

3 Needles brings beauty to trio of emotional stories

A tragic, emotion-packed story doesn't have to look depressing, says Thomas Harting, CSC, who won the Ed Higginson Cinematography Award at the Atlantic Film Festival in Nova Scotia, Canada, for **3 Needles**. "We wanted to make the film as beautiful as possible to offset all the horror and drama going on," he says.

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3 Needles is the fourth collaboration between Harting and director Thom Fitzgerald. The film tells a trio of stories revolving around the worldwide AIDS epidemic. While their stories are thematically connected, the characters never meet.

One story, set in Africa, follows a nun played by Chloe Sevigny who negotiates a dark deal to save the lives of disease-stricken children in her mission. A second story features Lucy Liu as a woman running an illegal blood bank in a remote part of China, buying blood from farmers, unaware that she is spreading death with dirty needles. The third story features Shawn Ashmore as an HIV-positive porn actor in Montreal, who hides his illness so he can continue to work and support his parents. In each case, the characters have good intentions but their actions have tragic consequences.

Below: (Far left) DP Tom Harting, CSC, on location filming a scene for *3 Needles*.

All three stories were shot at practical locations with Thailand doubling for China. Harting characterizes the look as forced realism. "I enhanced natural light enough to shoot but didn't go overboard. In the real world, not everyone has a back and rim light all the time."

In Africa, he shot several scenes in small, mud huts with only one window and a doorway. "I bounced tons of light from a 4K and 2500 through the front door and window, and used bounce boards and mirrors," he says. "It feels like all the light is just coming from these two places, so you get an unlit, natural look."

Night scenes were recorded on either Kodak Vision 500T 5279 or VISION2 500T 5218 films. Most daytime scenes were shot on Kodak Vision 200T 5274 film.

"When we started in Africa, 5218 had just come out, so we started on 5279," Harting explains. "When we went to Thailand, we moved to 5218. On a print, you can intercut the negatives, so it's hard to tell the difference. But with 5218, the blacks and grain structure are better. 5218 was definitely an improvement that I welcomed."

Harting says he was strongly influenced by the work Allen Daviau, ASC, did in **Empire of the Sun** and **The Color Purple**. He wanted to take advantage of the beautiful, natural surroundings and create an epic look.

While shooting in an abandoned city hall in Thailand, Harting relied on the broad exposure latitude of 5218. "I wanted really bright and dark elements in the frame," he explains. "This film enabled me to use softer light around the actors while still producing a really contrasty image." The hall was open on both ends, so he lit for a low-key ambience in the building, and had layers of brightness behind the action.

"We also had a scene in a hospital in Thailand, where different color temperatures were colliding," he says. "I used the 5218 in available light with no correction."

Harting describes himself as a minimalist when it comes to filtration and diffusion. "I used very light diffusion — some black Pro Mists and some straight neutral density and soft grads to control the sky, and even the ground, when it got too hot."

"So much of what you would do with filters you can now do with timing, and in the process, keep it more consistent" he says. "Africa and Thailand have such natural beauty, why turn them into a music video with filters?"

3 Needles was timed by Vaughan Killian at Deluxe Labs. The film made sparse use of digital intermediate technology, mostly to save a scene that had to be shot too early in the day. ■

