

Short Takes

A Hollywood photographer (Mireille Enos) documents the roundup and destruction of Mustangs in *Wild Horses*, directed by Stephanie Martin and shot by Robert Richardson, ASC.



Equine Plight

By Jennifer Wolfe

The 19-minute film *Wild Horses* focuses on Mills (Mireille Enos), a Hollywood photographer who returns to her native Nevada to document the roundup and destruction of a band of Mustangs. The production is the directorial debut of Stephanie Martin, who spent 10 years working as a cinematographer before she was accepted into the American Film Institute's Directing Workshop for Women. "I became aware of the plight of our nation's wild horses in 2005 and have been involved with the issue since then," says Martin, who co-wrote the script with Jessica Walsh. "What inspired me to make a movie about the subject was a quote by Anna Sewell, the author of *Black Beauty*: 'If we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt.'"

Chief among the talent Martin assembled to make the AFI film was her husband, director of photography Robert Richardson, ASC, who came to the project immediately after wrapping *Django Unchained* (AC Jan. '13). He brought with him several collaborators from that picture, including key grip Chris Centrella, gaffer Ian Kincaid and horse wrangler Scott Perez.

"I attended the Jackson Mountain roundup in Nevada prior to our shoot, and that experience proved instrumental in developing a look for our film," says Martin. "The roundup influenced everything: the color palette, the casting, the costume design, and our choice of locations, vehicles and horses. In developing the character of our lead horse, Phantom, I was inspired by a particular photo taken by *National Geographic* photographer Melissa Farlow."

Production took place over five days (a limit set by the AFI) at the Big Sky Movie Ranch in Simi Valley. Given that the shoot called for 45 horses and a helicopter, Martin knew that meticulous scheduling would be crucial to keeping the shoot on track. "I've shot films that were 90 percent exteriors, and many times, when you try to explain to the director the importance of shooting various elements at certain times of day, they start getting intimidated by the schedule," she says. "There is always a reason for not sticking to a plan, but I tried to remind myself how important it was for things to look the way we had planned for them to look."

Martin and Richardson decided to shoot the picture with Arri Alexa EV cameras (provided by Panavision and Tool), capturing in 16:9 in ProRes 4:4:4. Richardson's lenses comprised Arri Master Primes, Angenieux Optimo 24-290mm and 15-40mm zooms, and a Fujinon 18-85mm 4K Premier Zoom. Digital-imaging technician Glenn Derry provided two wireless Pix 240 handheld monitor kits so Martin could be next to Richardson's camera at all times.

Key action sequences involving the helicopter and horses were filmed early in the shoot, with wide shots and scenes of the running horses scheduled for the beginning and end of each day in order to take advantage of natural backlight. "When you're shooting over the course of several days something that's meant to take place within a few minutes or hours, the use of backlight allows you to maintain a consistency that would be otherwise difficult to achieve," Richardson says. "Because of the horses, we knew we might only get one or two takes a day. So, you work more with color temperature, which makes it less noticeable when the backlight disappears and the clouds roll in."

Richardson compares the production to a commercial

Photos by Melissa Farlow and Andrew Cooper, SMPSP; courtesy of Stephanie Martin.



Right: To capture a shot of the horses galloping over a rise with a helicopter in hot pursuit, Richardson rides a GF-16 crane while Martin watches the action from the ground.



shoot. "We shot very rapidly. We had calls early to capture the sun rising, and then in the late afternoon as it was setting. It wasn't that we were trying to get a sunset look; rather, we wanted to achieve a look with natural contrast. With such a flat landscape, we were hoping to get more out of it with low levels of light."

The look Richardson developed for scenes set in Nevada is one he describes as "more extreme" than bleach bypass. "I would describe it as an externally aggressive high contrast that leaves virtually no color within the image. Steph and I thought it would be nice to maintain the feeling of Melissa Farlow's photograph and the style in which she shot it. We decided that any live-action material surrounding that would best contrast if it had a very muted palette."

The meadow sequence central to *Wild Horses* took five days to capture. The filmmakers reserved mornings and late afternoons to film, and trailered the horses to shuttle them between locations during the day. "It would have been a logistical nightmare if we hadn't had such a great team behind us," says Martin, who notes that the film was made possible in part by the many working relationships she and Richardson have formed in their respective careers.

Tool founder Erich Joiner has worked with Richardson on more than a hundred commercials, and the two have developed a shorthand that serves them well under tight deadlines. Joiner and his crew arrived on location on the second day of production, just in time to help capture footage for a

crucial sequence: the first time the viewer and the horses are introduced to the helicopter as predator. Veteran horse trainer Rex Peterson, who worked with Richardson on *The Horse Whisperer*, and helicopter pilot Rick Schuster "became deeply respectful of each other," according to Richardson. "Rex felt that Rick was a phenomenally gifted pilot, and essentially allowed him do all the things he wanted to do because he knew he was extremely diligent and respectful of the horses."

Riding the crane, Richardson kept the cameras low enough to allow the helicopter to swoop down behind the pack of horses and into the same frame as they galloped over a rise. "The shot has the appearance of being taken from a much larger distance, but everything happened at a very rapid pace," Richardson remarks. "We picked a site that allowed the horses to rise into the frame, and that allowed us to put the chopper directly behind the horses at a very low altitude. Rick maintained that low profile, and, of course, we kept the cameras low enough to be able to utilize the fact that we had a chopper that close to the horses."

For the film's sole visual-effects shot, in which Phantom rears up and faces the helicopter, the filmmakers first captured footage of the helicopter, and then shot the horse as Peterson guided its moves with an elaborate choreography of signals. "There was absolutely no other way to acquire the shot as it had been storyboarded because Rex needed to stand directly below the helicopter in order to guide the horse," says Martin. Post supervisor Ron Ames and visual-effects supervisor Adam Gerstel took a break from their duties on *Star Trek Into Darkness* to assist on *Wild Horses*, seamlessly compositing the footage into a single shot.

When they weren't capturing footage for the helicopter sequences, Richardson and Joiner would grab various bits of scenery, such as hawks circling in the sky. For a sequence showing Mills and her friend Becks (Barbara Tarbuck) watching the meadow from their truck, Richardson took advantage of natural light, repositioning the truck to catch the perfect angle of sunlight, and then using negatives to block the rest of the ambient brightness. "Normally, I love to

From top: Martin (left) discusses the next setup with Enos; 1st AD Bettina Godi, Enos, 1st AC Bob Smathers, Richardson, Martin, and boom operator Thomas W. Hartig collaborate on a close-up captured with an Arri Master Prime and a Century Series 2000 MK-II periscope; Richardson, 1st AC Scott Beckley, dolly grip Dan Pershing (behind Beckley) and on-set dresser Derrick Sims block out a move with Martin and Enos.



do camera tests with the actors," says Richardson. "In this case, I couldn't, and I was fortunate to have such a great actress, one so beautiful that she could take any of the light we were throwing her way."

Contrasted with those sequences is Mills' Hollywood photo shoot with Brooke Shields at the beginning of the film. "We knew that the tonality of the landscape in the West is beige to gold, regardless of how stepped on it was for contrast, so our choice for the photo shoot was something cooler," says Richardson. "We played with a reduced color palette, not as steep in the contrast levels, and worked a bit more with blue. Instead of 5,600°K, I used 4,500°K."

Martin and Richardson graded the picture at EFilm in Hollywood with colorists Yvan Lucas and Benny Estrada. "Fortunately, we used a heavy contrast, which worked well to disguise certain mismatching shots during the DI process," Richardson comments. "The dailies looked good and had a very consistent desaturated feel, but it still wasn't as far as I wanted to go. When Steph and I were in the color suite, we just stepped on it, going over 100 percent at some points."

Wild Horses made its U.S. premiere at the 2013 Palm Springs International Short-fest, where it won first place for Best Live-Action Short Over 15 Minutes. ●