

Panavision in depth

ACS

Cinematographer
Profile:

Denson Baker ACS



Recently, we cyber-chatted with cinematographer, Denson Baker ACS, whose achievements over the last couple of years have rocketed him to the front rows of his profession. You would know his credit best from awards received for **The Waiting City** (Dir.: Claire McCarthy, 2010) and **The Black Balloon** (Dir.: Elissa Down, 2008) and he has had quite a few prolific and versatile years starting at age twelve when his interest was piqued by an encouraging teacher. A few months ago, he became a dad for the first time, something that has inspired him to reach for even more meaningful projects.

‘ ... that hopefully stand the test of time. I was very fortunate to have incredibly supportive parents who encouraged me to pursue my dreams and my career of choice, I will do the same for Pax, no matter what he decides he wants to do. Unless he decides to become a parking inspector!’



Clearly, a good showreel kick-started his career, which combined a bit of luck with a speedy response and tenacity: ‘Total case of right place, right time, fresh showreel. It was Christmas break after my first year at AFTRS and I had stayed back in the school and spent a late night cutting my reel of work I had shot that year. ... I had an email from a German production company looking for an Australian cinematographer to shoot part of an international project that was being shot in 5 continents simultaneously and would be screened at the World Expo in Hanover. I replied immediately, the next morning I Fedexed my reel to Frankfurt (this was in a time before you could just upload a QuickTime movie) and the phone rang 3 days later. I had the gig. I got along really well with the producer who was from Vienna and a month later he got me a job shooting a commercial in Germany ... that lead on to more work there and some nice new material for my show-reel.’

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Denson is currently revising that reel in the light of some terrific recent shoots.

'I feel that a show-reel should express the kind of work that you want to be pursuing further and be an exciting showcase of your very best work, not just a compilation of everything you have done thus far. I mean for example if you took on that dish washing detergent commercial because it was going to help pay the bills that week, you certainly wouldn't put it on your reel unless you wanted to pursue more dish washing commercials!'

Opening and closing shots are vital for the 'wow' appeal and Denson's hints include using storytelling devices and creating atmosphere and emotions in a package somewhere between 1:30 and 3:00.

His calling card film, the impressive *The Waiting City* (Dir.: Claire McCarthy, 2010) is as much about relationships tested in an exotic location as about the yearning for a baby and there is a challenge for a cinematographer to give all parts of the story equal time, especially when surrounded by all that chaotic 'colour and movement'. He credits a very talented art department (headed up by Pete Baxter) and A.D. team.

'Not so much a distraction but a challenge to capture it all. When we first arrived in India we were overwhelmed by how much was going on and so much to look at. The challenge became, how to get all of that on screen because when you break it down, it isn't all happening at the same place at the same time in the composition of the frame how you would want it.'

He and Claire McCarthy (now his wife, and mother of baby, Pax) went to India ahead of schedule and shot many of the atmos shots during the Indian festival of Durga Puja. Claire and Denson met at AFTRS and their shared understanding and appreciation of a specific filmic aesthetic made him a natural to shoot *The Waiting City*, marriage coming not long after. 'If we can do a feature film in India together, we can do anything together,' he commented and added that there are many creative partnerships between DPs and Directors, not that marriage is always a factor.

Denson was accredited by the ACS in 2005 and the honour is not lost on him. '... the ACS is one of the most highly respected cinematographers' societies in the world. It had been one of my career goals since I first started pursuing a life in the biz.' As a pre-teen, he was blessed with one of those teachers who recognized his budding interest in film and was spurred on to make mini documentaries. He followed this with a course in Media Design, finding the cinematographers' tools of lenses and lighting his best methods of creative self expression. Like most DPs of note, he never stopped shooting, experimenting and pushing the media to the limit in his spare time whether on Super 8 or 16mm – whatever short ends were available. He made many music videos at this time.



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Again, the resultant vibrant show-reel opened doors and he was advised by Jan Kenny at AFTRS to get some work as an assistant before taking on full-time study. Good counsel as it happened as the work experience was invaluable. Doing everything from operating the Video Split on a children's television series to being clapper loader and focus puller on feature films, he was only too happy to have the opportunity to learn from camera operators, grips, lighting and picked up hands-on experience from what he calls a 'slick team of professionals under the leadership of an experienced and talented DP'. (Director of Photography Steve Arnold ACS) 'I developed more of an understanding of what the other departments do, I also started to find mentors.' Denson also recommends putting some time into Screen Studies; the deeper the understanding of film history, the better the filmmaker. At AFTRS he learnt from fellow students, was constantly challenged and encouraged to ask questions and experiment. Master Classes that inspired him included those with many of Australia's greats: Russell Boyd, Andrew Lesnie, Steve Newman and Tony Wilson.

'Storytelling' has top priority in the way he shoots, each film setting its own style, though he tends to be drawn to lighting setups that are 'atmospheric, epic yet based in realism'. It's no surprise then, that he is a fan of the work done by a wide range of diverse cinematographers including the above. He adds to this Dean Semler, John Seale, Vittorio Storaro, Darius Khondji, Eduardo Serra, Rodrigo Prieto, Emmanuel Lubezki. The Polish film Festival (CamerImage) gave him the opportunity to meet Lazlo Kovacs and he also attended workshops with Vittorio Storaro, Remi Adefarasin and Phendon Papamichael. '... cinematographers that I have met ... working at the elite level are generally very generous with information, tips and support.'

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Building networks has been vital to Denson's fast-track career in what is a small industry run on loyalty and long-term associations. 'When I first arrived in Sydney before going to film school, I called up Panavision and said that I wanted to get experience working with film cameras. I came in and was offered an afternoon, being shown how to load every type of 35mm and 16mm magazine. Then when I had the role of being a DP, I would have the opportunity to test new gear and talk through options, plus receive technical support, the attitude was that if I'm going to be using Panavision equipment then I should know how to use it properly ... the better the results we achieve the more it will lead to more films plus bigger and better work. One of the biggest benefits of teaming up with a gear house like Panavision is having the support.' Filmmaking, according to Denson, is a lifestyle, not merely a job and it's important to be surrounded with supportive, like-minded people whom you admire and whose company you enjoy.

He has just completed shooting the feature *Oranges and Sunshine* (Dir.: Jim Loach and son of the legendary Ken Loach), an Australian/ UK co-production based on the story of the organised deportation of children in care from the United Kingdom to Australia. It stars two of his most admired actors, Hugo Weaving and David Wenham. It was shot on Fuji 35mm using Arriflex Cameras and Cooke S4 lenses.

The next project for him is a 3D action, adventure film shooting in China, an Australian/Chinese co-production.

'It is going to be epic!'