

# UCLA thesis film references grim history to tell poignant story

Walter Richardson suspected that his advisors didn't believe him when he informed them that Emmy-winning cinematographer Donald A. Morgan, ASC had agreed to shoot his thesis project *Forgive Us Our Transgressions*. Richardson was a Steadicam operator when he met Morgan in 1998. They worked together on *The Tom Arnold Show*, *Built to Last* and *Girlfriends*.

Richardson subsequently enrolled at the University of California Los Angeles School of Theater, Film and Television with the intention of earning a master's degree in directing. He rekindled his relationship with Morgan and asked the cinematographer to collaborate with him on the production of his thesis film.

"I had to sit down after reading the script because it was so powerful, short, and to the point," recalls Morgan, who had taught television lighting to theater students at UCLA five years earlier.

## Rich, cinematic style

*Forgive Us Our Transgressions* is the story of a young African-American college student who is haunted by the lynching of a relative in the South. When he has an opportunity to confront the perpetrator, he must choose between moving forward or avenging the unpunished crime.

For the opening execution sequence, Richardson and Morgan devised a look that reflects the early 1900s with a rich, cinematic style. They referenced *Without Sanctuary*, a book with lynching photos that depicts very graphic images with deep brown tones. "When you look at these pictures, you're transported to that time and place," Richardson says.

The scene was shot at night on location at The Price Ranch in Los Alamos, just north of Santa Barbara, California. Morgan was assisted by camera operator Deborah O'Brien and two assistant cameramen using a small lighting package and a set of prime lenses from Panavision. The Panaflex GII camera was mainly on a dolly or handheld. The images were recorded on three-perf 35mm KODAK VISION3 500T 5219 color negative film.

## Sensation of the South

A fire provided the main lighting motivation, with blue rim light added. "Film definitely enhanced our ability to tell this story and give it more life," says Richardson.

"You can see the characters' skin tones, and feel the richness and emotions of the story. I wanted to give it that sensation of the South — the heat and sweat, and how 'bluesy' it can be."

"We didn't have a lot of time, manpower or footage," adds Morgan. "We were limited in the number of takes and the amount of coverage we could get. We wanted some camera movement and to see landscapes in backgrounds. Based on tests, I knew I could light for a different variety of warm and cool tones at night, and also get everything we needed during the daytime."

Richardson had received two fellowships to cover production costs. The night before the five-day shoot, he received a call notifying him that he had earned the Technicolor Thesis Award, which includes digital intermediate (DI) services. Morgan advised Richardson to just stick to the game plan, but admits it was a relief to know they would have flexibility in post-production to fine tune the images.

Technicolor processed and transferred the film in addition to offering their proprietary OZ process that was applied to the print after color grading was completed in the DI suite. The process retains silver and increases contrast, giving the images a more saturated look.

Richardson says this project taught him how important it is to consult with the director of photography to accomplish his vision as a director. Morgan also advises, "If you have good communication amongst the departments, it makes everybody's job easier because then you flow as a unit. Filmmaking is a team project. I really push young talent to find out what the other departments are doing and why, and to listen."

*Forgive Us Our Transgressions* was produced by Kathy Cabrera and Alexandra Creswick, also graduates of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. The filmmakers plan to submit the short film into festivals.



1 (L-R) Actors Scott Dewey and Owen Scholar pose before shooting a scene from Walter Richardson's UCLA thesis film *Forgive Us Our Transgressions*. Photo by Jessie Lamfers