

Puritan

a modern film noir

"Cinema audiences are used to seeing fully lit faces, particularly during dialogue scenes, and breaking this convention was a challenge," admits British Director of Photography Peter Ellmore of *Puritan*, his second feature with Writer/Producer/Director Hadi Hajaig (*The Late Twentieth*).

A modern film noir, *Puritan* explores the seismic fault line between past and present, natural and supernatural. It is the story of one-time writer and crooked medium Simon Puritan (played by Nick Moran) who lives in a house designed by 17th century architect Nicholas Hawksmoor. A troubled man with a failed marriage, Puritan's heavy drinking fuels his obsession with the paranormal as he investigates links between supernatural events and Hawksmoor's churches. After an accident, he is visited by Jonathan Grey, a disfigured and intimidating man who tells him about his wife Anne (Georgina Rylance). Then Puritan meets her and the dark plot unfolds.

Ellmore was intrigued by Hajaig's supernatural storyline and the opportunity to experiment with lighting. "Photographing in extremely low light without the image breaking up into murky blackness was my greatest challenge and sticking to our plan when nothing could be seen on the video assist took a certain amount of courage. I needed solid blacks with a pleasing fall-off of natural looking light and colour and no distracting grain, and KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 helped me to achieve this," he says.

In order to maintain the film's classic feel, Hajaig chose to go down the traditional optical route. "Hadi was keen to create a believable ambience on set by creating real darkness, which was extremely challenging and a real test for the stock," comments Ellmore who was careful not to disclose too much in the frame and often only revealed half a character's face or silhouetted a face against lighter walls. "Hadi wanted a sedate and steady feel with very little camera movement, strong composition

and shadowy interiors to enhance the supernatural ambience and mystery of the characters and their world. It's a modern film with a timeless feel and a rich, very dark look that evokes a past era."



Dedos. "I tried to incorporate as many practical sources as possible to oppose the darkness and maintain contrast and supplemented them with Lowel Rifa lights. They're compact, lightweight and the diffusion hood conveniently opens like a square umbrella. I placed various diffusion materials in front of them and grouped together up to four units to provide a large soft source of light."

Below: Anne Grey (Georgina Rylance) in a scene from *Puritan*.
Right: Eric Bridges (David Soul)



Hadi cited *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity* and *Body Heat* as visual references for the film. One scene in particular that typifies this approach is Anne Grey's entrance into Puritan's life. "It is marked by a classic lighting approach that captures an elegant radiance reminiscent of a Hollywood starlet," explains Ellmore. He used black nets behind the lens to give an attractive glow to light sources in frame and an attractive diffusion on longer lens portraits. "The effect is subtle, but there may be something in the audience's subconscious that will remind them of older films," he muses.

He lit night interiors with overhead soft sources such as 2kW's with chimeras or Chinese lanterns and created "accents of light" on walls with ARRI 500s and

Red, Hajaig's favourite colour on 35mm, was gelled onto windows and lights throughout the film and in a large auditorium scene in which Eric Bridges (David Soul) makes a speech, the entire perimeter was lit with red lights. Ellmore maintained a consistent balance of darkness that provides a powerful introduction to Soul's character.

Would Ellmore willingly shoot that dark again? "A great deal of my work errs on the darker side and extremes of light within a frame always attract me. Creating interest and visual focus in an image is something I look for and Kodak stocks have consistently enabled me to achieve this," he replies.

Puritan was selected for screening at London Frightfest 2006. ■