

The Big Bends: a lesson

Jason Marlow imagined his 13-minute short movie, *The Big Bends*, as a film project from the start. "Initially, it was an aesthetic choice," he says. "I watched a lot of classic Westerns and John Ford films, and I tried to imagine those movies shot on digital video. I wasn't impressed with what I saw in my mind's eye."

When Marlow and his cinematographer Tod Campbell looked more closely into the technical realities of making the project, they realized that shooting film would be necessary to success.

"We were planning to shoot at harsh exterior locations where there are at least 11 stops of difference between the shadows and the highlights," says Marlow. "Our production strategy required the ability to shoot in 360 degrees, so the flagging and bounce boards we'd need to control the light and bring down that exposure difference for video were out of the question – not to mention the extra time that this would take."

"We also felt it was important

that the actors looked like they were part of the environment," he adds. "So there really was no option – the only medium that would work for us was film. Otherwise, the desert would have been washed away."

Marlow took a circuitous route to become a film director. He initially studied anthropology, but became interested in filmmaking when he was recruited to make an anthropological film about the decline of industry and its cultural effects in Natchez, Mississippi. Unhappy with the title graphics on another documentary he worked on, Marlow learned graphics programs and worked as a freelance motion graphics and visual effects artist. He says working with digital imaging for seven years sharpened his thirst to work with filmed images.

"I shot video for the documentaries and the graphics were all digital," he recalls. "With digital, everything was so crisp. I was working with pieces of data rather than light, and I was losing the story in the highlights. It didn't seem magical anymore."

"I wanted to tell a story," he continues. "My education – growing up in the South – taught me that the literal truth isn't always the best way to communicate an idea. It's better to adapt the idea into something we want to say, and to say it in our own voice. Ideally that leads to a deeper truth that resonates with people."

Vast landscape

The Big Bends follows a character named Warren who is diagnosed with a terminal disease. He chooses to check out of life and pass his remaining days isolated in the Badlands of Big Bend in West Texas. Within the vast landscape, he locks himself inside a small camper trailer and waits for death. The hush is broken as he is faced with a troubled Mexican couple crossing the border.

The decision to shoot film and the constraints of the budget led Marlow and Campbell to the Super 16 format. "We imagined a handheld vérité style with very desaturated colors and the grain structure of film. We didn't want a bleach bypass look or blown out highlights. We also didn't want the hot highlights of the desert, the bright blue sky and the rich yellows of the terra. We wanted it to feel hot and cool at the same time."

Campbell used an Aaton XTR camera and KODAK VISION3 250D 7207 film, most often with a 16mm fixed focal length lens. The schedule included three days in the desert in West Texas and two days in a nearby town.

Marlow notes that another aspect of their approach was the decision to work unrestricted by video assist or other cables. "Tod and I broke everything down technically and created a detailed shot list," he says. "When we actually started shooting,



in the magic of film

we didn't tether and we didn't do video assist. We knew what the lens could do and we watched the light to see how it played on the forms. I'd rather not have a reference monitor on the set; it's this weird magnet. I stand next to the camera and see it through, stay active with the actors and the scene, and don't break for playback. I want the actors, and Tod and myself to stay in the scene. We are telling a story, and that's where our focus is."

Collaborative

Omitting a playback monitor gave Campbell ownership of the visuals. "Tod is brilliant and talented," says Marlow. "I didn't want everyone huddled around the monitor and distracted by something they don't really need to be concerned with. Instead, they are all engaged in doing what they are best at. When everyone is contributing in sync, that's the joy of it - filmmaking is

collaborative, and each person's contribution is integral."

One climactic scene takes place as the sun sets over a mesa, partly obscured by clouds. The camera moves around the scene before settling with the sunset in the deep background. "We were racing the sun to capture this gorgeous moment," Marlow explains. "We wanted to capture the natural shift of the day because it's an important part of the story. With the exposure range, video would have blown out or we'd have had to reset and move lights to adjust exposure in the foreground - and we would have missed the sunset and gone home without the shot. It would have shut us down."

The post-production included a one-light transfer at FotoKem in Burbank, California. Editing was done by Marlow on Final Cut Pro. "Editing was pretty straightforward," says Marlow. "We shot to edit, and we didn't really do any B-roll. We made no gratuitous shots at all. We just picked the best take."

The Big Bends was accepted at South by Southwest (SXSW) film festival in Austin, Texas, where it earned a Special Jury Award in the Texas Shorts category. Marlow is planning to take the film to more festivals, in addition to developing a new script for a feature film that takes place in Mississippi and Paris. He intends to shoot that project on film.

"*The Big Bends* gave me a chance to work with film," says Marlow. "Along the way, so many people told me it wasn't necessary. They said that this was my first film and that it really didn't matter. I guess I needed to find out for myself. I figured that since this was a short, and I had some latitude, that this was the time to experiment. And I ended up landing on the realization that what I'd always hoped was pretty much right."

Marlow notes that there were also lessons learned about the process of filmmaking and the

impact of the medium on the attitudes of the people working on the set.

"People refer to 'the magic of film,' and generally that is thought to refer to the way it looks," he says. "But it also has to do with the way it is worked with. Filmmaking is literally an art. There is knowledge and a skill set. You have to understand the way that light plays with form and color. It's a fascinating world; when you pay attention, you can really engage with what you are doing, and with the actors and the environment in a different way.

"When I tell people about our methodology, and that we found a way to do it economically and efficiently, they are intrigued. When making a movie, everything contributes to the tone of the story. The medium is an essential character that must be considered."



Key Data at a glance

Director	Jason Marlow
Cinematographer	Tod Campbell
Camera	Aaton XTR
Film stock	KODAK VISION3 250D 7207
Post-production	FotoKem, Burbank, California

1 Jason Marlow (center) discusses a scene with actor Jimmy Lee Jr. (right) and cinematographer Tod Campbell (left), with the crew (in background) ready to roll. (photo by Max Sturgeon)