



Meet the

a cinematic portrait painted by Sandi Sissel

Meet the Browns takes the audience on a journey to two different worlds in contemporary times. The film opens in a housing project in the inner city of Chicago, where Brenda (played by Angela Bassett) is struggling to raise her 17-year-old son and 10- and 4-year-old daughters alone. Their lives are turned upside down when the family travels to Georgia for the funeral of the father Brenda never knew.

That is where they meet the Browns. Her Georgia family and their friends live in a rural area, surrounded by fields of grass, blue skies, colorful flowers and open spaces rather than graffiti-covered walls. They are a fun-loving and raucous bunch.

The story was conceived, written and directed by Tyler Perry, who began his career as a playwright at the age of 18. He has authored and directed eight successful plays with inner city themes and strong female central characters. *Meet the Browns* is the fifth feature film co-venture for Tyler Perry Productions and Lionsgate in three years. Perry also writes, directs and co-produces the TBS television series *The House of Payne*.

It was his first collaboration with Sandi Sissel, ASC. The cinematographer brought an eclectic background and a unique vision to the project. Her father was the editor of a local newspaper in Texas. Sissel thought about following in his footsteps and becoming a TV news reporter, but decided that she was happier behind the camera. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin with a master's degree in fine arts, Sissel began her career as a television news photographer and segued into shooting magazine stories for *60 Minutes* and *20/20* as well as Emmy- and Oscar-winning documentaries. She earned her first narrative credit for *Salaam Bombay!* in 1988. Among her eclectic list of credits are the documentaries

Chisholm '72: Unbought & Unbossed, The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition, Mother Teresa, and Witness to War. Sissel's narrative credits include the features *Drop Dead Fred, Rising Son, The People Under the Stairs* and *The Reef*, as well as the TV classic *The Wonder Years* and the award-winning mini-series *Drug Wars*.

A decision had been made to produce *Meet the Browns* in 35mm film format framed in 1.85:1 aspect ratio before Sissel was on the scene. She agreed that this was the correct aesthetic decision and embraced the flexibility of working with spherical lenses.

Longer lenses

Sissel had the luxury of four weeks in pre-production planning. She scouted locations in Chicago and Georgia with first AD/co-producer Roger Bobb, organized the crew, and planned subtle differences in the visual grammar for the two parts of the story.

During the Chicago sequences, Sissel planned to move the camera more aggressively and use longer lenses to isolate characters in foregrounds and backgrounds, so they felt more claustrophobic. In Georgia, she planned to use wider angle shots, incorporating trees and houses in backgrounds with more breathing room in the frame. Those nuances were designed to be transparent to audiences. They are seamlessly interwoven with differences in characters, performances, costumes and settings. Perry focused mainly on performances and the coverage he wanted.



Browns

"The day before we started shooting, Tyler got in the van with me, Roger (Bobb) and (production designer) Ina (Mayhew)," Sissel says. "I showed him how we planned to block scenes with one camera recording the master shot, and the other covering the action from a different angle, usually on a medium or close-up on one or more characters."

Collaborative process

Panavision provided the camera package, including Platinum and Lightweight bodies, and a set of Primo primes and 11:1, 4:1 and 3:1 zoom lenses. There was always a Steadicam available when needed, and Sissel planned to use a Technocrane.

The schedule was ambitious, including 16 days filming scenes at 37 practical locations in Chicago and Atlanta, and 10 days filming all interiors scenes on sets built on stages in Georgia, where *The House of Payne* is produced. They never shot longer than 12 hours a day.

Sissel stresses that narrative filmmaking is a collaborative process with everyone playing a role, including the grips, gaffer, camera operators and focus pullers. "Jody Williams, the A camera operator, had worked with Angela before," Sissel says. "They had a wonderful relationship, and he understood what I wanted."

Sissel had KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 and 250D 5205 films for her palette. She used 5218 for scenes filmed on stages and night exteriors and interiors, 5205 for most day exteriors, and some KODAK VISION2 50D 5201 film for occasional shots with ultra-wide angle backgrounds when there wasn't time or resources needed to silk down the intensity of sunlight.

Technicolor in Los Angeles processed the negative and provided HD resolution DVD dailies. About every five days, Sissel requested 35mm print dailies of selected scenes to give her and her crew a feeling of how the images played on a big screen.

Perry multitasked as a performer. He played a cameo role as Madea, an older member of the Brown family. Sissel describes Madea as "a very wild, crazy character."

"There was a car chase sequence that we filmed at night without a rehearsal," Sissel recalls. "We were covering the chase with the camera on the Technocrane, providing a broad perspective. The script called for police cars to surround and stop the vehicle, arrest Madea and put him in the back seat of a police car."

Things didn't always happen as planned. Perry came out of the car screaming, yelling and jumping in the air, like the crazy and unpredictable person he was playing. The actors playing cops instinctively responded by wrestling him to the ground.

It is hard to surprise a cinematographer who has spent years with a camera on her shoulder shooting news and documentaries. Sissel instantly responded to the ad-libbed performance, but she credits the entire crew for reacting as a team.

"Our Technocrane operator reacted by instinct," she says. "He was right on the shot. That was typical. Things like that happened all the time. We would have a 400mm lens on the camera, figuring that we would get a close-up on a face, and something totally spontaneous would happen. That actually wasn't a big problem, because with the Primo zooms you make adjustments as fast as you can think."