

How do you translate a hit Broadway musical into a motion picture that enhances the magic of live performances? That was the first question Stephen Goldblatt, ASC, BSC, asked himself when director Chris Columbus invited him to collaborate on creating a cinema depiction of the mega-hit "rock opera" **Rent**.

The musical premiered on Broadway in 1996. The play is a slice of contemporary life in New York City's East Village. The story revolves around a group of bohemian friends who are coping with their lives and entertaining ambitious dreams. It won a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award and has run continuously for nearly 10 years.

"I hadn't seen Chris since we met in 1985 when he wrote the script for **Young Sherlock Holmes**," Goldblatt says. "He told me we would be working with the Broadway cast. The story is faithful to Jonathan Larson's Broadway musical with only 20 pages of dialogue in a 112-page script."

Goldblatt brought an eclectic background to the task. He was born in South Africa and raised in England, where he studied art and worked as a still photographer including a memorable Beatles session. Goldblatt transitioned into shooting documentaries and then narrative films, in genres ranging from **Lethal Weapon** to **Closer**. He has earned Oscar nominations for **The Prince of Tides** and **Batman Forever**, and Emmy nominations for **Conspiracy**, **Path to War** and **Angels in America**.

"During pre-production I looked at several musicals again, including **West Side Story**, **All That Jazz** and **Cabaret**, and just about anything else Bob Fosse directed," he says.

Columbus and Goldblatt decided to film **Rent** in widescreen 2.4:1 aspect ratio. The cinematographer says they chose Super 35 format rather than anamorphic because he wanted to use spherical lenses, which offer a broader selection of focal lengths and render a somewhat "edgier" look. They also agreed Goldblatt would time the film for continuity, and put painterly touches on the look in a digital intermediate suite.

There was an ambitious 60-day production schedule and a relatively modest \$40 million budget. **Rent** was mainly produced at locations in New

York City and the San Francisco Bay area with one beautiful setting staged on a mountaintop in New Mexico. Other scenes were filmed on an East Village exterior set on a Hollywood backlot.

Goldblatt primarily covered scenes with a single camera for optimum lighting, composition and movement, and a second crew ready to pick up the action. His camera package included a couple of Panaflex Platinum bodies with 4:1 and 11:1 zooms, a set of Primo primes, ranging from 14 to 10mm and a 600mm Nikkor lens.

Camera movement was choreographed with the music and flow of the story. Goldblatt used a Technocrane with a stabilized head from Chapman, which made it possible to smoothly extend a 50ft arm in 10 seconds while the camera was tracking. **Rent** was also the first feature film to make use of the new AR Steadicam rig, which enabled the operator to smoothly move the camera from a few inches above the ground to over his head and back while keeping the horizon level.

"We often covered entire numbers in one shot, some as long as eight minutes," Goldblatt says. "It was important to get the action in as few takes as possible, because the dances were strenuous. A great crew can easily save you one to three hours a day. We never shot for more than 12 hours a day, and came in under budget."

Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 film was the main negative on his palette. He explains that the 5218 film gave him the flexibility to record images in virtually any light with the right "texture." He sometimes used Kodak VISION2 250D 5205 film for daylight exteriors.

How Goldblatt made **Rent** off Broadway



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One day they were setting up to shoot a song and dance number. As a string of lamps were being raised over the set, Goldblatt noticed they were creating little circles of light in the darkness. They got brighter until they seemed like halos revealing the cast. He and Columbus decided to open the scene with that visual prelude.



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No creative compromises were made in anticipation of timing in a DI suite, but it was a time-saver. For instance, Goldblatt saw a hot light flaring on a window in the background, and decided to "fix it" in DI rather than taking time to flag it on the set.

He used Kodak Look Manager System to communicate with dailies timer Adam

Clark at Deluxe labs in Los Angeles. Goldblatt used Canon and Nikon cameras to record digital stills of every set-up, and a dual processor Mac G4 desktop computer to manipulate those images to reflect his intentions for the shot. Goldblatt emphasizes that the Kodak Display Manager System calibrated all the monitors that he, Clark and everyone else used exactly the same way.

"That ensured everyone was seeing and using the same visual references, which accurately reflected our intentions for the look," he says.

He and Columbus felt that film dailies were an essential part of the creative process. Goldblatt explains, "It was a participatory experience that was fertile ground for discussing ideas. I hate it when directors watch digital dailies that don't accurately reflect what is on the film. They aren't seeing the look, which is incredibly important."

After *Rent* was edited off-line, the conformed negative was scanned at 4K resolution and down-rezzed to 1K proxy files to speed up interactive timing.

EFILM colorist Steve Scott used the digital stills as visual references for preparing for the DI sessions with Goldblatt. Scott used articulated software tools to draw masks around people and objects where he felt that Goldblatt would want to manipulate images.

"There's a scene where a woman dancer is wearing a red dress," he says. "I anticipated Steve would want it redder, so I drew a matte around it. When Steve came in, he guided me through making the dress redder until he was satisfied."

Corrections made during timing were applied to the 4K master files.

"That enabled us to retain the full tonal and dynamic range of the images recorded on the negative," Goldblatt says. "Nuances in tones and colors are part of the story."

The timed 4K digital master files were recorded directly onto three Kodak internegatives made with a sturdy Estar base. Each internegative was used to generate 1,000 release prints. "Basically, they are all show prints," Goldblatt concludes. ■



Above: (L to R, on table) Actors Adam Pascal and Jessie L. Martin in a scene from *Rent*, shot by DP Stephen Goldblatt, ASC, BSC.

Top: DP Stephen Goldblatt, ASC, BSC taking a meter read on the set of *Rent*.