

Frank Barrera's Approach to Lighting *In the Family*

Creating Dramatic Scenes Covered in Long, Single Takes

StudentFilmmakers Magazine: In reference to the multi-award winning film, “*In the Family*,” for which you served as Director of Photography, how would you describe the film’s ‘look,’ and how did you achieve this look?

Frank Barrera: We took a naturalistic approach to the visuals of *In the Family*. We spent a great deal of effort to ensure that all aspects of the sets, props and wardrobe were accurate to the world we were attempting to create. This included tight control over our use of both color palette and color temperature. We developed rules regarding the use of warm versus cold tones, i.e., when either should be utilized and when they should be avoided. We wanted to make a film that didn’t need garish color or dynamic camera moves to tell its story. This is a quiet film whose subtle shifts in color and light work on an almost subliminal level.

We had many outside references that we drew upon to act as guidelines for every shot. We looked at paintings, photographs and films. Both Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage* and Cassavetes’ *A Woman Under the Influence* were of great inspiration to us. These films are brilliant examples of production design that at first glance seem practically happenstance. But on closer inspection the viewer realizes that little is left to chance in these films. Naturalism is not synonymous with documentary. Naturalism is created from the ground up.

SFM: Tell us about the lighting for scenes.

Frank Barrera: As we were looking for a natural look I decided to look at the locations and learn about how the sun affected the interiors. I looked for natural light throughout the day that might add to or propel our story forward. Usually the sun would offer some inspiration as a base from which we would light a particular scene. Sometimes this meant warm direct hard sunlight. But usually it meant soft indirect cool light. Our gaffer Chris Clarke was integral in making this happen. Our

daily lighting package maxed out at a single 4K HMI PAR. We also had some smaller HMI units as well as an array of tungsten units. But that 4K was our workhorse for all our day interiors.

The principle aspect of creating natural light is using a single large soft source. Achieving that with a single 4K was not easy. Chris was able to work wonders.

SFM: What was one of your most favorite scenes to light?

Frank Barrera: The library scene where Paul [played by Brian Murray] proposes that he offer his free legal representation to Joey [played by Patrick Wang] is my favorite scene in the film from a lighting perspective. For starters it is a critical scene in the film that gives Joey sudden hope that he might be able to see his young son again. It is very dramatic. The library location we had was lovely. We shot this and all the mansion scenes in a late 19th century mansion in Yonkers New York. The value of using the correct location cannot be overstated.

We were on an extremely tight schedule [120 pages in 18 days]. When we were to shoot the library scene the sun was just about to poke through these high and narrow southern facing windows and give us a perfect back light from high up. If this was a bigger budgeted production I would have simply blocked the real sun from coming into the room and rigged up an 18 K HMI re-creating the practical sunlight and shoot for two hours. Instead we knew that the sun was going to only shine through this window for about 30 minutes and we didn’t have an 18K or the man power to rig one. If we wanted this beautiful and dramatic light we would have to shoot the entire 5 1/2 page scene in 30 minutes.

By this point in the production we had all learned to move as quickly as possible and still get Patrick what he needed and wanted. Needless to say we all jumped at the challenge to shoot this pivotal scene in such beautiful light in such a short time. Patrick often talks about how discovery is part of the filmmaking



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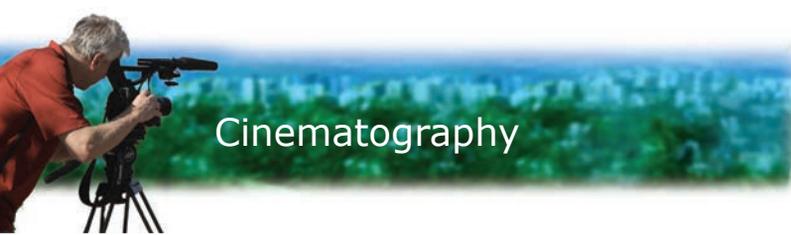
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Cinematography

process. And that's what we had to do and do it quickly we did. We had to jettison Patrick's initial concept of coverage for the scene which was traditional and we came up with a roving single to cover the dialogue. This was decidedly untraditional and risky. It was a gamble that paid off. I love this scene.

SFM: Covering scenes in long, single takes. Why did you decide to shoot this way, and could you share any 'Do's and Don'ts' in relation to using this technique?

Frank Barrera: The long takes were essentially written into the script. The shooting style was built into the DNA of the film. We had no choice about it one way or the other.

You must schedule more time in your day when attempting this approach because every shot must be 100% perfect as there will be no cutaways or coverage to help with poor performance, incorrect dialogue or poor camera work. An experienced Assistant Director is invaluable in this instance. Rehearsal is also extremely important. Patrick worked with all of his actors in extensive rehearsals many of which I was able to observe.

SFM: What other camera and lighting techniques did you use to create visually dramatic scenes and characters?

Frank Barrera: The first shot of the film was written as a slow FADE IN from BLACK. But as we discussed it in prep we decided to do the FADE IN 'in camera' as opposed to doing it in post production. We thought there would be a more compelling and realistic effect this way. We not only did a rack open exposure on the lens iris at the beginning of the shot but also faded up on a couple of lights inside of the bedroom and panned our 4K in through a window from the outside. It was a complicated shot that took several takes but I think we captured something subtle and unique.

SFM: By the way, what cameras and lenses did you shoot with, how many, and why?

Frank Barrera: We shot with a RED MX out of TCS in New York. We had a full set of the Cooke Panchro lenses. This lens set was new from Cooke when we shot. They were designed for the low budget PL mount camera systems such as Red and the Sony F3 and the Canon C-300. They are much more affordable than the Cooke S4's and S5's. They only open to a 2.8 and this is reflected in their price. However, the Panchros are just as sharp at a 2.8 as the S5 at a 2.8. Same glass, same sharpness. The loss



DP Frank Barrera.

of stop is not a significant burden when rating your camera at an 800ASA. And the shallowness of the depth of field at a 2.8 is usually sufficient.

SFM: Tell us about your workflow with the RED.

Frank Barrera: We had our assistant editor on set and he would verify, then back the footage up onto a couple of hard drives. Even with the long takes we were usually able to stay with using the CF cards. The cards are more stable than the drives and more importantly the cards make for a more disciplined camera department. In many ways using shorter loads mimics the protocol for film which has taken a beating over the years with the seemingly endless recording times of digital capture.

During the deposition scene we had to go direct to hard drives because we were doing 30 minute takes.

SFM: Your experience spans over 15 years working in everything from television series to commercials to feature films. What came first, television or film, and how did you make the transition from TV to film, or vice versa?

Frank Barrera: I learned most of what I know about lighting by working in the Grip and Electric departments on several low budget 35MM features in the mid to late 1990's. It was the peak of the indie feature scene in New York City. Even though these were low budget productions we always shot film and had access to all the same gear that much larger shows used: boom cranes, jib arms, dollies, large HMI's, etc. After several years in

that world, I moved up to the gaffer position and began to light commercials.

Finally I was ready to move over to the camera department. This transition was hard because all of my feature and commercial contacts only knew me as a gaffer. This is a common problem when one transitions for one department to another. No one wanted to hire me as a DP. So I had to take my knowledge and start gathering new clients and collaborators. I began by being the DP on any student film that would take me. I used this material to put together a show reel. But that wouldn't pay my bills so I also began operating camera on the latest craze on television: reality TV. I could talk about the mixed feelings I have about some of the content on some of the reality shows I worked on but the truth is that my hand-held operating skills reached a much higher level from all of that experience. Eventually, I was able to translate my reality operating ability to narrative feature work.

Currently, I have one foot in the narrative world and one in the reality world. More and more narrative shows seem to be referencing some type of reality TV aesthetic. And that's just fine with me.

SFM: What are some of the unique differences working in television world versus feature film world in your experience?

Frank Barrera: In feature film production there is often a more personal and financial investment by the directors and producers. There is often a labor of love. This affects the entire tone of the set on a daily basis. It is common for the crew to also feel a personal connection to the project and its success or failure.

Conversely, in TV production there are often many more people involved [multiple directors and producers] with a wider range of personal commitment applied. It can begin to feel like a 'regular' job. Interestingly, because there is that lack of the Labor of Love Effect TV productions can be more fun to work on just because there is less stress revolved around the success of the show. There can often be more levity on a TV set compared to a feature set.

SFM: By the way, what is your favorite camera to shoot with and why?

Frank Barrera: I am excited about the recent crop of moderately priced PL mounted S35 sized sensor cameras: Sony F3 and Canon C300. Many of the early technical issues with solid state recording codecs have been resolved and the cost of

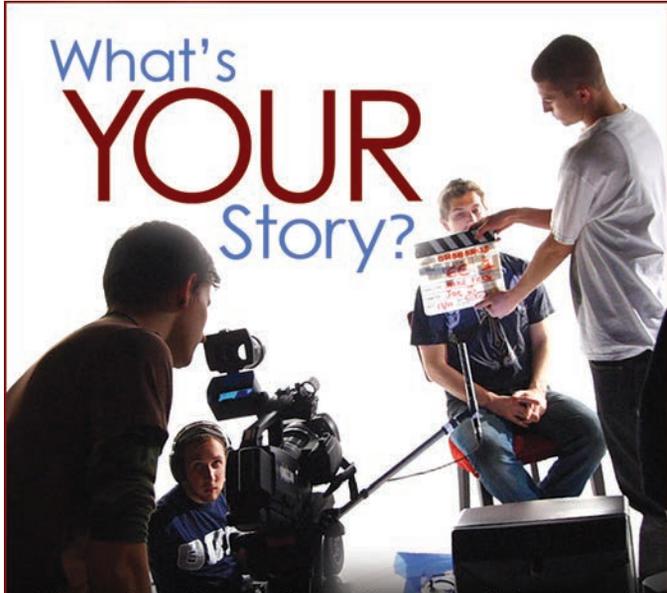
manufacturing a large sensor chips have dropped. We now have access to several stable wide latitude capture systems and the ability to use high end glass with them. The future looks bright for all low budget filmmakers.

SFM: If you could share a piece of advice with new and aspiring filmmakers, shooters, and storytellers around the world, what would it be?

Frank Barrera: To be brutally honest I usually tell aspiring filmmakers to find a husband, wife or partner who believes in the idea that you are destined to tell stories and there is no other path for you. Oh yeah and this supportive person needs to have a 'real' job with benefits. It's a long haul to become successful in this business and it is critical that on your way you also have a full life experience that involves family and friends. So go out and find someone. Someone with a job.

SFM: What are you working on next?

Frank Barrera: I will shoot Patrick Wang's next movie whenever that happens. Otherwise I am seeking the next great production.



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Patrick Wang Discusses Award-Winning Debut Feature Film, *In the Family*

*Methods of Directing and Acting, and
Working with Child Actors*

Interview by Jody Michelle Solis

In the town of Martin, Tennessee, Chip Hines, a precocious six year old, has only known life with his two dads, Cody and Joey. And a good life it is. When Cody dies suddenly in a car accident, Joey and Chip struggle to find their footing again. Just as they begin to, Cody's will reveals that he named his sister as Chip's guardian. The years of Joey's acceptance into the family unravel as Chip is taken away from him. In his now solitary home life, Joey searches for a solution. The law is not on his side, but friends are. Armed with their comfort and inspired by memories of Cody, Joey finds a path to peace with the family and closer to his son.

Produced, written, directed by and starring first-time filmmaker Patrick Wang, "In the Family" has won awards, such as Best Narrative Feature and the George C. Lin Emerging Filmmaker Award at the San Diego Asian Film

Festival (2011), was a New York Times Critics' Pick, and garnered numerous nominations, including Best First Feature Nominee at the prestigious Film Independent Spirit Awards this year (2012).

Patrick Wang shares the benefits of writing, directing, and acting in his first feature film, methods of directing and acting, and working with child actors.

StudentFilmmakers Magazine:
What were some advantages and benefits of writing, directing and acting in your first feature film, "In the Family?" If there were any obstacles or challenges, what were they and how did you overcome them?

Patrick Wang: I like that you start by asking about the benefits, because the challenges are a little more obvious, the benefits a little

more obscure. If I hadn't acted in this film, a significant amount of my energy during photography would have been dedicated to communicating with the lead actor. On a shoot where every minute counted, closing this gap probably went a long way to helping us finish the shoot on time. Another wonderful tool from being in most of the scenes is I found I could direct the other actors from within the scene. If I was looking for something from a particular actor or if I thought the rhythm was getting off track, I could try to encourage a change by doing something in character as their scene partner. For a shooting style that was mostly long takes, this tool saved time and helped make almost every take usable. If I were not in the scene, I would have had to wait for the next take to direct the change.

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Directing

The big challenge in taking on all these roles is to make sure each job gets its due attention. And here the most important tool I had was time. I made sure the writing was solid before I got anyone else involved, and we ended up shooting a white script. I had nine months of pre-production and spent five months rehearsing just myself before I worked with any other actors. Also, I found that I had very different, sometimes conflicting views of scenes depending on whether I took the perspective of the writer, director, or actor. I tried to give those conflicts space to play out fully in my mind before making a decision as to how to resolve them.



Joey (Patrick Wang), Chip (Sebastian Brodziak) and Cody (Trevor St. John).

SFM: What methods of directing and acting did you prefer to use during rehearsals and filming for “In the Family?”

Patrick Wang: How I worked with the actors, and the degree of rehearsal, changed depending on what each actor [and role] needed. For myself, I started out video

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recording my rehearsals with myself, but I quickly switched to audio recording the rehearsals. I found I could just as easily hear a false performance as I could see it, and it gave me more physical freedom early on in developing my character. For some actors we discussed characters at length and rehearsed extensively, for others we just needed to get together once to get used to each other as scene partners. And for some characters I had no clue how much rehearsal was necessary. I started rehearsing with Trevor St. John a few months before the shoot, and after each rehearsal we decided together when it felt right to meet next. In the

end, I think we only had about five rehearsals.

During filming, there were two practices that served me really well as director [and these apply to working with actors or with any other department]. First, when I witnessed a deviation from what I had expected or planned, I took the time to digest the deviation before making a decision what to do about it. Things move so fast on a shoot, sometimes you have to actively impose a patience so that you don't crush a new opportunity or erase a beautiful accident. Second, think about how to close the gap between what is and what you want before you

speak. How the director expresses himself or herself can impact the confidence, self-consciousness, and behavior of everyone else. Proceed with consideration and simplicity. For example, I may watch a scene and notice five things an actor did that I didn't like. Instead of just naming these five things (which may do more harm than good) consider other paths to a solution. Maybe the actor already knows the problems and just needs another take. Or maybe the solution is to give the actor a prop or a new idea rather than a list of everything that's wrong.

SFM: How did you direct scenes you were in?

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Directing

Patrick Wang: Rehearsal and preparation are key: both so that you get very fluent at doing your work and very fluent at evaluating your work. I spent a lot of time the first week of the shoot watching dailies to calibrate my performance. When shooting, some feedback mechanism is necessary, but it can come in many different forms. Sometimes on set, I would have to watch playback of entire scenes. Sometimes, I would ask my DP. Sometimes, I just needed to see a few frames. Sometimes, I just needed to listen to a few seconds of sound. Sometimes, I could just look at the faces of the crew, and I knew.

SFM: Was working with Sebastian Brodziak your first time working with child actors, and was he the youngest you've ever worked with? What kinds of unexpected challenges came up during filming, if any, and how did you overcome those challenges?

Patrick Wang: I had worked with child actors before, but Sebastian was the youngest I've worked with [six years old when we shot], and he had the most demanding role of any

child actor I've worked with. There was really only one surprise with Sebastian on set, and that was that it didn't occur to me I would kind of be acting as his dad between takes as well as during takes. He would want to go wherever I went, and so I was carrying him around all day. It was exhausting but wonderful. You have a kid that great who wants to spend time with you, you just find the energy.

SFM: How did you cast the role of Chip Hines, and what important qualities were you looking for during the casting process?

Patrick Wang: Our casting director Cindi Rush pre-selected about 15 actors for us to see for the role of Chip. There were a few qualities I was on the lookout for: a killer memory [Chip has a lot of lines in long scenes]; an emotional understanding of the scene; precociousness; a big heart; confidence when under scrutiny; and the ability to play and adapt a performance based on what another actor is doing. When I first met Sebastian, he started with a very cute, commercial mode of delivery.

But he was able to change into a more realistic mode very quickly, and as I read scenes with him, he followed all the turns and twists I threw in and seemed to have a ball playing the game.

SFM: Could you share with us any special 'Do's and Don'ts' in relation to working with child actors?

Patrick Wang: I think the first thing I would suggest is not to expect any less of them than anyone else. There are probably even reasons why you should expect more. Make sure they have time to get used to being around the people they will be working with most. A safe and comfortable environment is very important. Remind the crew not to speak of kids in the third person when they are right there. Try to engage them, maybe with games and exercises and questions, rather than issuing commands. Take the time to have kids explain things to you; it will at least be entertaining, at best illuminating.

SFM: Did scenes or lines in the script change during the

Chip (Sebastian Brodziak).



Joey (Patrick Wang) and Cody (Trevor St. John).



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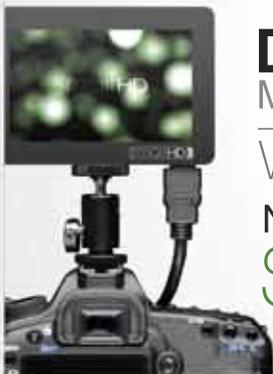
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Directing

casting process or during filming?

Patrick Wang: Very few lines changed from the script. I'm not a fan of textual improv. I like surprise interpretations of the written lines, but if someone can easily and at a moment's notice come up with text better than the script, the writer has not done their job.

SFM: If you could share a piece of advice for aspiring directors and storytellers around the world, what would it be?

Patrick Wang: There is no shortage of people in this business telling you what to do. One of the most useful skills I feel I've developed is in learning how to separate the frequent noise from the occasional quality thought. Separate out the noise, and think through what is right for you. And God bless you if you feel compelled to do the thing everyone tells you not to do.

SFM: "In the Family" has won awards, such as Best Narrative Feature and the George C. Lin Emerging Filmmaker

Award at the San Diego Asian Film Festival (2011), was a New York Times Critics' Pick, and garnered numerous nominations, including Best First Feature Nominee at the prestigious Film Independent Spirit Awards this year (2012). What advice would you share with new directors in relation to getting their films in festivals and creating a multi-award winning film?

Patrick Wang: I can only give advice to people who are making personal films, the kind of film that is not a means to some other end. To these people I say don't think about festivals or awards or distributors or box office. There was a time no festival wanted this movie and no one really liked the movie. Focus on the film. Protect the things that make it unique. Be its most intense critic. Figure it out. Spend your energy figuring out your film first. Then help it find its place in the world. It may take time and the path may be difficult and unique, but there's nothing like fighting for a film you love without reservation.

SFM: What are you working on next?

Patrick Wang: I've written a film that is this tapestry of monologues and songs, each a portrait of very different people across time and place. It's about what we can learn from our short, snapshot exposures to people and how we make sense of these seemingly unrelated series of snapshots. It's an odd project to describe, but I've fallen for it, and I can't wait to make it. I'm also working on writing my first adaptation of a novel. The novel is gorgeous and lives largely in dramatic space. With this strong dramatic core, I'm looking forward to experimenting and inventing some cinematic techniques for translating the novel's complexity to film.

Photos courtesy of In the Family LLC.

Helen (Zoe Winters), Gloria (Elaine Bromka) and Anne (Eisa Davis).



Chip (Sebastian Brodziak), Joey (Patrick Wang), and Nurse Jackson (Gina Tognoni).

