

# Creativity of student filmmakers transcends tight budget



The filmmaking team of writer-director Nadine Truong and cinematographer Tal Lazar was consistently told they did not have sufficient funds to shoot the script for *Shadow Man* because it was a period piece with battles, guns, children, and extras. But the short film, which is set during the Vietnam War, was completed on one of the lowest thesis budgets at the American Film Institute (AFI) last year.

Truong and Lazar both received their MFAs in 2009. Lazar previously earned a bachelor's degree in practical film studies from Tel Aviv University, and gained years of professional experience as a union assistant cameraman in Israel. This was their first full-length narrative project together.

It was a victory for the filmmakers, who not only succeeded in making their vision a reality, but did so using the most advanced tools with the help of Kodak, Panavision and FotoKem. According to Truong, "*Shadow Man* became what I set out for it to be: A short, epic film utilizing convincing battle scenes alongside moments of intimacy to tell the story of one man in his quest to protect his family and his country. And we did it for a lot less money than other thesis films that shot present day in HD format."

The film's visual theme relies on shadows, as the title implies. "The theme encompasses the physical shadow of the character on walls, as well as the dark side of his behavior and emotions," Truong notes. "We played a lot with darkness."

With financial restrictions in mind, the determined filmmakers used everything available to them to their advantage. "We looked around our AFI campus with new eyes," says Lazar. "Obviously nothing looked like period Saigon, but with a little bit of imagination and some production design, we were able to do wonders with the frame. We also had to be very disciplined."

*Shadow Man* was shot mostly on school property, with the exception of a few jungle sequences, which were filmed on a movie ranch in Santa

Clarita, California. "Out of necessity, every single dollar spent on this film was scrutinized," says Lazar. Limitations included the inability to transport equipment off campus, and the need to build a 20-by-20-foot black cube on AFI's lawn, in lieu of a soundstage.

The filmmakers decided early on that this particular story needed the cinematic feel of 35 mm film. Lazar chose KODAK VISION2 Expression 500T 5229 film in the 3-perf format. "As newer stocks improve, the grain starts to disappear, and we wanted the organic feeling of film," notes Lazar. "The low contrast, low saturation of the 5229 helped us achieve the period look in a much more subtle way than applying post techniques."

Film also provided the latitude and flexibility to work with available light, aside from some AFI locations that were shot using a small lighting package provided by the school.

Additionally, the filmmakers received grants from both Panavision and FotoKem, allowing them access to a full camera package, including a Panaflex GII, as well as processing, development and a limited amount of print dailies. A variety of Zeiss lenses were also used based on availability.

Lazar says camera movement underscored the main character's turmoil and ultimate demise. "The more agony he begins to feel, the more movement we used," he explains. "However, we didn't want the audience to necessarily feel those camera moves, so we decided against handheld and Steadicam, and mostly used a tripod or dolly."

The filmmakers also point out that no special processing was done in post. Color correction was applied to achieve a certain cooler look for the military scenes and a warmer look for the more intimate family scenes towards the end of the main character's journey.

Truong and Lazar proved that with determination and creativity, nearly everything is possible. They beat the odds and brought their story to life. Now *Shadow Man* is heading to the festival circuit.

1 Cinematographer Tal Lazar on the set of *Shadow Man*. (photo by Natalia Regas)

2 The American Film Institute campus stood in for Saigon at night for the thesis film *Shadow Man*. (photo by Michael Yates)