

# La Misma Luna

a love story with a happy ending



Patricia Riggen claimed top honors in both the Directors Guild of America and Academy Award student film competitions for *La Milpa (The Cornfield)* in 2003. Her short documentary, *Family Portrait*, was a winner at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival. *La Misma Luna (Under the Same Moon)* is her first turn at the helm on a long-form narrative feature. Her husband, Checco Varese, AMC, was the cinematographer on all three films.

Varese began his career shooting television news and documentaries, mainly in war zones for broadcast networks during the mid-1980s. He has also shot hundreds of music videos and commercials, and has compiled some 20 narrative credits. His other 2007 projects include the Screen Gems feature *Prom Night*, and the HBO pilot *True Blood*.

*La Misma Luna* opens by introducing the audience to Rosario.

She is an illegal immigrant who works as a housekeeper in several posh Beverly Hills homes in order to support her nine year-old son Carlitos. The boy lives in Mexico with his grandmother. Rosario and Carlitos haven't seen each other for years, but they stay in touch with weekly calls made from pay phones on streets in Los Angeles and a town in Mexico.

When the boy's grandmother dies, *La Misma Luna* turns into a modern-day road movie that takes the audience on a journey with Carlitos. After a shady character, a.k.a. coyote, smuggles the boy across the Mexican-American border into Texas, the youngster hitchhikes, rides buses and washes dishes in roadside cafes in a quest to find his mother.

Riggen produced the film, which was written by Ligiah Villalobos. The project was temporarily in jeopardy

when the original financier reneged, but disappointment turned to joy when they got a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Mexico and raised matching funds

compromising our vision for the story," Varese says. "We compared costs for producing *La Misma Luna* in Super 16, 35mm film and digital HD formats."

**"When I'm shooting film, I am looking at life through a viewfinder with the right colors and tones. Somehow that speaks to my soul and my brain at the same time."**

from investors in the United States. The compelling script and their passion for the project also attracted a talented cast, including Kate del Castillo as Rosario, Adrian Alonso as Carlitos, and Eugenio Derbez as Enrique, the coyote.

"Patricia asked me to help them figure out an affordable way to produce the film without

He determined that Super 16mm film was the most cost-effective alternative, and that the budgets for three-perf 35mm and digital HD formats were identical. Varese emphasized that the 35mm option coupled with digital intermediate (DI) timing would enable them to create the nuances in tonalities, colors, contrast and depth of field

- 1 (L-R) Actors Kate Del Castillo and Adrian Alonso in a scene from *Under the Same Moon*, shot by DP Checco Varese, AMC.
- 2 (Far left) DP Checco Varese, AMC preparing to shoot a scene for the film.
- 3 (L-R) Actors Adrian Alonso and Eugenio Derbez.
- 4 Actor Adrian Alonso in a scene from the film

Photos Courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures.



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Camera and Lenses

ARRI BL-4 camera with a range of spherical Ultra Prime lenses, and an Angenieux Optima 24-290mm zoom.

necessary to visually punctuate the sense of time and place and the emotional flow of the story.

They had a 24-day production schedule in northern Mexico, including practical locations where the buildings, highways and backgrounds could be in the USA.

various times of day.”

“My job begins when I am reading the script,” he continues. “In the back of my mind, I am beginning to apply basic rules, which I might decide to break later. There are two different worlds portrayed in this story, Mexico and the United States. You

Carlitos on a pay phone speak as loudly as words.

They made an aesthetic decision to compose the film in 1.85:1 aspect ratio using a range of spherical Ultra Prime lenses, and an Angenieux Optima 24-290mm zoom. Varese covered the action with a single

available to cover the action from another angle or perspective. In those situations, they did another take from a different angle.

“When I’m shooting film, I am looking at life through a viewfinder with the right colors and tones,” Varese says. “Somehow that speaks

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The main exception was an exterior set replicating the border checkpoint. There was an additional four days of production in Los Angeles to establish settings.

“We planned to shoot big exterior scenes in Mexico at locations that had mountains with green trees in the backgrounds when the boy was supposed to be traveling on desert roads on the way to Los Angeles,” Varese says. “I knew that we would be able to eliminate the green trees and other things that didn’t belong in backgrounds, and use elements of shots filmed in different light at

can feel as well as see the differences in lifestyles, including where and how they live and dress.”

He emphasizes that the backgrounds and environments are like visual dialogue, including the poverty-stricken town in Mexico where Carlitos sells chewing gum on the streets, and the fading brown color of the walls in his grandmother’s small home. Those backgrounds are in sharp contrast to the lush colors in the posh homes in Beverly Hills where his mother works. The environments on the road trip and on the street corner in East Los Angeles where Rosario talks with

ARRI BL-4 camera provided by Denny Clairmont. He notes that the three-perf negative trimmed both raw stock and lab costs, and allowed for 25 percent longer takes between the need to change magazines.

There were no storyboards. Rigger rehearsed with the actors, and then she and Varese broke scenes down, and discussed whether shots should be made with the camera tracking on a dolly from one point to another, handheld or with a Steadicam. The cinematographer notes that there were times where he would have liked to have had a second camera and another operator

to my soul and my brain at the same time. I am automatically doing the math to get the exposure for the looks we want. That is because film works the way our minds work. There is more range for contrast, colors, and things happening in the highlights and shadows. I believe that if you want to tell stories that will touch people’s souls and last forever, you should shoot on film.”

Carlitos doesn’t have a visa, so he is smuggled across the border hidden under the floorboards of a minivan driven by a coyote who specializes in that work. To prepare for shooting that tense scene, Rigger and Varese

Film stocks

KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 and KODAK VISION2 500T 5218

Processing

New Art Laboratories, Mexico City



crossed the border five times in one day, and 14 times in a week to get a sense of what it felt like on an emotional level. They were stopped and brought in for questioning, because the border guards were suspicious.

### A bigger picture

“We decided to shoot that scene with a handheld camera in *cinéma vérité* style to help the audience feel what the boy felt in that tense situation,” Varese says. “We want them to feel his loneliness. The boy looks fragile and vulnerable when the camera looks down on him. Adrian (Alonso) was around 12 years old when we shot this film. He was constantly getting it right in one take. We only used second takes for different angles.”

Panavision had a Technocrane available the day that the border crossing was filmed. Varese and Riggen used it to give the audience a bigger picture of the setting.

“There are basic rules for visual grammar, but you can bend them as you interpret the story,” Varese says. “Every movie has its own rules, just like poetry, novels and journalism have different structures.

A handheld shot could be used at a poetic moment, or it could be used to punctuate an extraordinarily violent and aggressive scene. The only unbreakable rule is that it must serve the story.”

In *La Misma Luna*, Varese explains that camera movement was primarily motivated by the boy’s actions. Sometimes they lowered the camera angle, so the audience could see the world through his eyes. When Riggen wants them to feel that Carlitos is in danger, the camera looks down at him from an adult’s eye level.

“It’s a subtle dance of slightly higher and lower camera angles that helps to convey the emotions of happiness, sadness or fear that the boy is feeling,” Varese says.

The cinematographer chose two KODAK VISION2 color negative films with the same attention that artists use to select paints for their palettes to create specific pictures. He used KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 film for most exterior scenes because its inherent imaging characteristics reach into the darkness and shadows without losing highlights.

“The desert was very bright with a sandy color and blue skies that were filtered by the ozone layer,” he says. “I wanted to use a stock that was very gentle in managing the

highlights that would seamlessly match the (KODAK VISION2 500T) 5218 film we used for interior and darker exterior scenes. Because of the budget, we only had one or two HMLs available. When we were running out of light, I switched to 5218, because it reaches deeper into the shadows. No one notices we switched films. That would be distracting.”

### Visual grammar

The negative was processed at New Art Laboratories in Mexico City, which is accredited by the KODAK IMAGECARE Program. After *La Misma Luna* was edited offline, the conformed negative was scanned and transferred to a digital file at Modern VideoFilm in Los Angeles. Varese timed the DI in an interactive environment at that facility.

“There is a temptation to want to make every shot perfect when you are timing a film in DI,” he says. “It’s easy to put a window around something and tell the timer to make it brighter and pop the colors. DI is a fantastic tool, but it is important to remember that every film has its own visual grammar. DI gives you the ability to make the sky a beautiful pink color in every shot,

but it’s not about creating shots. It is about creating an arc that flows with the emotions of the story.”

When *La Misma Luna* was ready to enter the festival circuit, instead of settling for digital projection, Varese advised making a small investment in 35mm film release prints on KODAK VISION Premier Color Print Film. His advice was accepted.

“Maybe it’s my documentary background, or the way I see the world in the back of my mind,” Varese explains. “I really like rich black tones and colors that this print film renders with details in shadows and highlights that look and feel realistic.”

“Films are the same as literature,” he concludes. “We are grabbing moments in life and freezing them for tomorrow. I learn new things every time I shoot a movie.”

This story has a very happy ending. After earning a long, standing ovation (*Daily Variety* described it as “rapturous applause”) and rave reviews at its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, Fox Searchlight Pictures and The Weinstein Company acquired the rights for broad international distribution of *La Misma Luna* in Spanish with English subtitles in early 2008.