

American

a journey to the 1970s



“Cinematography is like a symphony, with whole, half and quarter notes.... They are different notes that combine to create a visual rhythm as we transition from scene to scene, and shot to shot.”

American Primitive takes the audience on a journey back to the 1970s. A widowed father and his two teenage daughters relocate to a house in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where he begins a new career handcrafting American primitive furniture. There is a dramatic twist when the sisters discover that their father has a secret life that results in a custody conflict with the maternal grandparents.

Gwen Wynne co-authored the script with Mary Beth Fielder. Wynne directed stage plays and worked on documentaries for about 10 years while trying to get the film off the ground. It was her first turn at the helm. She was introduced to Chris Chomyn by a mutual friend. His body of work includes more than a dozen cinematography credits for independent features, all shot after he earned a master's in filmmaking at University of California, Los Angeles.

There was a modest \$1.5 million

budget and about a month of pre-production time. Chomyn scouted practical locations with Wynne, including a summer vacation house on the bay at Cape Cod that served as the family's new home. There is a room with a piano that the mother used to play for her daughters. The room has rustic wood walls and windows on three sides that frame the lawn, bushes and bay.

“I wanted to help Gwen shape the project and to be part of a collaborative creative process,” says Chomyn. “Her storyboards gave us a way to talk about whether a scene called for a tight or wider shot, and about what type of movement was right. I also watched her rehearse with the actors, which revealed cinematic opportunities.”

“John DeMeo (production designer) and Peggy Paola (set decorator) found authentic American Primitive art and furniture from the 1970s and earlier. Gwen's sister, Daphne Nixon, painted a three-wall mural in the dining room in the style of American Primitive art.”

Chomyn recommended producing *American Primitive* in

Super 16mm format composed in 2.4:1 aspect ratio coupled with digital intermediate (DI) timing.

“It was primarily an aesthetic issue,” he explains. “We want audiences to see and feel textures in backgrounds with shallow enough depth of field to keep them focused on the characters in the foreground. The Super 16 film format records more depth of field than 35mm film. Even though the smaller 16mm image area is not as sharp as a 35mm frame, it does capture enough clarity to create a sense of place and texture.”

2.4:1 aspect ratio

Chomyn adds that the wide screen aspect ratio gave them more flexibility for integrating environments into shots, and also for composing close-ups that get inside the eyes, minds and souls of characters, so the audience can see what they are feeling without losing that unique sense of time and place.

Chomyn explains that by composing in 2.4:1, he was exposing images on only about 60% of the usable Super 16 frame. That had the effect of slightly

magnifying grain, which enhanced textures and felt right for the time, place and story.

“One of our producers asked me about shooting in HD format,” he says. “I told him that it would be slower and more expensive. It would require more time and equipment to light interior scenes with bright, sunny exteriors outside of windows with enough exposure to see details in people's faces and in background textures.”

Chomyn spent several days during pre-production taking still photographs in rooms at different times of day to see how sunlight reflected off the ocean. He also documented how changing cloud cover affected the light and colors inside the house.

He also shot make-up and wardrobe tests in the house in changing light throughout the course of the day. That paid an additional dividend by enabling him to establish trust and relationships with the actors and to get inside of Wynne's mind.

He adds that the preparation also helped him work with AD

Primitive

Camera and Lenses
Film stocks

Two ARRI SR 3 cameras, Canon 8:64mm and 11:138mm zooms, and a set of Zeiss Superspeed lenses
KODAK VISION2 200T 7217, 500T 7218, and 100T 7212 films

Front end processing and digital intermediate LaserPacific



Matthew Campbell and Wynne to schedule shooting scenes at different times of day to make the most of sunlight. He had 12K sources outside of windows that came through bleached muslin to soften the light.

The camera package, provided by ARRI CSC in New York, included two ARRI SR 3 cameras, Canon 8:64mm and 11:138mm zooms, and a set of Zeiss Superspeed lenses.

Chomyn covered most scenes with a single ARRI SR 3 camera, partially because they were frequently working in small rooms. He and Wynne wanted to give the cast space to move and act spontaneously. Chomyn used the camera to interact with the actors as though it was an invisible character providing a subjective point of view. There are also a few zoom shots, which he and Wynne felt were appropriate for the period.

"We had a crane for a couple of days," Chomyn says. "The second camera let me keep shooting while the crane was being rigged. There were also days when we were bouncing from shooting exterior to interior scenes because of the weather or schedule."

LaserPacific inDI

A seminal scene takes place on a Saturday night when the sisters tell their father they are going to the movies with new friends. The girls believe that this is the truth when they get into the car, but their friends have fake IDs that get them admitted to a gay disco. Chomyn lit the bar in the disco with gold, blue and lavender light. The light on the floor shifts to red when the girls see their father dancing with a man. It was an unobtrusive way of informing the audience that something important was happening.

His palette included KODAK VISION2 200T 7217, 500T 7218, and 100T 7212 color negative films. Chomyn explains that each of those emulsions has distinctive imaging characteristics that were right for particular scenes and settings.

"Cinematography is like a symphony, with whole, half and quarter notes," Chomyn says. "There are handheld, Steadicam and dolly shots with close-up, medium and wide composition. We used different emulsions and warm, cool, hard and soft light from above and below. They are different notes that combine to create a visual rhythm as we transition from scene to scene, and shot to shot."

A decision was made during pre-production to do both front-end lab work and DI timing at LaserPacific in Los Angeles. Chomyn advised shipping the exposed negative to the West

Coast for processing so it could be kept in a vault where the DI would be done. Chomyn explains that the facility offers an affordable DI system (inDI™) for scanning film and converting to HDSR format (1920 x 1080 RGB 4:4:4).

In the beginning, he took digital stills of scenes and emailed them to the dailies timer along with a note describing his intentions. Chomyn got daily emails from the timer and DVD dailies about every three days. After a while, he felt that they were in sync and just took a few stills every day.

"DI is not a substitute for getting the right images on film," Chomyn concludes. "But, in combination with advances in film technology, DI enables you to shoot in Super 16 format and produce pristine release prints in 35mm anamorphic format."

(Editor's note: This issue went to press before the DI was timed.)