

WEST OF MEMPHIS

Chronicling the Case in Amy Berg's Cinematic Documentary

With a Christmas Day release date, this month's must-see film is the documentary feature *West of Memphis*, which details the celebrated case of the West Memphis Three—Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelley—three young men falsely convicted and imprisoned for the murders of three young boys in rural Arkansas in 1993. Fueled by a combination of poverty, corruption, religious bigotry and political ambition, the story is an all-too-common tale of the American justice system gone awry.

Produced by the filmmaking team of Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh, and directed by documentary filmmaker Amy Berg (*Deliver Us from Evil*), *West of Memphis*, which premiered earlier this year at Sundance, was shot by DPs Maryse Alberti (*The Wrestler, Happiness*) and Ronan Kileen (*Smash This Camera*). Alberti, a multi award-winning cinematographer and photographic artist from France who has shot a number of political documentaries working alongside longtime collaborator Alex Gibney, teamed with Kileen in 2010 to begin filming formal and impromptu interviews and cinéma vérité sequences for the project.

Making countless trips to West Memphis, Arkansas, Alberti and Kileen shot footage with a combination of Sony PMW-EX3 and PMW-F3 camcorders supplemented with Canon EOS 5D and 7D digital cameras, augmenting previously acquired material captured with RED ONE and Canon EOS 5D and 7D cameras.

"This really is a film of its time," Kileen comments, noting that at least five different cameras were used during the two years he spent on the production, a period marked by rapidly changing technology. "Amy [Berg] likes to have a lot of coverage to edit with, she likes to find alternate angles or perspectives, so there would always be two if not three cameras rolling. She was never very explicit in terms of describing a style,



Damien Echols



PHOTO BY JEFF DAILEY

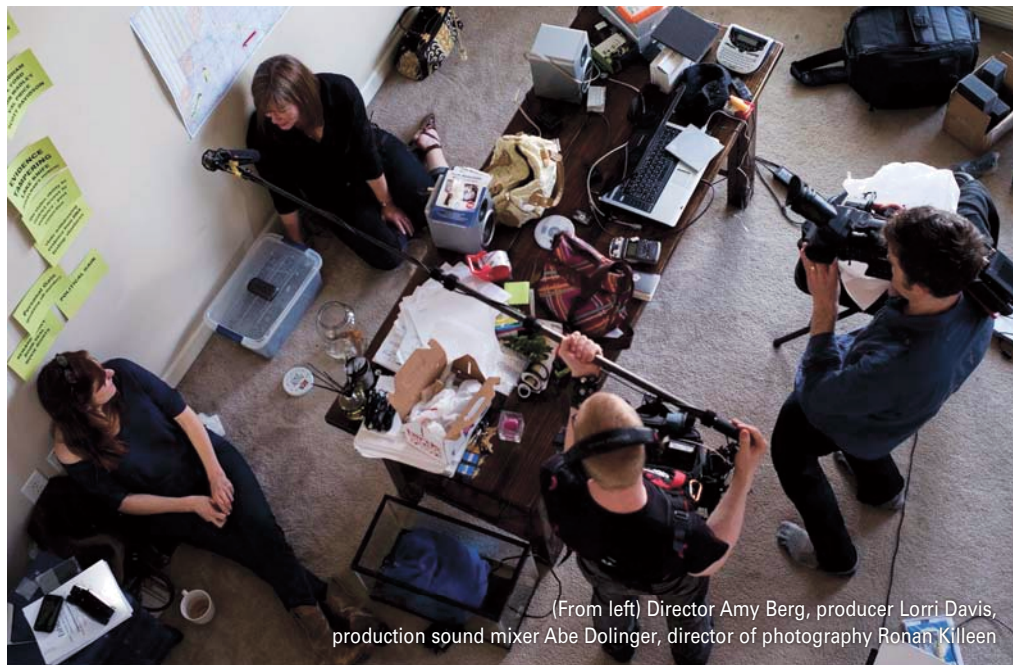


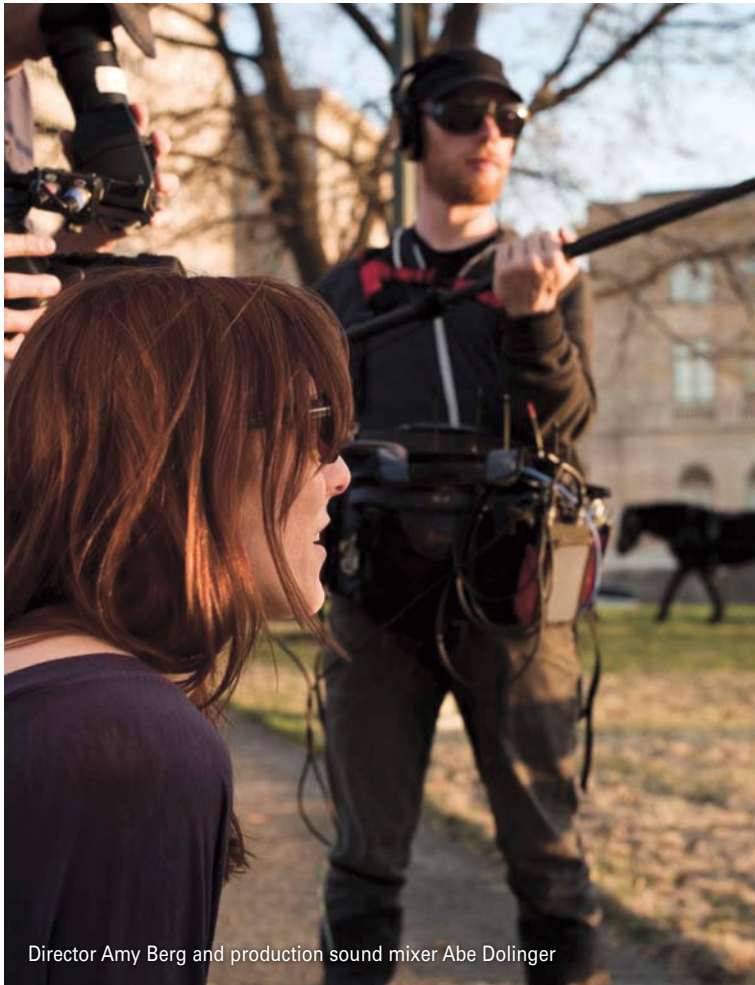
PHOTO BY OLIVIA FOUGEROL HAMEL

(From left) Director Amy Berg, producer Lorri Davis, production sound mixer Abe Dolinger, director of photography Ronan Killeen



PHOTO BY OLIVIA FOUGEROL HAMEL

Lorri Davis, wife of Damien Echols and producer on *West of Memphis*



Director Amy Berg and production sound mixer Abe Dolinger



PHOTOS BY OLIVIA FOUSEIROL HAMEL



Pam Hicks, mother of Steve Branch, one of the three 8-year-old boys murdered in May 1993

but once you start to work with her you realize she wants her documentary films to feel cinematic.”

The duo initially used the Sony EX3 as their primary camera. “It’s very nimble and can switch between various lighting conditions very easily. It does pretty well in low light, and the equivalent zoom range in 35mm terms is something like 30-400mm, which gives you great flexibility,” Kileen says. “If you’re careful about exposure, the image quality is really great.”

To make the EX3 feel more like a shoulder-mounted camera, Kileen adds a VFGadgets EX3 Teleplate with an Anton/Bauer adapter on the shoulder plate. “If you put an Anton/Bauer Dionic battery on the shoulder plate, it acts as a nice counterweight and will power the camera for a long time,” he details.

Finding DSLR cameras to be less than ideal for documentary work because of ergonomic and sound recording issues, Kileen nonetheless would often use a Canon EOS 5D or 7D with a Canon EF 70-200mm *f*/2.8 zoom to pick off extra angles

while Alberti was shooting with one of the larger cameras. “The IS [image stabilization] function on the Canon zooms was really impressive and allowed me to hold a shot steady for a few beats, even at very long focal lengths,” he enthuses.

“Of course, one of the main things people find so appealing about DSLRs is the cinematic depth of field that you get due to the size of the sensor,” Kileen continues. “In mid-2011 Sony released the PMW-F3 and we started to use that as a primary camera. It was great to have a Super 35mm size sensor with all the functions you’d expect from a professional camcorder.”

The team used primarily Nikon 17-55mm *f*/2.8, 24-70mm *f*/2.8 and 24-120mm *f*/4 zoom lenses. Kileen says, “We didn’t have the budget for cinema-style zoom lenses, so I used Nikon zoom lenses to good effect. Still photography zooms aren’t built with the same functionality in mind as motion picture zooms. You have to work a bit harder and it can be a struggle sometimes, but I think it’s worth the trouble.”

To augment available light, the production team kept a Kino Flo Diva-Lite 400 and a Litepanels 1x1 Daylight Flood on hand, both of which are dimmable and would work for daylight, tungsten or mixed light environments. “Because we were entering people’s homes or places of work, we needed to keep our footprint small while keeping production values high,” Kileen explains. “The Diva makes for a very quick and pleasing key light and the Litepanels is very portable. You can just pop a battery on the back and have a light up in seconds.”

For formal interviews, Kileen employed a K5600 Joker-Bug 800 HMI, directing it into the corner of the room to bring up overall ambient levels. “It’s one of the strongest units you can plug into a household electrical outlet, and it’s very useful if you’re trying to compete with daylight in the shot,” he says.

“The tools and techniques that are used to dramatize a story in narrative filmmaking are more readily available to everyone now,” Kileen concludes. “It’s an exciting time to be working in documentary film.” **dv**