



Hurricane Party

Combines theater and film talent

Students enrolled in the theater arts master's program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) are given an annual opportunity to perform in front of the camera lens. *Hurricane Party* is the third short film produced under the auspices of the UCLA Theater Department Film Project. The project gives graduating theater arts students opportunities to showcase their talent while acquiring practical experience in filmmaking. It enables students in the UCLA film department to have an opportunity to participate in creating a showcase film.

All students enrolled in the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television were invited to submit story treatments. Director A.P. Gonzalez, who is also a full

professor, and producer Dianne Haak Edson, an adjunct professor, read some 20 submissions before selecting Zack Godshall's *Hurricane Party*.

The story follows several friends and locals who are riding out a Category 5 hurricane at the Old Mill Dancehall just outside a rural town in southwest Louisiana. They are tempting fate and ignoring evacuation warnings. The emotional flow of the story ranges from friendship and anxiety over the impending storm, to flirtatious drinking and the tensions that arise from not knowing if tomorrow will come.

The script was written and developed for 11 characters, seven men and four women, which Gonzalez then cast from the 11 students in his masters in fine arts (MFA) acting class.



The crew was assembled from volunteer film students and theater students who received academic credit for their endeavors. Some of the crew, including the gaffer, script supervisor and sound recordist, were hired for “a very modest honorarium.”

The genesis of the Theater Department Film Project dates back several years when then-Dean Gil Cates and theater department head Bill Ward foresaw the benefits that students would receive from working on a professional production. There are professional mentors for the student cinematographer, production and costume designers, and others on the crew.

On *Hurricane Party*, Johnny Simmons, ASC, was the cinematography mentor for Director of Photography Quyen Tran. Edson worked with the Line Producer and Assistant Director, and oversaw production. Hak Choi was the mentor to Production Designer Brett Banakis, and Eduardo Castro for Costume Designer Jennifer Lee.

Hurricane Party was produced in Super 16 film format over a 10-day span. Various companies contributed products and services, including Kodak, LaserPacific, Fotokem, J.L. Fisher, Keslow Camera, Lacy Street Production Center and Paramount Pictures.

“The set was a dancehall/bar that had to look real,” says Gonzalez. “We are so grateful to have had the opportunity to shoot film and capture the gradations of black and shadows that were necessary to visually establish the reality of the location.”

All interiors were built on a UCLA soundstage and all exteriors including one bathroom interior were on location at Lacy Street Production Center in Los Angeles. Gonzalez worked directly with Tran to communicate the look he envisioned, including the need for tight framing to enhance a claustrophobic feeling. Tran used light and darkness to visually punctuate the passage of time from the early afternoon, when the characters gather, until the storm hits at night.

“I learned some important lessons about the art and craft of lighting, camera movement and framing, and also

how to run a large crew,” says Tran. “With Johnny’s (Simmons) guidance, I established practical light sources, learned to deal with various skin tones, and discovered how important it is for a cinematographer to collaborate with the production designer.”

The set had numerous windows, which motivated light until the day’s end when candlelight prevails. Tran worked with Banakis to make sure candles were always in the frame. “I had observed Roger Deakins discuss candlelight in one of his workshops,” Tran recalls. “He used gold leaf reflector boards. I built some for bouncing Tweenies. We also had one flicker box, but the frequency was too distracting and looked more like firelight after seeing dailies. I had the grips pan the Tweenies back and forth into the gold bounces at different speeds. I also had some electricians wave their hands in front of the lights. The look was more natural. Basically, we created our own human flicker box!”

Tran chose KODAK VISION2 7218 color negative film. “The latitude helped us maintain rich, deep blacks in the most challenging night scenes,” she says. “It was also ideal for the flesh tones of the diverse cast, and the tight grain structure resulted in an excellent 35mm blow-up.”

LaserPacific scanned the film into a digital file that Gonzalez and Tran color timed to enhance the story visually. Simmons notes this step was an especially important experience for Tran.

“We couldn’t create certain looks while filming because of time constraints,” says Simmons. “The digital intermediate (DI) process can save time during production, so you can be more creative later. However, you have to know what a DI can do for you in order to be effectively efficient on set. You can’t fix everything in post, but she and Gonzalez were able to extend the creative process.”

“Johnny taught me so many little tricks of the trade, but overall he constantly kept me aware of the possibilities and to think several days ahead of schedule so I’d be prepared,” Tran notes.

Hurricane Party screened at UCLA’s annual festival of student works, in addition to the Big Island Film Festival in Hawaii. Gonzalez and Edson will continue to enter the film into festivals.

“This project is the most professional way to show off interdepartmental talent,” says Robert Rosen, Dean of UCLA’s School of Theater, Film and Television. “This film demonstrates a great way for students to bridge the gap between their college education and their careers. Film is also a proven archival medium, so when the students who collaborated on this project become famous filmmakers, we have a record of their work for posterity.” ■

Opposite from top: (L to R) *Hurricane Party* Director of Photography Quyen Tran, 1st AC Dagmar Weaver-Madsen, and Johnny Simmons, ASC, inspect a scratch test on one of the film magazines. Simmons was the professional mentor on the UCLA Theater Film Project.

A scene from *Hurricane Party*, a UCLA Theater Department Film Project.

Below: Director A.P. Gonzalez.

