

"A Lot of Creativity and Beauty Can Come from Limitations": DP Nicholas Wiesnet on L.A. Times

[Filmmaker Staff](#)



L.A. Times

Five years ago, Michelle Morgan made her Sundance debut with the short film *K.I.T.* She returns to the festival in 2017 as the writer, director and star of her first feature, *L.A. Times*, a romantic comedy where she plays alongside Jorma Taccone of Lonely Island fame. Morgan hired Nicholas Wiesnet, a DP known primarily for documentary and short film work, to shoot the picture. Below, Wiesnet discusses how he got the job, why he shot the film in anamorphic widescreen and his approach to lighting and blocking comedy. *L.A. Times* will screen six times during the 2017 Sundance Film Festival.

Filmmaker: How and why did you wind up being the cinematographer of your film? What were the factors and attributes that led to your being hired for this job?

Wiesnet: An agent at WME referred me to Michelle as a young, up-and-coming DP to consider. I interviewed and thought it went really well and really enjoyed the script but didn't hear back and assumed they went with someone else, pushed or the project fell through. Nearly a year went by and I got a call from the producers saying that the movie was on and prep would start the following week. I signed on a day later. I was a little hesitant to shoot a comedy that was very dialogue heavy but the script was very good and I realized that a lot of creativity and beauty can come from limitations.

Filmmaker: What were your artistic goals on this film, and how did you realize them? How did you want your cinematography to enhance the film's storytelling and treatment of its characters?

Wiesnet: Early on Michelle was very clear with me she wanted a classically beautiful film with strong compositions and controlled palettes. We wanted total synergy between lighting, art direction and wardrobe. This film is a comedic love-letter of sorts to this iconic city and the wonderfully delusional people who live here. We took a very straightforward, unforgiving and dry approach to our photography, making a firm commitment to minimalism. If we could do the entire scene in one-shot and enhance the comedy through blocking and framing we went for it.

Filmmaker: Were there any specific influences on your cinematography, whether they be other films, or visual art, of photography, or something else?

Wiesnet: Early on before filming Michelle and I watched a few films together and it became apparent all of our favorite references were shot anamorphic: *The Graduate*, *Manhattan*, *Rushmore*. We especially loved how

framing could enhance the comedy and tell the story, like the iconic shot of Dustin Hoffman framed between the legs of Mrs. Robinson. That one shot epitomizes the whole story. We also looked at some more contemporary films from Europe like *Rams* (Iceland) and *Dogtooth* (Greece). Both shot anamorphic as well and had little to no movement with the camera. I love this dry, tableau style of filmmaking and the anamorphic lenses lend a lovely painterly quality and softness that was perfect for our film. For lighting I took a lot of inspiration from Rodrigo Prieto's use of soft light in *Wolf of Wall Street* and Roger Deakins' interior lighting in *The Reader*.

Filmmaker: What were the biggest challenges posed by production to those goals?

Wiesnet: We had a very small budget and not a lot of time to do this movie with a fairly brisk 20-day shooting schedule.

Filmmaker: What camera did you shoot on? Why did you choose the camera that you did? What lenses did you use?

Wiesnet: Although I would have loved to shoot on film it wasn't practical for our budget and because Michelle was directing and starring in her movie, having playback and being able to show her exactly what we were capturing was essential. We shot single-cam with an Arri Alexa coupled with Panavision Primo anamorphic primes.

Filmmaker: Describe your approach to lighting.

Wiesnet: My approach to lighting is very simple. I come from a documentary background where you have little to no control and have to make do with the conditions you have. I love natural, single-source lighting. For our exteriors I spent a lot of time scouting and calculating sun positions and worked very closely with the AD to schedule our exteriors for the best

light. Our exteriors utilized natural light with the occasional negative fill or bounce.

For day interiors I like to light from the outside with large HMI's to maintain consistency and give actors and camera the freedom to move. We were a bit limited on budget on this picture so our largest HMI was an Arri M40 but we weren't dealing with large spaces so we were able to make it work.

For night interiors it was really about putting a practical in the right place and supplementing. Michelle wanted warm, cozy, romantic interiors. We'd typically augment practicals with an LED LiteMat with bleached muslin and control grid hidden just out of frame. Hillary Gurtler, our incredible production designer, provided us with lots of practicals and we would typically use a photoflood bulb on a dimmer to add a bit of warmth. For our bar interior scenes we used nearly 100 feet worth of LiteGear LiteStix for architectural lighting. They came in three foot segments with one inch round frosted housing, which are essentially LiteRibbon in a more robust, architecture-friendly housing. I'm a big fan of modern LEDs, especially LiteGear's line. For our budget and modest G&E crew, our LEDs really saved us. They allowed us to work incredibly fast and their small and light build allowed us to tape, velcro or menace arm in very small tight spaces.

Night exteriors we shot just a pinch above wide open on the primos and augmented existing streetlights and predominantly used LED LiteMats and tungsten PARs for big washes in the background.

Filmmaker: What was the most difficult scene to realize and why? And how did you do it?

Wiesnet: The most difficult scenes always tended to be our day exteriors. We didn't have the budget to use large fly swatters and 18Ks, so it was a challenge dealing with constantly changing weather conditions and

maintaining continuity.

Filmmaker: Finally, describe the finishing of the film. How much of your look was “baked in” versus realized in the DI?

Wiesnet: I try to do as much in camera as possible. I’d much rather set one extra flag to make the shot that much better than try and achieve the same thing in post. Our treatment in post was incredibly subtle, mainly ensuring continuity from shot to shot.

- Camera: Arri Alexa XT
- Lenses: Panavision Primo Anamorphics and MAP55
- Lighting: Arri M-series HMI’s, Joker HMI’s, LiteGear LiteMats, LiteRibbon, and LiteStix, and practical bulbs.
- Processing: Digital
- Color Grading: DaVinci Resolve