

Beautifully Esther

follows unusual post path



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Russell Bell studied film at York University in Toronto, and came to graduate school at the American Film Institute (AFI) in Los Angeles with the goal of becoming a great cinematographer in his own right. It was also this attitude - "aim high" - that led in part to the decision to photograph *Beautifully Esther*, Bell's thesis film at AFI, in 35mm format with a film print finish. Director Ricardo Korda also insisted on this strategy.

"We knew that if all went according to plan, we'd be screening our film internationally in a variety of situations," says Bell. "We knew that some theaters and festivals would not have HDCAM SR capability, and we were worried that our film would be projected from DVD, which would be a shame. In addition to delivering the best image quality, 35mm is a world standard. We felt the format would help our project stand out."

While researching the available options and costs, the filmmakers spoke to Clark Henderson at Technicolor, who suggested making a print directly off the Cinevator. A high-speed film recorder/printer made by Cinevation, the Cinevator takes HD images back to film more quickly and affordably than most digital intermediate workflows.

Together with Technicolor, they developed a workflow tailored for *Beautifully Esther*. This method obviated the need to create a separate optical track or to strike an answer print, going direct to print straight from the Cinevator, and striking the optical track in real time during the film-out. "We planned for a print to be the end result of the workflow from the beginning. So we were able to keep the HDCAM SR tape in log color space throughout the process," Bell explains.

"We looked at tests and compared direct-to-print film-outs from HDCAM, HDCAM SR and 2K DPX files," says Bell. "The difference between HDCAM and HDCAM SR was significant, warranting the additional expense. But I was amazed to see how small the differences were between

the SR images and the 2K DPX images. They were almost indistinguishable. So we avoided all the costs associated with working in 2K."

The images were scanned into HDCAM SR log format. HDCAM linear tape dubs were made with the look baked in, allowing for more fully informed editing decisions. The images were then onlined to HDCAM SR tapes and color corrected in log space using a digital cinema projector and a KODAK VISION print stock look-up table (LUT). That version was mastered back to HDCAM SR and the print, done on KODAK VISION Print 2383 film, was output from that tape.

"This allowed us to have an amazing looking print for a fraction of the cost in a workflow that was incredibly efficient," says Bell. "I think this new technique is really opening up doors, and allowing people to create a print where it might have been impossible before. As soon as the print was finished, we sent it off to Venezuela, where the director had arranged a series of screenings for friends and investors."

Beautifully Esther was photographed on KODAK VISION2 500T Expression 5229 and 200T 5217 emulsions. "Ricardo was looking for film that looks like film," says Bell. "The 5229 is versatile, and the grain lends an amazing texture to the images."

Beautifully Esther was one of six thesis films shown at the AFI Showcase 2010 event at the DGA Theater in Hollywood. It was one of only two that screened a film print. "People definitely noticed the difference. Several people came up to us after the screening and commented on how dramatic the difference was," says Bell.

"It's great to be able to send the print anywhere in the world and know that it will look great," he concludes. "Film is definitely the highest common denominator."

1 Cinematographer Russell Bell (left) and director Ricardo Korda (right) line up a shot. (Photo credit: Ricky Lesser)