

Fraisse and Cassavetes team up on Alpha Dog

Below: (L to R) Actors Justin Timberlake and Emile Hirsh in a scene from *Alpha Dog*, shot by DP Robert Fraisse, AFC.

Robert Fraisse, AFC, has more than three-dozen narrative credits including *Ronin*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Enemy at the Gates* and *Hotel Rwanda*. Fraisse first collaborated with director/actor Nick Cassavetes on *The Notebook*, a stylish remembrance of unrequited love. Their most recent project, *Alpha Dog*, is a hard-edged true crime story about conman Jesse James Hollywood. The story follows the charismatic and dangerous Hollywood who became the youngest person ever on the FBI's most-wanted list. The film stars Bruce Willis and Justin Timberlake.

"Because this film is based on a true story, we felt the look should be very realistic and natural," says Fraisse. "I didn't want the images to be too beautiful."

In keeping with that aesthetic, Cassavetes and Fraisse shot most of the film at actual locations in southern California, primarily around Los Angeles and Palm Springs. This meant Fraisse often had to adapt his lighting approach to tight spaces. The filmmakers chose to shoot in the anamorphic format, which also influenced decisions about blocking and camera movement.

"Nick was looking for something unconventional in the visuals," says Fraisse. "Most of the time we worked with long lenses, usually a 135mm, and sometimes the 180 or 250mm. Often we were quite close on the actors, emphasizing the faces."

The camera package, provided by Claremont Camera, included a Moviemcam Super America camera with Russian Hawk anamorphic lenses. Often the locations precluded hanging lights or laying dolly track, so the filmmakers used a Steadicam rig operated by Stephen Ullman to track with actors through the rooms. Shots were often framed through windows or doorways.



PHOTOS: Darren Michaels/newline.wireimage.com

Fraisse used Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 film for night exteriors, and night or tungsten lit interiors. In daylight situations he chose Kodak Vision 200T 5274 film.

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"I like Kodak's 200T stock because it holds the highlights very well," says the cinematographer. "You can go pretty far with overexposure and still see details out the windows. This was important because in many scenes we wanted the audience to see these real locations, including what is outside – a swimming pool or a beautiful garden, for instance."

Fraisse says the 5274 film also helped him and his crew maintain an adequate T-stop. "We were able to shoot inside at a stop of 5.6, or between 4 and 5.6," Fraisse adds. "With anamorphic it's important to have at least a 4. Nick likes to give the actors a lot of freedom, so for the focus puller it was better to work at 5.6. Also, it's nice to have a soft background in anamorphic, and a 5.6 works for that as well."

Cassavetes likes to improvise on the set. "Because Nick is an actor, he likes to avoid any restrictions on the actors," says Fraisse. "He comes to the set with a preconceived notion of how things will work, but he is willing to let the actors play and perform and come up with a different approach. I've worked with Nick enough to be acquainted with what he likes, but we have to be ready to adapt to any last-minute changes."

Because Fraisse had a prior commitment, Francis Kenny, ASC, photographed nine days of pickups. Fraisse says that the material intercuts seamlessly with his work. Cassavetes used a digital intermediate process to fine tune contrast and color in the night sequences.

"I wasn't looking for beauty but of course I hate it when things are ugly for no reason," says Fraisse. "We were looking for realistic, unsophisticated visuals, because that's what suited the story. I'm very happy with how the film turned out." ■

Left: (L to R) DP Robert Fraisse, AFC and director Nick Cassavetes discussing a scene for *Alpha Dog*.

