

Romance & Cigarettes

Romance & Cigarettes has been described as a cross between **Pennies From Heaven** and **The Honeyymooners**. The story involves realistic characters and situations, but intermittently becomes a dark comic musical with a strange theatricality.

John Turturro wrote and directed the story about an Italian family growing up next to JFK airport in New York. James Gandolfini plays the chain-smoking, philandering father, and Susan Sarandon is cast as the mother. Mandy Moore and Mary Louise Parker portray their daughters. Joel and Ethan Coen were the executive producers.

Tom Stern was a Gaffer for many years prior to becoming a Director of Photography on **Blood Work**. His cinematography on Clint Eastwood's **Mystic River** caught Turturro's eye. The director liked the feeling Stern evoked in his visceral portrait of South Boston.

In **Romance & Cigarettes**, the realistic environment of a humble Queens household is punctuated with occasional – and surreal – musical extravaganzas. Old favorite songs from Connie Francis to Nick Cave ring out and the cast breaks into choreographed dance numbers while lip-syncing the words. The result is amusing, affecting and original.

Stern and Turturro opted to shoot in anamorphic format, which results in a 2.41:1 widescreen aspect ratio. In some of the dance numbers, the frame acts as a proscenium in which the choreography plays out. In other situations, the camera takes a more active part in the dance. The color palette tended towards pastels popular in the 1950s.

Stern used the same set of older C-series lenses that he employed on **Mystic River**. "This film has many females in important roles, and we wanted to keep them looking lovely, but in a diffusion-free environment. The contrast on the E-series lenses seems a little steeper or sharper."

Much of the roughly 45-day shoot took place in tight practical locations, which made lighting a challenge. "Sometimes it seemed like we were shooting **Das Boot** in the Suburbs," says Stern. "The anamorphic format is usually thought of as appropriate for epic, outdoor pictures, but in this case it helped us create a sense of claustrophobia. The frame emphasizes the horizontal, which tends to pull down the vertical. John wanted to see the ceilings and get a sense of the small spaces. The camera would be jammed into the corner, and lens choice became a matter of what was possible. Typically, we'd be pretty wide at 28 or 30mm, and the tighter shots at 40 or 50mm."

Stern shot the majority of the picture on Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 color negative film. "I'm a big fan of that (52)18," he says. "For some shots, especially with the women, I used the (Eastman EXR 200T) 5293 film."

Musical numbers

Stern says that the musical numbers help carry the narrative, with the lyrics lip-synced by the actors in some cases. "One thing I learned from Clint is that the audience is smarter than many people think," says Stern. "They get it."

One dance number takes place in and around a mundane location near JFK airport. Kate Winslet, who plays the father's mistress, expresses her feelings by belting out a Connie Francis song. The song culminates in a push in/zoom onto a very tight shot of Winslet's mouth as she "sings" the final note. It was made with a 50-foot Technocrane.

"Bill Coe, my first assistant, and the grips on the crane did a terrific job on this very difficult shot," says Stern. "We knew the final position was at the end of the Technocrane's reach. The last thing we want to do is ram a Panaflex camera into Kate's face. She had a difficult task,



dancing with abandon while hitting her mark. It's the kind of shot you'd normally want a day to do, but John was up for winging it even though we only had a couple of hours. We had a great crew and a lot of luck. The movie is full of shots that prove it."

Stern worked with Technicolor Lab in New York City. He usually had 400 feet of film printed each day as dailies to make sure difficult shots looked right and that printer lights were in an acceptable range. The rest of the dailies were in DVD form.

"I like a nice rich negative, with printer lights in the high 20s or low 30s," says Stern. "Once you've got a good solid negative then you can do anything you want later on."

Stern says that establishing a believable and comfortable reality was crucial to the success of the more surreal scenes. "I'm content with the knowledge that I photographed the weirdest film of 2004," he says. "Everyone else should throw in the towel because this is it. There's a sensual honesty about the film, even with the theatricality of the dance scenes. That dichotomy is what makes it a fun and engaging movie." ■

Above: Actress Kate Winslet in a scene from *Romance and Cigarettes* shot by Cinematographer Tom Stern.