

Behind the scenes with Checco Varese filming **The New Daughter**

The New Daughter begins with an unhappy woman leaving her husband, 12-year-old-daughter and 8-year-old son. Over the summer, her husband moves the family from the city to an old house in a rural area by a forest.

The first half of the film focuses on the deteriorating relationship between the father, a struggling novelist, and his daughter. The story takes a dramatic twist after the James family discovers a mound in the forest that is part of an ancient burial ground. The second half of the film depicts frightening encounters with humanoids that inhabit tunnels under the mound.

The independent feature was produced by Gold Circle Films and Mandate Pictures. Oscar-winning actor Kevin Costner portrays John James. *Pan's Labyrinth* star Ivana Baquero is his daughter Louisa and Gattlin Griffith play his son Sam. The humanoids are portrayed by actors wearing costumes and prosthetics that are enhanced with computer-generated visual effects, which were also used to multiply the number of creatures in the backgrounds of some scenes.

It was Luis Berdejo's first turn at the helm on a full-length feature film. He had previously written and directed a number of acclaimed short features in Spain.

The cinematographer was Checco Varese, AMC, who brought an eclectic range of experience to the project. His parents migrated from Italy to Peru where he was born and raised. He began his career shooting television news stories and documentaries around the world and segued into filming music videos and commercials. The Los Angeles-based cinematographer has earned some 30 narrative film credits since 1989.

"Luis had a clear idea about how he wanted to interpret the screenplay in terms of visual style," Varese says. "In our earliest discussions, we agreed on using a widescreen film format to help convey both feelings of loneliness and a sense of claustrophobia."

He explains, "If you have a single character standing in the middle of

a forest looking around, it conveys a sense of loneliness. You also can't help thinking that maybe a humanoid creature may be just off the edge of the frame."

Varese suggested producing *The New Daughter* in three-perf Super 35 format coupled with digital intermediate (D.I.) post-production as a tool for putting finishing touches on the look. The three-perf film also reduced raw stock and lab costs.

The New Daughter was produced in South Carolina during an ambitious 42-day shooting schedule. The opening scenes were filmed at a school and other practical locations in Charleston. They filmed the vast majority of the story in and outside of an unoccupied house and in a nearby forest about 40 miles from Charleston.

Berdejo, Varese and production designer Chris Shriver discussed using colors and textures on walls and furniture in the house to subtly augment a sense of loneliness.

"Luis wanted very subtle and subdued production design, so nothing stood out," Varese says. "He also didn't want any red tones, except when there was blood. That makes it more shocking and obvious when there is a blood stain."

The house is relatively big with 14 windows on the first floor that are about six feet wide and four to five feet high. There is a high ceiling, which gave gaffer John DeBlau flexibility for rigging lamps that were used to augment natural light.

The camera package, provided by Clairmont, included two Moviemax SL MK2s and a lightweight Moviemax, along with a range of Optimo zoom and Ultra Prime lenses. Before the creatures appear, Varese recorded scenes in the house and night-time exteriors on KODAK VISION3 500T 5219 film. He slightly over-exposed the film, rating it for an exposure index of 320 to render rich-looking images with deep black tones.

Varese chose KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 film for shooting daytime exterior scenes. When they began

production, leaves on the trees were a yellowish tone but the script called for summertime. Varese used custom Tiffen chocolate filters on lenses to enhance greens and the blue sky without affecting skin tones.

The minor children were limited to working six hours a day and no later than 10 p.m. Varese notes that they were shooting in February and early March when it got dark between 6 and 6:30 p.m. When they needed to film longer interior night scenes with one or both minors, they began earlier, shooting day for night, using neutral density gels on windows to dim daylight.

"We started with three layers of Rosco gels at 11 in the morning, so when the sun hit the windows it looked like the moon," he says. "We would take one layer off in the afternoon. When we shot daytime scenes with Kevin after 10 p.m., we took the gels off the windows, and lit the forest to match what morning sunlight looked like."

Three Condors with two 18K HMI's on each of them were mainly used to simulate daylight, and sometimes Varese used as many as eight Condors with two lights on each.

Varese frequently used two cameras to maximize coverage of scenes with one or both of the two minor actors. The two cameras were generally at angles from 90 to almost 180 degrees apart to give the director and editor options.

Camera movement and angles of coverage are integral elements of the visual grammar. Varese cites an example: The cameras are static for about five minutes at the beginning of the film, until a scene where he used a dolly shot to lead the audience to discover an important story point. He also describes a smooth Steadicam move following Costner down a hallway. When the father opens his daughter's bedroom door, the shot is subjective, seen through his eyes. Then in a cut-away, she looks up at him. The same subjective camera angles were used when the boy looks up at the father and he looks down at his son.

After a humanoid comes onto the scene, Berdejo wanted an edgier look to augment a growing sense of danger. Varese chose to record the rest of the story on KODAK VISION2 Expression 500T 5229, a low-contrast negative designed to render smooth flesh tones and details in shadows. He "pushed" the exposure a stop-and-a-half.

"I wouldn't call it grainy," he says. "It is a textured look with a documentary, cinéma vérité feeling. We couldn't have done it without pushing the film."

There is a breathtaking sequence after the daughter disappears. The father finds a tunnel entrance and begins searching for her. That sequence was filmed on a set. It wouldn't be fair to readers who plan to see the movie to reveal the ending.

"Ivana is a very experienced actress and Gattlin has it in his blood," Varese observes. "Luis spent a lot of time with them and their families, and Kevin was collaborative every step of the way. He helped Ivana and in the process helped all of us."

Technicolor in Los Angeles did the front-end lab work and provided film dailies four days early in production and another four days at the end when Varese began shooting night scenes in the forest and on the tunnel set. The rest of the time, Riot, a post-production facility in Los Angeles, provided DVD dailies. Varese timed the D.I. with colorist Maxine Gervais at Pacific Title in Los Angeles.

Postscript: About halfway through production, Varese fell off of a moving vehicle and broke his right hand. He worked for seven days with a splint on his hand while taking painkillers. Antonio Calvache, ASC flew to South Carolina, consulted with Varese and filled in for him for five days while he was having surgery in Los Angeles.

"I owe Antonio big time," Varese concludes.

1 : Cinematographer Checco Varese, AMC, contemplates a shot on the set of *The New Daughter*. (Photo by Ben Glass. © 2008 Gold Circle Films LLC. All rights reserved.)

