

# CILECT

## Project marries students from Mexico and Italy on thesis film



Armando Casas, a professor at CUEC and supervising producer of *Los Trashumantes*, explains that the Italian national film school, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, approached him about hosting one of their cinematography students. Casas presented Cecchetti with this bi-national opportunity. Cecchetti agreed, and Massimo Bettarelli flew to Mexico and joined the crew. Their main language for communicating was Spanish, since Bettarelli was fluent.

CUEC and Centro Sperimentale are members of Centre International de Liaison des Ecoles de Cinéma et de Télévision (CILECT), a global association of film and television schools. CILECT was founded in 1955 with the goal of providing a means for the exchange of ideas among member schools that are preparing the next generation of filmmakers to pursue their dreams. The organization consists of 137 institutions from 56 countries on five continents.

Casas says that members of CILECT are committed to fostering the creation, development and

When a student production rises above the international confines of culture, language and distance, a true learning experience can transpire. Such is the case with *Los Trashumantes*, the thesis film project by Federico Cecchetti of Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematograficos (CUEC), the cinema school of the National University of Mexico (UNAM).

maintenance of regional and international co-operation among its member schools. With that in mind, he encouraged Cecchetti and Bettarelli to embrace the common language of filmmaking. "Although they come from different cultures, I believed they could learn from each other based on their different academic backgrounds and cultural milieux," he says.

*Los Trashumantes* is an historical comedy about three filmmakers who become obsessed with the idea of producing a film about Pancho Villa. The story is set in Mexico during the Revolution (circa 1910). When the filmmakers find out that an American company has already begun documenting Villa's conquests, they trick the mayor of a small town, who resembles Villa, to fill in unknowingly. Their plan takes a wrong turn when the truth is revealed.

The film is one of eight projects chosen by CUEC for production with school funds and equipment. The television department of the university also co-sponsored the ambitious shoot along with the

government of Mexico City. Both entities are planning programming and celebrations around the centennial of the Mexican Revolution in 2010.

"Choosing to work with someone I didn't know was a bit risky, especially a foreigner with roots in another country who was unfamiliar with the deeply-local story of Pancho Villa, the greatest hero of the Mexican Revolution," admits Cecchetti. "But Massimo made a lot of creative contributions. He had a great capacity for interpreting the script."

Bettarelli points out that in Italy, there are very few opportunities to work in cinema. He graduated two years ago, under the guidance of renowned cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno, AIC, ASC. He also attended the Budapest Cinematography Masterclass in 2007 as a Kodak participant.

The two filmmakers began by watching films set during the Mexican Revolution, and taking notes on lighting and camera movement. Next, they traveled



2

to Real de Catorce in the San Luis Potosi region of Mexico, and to La Luz, where *The Mexican, Bandidas* and other movies have been filmed. Cecchetti says that the towns located in the Mexican desert resemble a classic Western movie look, which made them ideal locations for an epoch film with a small budget.

"Pre-production planning was very important," Bettarelli observes. "We spent five months getting to know each other, scouting, drawing storyboards and seeking additional support. We became friends, which was very useful on set when challenges needed to be overcome without compromising our goals for the project."

Cecchetti and Bettarelli envisioned a desaturated look similar to sepia tones, and high-contrast black-and-white scenes like classic, archived films from the early 1900s.

"We wanted a mix of Sergio Leone's 'Spaghetti Westerns,' Sam Peckinpah's classic US 1950s Westerns, and the expressionist

color palette of such Mexican muralists as Diego Rivera," says Bettarelli. "It was a challenging balance."

Bettarelli endeavored to replicate the texture of motion picture films

**"We wanted a mix of Sergio Leone's 'Spaghetti Westerns,' Sam Peckinpah's classic US 1950s Westerns, and the expressionist color palette of such Mexican muralists as Diego Rivera. It was a challenging balance."**

from 1915, in order to place the characters in the appropriate era for the story. Cecchetti and Bettarelli worked closely with the production and costume designers to create a color palette that integrated their visual goals with the narrative story.

Bettarelli chose KODAK VISION2 Expression 500T 5229 for its low color saturation and wide latitude range. "This stock is a great emulsion for achieving a desaturated look, and also to compensate for the increased contrast from the skip bleach process that I was planning," he says.

His camera package included an ARRI 535 body with a range of 14-100mm Ultra Prime lenses, an Angenieux 25-250mm zoom, and a long 600mm Canon lens. They also had use of a Steadicam.

For lighting, Bettarelli heavily relied on a Maxi-Brute of eight lamps with 28 volts each. "This fixture produces marvelous light controlled by dimmers on a console," he says. "The lamps allowed me to light up very long spaces at night. My gratitude goes to our rental house, Revolution, which built them especially for me."

For black-and-white scenes, Bettarelli tested several stocks but wasn't able to mimic the exact look he wanted. In these sequences, Bettarelli took a calculated gamble

and used EASTMAN high-contrast positive intermediate film 5363 as a camera negative. He also used a hand-cranked 1920s camera. The lab used the Kodak D76 process to get an extreme high-contrast film look like movies from the beginning of the 20th century. Bettarelli lauds Labo Films, at Estudios Churubusco Azteca in Mexico City, for their processing support on this film.

"When you use the traditional, photochemical post path, you have to plan every shot during production very carefully because that's when the major portion of the look will be created," says Bettarelli. "After seeing the one light transfer, I knew the major part of the work for *Los Trashumantes* was done, and there would not be much to modify in post-production."

After shooting in Mexico, Cecchetti traveled to Italy where post-production was completed at Centro Sperimentale with Bettarelli.

- 1 The main set of *Los Trashumantes*.
- 2 (Center) Actor Enoc Leano in a scene from the film. Photos by Alejandra Cerrillo