



# Southland Tales

## Behind the scenes with Steven Poster, ASC

Think of George Orwell's 1984, and try melding it with Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Love and Live With the Bomb*. That should give you an insight into *Southland Tales*, a surrealistic journey to the near future in 2008.

### Above (L to R):

Seann William Scott stars in *Southland Tales*, photographed by Steven Poster, ASC

Sarah Michelle Gellar in a scene from the film

**Opposite above:** Writer and Director Richard Kelly on set

**Opposite right:** Sarah Michelle Gellar and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson in action

The independent feature was written and directed by Richard Kelly. The story unfolds in Los Angeles, which is on the brink of environmental, economic and social calamities. Kelly has weaved threads of music, drama and science fiction into the fabric of the film, which takes place during a three-day heat wave and ends with a massive July 4th celebration.

*Southland Tales* is Kelly's second collaboration with Steven Poster, ASC. They met in 2001 when the cinematographer shot *Donnie Darko*. That was Kelly's first endeavor after graduating from film school at the University of Southern California. Poster had some 40 narrative credits, ranging from upscale studio features to art house films. *Donnie Darko* earned rave reviews and became a cult favorite for an army of fans.

Poster was intrigued by Kelly's vision for *Southland Tales*. He also realized that it was going to be a complex and challenging endeavor with a large ensemble cast and an ambitious six-week shooting schedule, mainly on the Santa Monica Pier, southland beaches and other locations in Los Angeles. There were some 400 visual effects shots and many digital HDV images taken from the perspectives of surveillance cameras. The surveillance shots were slated for compositing onto TV monitor screens.

One of the sets, a law enforcement office, had 18 large monitors.

"We wanted the surveillance images to have a distinct video look that is different from the rest of the film," Poster explains.

Kelly and Poster made a decision to frame *Southland Tales* in widescreen 2.4:1 aspect ratio. They agreed that the format feels more intimate, and that it would enable them to shoot close-ups with wide-angle lenses and include other characters in the frame. Poster ultimately made more extensive use of 17mm and 24mm lenses than anticipated.

He suggested shooting in Super 35 format on three-perf negative combined with digital intermediate (DI) timing. Poster says that he advocated DI, because it would enable them to add painterly touches to the look, including seamless blending of the visual effects shots, and also save precious time during production. The three-perf film trimmed raw stock and lab costs. Kelly also appreciated having 25 percent more time between magazine changes, especially in dialogue scenes.

They had a long pre-production period, including scouting locations and conferring with the costume and production designers about the palette of colors, practical light sources and space needed for camera movement. Instead of

building a set for the interior of a Zeppelin, they found two locations that they were able to marry digitally with the help of production designer Alec Hammond. The audience will believe they are up in the air in the Zeppelin.

Poster and Kelly read the script together and discussed the meaning and physical realities of each shot. The only storyboards used were for visual effects and large action scenes. The rest of the movie was indicated with very specific notes that Kelly and Poster made in pre-production. This allows Kelly and Poster to work more intuitively on the set. The cinematographer chose to record all the action with Panaflex Platinum and XL cameras with Primo lenses. He chose KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film because the relatively fine-grained emulsion enabled him to concentrate on lighting for time, place and moods rather than exposure. He also notes that 5218 has a particular palette that was very well suited to depict the Los Angeles and southland urban landscape.

Poster cites an example of how the DI affected decisions he made while shooting. "We had a scene with one of our main female characters sitting on the steps at the bottom of a staircase. Richard (Kelly) and I agreed that we wanted a darker look in the background. Instead



of spending time flagging ambient light off the background, I decided we could do it in just a few moments in DI. The process of DI is really an extension of the editorial process. While the editor is defining the storyline in the editing room, the cinematographer is focusing to further cultivate the images."

LaserPacific in Los Angeles handled front-end processing, dailies and the DI. Dailies were delivered to the set in HD format on hard drives. They were projected on a seven foot wide screen with as many as eight to ten people every night in Kelly's director trailer. After editing, the negative was scanned at 4K resolution to retain nuances in tones and colors.

It took about 15 days for Poster and LaserPacific colorist David Cole to time the film. Cole applied the basic looks designed by Poster and Kelly, and then Poster fine-tuned them scene-by-scene in an interactive and collaborative process in a cinema-like environment. Kelly monitored the fine-tuned imagery and occasionally offered suggestions.

"A main advantage of a DI is to allow the cinematographer to editorialize the images just like the director does with the editor," Poster says. "You have the ability to focus the attention of the audience on elements that are important to the story. I believe that every part of the image informs the audience. It could be as simple as tears in a character's eyes or a faint blush on their cheeks. DI is a powerful new tool that can't be over-emphasized, but you have to understand that you can't enhance what isn't on the negative."

The timed digital master was used to create a projection master for digital exhibition at the 2006 Cannes International Film Festival in addition to generating 35mm release prints. ■

