

Short Takes



Leo (Aric Chase Damm) spins Hazel (Aryn Wuthrich) during a musical number in this frame grab from the *The Bright Side*, shot by Ryan Broomberg.

ASC Honors 3 with Harris Savides Heritage Awards

By Jennifer Wolfe

The ASC presented Harris Savides Heritage Awards to three student cinematographers from Chapman University's Dodge College of Film and Media Arts during an awards ceremony at the Clubhouse in June. Ryan Broomberg won the graduate competition for *The Bright Side*; Mishka Kornai won the undergraduate competition for *Straight Down Low*; and Drew Heskett and Ryan Westra won the documentary competition for *We Are the Land*.

The Bright Side

Director: Sarah Wilson Thacker

Cinematographer: Ryan Broomberg

The Bright Side is a 1940s-era musical romance that merges fantasy song-and-dance sequences with the gritty realities of a nation preparing for war.

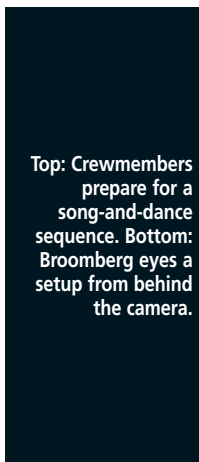
Director Sarah Wilson Thacker, cinematographer Ryan Broomberg and their collaborators referenced two period gangster dramas, HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* and the feature *Road to Perdition* (2002), for mood, lighting and camera moves, and the musical *Moulin Rouge* (2001) for how it blends fantasy and reality. "We stayed relatively wide and let the composition and lighting tell the story," says Broomberg. "We knew we didn't need tons of angles to

tell the story, and we didn't have time to overshoot every scene. If the camera moved, it was motivated by an action or a feeling." For the most part, the filmmakers employed single-camera setups, reserving a B camera mainly for inserts and establishing shots. One notable exception is an emotional scene set in the rain; for that, two cameras were used to simultaneously capture medium and close-up coverage of the performances.

Broomberg shot the picture with Panavised Red One MX cameras and Zeiss Super Speed prime lenses provided by Panavision Hollywood. He captured in the 2.0:1 aspect ratio in 4K, recording in Redcode 36 to Red CF Cards. He used a range of Schneider Black Frost filters on the lens to bloom practical lights and soften skin tones and textures, and he worked closely with production designer Rachel Aguirre to make sure the sets could incorporate vintage lamps and filament bulbs as much as possible. "The filament bulbs looked amazing with the Black Frost," he notes.

The cinematographer used the in-camera Redcolor LUT for viewing images on set. "The raw image looks very flat and dark, and I wanted to view an image that was as close as possible to the look we wanted to achieve and then make tweaks in the final color correction," he explains. "The Redcolor LUT crushes the blacks and brings up the highlights, which is what I intended to do in the timing. Also, by using the LUT, I gave myself a little more latitude in the highlights and the blacks in the raw file. During setups, I toggled between raw and Redcolor preset to see the range I was working with." ➤

The Bright Side photos by Joe Mackedanz. Photos and frame grab courtesy of the filmmakers.



Top: Crewmembers prepare for a song-and-dance sequence. Bottom: Broomberg eyes a setup from behind the camera.



To light the musical number that introduces the main characters, Leo (Aric Chase Damm) and Hazel (Aryn Wuthrich), the crew installed 12 Mole-Richardson 300-watt Fresnels into an archway setpiece Aguirre designed. The fixtures were wired to a dimmer board and programmed to do an alternating pulse and a chase pattern, and to dim 50 percent; these transitions were all programmed to match cues in the song. "It gives the scene a big Broadway feel," the cinematographer says. "We wanted this sequence to have a golden feel, and we achieved that by dimming the Fresnels."

Another number, "Crossfire," depicts a fantasy sequence inside a movie theater. Broomberg explains, "In this scene, Leo and Hazel share a fantasy that they're transformed into movie stars while they're

watching a movie about the war. The song has an arc, with layers of highs and lows; it's about the contrast between chaos and calm, and finding the happiness within. We wanted a different look and feel for every verse and chorus to show the progression of Leo and Hazel's journey, and we accomplished this with choreography, lighting, production design, composition and camera moves.

"For example, at the start of their fantasy, Hazel and Leo are lying on the ground, facing up toward the camera. We used a Frazier Lens System to shoot an overhead angle that spins 180 degrees and booms up on them as they calmly sing the first verse. This transitions into the next shot, which is the chorus, and this brings us into the chaotic world of the war with confetti explosions and gunfire. While

they're singing and spinning around to defend themselves, we do a counter dolly next to them to convey unease."

To backlight the chorus, electricians hung a Mole-Richardson 9K Maxi-Brute and a 4'x4' panel of 250 diffusion on the second floor of the theater. "We used this [setup] to backlight a few other scenes in the film," notes Broomberg. "We liked the light's warmth and punchiness." A 2K Fresnel aimed into a 12'x12' muslin bounce provided fill. For the gunfire, lighting gags were created to help sell the CG muzzle flashes that were inserted later in post.

The second verse of "Crossfire" transitions into a dance that is performed in front of a 20'-long strip of light bulbs, which key the scene. Broomberg and gaffer Doug Potts found the light strip at the location during a tech scout. To uplight the medium shots that were motivated by the light strip, Potts created a ¾ low-lying book light with a 4'x4' piece of foamcore, a 1K open-face and unbleached muslin.

Broomberg was keen to employ uplighting as often as possible "because in our tests, it looked stunning on the actors." In another scene, he used a 2K Fresnel at a ¾-frontal low angle as Leo and Hazel run across the stage, casting tall shadows on the background wall. "Following a suggestion from my mentor, Johnny Jensen [ASC], we opened the Fresnel lens to sharpen the actors' shadows," adds Broomberg.

For the edit, the .R3D files were transcoded to 2K XML and ingested into Avid Media Composer. Once the cut was complete, the sequence was exported as an EDL for final conform and grading in Autodesk Lustre.

Straight Down Low

Director: Zach Wechter

Cinematographer: Mishka Kornai

A neo-noir set in the inner city, *Straight Down Low*, directed by Zach Wechter, follows a shrewd teenaged detective who must solve a curious gangland crime in order to protect the girl he loves. The film is a modern take on the classic love triangle, pitting "The Student" against gang leader Tyson, who uses love interest Amber as a shield. ➤



Top: The Student (Shamar Sanders) investigates a gangland crime in *Straight Down Low*, shot by Mishka Kornai. Middle: The crew prepares a dolly shot. Bottom: Kornai (right) frames a shot with 2nd AC Jeff Geukens (left) and dolly grip Joe Gabay.



Inspired by Rian Johnson's *Brick*, shot by Steve Yedlin (AC May '05), the filmmakers opted for a look cinematographer Mishka Kornai describes as "deconstructed noir." He explains, "It's a very low-contrast image rather than one defined by blown-out whites and crushed blacks. The idea was to capture the noir sensibility, but with a modern noir palette."
To create a monochromatic light

effect as *The Student's* flashlight pans around Tyson's dark room, Kornai employed a low-pressure sodium lamp specially flown in from Michigan. "The unique orange glow emitted by this legacy streetlight fixture is entirely devoid of other color, creating a visual atmosphere similar to black-and-white film," he says. The vintage source was attached to a Menace Arm with C-clamps and shaped with gobos. "It was

about the size of a large, heavy microwave, with a bulb shaped like a Coke bottle. My gaffer, Eli Just, and key grip, Ryan von Bengfort, had to keep it perfectly level at all times because if the sodium vapor had collected, the bulb would have exploded!"

Framing 16:9 for a final aspect ratio of 2.40:1, Kornai shot the picture with a Sony F65 CineAlta, an Angenieux Optimo 24-290mm zoom lens and Zeiss Compact Prime CP2 lenses. The camera captured in F65Raw-Lite and recorded to 1TB SRMemory cards. Data transfer and backup was handled via Sony's SR-PC4. "The F65 is the state-of-the-art camera right now, not to mention expensive to rent, so it was a blessing to be able to shoot a student project on it," says Kornai. "Chapman also has a Red One MX, which I sometimes prefer to even the Epic or Scarlet, but the F65's resolution, dynamic range and color processing are unmatched."

Flashback sequences shot in Tyson's bathroom were captured in 3-D with a beam-splitter stereoscopic camera rig custom-built by stereographer Jacob Mendel. "Zach and I wanted the flashbacks to be a departure stylistically, but we didn't want to do the clichéd blown-out look or some other overused effect," says the cinematographer. "We had a long conversation about what a flashback is, in a narrative sense, and decided we needed to suggest an objective point-of-view."

The scenes were played back in 2-D to create what Kornai calls "a sensory-overload alternation between the left and right eye. I'd seen something like it in music videos and thought it would be very interesting narratively. We liked the idea of going from a clean-cut perspective to an almost hyper-real one."

The original camera files were converted to 1080p DNXHD for the offline edit in DaVinci Resolve 9. For the online, the files were transcoded to 16-bit 2K DPX files, and then reassembled using an EDL in Autodesk Smoke. Color correction, handled by Ntropic's Trevor Durtschi, was completed using exported DPX sequences in Autodesk Lustre. The finalized 2K DPX files were re-ingested into Smoke as a single sequence, and final titles and sound were merged with the footage.



Straight Down Low photos by Brian Tran, courtesy of the filmmakers.



We Are the Land

Directors: Lauren Lindberg, Drew Heskett and Ryan Westra

Cinematographers: Heskett and Westra

Tackling the controversial topic of hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking,” the documentary *We Are the Land* follows Native American activist Pauline Matt as she tries to protect her homeland, the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana.

Under the Chapman University initiative Project W: Stories of Women Creating Change, Lauren Lindberg, Drew Heskett and Ryan Westra were individually selected to collaborate on a short film on a subject of their choosing. With a shared interest in ecological issues and indigenous rights, the three filmmakers decided to tell Matt’s story.

The biggest challenge they confronted was the extreme cold of the wintertime shoot, which involved location work in northern Montana and in Williston, N.D., where fracking is already in progress. “It was around -10°F the entire time,”

recalls Heskett. “You really need to think carefully about exactly what you want to do with the camera in that kind of cold, because there isn’t much time to mess around with its settings. You have to pre-visualize what you want to get, what your F-stop will be and what your shutter speed will be. Then, you take your hands out of the gloves!”

Westra notes that there were some advantages to shooting in the extreme conditions. “For one thing, the snow provides a really nice natural bounce. For scenes of Pauline in the woods harvesting branches for a prayer ritual, we didn’t need any lights because the snow reflected sunlight on her face so beautifully. Also, there is very little ambient sound when you’re out in the wilderness in a really cold environment, so for that scene, the audio is almost entirely natural.”

The filmmakers shot with Canon EOS 6D and 60D DSLRs, capturing in 16:9 1920x1080 24p. They used two Canon L-series lenses, an f1.2 50mm and an f2.8 70-200mm zoom. “I just like Canon, and so



The documentary *We Are the Land* was shot in North Dakota (top left) and Montana (bottom left). Above: Co-cinematographers Drew Heskett (left) and Ryan Westra at the Harris Savides Heritage Awards ceremony.

does Ryan,” Heskett says of the team’s choice. “I’ve shot on Canon cameras since my still-photography days in high school.”

Acquiring roughly 40-50GB of material a day, the filmmakers recorded to SD memory cards, and then transferred to a 1.5 TB hard drive for storage and backup. For the edit in Final Cut Pro 7, the camera files were transcoded to Apple ProRes 4:2:2 using MPEG StreamClip. Archival photographs licensed from Getty Images were rotoscoped by Westra in Adobe After Effects, then imported into FCP for conform and finishing.

The ASC Heritage Award is named for a different ASC cinematographer each year. Savides, who died in 2012, earned Independent Spirit Award nominations for the features *Gerry*, *Elephant*, *Last Days*, *Milk* and *Greenberg*. His credits also included *The Game*, *The Yards*, *Finding Forrester*, *Margot at the Wedding* and *Zodiac*. He also shot award-winning music videos for Madonna, R.E.M. and Michael Jackson, among others.

Honorable mentions for ASC Harris Savides Heritage Awards were as follows:

Graduate: American Film Institute fellows Petr Cikhart (*First in Flight*) and Martin Kobylarz (*Wolves from Another Kingdom*). Undergraduate: Nick Reinhard of Florida State University (*Cootie Contagion*) and Daniel Rink of Brooks Institute (Ai). Documentary: Dan Duran and Sam Price-Waldman of Chapman University (*Wolf Mountain*). ●

We Are the Land photos courtesy of the filmmakers. Top right photo by Alex Lopez.