

John Bailey, ASC: Exploring the aesthetics of anamorphic filmmaking

You don't need all of the fingers on one hand to count the number of cinematographers who have shot two films nominated for a Grand Jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival. John Bailey, ASC joined that exclusive club in 2009 with *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *The Greatest*. He collaborated with first-time directors John Krasinski on the former, and Shana Feste on the latter. "I was drawn to *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *The Greatest*, because they are real stories about interesting characters and their relationships," he says.

Most of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* takes place on a 12-by-18 foot set of a room where a female graduate student is doing research for her thesis by asking men to share memories of their experiences with women. The interviews are woven into the fabric of the story, which includes transitional and flashback scenes.

1

The Greatest is a family drama that revolves around interactions between a mother and father coping with the loss of a son and his troubled, pregnant teenage girlfriend, as well as the downward spiral of their surviving son. The family's home and other practical locations are like characters in foregrounds and backgrounds of scenes.

Bailey suggested shooting both films in 35mm anamorphic format with traditional film answer printing because he believed it was both the right aesthetic for the stories and affordable. He estimates that the budget for *The Greatest* was between \$3 million to \$4 million, which was double the budget for *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

His introduction to Krasinski was pure serendipity. When Bailey was preparing to shoot *License to Wed* in 2006, which starred Krasinski, director Ken Kwapis told him that Krasinski was planning to direct a film, and suggested they talk.

Intimate portraits

Krasinski wrote the screenplay, an adaptation of David Foster Wallace's novel, in addition to directing and acting in the film.

"I visualized producing the film in anamorphic format while I was reading John's (Krasinski) script," Bailey says. "I told him that it would give us more flexibility for composing intimate portraits of the men with medium and close-up shots that have a feeling of depth. It would also enable us to put faces in interview scenes in slightly different places in the frame and to play with positioning of heads, which would give me a larger canvas behind the heads to paint with light to subtly differentiate characters."

Feste contacted Bailey because she admired his work on *Ordinary People*, a 1980s character-driven, dialog-heavy film that focused on a crisis within a nuclear family.

"After I read the script, I told Shana, (producers) Lynette Howell and Aaron Kaufman that if they wanted to produce a movie on digital video with a lot of handheld camerawork that was their decision," Bailey says. "I also told them that by the time they paid for digital intermediate and film-out for cinema screens, the cost would be pretty much the same as shooting on 35mm film. I explained that we could shoot 35mm, if we were really responsible about the film's raw stock budget, in anamorphic format with traditional answer printing."

Bailey also advised Feste and the producers that a 2K D.I. would defeat the purpose of shooting in 35mm anamorphic format because it would degrade the richness of images and nuances in contrast and colors integral to the visual grammar.

"Most people assume that if you scanned all of the information off a 35mm film frame it would translate to a 2K or 4K data file but that's just what's practical today," he says. "My eyes tell me a medium-speed 35mm color negative that is properly exposed in anamorphic format is the equivalent in image information to an 8K digital file, and probably closer to 10K if you want to translate it into numbers."

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men was mainly produced at several small studios in Brooklyn, New York, that were previously warehouses. Some exterior scenes were filmed at a Boy Scout camp on Staten Island, and a couple of daytime exterior and classroom scenes were staged at locations on the Columbia University and Brooklyn College campuses.



The Greatest was mainly produced in Rockland County, a reasonable commute north of Manhattan. The script attracted an impressive cast, including Susan Sarandon and Pierce Brosnan, who portray the mother and father. Much of the story unfolds in a house that has been used as a location for many movies and commercials. It has a couple of wild walls and a source of power. Other scenes were filmed at nearby practical locations.

Panavision provided the camera and lens packages for both projects. Bailey estimates that he covered about 90 percent of the scenes with either a T2.8, 40 to 80mm or a T3.5, 70 to 200mm zoom lens. He had asked Panavision to develop both lenses years ago. Bailey also used a T4.5, 270-840mm anamorphic zoom lens for a few daylight exterior scenes, and Panavision C Series 40, 50 and 75mm lenses for Steadicam shots.

Complete control

His palette for both pictures consisted of KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film for tungsten-lit scenes, and KODAK VISION2 5205 250D and 5201 50D films for daylight sequences.

"John (Krasinski) and I talked at great length about the content of each of the interviews and how each actor would be interpreting his monologue," Bailey explains. "It was a springboard for me to think about how to light each character while he was talking about the experiences with wives, girlfriends, parents and friends. I used lighting as a variable, to get us into each character's soul."

The set for the interview room had four wild walls that could be moved independently if Bailey needed more space for lighting, or if he wanted to work with the camera further away with longer lenses. He decided to film all the interviews with the camera at basically the same height and distance with the same focal length lenses.

There were two windows on the left side of the set that were off camera most of the time and a third one directly behind the person being interviewed. Sometimes Bailey lit through that window. The light was hard or soft depending on time of day.

"Since the image sizes, angles and focal lengths were consistent, the defining characteristic was lighting," he adds. "I had complete control over colors and the quality of the light since the office had neutral colors and no character or presence of its own. Sometimes I bounced light coming off of a floor as though it were reflected sunbeams."

In contrast, *The Greatest* has characters interacting at more varied and bigger locations. Bailey observes that the wider aspect ratio gave the actors freedom to follow their instincts and move freely through sets without requiring a lot of panning. He occasionally let parts of scenes go a little soft to draw the eye to what was in focus.

"The anamorphic frame feels more organic and natural, like the way we see the world with our eyes," he says. "I don't over-prepare or intellectualize during pre-production. I've learned to trust my instincts and what my heart tells me to do."

A longer version of this article can be found at http://motion.kodak.com/US/en/motion/Publications/In_Camera/index.htm

1 (L-R) Julianne Nicholson and Michael Cerveris in a scene from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.
2 Writer-director Shana Feste and cinematographer John Bailey, ASC on the set of *The Greatest*.
Photos by Jolo Whilden