

AUSTRALIAN SHORTS

Nathan Loves Ricky Martin is a sensitive piece which has recently been nominated for an AFI/AACTA Award for best short film, Cinematographer Michael Wylam speaks about the film – *interview by James Cunningham*



A scene from 'Nathan Loves Ricky Martin' - DOP Michael Wylam

AC How did you get involved with the project? Had you worked with the Director previously?

MW This was my first time working with Director Steven Arriagada. He approached me for another script after viewing some of my recent work and, as happens with a collaborative Director, our aesthetic and ideologies interwove to discover a shared sensitivity in developing an emotional subtext visually, honest storytelling and considered frames that require little 'coverage'... and so, a new script, *Nathan Loves Ricky Martin*, was written by Arriagada and his collaborators for us to explore our shared philosophies.

AC What discussions were there on what to shoot on and how did that inform your approach?

MW Shooting this project on film was an important part of sketching the world these characters inhabit. We wanted to approach painting the story using film on this project for both its texture and undefinable 'feeling'. Shooting 2-perf was essentially a financial decision but also we wanted the 2.35 aspect ratio to breathe emptiness into the frame. We also felt anamorphic characteristics and distortion wouldn't feel right for this particular project. So we decided that shooting spherical would feel more immediate and tangible in framing the story.

Shooting an interior in one location meant I could have complete control and I wanted the world beyond a window to be out of reach, almost oppressive and to envelope them in this room. Blowing out the window while retaining details in the net curtain in front of it was something that would have been harder to do on digital as I was really pushing the stock and the off in highlights on film is still superior to my eye.

AC How important was the location to the film and how did this help tell the story? What were your discussions with the production team in pre-production?

MW We narrowed down our location to an abandoned house which meant there were few compromises in modifying the space to our needs. Arriagada and I knew the location had to be a character in the film and with barely any dialogue we had to let the images speak for the characters. One of the feelings I had when reading the script and asking Arriagada about the characters lives was that it might be interesting to explore the idea that they live in this womb-like environment.

There's a safety and there's an isolation. Pauline (mother and carer for her son Nathan - who has a mental and physical disability) feels as if she has been trapped there for a long

time, desperate and detached from another life she once knew. I wanted that ideology to inform a palette and so we employed embryonic flesh tones on the walls of the living room. Contrasting splashes of blue were to suggest escape near doors and windows.

We were also afforded the luxury of cutting down trees and bushes from outside our main window so we could get the right quality of light with the distance of our lamps. Our Production Designer Dorian Lazar did an incredible job rebuilding that living room and bringing character and nuance to the location. He was able to distress and age the location with no restrictions. We even tested patches of paint on the walls to see how they responded in different lighting conditions.

AC What were some of the considerations in creating the look of the film during pre-production?

MW The Director and myself looked at a lot of references but we were really on the same page to create a look of our own. We looked at Michael Haneke's film *The Seventh Continent* (1989) for the use of lingering frames and the compositional language employed to frame mundane activities. We also look at the paintings of Edgar Degas for his portrayal of

everyday life. We favoured lingering frames and wider lenses for a sense of intimacy. As we storyboarded it became apparent every frame needed to be Nathan-centric, even if we don't start a shot with him, we are always brought back, as if tethered by an umbilical cord. The quality of the light was very important and we wanted a moody realism to punctuate the scene. We also wanted to sell this cold light bearing witness on the characters existence and so we looked at practicals with specific bulbs to give little splashes of warmth as a reference to the viewer's eye in a cold frame. As we had to shoot in the day through to the night we tented out all the windows keeping the film consistent as a daytime interior scene.

AC Did you approach this project differently to any other film?

MW I approach each script with a different philosophy. We wanted the actors to have freedom to move without being tethered to marks on this film. I was lighting a set rather than a frame and this European approach helped me paint light with broad strokes to allow that to happen. The actor, playing the wheelchair bound, Nathan, was method acting and remarkably didn't break his performance all day so having minimal lights on the set was integral to making the actors feel at home in their environment and not on a set. I use my light meter the same way on film as I do on digital as I find it a quick way to communicate values to the gaffer so nothing else changed except how I chose to light on film.

AC Do you have a favourite shot or sequence and what always your intention for that scene?

MW There is a long take in the film where we view the living room on a reverse; a new perspective after a climactic event. We also favour wider lens choices until this point. The room was set up to be centred around the television in the corner; a means to escape from their world. I wanted this long take to be from the television's perspective, observing the drama. Pauline has just attempted to seduce a local gardener in an act of desperation. She chases him out and as she enters again she lingers in the doorway. As she walks deeper into the



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living room the fantasy of hope fades as she settles to a stop in front of Nathan and is forced to face her sadness and desperation. For the first time there is a subtle shift in the quality of the light; a subtle and almost biblical light brushes her at this arrival point and it is the only time we see a slightly harder light in the film.

Framing the space rather than the actor at the beginning of this shot I aimed to give weight to the actions that had already unfolded and by keeping the camera static I allowed her to fall into 'correct' headroom as she walks to the centre of the living room; physically and emotionally arriving at a realisation. We couldn't have storyboarded that as the performance was so powerful in the rehearsal. So reacting to that in just the most subtle of ways and finding new meaning in that frame was a very rewarding moment. The camera then pans with Pauline to the stereo to appease Nathan's request for his favourite song and pans with her to the other side of the room where she looks out of the window into a world abandoned. There is so much emotional

weight in this one shot and we stay with her the whole time, observing and finally tethering her to Nathan in a two-shot.

AC What did you take from this production?

MW Beyond friendships and being involved in something special I am always impressed with the teamwork and other crafts that contribute to a film. To work with crew who are equally as passionate about a project is real pleasure and I'm very thankful to the wonderful people I get to work with. Working with Arriagada was an absolute pleasure and we are always enthusing about the next project.

AC Finally Michael, what are you working on next?

MW I'm also in pre-production with Arriagada for his next short film - a black and white Japanese war film.

Michael Wylam is a multi-award winning Cinematographer currently working on projects in Australia and New Zealand.



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