

SALVATORE TOTINO, ASC, AIC
EVEREST


MASANOBU TAKAYANAGI
BLACK MASS

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TIME OUT OF MIND
99 HOMES

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ROGER DEAKINS, ASC, BSC
DELVES INTO DRUG WAR

Short Takes

A father (Kevin J. O'Connor) travels to a remote hotel in the desert to meet with two potential baby-buyers in the short film *Chimeras*.



Monstrous Deeds

By Matt Mulcahey

In Greek mythology, the Chimera was a fire-breathing, many-headed creature that roamed the countryside of Lycia. In the short film *Chimeras*, the monster metaphorically takes human form as a trio of desperate men converges in the desert to make a transgressive deal. "I wanted to have the faces of the actors be partially in light and partially in the darkness," says cinematographer Carlo Rinaldi, AIC. "I wanted to make them [resemble] this beast, the Chimera."

Shot in the Mojave Desert over eight days in June 2014, *Chimeras* tells the based-in-fact tale of a father (Kevin J. O'Connor) who travels to a remote motel to sell his infant son to two men (Chris Coy and Michael Ironside). Director and co-writer Gianluca Minucci never reveals the motivations for the transaction. "I fell in love with the script and its atmosphere," says Rinaldi, who splits his time working in Los Angeles and Rome. "It's a noir story crossed with a Western. It made me think of the Coen Brothers' *Fargo* or the tension of Paul Thomas Anderson's storytelling."

Rinaldi found inspiration in the cinematography of Gordon Willis, ASC; Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC; and Joaquin Baca-Asay. "Gordon Willis was my reference in terms of contrast ratio and the use of deep shadows," says Rinaldi. "I looked to Joaquin Baca-Asay for this idea of lighting interior days to almost look like interior nights. And Roger Deakins for me is a benchmark of elegance and creativity."

Minucci initially envisioned shooting *Chimeras* in 35mm with anamorphic lenses. However, the budget couldn't accommodate anamorphic glass, and shooting 35mm would have required performing post in Los Angeles rather than at Rinaldi's preferred destination, inHouse Post in Rome. With anamorphic lenses off the table, Rinaldi tested a vintage set of spherical Kowas, but was unsat-

isfied with the distortion of the wide-angle lenses and the color differences within the set. Rufus Burnham, president and CEO of L.A.'s The Camera House, then played matchmaker between Rinaldi and a set of Leica Summicron-C T2.0 lenses. "Rufus suggested the Leicas, and I literally fell in love," Rinaldi says. "They have a unique bokeh for a spherical set, they are lightweight and compact, and they perfectly married with our CinemaScope aspect ratio."

In choosing a digital camera, Rinaldi's main concern was finding a sensor that could handle the wide dynamic range necessary for *Chimeras*. "We had interior days with big windows that I didn't want to blow out, so I needed a camera that could easily handle overexposure," he says. "On the other hand, I had exterior night scenes in the desert, so I needed a camera that I could push to 1,600 ASA. The Arri Alexa Classic was the perfect choice."

Chimeras opens with a 90-second push-in amid a suburban dining room. The camera creeps toward a baby basket while the child's parents frantically cross in and out of frame. The parents remain largely in darkness, without the reassurance of fill light, while a hot toplight beams down upon the basket. "That first image is very important because it has to catch the audience right away, especially in a short film," says Rinaldi. "Gianluca and I wanted to immediately give a sense of mystery and anxiety, and we used the toplight on the baby's crib to underline that the baby's character is pure."

To convey that purity, Rinaldi left the Joker-Bug 200 HMI used for the toplight free of gel, while placing ¼ CTO on the 4K HMI backlight positioned outside the glass sliding door. The backlight was pushed through a 4'x4' frame of Lee 251 Quarter White Diffusion.

The bulk of *Chimeras* unfolds at a motel located in the sandy wasteland of the Mojave Desert. Those scenes were filmed at the Four Aces — a movie set comprising a motel, diner and gas station

All images courtesy of Gregory J. Rossi.

Top: The baby-buyers (Michael Ironside, left, and Chris Coy) in a diner scene captured at the Four Aces film set in Palmdale, Calif. Bottom: The diner exterior is prepped for shooting.



— in Palmdale, Calif., approximately an hour northeast of Los Angeles. Rinaldi describes the location as “a little jewel. Shooting there helped us make the desert a character. We wanted to have this deep-brown, sandy palette and really make the audience feel how hot and dirty the place is.”

The prospective baby-buyers make their first appearance at the Four Aces’ diner set. The scene begins with an overhead shot peering down at a booth table. Key grip Tommy Donald helped achieve the shot by adding risers and a long offset to a Fisher 10 dolly and employing a Cartoni Lambda head. “The Lambda is usually used for low-angle shots, but if you rig it on top of the Fisher with the risers and then tilt 90 degrees, you have a perfect overhead shot,” says Rinaldi. “You can also spin the

camera and boom down, which we did in a shot where Kevin J. O’Connor signs the [guest register] in the motel office.”

To keep the diner windows from blowing out, Donald placed Gam adhesive .9 ND gel on the glass. For the key light on Coy and Ironside, an 18K HMI Fresnel with ¼ CTO was aimed into the diner through a 12’x12’ frame of Half Soft Frost. A 1.2K HMI with ⅓ and ¼ CTO was bounced off a 4’x8’ beadboard for a backlight. To give the scene the warm glow that exists throughout *Chimeras*, Rinaldi set the Alexa’s color temperature to 6,500K.

Rinaldi captured *Chimeras* in 2K ProRes 4:4:4:4 onto SxS cards. He operated the camera and used an onboard TV Logic 5.6” LCD monitor rather than trekking to video village. “We didn’t use any LUTs for monitoring on the set,” he adds. “I would

switch between Rec 709 and Log C on my onboard monitor just to check the contrast ratio.” Digital-imaging technician Shiblon Wixom then adjusted the color and contrast to generate ProRes 4:2:2 HQ 1080p dailies in Blackmagic Design’s DaVinci Resolve, which Rinaldi and Minucci viewed on an iPad during the following day’s lunch or after wrap.

Rinaldi did get a break from operating when he turned the camera over to Steadicam operator Damian Church, who flew his rig for *Chimeras*’ bravura four-minute tracking shot. The shot finds Coy and Ironside traversing the length of the Four Aces to reach O’Connor’s room, where they expect to exchange cash for the infant. Despite help from the Four Aces’ neon sign and colorful practicals, the night exterior still necessitated emptying out the electric truck. “Everything I had was on set,” Rinaldi recalls. Laughing, he adds, “I remember the gaffer, Jeremy Kerr, telling me we were out of stingers!”

Even with every light working, Rinaldi rated the Alexa at 1,600 ASA to get to a wide-open T2 on the 25mm lens. For the shot’s conclusion — which finds Coy and Ironside in front of O’Connor’s room — Kerr taped a Kino Flo tube above the motel-room door. Just before the 13th take, the tube broke. “I was a little desperate, but Gianluca said, ‘Let’s shoot it anyway,’” Rinaldi recalls. “And of course, as is always the case, that take happened to be the best one, and it’s the take that’s in the short. Sometimes mistakes or randomness make the movie better.”

O’Connor flees the Four Aces and



Top: The setup for a high-angle shot looking down on the infant. Middle: Cinematographer Carlo Rinaldi operates a Nettmann Stab-C remote head from the back seat of a Pursuit Systems Off Road Buggy for a car chase in the Mojave Desert. Bottom: Rinaldi lines up a shot.

his potential buyers, leading to a car chase set against the black oblivion of the Mojave. Rinaldi captured the chase with a Pursuit Systems Off Road Buggy. The cinematographer operated the camera using a Nettmann Stab-C remote head while stunt driver Josh Lakatos drove the buggy along its sandy track. An 18K rigged on a 45' Condor created a moonlight effect, and a 4K rigged to the same Condor basket — but pointed in the opposite direction — illuminated the background. “I wanted to have the moonlight effect always as a backlight,” Rinaldi explains, “so we had to reset and back up the cars to their first position after every take.”

Chimeras was graded at Rome’s inHouse Post by colorist Rocio Valladares Alegria using DaVinci Resolve. Alegria added inHouse’s proprietary grain for a more filmic look. Rinaldi notes that inHouse “has a special algorithm for grain that they programmed themselves, and I really fell in love with it. The good thing about [adding the grain in post] was that I could adjust the grain effect scene by scene or even frame by frame. For example, maybe on a close-up I would want a little less grain, and that’s something you can only do in the digital world.”

For its upcoming festival run, *Chimeras* was finished as a 2K DCP. A ProRes 4:2:2 HQ file was also prepared for the short’s eventual online afterlife. Additionally, Minucci has expanded the short story into a feature-length screenplay, which Rinaldi hopes will be shot in 2016. “Gianluca and [*Chimeras* producer] Gregory J. Rossi are trying to fund it in L.A. right now,” the cinematographer says. “I think the short makes a great promo for a [feature-length] version, and I really hope we get to make it.” ●