



MAGAZINE

> American Cinematographer

Current

Online Archive

Podcasts & Downloads

New Products

Book Reviews

Classifieds

Newsletter Signup

Subscriber Login

American
Cinematographer
March 2008

Television

Man in the Chair

Crossing the Line

DVD Playback

David Watkin

ASC Close-Up

Only in Hollywood



Article Images
click image to enlarge



An unusual collaboration is the focus of *Man in the Chair*, shot by Dana Gonzales.

by Paige Donner

Chronicling the friendship that develops between an aspiring filmmaker (Michael Angarano) and a curmudgeonly former gaffer (Christopher Plummer), *Man in the Chair* pays homage to film's craftspeople. The retired gaffer, Flash, who lives at the Motion Picture & Television Fund home in Woodland Hills, is a walking vault of film history; through a black-and-white flashback sequence, we learn he was given his nickname by Orson Welles on the set of *Citizen Kane*.

Playing supporting roles in the picture are legendary production manager Abby Singer, for whom the penultimate shot of a shoot is named, and longtime prop master Jack E. Ackerman, who wagged the Cowardly Lion's tail in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Man in the Chair was written and directed by Michael Schroeder and shot by Dana Gonzales. In the film, high-school student Cameron Kincaid (Angarano) is fascinated by Flash when he spots the old-timer hurling drunken insults at the

screen during a showing of Welles' *Touch of Evil* at the New Beverly Cinema in Los Angeles. Kincaid decides Flash's assistance is essential for the short film he wants to make for a school competition.

"The movie is about old cinema and new cinema," notes Gonzales. "Flash, who has this incredible background in the industry, helps this kid make a student film on hi-def video." The cinematographer's palette underscored this theme; his toolbox included black-and-white and color film stocks, a hand-cranked camera and a standard-definition video camera.

After starting out in the industry as a second camera assistant in the mid-1980s, Gonzales steadily worked his way up the ranks. He recently served as director of photography on the feature *Felon* and 2nd-unit director of photography and camera operator on *Rush Hour 3* and *Crash*. It was his work on *Crash* that caught Schroeder's eye, leading the director to offer Gonzales *Man in the Chair*.

The cinematographer filmed every scene in *Man in the Chair* with two Panaflex Gold IIs, shooting 3-perf Super 35mm. He notes, "Any cinematographer will tell you shooting two cameras is difficult because you're sometimes doing a wide shot and close-up at the same time, but that's what a 25-day shoot dictates."

For the scenes in the New Beverly Cinema, the production used a 15' Technocrane "that was brand new at the time," he recalls. "It enabled us to shoot in the theater without pulling any seats. We built a grid similar to a rock 'n' roll truss grid inside the theater and hung a bunch of 2K Blondes and 1K Pars on the girders. We rigged a 40-by muslin underneath the lights and put all the lights on dimmers. I had lights on every angle so I could dim them depending on where we were shooting; I could shoot wide or tight."

Singer plays one of the film-crew veterans that Kincaid is able to recruit for the making of his student film. "There are probably two questions you ask yourself when you're new in the business: what's the Abby Singer, and what's the Martini?" notes Gonzales with a laugh. "The Abby Singer will be here until the end of cinema. I don't ever see it going away." (Singer began working in the industry as an assistant director and was honored with the DGA's Frank Capra Achievement Award in 1985.)

While filming three dramatic scenes set in the Motion Picture & Television Fund residence, Gonzales took different approaches to each "because it was a lot of material with a lot of principal actors, and I didn't want it to seem like we just shot all the scenes back-to-back." He shot these day interiors on Fuji Super-F



250T 8552. “We shot the scene where Flash tells the residents of the home that they’re going to shoot a movie using fairly conventional coverage,” says the cinematographer. “For the scene where Flash gets drunk and tells the residents no one cares about them, we shot handheld to make it uncomfortable; when Flash later comes back and apologizes for his rant, we shot from a voyeuristic perspective, shooting from behind people and using side-to-side movement to create a slightly different uncomfortable feel.”

Gonzales chose Fuji Super-F 400T 8582 for all the night material “because it just looked right.” He adds, “Fuji film brings all this color to you, and when I use it, I always know I’m going to pull the color back in post. That’s how I see the world: a little more desaturated. Whenever I desaturate what I’ve shot, the palette seems to fall into place. I force-developed both Fuji stocks by 1 stop and underexposed them by 1 stop. That gave me more grain and more contrast, which is what Michael and I wanted.” He desaturated the color further during the digital-intermediate (DI) process, which he carried out at IO Film with colorist Adam Hawkey.

Throughout the shoot, Gonzales also used a hand-cranked Arri 2-C equipped with Kodak Ektachrome 5285 color-reversal stock. “We cross-processed and force-developed the Ektachrome,” he says. “Michael wanted to shoot hand-cranked from the very first discussion we had, and we collaborated on using multiple exposures for story points. I would usually do three or five multiples, depending on how I felt and what the material called for. All the effects that look like layered images were achieved in the camera; there are no dissolves, no composites, no CGI.”

Gonzales shot all of *Man in the Chair* using Panavision Ultra Speed MKII lenses. “Their coatings aren’t as modern as the coatings on the newer lenses, and that’s what I love about them,” he says. “We shot 80 percent of the movie on a 29mm prime lens; it’s somewhat wide, but you can go close with it and it doesn’t distort [the face].”

For the black-and-white *Citizen Kane* flashback, he used Kodak Plus-X 5231 and placed heavy filtration, a Tiffen Soft/FX5, on the lens, and for a few scenes from Kincaid’s student film, he shot standard-def video using a Canon XL-1.

“Michael wrote a sincere script that dealt with some very important social issues, and I was fortunate to be able to shoot this film and give it a special look,” Gonzales concludes. “I will always prefer photographing the kind of subject matter that speaks to the soul.”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

2.40:1, Super 35mm (3-perf); Digital Video (select scenes)

Panaflex Gold II; Arri 2-C; Canon XL-1

Panavision Ultra Speed MKII lenses

Fuji Super-F400T 8582, Super-F250T 8552;
Kodak Ektachrome 5285, Plus-X 5231

Cross-Processing by Deluxe Laboratories

Digital Intermediate

Printed on Kodak Vision Premier 2393

[<< previous](#) || [next >>](#)

[Media Kit](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Log In](#)

© 2007 American Cinematographer