

The special lighting of Marco Onorato

Director of Photography Marco Onorato created the lighting for some of the most highly regarded films of the last few Italian cinematographic seasons, including *L'imbalsamatore* (*The Embalmer*), *Primo amore* (*First Love*), *Ora e per sempre* (*Now and Forever*) and *Prendimi e portami via* (*Take Me Away*). 'InCamera' talked to Onorato as he completed the shoot of the eagerly awaited biopic, *Maradona, la mano di Dio* – an Argentinian, Spanish and Italian co-production. He first met the Director, Marco Risi, when he was Assistant Cameraman and Risi was Assistant to Director Duccio Tessari. They collaborated on several films, including *Zorro*, but lost touch and were reunited last year on a project with Onorato as DP and Risi as Producer.

Q *What solutions did you adopt in terms of light and colorimetry to distinguish the different historical periods in Maradona, la mano di Dio?*

A "The biopic recounts three stages and 25 years in Maradona's life: the ten year old boy playing football in the slums of Argentina; the 18 year old adolescent who is already junior champion of the world; and the adult played by Marco Leonardi who, in my opinion, captured the essence of Maradona's internal struggle and his powerlessness to handle life in the public eye both on and off the football pitch. It was shot mainly in Argentina and the lighting faithfully reflects the environment, marking the most emotional moments with an intense *chiaroscuro*,

while other moments were lit more softly. I characterised the 1970s with vivid and lively colours, giving an embedded sense of a moment in time. In contrast, there is a more homogeneous photographic continuity for other periods in the film: for example, the 1980s were unmistakably identified by the costumes, differentiating that decade from more recent years. Lastly, in a few sequences in which Maradona was hallucinating from the effect of drugs, Marco and I emphasised the effect with dazzling white light. I adopted a different lighting strategy by using directional and flag lights on Maradona to heighten the hallucinogenic flavour of the moment."

Q *In contrast, your photography on The Embalmer was hard and contrasty; would you agree you didn't adopt such a clear choice in terms of characterisation in that film?*

A "No, I'd have to say not. However, as I mentioned previously, I treated certain sequences in a decisive way, for example there was a virtual galaxy of light for the champion's wedding scene. The story, which was articulated and eventful, was my only reference when I planned the lighting."

Q *Do you recall any shots that put your lighting approach to the test?*

A "In one shot when he was playing Maradona at 22 stone, Marco Leonardi was made up with a prosthesis on his face. The sequence called for a very close shot of him, collapsed on the ground after snorting cocaine and that posed a few problems; traditional lighting would have revealed that he was wearing a mask. After some evaluation, I chose an unconventional solution. I surrounded the actor's body with several sources of

extremely low intensity Christmas tree-type lights to capture the champion's body without revealing too much, whilst at the same time expressing the dramatic intensity of the situation."

Q *Which format did you choose?*

A "In agreement with the Director, I selected Super 35mm – a format I like very much. For me 'classic' cinema is that of Sergio Leone and in *Maradona, la mano di Dio* I used long lenses, in particular Zeiss Ultra Prime 14mm and 16mm, to give a sense of the places and spaces surrounding the characters and make the champion's extravagance and wealth evident on screen. In general, I tried to avoid zooms because when one has nine lenses as opposed to the usual two or three, something is always lost in terms of definition and transparency. But I did use zooms in the football action sequences because that was the proper way to tell the story stylistically."

Q *You chose a single film stock – Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 – as you did for some of your earlier films. Why?*

A "I'm well aware that all the new Kodak films are interchangeable, but I like to work with one stock; it ensures that I have a single base for the entire film, which for me is essential and I believe that 5218 is the most versatile. Normally I underexpose





by half a stop and compensate during processing, but because of the DI process I preferred a denser negative and shot everything at the centre of the scale."

Q *What did the lab think of your decision to expose the stock at the nominal value?*

A "As the negative was perfectly balanced from the start, the technicians at Technicolor were delighted because their work was less 'articulated' than usual. I especially like to collaborate with them because of their broad collaboration and indulgence of my innate keenness to experiment. On *The Embalmer*, the grader Tonino Salvatori, the chemist Carlo Macagni and I created a great many test strips to find the right look for the film and concluded that the ENR on Vision Premier film produced the ideal results from a photographic aspect. In that movie we wanted queasy images that would convey anxiety and pain so that the audience could share the sense of suffering in the story. I recall that after several colleagues saw the film they rang me up to chastise me because of the photographic claustrophobia!"

Q *Why did you decide on DI for *Maradona la mano di Dio*?*

A "We decided on DI because of the need to mix the various fictional sequences with many other stock shots, while still

providing expressive continuity. The Director's intention was to create a classic film rather than a documentary so it was important that the language was that of film. Proxima Post House did the DI and I worked there to heighten the photographic atmosphere that took shape during the shoot."

Q *Were you able to experiment with the new Kodak Look Manager System during the shoot and, if so, what was your impression of the new software?*

A "I was particularly struck by the possibility of simulating the use of several different film stocks while working with the same image. I found it useful during the shoot in terms of determining the proper lighting on certain sets and simulating in advance the response of the basic set without lighting. It provided an excellent visual point of reference. I'd like to express my thanks to Flavio Trezzi of

Kodak for his technical assistance and for staying with me during an entire shooting day to ensure I was acquainted with the software's potential."



Q *Out of sheer curiosity, did *Maradona back or rate the film in terms of the screenplay or the story?**

A "The champion hasn't seen the film yet, the primary inspiration for which came from a book. I believe our work on the film constitutes a balanced attempt to recount in

parallel the stories of an extraordinary champion and a melancholy man who came from extreme poverty and suddenly found himself with the world at his feet. He lived in a system in which he was cosseted, then exploited and manipulated. Unquestionably, he was never sufficiently protected. This is the story we propose to tell and I believe Marco Risi has achieved it with the nuance and sensitivity of a great director." ■

Above from top: Actor Marco Leonardi playing Maradona when he first arrived at San Paolo stadium in Naples during 1984.

Inset left: Cinematographer Marco Onorato behind the camera.

Inset far left: An outdoor shoot in Naples, Italy.

PHOTOS: FABRIZIO DI GIULIO