

Joshua wins cinematography prize at Sundance

Film stocks

KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 (night shots), KODAK VISION2 250D 5205 (Daylight-balanced interiors)

Camera

ARRI 535 with Zeiss Ultra Prime lenses usually



When Benoît Debie won the prize for Excellence in Dramatic Cinematography at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, the recognition was an unexpected pleasure. Debie, who was born and lives in Belgium, won for his work on the independent feature film *Joshua*. His previous credits include *Irreversible*, *Innocence* and *Day Night Day Night*.

"It's hard to know when you're working on a film how people will receive it when it's finished," he says. "It was a very nice surprise."

Director George Ratliff chose Debie to photograph *Joshua*, a psychological thriller about a 9-year-old piano prodigy who begins to act strange when his upscale Manhattan parents bring a baby sister home.

Ratliff and Debie designed a three-part approach to storytelling. The first segment is told with relatively straightforward imagery. As things begin getting creepy, the images were posted with a roughly 30% bleach bypass process done during the print stage. That lab process leaves silver on the image, resulting in increased contrast and grain and decreased color saturation. The third segment was processed with a full bleach bypass at the print stage. Deluxe in Los Angeles provided the lab services.

Debie fine-tuned the bleach bypass effect with careful manipulation of lighting and exposure. At times, especially late in the story, he underexposed the negative by as much as 3½ to 4 stops. "Having done three films with bleach bypass, I know you have to be careful about how dark and contrasty you want the images," he says. "I altered lighting on the set, including the color, depending on the context of the scene."

Debie composed images within the Academy aperture 1.85:1 aspect ratio on 35mm film. Much of the story unfolds in dark interiors. Debie shot KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film for nighttime situations. Daylight-balanced interiors were recorded on KODAK VISION2 250D 5205 film. The A camera was an ARRI 535 with Zeiss Ultra Prime lenses, usually either handheld or on a dolly.

Most of *Joshua* was shot in a house in Queens, New York, that was surrounded with a Translite of the Manhattan skyline. For night scenes, the light through the windows often came from sodium vapor fixtures to maintain an urban, streetlight feeling with a yellowish cast. Debie worked hand in hand with production designer Roshelle Berliner to underscore the drama.

"I asked her to paint some of the walls in the family's apartment a deep, glossy green," he says. "I lit those interiors using only light coming through the windows. We could see reflected window light on the shiny walls, and often lit the characters with that reflected light. The impression is that of very bright, slightly overexposed light outside, with a contrasty and intense atmosphere inside the house."

In the boy's bedroom, the script called for walls painted with large fish. Debie was reminded of an aquarium, and decided to light with a black light fluorescent tube from inside the habitat of the boy's pet guinea pig. The eyes of the fish were painted white at Debie's request. As a result, the fish eyes are highlighted by the black light.

"I thought it was an interesting effect," Debie says. "It was something a little strong, yet a little strange."

The filmmakers considered digital intermediate timing but decided to use traditional photochemical techniques. "I've shot some movies with DI and some without," says Debie. "I like DI because you have so many possibilities. But for *Joshua*, going without DI was the right choice."

1 Actors Vera Farmiga (image on screen) and Jacob Kogan in a scene from *Joshua*, shot by cinematographer Benoît Debie. Photo: Jojo Whilden