to get out and direct his first feature film. His return to Vancouver, where he had been production manager on *The Grey Fox*, coincided with the resurrection of the *Lighthouse* project.

Tucker connected with producer Harry Cole (the two were introduced by B. C. Film's Wayne Sterloff), and they got excited about Schliessler.

They heard about Schliessler, saw his reels from *Quarantine* (see On Location CC #156), some of the documentary work he's done and took him on the project. With Schliessler came many of the keys from *Quarantine*, people Schliessler prefers to have working on all his projects.

Tucker raves about Schliessler as "his secret weapon... born with an Arriflex on his shoulders and Zeiss lenses for eyes. You can always tell if a scene has gone well by the way Tobias looks away from the eyepiece at the end of a scene. If the eyes sort of look loose in the sockets and don't seem quite focused, you do it again. If they pull away together you can tell he'll say 'perfect'" says Tucker.

Schliessler's eyes are worth noting because they seem so unusual, unnerving, clear, direct, deep. They seem to look straight through you. You wonder what he's looking at. If he wasn't a DOP, he'd make a great contract killer.

Even though they had never met before,

Tucker and Schliessler never seem to disagree and they both seem to anticipate the other's direction. On this project Tucker describes himself as more of a "cheerleader" than a director.

With only four hours of sleep a night actor, Ryan Michael needs a lot of cheer. He had just moved back to Vancouver with his family two weeks before he was cast for the male lead, shortly before production began. Wakeham was cast out of L. A. around the same time. Same with veteran B. C. actor Miller.

While the beginning of the film, the "big city" shoot in Victoria, is very stylized, the rest of the film is shot rough. The interior shots of the actors being possessed are shot with slightly different lighting to subliminally alert the viewer that something has changed. The outside possession shots are hand-held, instead of being on rails, to create the same impression. The rest of the shots are "natural" to take in as much of the green and storm and drama of the location as possible. Schliessler sticks to his favorite long focal length lenses and moves fast, as if he's working on one of his documentaries.

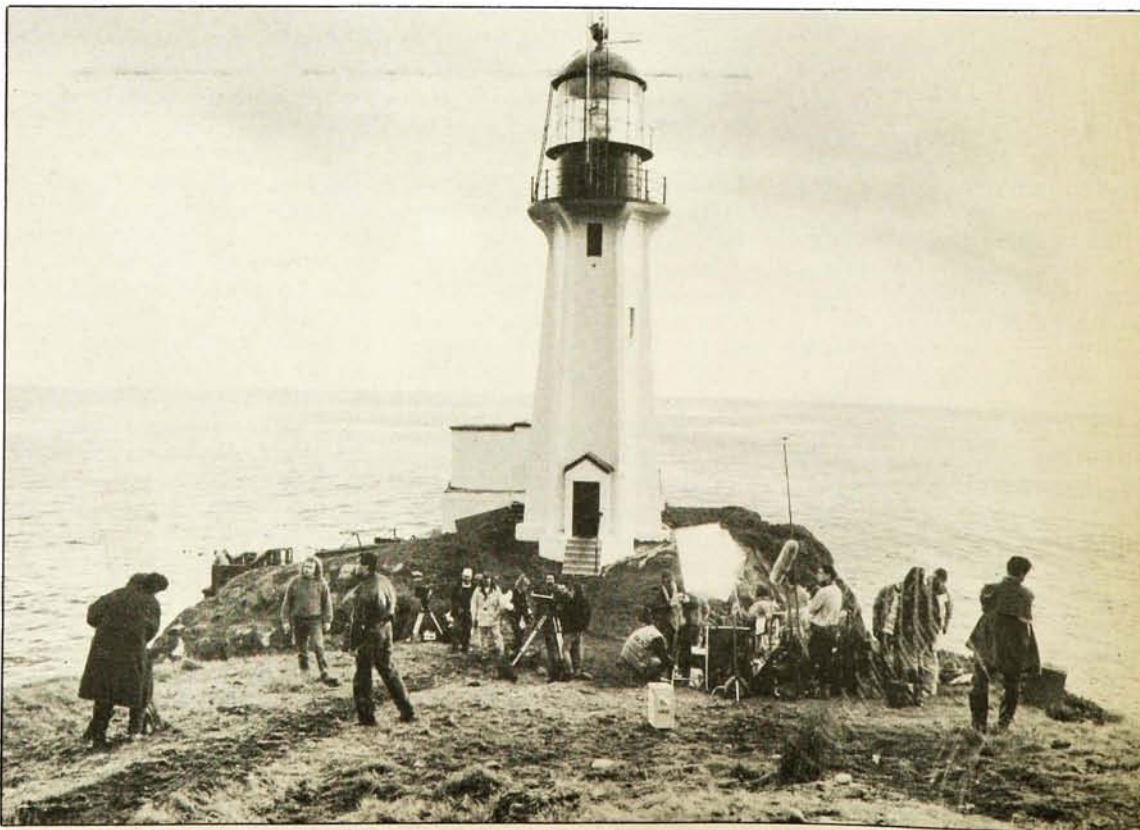
When *Lighthouse* is given wide release in late spring this year, the storms around Sooke will have eased. But, with the release of the other features Schliessler has shot last year (*Quarantine*, *The Top of His Head* and, to begin shooting this month, *Ricochet*), the storm surrounding him as B. C.'s new hot DOP will have just begun.

Ian Hunter •



Director Paul Tucker and DOP Tobias Schliessler

PHOTO: IRON GROVER



The lighthouse, featured in film of the same name, in Sooke, B.C.

PHOTO: DAVID COOPER