

# The Undergr

documentary naturalism with a cinematic touch



*The Underground* is a documentary mini-series about the hidden world of organized crime in Canada. The series covers the evolution of the criminal underworld from the beginning of the 1950s up through to the 1980s, which gave Brendan Steacy the opportunity to create a range of looks to underscore the various periods.

Steacy became interested in cinematography while studying at Concordia University, where he minored in film studies. After graduation, he began his career as a production assistant and eventually gravitated to the camera department. His credits include science-fiction (*Warriors of Terra*), thrillers (*The Mad, Harm's Way, Living Death*), comedy (*Ham & Cheese*) and documentaries (*Metal: A Headbanger's Journey*).

His work on a short film titled *I Am an Apartment Building* caught the eye of *The Underground* producers Peter Gentile and Remo Giralto, who teamed Steacy with director Brad Walsh.

"What attracted me to this project was the chance to tell stories that are true and accountable as to their accuracy," says Steacy. "Brad had a very clear picture of the general feeling and coverage he wanted, but he was also open to input and very collaborative."

*The Underground* intercuts

recreations of historical events with stock footage, interviews and still photos. "We wanted the recreations to have a bit of a gritty, documentary feel," notes Steacy. "We achieved that look by tending towards longer lenses and loose framing, and we avoided making it feel too composed.

"At the same time, we worked to establish the main character of each story in a cinematic way," he says. "We had to find a balance between two pretty different aesthetics."

To indicate a period, Steacy integrated his choices with those of the production designer. "I took a lot of cues from wardrobe, period photographs and locations that were generally very close to the actual events' locations," he says. "Because the stories we are telling are all real, I strived to be as honest as possible with the lighting. I tried to build on what lighting would logically have been there at the time these events took place."

For certain scenes taking place in the 1980s, the color palette was counterintuitive. "We filmed in one bar that was entirely red and yellow," he recalls, "but that lent itself perfectly to the period."

Steacy describes the pace of the shoot as "fast and furious." The production had to move often and quickly, sometimes doing three company movies in one day, and often getting a single shot at a location and then moving on.

"I had to be pretty respectful of available light, and work with it rather than fighting it," he says. "That could have been a nightmare, but Brad understood and was usually willing to block a scene with the available light in mind. The fact that we were shooting on film made an enormous difference."

MDF Productions originally considered producing *The*

*Underground* in digital HD format, but opted for Super 16mm film. Steacy chose KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 and KODAK VISION2 200T 7217 films.

"I relied heavily on the latitude of film, especially the 7218, and shot some night exteriors with almost entirely available light," he says. "We did some tests before we began shooting, comparing stocks and experimenting with push processing. In the end, 7218 processed straight

Steacy says shooting Super 16 was right in aesthetic as well as practical ways. "I love the look of 16mm film," he says. "The new stocks make it a more viable option. They have better latitude and a more cinematic feel, as well as being so much more fun to light for. Things like flares from light sources passing through frame or blooming highlights become a nightmare on HD, but a real treat on 16mm film."

In his research, Steacy learned that sodium vapor, mercury vapor and



and slightly 'dug out.' The transfer seemed cleaner than the same stock pushed one stop. After testing, I felt comfortable shooting nights two stops underexposed. That gave us a look that was very natural with just the right amount of grit.

"I shot 7217 for everything else, filtering it for daylight and using it straight for the rare occasions where I could control everything and light with tungsten," he says. "Again, I heavily relied on the latitude of the film. During the daytime scenes I often took advantage of the stock's graceful handling of highlights. We would sometimes shoot towards a window and allow the ambient bounce light to illuminate most of the scene, while letting the window blow out. This is something that I find beautiful on film and problematic on HD."

fluorescent lighting fixtures all came into commercial use during the 1930s. That enabled him to mix light from all of these types of sources when he found them on locations in Toronto.

When he encountered very low-light situations, Steacy had to trust that the film would capture an image. "I took a lot of calculated risks," he says. "I like to shoot digital stills on set as a reference for the colorist, but my digital camera has way less latitude than the film. There were a couple of times that my stills were extremely dark. I just had to trust the tests that we had done and know that there would be a dense image on the negative, and there always was."

Often Steacy and his crew saw locations for the first time as they arrived to shoot. "We had a really great

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Film stocks

KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 and KODAK VISION2 200T 7217

crew that was willing to roll with the loose style of the shoot and still keep on top of things," he says. "I'm very grateful to gaffer Frank Gentile and key grip Felipe Rodriguez.

"The crew can have a powerful impact on the look and style of any film, whether it's a narrative or documentary," Steacy adds. "This project involved a lot of longer lenses and handheld camerawork with non-union actors, frequently wide open, and little or no real rehearsal time. My regular focus puller, Lainie Knox, rose to the occasion and pulled off several miracles. Having a less experienced focus puller would have forced us to change our approach and ultimately would have limited the amount of footage we could have shot."

Steacy also considered today's television audiences as he made his choices. "As a result of reality television and the renewed popularity of documentaries, I believe audiences have come to associate certain aesthetics with 'truth,' and I tried to keep that in mind as well," he says. "We didn't shoot like a documentary, but as if a documentary were shot in a world that always had a window where you needed one and the sun just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

Dailies were transferred flat to HD SR format and will undergo final tape-to-tape color correction at Deluxe in Toronto. *The Underground* is slated for broadcast on History Television in Canada. The producers hope to leverage the success of *The Underground* into a regular series.

1 Actor John Tokatlidis (right) in a scene from the film.

2 Vic and Paolo Violi in a scene from *The Underground* shot by DP Brendan Steacy

3 Volpe in action

(Photos by Ivan Oatis) © MDF Productions

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