

Short Takes



Alice (Odessa Young) experiences a rush of teenage awakening in the short film *Blood Pulls a Gun*.

Fugitive Motel

By Simon Gray

Fourteen-year-old Alice (Odessa Young) halfheartedly helps her dad run a ramshackle motel far beyond the city limits. As she daydreams and pilfers mementos from guests, archetypal bad-boy Blood Lieberman (Josh McConville) checks in and sends Alice into a spiral of curiosity. Directed by Ben Briand and shot by Jeremy Rouse, the coming-of-age short film *Blood Pulls a Gun* tells Alice and Blood's ultimately tragic tale.

The film, which premiered at the 2014 South by Southwest Film Festival, marks Briand and Rouse's first collaboration. "Ben favors subjective filmmaking and wanted to tell this story through Alice's teenage eyes," says Rouse. He adds that an important aspect of the camerawork was to make the audience participants in Alice's voyeurism. "We wanted to pull the audience through her new experiences and show them what it literally looks and feels like to her as she discovers this new adult world, which is both romantic and dangerous," he says. "However, we still wanted the characters to feel like they were in the same film together, so there was no dramatic shift in camera style between Alice and Blood's worlds. A mix of handheld, graphic wide shots and intimate close-ups was used for both characters."

Framing for the 2.40:1 aspect ratio, Rouse shot *Blood Pulls a Gun* with a Red Epic MX in 5K resolution with 5:1 compression, recording to Red Mini-Mags. "I chose [ArriZeiss] Master Prime lenses because they are high speed and I have always liked the look they

provide," he says. "There is an ongoing discussion about using vintage glass with digital cameras because newer lenses are often considered too sharp and crisp. I think there is a lot of truth to that, and older lenses offer unique characteristics that I love, but I also think knowing what the lenses have to cope with is important. I knew I was going to be pushing the lenses really hard — there would be a lot of heavy flaring, lots of shooting straight into windows, and I like how [the Master Primes] handle that, even wide open. Older, vintage lenses would have just blown out and had too much soft flare for the look I was after.

"Ben wanted a mood that expressed fragile, emerging sexuality colliding with dirty, cheap motel sex," Rouse explains. "We opted for a warm palette in order to underscore how Alice has constructed a lie about her own life. She lives a dull existence and attempts to escape the stifling boredom by romanticizing her life: smoking cigarettes, listening to swirling music and reading glossy magazines while sunbathing. She wants to be in her own *Casablanca*." As Alice's daydreaming takes on a darker, more obsessive tone with the arrival of Blood and his companion, the sultry Mysterious Woman (Tess Haubrich), "it was as simple as shifting between states of light and dark to illustrate how Alice and Blood exist in different worlds," the cinematographer says. "Alice's romantic look is sun-drenched and golden, while the scenes with Blood tend to be darker and more mysterious.

"To develop the feeling of mystery surrounding Blood," Rouse continues, "we used longer lenses and obscuring objects in the frame, so the audience never really gets a good look at Blood

Unit photography by Scott Lowe and Andrew Peters. Photos and frame grabs courtesy of the filmmakers.

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Alice lives a dull existence at her family-run motel until Blood Lieberman (Josh McConville, third from top) checks in. Top right: Director Ben Briand (left) and cinematographer Jeremy Rouse discuss a scene.

until the moment he confronts Alice for watching him having sex with the Mysterious Woman. His look to her then is a true POV [from Alice's perspective], straight into the lens. Also, much of the story is told from the perspective of Alice watching Blood and the Mysterious Woman from afar. Their arrival at the motel is a good example of this. We used long lenses such as the 150mm to glimpse them with a distanced, voyeuristic feel. I then used the 35mm or 40mm to create a closer, more intimate feel for Alice's reactions."

While Rouse often prefers to use standard-length lenses in the 35mm to 50mm range, Briand had some specific requirements for wider shots. "Ben likes to use wide establishing shots to open scenes, but he prefers a slightly longer lens than normal — for instance, a 50mm rather than an 18mm or 25mm. This created a graphic, painterly image that also 'flattened' the characters onto the oppressive motel architecture, reinforcing the idea that they are all not only defined by their location, but also trapped in it."

The filmmakers spent several months scouting for that all-important location. "The hotel we envisioned dictated every aspect of *Blood Pulls a Gun*," recalls Rouse. "It had to be a dilapidated paradise that was visually representative of Alice. We finally chose a motel in Swansea [in New South Wales], because it had such an oppressively claustrophobic feel, which was only added to by the overgrown grass and trees surrounding it. The interior was decked out in peachy, flesh-colored tones, which helped to determine our color palette. Visual tension was created by shooting the ramshackle motel in a 'romantic haze' — a golden, almost faux-tropical glow."

Rouse avoided using predetermined look-up tables on set, preferring to light by



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Alice approaches Blood's room, where she catches him in an intimate moment with the Mysterious Woman (Tess Haubrich). Top right: Rouse leads Young with a handheld Red Epic MX.



eye. "I really like responding instinctually to the image," he says, "so I used the Epic's basic gamma and constantly toggled between that and raw. Once I know what's actually being captured, I'm happy to tweak the monitor settings: brightness, contrast and saturation."

For filtration in front of the lens, Rouse consistently employed Tiffen Black Pro-Mists, ranging in strength from ½ to 1. "The scene in which Alice listens to Blood and the Mysterious Woman fighting was shot against a very hot sky," Rouse notes. "The filter helped lower the high contrast a little and soften the highlights for a more pleasing, softer look."

During preproduction, the filmmakers found particular inspiration in the work of photographer Todd Hido. Rouse notes, "Ben and I were primarily interested in and inspired by [Hido's] choice to photograph the backs of motels, rather than the fronts. These mundanely domesticated parts of the motel were a more likely place to find our characters [and] a truthful point of view from which to tell this story."

The filmmakers' primary camera support was a 3' slider mounted on a Chapman/Leonard PeeWee dolly, which Rouse describes as "a great way to get small moves quickly. When Alice is inside the motel, the camera is mostly static to show that her world inside is safe but also stagnant. This is in contrast to when she is outside, where the camera was handheld to reflect the excitement, trepidation and — at times — panic that Alice was feeling." Rouse occasionally used a tripod with a loose head or a [Cinekinetic] CineSaddle to create a light, floating feeling that maintained the dreamy, romantic tone.

Rouse's workhorse light was a 6K





Photographed by Diego Zitelli

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Top two: Alice encounters Blood. Bottom two: Alice whiles away her time daydreaming, smoking and stealing from guests.

Par, which the cinematographer describes as “a quick and versatile source. We had a limited budget and the 6K was perfect to quickly move from scene to scene. The 6K was used for most of the interiors, often bashed into the curtains or blinds to create a glowing window source falling into the room. With that approach, I rarely felt the need to key-light actors’ faces. The scene where the Mysterious Woman and Blood have their altercation shows this technique particularly well.” Rouse also used Kino Flo Image 80s or 4’ four banks with a mixture of daylight and tungsten tubes, as required, on interiors.

For night exteriors, Rouse and Briand sought to create a streetlight source that would not be mistaken for moonlight. “Ben and I really wanted a color we don’t often see,” the cinematographer recalls. “Gaffer Mark Kavanagh and I tried a couple of different gel packages before settling on a combination of teal and cyan on a daylight-balanced source, which contrasted really richly with the tungsten warmth of the motel exterior.”

Blood Pulls a Gun was color-timed in 2K anamorphic by Billy Wychgel in Blackmagic Design’s DaVinci Resolve 10 at Definition Films in Sydney, Australia. Briand and Rouse also had a DaVinci system set up in one of the motel rooms to view dailies on location. “We watched rushes each day with [digital-imaging technician] Ben Blick-Hodge for a tech-check, and we also made some basic tweaks to the LUT,” Rouse recalls.

As the cinematographer explains, the director’s non-traditional workflow played a key role in production. “Ben really likes to work across many departments while putting the film together,” says Rouse. “For instance, the score was written before principal photography so the music could be played as we set up shots. The music also helped us find the mood of the grade very quickly. We did a temporary grade on the rough cut that was just a quick, instinctual response to the images. This turned out to be great for the editor and sound designer, as they could feel what I like to term the ‘viscosity’ of the images. When we eventually went back to do the final grade, there were only a handful of detailed tweaks left to do, mostly around the saturation levels.”

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