

From the page to the screen:

Bringing *St. Urbain's Horseman* to television

St. Urbain's Horseman is a four-hour, two-part television miniseries based on the 1971 novel authored by screenwriter Mordecai Richler, one of Canada's best known literary figures. The story follows Jake, a struggling film director of modest success consumed with guilt about his cousin Joey, whom he imagines to be a Nazi-hunter, adventurer and war hero. Jake eventually moves away from the close-knit, ghetto-like community in Montreal to become a successful, happy individual in London, England.

Norayr Kasper, CSC envisioned a visual style similarly split between two opposing poles. "The script had a complex and epic feel that I liked a lot," says Kasper, whose cinematography credits include *Race to Mars*, *Last Exit*, *Deadly Friends*, *The Life Before This*, *The Last Debate*, and *Calendar*.

"It was a story with no guns or violence, and no need to drive it with unnecessary imagery. The chance to portray contrasting settings and characters – the social and the individual, Montreal in the 1950s and London in the 1960s – was very exciting to me."

Kasper and director Peter Moss sought to emphasize Montreal's ethnographic nature. "Jake's identity is seen as part of a community of people, friends and family," says Kasper. "We usually shot handheld, and opted to compose shots ranging from super-wide to medium to show their dynamic interrelation, to give the actors space to move within the frame, and to include the environments. We also avoided conventional coverage whenever possible in favor of fewer, richly descriptive compositions. The lighting was more directional with higher contrast ratios."

In the London sequences, individuality prevails in the story as well as in the images. "Generally, we stayed focused on the portrait with longer lenses," says Kasper. "Compositions were tighter and more frontal. Coverage was more formal, making greater use of shots and counter shots to emphasize the mindscape, as opposed to the environment. The lighting was softer, and the images have richer mid-tones, less contrast and increased color saturation compared to Montreal."

Kasper tested a variety of films and formats. He initially considered using two brands of film to delineate the Montreal and London sequences. He chose the Super 16 format and KODAK VISION2 200T 7217 film.



After seeing the results of his tests, Kasper chose to process the London portion normally creating a rich, sharp look, and to set off the Montreal scenes by push-processing the negative. "For the Montreal sequences, I favored pushing the 200-speed 7217 negative from one-half to one full stop, as opposed to using a more sensitive film," he says. "I aimed for slightly monochromatic hues and medium-grained texture. I think the grain adds immediacy and spontaneity by heightening the expressiveness of the image. Impressionists used it for the same reasons a century ago. One can say that with grain, the image breathes with life."

Kasper's cinematography worked in tandem with the contributions of his collaborators. "As a cinematographer, I rely on all other creative departments to help construct the image and visual narrative," he says. "I often shared my ideas with the director and all key departments, and I listened to theirs."

1 Actor David Julian Hirsh in a scene from *St. Urbain's Horseman*, shot by DP Norayr Kasper, CSC.