

Southern Comfort

Paul Schattel Guides Sinkhole Down a Filmic Path

Writer-director Paul Schattel didn't allow a bare bones budget to keep him from shooting Sinkhole in 35 mm format. He recruited a professional cast and crew who dedicated their weekends to the project for four months, and made maximum use of available light. The feature film, which exposes the underworld of a rural town in the South, was produced at practical locations in Asheville, North Carolina. It features Bryan Marshall as Jason, an ex-school teacher whose reputation is marred by a questionable past. When he discovers the body of a dead girl, Jason becomes embroiled in a local drug ring.



Writer-director Paul Schattel on the set of Sinkhole, an independent feature filmed in rural North Carolina.

"It's a modest story by design, so we kept it very simple," Schattel says. "We didn't want images that were too slick or overproduced. The story needed a gritty, raw approach. We had a small crew, who knew how to run-and-gun when necessary."

Cinematographer Steve Agnew created the stark visual design of the film. Agnew has years of experience shooting commercials and government projects in Washington, D.C., but this was his inaugural feature. His palette included KODAK VISION Expression 500T Color Negative Film 5284 and KODAK VISION 250D Color Negative Film 5246 along with a small lighting package used to augment natural sources when needed. Schattel says he was "lucky" to find a "world-class" cinematographer in Asheville because the staggered production schedule required a local crew.

"Steve really set the tone for the production and became a team leader," he says. "I liked the bleached-out, monochromatic feel in Tender Mercies. I wanted a minimalist vibe and something that wasn't too polished. We also looked at Jesus' Son for the color scheme since it was a bleak, mid-winter film set in the Midwest."

Instead of shooting the picturesque mountains around Asheville, the director sought to capture the setting of a small Southern town in all its rundown glory. Trailer parks, crumbling parking lots and rural highways lent a rustic texture to a story of an oppressed character who tries to make the best of his circumstances.



Cinematographer Steve Agnew

"There's a natural production value that's literally laying around Asheville," Schattel says. "It's a feeling of Southern decay. When you shoot a rusted-out trailer park, even the mold on the side of the trailer can be an interesting detail. If you have a cinematographer like Steve, and a production designer like Pearson Hobart-Beaumari, you can have some amazing things happen in front of the camera fairly easily." Rather than trying to out-guess nature, the filmmakers often found themselves shifting gears to use the elements in their favor.

"We helped ourselves by using the weather," Schattel explains. "It was winter, so we had a lot of dark, overcast skies that went along with much of the content in this bleak film. But if it turned sunny, we didn't change plans. We didn't want a production that was too controlled, or too locked down on any facet. Flexibility was one of the strengths of the production."

In one scene, Jason makes a delivery to a methamphetamine addict beneath a bridge. "We had two natural edge lights coming in from each side underneath the bridge, and the actors just stood in the shadows of the overpass," he says. "It's a shot that looks naturally beautiful without bounce. The inherent beauty of 35 mm took care of the rest."

Schattel limited the cast and crew to a few takes of each set-up.

"You hire good people and they come prepared," he says. "If you get a fairly experienced cast and rehearse, all you need is two or three takes. Even if you can afford it, you don't want to shoot and shoot. You have to think about what you want. I think that's a healthy thing. Who wants to end up with a 100 hours of footage to edit a feature?"



Director Paul Schattel, cinematographer Steve Agnew and first assistant cameraman Greg Hudgins discuss a shot on the set of Sinkhole, a 35 mm low-budget feature produced in rural North Carolina.

Schattel's first feature, 78, was produced in DV format.

"The difference between shooting DV and 35 mm film is incredible in the response you get from your audience and talented people are automatically more interested in helping you make your movie. I had never shot 35 mm before. For my next film, maybe we'll ramp up to 70 mm!"

For more on Sinkhole, visit www.harrowbeauty.com.

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