

16mm captures Any Human Heart & Merlin

The much-acclaimed British television series *Any Human Heart* and *Merlin* were both shot on Kodak 16mm film stock.

Channel 4's ambitious four-part television adaptation of *Any Human Heart* is based on William Boyd's best-selling novel. Spanning every decade of the 20th century, the star-studded drama explores fictional writer Logan Mountstuart's long life through the eyes of three actors.

"*Any Human Heart* is a brilliant book, but it has such scope and scale, and every conceivable obstacle that William Boyd thought it could never make it to the screen. I'd have agreed with him; it certainly seemed a crazy venture," admits producer Lee Morris. "We instinctively felt this was a film project and knew that with 16mm we could push that bit further and capture all the information for the grade."

Director Michael Samuels and Polish director of photography Wojciech Szepel, PSC had worked together on *Mrs Mandela*. "Wojciech is very good at understanding the scripts as a whole, which was vital," he says. "In conversations about the look of the films, we always had the scripts firmly in mind. I wanted to be bold, but I wanted it rooted in the scripts. Wojciech absolutely understood which made for some creatively thrilling discussions. We were able to take it into the grade, where individual looks reflecting the mental state of our central character were assigned to each film. Our shared ambition was to push what was achievable within the limitations of a television schedule."

"I wanted to shoot on 16mm and Wojciech and I were keen to use Kodak stock. I felt it would be a huge advantage and would enable us to push the grade and general look of each film in some very interesting directions."

"Our collaboration on both films was very smooth. Michael is a director with a strong vision, but he is always ready to listen," notes Szepel. "We chose Super 16mm for all the right reasons: shooting handheld at speed in high contrast situations; the very demanding schedule; the size of the gear; and the price of the stock."

The DP selected KODAK VISION3 250D Color Negative Film 7207 and KODAK VISION3 500T Color Negative Film 7219. "They're perfectly balanced and reliable stocks with fantastic



latitude. I was able to work really quickly and capture highlight detail in the most extreme lighting conditions. Occasionally there were risky scenarios in terms of lighting, but when I watched the rushes I realised I was very safe."

"Lack of depth was a vital aspect in *Any Human Heart*, so I kept my aperture as open as possible. Sometimes I purposely shot handheld at T1.3 in order to achieve that 'in and out of focus' look; a stressful option for focus-puller Christian Allinger. There was little time to spend on the very bright exteriors, but I'm extremely pleased with the results," says Szepel.

"The design and costume departments did a brilliant job. The lighting also played a large part in creating the looks achieved in the grading room with Jet Omoshebi. She's a fantastic, dedicated grader with lots of ideas." Szepel also wishes to acknowledge the assistance of camera operator Adam Gilham and gaffer Mark Clayton.

ARRI RELATIVITY™ advanced de grain software, which is being placed in strategic laboratories throughout Europe, played a role in the grading. "The decision to use it has to be made in pre-production, so testing, testing, testing is the answer. When you do that, you can achieve excellent results," acknowledges Szepel. "We also played with the Lensbaby; a very specific tool that achieved the most amazing results, particularly on memory flashbacks and imaginary characters."

"Everyone is thrilled with the results," concludes producer Morris. "I'm so glad we took the film route; Super 16mm has helped us to pull off what was thought of as the impossible."

Any Human Heart is a Carnival Film & Television production.

UK-based New Zealand director of photography Dale McCready shot most of the third season of *Merlin*. The enormously popular British fantasy adventure was filmed on location in France and Wales. He also shot most of the first series and all the second series.

"Although the look of the show was already well established with its punchy highlights and quite extreme contrast range, I tested various formats and different stocks before commencing the third season," says McCready. "I investigated shooting digitally and visited a successful US television show shot on Genesis cameras. But I concluded that Super 16mm, combined with good lenses and post was the best choice for us overall. For example, lightweight 16mm cameras can shoot up to 150 fps without requiring much extra gear. No digital package can quite match that."

McCready has worked with several different directors on *Merlin*, each bringing their own mark to stories and visuals. "*Merlin* is very demanding to shoot and it's a challenge to make it look expensive when, relatively speaking, it's not. We shoot fast and mainly with one camera, so it's testament to my crew that we succeed in making it look the way it does. Film gives me the option to be almost reckless with exposures and enables me to create far more dramatic looks than I could manage with a reduced contrast range."

McCready's workhorse stock on *Merlin*'s second season was KODAK VISION3 500T Color Negative Film 7219 exposed often at T4. "But after tests I decided to push the look of the third season into a sharper area to provide even cleaner HD broadcast masters; I also wanted narrower depth of field. My 1st assistant Ivan Meagher is so good that I could shoot more consistently at wider apertures, so I used KODAK VISION2 200T Color Negative Film 7217 at 2.8. The stock is extraordinary in its ability to render shadow detail and it let me light progressively

darker throughout the series." McCready utilised a combination of dramatic beams and shafts from windows, and soft light stills-style lighting for faces.

"*Merlin* is quite glamorous, so first and foremost I wanted the actors to look their best, while also providing punchy, dramatic wider frames. I tried to shoot wider frames from a distance to retain a cinematic look, intercutting with close-ups on longer lenses and moving away from television-style mid close-ups. The show is classical in its approach, with simple, elegant dolly shots, nevertheless the camera is always alive, smoothly sliding and tracking in every shot in a very modern way," explains McCready. He also used KODAK VISION2 50D Color Negative Film 7201 and KODAK VISION3 250D Color Negative Film 7207 for location work and daylight interiors.

"We have a great team on *Merlin*, both editorially and in post. I'm particularly grateful to the guys at Soho Film Lab for their consistently terrific processing and rushes transfer, and The Mill bends over backwards in finishing and grading the show. Colourist Mick Vincent has done a terrific job grading with Baselight. I'm staggered at how far we've come with *Merlin* in three seasons," he states. McCready is in line to shoot the newly-commissioned fourth season.

"Dale's contribution to the overall look and feel of *Merlin* is hugely valued," says line producer Amanda Wilkie. "He offers great ideas and is an enormous support to the directors and producers. He tests different formats, but every time 16mm proves it can give us the cinematic look with the right fairytale/storybook feel. We push it to the absolute maximum in post-production."

"Each episode is a mini-feature, and with each series we push the boundaries and production values still further. It takes a massive team to produce *Merlin* and we're all very proud to be a part of it," she concludes.



1 A scene from *Any Human Heart*
2 DP Dale McCready