

Andrew Wheeler on Capturing *Winter Light*



Scene from *Winter Light*

Director Julian Higgins and cinematographer Andrew Wheeler recently reunited for the short film *Winter Light*, which is based on the writings of James Lee Burke. The story is a modern-day revisionist Western set against a winter landscape in Montana.

Wheeler and Higgins first began working together while attending AFI. Their thesis film *Thief*, which was shot on 35mm, won a 2011 Student ACADEMY AWARD® Gold Medal. The filmmaking duo also took top honors in Canon's Project Imaginat10n film contest for *Here and Now* in 2013.

"Our collaboration is symbiotic," says Wheeler. "Julian knows what I am drawn towards and what I react to, and vice versa. Aesthetically, we like a lot of the same looks and generally speaking, we have a fairly simple and practical approach to discovering answers to the questions the story demands. This has made our on-set communication straightforward and we are able to adapt pretty quickly. Sometimes, we just look at each other and know what the other one is thinking."

"I have a huge amount of respect and trust in Julian and his talent," adds Wheeler. "He is able to get the most out of the crew by making everyone feel involved. He listens to the people around him, and filters out the best opinions and options all while maintaining the creative path of the film."



The filmmakers have been looking at the possibility of bringing *Winter Light* to the screen for several years. The film follows Roger Guidry (played by Raymond J. Barry), an aging college professor who feels a loss of purpose in his life. His prickly personality has left him abandoned by his family and marginalized by his colleagues. He finds himself alone and full of regret. Roger is forced to turn inward, and seek solace in the unspoiled natural landscape surrounding his small cabin, hoping to protect and cultivate what little he has that gives his life meaning.

The cast includes Vincent Kartheiser (*Mad Men*), Q'orianka Kilcher (*The New World*), Josh Pence (*The Social Network*) and Michael Bofshever (*United 93*).

Production of *Winter Light* took place primarily in Arlee, Mont., which is 30 miles north of Missoula. Wheeler's camera was a PANAVISION Golden PANAFLEX GII mounted with Ultra Speed lenses.

"We wanted to create a film with scope and contrast that also seemed timeless," notes Wheeler. "We shot 2 perf, 2:40 and used mostly wider lenses. Most of the film was shot between 20mm-40mm. This kept the backgrounds always present, which was one of the main reasons for shooting in Montana. The landscape and weather are a strong character in this film."

The filmmakers chose to capture *Winter Light* on KODAK VISION3 500T Color Negative Film 5219. "It wasn't a difficult decision to shoot on film," recalls Wheeler. "We've shot all of our shorts on film with great results. There was a momentary lapse in judgment while we entertained shooting digital to try and push potential savings to production design. However, we slept on that possibility and quickly came to the conclusion that we might be disappointed if we shot digital, and we knew we wouldn't be if we shot film. So, we pushed hard to shoot on film."

Wheeler explains they did take a chance by deciding to do a 100% bleach bypass on the negative to desaturate the film, add contrast, and to give it a slight silver tone that he felt would be nearly impossible to replicate in a DI. "The biggest risk for me was always doing the bleach bypass. I was able to do a run through at Panavision before we left to shoot the film. It was a basic over-under exposure test to see where I wanted to place my exposures, where the highlights blew out, and the blacks went black. I did the same tests with 5219 processed as it would be normally, and then again with it 100% skip bleach.

"Because so much of the film took place in the snow, I was nervous about maintaining exposure in the elements and holding detail with the skip bleach," continues Wheeler. "I had to put a lot of light on the actors' faces to balance their skin against the snow. I got very lucky with the weather because it was mostly overcast while we shot. Not only was that ideal for the narrative, but it also helped out the bleach bypass process. Had there been hard sun, I wouldn't have been able to keep snow detail in the backgrounds, and I probably would've chickened out and processed it normal. It felt like I was taking a big risk, but it was also what paid the biggest rewards and now I can't imagine the film being any other way."

The film was processed at FotoKem in Burbank, Calif., and the film scan, dailies and digital intermediate were done at Cinelicious in Los Angeles.

"FotoKem provided our negative with a flawless, full skip bleach," says Wheeler, "and Paul Korver at Cinelicious has continued to help this group of collaborators shoot on film. His dedication and consistent accommodations to our production needs have been invaluable."

Produced by Innerlight Films, look for *Winter Light* to premiere at an upcoming festival.

