

Snail Chase heightens the pace for NZ newcomer

For 24-year-old New Zealand filmmaker, Damian Seagar, making the leap to shooting on film was certainly a baptism of fire. Along with writer/director Edward Lynden-Bell, Damian launched himself into a first-time filmmaker adventure on the low-budget feature, *The Last Great Snail Chase*.

The film explores the lives and troubles of young people living on the brink of the end of the world, or at least the end of something.

Damian recalls, "When I received the script I noticed the words under the title, 'A Scrapbook Film'. It was almost like a tagline and helped me quickly understand my entire visual approach for the project."

The largely location-based film was shot during November and December 2006 in the eclectic and exciting city of Wellington, New Zealand and was produced by David White of White Balance Pictures and Pocket String Pictures. Damian relied heavily on the experience of the resident industry professionals, focus pullers, Simon Buyers, and Mike Knudsen.

Originally envisioning a naturalistic lighting style, Damian discussed Lynden-Bell's preference for 'movement' which was achieved with dolly shots or the occasional handheld.

"I didn't want anything to have an over-lit or glossy feeling," explains Damian who learned to use the dolly to his advantage. "Just a real life/real world kind of feel, where houses have dark patches, and people don't hit their marks or step into their keylights, where fluoros are uncorrected and slightly garish.

I also wanted to heighten movements in the film with the dolly, as if to suggest a more calm and controlled environment, as motivated by characters decisions and actions without making it forced or staged," he said.

Working in Super 16mm with an ARRI SR11 camera, Damian began principal photography without the benefit of film stock tests, and recruited four films from the KODAK VISION2 range. Shooting on blind faith, he took advantage of the various product features to create distinctions between scenes.

With up to 50% of the action captured during daytime, Damian chose the KODAK VISION2 250D 7205 and where he wanted to achieve a nice polished result and depict the characters as they matured, he shot the fine grain KODAK VISION2 100T 7212. Night scenes were captured on the high-speed KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 and he relied upon the KODAK VISION2 Expression 500T 7229 to create a warmth and softness when shooting inside a record shop that represented a time reminiscent of the 70s. He was surprised by how far the '29 went.

"The '29 read into the darkness much more than I anticipated," he remarks. "The set was lit with practical bulbs only descending toward the back in wattages of 100, 75, 60, 40, and 25. I thought a single 25w bulb placed 8-10 metres towards the back would yield only a faint exposure, but I could see right into the shadows as if I had deliberately increased the fill and I had to increase the contrast in post to correct it".



For Damian, shooting film taught him some invaluable lessons, not the least being to trust the film stock.

"On one exterior night scene, we were running behind schedule. The scene was shot in a dark alley and I wanted to avoid over lighting. I was conscious about having the shadow at relatively the same height as the actor, but not flattening out the image too much, and so we worked with the available streetlights. I shot a grey card against the very orange lamps, and 'dialed it out' in telecine, and used half corrected HMIs as fill bounced off gryflons and muslins. The streetlight key brought my exposure down to 1-2 stops under. I was shooting between T1.3 and T1.3½, which meant the fill had to be barely readable. Most of the time my meter was reading 0, so I just had to trust my eyes and the capability of the film stock."

1 Filmmaker Damian Seagar shooting on *The Last Great Snail Chase*