

Not Afraid of the Dark: *The Messengers*



Above: Cinematographer, David Geddes, CSC, filming ravens as they are lured toward the camera.

In *The Messengers*, a family attempts to rebuild their lives by returning to their farming roots, but the abandoned sunflower farm they buy has a menacing past that threatens to tear them apart. The Sony Pictures feature film was co-directed by Danny Pang and Oxide Pang Chun, twin brothers who were born in Hong Kong.

The Pang brothers have produced, written, directed and edited various films made in Thailand and Hong Kong. *The Messengers* is their first fully English-language venture. They collaborated with Canadian cinematographer David Geddes, CSC, who has more than 50 narrative credits including many award-winning films.

"I felt shooting a daytime horror film directed by the Pang brothers would be a great creative challenge," says Geddes. "The Pangs have a strong and distinctive visual style. I knew we would need to find ways other than language to merge our creative ideas. We quickly developed a visual shorthand, and enhanced our communication by shooting digital stills and manipulating them with photo software."

The filmmakers planned to contrast the wide prairie vista and blue skies with brooding interiors while using angles, cuts and deep shadows to create a menacing feeling in the seemingly safe harbor of home and family. Half of the film was shot on stages and half on practical locations, most importantly the sunflower farm. After a suitable location was found near Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, a barn was trucked in, and a farmhouse was built. Months before shooting commenced, 5,000 sunflower plants were planted in stages so that over the ten weeks of shooting, the filmmakers could show a crop go from planting to harvest.

"At times we felt just like the farmers because of the vagaries of the weather," says Geddes. "We were afraid we would lose our crop to rain or hail, and wouldn't have an opportunity to re-shoot our exteriors."

The stages included two floors of the farmhouse, plus a basement root cellar.

"This was a dark, claustrophobic space with only four small windows and one practical light bulb as sources," says Geddes. "Those scenes were dark and edgy."

Geddes and his crew dubbed the directors' dynamic use of movement and distinctive framing style 'PangVision'. "They love movement, within a shot or with the camera," says Geddes. "There is a definite relationship between the camera and the characters and plot."

Geddes used Panavision cameras and Primo lenses, citing their color rendition and contrast as his reasons. Visual effects supervisor Bruce Jones executed a series of disturbing perspective changes using the Panavision 14.5-50mm macro zoom.

KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film was used for all interiors and night exteriors. "I used 5218's great latitude to the maximum," Geddes says. "Our interior sets were very monochromatic and dark, which meant I was always working in the toe of the curve. Some situations were so dark that the actors would literally disappear into black. 5218 has amazing grain quality, allowing me to work in these dark situations without introducing too much grain into the image."

"To contrast the dark, monochromatic interior scenes, I used KODAK VISION2 100T 5212 on the exteriors," Geddes continues. "5212 gave me such fine detail and fantastic color saturation, I often felt I was looking at a 3D image."

"KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 was the stock of choice for all the visual effects work," says Geddes. "Our testing showed that 5217 would give clean separation in green screen work and easily match with 5218 or 5212."

For the Pangs, the withholding of visual information is a key element in filming horror. Visuals were designed with the belief that people's irrational fears are more frightening than anything visible on the screen; fear is more about what you don't see than about what you do.

"We wanted the interiors to be dark almost to the point of disorientation," says Geddes. "We lit one scene, a hallway, so that the characters were barely visible. The Pang brothers said, 'Yes, yes, just turn out the rest of the lights and you've got it! I love the darkness and definitely believe that less is more, but I met my match in the Pang brothers.' ■