

AI Blair



tered brings together Witch creative team

Those **Blair Witch** people are at it again.

Director Eduardo Sanchez, co-producers Robin Cowie and Gregg Hale and executive producer Bob Eick have teamed up to bring the supernatural thriller **Altered** to the screen. **Altered** follows a group of men living a night of terror while coping with a creature that changed their lives 15 years earlier. As with many contemporary horror films, the secret to the thrills is letting the audience see just enough to spark their imagination about what the unseen bogey might really be like. For that task, the producers chose director of photography Steve Yedlin.

"I think they chose me because I can light scenes so that they feel truly dark and yet are still illuminated with subtlety, texture and detail," says Yedlin, who shot his first feature in 2001.

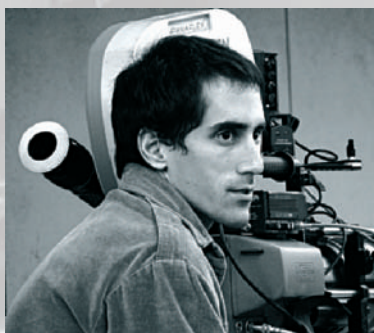
Yedlin explains the task was to strike the difficult balance of rich and varied darkness, which lies between the two opposing extremes of phony over-lighting and mere underexposure. His visual design was to support terror and suspense while providing an appropriate mood for the film's performance-heavy scenes. Halfway through the film, the lights go out in the house where most of the story takes place. In these lights-out scenes actors are lit with dim and somewhat directionless light that mimics the inexplicable ambience, which we see in near-complete darkness. These scenes also show the windows backlit more brightly than in previous lights-on scenes to signify that the previously dim incidental window light is now the brightest light present.

Yedlin shot the entire film on Kodak Vision 500T 5279 film, mainly through a Panavision 14.5-50mm Primo Macro Zoom (PMZ) lens.

"Shooting on a single stock helps in terms of logistics. The loader doesn't have

to juggle stocks and so forth," Yedlin observes. "I also wanted a fast film for our dark interiors and actually liked the idea of a slight grain increase for our few day exterior scenes."

He says that the macro zoom lens is as sharp as a prime, opens to T2.2, and focuses down to within a few inches of the front element. This makes it a powerful tool for quality and versatility for general as well as dark scenes in confined spaces, like those that dominated **Altered**.



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The film opens with night exteriors in the woods where several of the characters capture the creature. Yedlin didn't want the characters and trees to always be lit against a black void, as is a danger of such night exteriors. "In reality, when you are outside in the woods on a moonlit night, the sky is brighter than anything else," he explains.

Yedlin and gaffer Ama MacDonald positioned 60 Par cans with wide lenses on the periphery of the woods, pointing straight up, while the special effects team generated smoke. The lights illuminated the smoke, and as it moved, the levels of brightness varied from moment to moment. Trees and characters were silhouetted or separated against the distant smoky air. Yedlin dimly lit the actors with 5K and 10K Molebeams bounced off 12-foot muslins hung in the trees to simulate the faint glow of the sky.

When Yedlin was recruited to shoot **Altered**, the project was to be shot on high definition video. He brought up with the director and producers the many benefits that film could bring to production, post-production, and the final product. "The first reaction I got was that they would love to shoot film, but the budget might not support it," he explains. "I pointed out that doing proper post on HD is very expensive. Most people don't budget properly for it or understand what's involved. For this movie especially, the total budget including a proper HD finish would have been very similar to the cost with traditional film finish, but the sacrifice in look would have been huge."

Shooting in HD usually requires more fill light than film does to reveal details. "When you're shooting very dark scenes, as we were in **Altered**, 8-bit linear HD forces you to shoot in a more artificial way," Yedlin explains. "With film, you can actually shoot with no fill. In HD, you've

got to put a light somewhere, and that causes new shadows, which reveal the source. It didn't seem right to choose a medium that forces you to use light sources from more directions in a scene that's supposed to be utterly unlit."

Altered is being produced and distributed by Rogue Pictures, the genre arm of Universal Studios' specialty unit, Focus Features. The film was shot at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, taking advantage of the Universal Studios Florida Production Group Stage 20 Independent Filmmaker initiative that gives cost breaks to projects that hire a majority of their crews locally. ■

Left and inset:
DP Steve Yedlin.