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SHORT TAKES



Student Award Chair David Darby, ASC (second from left) with winners (from left) Łukasz Dziędzic, Oscar Ignacio Jiménez and Jazleana Jones.

Emerging Filmmakers

By Debra Kaufman

Established to inspire the next generation of cinematographers, the ASC Student Heritage Awards took place on Oct. 12 at the Society's Clubhouse in Hollywood, where honors were presented to three emerging directors of photography. In the Graduate category, the Richard H. Kline Student Heritage Award was presented to Łukasz Dziędzic, of the American Film Institute, for *Animals*. In the Undergraduate category, the Richard H. Kline Student Heritage Award went to Oscar Ignacio Jiménez, of Brigham Young University, for *Gather*. The Haskell Wexler Student Documentary Award was given to Jazleana Jones, of Florida State University, for *King, Charles*. The winners took time with *AC* to discuss their work on these standout projects.

Animals

Cinematographer: Łukasz Dziędzic

Director: Chen-Wen Lo

In *Animals*, two child soldiers, a brother and sister, escape their unit's jungle outpost but are captured and confined in a stable, where the sister must watch her brother suffer the ravages of dengue fever. The movie is set in Myanmar in 2013, during a domestic conflict between the government and separatists.

Director Chen-Wen Lo, producer Miguel Lozano and production designer Dara Zhao arranged a meeting with cinematographer Łukasz Dziędzic to talk about his participation. "They told me the story, and I was immediately onboard," he says. "I felt this was a project I wanted to shoot."

The logistics were challenging from the outset. The AFI requires student projects to be shot within 30 miles of Los Angeles, so finding locations that could double for the jungles of Myanmar was critical. Lo and Lozano began scouting for locations about a year before shooting began. The spectacular, panoramic opening shot was captured at Malibu Creek State Park. Other locations were Sanna Ranch in Santa Clarita, carefully chosen sections of the Warner Bros. backlot, and AFI's surrounding hillside, augmented by jungle plants. Success, says Dziędzic, was about "finding the right angle to photograph and not show everything." He adds, "There was a lot of back-and-forth about what would be an organic view and what isn't in Asia. We managed to fool everyone."

Dziędzic shot with an Arri Amira and Cooke Speed Panchro lenses from The Camera Division. "I like the aesthetic of the lenses," he says. "They're soft and have a strong veiling glare when wide open, an effect I used as a tool in our visual storytelling." He also used a Sony PMW-F55 CineAlta as a B camera for a few shots. For his lighting package, he had two 9Ks and two 4Ks from Illumination Dynamics and Cinelease, as well as the Light



◀ Dziedzic checks his monitor.
▲ Jiménez and crew capture a scene.

Bridge CRLS (Cine Reflect Lighting System), a system of bounce plates designed by gaffer Jakob Ballinger.

In addition to the challenge of locations, Dziedzic also had to design shots featuring children — as well as animals, specifically grasshoppers and a rat. The children playing the main characters were both amateurs. “I had two lighting stand-ins, so that was a comfort,” says the cinematographer. “For these kids, it was important not to take them away from their mental state. We also had a lot of support to keep them from being too tired. They were great.”

An animal wrangler kept the grasshoppers in a cooler, which slowed them down. “We had 10 to 15 seconds before they went back to normal,” says Dziedzic. The rat, he adds, was easier to wrangle — it just did what rats do.

“I was very lucky that my best friends from AFI had my back during this exhausting shoot,” he says, citing camera operator Michał Wroński, gaffer Carlo Mendoza and key grips Yoni Shrira and Shannon Connally.

Dziedzic and colorist Alexey Kurbatov performed the final grade using Blackmagic Design DaVinci Resolve.

Dziedzic says another big challenge was lighting inside the stable without it looking like the children could escape through holes in the stable’s walls.

“For night scenes, we bounced two 9Ks and two 4Ks off a 12-by-12 Ultra-bounce frame hanging over the roof of

the building, and supplemented with tungsten units shooting through the cracks in the walls. Daylight was easier; we had direct sunlight that we shaped with diffusion and duvetyn.” He is proudest of the lighting design of the last shot, when soldiers drag the siblings out of the stable. “It was quite a spontaneous idea,” Dziedzic says. “We were scouting the location while the sun was setting, and when we walked out of the stable, we noticed that the sun was low in the direction of the door. We used lights to recreate that on set. It was a happy accident.”

Gather
Cinematographer:
Oscar Ignacio Jiménez
Director: Howie Burbidge

In *Gather*, a father and daughter in 1800s rural America are on the verge of starvation. When wolves steal their last bit of meat, they turn to fishing, and both drown in a tragic accident. We see them in the afterlife as they make their way home, where other deceased family members welcome them to a table laden with a feast.

The story’s dark nature was inspired by director Howie Burbidge’s diagnosis of Stage 4 lymphoma. Burbidge, who also wrote the script, told Jiménez that he saw death as reuniting with family and leaving hardship behind. Cinematographer Oscar Ignacio Jiménez immedi-

ately gravitated to how the script, which has little dialogue, relied heavily on visuals. Both filmmakers responded to the “visual poetry” of directors Terrence Malick and Alejandro González Iñárritu, Jiménez notes. “I knew there would be a lot on my plate,” he adds. “I knew collaboration was the only way to get it done, and that energized me.”

For inspiration, Burbidge and Jiménez turned to *The Revenant* for the sense of nature vs. man, and to *Babette’s Feast* — with its intimate and not clichéd “bright light” heaven, the cinematographer notes — for the final scene. Jiménez says he also rewatched one of his favorite films, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, to absorb how cinematographer Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC created visual atmosphere. “At the beginning of our film, the father and daughter are gathering food but become prey to the wilderness,” he says. “What I got from [our discussions] was that it was more of a spiritual film; it needed to feel like a prayer that transitioned from want into gratitude.”

BYU supplied the Red Epic Dragon camera and Canon CN-E Prime lenses. “I popped in a couple of Black Pro-Mist ½ and 1 filters to give the image another characteristic when I wasn’t getting the look I wanted,” says Jiménez. “The lenses are too sharp for my taste, but fast, so we could get away with less light for night scenes.” Lighting was minimal. “We had to economize by choosing the best time of day to shoot,” he says, noting that most of the scenes were shot with available light. “If it rained or snowed, we had to embrace the weather as part of the story.”

The six-day shoot had eight locations, most of which were in rural areas of Utah, and one big challenge was getting to them. “Once we got there, we’d have to carry all the equipment a quarter mile in the snow to a cabin [built in] the early 1900s,” he says. “Luckily, we had an incredible team. We’d catch snow in the higher elevations, and in lower ones it was sunnier, warmer.”

Jiménez’s favorite shot opens the movie, when father and daughter fish by a river. It’s a brief tease of one of the

Photos courtesy of the filmmakers. Dziedzic photo by Thierry Brouard.



◀ Jones shoots handheld for an exterior. ▲ A still from *King, Charles* depicting the silhouette technique Jones developed for event reenactments.

more protracted scenes toward the end. “When the camera comes out of the river and the droplets start falling down in front of the lens, it’s like the lens is crying, which mirrors what the father is feeling,” he says. “You see him struggle. The camera is expressing what he was internalizing, and that felt like poetry.”

Jiménez researched underwater photography, did tests, and procured a splash bag from local vendor Mystery Box. Despite all the planning, shooting the scenes presented unforeseen challenges. “We were ignorant and ambitious, and then found out how hard it is to make this kind of film,” he says. “Little things that I didn’t think would make problems caused the headaches, but with the help of my gaffer, John Newton, and key grip, Christena Taylor, we problem-solved our way out. Fellow student Ryan Romanovitch, our colorist, nailed the bleached look of the film when he graded it [in DaVinci Resolve] at BYU’s post facility.

“This film was definitely a group effort, and I am grateful for every single one of my collaborators.”

King, Charles

Cinematographer: Jazleana Jones

Directors: William O’Neal II and Skylar Theis

During her second semester in FSU’s film program, cinematographer Jazleana Jones was tasked with creating a documentary. She was drawn to co-direct-

tor William O’Neal II’s story of his distant relative, Charles King, who died in combat but had written letters from the battlefield to his unborn son. Jones, O’Neal, co-director Skylar Theis and sound mixer Katelyn Lopez met to discuss the look. “The main character wouldn’t appear in the film, so we talked about creating open frames, leaving space to show he’s no longer there but that his presence is,” Jones says. “We wanted to keep the frames loose, giving more headroom than you ordinarily would.”

The university provided a Panasonic AU-EVA1, a Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera for a B camera, and two Canon EF lenses (24-70mm and 50mm). Before the team could begin, they had to figure out how to fit four people, luggage and the equipment in the car. “It was the biggest game of Tetris, especially with the lighting gear,” recalls Jones. “We disassembled C-stands and put them in nooks and crannies.” Then they embarked on a 12-hour road trip to the first destination, Cincinnati, Ohio, where King’s mother, Gladys, and sister Gail lived. For Jones, the challenge was being a camera department of one. “I had to light everything, do all the setups, and get the camera right,” she says. “We were able to collaborate to some extent, but I was the operator, key grip and gaffer.”

When the interviews began, the movie, which was going to focus on King’s letters to his son, changed. “We learned that Charles was an artist — he left art to

become a soldier — and we saw all of his art in the home,” she says. “The story blossomed, and the script was written in the interviews.” The entire crew was inspired by King’s artwork, which richly decorated the house. “His art gave our film that look,” Jones says. The next stop was Cleveland, where King grew up. “We went to the places and the streets mentioned in the interviews to capture some realism, and we visited his grave in Bedford Heights,” says Jones.

The cinematographer notes the picture was not finished with a formal color grade. “After doing the edit,” she says, “Skylar just used Lumetri Color in [Adobe] Premiere Pro to make minor adjustments.”

With an invisible subject, the filmmakers had to come up with a way to make the documentary more than talking heads. The directors wanted to somehow re-enact stories told in the interviews, so Jones suggested telling the stories with silhouettes rather than just showing photographs. “I had no idea how to do it, but I convinced the directors I could and then tried it out,” she says. This portion of the movie was shot in Atlanta, Ga., in the basement of O’Neal’s childhood home. “I tried lighting a bedsheet, but it wasn’t working out,” Jones recalls. “Then I figured I could underexpose the image because we had a lot of fill.” She soon determined that the subjects needed to be far enough away from the lights to make it work. With a camera, two lights and a bedsheet, she underexposed the image but made sure the whites stayed bright and the subjects were as blacked-out as possible. “We shot at 96 fps, so the camera had less light hitting the sensor,” she says. “I monitored the histogram to make sure we weren’t peaking.” Much to her relief, it worked, and the silhouette images are her favorite in the movie. “Our greatest strength,” she attests, “was how in-sync we all felt as we filmed it.” ◆