

music for the eyes

Ivory

Ivory takes the audience on a year-long, behind-the-scenes look into the lives of two young concert pianists as they prepare to vie against each other in the International Liszt Piano Competition in Budapest, Hungary. Jake is a smooth professional who shines under pressure. Andreas is a temperamental artist with a world of talent when inspired, but he can also soar maddeningly out-of-control. They meet during a competition in New York and subsequently both spend a year studying at a music conservatory in Chicago, where other characters enter the picture. The final chapter in the saga plays out during the competition in Budapest, where the story takes a dramatic twist.

It was Andrew W. Chan's first turn at the helm on a long-form narrative feature. He collaborated with veteran cinematographer Donald M. Morgan, ASC who has compiled some 70 narrative film credits for the cinema and television. Morgan has earned five Emmy awards and four other nominations for television movies.

Chan and Morgan discuss their collaboration in the following conversation:



with wonderful credits, including *The Godfather* trilogy and *Apocalypse Now*. He teaches at the University of Oklahoma. I was thrilled when they asked me to direct. We had a fabulous cast on the strength of the script.

Q

How did you get Don involved?

A

MORGAN: Andrew invited me to a screening of his short film. When he told me he was going to direct *Ivory* and what the story was about, I said I was interested.

Q

How did you meet?

A

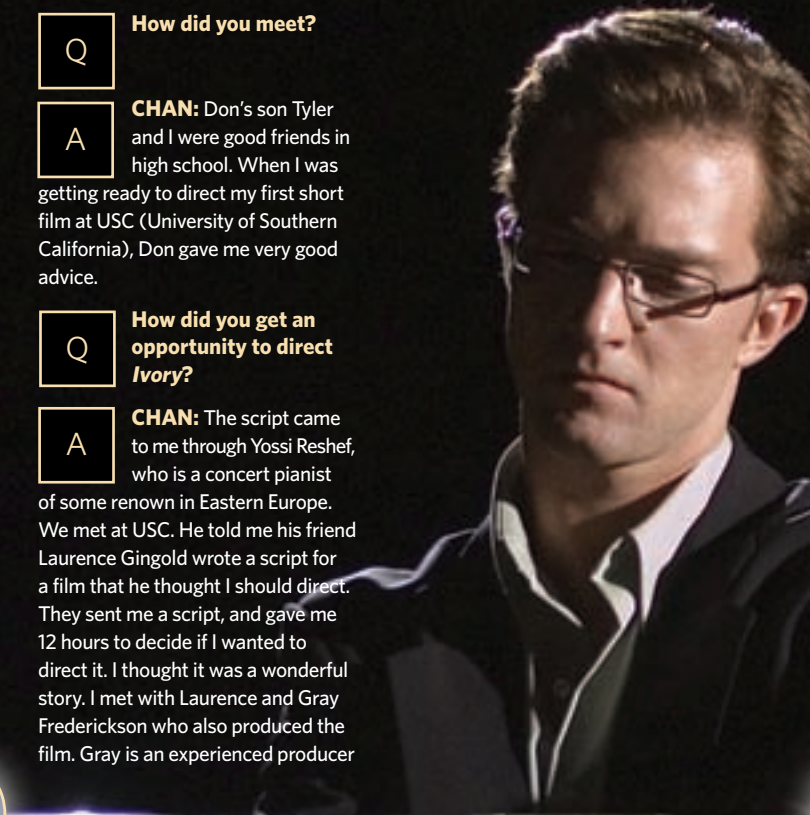
CHAN: Don's son Tyler and I were good friends in high school. When I was getting ready to direct my first short film at USC (University of Southern California), Don gave me very good advice.

Q

How did you get an opportunity to direct *Ivory*?

A

CHAN: The script came to me through Yossi Reshef, who is a concert pianist of some renown in Eastern Europe. We met at USC. He told me his friend Laurence Gingold wrote a script for a film that he thought I should direct. They sent me a script, and gave me 12 hours to decide if I wanted to direct it. I thought it was a wonderful story. I met with Laurence and Gray Frederickson who also produced the film. Gray is an experienced producer



CHAN: Don was both my support system and a wonderful collaborator.

Q At what point did you decide to produce *Ivory* in Super 16mm format?

A **CHAN:** A day after Don came on-board. There was some talk about shooting in digital HD, but Don and I convinced everyone that the story called for an organic film-look. We could shoot in Super 16, time the film in digital intermediate post-production, and record out directly onto 35mm film for cinema release.

MORGAN: We also needed the dynamic range that film offers for recording details in highlights and shadows because we were shooting in challenging environments on a tight schedule. We were blessed with an incredibly talented crew, including gaffer Larry Wallace and Steadicam/camera operator Russ McElhatton.

Q We understand you made early use of the new ARRI 416 camera.

A **MORGAN:** We got one of the first ones available in the United States from Otto Nemenz. It is an extremely lightweight, compact camera with a 35mm quality viewfinder. We used Cooke S4 prime lenses almost all the time. I had a couple of Canon zoom lenses but made minimal use of them because the primes render a richer look.

Q Where was *Ivory* produced?

A **CHAN:** It was mainly produced in buildings at the university in Norman and Guthrie, Oklahoma, which has the largest Masonic Temple in the world. We went to Budapest to shoot exterior scenes to establish locations.

Q How would you describe your approach to visual storytelling?

A **CHAN:** Don and I discussed each scene and what we wanted the audience to see and feel. It mainly came from the performances, but also from how shots were structured. We asked ourselves what does a concert pianist feel on a stage creating music for an audience, and how do you make the audience see and feel that?

MORGAN: It's a story with a beginning, middle and an end. I believe the audience will relate to the characters and want to know what happens in their lives.

Q How did you create the illusion characters were playing the piano?

A **CHAN:** Yamaha provided very advanced player piano technology and helped to train the actors to fake fingering the keys so it looked real. They could hear the music playback over speakers or in little ear plugs if scenes had dialogue.

Q You carried two cameras. How did you use them?

A **MORGAN:** Sometimes we would shoot a tight shot with the second one on a wider take. But, we had an agreement if the lighting wasn't right, we only used one.

Q How about choice of film stocks?

A **MORGAN:** I mainly used (KODAK VISION2 500T) 7218 film because a very large part of the story takes place in interior locations.

Q Did you predefine a visual style or was it a process of discovery?

A **MORGAN:** We didn't have storyboards.

We watched the actors rehearse in their environments and that dictated how we lit and moved the camera. Andrew would tell me what he wanted and I'd make suggestions to him. Sometimes, we would plan dynamic camera movement with the Steadicam, handheld, or on a dolly, and other times we would decide to find the right angle of coverage and just watch the action. It comes down to trusting your instincts and listening to your collaborators. We had a scene with a main character playing the piano and talking to someone else. Larry Wallace had these wonderful little panel lights that are battery operated. He asked, 'how about if I put a panel light here to get these reflections on the black shiny surface of the piano?'

CHAN: We covered some scenes in one take with no cut-aways, using camera movement to get different points-of-view. The longest one is two-and-a-half minutes.

Q What did you do about a film lab while shooting in Oklahoma?

A **MORGAN:** We sent our exposed negative film to FotoKem in Los Angeles for processing and dailies.

Q Any final thoughts about shooting in Super 16 format?

A **CHAN:** There is an elegance in the visuals that is right for the story.

MORGAN: There is a texture that you just don't have when you're shooting HD. It's something you feel more than notice. I'd shoot a \$100 million film this way if the script called for extraordinarily portable cameras and a little more texture in the look.



1 Actor Tim Draxl as an ambitious young concert pianist in *Ivory*, shot by DP Don M. Morgan, ASC.

2 (L-R) Actors Tim Draxl and Beau Garrett in a scene from the film.

3 Cinematographer Don M. Morgan, ASC working on the set.

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