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Camera Panavision Millennium XL Film stock KODAK VISION2 Expression 5229 500T

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American Son

examines a soldier’s farewell

American Son is an independently financed feature film that tells the story of a 19-year-old Marine and the four days leading up to his departure from Bakersfield, California, for Iraq. The quality of the script and the reputation of the filmmakers helped attract a high-profile cast that includes, Nick Cannon (*Bobby*), Tom Sizemore (*Black Hawk Down*) and Danielle Renfrew (*Waitress*)—who also produced the film.

It was the first feature-length narrative project for Kris Kachikis, who is best known for his handheld cinematography on commercials. Writer-director Neil Abramson, who also directs and shoots commercials, brought an experienced eye to the project.

“I knew that the size of the budget meant minimal lighting,” says Kachikis. “But the script included many good night scenes and dimly-lit interiors, and the fact

that it could be a dark movie made it seem like the right career move. That was exciting.”

Because the budget was tight, discussions about format included talk of small DV cameras. “Sometimes choosing the proper format can be the most important part of shooting a project,” says Kachikis. “We looked at video cameras, large and small, as well as Super 16 film. I told Neil that whatever format we decided to shoot on, I would be there and give it 100 percent. At the same time, I thought the material needed to be shot on 35mm film. The audience needs to sense the textures of this soldier’s world, to smell the dust and feel the heat of the poor side of Bakersfield. It’s important that the audience fully understand his world. It is propelling him to join the Marines and do something as undesirable as going to war in Iraq.”

After a series of tests with different films, Kachikis chose KODAK VISION2 Expression 5229 500T film. “We couldn’t have done the film as well with any other stock,” he says. “Much of the story takes place inside cars, and I knew that we wouldn’t have the time or money to load picture vehicles onto process trailers with lights. I would have to be inside the car, shooting an African-American actor with daylight outside the windows. The range of the 5229, particularly in the highlights, allowed me to do that.”

Kachikis says that he and Abramson attended a screening of *Children of Men* where Emmanuel Lubezki, ASC spoke about his use of the Expression 5229 stock in several car scenes. “Lubezki chose the 5229 stock for car shots for the same reason,” says Kachikis. “Inside the car, things are underexposed by a stop-and-a-half, and outside, you’ve got two

to three stops over. The 5229 allows me to put myself in high contrast situations. I can put a dark-skinned actor against the ball of the sun, and I will get their face, with detail on the shadow side. It helped us to make the movie the way we had planned, on schedule, and we could do it well.”

Kachikis shot the entire movie handheld, usually with an 85 filter to compensate for daylight. The main camera was a Panavision Millennium XL. Close-focus prime lenses allowed him to be intimate with the actors without the use of a diopter. The aspect ratio was Academy 1.85:1. The film was processed at Deluxe Labs in Hollywood.

“For a commercial guy who is used to the telecine, the photochemical process was terrifying and thrilling,” Kachikis says. “The results are beautiful.”

American Son will hit the festival circuit in 2008.