

On filmmaking in Greece: shooting the «canteen», a low budget feature...



This is the camera-team, from left, Pantelis invaluable 2nd-ac, Dimitris (myself) & Babis 1st-ac extraordinaire (arri-certificated). Probably the best "trio" I led in years. Having "paid my dues" as an AC for a decade during the '80's, I always take good care of my team, who are best friends first, close collaborators as well. In Greece the 2nd-ac, apart from loading mags, takes good care of cutting all possible flares as well, working with flags to build a little village around the camera, to the great "chagrin" of electricians (there are never enough "cutters"...))

We shot on super-16, with Fuji-Eterna 500T and we are printing on Agfa as most productions do here in Greece, those still shooting negative-film that is. Agfa is an interesting positive stock, warmish, good skin tones, but inconsistent... We used Aaton cameras my personal-kit, (an xtr & an ltr), a set of Zeiss high-speeds and an 8-64mm Canon zoom. Occasionally a Canon-Optex 200mm telephoto was used

as well, a beautiful lens very sharp and very fast (f-1.9).



A DP in such a small industry has to own equipment just in order to control his own work. Not that we don't have decent camera-rental houses but there're just two of them (for film-cameras). One never knows what's available... Over the years I've managed to assemble a decent kit (cameras, lenses) that I never rent-out; only for the films I shoot. Of course it's trouble. The responsibility of maintaining all that equipment is huge and very expensive as well. Once, I read in the CML-forum that a particular DP's happiest day in the life was when he purchased his own equipment, until the day he sold it all and then that day became the happiest-one: I couldn't agree more... It's always a nightmare for my assistants, used to work with "rental" equipment, not taking that much care with personal-kit... As we say, my heart really aches, for every tiny scratch on the camera-body, the "baby"(to moro) as film technicians call it here!

The story of the movie "Canteen", directed by my good friend Stavros Caplanides, co-produced by the Greek Film Center & ERT(national TV network), goes like this: on a late afternoon Philippos, drives his beat-up Citroen-pony jeep, to the semi-illegal canteen he owns, on a side street of the national freeway. This is the meeting place for drive-by truckers, taxi-drivers and their sometime strange customers, lovers lost & found, gamblers & losers from the nearby casino, even thieves who try to steal the canteen's earnings! It takes place "from dusk 'till dawn" and this was our challenge: to maintain continuity for four weeks in a row, while trying to accommodate our shooting schedule, to the ones that had the different actors, that appear in the various scenes that form that particular strange night our story takes place in... There was an additional fifth week of 2nd-unit work, shooting flash-backs, pick-ups etc, shot of course by the "fist-unit"!

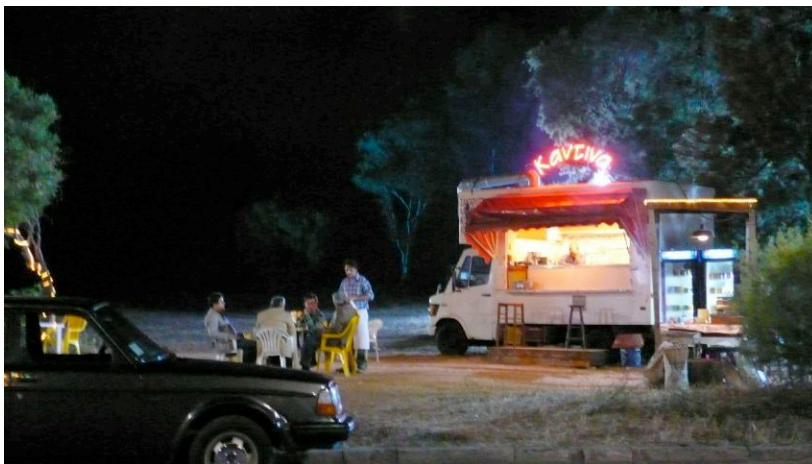
Late May-2008 weather was totally unpredictable, lots of rain and mostly windy. My burden was that I occasionally had to lower the height of the film-lights (long shadows as a consequence), plus no amount of sandbags could handle the positioning of flags, gels & diffusion in place to control the lighting...

My initial plan, was to treat the story like a theater stage-play and had in fact come-up with the concept of shooting all scenes in a long-shot two ways: either with a 12mm whenever vehicles were in the foreground, or move back a bit and use a 25mm lens (exact same frame but more compressed), when actors only were involved. Then, the plan was to move-in handheld and cover the scenes, as in a documentary about that particular stage-play. However, great concepts don't always have to work and we kept the handheld-approach only for scenes when we had 30-60 extras, while our normal coverage consisted of mediums & close-ups in longer takes, using 25-35mm lenses, on a mini-Worrall head for a

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I was reading this article on American Cinematographer magazine, where Roger Deakins was interviewed on the Cohen bros' "no country for old men":... "we got about eight 18Ks and literally just shot them up into the air to light the sky"... I thought why, I really had one 18K to light the entire night exterior of our football stadium sized-set, where our film takes place: my lighting kit consisted of 3 x 4K-HMI pars, 2 x 2,5Ks, 5 x 1,2Ks, some 575Ws(all of them pars as well) plus some Kinoflos. Grand total was approximately 20-23 KW on an average night, that's an 18K and a quarter; of course we had to tie-in, no generator, and that was the maximum the production could afford. We did manage however, to achieve a T-2.5

for long shots and an average of a "healthy" T-2.8+1/3 for mediums & close-ups.



Two of our typical long shot set-ups. Philippos, beautifully portrayed by the excellent actor & great friend Alex Logothetis, takes good care of his customers... For the background three 4K-HMI pars with special and plain steel blue & some frost, some side lighting provided by a 2,5K-par plus 3 x 1,2Ks, then some 575s (all in the same color configuration as well). Finally some daylight-Kinoflos, through pale-amber-gold gels & light frost, at approximately 3.400°K, provide some fill.



I was probably having a hard night's night... For four weeks straight, call was at eight in the evening, wrap at six in the morning, plus an hour's drive home back & forth, through either early morning or late evening traffic; but as the Stones sung "... I know, it's only rock'n'roll but I like it..." Our director was saying to me, you're having more fun shooting & lighting than I have directing (plus supervising production and editing)! Indeed. Hopefully the release print will be "fun" as well...



Our set before & after all from the same angle...
From above: as it was before shooting, middle-the first day the canteen was positioned/the space cleaned-up; down-last day of shooting. The beautiful red vintage 1966 "Sunbeam" convertible, in front of the Aaton...