

# Millard and Eitelbach collaborate on Western film with old school techniques

Film stocks

KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 and KODAK VISION2 500T 5218

The dry, desert plains of West Texas have attracted such recent studio productions as *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood*. It was also the location that Lucas Millard chose to produce *Western*, his student thesis film. Millard earned his MFA with a focus in cinematography at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) in 2007. He wrote, directed and edited *Western*.

Based on his experience directing and shooting his pre-thesis film, Millard decided that it was important to focus on the performances in *Western* and brought on fellow student cinematographer Jason Eitelbach to collaborate with him. He had worked with Eitelbach on a previous student project.

"I wanted to produce an epic, Western-genre film with strong use of landscapes that was timeless," Millard recalls. "Jason's enthusiasm for the project, encyclopedic knowledge of film history, and grasp of the technology sealed the deal."

Millard describes *Western* as a revenge story between two brothers. "The movie is sparse in dialogue," he says. "I tried to create a fabled world where you have Western-style characters that could be from the late 19th century, but I didn't want to root it in a specific timeframe."

Millard and Eitelbach referenced Sergio Leone films and a book about his movies, as well as *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *The Long Goodbye* which were shot by Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC. They envisioned a low-contrast look as an ingredient for the visual recipe.

*Western* was filmed in 35mm format in five days at practical locations in Terlingua, Texas, located at the Western end of Big Bend National Park, and at a ghost town.

They used ARRIFLEX BL-4 and ARRIFLEX 35-3 cameras and Zeiss Superspeed lenses available from the school, along with a few small HMI lights.

## Desert soil

"The scenery lent itself to the sense of brooding desolation that Luke envisioned," Eitelbach says. "I initially thought I would need a lot of fill light because of the high sun and big, wide brim hats on characters, but the natural light that bounced off the West Texas desert soil, combined with pull processing the negative, gave us just the right look."

They opted to record images on KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 and 500T 5218 color negative films, which were pull-processed at Alpha Cine Lab in Seattle. The lab also transferred the negative to a DigiBeta master.

For a burial sequence in the film, Millard's script called for two characters to drive off together at the break of dawn, after one of them has buried his lover in the desert. Because they had not secured a car in Terlingua, the director and cinematographer decided spontaneously to shoot day-for-night.

"I rewrote the script to have one character exit the frame, and then added sound in post to make it seem like he is getting in the car," Millard

describes. "Then at the break of dawn, we have the other character walking alone through the desert. It works well. We never shot any composite footage in West Texas. I drove around the outskirts of Austin and shot 16mm KODAK EKTACHROME for the front projection mattes. The exterior car scene was shot later at a quarry in the Austin area."

Eitelbach adds, "The day-for-night shot was one of the greatest risks we took, but we were blessed with perfect weather. We filmed at high noon with the sun almost directly overhead, and no clouds or shadows. For the front projection sequence, we procured some 3M Scotchlite material, which is an old school technique

for creating traveling mattes, and filmed night-for-day. The scenes end up working visually as well as serve the story."

Eitelbach notes that it was challenging to research these methods. His resources were the *American Cinematographer Manual*, *The Technique of Special Effects of Cinematography*, and Cinematography.com forums.

"Some people didn't understand why I wasn't shooting with a green screen background, or simply at night," Eitelbach concludes. "I knew a digital matte was a costly post-production choice, and that today's sensitive films could capture the night images. It was a stylistic choice."

Millard plans to screen *Western* at film festivals in the near future.



1 The cast and crew of Lucas Millard's thesis film *Western* prepare for a shot on location in West Texas.