

BROADCAST



The Seal Whisperer, BBC1

30 August 2024

Nathalie Grace, first time shooting producer/director, on capturing seals beneath the waves - and one man's extraordinary passion for studying them

Production Company: Big Wave Productions

Commissioner: Diana Hare

Length: 29 minutes

TX: Friday 30 August at 7:30pm on BBC1

Executive producer: Sarah Cunliffe

Director/producer: Nathalie Grace

Camera team: Josh Tarr, Nathalie Grace, Ben Burville and Nicki Meharg

Post house: The Edit, Brighton

Opportunity to step up from shooting assistant producer, to shooting producer/ director is really at the best of times, and especially so in the current job climate. Despite this, my journey as

a shooting producer-director began this year with 'The Seal Whisperer,' an incredible adventure that surpassed all my expectations.

I'd been at Big Wave for the last two years, working as an AP on their marine shows, and during that time Big Wave also paid for me to do my HSE4 Commercial Diving course. After 20 days, and a somewhat intense course of many hours underwater doing full face mask drills, I surfaced with a new qualification. I could now work on Big Wave shows as a shooting underwater AP, or safety diver. Multi-skilling seems to be key to survival.



Nathalie Grace

When executive producer, Sarah Cunliffe said to me she thought it was time I made my first film and suggested pitching for the BBC Our Lives strand, I jumped at it. We mulled on a few ideas but the story that really excited me the most was 'The Seal Whisperer'. Here was the perfect story to use my marine skills, and tell the extraordinary story of GP Ben Burville's passion for the seals of the Farne Islands.

By day this busy GP is hard at work seeing patients in Northumberland, in his spare time, he heads beneath the waves to spend time studying the seals. Over 20 years, he's captured unique seal behaviours that have never been seen before.

With the invaluable support from Sarah, we secured a BBC Our Lives commission, working with brilliant Commissioning Editor, Diana Hare. The 'Our Lives' series celebrates life in the UK in all its diversity and actively encourages new directors. I was blown away.

However, for a first film, the project certainly presented its challenges. The Farne Islands, off the coast of Northumberland, are remote. My first shoot was in January to film seals with their pups. Filmed with a long lens from local tour operator, Billy Shiels boat, it was far from easy with choppy seas, and freezing conditions.

Our delivery date was July. Producing a documentary within a tight schedule, covering multiple life stages of seals, and managing a location that was 10 hours away from home, was no easy task. Then add to the mix, juggling childcare for two kids under ten, a full-time GP's busy schedule, the weather, trying to film a highly mobile marine mammal, and also coordinating the availability of our crew and safety team was needless to say, a big challenge. Harry Harris, (who was also stepping up from PC to Junior PM for the first time) had his work cut out. By June, we'd managed 11 filming days across the seasons. Remarkably, only one shoot failed due to poor water visibility.

My 'Tricks of the Trade' - Nathalie Grace

- Never Stop Learning –excel in your primary role but get new skills to complement your expertise. It helps you to stand out, be more versatile and effective.
- Work with a Small, Trusted Team – Choose your team carefully and make it the best it can be. A small, multi-skilled team that works well together saves time and budget and also makes the production process far more enjoyable.
- Trust the Experts – It can be difficult to let go of control, especially when you're starting out, but trust is essential. The support of Ben, our contributor, and Micky, our skipper, were invaluable. Their decades of knowledge allowed us to operate far more efficiently.
- Review Your Footage – After every shoot review your footage. Also cut together selects to see how your scenes are coming together before the edit. Learn how to edit, it's a highly valuable skill to develop.

We were also operating on a relatively modest budget of £70,000 for a marine project . It pushed us to really plan in detail, how we filmed our scenes. We also kept the production to a really tight two-man team of me and DoP Josh Tarr, who I've worked with multiple times before. Josh is multi-skilled and immensely talented, so on some shoots, while I was underwater filming, he was topside, covering the actuality and doing interviews. With shoot days and our time so precious, great teamwork was vital.

So how was it? Well, what a dream come true! Working as a shooting producer-director with my number one hobby, scuba diving was just the best. And then add the spectacular underwater scenery of the Farnes...what more can a girl ask for? Seeing seals underwater for the first time remains one of the most awe-inspiring moments of my life. So many stars aligned for me on this project. We just had an amazingly supportive team all round, and I had a blast. I can't wait for everyone to see it.

Training up the next generation of filmmaking talent

Sarah Cunliffe, executive producer and founder, Big Wave

One of the biggest challenges production companies face in factual TV right now (aside from getting commissions) is how to give

newcomers and junior production staff job stability and opportunities to train and build their experience so that they can eventually step up and run their own shows. They are our future, our next generation of film-makers, yet



now, our industry feels like it is falling off a cliff with commissions drying up, budgets dropping and many leaving to take up new careers.

If we are to maintain a vibrant TV industry, the new generation of film-makers needs support, training and investment. And the opportunities to do this are becoming few and far between.

Sarah Cunliffe

The BBC Our Lives strand is one of the few slots encouraging new film-makers to step up. When we got the The Seal Whisperer commission we decided to staff it entirely with junior production members stepping up for the first time to take on senior roles. Overseen by myself

and our head of production Nina Lowes, we had a Skillset trainee come in as a trainee production assistant. Harry Harris, our production coordinator, took on his first junior production manager role. And Nathalie Grace, moved from shooting assistant producer to shooting producer/ director. Seeing the team learn, grow, and also make an absolutely stunning first film is what our industry is all about. It's a rare and special opportunity to watch.

I really fear for the new generation of film-makers wanting to come into our industry. Job stability is non-existent and the opportunities to become a trainee increasingly rare. How does it improve? I believe we need more financial support from government, and from broadcasters to train the next generation, to give them support. We also need more commissions for young film-makers. And we need to wake up to the talent drain leaving TV, before our industry changes beyond all recognition.

To make great films, you need experience, you need time. You need to learn your craft and above all, you need to feel supported.



