

# Sundance Standouts

could in front of the girl with his wrists locked — “one of my favorite camera moves to do,” he says. Zeitlin notes, “We *hoped* to catch this thing burning down behind her. That was the mentality: whatever we catch, we catch.”

One of Richardson’s challenges was keeping the camera close to Hushpuppy’s 4’-tall eye level for the entire film. Going handheld made the camera feel too present for the filmmakers’ taste, and Steadicam was too solid (and also unaffordable for more than a day or two). His solution was an EasyRig. “It was designed to just take the weight off the operator’s shoulder, but I discovered it worked well at hip height, too,” he says. “I didn’t feel footfalls as heavily as I did when I went handheld, and [the images] could be very cinematic.”

Shooting on open water also required special strategies. One was finding a boat captain who could pilot a flat-bottomed jon boat like a dolly. Richardson remembers one complicated scene where Wink fishes by hand. With only 15 minutes of daylight remaining, Richardson explained to boat captain Mike Arceneaux how he wanted to slowly dolly in on the actor. “Mike spun the boat around, blasted 500 yards downriver, swung around, came screaming back, killed the throttle and just glided in. I was literally hanging off the front of the boat with Jason’s hand on my belt. We glided for the entire length of that shot — a minute-and-a-half — and did it in one take. It’s absolutely beautiful.”

Other moves entailed an underwater pulley system engineered by the boat captains with ropes and a “Cajun anchor,” a 6’ spear that could fasten into mud. In shallower waters, Richardson donned waders and jumped in. The camera sat on his shoulder or floated on “the *Titanic*,” a block of Styrofoam set on a 2’x2’ piece of plywood. “When we were in the water, we wanted to *feel* the water,” says Richardson.

Pulling focus in such situations wasn’t easy. “The bayou waters are fast moving, and the tides are strong,” says

Richardson. “Setting up shots, we were always getting set for where we’d be in 15 seconds.” Knoll started out trying to take measurements, “but 80 percent of the movie is him just skillfully eyeing it,” adds Richardson. “He got really good.”

Given that *Beasts* is his feature debut, Richardson had his own moments of doubt. “I was giving myself heart attacks daily because I knew how far I wanted to push it,” he says. “I decided the worst thing I could do would be to change what I was doing just to be a little safer. I decided I just couldn’t be afraid.”

Fox Searchlight will release *Beasts of the Southern Wild* in the U.S. on June 29.

— Patricia Thomson

## *My Brother the Devil*

### **Cinematographer:**

David Raedeker

**Director:** Sally El Hosaini

Set in a public-housing project in London’s East End, *My Brother the Devil* follows siblings and second-generation Egyptian immigrants Rash (James Floyd) and Mo (Fady Elsayed) as they navigate turning points in their respective lives and in their relationship. The street-smart Rash sells drugs for the neighborhood gang but is losing his taste for the criminal life, while the younger Mo yearns for the respect Rash appears to command. The murder of a close friend leads both to take steps in new directions.

In presenting David Raedeker with the cinematography award in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition for his work on the picture, Sundance juror Alexei Popogrebsky praised him “for bringing to vibrant, pulsing life a searing drama from a little sector of modern society.” Stepping up to accept the prize, Raedeker credited his close collaboration with director Sally El Hosaini and production designer Stéphane Collonge for making the achievement possible. “This film took us on a journey,” he added, “and it was a rollercoaster.”

Indeed, El Hosaini, Raedeker and Collonge formed a strong nucleus that proved instrumental in the success of the project, which encountered challenges that might be considered remarkable even by indie-film standards. Their creative bond was facilitated by five weeks of prep, three of which were spent “dissecting every detail of the script,” says Raedeker. “At that point, I wasn’t thinking about visuals at all. I wanted to understand the story from the inside and let the visuals come out of that.”

El Hosaini, who was making her feature-directing debut, knew she wanted the camera to stay close to the brothers and present the world from their perspectives — “to be an insider looking out,” she says. To facilitate this, the team arrived at four rules. El Hosaini explains, “The first rule was that the visuals should be experience-driven — how is this scene experienced by Mo or Rash? We wanted to use their five senses to access the emotion of the scene and then translate that visually. The second rule was maintaining a 1.5 POV, with Mo’s POV being the 1 and Rash’s being the .5, so that the film would be mostly from Mo’s POV, but not entirely. Rule 3 was no master shots; we wanted to always maintain a subjective style. Rule 4 was simplicity, because it’s an art form, and it’s what we’re all ultimately striving towards.”

Gus Van Sant’s *Paranoid Park* and Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and David O. Russell’s *The Fighter* figured into the discussions, and El Hosaini found Magnum photographer Simon Wheatley’s book *Don’t Call Me Urban!* a useful way to share with her collaborators some of the details of the world her film would depict. “It’s a world I’d spent years researching, and Simon’s book helped me bring David and Stéphane up to speed on many aspects of it,” says the director.

El Hosaini and Raedeker decided a 2.40:1 frame was essential to telling the story, and comparison tests convinced the rest of the team. “Most films that show council estates portray



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Rash (James Floyd, left) and his younger brother, Mo (Fady Elsayed), share a late-night conversation in *My Brother the Devil*.



them as quite gray and horrible, and we didn't want to do that," says Raedeker. "We just wanted to show how these boys see the world." El Hosaini adds, "It wasn't that I set out to make a beautiful movie. The choice was all about being very subjective and close to the brothers. It's their home, and to them it is beautiful. I also think 'Scope made what could be quite a mundane world an adventure."

The format also enhanced the camera's intimacy with Mo and Rash. El Hosaini recalls, "Shortly before filming began, I was on the bus, and there was a teenaged boy sitting in front of me who had really bad skin. I remember thinking, 'That's what this movie needs: I want to be close enough to the characters that you see their bad skin.' I wanted to see their sweat, their acne, the meaty texture of their skins. 'Scope really pushed us into all those close-ups."

Staying close to the brothers also meant a very mobile camera. "There are two heroes in the film, which is not common," notes Raedeker. "Sally compared their relationship to a strand of DNA; their lives spiral around each other but are always connected. That served as our visual blueprint, and I developed a slightly different camera style for each brother. I used a much

looser handheld camera with Mo and tried to keep him off-center in the frame, whereas Rash appears with more compositional weight in the middle of the frame and was often shot with a Steadicam. When they shared a scene, I'd choose an angle close to one of their perspectives, as one brother would observe the other.

"In prep, I mapped the whole movie out in this fashion, an idea I got from the *American Cinematographer* article about *127 Hours* [Dec. '10]," he continues. "Anthony Dod Mantle [ASC, BSC, DFF] mapped out the dramatic structure of that movie in a timeline, and I did something similar. It helped me to understand and bring out the interplay between the brothers' development; it was a great starting point for thinking about camera style and other visual ideas."

He estimates that about 80 percent of the picture was shot handheld, and when the camera wasn't on his shoulder, it was on an EasyRig. "Most of the actors, including Fady, had never acted before, and it was important for me to operate because I needed to react to what they were doing quite spontaneously," he notes.

The casting of a number of local non-professionals was part of El Hosaini's quest for authenticity, and so

was the choice to shoot on location on a council estate in Hackney. To everyone's surprise, shortly before filming began last summer, the area erupted in fires and rioting. (A police shooting on a nearby council estate sparked the unrest.) "Fear of further riots led London to pass a city-wide law prohibiting the filming of youths with guns and knives on the streets all summer," says Raedeker. "Sally had to rewrite a few scenes at the last minute to move them indoors, and that changed the dynamic of things. We couldn't recce [the new locations] properly because they were confirmed just before we were scheduled to film in them. We had to adapt quickly, and Sally was fantastic at thinking on her feet and coming up with solutions."

He notes that a shared background in documentaries — his as a cameraman, El Hosaini's as a director and assistant producer — helped enormously. "Documentaries force you to think on the spot, especially if you take risks and do something visually interesting, because you can't reshoot it," he says. "I think you learn an enormous amount, and if you can bring that into your practice in drama it can lead to good results."

"A lot of things changed during production, and some of it was just the

*My Brother the Devil* photos by Étienne Bol and Nick Wall. Photos and frame grabs courtesy of Pacha Pictures.



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Top: Cinematographer David Raedeker consults with director Sally El Hosaini. Bottom: Assisted by focus puller Chris Kane, Raedeker shoots Elsayed on a street set that the filmmakers had to prepare in a hurry. An LED Kisslite on the camera casts a bit of extra illumination on the actor.



nature of low-budget filmmaking,” he continues. “Sometimes the Hackney kids we’d cast would turn up late or not at all, and we’d have to adjust. That unpredictability is not always a negative thing because it makes you think about why you’re doing what you’re doing. You have to determine what’s important *now*.”

One last-minute rewrite actually led to the production’s biggest lighting setup. The scene depicts a nighttime fight involving Rash, his friend Izzi (Anthony Welsh) and some rival gang members, and it was originally to be

filmed on the streets of Hackney. “We had to move it to a street set on a studio backlot, and the only street we could get was a suburban street with a village pub,” recalls Raedeker. “Stéphane had to transform that into a gritty Hackney street overnight, which was not easy! We shot a lot of the action up close, and I think we just got away with it.

“Because it was a studio backlot, we had to light everything. We had a tiny lighting package from Panalux, and my gaffer, Max McGill, had to position lights so we could be ready shoot in any direction immediately. We positioned

some tungsten Fresnels and two 2.5K HMIs gelled for sodium vapor in the first-floor windows of the buildings at both ends of the street, out of shot, to backlight the scene from either angle. The only lights on the floor were two dimmed Parcans held by a spark [electrician] to simulate car headlights.”

Throughout the shoot, the “tiny” lighting package sufficed thanks to Raedeker’s choice of an Arri Alexa, which he rated at ISO 800 most of the time. (He used ISO 1,200 on some night scenes.) He had used the Alexa several times and chose it mainly for the latitude of its Alev-III CMOS sensor. “I had to shoot a lot of available light on this film,” he says. “The flat [where Rash and Mo live] was high up, and we didn’t have the resources for cherry pickers to light from outside. Also, it was very hard to hide lights [inside] because we shot so much handheld. I needed a camera with a great contrast range to capture the detail outside because I wanted to give the image a lot of depth—I didn’t want the windows to burn out. I knew that apart from shooting film, which we couldn’t afford, the Alexa was the only way we could achieve this.”

For day interiors, he typically augmented available light with a few single Kino Flo tubes. The council estate’s sodium-vapor streetlamps defined the night look, and Raedeker carried these warm hues inside with a few small practicals.

Though he prefers Cooke Panchros for digital shoots, he chose Cooke S4 primes this time. “The Panchros help take the digital edge off, but because I was shooting so much available light and had so much back-light coming through the windows, I was a bit concerned about soft lens flares,” he explains. “The S4s were great.

“I was often shooting wide open [at T2] and just following the actors, and my focus puller, Chris Kane, did amazing work,” he adds. “I don’t know how he did it, but he did it.”

London rental house Movietech supplied the camera package, as well as



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Left: Kane takes a measurement as Raedeker prepares to shoot the film's final scene. Right: Elsayed jokes with the camera team during a break on set.

a few rigs that enabled Raedeker to achieve elegant shots in tight quarters, including the brothers' tiny bedroom. "With those rigs I could position the camera just below the ceiling or low on the floor and still move it around," says Raedeker. "Once I used a high-quality mirror in front of the lens to get into a corner, and Movietech mounted that to the camera with an Israeli arm. They supported us in all kinds of ways, and I owe them big-time."

The filmmakers recorded in ProRes 4:4:4 using SxS cards. "Shooting raw was out of the question financially, but we shot tests comparing raw to ProRes because we needed to show that ProRes would hold up," says Raedeker, referring to the compression inherent in the codec. "It held up absolutely fine as long as we didn't zoom into the image."

He was unable to utilize look-up tables during production because the edit was done on an Avid. "The Arri Look Creator had just come out, but its metadata could only be read by Final Cut Pro at that time," he explains. "With the Avid, we would've had to bake the look into the rushes, and that would've made our workflow too complicated for our fast turnover."

"Our production office was located next to our location, and we began the assembly edit during the shoot," adds El Hosaini. "This allowed

for a direct dialogue with our editor, Iain Kitching, and we were able to grab pickups and make adjustments on set that directly affected the edit."

Raedeker and El Hosaini spent a week on the color timing at Technicolor London, where they worked with colorist Paul Ensby. "After an initial consultation, Paul spent about four days pre-grading before we went in," says Raedeker. "We unified the look of the exterior night-time practicals, and Paul gave the images a great deal of depth. He did a fantastic job." The movie was projected digitally at Sundance, and when the filmmakers spoke to *AC*, they were readying a 35mm print for Berlinale.

*My Brother the Devil*'s premiere at Sundance marked a homecoming of sorts, in that El Hosaini had developed the project in three different workshops (two writing labs and a directing lab) at Sundance Institute. Raedeker recalls his excitement upon reading her script: "It wasn't what I expected. I was wary at first because it's based in an urban ghetto, and it feels in the beginning like a kind of gangster story, but it very cleverly breaks out of that genre to become much more a relationship film about two brothers. It's far from cliché. When I read it, I just knew it was my kind of thing."

— Rachael K. Bosley

## *5 Broken Cameras*

**Cinematographer:** Emad Burnat

**Directors:** Burnat and Guy Davidi

When the lights came up after a screening of *5 Broken Cameras*, documentary cinematographer Tom Hurwitz, ASC stood up and told the filmmakers, "I've been making films for 35 years, and this is one of the most powerful I've ever seen." It was remarkable praise for self-taught cameraman Emad Burnat, who just eight years earlier had been a farmer eking out a living in the West Bank village of Bil'in. The Sundance jury shared Hurwitz's enthusiasm, bestowing the directing award in the World Cinema Documentary Competition on Burnat and co-director Guy Davidi.

*5 Broken Cameras* boasts no technical novelties, but it's a compelling example of unwavering courage under fire and the power of images to bear witness. Over the course of seven turbulent years, Burnat repeatedly came under fire yet persisted in filming the events as an Israeli settlement encroached on land long cultivated by Bil'in's farmers.

Burnat's life as a cameraman began in 2005 with the arrival of his youngest son, Gibreel. Burnat and his wife received a Mini-DV camcorder, a JVC GR-D54E, as a gift. He began documenting Gibreel's first steps, birthdays and outings to the olive groves that