

Universal story relies on visual storytelling



Storytelling with images is a universal art. That's what director Joe Kelly was counting on when he traveled to Thailand to direct a Lifebuoy shampoo commercial for the ad agency Lowe Mumbai on behalf of international conglomerate Unilever.

The spot, which was shot for the Indonesian/Vietnamese market, is very simple. Two parents bring their adolescent son to school, and as they are leaving the mother attempts to hug her son. Embarrassed by his mother babying him in public, he jerks away. The mother is shocked and surprised at her son's sudden change of behavior until her husband points in the direction of the oncoming schoolteacher.

The boy's eyes are locked on the teacher for whom he has a schoolboy crush. Realizing what's happening, the mother exchanges a smile with her husband, then playfully rubs her son's hair from which flakes of dandruff emerge onto his shoulder. The mother, recoiling in horror, turns to her husband who gives her a reassuring look.

In the next scene, we cut to an interior bathroom with the parents placing a Lifebuoy shampoo bottle on the sink counter and then cut to the boy who's smiling and shampooing with Lifebuoy anti-dandruff shampoo.

The following day the parents drop their son off at school. After he waves goodbye to them, he turns around and is greeted with "good morning" from his favorite teacher.

With his voice cracking, he replies "good morning." The teacher then ruffles his hair and when no dandruff flakes off, the boy is relieved and overjoyed. The parents chuckle at their lovesick boy.

"It's a slice of life," Kelly says. "For the story to work with no dialogue, capturing certain subtle moments in the commercial including the look in the boy's eyes as he's gazing at his teacher, his parents glancing

at one another to acknowledge their son's crush, the boy blushing as the teacher ruffles his hair, and his parents' reaction, was critical."

While the spot was shot for an Asian audience with Asian actors, it would also work just as well in the United States or Europe. There's almost no dialogue, just "good morning" in the Indonesian native language Bahasa from the teacher and the boy. The story is told through pictures.

From day one Kelly felt he was on the same page with Lowe Mumbai's Creative Director Sam Dasgupta and Producer

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Archana Thakoor, and Lowe Jakarta's Art Director Galvin Sanusi. "From the moment we met we hit it right off. We all felt the same about the tone of the spot. We wanted to give a cinematic feel to the commercial by having rich colors, soft skin tones and a lot of detail in the highlights. When it came to film stock, I showed them images of Kodak VISION2 250D 5205 film for the exteriors at the school, based on a recommendation from colorist P. J. Marsiglia at Company 3 in Los Angeles. After that we were all in agreement it would give us the look we wanted."

Kelly's most important collaborator was Thai cinematographer Yingporn "PTong" Anaman who spoke limited English. "He wasn't big on nuances or slang but our visual vocabulary was very similar," Kelly says. When Kelly showed him sample images from Marsiglia's reel that he wanted to match, language barriers disappeared.

"The look we wanted was straightforward, clean and colorful," says Kelly. "The film really delivered exactly what we needed. It's a big improvement from the old 250D film. The highlights

were incredible, a lot cleaner from the previous stock."

Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 film was used for the interiors. To get away from the "feel" of a film set, Kelly had a 4K HMI punch through a light grid cloth diffusion to mimic the soft light of fluorescents commonly used in bathroom lighting. "The stock has a very fine grain look to it, and the film overall gives skin tones good color."

As the day wore on, the natural sunlight diminished and the crew turned on HMI lamps and shined light off a 12x12 bounce. "But throughout the day, we had a consistent look. The shadow detail was fantastic, the colors were lush, and the film (5205) held up in the highlights perfectly."

"I showed PTong the look I wanted from PJ's reel, and he just nailed it," Kelly adds. "The outdoors were amazingly beautiful, the actors blue clothing against the silver car with lush green trees and bushes in the background gave it an organic feeling. The film's (5205) range and latitude gave us the flexibility we needed to shoot all day."

To create a sense of presence, Kelly wanted subtle camera movement so the audience would not be conscious of it. He left the lens choice up to the cinematographer with both of them agreeing it should capture the intimacy of the actors' eyes. "It was really all about capturing the little boy and his expression. There was such innocence in his eyes, and we really wanted to zero in on that. I knew we had achieved our goal when the client expressed to me that we had captured exactly how he envisioned it. Every shoot is different," Kelly concludes. "You learn something every time you shoot. ... This is one I'll remember a while."

To read more about the making of the Lifebuoy commercial, go to www.kodak.com/go/motion. ■

Above left: Cast and crew on location while shooting the commercial for Lifebuoy shampoo.

Centre: Director Joe Kelly

Right: Scene from the spot.