

Production Slate

Honing Images on Indie Budgets



Jimmy (John Patrick Amedori) is one of the youths whose whirlwind day is tracked in *Little Athens*, shot by Lisa Wiegand.

Partying Too Hard

by Hugh Hart

When director Tom Zuber first approached Lisa Wiegand last April about shooting his independent feature *Little Athens*, he already had a specific look in mind for his film, which traces four groups of misguided, small-town teenagers over the course of one tumultuous 24-hour period. The long day culminates in a late-night party that spins out of control. "When I initially read the script, I imagined it would be in the vein of *Bully* [shot by Steve Gainer, ASC], with handheld, frenetic camerawork," Wiegand says. "But Tom had a totally different take on it. He wanted to make it feel really epic, so he had all of these storyboards designed with frames in a widescreen aspect ratio."

Little Athens, featuring an ensemble cast that includes D.J. Qualls and Rachel Miner, cost less than \$1 million to make. The challenge for Wiegand was how to capture widescreen grandeur on a modest budget. Zuber and producer Josh Lawler had envisioned shooting the entire movie on 16mm. However, Wiegand soon discovered that it was difficult to

get a good deal on those packages. "When I looked into shooting anamorphic 16," she says, "it was hard to find those sorts of lenses, and it was also hard to find bargains in postproduction to support that kind of approach."

Wiegand instead recommended shooting in the widescreen Super 35mm format for the daylight portion of the movie, and Zuber and Lawler signed on. "The great thing about the whole process with Tom and Josh is that they were really receptive to what I had to say," Wiegand offers. "When Tom told me about his vision for the film and I responded with my ideas, they took the time to educate themselves about the different techniques I talked to them about, even if at first it seemed like those approaches might be more expensive. They made the calls and wound up getting a lot of support from a lot of big vendors in town. Tom and Josh were able to secure our camera package through a grant from Panavision, which was amazing because without it we probably would not have been able to shoot 35mm."

The Panavision package included a Panaflex G-2 camera and a set of MKII lenses, which Wiegand had never used

before. "I was worried about flaring in the lenses because Tom wanted a lot of bright sources in the backgrounds of shots," she notes. "I did some tests with the MK IIs and they held up amazingly well, so I was happy to use them."

During preproduction, Wiegand convinced her director to try a digital intermediate (DI). "Image manipulation wasn't new to me, because I was familiar with digital programs like Photoshop and I've done a lot of image manipulation with stills. I've also done a lot of image manipulation in telecine working on projects that finish on video, so I know what is possible in the digital realm."

Wiegand had also researched the DI process in a number of trade journals, including *AC*: "I keep up to date by reading articles where people discuss the DI as something that's becoming more and more important in the filmmaking process. Tom and Josh are savvy guys, and they were able to reference articles to see why I was suggesting digital manipulation. Also, a lot of the films that I've admired in the past few years have used the DI process, so I started to realize all the potential for image manipulation."

Once the filmmakers saw a DI as the best way to execute the ambitious look envisioned for *Little Athens*, Burbank's Level 3 Post put together an affordable package for the project. Notes Wiegand, "We didn't have a huge budget that allowed us to actually design everything the way Tom wanted it, so many of the things he wanted to do seemed next to impossible without some sort of manipulation capability. That made it much easier to decide on a DI. If we had an affordable DI, we could achieve a lot of what he wanted to do,



Emily (Michelle Horn, left) and Allison (Rachel Miner) are detained by the police after a party gets out of hand. Though *Little Athens* is a low-budget film, Wiegand was able to use a digital intermediate, which helped her achieve a blue wash with red elements and bright highlights that came through (top image) during the party scene – something she could not accomplish with camera filters in the original photography (bottom image).



such as isolating different colors.

"Tom wanted each character's storyline to have its own color — orange, blue, yellow or green," she elaborates. "The production designer, Abbe Thorne, did a great job creating the color design for interiors, but obviously it was hard to control things like buildings and cars for our exterior shots. Once I showed Tom how much control we would have over our image by using a DI, he loved it. Then Josh figured out a way to fit it into the budget and raise the money."

Early in the 25-day *Little Athens* shoot, which took place last summer in Sylmar and other Los Angeles-area locations, Wiegand utilized the Panavision Swing Shift Lens System. Zuber wanted one character at the beginning of the story to be out of focus every time he appeared onscreen; the Swing Shift System allowed Wiegand to blur the character's face in cramped quarters, where racking focus in the conventional manner proved unfeasible. "Sometimes

we'd stage a shot so that the character would have his back to the camera, and as soon as he turned around we'd do a rack focus to make him extremely out of focus," she explains. "But in smaller locations where that wasn't possible, we used the Swing Shift System to help control our focus."

Little Athens' narrative flow abruptly accelerates in the third act, when all four story lines converge at a wild, late-night keg party. For this section, Wiegand and Zuber crafted a distinct visual vocabulary that would heighten the tension of the climax. Says Wiegand, "Tom wanted everything that happened during party scene to seem completely different from the footage we had shot during the day, so that it would get progressively more intense."

The 25-minute party sequence was defined through a variety of elements. Wiegand switched formats, dropping Super 35mm in favor of Super 16mm. "Instead of that epic, clean feel of the day scenes, we wanted a grainier,

more intimate feel, which we got from using 16mm's much smaller negative and a more maneuverable camera. We also wanted the depth of field to feel totally different from the rest of the film. Since the party scene includes a lot of different characters from other storylines in the background, we knew 16mm would give us the depth of field we needed to show those people a little bit better."

Additionally, Wiegand, who operated the camera, shot the night scenes with a handheld Arri 16SR-2 and switched film stock from the Kodak Vision 250D 5246 used for the daylight scenes to Vision2 500T 7218. "I could have chosen 7298 or 7279, which are also 500-speed stocks," she points out, "but I wanted something with more latitude. Since I knew we were doing a DI, I wanted to get as much information as possible onto the negative. The 7218 gives you a lot of detail in the shadow, which was great because we were doing these night exteriors on a really low budget in a gigantic backyard. I knew I could always get rid of the information during our color-timing sessions, but I wanted the option of retaining that level of detail."

The party scenes' cool color tone represented a radical departure from the earlier, more warmly lit sequences. "We wanted those day scenes to be warm so the audience would really feel the heat of this hot summer day that leads up to the tragic evening event," Wiegand explains.

Wiegand's main lighting units of choice for the daytime portion of *Little Athens* were 2.5K and 4K HMIs. "Many times," she says, "I used the HMIs with very little diffusion to create hard light that would suggest a sunny, hot, summer day. I also really liked using Kino Flos. We had several in our package. Sometimes, to give add a little bit of warmth, I'd replace one or two of the daylight-balanced tubes with 3200°K tubes." When overcast weather threatened continuity, Wiegand used decamired filters to sustain the illusion that all of the events were transpiring on a single, consistently warm day.

To light the night exteriors,



Above: Emily Wiegand ponders her life at a public pool. **Right:** Wiegand (on camera) records a bird's-eye view of Emily after she takes a drastic measure. **Below:** Cool shades – Wiegand uses video goggles borrowed from Stephen Lighthill, ASC to operate in cramped quarters.

Wiegand set up two Condors in the backyard. "We rigged each of them with a Nine-light Maxi-Brute and rimmed the basket with Par cans, which we used to highlight specific areas in the background," she notes.

To enhance the foreboding mood with additional texture, Wiegand adds, "we put Par cans in different areas of the yard that we wanted to accent and did some lighting from the ground where we wanted to fill in. There were a lot of trees in the yard, so I was able to get great shadows by moving the Condors around. Depending on where in the yard we were shooting, we were able to shoot through the leaves and use those

trees to create some really cool shadows."

Wiegand deliberately used a lot of light for the extended party sequence: "I shot the night exterior stuff brighter and flatter than I normally would, knowing that later on I could build up the contrast and darken the image. The whole look was contingent on doing lots of work on that section of the film at the digital-intermediate stage."

Wiegand says several ideas were considered, but "in the end, we came up with the idea of having a blue wash over everything, with red elements and bright white highlights coming through. I thought about achieving that look in camera, so I tested some different filters, but it didn't work — once we started filtering to make everything really blue, the reds didn't come out very well." Wiegand decided to shoot the scenes without filters and instead manipulate the colors during the DI.

She established her visual template in advance by searching the Internet for images of party scenes. "I downloaded images of dark party scenes, processed them through Photoshop and found a look that Tom and I both liked, where the reds would pop and everything else would be monochromatic shades of blue."

Zuber says he appreciated Wiegand's resourcefulness in the face of *Little Athens'* limited shooting budget: "By going through Photoshop, Lisa demonstrated what we'd get with different combinations of desaturation. We didn't have the money to actually go practice [through tests], so it was

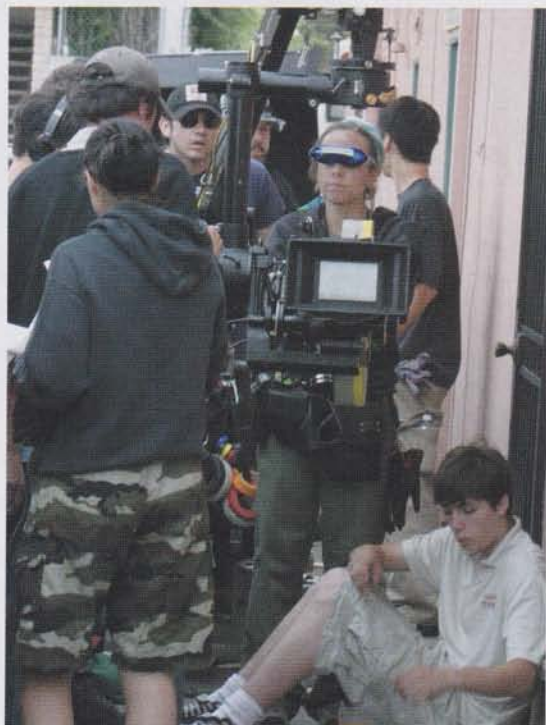


extremely helpful when Lisa came up with that idea."

Throughout production, Zuber was impressed with Wiegand's ability to produce high-quality work on a tight shooting schedule. "We were looking for a cinematographer who could make the frame look great and could make the lighting look great, but we also needed someone who was used to working with an independent budget," he says. "Besides being very talented, Lisa really came through for us by working within our time and budget constraints."

Since earning an MFA from UCLA in 1998 and the ASC's Karl Struss Heritage Award for Cinematography, Wiegand has shot several 35mm and high-definition features, including *Eastside*, *Dean Quixote*, *Fish in a Barrel*, *Outta Time* (a.k.a. *The Courier*; see AC Dec. '01), *Scrambled*, *Totally Sexy Loser* and *Cherry Bomb*. She credits first AC John Orphan and her "incredibly energetic" gaffer Eric Boland with helping her move quickly on a tight schedule. "I didn't come up through the ranks before becoming a cinematographer," she notes, "so I really rely on a strong crew."

During the *Little Athens* shoot, Wiegand supervised dailies indirectly by recording microcassettes delivered to Jeff Arden, the dailies colorist at Level 3. "Because Jeff was translating what I was doing into the digital realm, I tried to



communicate with him as much as possible. Every day I made microcassettes about each of the scenes we shot, telling him what I thought he should do with them. I also had Jeff transfer everything full-frame because I wanted to have all of that image available for the new digital negative, in case we wanted to reposition any shots or do any effects during post."

Little Athens, a Legaci Pictures production that is currently being submitted to film festivals, wrapped principal photography in mid-June 2004. Last fall, Wiegand worked on the DI with Level 3 colorist Ron Nichols, creating the final look of the party scenes, fine-tuning the palette and conforming the framing to create a seamless 2:35:1 aspect ratio for both the Super 35 and Super 16 footage. Wiegand spent about 40 hours on the labor-intensive DI process. "I know some directors of photography feel they'll lose control in the post process if they can't be there for it," she says. "I'm lucky in a way, because I'm not shooting features back to back. When I shoot a feature, I have time to go through the post process with it."

Now that she's completed her first DI, Wiegand harbors no doubts about the value that the process can bring to a visually ambitious low-budget project. "It's such a great tool," she enthuses. "I feel fortunate to have used it on this project, because without it we wouldn't have been able to achieve the director's exact vision."