

CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

CANADIAN SOCIETY OF CINEMATOGRAPHERS

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Artfully Clever **Luc Montpellier** csc Lenses Splinters



Allan Leader csc *The Dictators Rulebook* | George Willis csc, sasc at the AIC



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Fostering cinematography in Canada since 1957. The Canadian Society of Cinematographers was founded by a group of Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa cameramen. Since then over 800 cinematographers and persons in associated occupations have joined the organization.

The CSC provides tangible recognition of the common bonds that link film and digital professionals, from the aspiring student and camera assistant to the news veteran and senior director of photography.

We facilitate the dissemination and exchange of technical information and endeavor to advance the knowledge and status of our members within the industry. As an organization dedicated to furthering technical assistance, we maintain contact with non-partisan groups in our industry but have no political or union affiliation.

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Artfully Clever: Luc Montpelliier csc Lenses *Splinters*

By Trevor Hogg, Special to Canadian Cinematographer



Credit: Mark Stevenson & Allan Leader csc

Crafting *The Dictators Rulebook* By Allan Leader csc



Credit: Irene Willis

The Magic of Cinecittà By George Willis csc, SASC

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Artfully Clever **Luc Montpellier** csc Lenses *Splinters*

By Trevor Hogg, Special to *Canadian Cinematographer*
Photos: Courtesy of Luc Montpellier csc and Emotion Pictures

Aclaimed director Thom Fitzgerald (*3 Needles*, *Cloudburst*, *The Hanging Garden*) frequently moves between the worlds of theatre and cinema, and for his latest feature, *Splinters* – an adaptation of the stage play by Lee-Anne Poole – he turned to Luc Montpellier csc to craft the images for the screen. “We were trying to create a realistic portrait of how it is to live in rural Halifax and on these orchards,” Montpellier says. “A lesbian comes back home after her father passes away and she encounters all of the prejudices which come along with that, as well as dealing with her family.”

A month of Skype conversations between the cinematographer and director were followed by two weeks of official prep and four weeks of principal photography. The entire production took place on location in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, from

September to October 2017. Key crew members assisting Montpellier were gaffer Shawn Snip and key grip John Adamson. “Our production manager Doug Pettigrew is from the area, so he knew exactly where to take Thom,” Montpellier says. “Doug had the perfect farm, and Thom fell in love with it. We were able to visualize where the key points could be staged. There were very few times where I didn’t know where to put the camera, which is a testament to the location. It was like a huge studio backlot that had these amazing views going off of the veranda. I’m sure being in a real



“Lately, I have been working on bigger films and TV shows, so I enjoyed coming back to my independent film roots and getting my hands dirty framing the shots with Thom next to me. I had never seen anyone be able to pick apart what is not working in a scene so precisely as Thom. He’s such a great dramatist that way.”



L to R: Luc Montpellier csc,
DIT Evan Elliot and 1st AC
Gareth Roberts

farmhouse for the interiors helped our actors because they could look out a window and see the orchard and the hills rolling off. For me it’s the same way. I want an audience to be able to see a bird flying outside. I don’t want to have to blow out the windows in a studio.”

Montpellier, who has been lauded with a CSC Award for *Soul Cages* and a Gemini Award for *Hemingway vs. Callaghan*, says a major part of his preparation for any project involves utilizing digital technology. “You could shoot a feature film on a DSLR and it would be totally acceptable. I am constantly taking photographs and videos of locations that we’re potentially going to shoot. Now with the laptop you can colour correct. If we want to see how a piece of wardrobe is going to look, I can easily shoot a video clip and show what the texture of the image will be like,” he explains.

On *Splinters*, which had its world premiere at the 43rd Toronto International Film Festival, an important element was conveying a sense of legacy. “Thom and his company Emotion Pictures own a RED SCARLET camera with a Mysterium-X sensor. I had to put some vintage glass in front of that because I didn’t want the image to be too modern and electronic looking,” the cinematographer explains. “I called my friends at Panavision and they dug up these old Zeiss High Speed lenses that were used in the 1980s and 1990s. The antiglare coating on the front had been rubbed off chemically, so when the light hits it creates a halation effect. You still have coatings on the corners of the lenses, therefore, every lens had its own unique look.”

Montpellier operated the single camera with lenses ranging from 18 mm, 25 mm, 50 mm, 85 mm, 100 mm to 135 mm. “That was a good choice, not only because of budgetary reasons, but with this being such an intimate film, it was



Above: Sofia Banzhaf as Belle.

Below: Still from *Splinters*, featuring Deb Allen and Shelley Thompson.

“A lot of times, Thom would block with the actors, nod at me, and walk away. It was quite liberating to be able to work like that because I would have to figure out where the camera was going to go based on how I felt. It made me feel like another actor on the floor. I was appreciative of the trust he put in me. It made you to want to bring more to the process. That’s fantastic directing.”

nice to have a smaller crew on the set. Lately, I have been working on bigger films and TV shows, so I enjoyed coming back to my independent film roots and getting my hands dirty framing the shots with Thom next to me. I had never seen anyone be able to pick apart what is not working in a scene so precisely as Thom. He’s such a great dramatist that way,” he says.

He explains that a certain camera style was needed to create the look Fitzgerald wanted. “Thom said, ‘I want this to be a dance much like a musical.’ A sense of theatricality was important. It was less about cuts and more about blocking actors to the camera and editing within this big shot. We could cover things to get around something that wasn’t working. A lot of times, Thom would block with the actors, nod at me, and walk away. It was quite liberating to be able to work like that because I would have to figure out where the camera was going to go based on how I felt. It made me feel like another actor on the floor. I was appreciative of the trust he put in me. It made you to want to bring more to the process. That’s fantastic directing,” according to Montpellier who himself had ambitions of becoming a director while attending Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, but changed his mind upon discovering he loved being a cinematographer.

The DP says that on *Splinters* no storyboards were created, but scene transitions were kept in mind. “Thom and I would always have a post-mortem at the end of the day because we would have a one-hour drive back to Halifax from Annapolis Royal,” Montpellier explains.



Cast and crew shoot a funeral scene

“Transitions were a crucial thing that we talked about. Thom had a strong handle on the ebb and flow within the script. We needed intention behind things. That’s what’s beautiful about the early Woody Allen films. The blocking was so natural that you get a sense that it’s really happening. That informed the lighting of a scene too. I was lighting through windows a lot and had very little equipment on the set. I wanted to use a lot of dancefloor as opposed to Steadicam. The dancefloor is an old-school way of hitting marks. I would walk around the room and people would put tape marks on the floor for the key moments that I would need to grab. Not only did I have to be in tune with what the actors were doing, so did my dolly grip. We shot in widescreen and sometimes for the interiors. It opened up this beautiful landscape to choreograph the actors.”

For lighting, he used ARRI M series HMIs. “We didn’t always have a generator, and these new M series ARRI lights have a special reflector in them. I used M40s a lot as they have enough punch I could use them to source through windows with a diffusion frame,” he says. “Sometimes I wanted to use the one light source from the window but needed to cheat to get some light in a back corner. I didn’t want to put a light there because it’s going to wash the whole room and make the scene look like a sitcom. I gave myself rules with every room that I went in. It was that dance between Thom, the actors and me deciding where things were going to be.” A neutral light was chosen to enhance the naturalism. “I worked with the art department, wardrobe, hair and makeup to manipulate the tones rather than me imposing a look,” Montpelier explains, adding that a certain personal mobile device came in handy. “I ended up using my iPad Pro as a lighting source off-camera, and with Adobe Draw was able to dial in the exact colour that I wanted to use.”

Splinters was shot in the 2.40:1 aspect ratio and stored on RED MINI-MAGS at 4K 5:1 compression. “The LUT was developed 10 years ago at Technicolor based on a Kodak film stock and converts the digital colours to a log so you have velvet reds,” Montpelier reveals. “I had this idea of an old cigar box with faded graphics and inside are kept childhood trinkets. I approached the palette with that in mind and because it’s on an orchard a lot of earth tones were necessary.”

Other inspirations came from the aesthetic



From the top photo: The rolling hills of Nova Scotia served as the backdrop for the film. Belle takes a walk into the ocean. "I was lighting through windows a lot and had very little equipment on the set," Montpellier says. Sofia Banzhaf (Belle) in a still from *Splinters*.

“There were very few times where I didn’t know where to put the camera, which is a testament to the location. It was like a huge studio backlot that had these amazing views going off of the veranda.”

of films being influenced by the technology available at the time. “When you look at *Serpico* and *The Godfather*, there’s a certain age to them. I wanted to create a filmic look from the 1970s. The lenses, LUT and the sets having earthy tones combined to produce an ageless feeling,” Montpellier says. R3D files were utilized to create the dailies, with colour decisions being made on set between Montpellier and DIT Evan Elliot, while the DI was handled by freelance colourist Marc Savoie in Halifax.

During the shoot, the weather was characteristically erratic for the region. “In Halifax there’s a saying, ‘In 15 minutes you’ll have three different weather patterns,’” Montpellier says. “We cut up a lot of sequences like the bus journey of our lead character Belle [Sofia Banzhaf] that takes her through different parts of the coast. We shot those at different times and had to track how Thom wanted to cut that stuff so to avoid having one shot that was sunny then another shot that was overcast then another shot that was raining. We rolled the dice and got lucky with the weather. There was a scene outside between Belle and her brother, but because the weather wasn’t great, we took it into a barn and kept the doors open.”

Another moment has Belle sitting in the Atlantic Ocean drinking a bottle of wine. “We shot that scene in 10 minutes. The main problem was we would do a take and suddenly the tides were going out so fast I had to pick up the camera in waist-deep water and move it another 10 feet. Sofia also had to move another 10 feet and we would then have to try to film it. There was a frantic aspect to shooting that scene. The camera is about six inches above the water and you’re in the ocean, so if a huge wave came over it would have overtaken us. I have to hand it to Sofia because even though we were yelling at each other from across the way, you didn’t feel any of that tension when the camera rolled,” Montpellier recalls.

“There were a few actors from the play who were in the film,” he notes. “They had an extensive knowledge of the material but in a different form. It was fun to bring them to the filmmaking aspect of it where you get to redo things. Theatre actors tend to blow me away because they’re not riddled with those old tricks that actors sometimes have in film and TV. There’s a freshness to the whole thing. When you start seeing something you haven’t seen before, it is inspiring.”

A crane shot needed to be improvised, Montpellier recalls. “We would have liked to have a crane for the final shot. There comes a point when Belle’s mother realizes that she loves her daughter no matter what. They’re coming towards us in the orchard and the whole community has come together to help out with the harvest. We pan slowly across the field and end up on Belle and her mom, and we did jib up on the dolly with a bunch of risers. We did about 10 takes. It did feel like a crane shot even though we didn’t end up going to the sky,” he says. “I really enjoyed going back to my roots where you don’t always have the tools, but you’re still able to create an image that will bring people together.” 🍷