



Revenge Thriller: Michael Balfry csc on *EVANGELINE*

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In a dense forest by night a soft touch of yellow light from the nearby city shines between the black silhouettes of trees. A man dressed in white coveralls carries a woman and a spade. As he lays her on the ground, his glove-clad fingers gently caress her face, which is lit eerily blue. He unzips his coveralls, and as he enters her we slip into the woman's mind. She is imprisoned in a cellar-like purgatory, bound to a chair and bewitched by a faceless, grey-skinned creature with dark hair and long fingernails. Back in the forest, the woman awakes and with one fast gesture tears out the intestines of her attacker, before slitting his throat and disappearing into the woods.

This sequence is the central part of Vancouver director Karen Lam's sophomore film *Evangeline*, a low-budget revenge thriller that is making local headlines. The film tells the story of college student Evangeline who has the bad luck of meeting an enigmatic, violent fraternity leader. When he and his pals beat her up and leave her for dead in the woods, Evan-

geline finds herself trapped in a supernatural nightmare and starts a brutal quest to punish him, as well as the other violent men crossing her path.

Despite the fact that horror isn't his first genre choice, director of photography Michael Balfry csc, who also operated the camera on *Evangeline*, does enjoy a good scare. "Gratuitous violence, am I a fan of that? No, and I don't think anybody should be," Balfry says. "But being scared, yes."

When Lam, with whom he has a long working relationship, told him about her motivation to make a filmic statement about the tragedy of British Columbia's missing women, it got him curious about the project. The so-called Highway of Tears tragedy – a series of unsolved murders and disappearances along B.C.'s Highway 16 section between Prince George and Prince Rupert, and the Robert Pickton case, a Coquitlam, B.C., pig farmer who was convicted of murdering six women on his property – are on everybody's mind in the

province. It didn't take Lam long to convince Balfry a story with a female hero is worth telling.

Long before shooting, Lam came up with a look book showcasing her ideas for the story's moods and lighting. "That's a very handy thing the director and I worked with. It goes through the whole process. It'll create looks for the whole production," Balfry says. "The images were so striking; we didn't have to look at it very often afterwards again. We understood what we wanted."

The sentiment is shared by Lam. "Working with Michael Balfry feels effortless because we have such a similar aesthetic sensibility," she says. "I know him so well that I can just lean out from behind the monitor, give him a look, and he knows exactly what needs to get done. It's like telepathy, and I know it's so rare to have that sort of creative connection."

Producer Karen Wong says it was ideal that both Lam and Balfry worked so effectively together. "Eighty per cent of the shoot took place out on location at night in rain and wind, so it was fantastic to have the director and DP work quickly, harmoniously and decisively," she says. "It really kept the momentum of the shooting day going, and we were done our days in 12 hours or under."

Although Balfry is used to shooting on well-equipped unionized television sets, he gladly accepted the chance to shoot the independent feature. "It's exciting doing indie movies. It's extremely challenging. You can't pay your mortgage with it, but that's not why you do it," he says. So why did he? The creative freedom he received from Lam, as well as the opportunity to work hands-on as a camera operator were great advantages.

Balfry is a big fan of the ARRI ALEXA. "It's a filmmaker's camera – easy to operate and to handhold. The way it's rendering the interpretation of the skin tones is very pleasing," he notes. For lenses he used many prime Cookes and Cooke minis, which are great for handheld and are well-suited for low-budget productions.

Balfry says his main rule and daily challenge was to keep things simple. "Everything we did on set was so simple; we had no time to get fancy. It forces us to be creative, to make good choices quickly and to make the right choices the first time, because you don't have a chance to come back and fix it," he says.

In many scenes in which the film is told from Evangeline's altered state of mind, the images seem to shift in and out of focus. To evoke this effect, Balfry used the Lensbaby, which

enables DPs to bend, squeeze, tilt or rotate the lens. The standard Lensbaby has a slightly wide angle of view and a circular sweet spot of focus that falls off into blur around the edges. "What we do is we take the image, and you can move the lens around and it changes the focus, like in the purgatory," Balfry explains. "Karen was cautious at first, but when she saw the emotions it created in the purgatory, she fell in love with it for a specific reason. All tools should be used for a specific reason, not in a gratuitous manner."

While the scary grey arms touching Evangeline in the purgatory were in reality an actor standing behind her, the character's jerkiness in the scene was filmed with the in-camera effect of recording at six frames a second.

Creating visual tricks on set is a great thing to do, according to Balfry. "Our world is now all CG. If you can do something on set, something practical, it's just a fun challenge," he says.

The DP worked with gaffer Corey Jacques, who managed to obtain a great deal from the rental house Pacific Backlot. Jacques and his team lit the three-walled purgatory set using five blondes rigged in a five dice formation. "The five blondes were rigged above a 12 by 12 diffusion with Litetools to limit the light on the walls, which ended up having an almost vignette-like effect," he says. "We had the five blondes all on dimmers so we could control the amount of fall off that hit the walls. Then we came in with a Kino to give a bit of life to [actress Kat] de Lieva's eyes when we could."

The rape scene in the woods was shot in the winter when the nights start as early as 4 p.m. As with most movies on a micro budget, Balfry's crew had to be creative. "I can't have three cranes to backlight the forest. Also, I have no personnel to staff the lights. So you can't put them in the air; what do you do? You put them on the ground and add gels to them," Balfry says. "I figured the forest could be a big silhouette, a big unknown. Silhouettes are extremely scary; we don't know what's out there. The silhouettes, a bit of smoke, some yellow gel on the lights evoked an emotion, a sense of eeriness."

Jacques confirms there was neither the budget nor the space to bring condors to the forest. "So rather, we took out six SKs and a few blondes to fill in the gaps and put them on the ground evenly spaced out and pretty much lined the perimeter of the set and backlit the smoke," he says. "Then we used a Tweenie up close to give that extra kick on the two actors. We used Dirty Ice gel for our night stuff."

And then there are the "happy mistakes" that make a good film great. The blue light shining on Evangeline's face in the forest rape scene was accidental. The actor David Lewis wore





DP Michael Balfry csc.

David Feuillatré



Balfry (with camera) on the set of *Evangeline*.

a headlamp, and the contrast of the blue lamplight with the yellow background looked right to Balfry.

Another prominent scene shows the film's main antagonist, fraternity leader Konner, torture a beggar in the cellar of what looks like an abandoned industrial building. Again, simplicity was the nature of the beast, says Balfry. "Once again, one big light source, silhouetted, in an old environment, a big factory. We tried to show as much of it as we could. It was sort of a crucifixion. We had no cranes, no dolly, except for a doorway dolly, a plank of wood on four wheels," he says.

Jacques adds that they didn't light the entire background. "For the crucifixion scene, we had two Mac 12s with dichroic lenses (daylight) in the direct background. And we lit the actors with an ARRI M18 Green 15 gel," he says.

Some scenes shot at the University of British Columbia needed to be lighted with practical ambient lighting only because UBC did not let the production plug in any lights. In the opening scene of the movie, a car in a white light moves towards the viewer. "Things like that, you think, 'How am I going to do this?'" Balfry says.

"Where do you put the light? So we put one light deep down the road behind the car; it's silhouetted with smoke and you have two headlights."

Balfry says he enjoyed his first time working with Jacques. "His experience was very much in the indie world," the cinematographer says. "He worked really well with his crew. He was instrumental in this production."

His first AC Austin Balfour is a colleague of many years. The two have worked together for five years on several projects. "[He's a] great focus puller with a great sense of humour," Balfry says.

Though his busy schedule did not allow Balfry to be involved in colour correction and postproduction, which included some special effects made in Bulgaria, he has a working relationship with colourist Gary Shaw and knew he could trust his talented colleague.

Generally, Balfry salutes the crew's enthusiasm. "You have the same vision as the director and hope people will be entertained. And apparently, people are being scared by this movie," he says, referring to the positive reviews. 🍌

David Feuillatré