

Journey behind the scenes filming *Righteous Kill*

Flashback to Paris, France, during the late 1960s: A young man graduates from high school and begins to study medicine. He is an avid movie fan with a special passion for *film noir* from around the world and Hollywood classics from the 1930s, '40s and '50s. After learning that her son has seen around 1,000 movies over a two-year span, his mother suggests that he follow his passion and study filmmaking.

Denis Lenoir, ASC, AFC took his mother's advice and enrolled at the Vaugirard film school. He began his career working on camera crews in France. *Righteous Kill* is his 53rd cinematography credit since 1985. It's his fourth co-venture with director Jon Avnet, beginning with *Uprising*, a 2001 mini-series that earned an ASC Outstanding Achievement Award and an Emmy nomination for cinematography.

"I knew I wanted to be part of *Righteous Kill* as soon as I began reading Russell Gewirtz's script," Lenoir says. "Robert De Niro and Al Pacino were cast in leading roles."

The story takes place in contemporary times with a few flashbacks. Two veteran New York City detectives, played by De Niro and Pacino, have been working together for decades. Early in the film, they investigate the murder of a notorious criminal who had evaded arrest. Similar killings suggest that a vigilante is murdering criminals.

Righteous Kill was produced by Millennium Films and Nu Image Films mainly at practical locations in Norwalk, Bridgeport and Milford, Connecticut. Several scenes were produced at locations in New York, including a view from the roof of a building in Brooklyn and the exterior of an Italian restaurant in Queens.

Righteous Kill was produced in Super 35 format. Lenoir explains that the widescreen 2.4:1 aspect ratio gave him more freedom to compose shots with multiple characters in environments that augment the story. He suggested using three-perf 35 mm film coupled with digital intermediate (DI) mastering. That enabled the filmmakers to shoot longer takes and add painterly touches to the look during DI post-production.

Lenoir also compiled visual references that he chose from different pictures, including *The Killing of*

a Chinese Bookie, on a CD that he showed to Avnet. "I also shot some reference images of key light on faces," Lenoir says. "Sometimes one side of a face was in shadows and the other side was in bright light. In some shots there was as much as a six-stop difference between the two sides of faces."

Lenoir scouted locations with production designer Tracey Gallacher, who has been a frequent collaborator with Avnet. It was Lenoir's third film with Gallacher. They found a practical location in a small church, and designed and built sets for a police precinct and a nightclub in warehouses as well as a bankrupt bank.

Lenoir conferred with Gallacher about everything from colors on sets to where he wanted to motivate practical light and rig lamps.

"Each location had its own spirit, which defined the use of colors along with the content of scenes," Lenoir says. "The nightclub set had a very high ceiling. There was a dance floor where we used pulsating lights with changing colors in tune with the music. It would have been too expensive to build rock-and-roll trusses above the floor and hang lights on them. So, instead I built little columns, and we put disco lights on top of them right in the middle of the dancers, lighting them from the ground."

They had a 35-day shooting schedule with an ambitious shot list. Lenoir and Avnet decided to cover the action with two cameras. Lenoir describes them as Red and Blue camera crews rather than A and B to emphasize that they were equally important. He sought advice for assembling New York-based crew members from cinematographers who had worked in that region, but ended with West Coast operators: Red Steadicam/camera operator Duane Manwiller and Blue camera operator Christopher Duskin. "Elan Yaari was my





gaffer," Lenoir says. "We have worked together for years. He understood what I was after and brought his rigging crew."

Lenoir's camera package included two ARRICAM Lite cameras with a range of S4 Cooke prime and Angenieux zoom lenses. Lenoir chose to limit his film palette to KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 color negative, which he rated for an exposure index of 400 most of the time, because that rendered a somewhat richer look. Sometimes the cameras were side-by-side with one on a tight shot of the actors and the other one covering a wider angle. They were at 90-degree angles most of the time, giving the editor more options.

3-perf 35mm with DI

"We motivated scenes with every kind of light, including a confession by the serial killer that we lit through a stained glass window in a church," Lenoir says. "We shot that scene in a real church, shooting day-for-night, and using contrast and exposure to create the right environment. The following morning the police, including our two heroes, are at a crime scene in the church. This time, I mixed daylight with a tungsten work light."

Lenoir lit that scene with a few 4K HMIs and 6K Pars outside the window. He was shooting wide open at stop T1.3, planning to adjust contrast, if necessary, in DI.

Carla Gugino plays Karen, a police officer who is in a romantic relationship with De Niro's character. On the first days of production, there were night scenes in Karen's apartment. It was on the second floor of a house in Hartford. "We wanted Karen's apartment to be her universe, where she is comfortable and happy," Lenoir says. "The only light is motivated by sodium vapor streetlight outside the window. It was a very dark scene with a golden hue."

To stay in contact with both Avnet and his crew, Lenoir used his own communications system, the type usually used by high school football coaches. He says that it was especially useful on the crowded night club set, where there were several hundred extras. "It allowed me to get lost in the crowd and talk with my gaffer without having to yell for him,"

he says. "I have another wonderful tool called an OverKeeper. It's a little track that you put between the camera and head. It allows you to slide the camera sideways for a foot or two if you are shooting over a shoulder and an actor isn't exactly where you want him."

The showdown takes place at three locations, one after the other. One set was a linen factory that was filmed in a warehouse where there were rows of empty cylinders. They made holes in the bottoms of some cylinders and put shafts of sodium vapor light through them. Lenoir describes the second location as "the white factory." He asked the dailies timer to give those shots a cold blue look, as if they were shot underwater.

The third location was another factory with a little warmer look that he describes as "the color of headlights, but not as warm as the linen factory." The location was a big warehouse with the windows on two sides about five feet above ground level.

"This is where the final confrontation takes places," Lenoir says. "Jon envisioned freeways on both sides of the building with headlights from cars creating random beams of moving light and shadows. We originally considered having three or four pickup trucks with their own generators and lights driving by the windows. We also thought of using one light on a golf cart inside the building to create the same illusion, but I decided to pan light across our set instead, and it worked very well."

Lenoir documented different set-ups with digital stills, which he manipulated with a laptop computer and provided as visual references for the dailies timer at DuArt Labs in New York. They watched DVD dailies in Avnet's trailer at lunch time.

"It was a privilege working with Jon and such a talented cast, and watching them perform and react to each other," Lenoir concludes. "Al Pacino has the ability to bring meaning to scenes with his facial expressions and the way he says words. Robert De Niro is rock solid. The expressions on his face and his eyes speak louder than words."

(Note: We went to press before the DI was timed at Pacific Title in Los Angeles.)