

BY TERENCE
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Something to Sink Your Teeth Into

Cinematographer Kramer Morgenthau serves up a *Feast of Love*

Feast of Love weaves together a series of vignettes—at turns humorous, sexy and tragic—in which a diverse group of people (portrayed by actors including Morgan Freeman, Greg Kinnear, and Radha Mitchell) contemplate the nature of relationships. The film, directed by the Oscar-winning veteran Robert Benton (1979's *Kramer vs. Kramer*), favors somewhat contemplative cinematography technique allowing the human dramas to unfold against the lush backdrop of the Pacific Northwest.

Kramer Morgenthau, whose cinematography work spans features and Emmy-nominated television movies (this year's *Fracture*; 2004's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*), says that his greatest challenge in shooting *Feast* came in helping to create an engaging

narrative in the absence of action sequences so prevalent in many of today's movies. With so many scenes based on dialogue and the feelings written across characters' faces, Morgenthau looked to "convey the emotions with expressionistic photography, but not be so heavy-handed as to suffocate the actors' performances."

The cinematographer learned of the opportunity to work with Benton through a mutual friend—Hawk Koch, *Fracture*'s exec-

Director Robert Benton (left) discusses a shot with Cinematographer Kramer Morgenthau. All photos by Peter Sorel



utive producer, who served as assistant director on Benton's directorial debut, 1972's *Bad Company*. With dozens of acclaimed projects under his belt, Benton brings to the set a confidence and directing style that was honed well before video taps became the norm.

"He chooses to stand next to the camera, and look at the actors right in the eyes," Morgenthau says. "It's a fantastic thing for the actors, and a wonderful thing to watch. It creates a nurturing, safe atmosphere on set, because the actors are relaxed, and the director is with their every move supporting them." What's more, "he trusts the cinematographer to capture the performance in the way Benton wants it done, but he's not sitting there with his head glued to a 9-inch monitor."

Morgenthau drew inspiration from the shooting style of the late Néstor Almendros, who frequently used natural light to brilliant effect in films such as *Days of Heaven* and *Sophie's Choice*. Almendros served as Benton's director of photography for more than a decade, spanning *Kramer vs. Kramer* to 1991's *Billy Bathgate*.

The director challenged Morgenthau to do more with less on *Feast*. "I'm so used to shooting with two cameras, and getting tons of coverage," Morgenthau says. "Benton is much more comfortable with one camera, and getting quality over quantity: telling the story with fewer shots, creating frames that draw you into the actors' face."

The pair found a touchstone for their project in *Claire's Knee* which Almendros shot in 1970 for French Director Eric Rohmer. "It's very simple in the way it's shot," Morgenthau says, "and [in the way it depicts] the relationship between the characters and the landscape—a beautiful landscape, but one that isn't fetishized, or turned into a postcard. As we were shooting in Portland, Ore., which is very beautiful and lush, it could have been easy to make *Feast* into a magical realist type of thing. We wanted to keep it more real, and intimate."

Morgenthau did employ two cameras for some scenes shot in a fictionalized college town on the Portland outskirts. A Panavision Panaflex Platinum served as A-camera, supplemented by a Millennium XL, with the cinematographer usually reaching for Panavision Primo primes (10mm to 150mm) rather than zooms. Scenes, Morgenthau says, often lent themselves to the *plan-séquence* approach pioneered by Truffaut and later favored by Almendros: "a single moving shot throughout the space that tells the story with one shot, versus multiple shots edited together.

"Long walk-and-talks," the DP



Though Director Robert Benton wanted Cinematographer Kramer Morgenthau to "do more with less," there were allowances for the occasional crane.

Benton and Morgenthau allowed the action to take place within classically composed shots. Morgan Freeman and Alexa Davalos fall under love's spell in *Feast of Love*.



says, “were done with long dollies laid out—the way people used to do it before there were Steadicams. I love Steadicam. I use it all the time. But a dolly can be just as effective. In some ways, you have more control over the composition and lighting, being able to look through the viewfinder.”

There is a scene in which Mitchell’s character (Diana) shows Kinnear (Bradley) a new house. “We went through the whole house on a dolly and the shot plays unedited in the movie,” Morgenthau notes, adding that Benton “is not afraid to do that—he has an understanding of just how it’s going to play with an audience, and he doesn’t feel the need to barrage people with a cut every three seconds.”

Though the film is definitely more about faces than locations, Morgenthau did push to use locations in suburban Portland that conveyed a certain visual interest. One central location of the film is a corner coffee shop, owned by Bradley, and frequented by Professor Scott (Freeman). “There are lots of large glass windows overlooking the corner, so you could relate the coffee shop to the neighborhood and the overall context of the story,” he says.



Morgenthau fine-tunes the framing of a shot on location near Portland, Ore.

For the crew, Morgenthau observes, the shop turned out to be an experience akin to “shooting a day interior and a day exterior at the same time. We had large sheets of neutral-density hard gels on the windows to control the varying light levels. I felt that the sacrifice of dealing with that hardship of constantly changing background light values was worth seeing the depth of an exterior environment.”

Morgenthau employed Fujifilm’s Eterna 500T and Eterna 250D stocks exclusively for the super 35mm production. “The Fujifilm stocks have a quality that’s especially appropriate for this story,” he says. “I think they have a painterly, embracing look to them in the way they handle skin tones, people’s faces and color in general.”

In particular, Morgenthau appreciated the stocks’ ability to give him “super-inky blacks” in *Feast’s* high-contrast shots. “I use extreme highlights, very strong pieces to light a scene,” he says. “It might be a hot reflection off a table, or a stripe of light across a duvet. Often the actors’ faces are in shadow, lit by the indirect light bouncing off an object in the frame. It feels more organic not to have key lights always be perfectly focused on a face. What

you find in nature is much higher contrast ratios than what people normally light with for film. The human eye is able to compensate for these, but film emulsions react quite differently. They ‘freak out’ in a beautiful way. They also handle extreme ranges of contrast in a much more pleasing way than any electronic capture format I’ve seen as of yet.”

For all of *Feast of Love’s* classical compositions and extended takes, there are also sequences relying on Steadicam and jib arm/remote head, gas well as gyro-stabilized shots from the tops of 50-foot Techno and 90-foot Acela cranes brought up from Los Angeles.

The film was finished in a DI suite at Company 3, Santa Monica with colorist Siggy Ferstl. Morgenthau notes that while the DI allowed him to shape scenes to further direct the viewer’s eyes towards the faces in the frame, “I let the inherent texture of the film negative stocks carry through to the final film out,” he says. “That helped preserve the overall soft mood. Some film stocks seem to be getting engineered so clean that they take on qualities of digital acquisition. We chose to use these Fujifilm stocks so they wouldn’t look like that. I like the fact that they retain a filmic photochemical texture.” ■

FEAST OF LOVE

STOCK USED

Eterna 250D

Eterna 250T

Eterna 500T