

NOVEMBER 2009

American Cinematographer

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

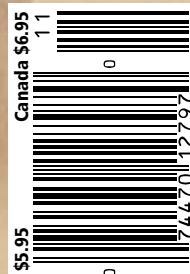
LANCE ACORD, ASC
ENTERS IMAGINARY WORLD

THE BOX

STEVEN POSTER, ASC
CAPTURES SURREAL THRILLER

PLUS: BEN SMITHARD ON
THE DAMNED UNITED

ANTHONY DOD MANTLE, BSC, DFF
ON ANTICHRIST



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In the widescreen feature *Cairo Time*, a Canadian woman (Patricia Clarkson) visits Egypt for the first time and becomes increasingly fascinated by its culture — and one Egyptian in particular. Top: “This was our ‘love scene,’ so the light had to evoke the passion present between Juliette (Clarkson) and Tareq (Alexander Siddig),” says cinematographer Luc Montpellier, CSC. Bottom: For a scene in which Juliette visits Tareq at a “men only” café, the filmmakers surrounded Clarkson with cool colors to set her apart from the environment.



Egypt's Allure by David Heuring

Luc Montpellier, CSC grew up in a small town in Ontario, studied film at Ryerson University in Toronto, and began his career shooting music videos. In the mid-1990s, he moved into narrative filmmaking, and has since compiled credits that include *Away From Her*, *Emotional Arithmetic* and *The Saddest Music in the World* (AC Aug. '04).

Cairo Time is Montpellier's third collaboration with director Ruba Nadda, following *Sabah* and *Aadan*. The new film reverses the pattern of the previous

two by placing a Canadian woman, Juliette (Patricia Clarkson), in a foreign land. As she waits for her husband to arrive, she strives to contain her growing interest in the foreign culture so she can experience it with him. But her thirst for experience draws her into the chaotic and mysterious world of Cairo, and some basic truths about her life are revealed as a result of the cultural dislocation.

“The cinematographer’s responsibility is to translate abstract ideas into reality,” says Montpellier. “Once I submit myself to a concept, the technical means of how to achieve it comes

naturally. I was drawn to *Cairo Time* because of the character arc and the opportunities for the cinematography to underscore those changes. There are no special effects, and because the photography must be honest and ring true, the cinematography almost becomes more important than it would be in another kind of picture.”

In spite of Cairo’s scenic beauty, the filmmakers wanted to avoid a picture-postcard look. Locations were chosen partly based on Juliette’s state of mind at particular moments in the story. Montpellier endeavored to create images that would evoke the appropri-



Cairo Time photos courtesy of Foundry Films and Luc Montpellier.

Top to bottom:
A conversation
between
Juliette and
Tareq is set
against the
Great Pyramid
of Giza to
underscore a
feeling of
solitude;
Montpellier
(left) and 1st AC
Andy Jekabsons
capture the
scene;
preparing the
final shot of
the film,
Montpellier
waits for the
right light on the
pyramids;
Montpellier,
Jekabsons and
Egyptian
key/dolly grip
Ehab Atiya line
up the final
dolly shot of the
picture.



ate feelings in the viewer even if the picture had no sound; he says this goal made light and its connection to the emotional drama extremely important.

The filmmakers also believed the script and the chaotic backdrop of Cairo called for the counterpoint of a more controlled, classical approach to framing and camera movement. They decided to avoid a documentary aesthetic, and that choice had many ramifications for the rest of the shoot. "Because we were shooting on location in a chaotic city of 20 million, without the resources we'd have at hand in Toronto or Los Angeles, our challenge was to create order out of chaos," says Montpellier. "We faced a paradox. We had to be at the right places, rolling at the right times, controlling the uncontrollable."

The color palette was detailed and precise. Cairo is represented by the warm earth tones that dominate the urban landscape there. At the beginning of the film, Juliette is dressed in and surrounded by cooler, more modern tones, and she slowly progresses to warmer, more golden tones as she begins to explore and engage with the ancient city. On location during prep, Montpellier did extensive testing for wardrobe, makeup, filtration and skin tones, and to gauge the local light patterns, using a Canon 5D camera and film-stock-emulation software. "Throughout the shoot, it was a challenge to balance interiors and exteriors because of the extremely bright African sun, and I wanted to see how far I could push the film stock and still maintain detail outside windows," he says. "I wanted to avoid blinding the actors by bringing up interior levels. However, there are many scenes where the characters go from inside to outside on a balcony, and that meant I couldn't ND the windows. It was important for me to know how far I could go with interior levels."

Nadda and Montpellier chose to shoot widescreen (Super 35mm) to integrate the performers with the environment, to isolate single characters in the frame when emotionally appropriate, and sometimes to create the simple



Filming
widescreen
enabled
Montpellier to
isolate
characters
within the frame
for dramatic
effect. In this
scene, Juliette's
husband (Tom
McCamus)
arrives
unexpectedly
and puts an end
to her potential
love affair.
Middle: As
Andris Matiss
mans the
Steadicam for a
walk-and-talk,
the crew uses ¼
grid diffusion to
soften the harsh
sunlight. Bottom:
Tareq takes
Juliette on a tour
of Cairo. "Getting
a crane on the
bridge was a
challenge,
considering that
we were unable
to ban traffic,"
notes
Montpellier.



classicism of a still photograph. "We made an effort to frame Juliette within static shots as she first ventures out into the city," says Montpellier. "As she begins to explore and feel more comfortable, the use of the Steadicam becomes more prevalent. We hope that helps the audience share in her emotional state."

The cinematographer used Tiffen Soft/FX filters throughout to subtly flare the whites, varying the strength according to the situation and the focal length of the lens. He chose two Moviecam Compact MKIIs, Cooke S4 primes lenses and a 12:1 Angenieux Optimo zoom; all gear came from Panavision Toronto, "whose support was crucial to our success," he says.



Montpellier used Kodak Vision2 250D 5205 for most daylight situations. "5205 enabled me to shoot from early morning all the way to magic hour without compromising grain; I changed ND filtration as the day went on to maintain a consistent look." He used a slower stock, Kodak Vision2 50D 5201, for a day's shooting in the White Desert, a barren location several hours outside Cairo. In the scene, Juliette listens to a friend confess her infidelity while she herself secretly considers cheating on her absent husband. "We chose the location to help create the right emotional impact," says Montpellier. "The uncertainty and feeling of losing one's points of reference were evoked by the landscape. When we first arrived, I couldn't open my eyes without wearing sunglasses. There are chalky white and cream-colored rock formations as far as the eye can see, with the sun beating down. It's an extremely low-contrast situation. Shooting the 50-speed stock allowed me to get the right levels with few hassles. I needed every bit of latitude I could get, and 5201 gave me that while capturing the subtle gradations of white and cream.

"We used the 12:1 Optimo with a doubler to accentuate the layers of eroded rock formations, creating otherworldly shapes," he adds. "You'd almost think you're in Antarctica, but instead you're in the desert! There's a surreal quality to it."

In Cairo, the filmmakers worked hard to compensate for a lack of standard materials. There were no blimped generators, and there were shortages of flags and scrims. The locals gathered large sheets of Styrofoam and painted them black, and a pitchfork-like metal tool would then be stabbed into the edge of the Styrofoam at the desired angle and mounted on a C-stand. Montpellier says the technique worked so well that he used it on subsequent shoots. As a substitute for scrims, the crew purchased a variety of fishnet stockings that would knock down the light by a half of a stop or more.

Montpellier says the local crewmembers had an amazing knack for

adaptive engineering. Cranes and dollies were often customized. The lack of legitimate rental houses meant that equipment was located and rented through an informal network of crewmembers.

Shots of cars moving through the legendary Cairo traffic were perhaps the most difficult to achieve, according to Montpellier. Standard towing rigs and process trailers don't exist there. "We made a rig with three or four car batter-

ies and some 575-watt Pars to get light inside the car," recalls the cinematographer. "Again, our concern was to balance the interiors and the exteriors. We'd be dragging a car behind a pickup truck with all our lamps strapped to it with about 50 ratchet straps. We would have handlers and grips hanging off the truck and waving for people to clear the way. If they didn't move, our people would jump off the truck and try to move them physically. We would also have a



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Top left: Director Ruba Nadda and Montpellier line up a shot. Top right: A tow rig devised by local crew enabled the filmmakers to capture traveling shots. "What we call process trailers in North America do not exist in Cairo, so this called for some creative engineering," says Montpellier.

vehicle ahead of us trying to find the owners of parked cars and pleading with them to move them. Sometimes, our people would just pick the cars up and carry them out of the way so we could keep moving and finish the shot! It was an amazing feat."

A government censor accompanied the filmmakers on every shoot day, but on days when no official shooting was scheduled, Montpellier often went out with his focus puller and a local crewmember to capture street scenes that helped frame the story. Once the



police hauled them in for filming without a permit, but they talked their way out of the situation. Another time, they tried to capture footage of some children laboring in a carpet-making business but were thwarted by the censor. They then proceeded to pretend to set up a big shot in a nearby area, and when the

censor wasn't around the B camera, it was surreptitiously turned on, capturing a scene that was lit by "spill" that Montpellier "accidentally" sent over from the fake setup. "It was worth the risks," he says. "Without that footage, the movie would be very different. It gives a sense of how it is to live in

prime choice



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Cairo. I think it's an integral part of the film."

Montpellier had other thrills, such as the opportunity to light and photograph the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Nile River at night. In both cases, he used uncorrected HMI lamps, in some cases with the lenses removed, to get the necessary levels. He was able to isolate and adjust the color temperatures in the digital intermediate, which was done at 2K at Technicolor Toronto. He also used the DI to fine-tune scenes with high contrast or widely varying skin tones, and to adjust interior and exterior levels in building and vehicle shots. Technicolor Toronto also processed the production's footage, which meant the filmmakers sometimes didn't see dailies, which were on DVD, for a week or more.

Montpellier was able to bring his key Canadian crew to Egypt for the shoot. The focus puller was Andy Jekabsons, the operator was Andris Matiss, and the gaffer was Scott Trem-

blay, who had worked in the Middle East on Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (AC Dec. '07). Montpellier emphasizes that resourcefulness and openness to local solutions were the foundation of a successful shoot. "You'd be ignorant not to open your eyes to the way that things are done elsewhere in the world. Sometimes when you don't have the right equipment, you end up being more creative. It was part of my evolution as a cinematographer, and being a North American going through these cultural experiences made me somewhat like our main character."

TECHNICAL SPECS
2.40:1
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Errata

Some of the text in last month's Q&A about *Mad Men* was erroneously altered during the production process. The quote that begins at the bottom of page 40 should read: "Sometimes we'll throw out a suggestion, such as asking if a scene can be twilight instead of night; sometimes it would just look better to glow the windows soft blue instead of having it be night, with nothing out there." And the question that begins at the bottom of page 41 should read: "With all the unusual colors and textures in the wardrobe, do you ever shoot wardrobe tests?"



28mm – 76mm



17mm – 80mm



24mm – 290mm

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