

Dangerous Crossings



Cinematographer Lisa Wiegand and director Lorena David bring an indie ethic to the action genre in *The Courier*.

by Stephanie Argy

The *Courier*, a low-budget action movie, is the second collaboration between director Lorena David and cinematographer Lisa Wiegand. Wiegand says that one of the pleasures of working with David is how much the director pushes her and allows her to experi-

ment. "She inspires me to do new things," the cinematographer says.

The duo's latest project, which had a budget of just over \$1 million, stars Mario Lopez as David Morales, a student attending college in San Diego on a soccer scholarship. After he injures his knee, Morales loses the scholarship. Unable to tell his mother back in Tijuana what has happened, he looks for work so that he can finance his education and stay in school. He finds a job with a doctor who claims that he's doing animal research forbidden in the U.S.; the doctor hires Morales to transport serum into Mexico so that he can continue his work.

In reality, the serum is destined for a gravely ill drug dealer in Mexico, who is being kept alive by the medicine. Morales finds himself increasingly entrapped by the job, and when he tries to free himself from the situation, the villains kidnap his mother to force him to make one last delivery.

Working with three Kodak Vision stocks — 250D 5246, 500T 5279 and 800T 5289 — Wiegand devised three different looks for *The Courier*. For the San Diego scenes, which represent the normal life Morales has before his troubles begin, Wiegand designed an appropriately "normal" look, one that contrasted significantly with later, more extreme sequences.

For scenes set in Tijuana, Wiegand pull-processed the 46 two stops to desaturate the colors and decrease contrast. She also used Tiffen Warm Pro-Mist filters on the lens — as high as Pro-Mist 1 for exteriors, and between $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ for interiors. For a single scene shot in a very dark tequila bar, which she spotted three days before shooting there, Wiegand used the 89 and pulled it only one stop. Even though she pulled the 89 less than the 46, she found it much harder to match than the others. She speculates that might be because the 89 was processed in

two separate batches.

Wiegand's most extreme experiment was conducted for a series of surreal sequences that appear periodically throughout the movie but are not fully explained until the end. The cinematographer shot through a dense green filter normally used for black-and-white work, and during timing, she color-corrected the image to be as close to normal as she could get. The effect is that every color except green is desaturated, while green appears in the highlights and the blacks. Wiegand says that although the effect isn't consistent from shot to shot, both she and David felt the strategy was very effective for their purpose, which entailed simply

dropping the individual sequences into other scenes.

To achieve these extremes, Wiegand collaborated closely with FotoKem timer Bob Fredrickson. She says Fredrickson was not thrown by any of her requests, and he offered ideas on how to smooth differences by cooling down or warming up entire sequences. He also helped her through the difficult process of timing the movie's numerous split-screen sequences, which required that the look for individual scenes be set well before the look of the movie as a whole.

In the surreal green-filter sequence, Wiegand and David used the Clairmont Squishy Lens for shots from a character's point of

Opposite page: Cinematographer Lisa Wiegand used Clairmont Camera's Squishy Lens to capture a drugged-out person's POV of the evil Dr. Drake (Nancy O'Dell) in this shot from *The Courier*. This page, top: For this shot of a businessman (Fritz Greve), Wiegand used Kodak Vision 250D 5246 with a green filter made for black-and-white photography, and then timed the image back as close to normal as possible. Left: Wiegand behind the camera.



Dangerous Crossings

Right: For the Tijuana section of the film, Wiegand shot on 5246 and pull-processed it by two stops; she also used a Tiffen Warm Pro-Mist 1 on the lens. Below (top): Wiegand (center) prepares for an upcoming shot. Bottom: Wiegand advises actress Nancy O'Dell.



view. They had tested the effect of using Vaseline on the lens, but when they saw the Squishy Lens demo, they both thought it looked much more organic. David felt so strongly about the lens that when the producers said they didn't have the money to rent it, she paid for it out of her own pocket. (Wiegand wryly notes that she and

David were both amused by the irony of the Squishy Lens being used on a film directed and shot by women, because the pliable element in the center of the lens that gives it its "squish" is the same kind of material used in breast implants.)

Wiegand says that manipulating colors has always been an interest of hers, and *The Courier* allowed her to try some non-digital techniques that she had wanted to attempt for years. "Because it was a low-budget film, we had to brainstorm about things we could do on-set instead of in post." Fortunately, she was able to do some tests before production began, which is unusual on such a modestly budgeted project. "On low-budget movies, the shoot is often the test," she notes.

The cinematographer says that her lighting package usually includes a lot of Kino Flos and HMIs. "Kinos work really well on low-budget movies. They give you a really nice light without taking up a lot of space, and they don't draw a lot of power. Also, they don't heat up as much as traditional lights, which is important if you're working on small sets."

The Courier had numerous night exterior scenes, so she also utilized two Condors, on which she

placed a 5K, a 12K, and a Maxi-Brute aimed at different areas. For night interiors, she used several small tungsten lights.

The production was shot in the standard 1.85:1 format, and the camera was an Arriflex 535B equipped with Zeiss Superspeeds and an Angenieux zoom, all of which were rented from Birns & Sawyer in Hollywood. Wiegand says she enjoyed using the zoom lens when she had enough stop; she even zoomed in and out mid-shot, a technique frequently employed in Hong Kong action movies. "A lot of times, I'd be going with the flow," she says. "You can do some crazy, creative stuff."

However, she admits that the technique was hard on her first assistant, Julie Donovan, who often had to pull focus on some wild shots without any rehearsal. "I'm surprised she didn't smack me," says Wiegand. The cinematographer was initially told she wouldn't be able to take Donovan along on the shoot for budgetary reasons, but she successfully argued that on a job as complex as *The Courier*, which required many scenes to be shot wide open, she needed a first AC she could trust.

Wiegand notes that she is

Dangerous Crossings

The film's finale boasts an intricate action sequence in which a character falls from a helicopter into a lake. "We had all kinds of crazy stunts," Wiegand remarks.



especially reliant on Donovan because she herself didn't come up through the assistant ranks. Instead, she studied in the graduate division of the UCLA Film School. She says she wanted to be a cinematographer from the age of 15, when she read an interview with Frederick Elmes, ASC. This ambition worked out very well

for her at school, because everyone else in the program wanted to direct, so there were plenty of projects for her to shoot.

One student for whom she shot a film recommended her to David, who was at that time prepping the feature *Eastside*. David says there were two things that piqued

her interest in Wiegand: one was a photograph on her wall that showed her father, a photographer, taking an 8"x10" picture of Wiegand as a little girl. David says that made her confident that Wiegand had been steeped in photography since childhood. The second factor was that Wiegand asked to see David's own reel, a request that hadn't been voiced by any of the other cinematographers with whom David had met.

Although David didn't do storyboards for *The Courier*, she and Wiegand and editor Allan Spencer Wall spent about 30 hours devising shot lists. The trio also discussed how to best use the camera to show what was really going on. "She does a huge amount of homework," Wiegand says of David.

To plan action sequences, the filmmakers went to the home of stunt coordinator Spiro Razatos and watched dailies from his other projects, using them as a way to narrow down precisely what they wanted in their own film.

Although Wiegand had previously shot projects that involved hand-to-hand combat and gunplay, *The Courier* was her first experience with large-scale action sequences that included explosions, helicopters and heavy-duty stunts. "We had all kinds of crazy stunts," she remarks. Fortunately, the B-camera operator for the stunt sequences, Igor Meglic, had a lot of experience shooting such scenes. "He was really helpful when I had to do process pickups," says Wiegand. "He had tips about putting in more action."

Wiegand says that the production wisely concentrated much of the budget on stunts, which enabled the stunt team to ensure that the action would be safe. She says she felt very confident in the precautions that were taken — not so much for herself, but for her crew. "When I'm shooting, I think about other people."

To heighten the intensity of action sequences, Wiegand manipulated the camera's shutter angle, reducing it to 90 degrees and sometimes 45 degrees to give the footage a strobing effect. She used this effect particularly for moments when the main character, who has been afraid of reinjuring his knee, decides to become very physical. In one such scene, set at a highway rest area, Morales makes a phone call and momentarily puts down the red-and-white ice chest that contains the last delivery he is transporting to Mexico. When he turns around, he finds that picnickers with identical red-and-white coolers have filled the rest area, and he has to run among them in order to relocate his.

One of the biggest stunts is set in the desert, where Morales' girlfriend shoots the gas tank of an FBI truck that is pursuing him as he rides away on a motorcycle. For this sequence, the crew used four cameras, including two Eyemos in crash housings. The stunt was shot

in two parts: first, the explosion of the truck, and then a "rollover" as the truck hits a small hill and flips. In both cases, the crew had to get the shot in one take because they knew the truck would be too damaged afterwards.

Razatos helped Wiegand select camera positions for the shots. For the fireball stunt, the A-camera was positioned behind Ali Landry,

who plays the girlfriend. The stunt actually takes place with her in the foreground; then, after the explosion, she turns to the camera to deliver a line. The other cameras were down closer to the truck, with the vehicle coming toward them.

It's hard to predict what's going to happen with crash cameras, and because they are unmanned it's impossible to control them during a

Could this be the perfect watch for a cinematographer?

Take the guesswork out of how many hours of daylight are left.

- Keeps time for sunrise and sunset along with exact lunar phase.
- Digital time for 500 cities and military time.
- One solar hand sweeps every 24 hours and relates to an LCD that displays length of day and night as they change throughout the season.
- A sunset alarm gets you up in time for the first rays.
- A calculator predicts sunrise and sunset times for future dates.
- An aqua backlight enables night viewing.
- Dot matrix shows hours-minutes-seconds-month-date-day, exact times of sunrise and sunset, and keeps time for two locations simultaneously.
- Locations can also be set by longitude and latitude.
- Initial travel tests even indicate that it helps combat jet lag by instantly connecting your internal clock to the local rhythms of day and night.
- The symbols on the rotating bezel can be used as peg marks for recurring production tasks, as third time zone, as your own personal code for daily events, or for sidereal time adjustment.

The Workhorse



Solid, stainless-steel construction, Swiss movement, water-resistant to 300 feet, locking clasp, one year warranty.

#W011 – The Workhorse, shown above, steel chain – \$299.

#W003 – The Bauhaus, same case, black leather – \$249.

Comes with instruction manual and chain adjustment tool. Measures 43mm by 15mm, weighs 5.6oz and 3.1oz, respectively. Lithium batteries. Worldwide patents.

Call: **1-877-YESWATCH (1-877-937-9282)** to order now, or visit our Web site to see the entire collection.



The Bauhaus

www.yeswatch.com

Dangerous Crossings

shot. Wiegand notes that this is one of the reasons why so many cameras are traditionally used during heavy action sequences. Also, because crash cameras tend to be older, they malfunction more often; in this case, there were some problems with scratching on the film, and at least one camera didn't roll. Nevertheless, Weigand says some of the best footage came from the crash cameras, because the shots were so intense.

In another sequence, shot at night, Morales escapes from a police station by hooking his handcuffs over a wire and sliding from the roof of the station to the top of a moving semi trailer in the street. This scene was filmed in three or four takes, with the two cameras covering the scene positioned in various locations that changed from take to take — on the roof, on a lower-level balcony and on the ground.

The two cameras shared the same lens packages. Because Meglic was usually handholding his camera, Wiegand gave him her widest lens, an 18mm. Wiegand was on a tripod, so she felt that it was better for her to use the 25mm. In both cases, though, she stayed relatively wide because she felt the wider lenses expanded the space and made the action more dynamic. Also, wide lenses hid the fact that the action was being performed by a stuntman. Later, the crew set up a horizontal wire, slid Lopez along on a dolly and shot with a camera on a dutch angle in order to create a cheated close-up of his downward slide.

At the end of the movie, the villains try to escape in a helicopter, but Morales grabs one of its skids and is dragged up into the air. He soon falls from the helicopter, plummeting into a lake. Before *The Courier*, Wiegand had never even been in a helicopter, so shooting the scene was particularly

exciting for her.

The stunt was divided into three sections: a jump onto the helicopter and the helicopter taking off, the fight on the helicopter, and the fall into the lake. The take-off and fall were shot during the same day on location. Later, on a pickup day, the fight scenes were shot with the actors at an airport, with the helicopter either on the ground or hovering a few feet above. At Meglic's suggestion, Wiegand shot many of the pickup shots with the camera whip-panning to and from the action, so that the editor would have many cut points and chances to enhance the excitement.

Wiegand says that while she was shooting *The Courier*, a cinematographer friend of hers, Scott Kevan, was shooting the movie *Bug*. The two of them would call each other up to compare notes. Wiegand remembers Kevan telling her, "I thought my shoot was insane until I heard about yours."

For Wiegand, *The Courier* offered a chance to experiment and to try new things — night scenes, action sequences, chases. "It wasn't that I felt I couldn't do those things, but I *hadn't* done them," she says. She adds that although each film she does seems bigger and more complicated than the last, she's still happy to work on very low-budget projects if they seem intriguing. Her next film is a 35mm sci-fi short called *The New, New World*, and she is also working on a low-budget digital-video feature, *Cherry Bomb*. "I just want to shoot and work with interesting directors, even if the project doesn't involve a lot of money." ■