

Cuttin da Mustard tackles illiteracy



Cuttin da Mustard is an independent feature film about a young man whose illiteracy is revealed when he is put in charge of an acting workshop. Following this humiliation, he is determined to learn to read. He eventually returns to the club, gains the respect of others in the theater group, and pursues his career with newfound confidence.

Director Reed McCants and cinematographer Joseph W.

Calloway collaborated on a plan for covering the dialog-heavy script on a demanding 17-day production schedule, while creating production values that support the drama.

"Reed wanted to shoot long takes with plenty of coverage," says Calloway. "Ten of the actors were in about 75 percent of the scenes. I decided to shoot the entire movie with KODAK VISION 500T 5279 film."

Calloway explains that 5279 gave him the latitude he needed to use a single negative in all situations, with slightly more saturated colors and contrast than the other KODAK VISION 500T stocks. "I knew that I could use the same stock in both bright light and low-key situations," he says. "That was important because we had limited equipment, especially in New York where we worked with a smaller crew."

In daylight, Calloway used an 85 color correction filter and neutral density filters on lenses to attenuate light. The look included shallow depth of field and saturated colors.

"Reed is also a graphic designer, so he had a very stylistic approach to the visuals," says Calloway. "We used shallow depth of field to keep everything immediate and right in front of the audience, just as the young actors in the story aren't yet able to see beyond what is happening directly in front of them. As the story evolves, and the characters begin to see beyond their own immediate desires, we opened depth of field up a little."

The schedule included two weeks on sets in an East Los Angeles warehouse, and a few days shooting at recognizable locations in Queens and New York City. The A camera was a Panaflex G-2, and a lightweight G-2 was used for handheld and Steadicam shots.

At times, the camerawork and editing was designed to communicate the improvisational, unrehearsed nature of a

fledgling actor learning his or her craft. The camera was often handheld. Sometimes it moved from one actor to another at unexpected moments. Other times it gazed off at nothing in particular, representing a young actor "spacing out" in class.

"Reed and I wanted the camera work to have a kinetic feeling," says Calloway. "We constantly recomposed and exaggerated motion within the frame and always tried to keep rich colors and layers in the backgrounds."

Front-end lab work was done at Deluxe and, at press time, Calloway was planning to fine tune the look during digital intermediate (DI) timing sessions at Modern VideoFilm. Both facilities are in Los Angeles.

"Having worked in television in the digital post arena, I knew I could use dynamic windows in the DI process to isolate and alter parts of the images," Calloway says.

Calloway observes that cinematographers are constantly balancing costs with the visual goals of directors. "Like every project, the challenge on *Cuttin da Mustard* was being able to run and gun with both limited resources and time," he says. "You must satisfy the director's vision, while at the same time be responsible to the producers and people who put up the money. You have to create a wonderful look and the right feelings, and you must do it within the budget. That is always the test." ■

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Above:
Cinematographer Joseph W. Calloway and first assistant Stan Keitt.

Right: Cast of *Cuttin da Mustard*.

