April 2007

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On the Cover
Shooting a scene in *Eramos Pocos*. José Arana (camera 2nd assistant), Alejandro Tejería, Ramón Barea and Mariví Bilbao.



This month in Las Vegas, with hordes of people pouring over new technology and the sounds of thousands of sellers and buyers roaring on the NAB2007 show floor, *StudentFilmmakers* magazine will be celebrating its one year anniversary in booth SU9626 with this issue of the #1 Educational Resource for Film and Video Makers.

We could not have reached this milestone if it were not for you, our readers, our website members and moderators, our contributing writers, many of the members of the ASC, the *American Cinematographer* Magazine, members of the SOC, and the many professors and department heads at universities across the country, as well as our small but extremely dedicated and hard-working staff; and let us not forget our current sponsors and advertisers. You all have inspired us with your work and dedication, and with your participation, and leadership, in the filmmaking industry.

This issue is written by very talented authors, including our wonderful contributing writers who have been with us since our first issue. This month's cover story is by Mary Ann Skweres, "Borja Cobeaga's *Eramos Pocos* Makes a Date with Oscar" (p66). Check out Chris Cavallari's quick FCP tips for mapping shortcuts (p40). Read M. David Mullen, ASC's featured Insights Column (p22), where he reveals his lighting techniques for the recently released *The Astronaut Farmer*. And we're very happy to welcome this month's new contributing writers, Thomas Ackerman, ASC ("Love the Look," p14) and Adam Biddle ("Shooting an HD Horror Movie in 15 Days," p6).

We are launching three new web sites this April. These communities will be educational but also will contain interactive social networking tools and resources for film and video making professionals, as well as independents, students and recent graduates. Visit filmmakersguide.org, animationmakers.net and screenwritersguide.net, and sign up for your free networking pages.

Please stop by our booth at NAB in Las Vegas. We love meeting our readers and will have information about new and exciting film and animation contests. See you there, and please enjoy this issue!

In celebration of our 1st birthday, we are again offering free subscriptions to the magazine, with the free sign up form coupon in this special anniversary issue.

Truly,
Kim E. Welch
Publisher/Editor-in-Chief

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Shooting an HD Horror Movie in 15 Days

A Look into Lens Choice, Scouting, Lighting, and More...

by Adam Biddle



Director of Photography Adam Biddle, Director Dustin Voigt, and crew on one of the sets of the HD horror, *Marked*.

At the end of last year, I ventured for the first time into the genre I've long been most wary of shooting - Low Budget Horror! (The production's budget was at least $300,000, approximately.) This to me has always seemed one of the most over saturated of markets with numerous projects generally underachieving. The main cause of this is scripts that rely far too heavily on post effects and bad blood gags. To do either of these to a believable audience standard is usually totally unrealistic in the low budget world. A knock on effect is sequences having to be lit way too dark or framed awkwardly to hide the cheese factor. Totally unrewarding.

So when I was given the script 'Marked' to read I was full of skepticism. About 112 pages later my mind had changed. This was a project that relied heavily on a visual mood to build tension and that challenge excited me. Next to meet the director, Dustin Voigt. He had also written the script and had a definite idea of what style of movie he wanted to finish with. I could tell from the very outset we were on the same page with both our expectations and concerns. We were in this together!

The production company Night Light Films had only recently been formed, and this was only their second feature. Their whole set up is based around shooting HD, so shooting any other format was never an option – and it had to be a Sony F900. Our only choice was lens type. Zoom or DigiPrimes – not both. Instinctively at first both Dustin and I wanted the primes, which are optically superb. But then when we started to get realistic about our shooting schedule of 15 days we realized compromises had to be made. A zoom is so much faster to work with. Constant recalibration checks when changing a Prime lens is a must by the 1st AC. That time spent would very quickly add up and cause us to start missing shots, something we didn't want to do. The other problem with Primes is that to do a move you obviously need to track. Taking the time to block and lay a track properly in the low budget world is a luxury. But by having the zoom always on, I could at least add some movement to 'quick' cutaways then and there. We could therefore save our big tracking shots to key moments in the script and plan our days accordingly.

The next step was scouting. Dustin had decided early on to shoot nine tenths of the movie on location in Lake Arrowhead, and this was a good call. The visual palette is so amazingly different considering you are only 70 miles from Los Angeles. This also gave our Production Designer far more chance to get the most out of her very meager budget. Despite improvements, HD photography in its present form still carries far too much depth of focus. This puts increased emphasis on production design, as it is far harder to 'get away' with background dressing, bad props or small sets.

Starting principal photography, my first task was to assess crew members – their strengths and weaknesses. I wasn't able to bring any of my normal crew onto the production, and I really was starting fresh. In this situation I try to avoid doing anything too complicated straight off. In just one or two shooting days crews normally get comfortable with my style, and then we can start attempting more intricate shots with confidence rather than apprehension. I was particularly impressed with my 1st AC and dolly grip. Both were a little green but had excellent work ethic and willingness to learn. I would much rather be surrounded by this type of crew member than someone





Photos from the movie, *Marked*.

more experienced who moans a lot. Another factor to assess when working at this level is cast performance. The vast majority will be 'up and coming' actors and very likely their first work of this standard. From a director's standpoint sometimes you luck out and sometimes you bust. It is unlikely you will have the luxury of recasting but you can adjust your coverage and blocking of scenes to focus more on what an actor is doing well.

A great deal of 'Marked' takes place at night in low key interiors. One of my most invaluable items was my Panel Lite kit. They are so versatile to use and so quick to adapt color temperature. One day we had fallen behind, and we needed to make up time rather than drop the last scene of the day (a night exterior set in the town). To speed things up, I scouted a location that was nearby to a sodium security light and used this as the key. When we went in for coverage I needed some fill and in a matter of seconds was able to match color temperature on the Panel Lite to the sodium by playing with the gel combinations that came with the kit. That's the sort of flexibility that I love.

Another piece of equipment that I always favor is the Chapman Peewee dolly. Often grips want to upgrade to a larger dolly but for me, I'd much rather have the options the Peewee gives you in tight spaces. We had one sequence that took place 'off the beaten track' and trying to get any other dolly to that location would have been a logistical nightmare.

So looking back I actually had fun shooting a movie in 15 days, but I wouldn't recommend it! Any shooting time lost is just so magnified. At this stage I have only seen a rough cut of the movie, but all things considered I am very pleased with the outcome. What always gives me a particular personal satisfaction is to see what can be created with so little resources.

Adam Biddle was the Director of Photography for movies including *The Gnostic* (2007) and *Crank* (2006), and has worked on over 20 films including *V for Vendetta* (2005), *An American Haunting* (2005), *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), *The Mummy* (1999), and other films.

Photos courtesy of Director of Photography Adam Biddle.



On set.



Director Dustin Voigt.

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Choosing Among In-Camera and In-Post Imaging Options

What Can Be Done in Post vs. Capture

by Ira Tiffen

In my first-ever seminar presentation, in 1977, I met two newsreel cameramen, who were active in the days of hand-cranked cameras. They told me that they used to get jobs in their very competitive business (the more things change, the more they stay the same) over other cameramen because of their 'little black box'- their box of filters.

In the era of black and white, they said, you could use a yellow-green filter to bring out more dramatic cloud detail in a blue sky that would be lost without the filter. But you had to know how to do it. And you had to have the filter at the ready. Or you didn't get the image quality you needed to distinguish your work from the next guy's. What you didn't know COULD hurt you, they told me.

In those days, you had to have a pretty clear idea of where you were headed image-wise before you took even the first step. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to change direction later.

Today, technology offers capabilities that didn't exist not too long ago. With the 'information superhighway' that everyone was concerned would numbingly flood our lives with data, we needed only to understand it well enough to know what to save and what to delete. Similarly, there is a plethora of image control choices available to today's filmmakers that could blind us with options- but again, only if we let it.

So here's the question: *Just what did you know, and when did you know it?*

Did you start out with a complete vision in your head, one that was bursting to come out intact, inviolate, and were your skills up to the task of faithfully bringing it to the screen? Or…

Did you begin with a concept, a feeling, a memory, something, but less than a completely conceived path and goal, making it necessary to leave room for creative adjustment as you went along?

If the former describes you, you're in rare company. It happens, but it often takes intense vision, a team of experienced and talented professionals, suitable budget, luck, and much more.

If the latter is more fitting, you are certainly not alone. While there are many shades of gray between the two situations, the key element is to recognize whether you know enough to make certain commitments up front, or if you need to leave yourself room for fine-tuning later. "Know enough," refers to two issues here: do you know what you want the image to look like and do you know how to get it to look that way?

Here's why this is important, and how it impacts your filmmaking process. Let's consider those newsreel cameramen again. Knowing they wanted to produce a more natural, correctly detailed sky was the starting point. To do this, they had to first learn about the effects of filters, and how to use them to advantage; and they had to plan on bringing the right ones as part of their kit. If they didn't use the right filter upon capture, the cloud detail would be lost forever. They would not have been able to "fix it in post."

Additionally, if the sun became brighter than they had expected, they would have wanted to have a neutral density filter available. Being able to handle random changes in circumstances starts by knowing what is variable and what you can do

