

Helen

tragedy of a tortured soul



Film stocks:
KODAK VISION2 200T 5217, KODAK VISION2 500T 5218

Camera and lenses:
ARRIFLEX 535B and an ARRICAM LT with a set of Ultra Primes

After a long struggle to turn her ambitious script into a film, award-winning director Sandra Nettelbeck has teamed up with Egoli Tossel Film to produce a daring feature about the triumph of the heart over the mind.

Helen documents a professional woman's battle with clinical depression from deep within her mind, and explores the effects of the extraordinary nightmare on her and her family. The film is elliptic, dark and inordinately hopeful and represents the fifth collaboration between Nettelbeck and director of photography Michael Bertl, BVK (*Loose Ends*, *Sergeant Pepper*, *Mostly Martha*).

"I needed the magic of film and my only option was a 35mm negative with its richness of detail, vast contrast range and ability to capture enormous amounts of information," says Bertl who found his photographic reference for Helen in a 16th century Flemish painting of Mary Magdalene. The colours of dark, wet wood, a Van Dyke brown, raw greenish umbra in an indigo sea; those were the first images for Helen. Silvery wood dried by salty winds on pale grey sand; Prussian green and translucent orange.

Using an ARRIFLEX 535B and an ARRICAM LT with a set of Ultra Primes, and shooting between F2 and F2.5 in S-35 3 perf 1:2.35, Bertl used the scope aspect ratio and the shallow depth of field to divide foreground, middle ground and background to place Helen in the world and separate her from it. "It was a hell of a job for my long-time 1st assistant cameraman Harald Mellwig, but he is a fearless hero and did a great job," says the DP.

"KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 worked perfectly for the overcast skies and daylight interiors, which we lit with big soft sources. It gave me the widest contrast range, clear whites and perfect blacks and was ideal for D.I. KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 is miraculous and was the best solution for low light without grain; the additional f-stops enabled me to shoot more quickly." Bertl used 16mm for the film's home movie sequence, pushing

KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 two stops and shooting with Antique Suede and Black Pro-Mist filters.

Bertl varied the lighting with Dedos, practicals, 18Ks on a 20 x 20, or a simple gelled fluorescent. He placed light in front of shadows and darkness around characters to create intimacy and forlornness. In the winter night scene on the black board roof, where Mathilda's and Helen's story ends, he dimmed and softened a couple of tungsten units. He was faced with a light meter that constantly read 'error', numerous pages of script, heavy emotions and a location that had to work almost 300°. "I knew that 5218 would capture everything on that very dark night - and it did. Every detail is visible in that breathtaking scene and, needless to say, it inter-cuts seamlessly with the other stocks," he muses.

Working closely with the actors on the eight-week Vancouver coast shoot, the DP used long lenses and slow soft floating or vibrating camera movements to express emotions, "the starting points for movement and rhythm," says Bertl. In one extremely challenging scene, a 20-foot remote crane was erected on muddy ground, adjacent to the receding tide. "Mathilda (Lauren Lee Smith) finds Helen (Ashley Judd) lying in the cold water. The camera pulls back from a close-up of her to a wide-angle shot of the two women on the shore as the tide is coming in: a Pietà," explains Bertl. Battling heavy winds and driving rain, he captured the complicated shot within a tight one-hour window as the incoming tide was reaching the crane base.

"Bruce Whidden from Technicolor did a wonderful job on our dailies. I sent him colour-matched digi prints and detailed descriptions in the early days and on every new set, but he quickly understood my vision," he says.

Bertl concludes: "I'd like to thank my great Canadian/German team and Sandra for such an inspiring experience."

1 Actress Ashley Judd on a rooftop in a scene from *Helen*. Photo: Ed Arraquel.