

Baca-Asay takes different path in creating real-life look for indie

Writer/director Dylan Kidd previsualized **Roger Dodger** as an intimate coming-of-age story that the audience experiences on a voyeuristic level. The independent feature focuses on a notorious man-about-town (played by Campbell Scott) whose teenage nephew (Jesse Eisenberg) asks for advice about how to get along with women.

What follows is a raucous adventure staged over 24-hours at practical locations in New York City. It was Kidd's first outing as a director. He tapped Joaquin Baca-Asay in the important role of cinematographer. Kidd and Baca-Asay met 10 years ago while they were students at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and have continued their collaboration. Baca-Asay is a rising star in the galaxy of television commercial shooters, but he turned down lucrative jobs to work with Kidd.

"Dylan wanted everything to look stolen or grabbed like second unit photography," says Baca-Asay. "That freed us in a lot of ways."

They primarily filmed with one and sometimes two handheld cameras that were almost always moving with the actors, drawing the audience deeper into the story. The strength of the script attracted an impressive supporting cast, including Isabella Rossellini, Jennifer Beals and Elizabeth Berkley.

Baca-Asay crafted a rough-hewn look designed to feel natural. The cinematographer made maximum use of available light, including sodium vapor streetlamps, which he augmented in painterly ways to accent moods and environments.

"We want the audience to feel like they're in the movie rather than watching one," Kidd says. "We chose to work in 35mm format (1.85:1 aspect ratio), because we wanted a film look and knew we'd be



Director Dylan Kidd (L) sets up a shot with DP Joaquin Baca-Asay (R).

working in challenging lighting conditions."

Kidd and Baca-Asay wanted the freedom to record a broad dynamic range of shadows and highlights which enabled them to reveal or conceal details. The cinematographer notes that the expression on someone's face reacting to something they saw or heard can speak louder than dialogue.

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"I shot two features on DV and it's not the same," Baca-Asay observes.

Baca-Asay chose an ARRI 535B camera, partially because its viewing system let him see details even in the dimmest light. For some dialogue scenes, a second ARRI 535B camera was used to cover reaction shots. Rachel Levine handled the second camera.

Baca-Asay mainly used Cooke S-4 prime lenses, because they render lower contrast images, and also 'see deeper into the blacks. We also used a modified Minolta zoom from a still camera when we wanted a muddy




Isabella Rossellini

look with stressed images."

Baca-Asay decided to record the images on Kodak Vision 320T film 5277. He routinely underexposed by one stop, which was the equivalent of shooting with a 640-speed film. That allowed him to work in the dimmest light, usually with small lamps, including sodium vapor lights for night exteriors.

Baca-Asay underexposed some night exterior scenes by two stops to create a more dynamic look, for example, when headlights of passing cars move through a scene. "The images we got are beautiful and they have great resolution," he says.

Baca-Asay notes that he could have chosen a "faster" film, but the Kodak Vision 5277 is designed to record lower overall contrast. It also provides enhanced underexposure latitude, which is an important characteristic when there is a need to record fine details in shadows. Even when the film was underexposed five stops, Baca-Asay reports the image quality was still acceptable. In one scene, a character's hair was backlit by the flaring colors from traffic lights 200 feet away in the deep background. "It was just stunning," he says, "and it helps to tell the story."

Roger Dodger is the first project fully financed by Holedigger Films, Inc., a production company founded two years ago by George Van Buskirk, David Newman and Martin Garvey. Scott also served as executive producer, with Van Buskirk and Anne Chaisson as the film's producers. 

PHOTOS: PETER FIGETAKIS