

Hagey lights goofy film noir Alien

by: **Marise Strauss**

Mar 28, 2005

"I just knew that it had potential to be a great cult film," says Toronto director of photography D. Gregor Hagey of the quirky sci-fi comedy feature Phil the Alien.

Despite the film's minuscule budget, Hagey was happy to lend his talents to the project, written by first-time director Rob Stefaniuk, who also stars.

"I've got a lot of experience with low-budget films, so it wasn't a problem," he says. "The script was just so funny and interesting that I was very enthusiastic to work on the film despite its [budget] limitations."

Hagey has accumulated a variety of credits, including features, docs, commercials and shorts, since he graduated from Ryerson University's film school in Toronto in 1993. In 2003, he was nominated for a CSC Award for the short Filthy, directed by Seth Poulin. He has also lensed the features Rub & Tug and The Limb Salesman.

Funded through Telefilm Canada's Low Budget Independent Feature Film Assistance Program, Phil the Alien was picked up by Lions Gate Films at the 2004 Toronto International Film Festival, where it was a surprise hit.

The story follows the misadventures of an extraterrestrial named Phil (Stefaniuk), who crashes his spaceship in northern Ontario, takes on a human form, and befriends a talking beaver (voiced by Joe Flaherty). During his escapades on Earth, Phil becomes an alcoholic, spends time in jail, and joins a Christian rock group while being hunted by government agents. The cast also includes Sean Cullen, John Kapelos, Nicole deBoer, Graham Greene and Bruce Hunter.

Hagey got the gig after a call from coproducer Craig Fleming, who arranged a meeting with Stefaniuk. "I showed Rob my reel and we hit it off," says the DOP.

With only a week's preparation and a 17-day shooting schedule (September/October 2003), the task seemed daunting at first. But Hagey credits Stefaniuk's sense of humor for their successful collaboration on the project.

"The crew was working for nothing, but they stood behind the film," he says. "Rob won them over and kept the mood light on set, which made it easier."

Various locations in rural Ontario were used, while an alien hangar and autopsy room were constructed at Toronto's Studio 99. Hagey says the crew also built a government office at the killer whale tank at the Marineland theme park in Niagara Falls, ON.

Director and cinematographer discussed different looks for Phil while envisioning classic sci-fi shows including The X-Files for scenes of alien captivity and dissection, as well as spaceship sequences.

"For that part of the story when Phil is being tracked down by an American secret government agent, we desired a film noir element," Hagey says. "We looked at The Lady from Shanghai, The Maltese Falcon and Blade Runner for noir inspiration."

Since Stefaniuk wanted to avoid Phil looking ostensibly like a comedy, the film is lit dramatically and very low-key, with splashes of color depending on location.

"There is an arc to the lighting as it follows the story," explains Hagey. "When Phil lands, he's very naive and childlike, but as the story progresses, he becomes more experienced with life on Earth, and turns into an alcoholic."

Hagey tried to reflect the change in Phil with softer, flattering, three-quarter frontal lighting in the

beginning.

"As Phil becomes more of an alcoholic, the lighting develops into high-contrast and low-key, where he's lit more from the side," the DOP explains. "When Phil finds Jesus after a short stint in prison, I used strong backlight to give him a bit of a halo."

Hagey operated an Arriflex SR2 camera, provided by Toronto's PS Production Services and fitted with Zeiss high-speed prime lenses. The camera was converted to the Super 16 format.

"The problem with the converted SR2 is you don't see the full picture in the viewfinder, so I never really saw the full width of the image. I would have preferred to shoot with the SR3," he concedes. "But as far as quality difference goes, there was none and the SR2 got the job done."

The Arri remained on sticks or a dolly for mostly static shots throughout the film, with some handheld work and one day of Steadicam.

"Whenever we shot a scene with the secret agents, we would always try to cant the camera, which, if you see a classic film like 1949's *The Third Man*, is conventional in film noir," adds Hagey.

Dino Laurenza operated the Steadicam, which captured Phil's point of view when he's living with a beaver, and as he travels through a forest from the beaver's lodge to town.

Hagey shot on Fuji 8652 F-250T stocks for interior and night exterior scenes, while day exteriors were filmed with 8622 F-64D Fuji negative.

Technically, the most challenging scene for the crew was the conclusion, when Phil leaves Earth in his spacecraft.

"It was our largest set," explains Hagey. "The spaceship was surrounded by plastic to give it a quarantine feel, while one side of the set consisted of a green screen, where the giant doors of the spaceship would open."

The cameraman hung 10K, 5K and 2K Tungsten lights to illuminate the scene, while a 9K served as the spaceship light and Fresnel fixtures lit the surrounding plastic. "Some of the lights were on the floor and some were hidden behind crates," Hagey explains.

Special effects consisted of a mixture of in-camera effects on set, featuring an alien suit and beaver puppet, and CGI work in post-production. Color correction, picture and sound were handled at boutique Toronto shop Keep Me Posted, while the film was processed by Technicolor.

Hagey is currently prepping *When Moses Woke*, a one-hour spoken-word/dance piece for Bravo! about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. The DOP is hoping to shoot another feature with Stefaniuk in the fall. That project is in development.

Phil the Alien is currently on Canadian screens. It also screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City earlier this month.

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