

The miracle of NimmerMeer

After the screenplay was turned down by virtually every German television station, director Toke Constantin Hebbeln, DP Felix Novo de Oliveira and producer Manuel Bickenbach turned their energies to securing FFA funding, sponsorships, technical support and post-production deals; then the trio convinced 50 Polish, Danish and German crew members, famous German actors and extras to donate their time. The result is *NimmerMeer* (*Nevermore*), a mesmerising feature shot in 24 days at a budget of \$71,000.

A stylised fairytale of dreams and childhood fantasy set in the 18th century, *NimmerMeer* tells of nine year old Jonas whose poor but contented life becomes one of solitude and puritan austerity after his fisherman father dies. All hope seems lost when the seedy village

priest takes the boy into his care, but eventually a miracle happens at the secret place where the sea and heaven become one. The acclaimed film has scooped The Eastman Best New Director Award and the German Film Promotional Award at the Hof International Film Festival, the best foreign drama award at Hollywood's International Student Film Festival and was nominated for the German Camera Award.

Director Hebbeln conceived a fairytale world of limited dialogue in which allusions and images relate the story in a gentle, inconspicuous way. "I knew that, as DP, Felix Novo de Oliveira was capable of creating beautiful, rich and moody light and he understood, almost instinctively, how *NimmerMeer* could be visualised. An impossibly low budget meant flawless preparation, so we spent three

months meticulously defining every shot, but we always left room for experimentation. Felix is sensitive, creative and worked enthusiastically with me to develop an enchanting dreamlike world in a modest, wonderfully down-to-earth, yet very demanding style."

InCamera talked to Felix Novo de Oliveira.

Q Authentic locations and natural forces play integral roles in *NimmerMeer*. How did you use them to create such strong atmospheric contrasts?

A "Toke and I felt it was vital to integrate the elements with heavily contrasted and carefully chosen historic locations, light and colour composition and camera movement, and work them into the framework of the picture as a means of storytelling. The power of the sea and the vast desolate landscapes are in stark contrast to the fisherman's small secure hut with its protective fire and warm, loving atmosphere, while static shots of the cold, dark and narrow vicarage contrast with the playful camera movements of the magician's dallying circus wagon. Moving lights and shadows from torches, candles and fireplaces, rain on faces and backgrounds, wind that can be felt through dancing shadows and flying sand on the beach tighten

the atmosphere. The audience will feel them in every shot."

Q How did you visualise Jonas's world of "poetic melancholy"?

A "We controlled colour, shape and contrast and used a muted production design palette of brown, dark green and beige to support the desaturated 'earth look' of Jonas's dark world with its low greyish sky and nightly storms and rain. It was also important to visually support his emotional sentiments with natural images that portrayed what he endured and we used a Steadicam to imitate his organic movements and curious, childlike view."

Q In the establishing dark and desolate church scene, how did you heighten the uncomfortable situation between the fisherman, villagers and the seedy priest?

A "After visiting more than 150 churches, we found one with dark walls, small clear windows, an historic interior and a gloomy atmosphere. We shone four 6kW HMI Pars for strong light contrast from outside, reflecting them into large mirrors to keep heat away from the delicate historic windows, and added black cloth on the far wall for negative fill. I worked very closely to the frame line and defined only one direction for a



1 DP Felix Novo de Oliveira with first AC Jan Prahel.

2-3 DP Felix Novo de Oliveira on set.

4 Gaffer Sven O. Heinze, Thorsten Lehnert (Key Grip), 2nd AC Angret Müller, Behind: Production Designer Nobel Nobielski, DP Felix Novo de Oliveira, Director Toke Hebbeln, Manni Laudenbach (actor on roof).

strong key light. I let a large part of the picture drown to black with only a small backlight. With 10 hours to achieve 35 shots from every direction, I used the same tracks and a well tried unfiltered ARRI SR2 loaded with tungsten stock for a cold blueish effect. We worked with bounce boards to highlight a number of narratively important faces and much of the remaining area was almost pitch black. It rendered an interesting, dynamic layering of anonymous villagers sitting in black shadow between two haze-highlighted beams of light, with only their silhouettes visible and overexposed extras in the background. With 10 stops between the key light and shadows on the faces, I overexposed by up to five stops, pushing KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 to the extreme."



Q

How did you use other stocks?

A

"I selected EASTMAN EXR 50D 7245 for its fine, practically invisible grain and crushing rich blacks (the new 50D wasn't available then) and loaded the camera with it almost every exterior daylight shoot. KODAK VISION2 200T 7217 was my choice for interiors, on which I often used 5600K and 3200K lighting and an 81EF filter to convert the material to 4000K in order to create a well balanced mix-light situation and also save on lighting. It was the perfect choice for a balanced, natural range of colours and reproduced fires and candles beautifully without any unnatural reds. I underexposed by two stops in day-for-night situations without using any conversion filters. With DI, we've achieved even higher contrasts, stronger blacks and a desaturated homogenous palette of colours."

Q

Which filters did you use?

A

"I used a lot of ND- Grads to bring the focus to one side of the picture while darkening the other and to turn the beach into a mysterious, haunted place. I also used them to create a depressing, dangerous atmosphere in the sky and to darken, in an almost stylised way, sections of an otherwise even beach. A Polfilter was essential on exteriors to increase detail and outlines of clouds, darken skies and produce a clear picture. As we worked a lot with candlelight and light spots, I used a low white Pro Mist filter to create the impression of a halation around hot spots, decrease sharpness, enhance the atmosphere and produce a tighter look. I created a magical irregular effect in the lower part of some wide beach shots with

a scenic fog filter and used a light Antique Suede colour filter on beach and beach hut scenes to create a subtle greenish-brown effect."

Q

How did you manage on such a small budget?

A

"The shoot was meticulously planned and everyone was forced to work as transparently as possible. Virtually every set was created with the same wood that we found during our location tour of old barnyards and scrap yards. We used a Steadicam instead of a dolly on the beach to save time and 'Berta', my self-built iron crane which Thorsten Lehnert, my key grip, raised onto platforms and tracks, served us well. I carefully figured out what equipment would be needed each day so special units were only rented

when definitely required and while one camera was in use the crew prepared the other for dolly or Steadicam shots so we could promptly move on."

Producer Manuel Bickenbach notes that the production design team was led by Polish production designer and artist Nobel Nobielski who "created a unique and hypnotising world, hardly ever seen before in students' work." But how did they secure such valuable sponsorships and technical assistance, and motivate crew, actors and extras? Bickenbach responds. "We worked up all our courage and communicated our vision of something extraordinary: a movie that lures with great cinematic images, vast landscapes and deep emotion. We would not have been able to fulfil our vision without our generous sponsors and enthusiastic helpers."

Hebbeln, Novo de Oliveira and Bickenbach wish to thank the FFA, Kodak, MBF Filmtechnik Hamburg, Maddel's Cameras Hamburg, 40GradFilm, MediaCityLab Berlin, VCC Perfect Pictures Hamburg, Meier Bros Cologne, Panther Rental Hamburg, Xinetics Hamburg, BMW Group, Audi Flensburg and Hertz Flensburg.

NimmerMeer is a co-production of Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg and Frisbeefilms.