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I AM THE NIGHT

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Indie Honors

The Film Independent Spirit Awards honor exceptional directors of photography

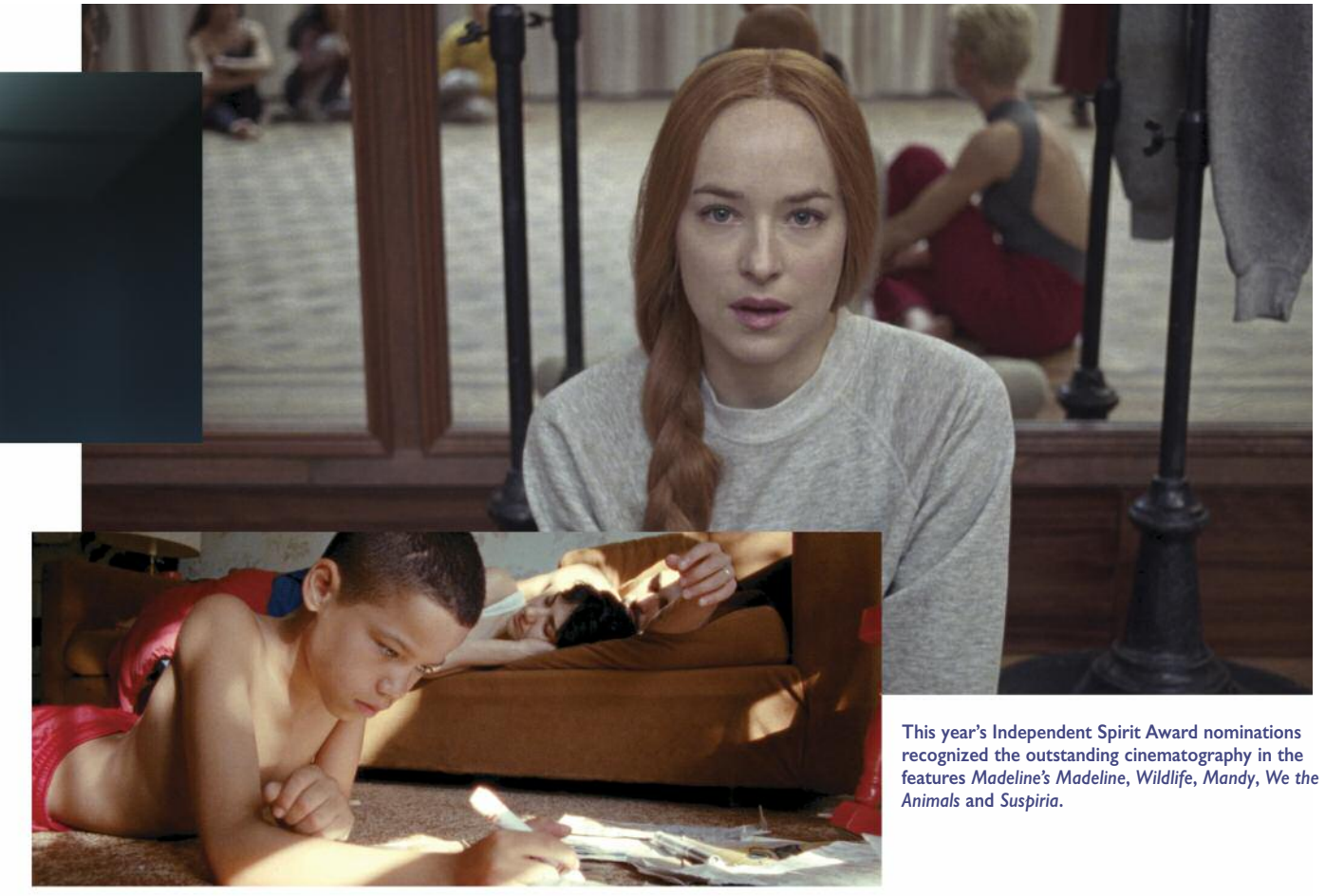
By Jim Hemphill and Iain Marcks

Honoring feature projects that are off the beaten trail and often supported by limited resources, Film Independent's Spirit Awards ensure that productions veering from the mainstream have a chance to take center stage. *AC* spoke with the five cinematographers nominated for Best Cinematography at this year's event: Ashley Connor for *Madeline's Madeline*, Diego García for *Wildlife*, Benjamin Loeb for *Mandy*, Sayombhu Mukdeeprom for *Suspiria*, and Zak Mulligan for *We the Animals*.

Madeline's Madeline
Cinematographer: Ashley Connor
Director: Josephine Decker

Director of photography Ashley Connor met *Madeline's Madeline* writer-director Josephine Decker eight years ago, and in the time since, they've worked together to create a unique cinematic language based on a fluid sense of discovery. "All of Josephine's movies involve heavy improvisation, so I developed a camera style that could help facilitate that feeling of the unknown," Connor reflects.

Connor's dreamy, enigmatic style is an ideal visual corollary for the inner state of the movie's title character — a troubled teenage girl whose sense of reality starts to fragment when she becomes involved with a theater group whose leader is all too willing to capitalize on her new protégé's raw emotional nerves. "Josephine wanted to push the style from our first two films and really embrace abstraction," Connor says. "She sent me a lot of pictures of outer



This year's Independent Spirit Award nominations recognized the outstanding cinematography in the features *Madeline's Madeline*, *Wildlife*, *Mandy*, *We the Animals* and *Suspiria*.

Madeline's Madeline images courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories, *Wildlife* images courtesy of IFC Films, *Mandy* images courtesy of RLJE Films, *Suspiria* images courtesy of Amazon Studios, *We the Animals* images courtesy of The Orchard.

space, and a few portraits of masked subjects by Diane Arbus. Then I sent her [the 1962 experimental short film] *Cosmic Ray* by Bruce Conner and some other pieces featuring fun in-camera effects."

For Connor, giving the actors freedom of movement was essential, given the improvisatory nature of the project. "My gaffer, Danny April, and I designed setups that gave the performers the most amount of freedom to explore the space," she explains. "We didn't have any large HMIs, so we'd use mirror boards outside and practicals in the space; our lighting package was very minimal, so we had to get creative."

In terms of camera movement, it wasn't enough to see Madeline's world — Connor wanted the audience to feel it as well. "It became a pas de deux between [lead actor] Helena Howard and me," Connor says. "Her performance was so raw and powerful that I wanted the times when we tell the story from her direct point of view to really capture her energy. It was emotionally and physically exhausting, but so fun to play in her world."

The biggest challenge for Connor and her crew was simply making the most of their limited budget. "We had many locations and not enough time, so we had to be quick to make sure we made our days," she remembers. "I made a little rig for the front of the camera to do in-camera effects, like abnormal focus shifts. Hopefully, our experiments will encourage someone else to play around and find their own magic."

Connor's choice of camera was influenced by the budget as well. "I always prefer to shoot digital on Arri cameras," she says, and the production ultimately employed Arri's Amira. Connor's 1st AC, Will Castellucci, researched old vintage primes to help the cinematographer find the right set. "Because most of the film involves intense handheld where we don't set marks or do proper blocking, I like to have the option to pull my own focus, and the Canon K-35s allowed me that flexibility. We wanted the image to melt and bend, and the K-35 set came with a lot of inherent characteristics that we responded to — chromatic aberrations and things of that nature."

In terms of filtration, in lieu of softening-filters, Connor would paint different substances onto the surface of a clear filter — "lube, Vaseline, other viscous fluids," she elaborates. She also used glass to distort the focal plane, "basically layering different types of magnifiers," she says. Regarding her selection of a softening or distortion technique in a given circumstance, Connor notes, "I usually chose one or the other, [as] it was too difficult to have everything working at once, because I was rotating the x, y and z axes of the filters." →

▲ The eponymous Madeline (Helena Howard) in a frame from the feature.
◀ Director of photography Ashley Connor.

The final grade for *Madeline's Madeline* was performed at Goldcrest in New York with Blackmagic Design DaVinci Resolve, where Connor worked closely with colorist Nat Jencks. "He's done about 93 percent of the projects I've shot," she says. "I tend to build the look when we're shooting, so coloring sessions are more about sweetening the image and matching, rather than making huge changes. Nat really knows my style, so he knows how to bring out the best in the footage."

Madeline's Madeline, Connor attests, was an experience — and a set — unlike any other. "We started every morning with five minutes of silence, followed by some sort of primal scream or improvised chant," she remembers. "I think when a director asks their collaborators to bring a lot of their own experiences into a project, there needs to be safety and trust. It was a unique experience to interact with so many true artists, from the actors [to the] crew. It made the work deeply personal."

Connor was profiled as one of AC's Rising Stars of Cinematography in the Feb. '19 issue.

Wildlife
Cinematographer: Diego García
Director: Paul Dano

As an actor, Paul Dano has worked with such directors as Paul Thomas Anderson and Denis Villeneuve, and with a list of esteemed cinematographers that includes ASC members Roger Deakins, Darius Khondji and Matthew Libatique — so it comes as no surprise that Dano's directorial debut is a confident, controlled production with a precise visual style. Adapted by Dano and Zoe Kazan from Richard Ford's novel of the same name, *Wildlife* tells the story of a small-town family in the 1950s, and adopts the point of view of a teenage boy whose parents' marriage is disintegrating before his eyes.

Cinematographer Diego García felt a kinship with Dano as soon as they were introduced. "I was very inspired by the way he wanted to approach the film," García recalls. "It was a combination of both modern and classical language, and from the beginning I understood that Paul wanted a true collaborator with whom he could share his vision, and find the film in the process of doing it." Together, García and Dano looked at numerous movies and photographs for inspiration, starting with such 1950s-era American photographers as Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. "The way that they captured the essence and beauty of everyday life in the '50s influenced us as we created the visual world and mood of the film," García explains. "Paul also brought a lot of Asian cinema into the conversation. We both admire Hirokazu Kore-eda's work [in] composing his frames, especially *Still Walking*. The same goes for Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day*."

García considered capturing the era to be one of his greatest challenges,

◀ *Wildlife* director Paul Dano leans in to check the frame as cinematographer Diego García operates the camera. ▶ Carey Mulligan and Jake Gyllenhaal as Jeanette and Jerry Brinson.

and looked to period films like *The Ice Storm* and *The Master* for inspiration. John Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence*, a film that shares in common with *Wildlife* a searing portrait of dissatisfaction with family life, was another key influence.

García adopted a less-is-more approach to his lighting, not wanting to distract from the emotional core of Dano and Kazan's script. "This was my way to approach not only the lighting setups, but the mise-en-scène, in general," he says. "We were looking for a simple and natural aesthetic to make the film connected and consequent with the storytelling. Light in this film is not over the characters, but is part of them. It is just there. That's why I decided to use available light as much as possible, choosing the right moment of the day for each scene."

This was a method that allowed García and Dano to discover the visual language of the production as they went. "We had a plan, but it was always open to modification by new things that we found on location, or that we observed while blocking the scenes," he says. "We were discovering the language of the film every day through a very fluid and pleasant creative process."

Wildlife was shot on Arri's Alexa XT with Panavision's spherical Primo Prime lenses. "After some research about glass, Paul and I determined that those lenses had the clean and correct performance [as well as] the personality and texture we were looking for," García says.

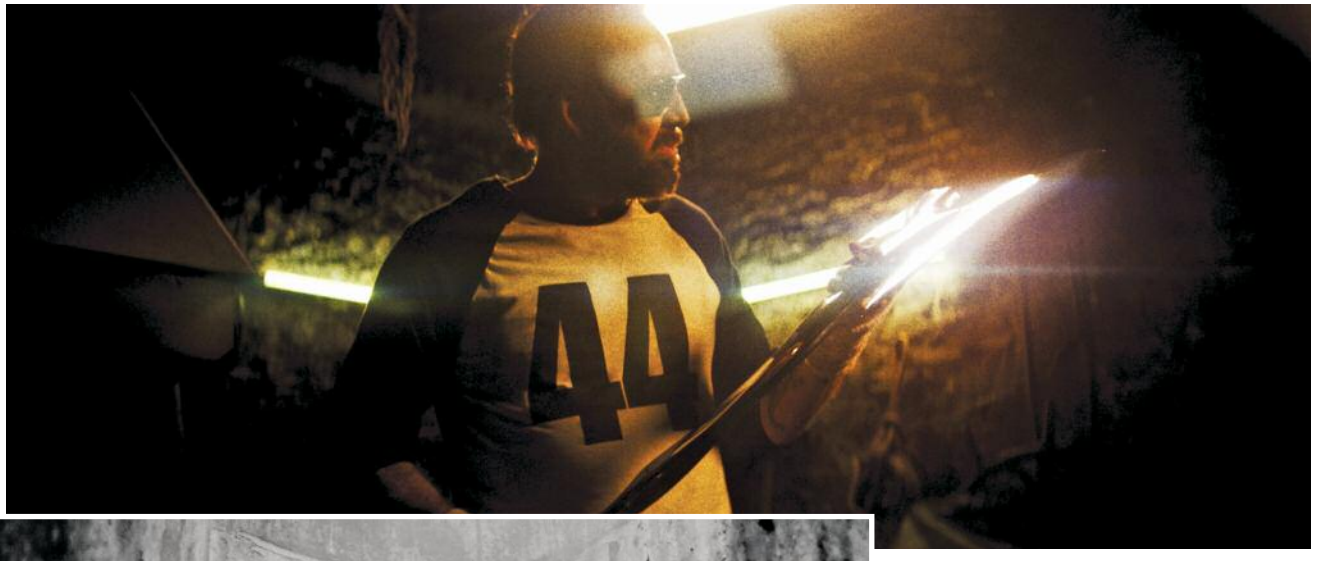
The final grade was performed at Harbor Picture Company in New York, where García credits colorist Joe Gawler with adding a new dimension to the movie. "In essence, the film was already there because of its natural spirit, but Joe pushed the material to a higher level," the cinematographer says. "He understood the simplicity of it, and found the right path to follow with color and contrast, using the proper blacks."

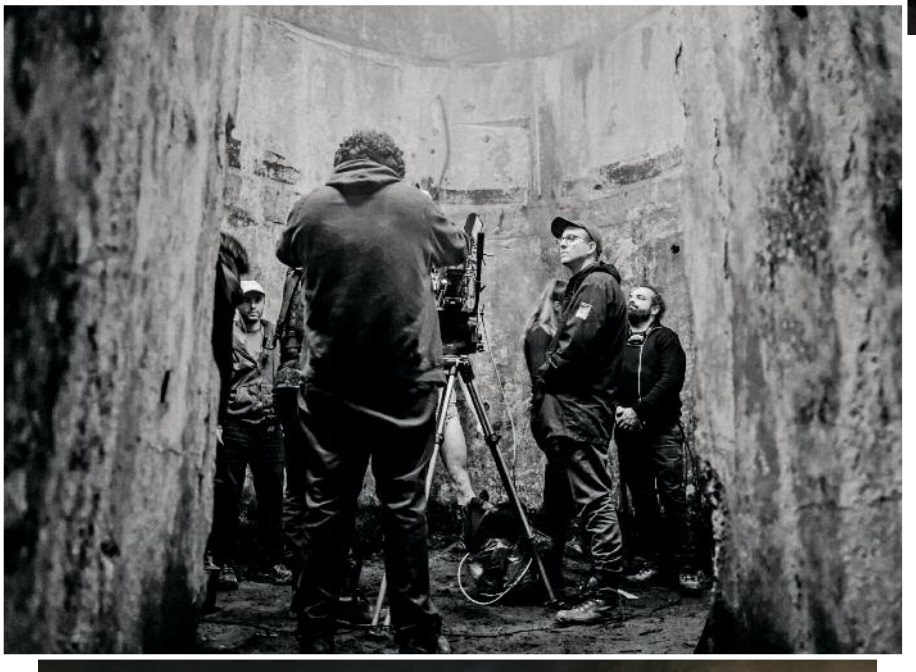
When talking with García, the word "simplicity" comes up often. He notes, "The idea was to achieve complexity through simplicity — doing everything in a very straightforward manner that helped us find the right way to tell the story based on emotions."

Mandy
Cinematographer: Benjamin Loeb
Director: Panos Cosmatos

Photographed by cinematographer Benjamin Loeb and directed by Panos Cosmatos, *Mandy* tells the story of a warm-hearted lumberjack named Red (Nicolas Cage) who has the love of his life, Mandy (Andrea Riseborough), stolen from him by a gang of demonic bikers. He does not take it well. Due in part to scheduling issues arising from Cage's breaking his ankle on another production, Loeb — a Kenyan-born, Vancouver-based Norwegian cinematographer — joined *Mandy*'s Belgium-based crew a mere two weeks prior to the start of principal photography. Other than Loeb, Cosmatos and producer Josh Waller, nearly everyone on the crew was a local to the Wallonian region in Southern Belgium, including gaffer Dirk van Rampelbergh and key grip Témoudjine Janssens.

When Loeb asked the director for a list of visual references, Cosmatos returned with *The Hitcher* (1986), *Days of Thunder*, *Revenge* (1990), *Psycho III*,





▲ Red (Nicolas Cage) forges his battle ax and plots his revenge in *Mandy*.
◀ Cinematographer Benjamin Loeb (second from right) and crew prepare a setup.
▼ Loeb operates the camera for a dolly shot.

the animated *Fist of the North Star*, and *Cobra*. "He was pretty specific about which films would be references for night exteriors, which would be for lenses, [and which for] day interiors," says Loeb. One detail in particular was the way an ND grad filter intrudes into the frame — a reference from *Black Rain*, photographed by Jan De Bont, ASC (AC, Sept. '89) — and sometimes even over the actors' faces.

Though the original plan had been to shoot on 16mm film, the feature was ultimately captured digitally, with the filmmakers employing Arri's Alexa Mini and XT from Panavision in Paris. When it came to moving the cameras, Loeb and Cosmatos agreed early on that they would always be on either sticks or a dolly, and never handheld. "We wanted the camera to be present, but not in a way where it felt subjective," says Loeb. The production employed Panavision Primo Anamorphic Prime lenses — along with such additions to the package as Panavision's AWZ2 40-80mm (T2.8) and Angénieux's 50-500mm HR Anamorphic (T5.2) zooms, the latter of which was converted to anamorphic

from a spherical 25-250mm HR (T3.5) via a rear adapter.

The production made significant use of primary colors as a vehicle to rotate through emotions, contrasting mostly blues and reds against the warm, natural tones of the movie's early scenes, and later against the similarly pleasant hues associated with an apocalyptic cult called Children of the New Dawn. Loeb accomplished much of this through a combination of lens filters — Tiffen's Corals, Chocolates, Tobaccos, Reds — with sometimes four or five of them in front of the lens at a time.

Seeking vengeance, Red funnels his molten rage into a blazing forge, from which he fashions a gleaming battle-ax in a fiery montage shot at a blacksmith museum in Ittre. "We installed some fluorescent tubes in the background and blacked out the rest of the space with negative fill," Loeb says. "We placed a few Arri SkyPanels in the ceiling to give some texture to Nic's face, and to get a reflection off of the ax. Otherwise, we wanted the flames of molten metal to do some of the work, and for Nic's coverage we installed a little flame bar along the mold that reflects off the lenses of his aviator sunglasses."

For one of the movie's two climactic boss battles, the flames from a burning car provided Loeb with a key backlight source, with two 12K Dino lights illuminating some of the location's rock walls. "On top of this," Loeb says, "we had rigged a 12-by-12 frame equipped with [a silver reflector and] 200 100-watt bulbs [powered through a dimmer pack controlled by a three-channel LFXHub flicker box] onto one of our vehicles that would act as a moving stand for this unit. It would help wrap the light from the flames around a bit. We also had a small 4K balloon light that would be rigged to a stand for some gentle fill when needed."

The final grade was performed at DameBlanche in Belgium with colorist Peter Bernaers, who worked in 2K resolution on a FilmLight Baselight platform.

Loeb says he was "pushed to the edge of sanity by the pure nature of the project, both conceptually and logistically." When he finally saw the movie, however, any questions and reservations he'd had during the production were finally resolved. "Even if I'd been given two months to prep, I'd still believe the approach we actually took was the right one," the cinematographer muses. "A lot of things went according to plan, and — as it usually goes — quite a bit didn't, but we were put in a place where we had to embrace our faults and mistakes, and those helped set the tone of the film and make it what it is."

For the full article on this production, see AC *'Oct. 18 or visit bit.ly/MandyACMag.*

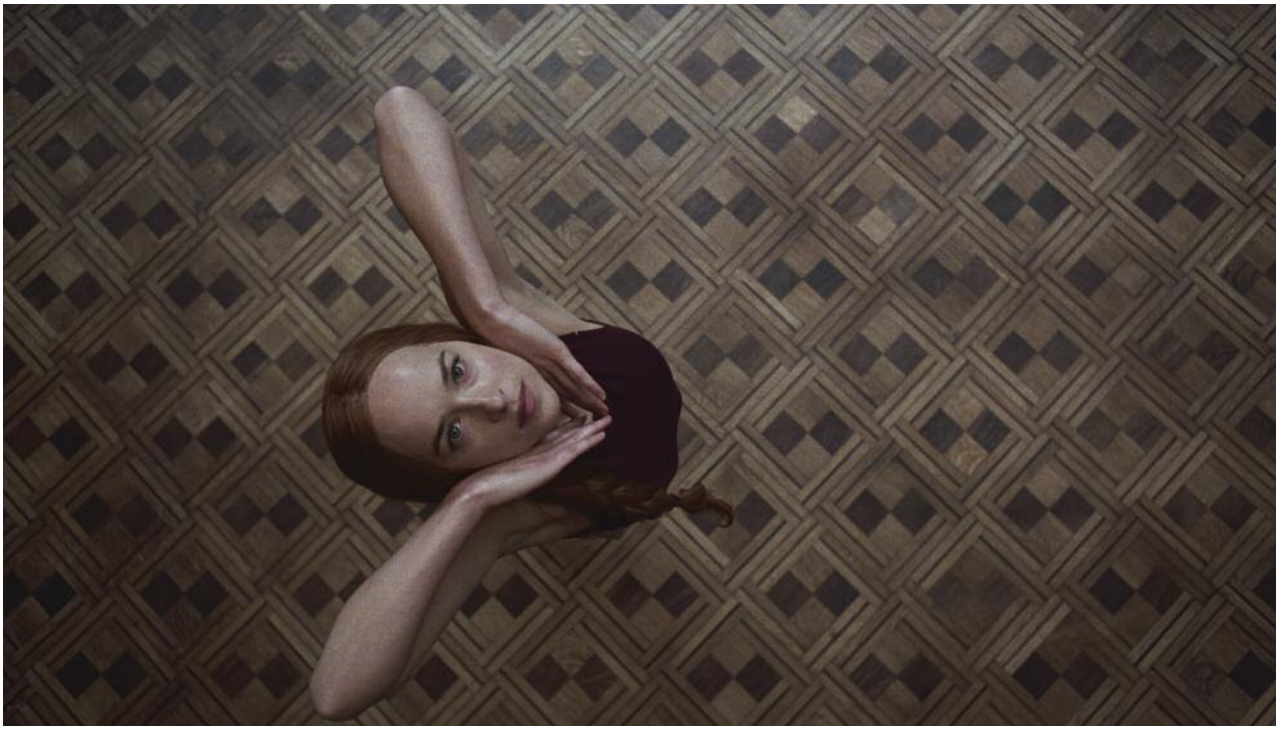
Suspiria
Cinematographer:
Sayombhu Mukdeeprom
Director: Luca Guadagnino

The premise of Luca Guadagnino's reimagining of Dario Argento's 1977 giallo landmark, *Suspiria*, closely resembles that of the original. American dancer Susie Bannion (Dakota Johnson) travels to Germany to study under Madame Blanc (Tilda Swinton) at the prestigious and exclusive Helena Markos Dance Company, only to discover that this tanztheater fronts for a coven of murderous witches.

The filmmakers behind *Suspiria* '18 all agree that Argento's film is a masterpiece, "so if we couldn't make it more interesting, we should do something different," says Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, a Thai cinematographer who had previously collaborated with Guadagnino on *Call Me by Your Name* (AC, March '18). It was during the production of that film that the director and cinematographer first began discussing the *Suspiria* remake.

Suspicion and subterfuge permeate every aspect of the film — which this time around takes place in 1977 Berlin. The filmmakers heightened and harnessed this oppressive atmosphere with a color palette that suggested myriad shades of brown, green and blue. Mukdeeprom wanted Berlin to look "very somber, very sad" — an arguably easy ask for the German capi-

Cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom moves through the hotel in Northern Italy that served as *Suspiria*'s dance theater.



Dance student Susie Bannion (Dakota Johnson) studies at the dance company — which in fact is a front for a coven of murderous witches.

tal in the cold season.

Mukdeeprom shot *Suspiria* entirely on Kodak Vision3 500T 5219 color-negative film — including day exteriors — without correction filters, and pushed it one stop to 1,000 ISO when needed. The camera package included an Arriflex 535A and two Arricam LTs, all configured for 3-perf Super 35 operation, as well as one 4-perf Super 35 Arriflex 435ES for visual-effects shots.

"This is my standing point: I always shoot movies on film," the cinematographer says. "Film cameras talk to me more than digital cameras."

In addition to the project's Cooke Speed Panchro S2 and S3 prime package, the production also carried Cooke's Varotal 18-100mm (T3) zoom and Angenieux's Optimo 24-290mm (T2.8) zoom, as well as vintage Arri/Zeiss Super Speed (T1.3) glass. When it came to moving the camera, Mukdeeprom strove to limit his options to what the cinematographers of the German New Wave would have used in 1977 — which meant no big cranes and no Steadicam.

Mukdeeprom notes that for *Suspiria*, he eschewed creating a look for the film, per se, and instead sought "to create the world of the film, and approach it as if we just brought the camera there to photograph it." The way in which Mukdeeprom engaged with this world was primarily influenced by Guadagnino's direction and the work of production designer Inbal Weinberg, as well as the movement of the actors. "I like to create a stage for Luca and the actors, so they have the freedom to move anywhere," Mukdeeprom says. "Luca watches the frame, and if he chooses to go in for a close-up, it will be driven by the character." The cinematographer adds that he generally lit "the whole set at once, like a stage," and only on occasions when there was limited space would he light one angle at a time.

The film's climactic dance performance takes place in the tanztheater's immense Mutterhaus chamber. "We are at the very heart of the [witches'] world — a secret place, and I wanted to create a different kind of stage for them," Mukdeeprom notes. The cinematographer wanted the ability to capture the set all the way up to the ceiling, so he, Italy gaffer Francesco Galli and crew lit the ritual stage from across the room with 750-watt ETC Source Fours, using a combination of 10-, 19-, 26-, 36-, and 50-degree lenses, all through Hampshire Frost, as well as 1,000-watt PAR 64 lamps with spot and flood bulbs.

The Mutterhaus ultimately plunges into darkness, save only for a soft, red light — created during the color-correction process — just barely bright enough to make out the grisly, incendiary fate of the coven's unbelievers. "I check everything with my light meter," Mukdeeprom says. "Even if I'm at the deepest, darkest point of the curve, it's there, and because I shot on film, I can do a digital intermediate and have the best of both worlds."

Augustus Color in Rome developed the negative and delivered dailies. Colorist Alessandro Pelliccia performed both dailies and final color correction with Blackmagic Design DaVinci Resolve.

"I was just very honest with the

script," Mukdeeprom concludes. He suggests that the success of any collaborative art form — be it film, music, dance or witchcraft — ultimately depends on the successful interaction of a team. As he says, "You have to let everyone show off."

For the full article on this production, see AC *Dec. '18, or visit bit.ly /SuspiriaAC18.*

▲▲ Isaiah Kristian, Evan Rosado and Josiah Gabriel as brothers Manny, Jonah and Joel, respectively, in a frame from *We the Animals*. ▲ Jonah shines a light.

We the Animals
Cinematographer: Zak Mulligan
Director: Jeremiah Zagar

We the Animals follows a group of young brothers whose unstable home life leads to both liberating freedoms and abrupt introductions to life's hardships and disappointments. For cinematographer Zak Mulligan, telling that story was a years-long process that began when he heard that director Jeremiah Zagar, a frequent collaborator on documentary and commercial projects, was adapting Justin Torres' novel of the same name with co-writer Daniel Kitrosser. "We first started talking about *We the Animals* roughly two years before filming," Mulligan says. "I purposely avoided reading the book so I could help Jeremiah create what was in his version of the script without knowledge of any other text."

The cinematographer found inspiration for his visuals in a variety of sources and media, from the photographs of Eugene Richards, Nan Goldin and Mary Ellen Mark to films like *Streetwise* and *Ratcatcher*. "One of the amazing things we got to do was explore the visual look at the Sundance Directors Lab," Mulligan recalls. "That gave Jeremiah and me an unusually rare gift: the time to explore what *We the Animals* should look and feel like long before preproduction had begun. We shot sketches of three or four critical scenes while at the labs. What we learned there was indispensable."

Mulligan and Zagar determined that they wanted to create images that captured the freedom of childhood. "The boys weren't trained actors, which was by design," Mulligan says. "They had to be real. Jeremiah didn't want them hitting marks, worrying about timing or eyelines, or any of the other technical aspects of acting. Collaborating with gaffer Brant Beland, we lit most spaces for maximum flexibility in blocking and movement. Most of the time, the camera could look in nearly any direction without seeing a movie light." Mulligan relied heavily on practical light, and placed larger units outside windows. The production primarily employed a handheld camera.

Early on, the decision was made to shoot on film. The production was captured in Super 16mm format with Arri's Arriflex 416 camera, using Kodak Vision3 500T 7219 and 250D

Jonah and his mother (Sheila Vand).

7207 stocks. "We used Cooke S4 and Cooke SK4 lenses, mostly sticking to wide-angle primes," Mulligan says. "The Cookes gave us a beautiful, round, almost 3-dimensional look on the boys, when in close-up. We were shooting wide and close, so it was important that the wider end of the lens set had that particular feeling. There's an immediacy to the image when you're physically close to the subject."

One challenge the filmmakers encountered was wedging old technology into current on-set practices. "Even though it's relatively modern for a film camera, the Arri 416 body still has an SD video tap," Mulligan explains. "Getting an image around set in an HD world meant converter boxes and more cables. The trend in digital has been smaller and lighter, and fewer cables. We went 'maximalist' with *We the Animals*."

Mulligan was forced into further inventiveness when he and Zagar agreed that for some of their sequences,

they wanted the type of movement that a gimbal allows. "At the time, the Movi M15 was the most advanced gimbal available, but it was too small to support an Arri 416," the cinematographer recalls. "Its floating and racing energy, when matched up with a wide lens, was perfect for *We the Animals*, so we modified a Movi M15 and stripped down an Arri 416 to its lightest build possible, and got the old tech to work with the new tech. It allowed us to create some really exciting shots."

Seth Ricart at RCO in New York served as colorist on the film — employing Blackmagic Design DaVinci Resolve — and Dorian West served as visual-effects supervisor. "We used a Red Helium camera for a few VFX shots and low-light sequences," Mulligan reports. "In preproduction, we shot several tests to make sure we could match the Red camera back to the look of 16mm film. Highlight retention and grain structure are probably the two most notable elements that separate the two formats. We spent a lot of time developing our approach, which involved shooting grain passes of the film stocks we used, then scanning those for use in DaVinci Resolve."

Cinematographer Zak Mulligan shoulders the camera.

Ultimately, Mulligan notes that the biggest pleasure of the film was working with the young cast. "The three boys became extremely close, like actual brothers," he explains. "Their reckless freedom always led us in a fresh direction. The approach with the camera was one of discovery, of being present and ready for anything that may happen in a particular moment. That came from the boys." ◆