

Well connected

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"**S**yrina is incredibly complex and the characters are so extraordinary that I had to read Stephen Gaghan's script twice just to keep track of who everyone is and what they're doing. I particularly liked the way it deals with the real world and I was intrigued how it would all be laid down on film," remarks Director of Photography Robert Elswit ASC.

"**Syrina** interweaves social, political and personal contexts with many fragmented - but connected - stories," continues Elswit. "It tackles the relationships at different levels between big money, big oil producers, big governments and the Middle East and focuses on the mid level managers. I really responded to the way people's everyday lives are affected by major issues, problems and events and how some of them try to change the status quo, no matter how difficult - or impossible - it is."

In their first collaboration, Elswit and Academy Award-winning Director Stephen Gaghan (**Traffic**) deliberated on the film's visual style and the portrayals of the different politically-charged worlds. "Stephen and I kept coming back to **Traffic** which was reminiscent in many ways, but he didn't want to create a stylised colour parallel between the east and the west or the CIA and the desert or impose a grand pictorial vision. Instead he decided to make each world look as close to the next as possible and real in a naturalistic way, and took a documentary

approach in terms of the characters. It was fascinating and very refreshing that we could let the story tell itself."

With a huge number of locations and the need for ongoing recces during the 85 day, seven day week shoot, Elswit and 1st Camera Assistant Gregor Tavenner handheld the Panavision XLS and used available light and basic staging. "We shot continuously with two cameras; the other camera operator was Colin Anderson, who did a marvellous job. Stephen and I developed a wonderfully simple shorthand and played with a very character driven creative focus, shooting each scene from the characters' perspectives. Keeping track of all the different people and the complicated stories and ensuring they made sense dramatically was an enormous challenge."

Elswit selected Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 for the entire shoot. "I love the way it handles colours and controls light and shadow detail; it scans really well too. We travelled so much in Switzerland, Morocco, Dubai and the United States that we couldn't have regular dailies, but I was so familiar with 5218 that I wasn't worried," he says.

"George Clooney went through a lot of physical pressures during the filming of **Syrina**," notes Elswit. "When some guys kidnapped him, he really struggled and when they tried to restrain him by wrapping him in a bag, he gave 100%. Similarly, when George was being 'tortured', he had to be taped to a chair

and table so he couldn't move and his fear was so real that he hyperventilated. It's a compelling scene, but it was pretty scary to light. We had to find a simple plan, so we used one of the windows in the key light area and created a soft window light effect where George was sitting and let the rest of the room fall away in both directions."

In another scene, Clooney leaves a building after completing a deal. As he walks away, two men behind him get into a car which explodes. "It was terrifically complicated," recalls Elswit. "Steve wanted one long scene, so we shot three passes from the dolly. The first was George walking out of a passageway into the street towards the camera. He gets closer and looks up briefly as if there's a signal, then he looks away and the car explodes. The second pass comprised everyone else in the street and the last was the timed explosion. We created a composite of the three elements and it worked out well."

"**Syrina** has a very real social and political context that affects us all. I admit to walking away feeling troubled that no one has any long-term solution to our energy problems," reflects Elswit.

Syrina was nominated for a Golden Globe Award. ■



Top: George Clooney stars in Warner Bros Pictures' political thriller, *Syrina*, also starring Matt Damon and Jeffrey Wright.

Above: DP Robert Elswit, ASC.