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Short Takes

Making Connections

The Heart of the Matter

by Christopher Probst

Regardless of a project's budget or visual intent, one of a cinematographer's greatest wishes is to have a director who understands the visual process and its particularly schizophrenic artistic and technical needs. On the short film *The Night Before*, I was fortunate to team with director Jay Holben, a filmmaking brother-in-arms. Jay, a contributing writer for *American Cinematographer*, and I have been working together in various capacities in films for over 10 years; he rose through the ranks of the electrical department, and I through the camera department. A benefit of our divergent paths into the industry was that we were well suited to work on each other's projects as fledgling cinematographers; on films I shot, Jay served as my gaffer, and on films he shot, I usually lent a hand as his first assistant and occasional gaffer.

When Jay asked me to be his cinematographer on *The Night Before*, I was surprised that he didn't want to shoot the project himself. He felt, however, that it was important that he be able to focus on directing the film. For starters, he wanted to execute a project that strove to connect with the audience on an emotional level, and second — and almost as important — was the fact that the three lead characters were all children, the youngest being around 8 years old.

Written by James Cole, *The Night Before* is based on a semi-autobiographical account of Cole's own childhood, during which he spent years in and out of hospitals being treated for exotropia, an extremely rare congenital condi-

tion. The 20-minute film takes place in one location, a hospital room, on the day before three boys are to undergo surgical procedures. The central character, Danny (Lucas Riney), is a veritable veteran of the O.R. and takes particular pleasure in taunting his nervous roommates about the horrors that await them. When Martin (Kevin Patrick) moves into Danny's room, however, the boy learns the power of compassion, support and understanding.

Jay wanted the film's visual design to have a timeless quality. Because the film was set in a hospital room, the choice of location was paramount to this goal. Fortunately, the production found an abandoned mental institution in Camarillo, California that was in the process of being renovated into a college campus. With a judicious slathering of paint and a thoughtful smattering of set decoration and props, production designer Mamy Nahrwold was able to transform an empty 30'x15' room into Danny's three-bed "suite." Jay, Mamy and I discussed the use of color early in preproduction. Jay and I wanted to create a visual dichotomy between Danny's makeshift hospital "home" and the clinical nature of what surrounds him. Therefore, although his room is painted in warm tones and the furniture and bedding are earth tones, we wanted anything having to do with medical technology or the hospital to have a cold, impersonal tone and clinical, metallic sheens.

A primary factor in the visual execution of the film was our decision to use a Panavised Sony HDW-F900 CineAlta high-definition camera, which was donated to the production by Bob Harvey of Panavision. The film's limited budget was a key factor in our choice to shoot in 24p. However, both Jay and I had worked



on several projects in the medium, and we both felt that the controlled nature of our shoot, as well as the format's long shooting loads, were well-suited to the project and its young cast.

It's a fairly well established fact that any electronic capture medium has trouble with extreme contrast ranges, especially in hot highlights. However, many feel the CCD's sensitivity in the shadows allows for this "tremendous reaching ability" into the blacks. Having done a fair amount of research on various HD and DV formats, I believe you can quickly approach what I call an electronic "ambient CCD noise threshold" with increasing levels of video underexposure. Looking at an electronically captured image on a 9" monitor on the set is one thing, but recording that image out to film and blowing it up for a 30' theater screen is another. I certainly have seen many electronically captured films with excessive noise literally "crawling" all around the blacks. With that in mind, I planned to treat the HD "stock" almost like reversal film.

While keeping an eye on the level of the highlights on the waveform monitor, I deliberately *lit* for the blacks in the image. In fact, as an added precaution,

Frequent hospital guest Danny (Lucas Riney) learns the value of friendship through an encounter with another afflicted boy in the short film *The Night Before*.

Right: With director Jay Holben (kneeling) looking on, cinematographer Christopher Probst films a scene in which a nervous Martin (Kevin Patrick) is reassured by a friendly nurse (Kelley Kirby). The scene is shown below.



when we calibrated our 20" HD monitor to the CineAlta's internally generated SMPTE color bars during our initial camera setup, I "crushed" the blacks very slightly on the monitor. That way, as I made qualitative judgments about the image while shooting, I had a built-in buffer zone for the black detail. I felt that by capturing the scene within a narrower latitude/contrast range in-camera, without blowing out the highlights, we would have that much more information to work with during postproduction. I wanted to have as much image-control flexibility as possible for the online color-correction and subsequent film-print timing. I intended to print down the image and gain actual physical density in the print, and thereby create crisper, snappier projected blacks.

The Night Before features four distinct looks. The film opens with the characters bathed in varying levels of hot afternoon sunlight. It then segues into a "lights on" night look. A pivotal point in the story occurs in the next look, the "lights out" night mode, and the final look features the deep orange of dawn's first light.

Jay and I discussed how to best use the CineAlta's added Paintbox color matrices feature, which allows for selective control of red, green and blue color response individually in the highlights, mid-tones (gamma) and blacks. Fortunately, Jay had just completed several articles for *AC* on the use of HD; armed with this knowledge, we determined that we'd do about 90 percent of our color manipulation in camera and then complete the look through more traditional color-timing methods in post. For example, for our "lights out" look, I used the in-camera controls for the color matrices, without affecting the camera's mid-tone (fleshtones) response, to bias the shadow (toe) region toward slightly cool, blue-magenta tones. I also added just a kiss of blue-cyan almost imperceptibly in the highlight response. The effect was a very naturalistic fleshtone rendering and a slightly cool night feel, as opposed to a wash of cool light across the exposure range. Because of this approach, the coolness is only visible in the shadows of the folds of Danny's blankets, creating quite a beautiful effect.

The lighting turned out to be serendipitous by design. My previsualization of the film's lighting needs led me to utilize several small, partially prerigged instruments from wall-spreaders above, and then attack certain "key" modeling needs with lights working off stands on the floor. Once we rigged our fixed units on the first day, they worked every shot for the entire four-day shoot and allowed complete turnarounds in less than 10 minutes.

Key grip Anthony Assini and gaffer Raoul Germain divided the rectangular room into thirds with two wall-spreaders and straddled an additional 12' speed-rail across the "headboard" length of room. This simple grid enabled us to hang a 2'x4' Kino Flo fixture, as well as dimmable 150-watt Dedolights, above each bed. Various practical lamps were placed on the wall above each bed and on each character's nightstand; these fixtures were lamped with PH211 globes and placed on hand-squeezer dimmers that were hidden under each bed. Finally, an additional 150-watt Dedolight was placed at each end of the room and wedged as tightly as possible into the upper corners to serve as optional back-or-edgelight.

On the floor, the next and perhaps most important fixture was either a 2K Baby Junior (for day scenes) or a 1K Baby (for night scenes). These were selectively bounced into the ceiling to provide what the late Conrad Hall, ASC termed "room tone." This allowed us to maintain a directionless, ambient fill light, creating a very realistic, unlit feel. Finally, with the environment around the actors fully sculpted, the modeling of the actors' faces was accomplished with a 2K bounced into a 4'x4' piece of foamcore (which, during daylight scenes, augmented the "sunlight" streaming in through the windows, an effect we created with the production's sole 4K HMI).

With the pre-rigged lights in place, the geography of the room established, and the actors' blocking worked out for a given scene, I would rough in the basic lighting for the scene and then summon Jay to the monitor. We then proceeded to design the look for that sequence by adjusting the camera's Paintbox controls. The first assistant, Andy Lemon, had extensive experience on HD productions, and he saved our custom settings on the camera as each new sequence came up. This feature greatly aided the production's need to frequently juggle scenes due to the young actors' availability. Still, we were able to quickly change over from a day scene to a "lights out" sequence in a matter of minutes.

Another component of our strategy

was to shoot with the longest lenses possible and maintain a stop near a T2 on the Panavision Digital Primo zooms. To help "sell" the HD imagery, I wanted to create as shallow a depth of field as possible to emulate the feel of 35mm photography. Fortunately, the room we were shooting in was a long rectangle, which allowed us to frequently place the camera quite far from the action. When we could, we'd cheat the actors farther away from their backgrounds to help the falloff even more.

Even though our goal was a fairly soft look, we didn't use filtration. In an interview for an upcoming *AC* article, Ira Tiffen explained that all diffusion filters are designed to affect one to three image factors: resolution (sharpness), flare and contrast. Our use of large soft sources and the softer contrast range in my exposure scheme, coupled with the lower resolution of an HD filmout (which we intended from the start), meant that we had two of these three factors already in hand on *The Night Before*. Therefore, I knew the final images would look as though I had actually used diffusion on the lens.

Indeed, even though the image in the final print is in sharp focus, it is not overly edgy. Judy Doherty of Kodak and Rita Cahill of Cinesite helped us with our filmout recording, and we found that we gained a fair amount of contrast back when going to print. The final nuance was the benefit of getting the *slightest* amount of film-grain "animation" through the printing process. Even though we output and printed to fine-grain stocks (Kodak Vision Intermediate 5242 and Vision 2383 print stock), it was still a two-generation process, and we were able to pick up a pleasing amount of movement that fused all of our techniques together.

Christopher Probst is the technical editor of American Cinematographer. Last year the International Cinematographers Guild selected The Night Before for its Short Film Showcase, which honors several films annually for excellence in cinematography. A trailer for the film can be viewed at www.adakin.com/nightbefore.