

Harsh

Creative fi meager



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CRAVE FILMS.

Above: (L to R) Freddy Rodriguez and Christian Bale in a scene from *Harsh Times*, shot by Steve Mason, ASC, ACS.

Harsh Times is based on writer/director David Ayer's boyhood memories of his life in South Central Los Angeles. The story revolves around two fictional characters: Jim David, an ex-United States Army Ranger who comes home from the war in Iraq, and his boyhood pal Mike Alvarez. They are living on the edge, drinking, smoking dope and committing petty crimes until the good times turn ugly.

Ayer produced the independent feature



Above: (L to R) Christian Bale and Freddy Rodriguez in a scene from *Harsh Times*, shot by Steve Mason, ASC, ACS. Courtesy of Crave Films.

Centre: (Far, L to R) Steve Mason, ASC, ACS discussing a shot with director David Ayer on the set.

Right: Actor Christian Bale in a scene from the film.

The story behind the story: Ayer was raised in South Central Los Angeles. He enlisted in the Navy and served a two-year tour of duty. After completing his military obligation, Ayer returned to Los Angeles, where he met Wesley Strick while working on a remodeling project at the screenwriter's house.

Maybe it was fate, or just good luck. Strick became his mentor. **Training Day** was the seventh script that Ayer wrote, and the first one he sold. His credits include **U-571**, **The Fast and the Furious** and **S.W.A.T.**

Ayer wrote the script for **Harsh Times** in 1995, right after **Training Day**. He decided to raise the money and produce the film rather than surrender creative control. "I had poured my soul onto those pages," he explains.

It was his first turn as director and as a co-producer. His script and passion for the project attracted a talented cast, including Christian Bale as Jim David and Freddy Rodriguez as Mike Alvarez. He also assembled a team of inspired filmmakers including Oscar-winning editor Conrad Buff IV (**Titanic**) and cinematographer Steve Mason, ASC, ACS, who has accrued some 20 narrative film credits since 1988.

"The script had richness, because David (Ayer) wrote it about people he knows and understands," says Mason. "It's a very harsh character study and a morality tale. You can't go off to war and not have it affect who you are when you come back."

During their first discussions, Ayer said he was considering shooting with digital cameras because the budget was thin. Mason recommended producing **Harsh Times** in Super 16mm format as a way to trim costs without compromising production values.

"The Super 16 format was perfect for this film," he says. "We were able to move quickly and shoot in tight spaces. We shot night scenes in cars with handheld cameras and used LED panels to light faces. It looks like the light is coming from the dashboard."

Mason generally covered the action

with two ARRI SR-3 cameras with Zeiss T1.3 lenses, and he recorded images on Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 film.

"We had to shoot without a generator quite a bit of the time," he says. "There are night scenes where we were driving on city streets shooting in ambient light. With the T1.3 lens we could reach into darkness and get the subtlest details on film."

Ayer notes that the 800-foot magazines enabled them to film for up to



24 minutes without stopping. He says that helped the actors stay in character during long dialog scenes.

"We were shooting five to six pages of complex dialog a day with two cameras," Mason adds. "After David rehearsed with the actors, we'd talk about shot design and lighting. The actors felt free to be spontaneous and try different things, because they knew we'd get three or four close-ups. That gave the editor the coverage he needed."

Mason used a Steadicam on wide-angle shots, usually when the operator was running or walking with characters, and

Times

Timing on a budget



when he felt a handheld camera would be too bumpy. Other times, he shot handheld close-ups with wide-angle lenses.

"I think the wider angle close-ups add a dimension of depth to the characters compared to being back on a longer lens," he says. "A lot of the story is about their faces, expressions and the different skin tones. We lit streets at night with sodium and mercury vapor lamps on telephone poles. We got phenomenal skin tones with the mix of green and orange light. I was



under-exposing some shots by as much as two-and-a-half stops. That just added a touch of grain, which felt right in those situations."

Unexpected things did happen, including one of the biggest rainstorms in Los Angeles in the last 100 years. It rained for two straight weeks while they were shooting exteriors on the streets. They just kept shooting because there were no covered sets.

The story takes a twist when David is recruited by a government agency to work in an undercover role in South America. He has to tell his girlfriend who is pregnant

with his child. He and Alvarez visit her home in Mexico, where David tells her that their relationship has to end because he's leaving the country for several years.

"We shot for five days in a very small town near Ensenada," Mason says. "Her family lived in a one-room hut that was about 12 by 12 feet. You can see the dirt and the grime on the walls. It's a painfully emotional scene. We also shot in another room that was about 12 by 8 feet. It had a patina that would be hard to duplicate on a set."

Mason used a hand-cranked 1920s ARRI 2-C camera for several shots, including a scene where David was confused and struggling to understand his situation.

"It was a glimpse of his inner being," he observes. "David (Ayer) got the actors to over-act and do things that they wouldn't normally do to reveal their inner thoughts."

Ayer adds, "I'd tell the actors to 'cry, laugh, scream, shout, shake your heads and give us really wild motions.' It was like improvisational guitar. Sometimes we created triple and quadruple exposures where you can feel the heat ingrained in abstract images that are liquid and fluid. Conrad (the editor) found very specific, poetic moments."

During pre-production, Mason considered using a bleach bypass process on the negative to desaturate the look. But after shooting a test, he decided that it wasn't the right look. He spoke with Ayer about exploring the possibilities of timing

the film in a digital intermediate (DI) environment. They tested different facilities before settling on LaserPacific, a Kodak-owned company in Los Angeles.

"It was great to be part of this project from dailies, through the DI and mastering," says LaserPacific President Leon Silverman. "These bold and compelling images are what happens when a tremendous story and creative minds meet our team and the powerful tools that can help express their vision."

"We decided to scan the film at 2K resolution, desaturate colors by 10% and lift the gain and contrast to exactly where I envisioned it," Mason explains.

Mason notes that the upfront decision to use a DI process gave them additional flexibility during production. There were occasions when he decided not to flag an unwanted light off a wall in the background because he knew that it would be significantly quicker to isolate and alter that element of the shot in DI.

Mason also decided to use Kodak Look Manager System (KLMS) to preview shots and create visual references for the dailies timer and DI colorist. He used a digital still camera to record images of different set-ups. The camera was calibrated to mimic the imaging characteristics of 7218. Usually at the end of the day, he loaded the stills on a personal computer that was in the camera truck. He used KLMS software to fine-tune the images. Mason sent the dailies timer a CD containing both the original and manipulated images every day. He also used a private phone system

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provided by LaserPacific to leave daily messages for the timer.

There were no storyboards. Mason discussed coverage with Ayer, and decided how and whether characters were going to be lit depending on the scene.

"We treated every shot as though it was a line of dialogue, and decided how to cover and light it based on the performances, story and location," he says. "Maybe an actor would decide to begin a dialogue scene with his or her face concealed by shadows, and then turn their head or take a few steps into the light. You've got to see a face at certain times, but those decisions have to be dramatically correct for the story."

After the film was edited offline, the conformed negative was scanned at 2K resolution with a Spirit DataCine. Mason's still images were used by the colorist as a guide for preparing the digital master. The file was down-rezzed to expedite timing.

The digital images were projected on a cinema-sized screen in a theater environment. It was an interactive process. The images were projected on the screen, and Mason would tell the colorist to isolate something in the frame and make it darker or brighter, or more or less saturated, until he was satisfied.

"There's a lie detector scene that has a monochromatic palette with a lot of blues and grays," Ayer states. "We decided

to make it really black and white in DI. In another shot, where we used the hand-cranked camera, a character was getting angry. We timed it warm, and made it hotter as the character got angrier. We experimented with finding the right balance without it feeling like a gimmick. It was totally subjective."

Mason estimates that the DI sessions took about two weeks. The corrections were made on the 2K digital file, which was recorded onto 35mm color intermediate film that was used as a master for generating release prints.

"You can see textures of fabrics, shades of black, and subtle details deep in the background that were on the original negative," Mason notes. "There is a sense of ethereal depth that feels natural and is part of the story. There are levels of colors in skin tones and hair, smoke from cigarettes and pigeons flying in the background."

Ayer concludes, "The DI gave us a big advantage, especially in night scenes, where we wanted the city lights visible from the car interior. There are backgrounds within backgrounds. I believe there's an audience out there that is hungry for more sophisticated movies that make them think when they walk out of the theater. The audience isn't consciously aware of the craft involved, but they can feel the energy." ■

Main shot: (L-R) Steve Mason, ASC, ACS discussing a shot with director David Ayer on the set of *Harsh Times*.

Top: (Front, L to R) DP Steve Mason, ASC, ACS, actors Christian Bale, Freddy Rodriguez, and director David Ayer on the set of *Harsh Times*.

Middle: Actor Christian Bale in a scene from *Harsh Times*, shot by Steve Mason, ASC, ACS.

Below: (L-R) Actors Freddy Rodriguez, Eva Longoria and director David Ayer on the set of *Harsh Times*, shot by Steve Mason, ASC, ACS.



PHOTOS BY JIM SHELDON