

# Following in the footsteps of Walt Disney

The feature documentary *Walt and El Grupo* recounts the 1941 journey that Walt Disney and a group of his key staff took to South America. The directing team of Ted Thomas and Kuniko Okubo and cinematographer Shana Hagan traveled to Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil to follow in Disney's footsteps.

Thomas explains that "a key aspect of the film is the juxtaposition of time – the place and events of 1941, and the same locales today. We shot several locations to make use of the large numbers of stills we have from 1941, and film footage that was shot at the time."

"The filmmakers and I wanted to recreate the feeling of discovery and the creative journey that the members of El Grupo felt during their trip," says Hagan. "In addition to shooting a traditional vérité style, we have a number of sequences with a highly stylized look as well as many abstract and atmospheric shots to set the mood and provide transitional material for the editor."

Pre-production began with a three-week scout and shoot during the fall of 2005, followed by two weeks of filming interviews in the United States in March 2006, and a six-week long journey in South America retracing Disney's steps that spring.

Hagan's production tools included an Aaton Super 16 XTR Prod camera, Canon 8-64 and 11-165mm zoom lenses, an Optex 2X extender, and a 12mm Zeiss Superspeed lens. She shot interviews

on KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 film and used KODAK VISION2 50D 7201 film to shoot daylight exteriors on location, and a few rolls of KODAK VISION2 250D 7205 film for early evening exteriors and on a Steadicam sequence shot on a Rio street in deep shade.

"We primarily used the 11-165 (zoom) for interviews to get as much depth as possible between camera, subject and background," says Hagan. "The 8-64 (zoom) was my choice for handheld vérité because of its minimum focus, which was great for a lot of small spaces that we were shooting in, and also for its sharpness.

"We used the 12mm Superspeed for a single sequence in a basement archive in Santiago, Chile. The very large archive was lit with widely spaced fluorescent practicals and was pretty dark, reading below a T1.3 on my meter. I knew I couldn't light the entire length of the shot, which was a handheld move about one minute long through the stacks to end on a reveal of one of our subjects pulling an archived book from a shelf. I shot (KODAK VISION2 500T) 7218 film at 24fps, wide open at T1.3 with a 172.8 degree shutter to knock out the 50hz fluorescent flicker and pulsing. It was processed normally, with some green pulled out in telecine. It looks great."

Hagan describes another sequence in Rio, Brazil, where they hired local Steadicam owner/operator Fabricio Tadeu Lima. They asked Lima to shoot some lengthy low-angle tracking shots of a mosaic sidewalk in the Vila Isabel neighborhood.

"This was a great opportunity to work with local talent," says Hagan. "It provided us with some interesting atmospheric shots to include in the mix of images."

After returning to the United States, they had to prepare for a tabletop shoot. Thomas, Okubo and Hagan decided to use a Chapman Stinger 2 jib arm, Cartoni Lambda two-axis head, a series of Superspeed prime lenses, the 8-64mm and the 11-165mm zooms, and a Probe II Super 16 lens set.

"We needed to make some photos and objects come alive and make them as three dimensional as possible," explains Hagan. "The combination of gear allowed me to manually fly over objects like a globe, a typewriter or a pile of brushes to end on typewritten letters or artwork created by members of the group. Being able to see details on an original watercolor from 1941 or paint on an artist's palette or the texture of onionskin paper of an original letter from 1941 adds such depth and character to the images."

The completed film contains archival footage from the 1941 trip shot by Disney and two of his travel companions, original interviews, location footage, tabletop footage of archival items, and other images, including graphics and still photographs.

"We used 16mm Kodachrome that was shot during the 1941 trip," says Thomas, "as well as newsreel material and a large amount of still photos that were taken by members of the Disney group, press and hosts in each of the countries. The fact that all the material originates on film gives a very integrated feel to the storytelling."

"I loved pushing the limits of film stocks on this project," says Hagan. "The stocks proved themselves in a variety of situations – basic interview set-ups, handheld vérité, bright sunny days in the countryside estancias of rural Argentina, the fluorescent lit basement archives in Santiago, Chile, the very dark interiors of the ruins of the once famous Cassino da Urca in Rio, and an exterior sequence shot with only available light about 45 minutes after sunset on the beach at Copacabana. It is incredible what we achieved."

*Walt and El Grupo* was in post-production when the article was written and will be completed in early 2007. ■

**Below:** (L to R) DP Shana Hagan and Director Ted Thomas shoot a sunset in Valparaiso, Chile, for *Walt and El Grupo*.

