

# Psychological drama *Half Nelson* from cinematographer Andrij Parekh

Andrij Parekh believes that *Half Nelson*, a provocative and moody independent feature set in New York City, will be his breakout film. As a graduate student at New York University in the late '90s, Parekh shot a number of award-winning films, including Ari Gold's *Helicopter*, Jessica Sharzer's *The Wormhole*, Victor Buhler's *Chaperone*, and Anthony Ng's ... (dot dot dot).

*Half Nelson* is directed by Ryan Fleck, another NYU graduate. It's the story of an inner-city teacher with a drug habit who forms a platonic relationship with a young student after being caught in a compromising position. The film is a 106-minute adaptation of Fleck's award-winning short *Gowanus, Brooklyn*. It played in competition at Sundance 2006 and opened New Directors/New Films in New York City last spring.

It was produced in Super 16mm format and shot on Kodak VISION2 Expression 500T 7229 film. "I prefer the lower contrast stocks that produce a more subtle, softer variation in tone," he says. "They feel much more painterly to me. The palette is soft and more pastel yet the blacks are still black. There's more detail and latitude than with the higher contrast stocks, and the speed allowed me to work with less light."

*Half Nelson*, produced at locations in New York City, was shot in an improvisational, documentary manner. Parekh shot the film almost entirely handheld using an ARRIflex SR-3 camera mounted with a Canon 11.5-165mm zoom and other long focal length Zeiss Superspeeds. Parekh believes that the look is honest, naturalistic and straightforward. Many scenes were shot with the lens wide open and no filtration.

"Our 1st AC Toshiro Yamaguchi did an incredible job pulling focus. I didn't want the actors to be bound by hitting marks. Giving them the freedom to move allowed them to focus on performance. Since the film was shot handheld, with both the camera and the subject moving, Yamaguchi had to be constantly on-point."

In one scene, the student (Shareeka Epps) is deceived into delivering drugs to her teacher (Ryan Gosling) in a motel room. When she arrives, she finds a party in the room.

"I gave it a barely lit feeling, with very few instruments on set," Parekh says. "I took advantage of practicals augmented with a three-unit Dedo kit tucked into the ceiling, giving the party sequence a very seedy and realistic mood." Gaffer Smokey Nelson and key grip Matt Walker were instrumental in realizing Parekh's visual design.

A second scene is set in the same room at dawn on the following day. Parekh used just one light, a 1.2KW HMI directed through a window covered in tracing paper (1000H). The actual motel room curtains were used to cut and shape the light, making the whole room glow.

"It's important to me that the actors can inhabit a space without being blinded by lights on the set," he says. "It's something I learned from working with John Thomas and Harris Savides, ASC, as an apprentice. Light the room, not the faces. It was a great piece of advice."

In pre-production, Parekh did stock tests with Kodak's 7229 film. "I was interested in seeing how far I could push the stock in various conditions," he says. "I also have one contrast test I do with every film, to see how dark and contrasty I can go. I like to ride that delicate edge of darkness."

He also took a field trip with Fleck and co-writer Anna Bowden. "My favorite pre-production tool is to walk through the Metropolitan Museum of Art and look at 17th and 18th century paintings with the director," Parekh explains. "It's a very concise way of determining what a director likes and doesn't like. I can translate that palette or texture or feeling through the choice of film stock, processing and lighting."

That trip led to the very naturalistic look that pervades *Half Nelson*. Parekh further desaturated and added contrast to the film during a 2K transfer that was done at PostWorks in New York.

*Half Nelson* is his sixth feature in three years, and will be distributed this summer by THINKfilm. Other Parekh films that will finish this year include *Sonhos de Peixe*, *The Treatment*, and *The Favor*. He is currently in pre-production for *Noise*, directed by Henry Bean and starring Tim Robbins. ■

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**Below:** (L to R) Shareeka Epps and Karen Chilton in a scene from *Half Nelson*, shot by cinematographer Andrij Parekh (inset).

