

Short Takes

Milia Showcases Arri's D-20

by Iain Stasukevich



Above: A New York fashion photographer (Rufus Collins) learns that a new model, Milia (Cecile Raubenheimer), is linked to his past. Below: Cinematographer Philipp Friesenbichler (far left) studies his notes while director Jorge Valdes-Iga rehearses the actors.

Cinematographer Philipp Friesenbichler didn't need much convincing when director and friend Jorge Valdes-Iga invited him to New York to shoot the short film *Milia*. The pair had been close collaborators while studying film at the University of Miami. "Philipp is very methodical and I tend to be more spontaneous, which creates a good balance," notes Valdes-Iga. In addition to that, says Friesenbichler, "Jorge and I

share an interest in the same kinds of stories."

Milia tells the story of Nathaniel (Rufus Collins), a gruff and charismatic fashion photographer living in New York City who encounters a model with a link to his past, Milia (Cecile Raubenheimer). Limited to a tiny budget, Valdes-Iga originally intended to use Panasonic's DVX100, but about a week before the shoot was scheduled to begin, he



learned Arri CSC was willing to loan the production an Arri D-20 at no cost. He immediately called Friesenbichler and asked him to shoot the picture. "I arrived in New York less than 30 hours before we set up the first shot," recalls the cinematographer.

Friesenbichler's experience with hi-def video up to that point was limited to ENG-style cameras. He researched the D-20 as much as he could, but "we started the shoot in May 2006, and at that time, people hadn't had much field experience with it," he says. "In fact, I believe *Milia* was the first narrative project shot with it in the United States. We didn't have time to test the camera or really get to know it before the shoot, but fortunately, it handles like a film camera — that's what I came to love about it."

Throughout the shoot, Andreas Weeber, head of Arri CSC's digital-imaging department, worked as a camera operator and go-to guy for all things related to the D-20. The fact that he and Friesenbichler both spoke German — Weeber is German and Friesenbichler is Austrian — "enabled a more efficient stream of communication between us from a creative standpoint," says the cinematographer.

Valdes-Iga wanted to take an improvisational approach, allowing actors to adjust their performances from take to take. "What I liked about *Milia* was it required me to constantly adapt," says Friesenbichler. "There's a different energy level on set when you take an approach like that. Everyone's got to be really alert and ready to capture those few moments that end up on screen." He singles out the D-20's optical viewfinder system as a key element in facilitating Valdes-Iga's directorial style,

as it allowed him to see clearly around the edges of the 1.78:1 frame in anticipation of the actors' movements.

There were two phases of principal photography, a few days in May 2006 and a few days the following October. Friesenbichler decided early on to let the main character guide his lighting and lens choices. "As a photographer, Nathaniel is a voyeur. Sitting behind the camera gives you a kind of distance from what's happening." He worked with Cooke S4 primes "because my goal was to achieve a rather natural look that would serve the intimate story in a subtle way. The characteristics of the S4s in combination with an occasional [Tiffen] Classic Soft filter were my recipe for that." Most of the time, he shot wide open. "In certain locations, I didn't have a choice because of the sensitivity of the camera's chip, but in general, I wanted to maintain a shallow depth of field to isolate the characters from the background and allow the audience to focus on the performances."

With most of *Milia* set indoors or at night on practical locations, Friesenbichler was concerned to discover that the 0 gain setting on the D-20 is roughly equivalent to ISO 50; Weeber recommended a maximum gain setting equivalent to ISO 200. On a shoot as small as *Milia*, large lamps were out of the question, and Friesenbichler's work with HD had taught him that with most such cameras, pumping up the gain would add a level of noise to the picture that would be unacceptable for a story like *Milia*. (For the second phase of principal photography, Arri provided him with a D-20 Exposure Wheel that had just been developed by German cinematographer Tom Fährmann.)

Friesenbichler soon discovered that when he dialed in one of the D-20's preprogrammed user settings, the camera's gamma curve adjusted itself whenever a gain adjustment was made. Furthermore, every user setting corresponded to a specific exposure index (50, 100, 200 and 320). "Basically, every user setting can be perceived like a different film stock, and choosing a setting will define how many stops



Friesenbichler takes aim on set with the Arri D-20.

above and below the working stop there are," he says. "Cinematographers working with the D-20 have to get to know the characteristics of the user settings just like they have to know the characteristics of various emulsions.

"When I shoot digitally, a waveform monitor takes over 90 percent of the work normally done with my light meter," he adds. "I definitely start to pay more to attention to highlights and deep shadows, and the ND grads come out of the box more often than they do on my film shoots."

Footage was captured in 4:4:4 via dual-link to a Sony SRW-1 deck on HDCam-SR tape. Between the two shoots, Friesenbichler and Valdes-Iga reviewed their footage (projected on a 2K NEC projector) in a screening room at Cineworks, the Miami facility that is handling all of the production's post. "The images were just stunning in terms of color rendition, and in terms of the dynamic range of the chip and motion rendition," recalls the cinematographer. "Everything about the image fit the criteria of what a good picture is."

Cineworks is providing *Milia* with 2K screening facilities, standard-definition downconversions for editing, and a digital intermediate on Assimilate Scratch. (Valdes-Iga intends to finish to a digital-cinema master.) At press time, Friesenbichler was looking forward to

the color correction. "It will be subtle," he says. "I want to play with a lot of contrast in the beginning to establish Nathaniel in such a way that we have a very superficial idea of him. It begins with a very cold look, and then warmer colors begin to take over."

One way the D-20 enabled him to achieve this transition was its ability to handle lighting conditions with mixed color temperatures on set. "When you're shooting digitally and introduce warm colors in skin tones, you often get a lot of weird artifacts on skin — it doesn't look natural," he notes. "But once I saw the first projection at Cineworks, I was very confident that I could mix tungsten sources with HMI sources, balance to HMI and let the tungsten go."

After working with the D-20, Friesenbichler has come to regard it as a digital camera capable of realizing looks he previously thought only film could achieve. "Over the past few years, there have been some exciting advances in technology for cinematographers like me who are just starting out," he muses. "As a cinematographer, you want to create the right picture for the story, and you have to know the palette each tool offers you. A tool is there to work, not stand in your way." ■