

JOHN TOLL, ASC  
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

LOWELL PETERSON, ASC  
CAREER ACHIEVEMENT IN TV

BILL BENNETT, ASC  
PRESIDENTS AWARD

# American Cinegrapher

International Publication of the ASC

MARCH 2016

## VINYL

RODRIGO PRIETO, ASC, AMC  
REED MORANO, ASC  
DAVID FRANCO  
LAUNCH HBO'S ROCK OPERA

PLUS:  
PETER LEVY, ASC, ACS  
RACE

AMERICAN CINEMATOGRAPHER • MARCH 2016 • VINYL - RACE - JOHN TOLL, ASC - LOWELL PETERSON, ASC - BILL BENNETT, ASC • VOL. 97 NO. 3

# Short Takes



Working at a poultry farm by day, Davy (Jesse Hill) is an aspiring race-car driver who becomes entangled in a sinister scheme in the short film *Yellow*.

## Crash Course

By Matt Mulcahey

In the short film *Yellow*, a struggling small-time race-car driver makes a Faustian bargain with a mysterious benefactor who holds a grisly interest in the sport's potential for carnage. Narratively, the short is a throwback to the *Twilight Zone* era of anthology television. Visually, it's a mixture of the low-key, high-contrast lighting of 1940s noir and a vérité documentary aesthetic. However, *Yellow's* initial inspiration came not from Rod Serling morality plays or bleak post-World War II productions. Instead, it sprung from a fortuitous brush with an eerie location.

That encounter came in November of 2013, when *Yellow* co-directors Alexander Maxwell and Alexander Hankoff — the latter of whom also served as cinematographer — found themselves in a remote part of Arizona wrapping up an arduous music-video shoot for the Gareth Emery song "U." Hankoff recalls, "We came across this dirt [racetrack] at night in the middle of nowhere. It was just blackness all around and then this pool of light. The track took on a very ominous feeling."

Galvanized by the experience, Maxwell set to work on *Yellow's* script and, with Hankoff, began scouting East Coast locations. They settled on Bridgeport Speedway in Swedesboro, N.J., not far from Philadelphia. The location was selected in April of 2014, giving Hankoff and Maxwell nearly five months of preproduction before the six-day shoot commenced in August. They spent most of their weekends that summer scouting the speedway, with Hankoff carrying his Red Epic MX to shoot B-roll and test footage, some of which made its way into the final edit.

The repeated scouting trips served two necessary purposes for the co-directors: to choose a race series for their story and to select a real-life driver to play the lead role of Davy. For their protagonist, they opted for Jesse "The Thrill" Hill, a third-generation New Jersey driver. For the race series, both Hankoff and Maxwell were drawn to the big-block modifieds. "Originally we were looking at the sprint cars, which have these wings on them," says Hankoff. "But after we saw the big-block modifieds, we said, 'Forget those little guys.'"

Maxwell adds, "The modifieds were mean-looking. With the noses they have on them, they almost have an expression like they're scowling at you."

The extended prep also allowed for experimentation with various rigging options for the GoPro Hero3+ Black cameras that would adorn the cars during the mostly night-exterior race scenes. "We initially struggled with trying to minimize shake because those vehicles just tremble so much, and our front-facing GoPros were limited because they would get pummeled so quickly with mud," says Maxwell. "But, ironically, what we ended up liking were the shots with mud splatter and more vibration in them. They just felt a lot more kinetic."

Wishing to avoid the fisheye look associated with the GoPros' native lenses, Hankoff enlisted the Canadian company Back-Bone to trick out the production's five GoPro cameras with its Ribcage modification, which moves the image sensor closer to the front of the camera and attaches a C mount. Back-Bone also provided the production with Computar lenses for the GoPros: two 4.5-13.2mm (f1.8) zooms for cockpit shots, as well as three 5mm and three 8mm primes for wheel-well, bumper and cage angles.

"We would find our frame, check focus, and then lock the

All images courtesy of the filmmakers.

Top: At a diner, a shady "scout" (Paul Arthaud) explains the malevolent goals of his employer. Middle: Co-director Alexander Maxwell (left) and co-director/cinematographer Alexander Hankoff prep the diner scene. Bottom: During the climactic race, one of the cars somersaults through the air.



GoPros down and pray to the race gods that the cameras would stay on — recording-wise and physically," says Hankoff, who shot the GoPros at 2.7K resolution, recording to SanDisk Ultra 64GB microSD cards. "We had the GoPro app for triggering the recording on all cameras simultaneously, but it

would cut out due to the distance from the pits to the track, so we couldn't monitor remotely. There was really no way of knowing what we were getting until after the race. It was nerve-wracking."

Hankoff's own Red Epic served as *Yellow's* A-camera, recording full-frame 5K

at 5:1 compression to 512GB Red Mini-Mags for a 2.39:1 crop in post. He paired the Epic with 16-42mm and 30-80mm Angenieux Optimo DP Rouge (T2.8) zoom lenses. "Given the run-and-gun aesthetic we implemented due to budget and time restrictions, [the zooms] allowed me to set up my shots quickly," Hankoff says. "I only had one AC for most of the shoot, so we didn't have support to run prime lenses back and forth. Also, given the nature of the track and how dusty and dirty it was, we didn't really want to expose the sensor to that environment if we could help it."

The dust did, however, lend what Hankoff calls a "magical" effect when photographed through on-camera filtration, which on *Yellow* included Schneider Classic Soft and Hollywood Black Magic filters and Tiffen Black Pro-Mist. "I never went above ¼ with the filtration because the atmosphere created a lot of diffusion on its own," Hankoff explains. "Because of the dust that gets kicked up in the air, there's this fine, mist-like quality. Pushing that a little bit further by using some mist filters created a beautiful, soft glow that I really liked."

In addition to the GoPros and the Red Epic, a Red Scarlet MX and a trio of Canon EOS 5D Mark III DSLRs were employed during the race sequences. Recording at 2K to 128GB RedMags, the Scarlet picked off long-lens shots from the center of the track with a Canon L-series 100-400mm (f4.5-5.6) zoom. The 5Ds — which recorded at 1920x1080 to SanDisk Extreme CF cards — sported Canon L-series



Top: Skip (Mike Faist) inspects the car. Bottom: Hankoff and Maxwell line up an under-the-car shot.



24mm and 35mm primes and were housed near the track in Plexiglas crash boxes. "Everybody involved donated their cameras for the shoot, so everyone was biting their nails out there," says Maxwell.

Hankoff did some cuticle chewing of his own for *Yellow's* climactic crash scene, when his Epic was placed on the track to film the effect's plate shot. The plate was photographed during an off night at the speedway in order to provide more control over the vehicles, and the effect is sold largely in a single shot — a wide frame in which one of the cars, digitally created by visual-effects house The Mill, somersaults through the air. "We were inspired by the framing of the shot in *The Dark Knight*, where the truck does the front flip," Maxwell says. "We knew we wanted to show the wreck and fulfill that expectation. Because it's a short film, you almost expect it to have some kind of clever solution that hides the monster at the end. We didn't want to do that."

Mikey Rossiter, a colorist at The Mill, handled the digital grade on *Yellow*, working in FilmLight's Baselight for a 1920x1080 finish. Maxwell and Hankoff strove to achieve as much of *Yellow's* look as possible on set, a preference honed in their commercial work. "In general," Maxwell says, "the color sessions are run by the agency, and you don't necessarily get an opinion there. So if you want a look, you have to bake it in."

A large part of *Yellow's* look came from the filmmakers' embrace of available light. Diffusion and bounce were often all the augmentation a scene needed. When fixtures did come off the truck, they were typically Kino Flo Celebs and photofloods in China balls. That preference for naturalism required Hankoff to boost the Epic's ISO to as high as 1,600 for the night exteriors at the speedway. "I wanted the look to feel as authentic as possible, and for the most part I found myself very happy with the reality of the preexisting [lighting] that we were

coming across," says Hankoff. "The lighting found on the track was a mix of sodium-vapor lamps and metal-halide floodlights, and in the pits it was primarily spots of sodium vapor, with nearby race-car trailers supplying a wash of fluorescent and tungsten."

That authenticity extended to *Yellow's* scenes away from the track. For a framing device set in a roadside diner, Hankoff used only the window adjacent to the characters' booth and a beadboard for bounce. For the interior of a poultry farm that serves as Davy's day job, Hankoff swapped out every fourth bulb with a 250-watt photoflood and selectively turned off some of the location's existing fluorescents for additional shaping. "We only had to do minimal lighting in there," Hankoff says. "That environment bounced light all over the place as soon as we put those photofloods in."

The short's poultry-farm scenes made their way into the story when Bridgeport Speedway owner Brian Ramey happened to mention the family business to the filmmakers. "We were still trying to figure out what our race-car driver did as his day job," Hankoff recalls. "We were in the office of the speedway chatting with Brian, and he casually said, 'So we're going back to the chicken farm tomorrow.' Maxwell and I just looked at each other. We knew that place was going to be incredible before we even set foot on the location."

"I knew going in that our story would require a minimalist approach," Hankoff concludes. "It was essential we remain as trim as possible and embrace the fact that modern digital cameras allow filmmakers to create scenarios that would traditionally be a tremendous challenge to pull off. I celebrate the fact that we were able to create the look I envisioned by implementing a mix of preexisting and sourced lighting. I truly believe this is the future of filmmaking, and it has become an aesthetic approach I've embraced wholeheartedly. Personally, I most admire visuals that incorporate as much reality as possible, and I'm thrilled we were able to achieve that in *Yellow*."

For updates about *Yellow's* festival screenings and upcoming Web release, visit [www.yellow-film.com](http://www.yellow-film.com). ●