

Lensing and sensing

The Emperor of Taste

The Emperor of Taste (De Smaak van de Keyser) was one of the longest and most demanding shoots of Stijn Van der Veken's career, but he enthusiastically rates it as "a beautiful present; an opportunity to devise aesthetic photographic solutions." Faced with 135 locations in Belgium, Sicily and France, and three distinctly different time periods (pre-war/wartime 1940s, the 1960s and the present day), the Belgian director of photography completed the feature and 10-part miniseries in a tough 125-day shooting schedule.

An emotional drama with unexpected twists, *The Emperor of Taste* features three generations of the de Keyser gin distilling family. The young Helena was in love with Alfred and George in the weeks prior to World War II. Alfred won her heart, but soon afterwards the two men were called to war and were ultimately captured. Alfred died a prisoner-of-war and George returned to marry Helena. After George's death at 80 years-of-age, Helena asks her granddaughter, Alessandra, to unravel the story behind Alfred's untimely demise.

Caviar Films wanted to shoot on film from the outset, so Van der Veken undertook extensive tests on 35mm and Super 16. 35mm looked "great", but was beyond the budget of the unusually long shoot. Super 16, 16:9 format proved the perfect cost-effective choice for both the series and the cinema release.

The DP was given the choice between expensive light sources or a 330 ft crane, but he was in no doubt that the direction and position of the inexpensive sodium lighting on large night exteriors was of prime importance. "Fortunately the excellent colour resonance of the Kodak stocks meant that I could get away with a big frame of carefully positioned inexpensive lighting and justify a 330-foot telescopic crane," he notes.

In the elaborate preproduction period director/producer Frank Van Passel, director Jan Matthys, Van der Veken and grader Peter Bernaers determined against the obvious use of heavy grading to depict the 1940s. Instead it was decided to achieve the look in a different way - through the story, acting, lighting, make-up, costumes, set design and subtle supporting photography.

Van der Veken used a large amount of lighting for the challenging 1940s scenes, including a remote-controlled device created by gaffer Bert Reyskens comprising 48 neon tubes with different colour balances. He used a mixed key from the front and side, placing Tungsten light beside an HMI daylight source to produce a cold key light with warm light in the shadows. He favoured a stronger-than-usual warm backlight on many

characters, as well as interiors and exteriors, and a slight glow to accentuate romance in the pre-war scenes. The 1960s look emanated from a 90° key and single colour of light (Tungsten or HMIs), while a mix of uncorrected light sources including Tungsten, neons, daylight and practicals in a ¾ front key created a crisp, bright and colourful present day.

Van der Veken used 16mm, 25mm, 35mm, 50mm and 100mm Zeiss Master Primes and a 8mm Ultra 16 on his ARRI 416. KODAK VISION2 50D 7201 was his choice for almost all exteriors. "It's very contrasty, sharp and beautifully grainless and helped to achieve the 1940s look we wanted," he says. KODAK VISION2 250D 7205 became his workhorse stock for interiors. "It helped me a great deal and handled the mixed/blended key lights very nicely. We achieved extremely high resolution and low grain with a combination of good stocks and lenses, through which every little pixel was exposed."



Film Stocks

KODAK VISION2 50D 7201, KODAK VISION2 250D 7205, KODAK VISION2 500T 7218, KODAK VISION3 500T 7219

Van der Veken selected KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 for most night exteriors. Then, towards the end of the shoot, he had the opportunity to test the new KODAK VISION3 500T 7219 – and subsequently used it for a large war scene shot in December. “7219 is beautiful and the grain structure is totally different to other 16mm stocks. It’s very important for the future of Super 16.”

In a key World War II mobilisation scene in a large city hall, Van der Veken had to contend with eight 13 by 16 foot pale yellow leaded glass windows. “Most filmmakers would have used big 18Ks on cherry pickers, or the like, at each window but our budget didn’t allow for

that. Instead I shot wide with 7205 and full Tungsten as daylight and created a kind of wash inside with eight Dinors (18 kW Tungsten each) and a combination of flood and spot lenses. The light was thrown through the windows in a church-like effect and the structure of the glass slightly diffused my lights. At the time I was a bit worried they might look too warm, but 7205 captured the variety of colours really well. The very nice, slightly warm look suits the scene perfectly.”

“A film project about taste and senses demanded a subtle approach and Stijn created it in the most organic way, giving each period its own specific look without being pushy or over-clear,” acknowledges Frank Van Passel. “He efficiently combined artistic and production needs into one style and created an overwhelming visual emotion that connects directly to the needs of scenes and characters. Switching between time periods during a shooting day demands extensive preparation, yet Stijn knew exactly where he wanted to go long before we started shooting. Over the years he has surrounded himself with the perfect crew, not only on-set but also off-set. Stijn

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established daily contact with colour grader Peter Bernaers during the six-month shoot and Peter often adjusted the one-light dailies. It has been a pleasure to see them collaborate in our Brussels production office-based Scratch colour grading room. Stijn was also in regular touch with Kodak, ARRI and Spots, the Belgian lighting equipment supplier, giving us great flexibility to adjust each system or idea in support of a stronger result.”

“We made our pre-production decisions 18 months ago, but after all that time I’m still very happy,” responds Van der Veken. “We don’t have to restore pictures in grading as everything we decided to do is in

the negative; Peter only needs to fine-tune. I’ve had such a good time working with Caviar Films; they’re professional, honest and an absolutely wonderful production company. They supported the whole process so well – right until the last day” says the DP, who is also very pleased that Kodak used a trailer from the film to promote its new Super 16 stock.

The feature is currently being screened and audiences can choose how they want to watch the miniseries. It has a weekly slot on Sunday night prime-time television, but it is also being transferred to a JPEG2000 file for digital projection on the Dolby® Digital Cinema system at Kinepolis Group’s innovative cinema complexes. Several episodes are screening together at unique weekly ‘events’ at which audiences can enjoy food, drink and state-of-the art technology.

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