

Short Takes

A Rescher Refresher

by Stephanie Argy



In 1973, Gayne Rescher, ASC shot a film called *Claudine*, which was about the romance between a housekeeper (Diahann Carroll) and a garbageman (James Earl Jones). To convey the reality of life for these two regular people, the cinematographer crafted gritty, desaturated images. Recently, directors Coodie and Chike wanted to create a similar feeling in a video for Cruna's "Take Me Higher," and they asked cinematographer Frey Hoffman to reference Rescher's work.

Hoffman was able to glean inspiration and advice straight from the source. He recalls, "I sent Gayne an e-mail, and a few hours later, he gave me a call. He was great to talk to, and I picked his brain on what he did."

In the video, Cruna's girlfriend is being hounded by a man who lies to her, claiming that Cruna has been fooling around with other women. As the girlfriend works in her beauty salon, Cruna talks to her over the phone, trying to tell her that the

stories aren't true, while his competitor tries to convince her that they are. Eventually, at a nightclub show, Cruna steps off the stage and whisks his girlfriend away, leaving the disappointed antagonist to walk off on his own. "The characters are ordinary people trying to make love and life work," says Hoffman.

In forming his approach, Hoffman at first thought of trying to obtain the camera, lenses, lights and film stock that Rescher had used 32 years earlier. But it quickly became evident that he'd never be able to precisely re-create the same shooting conditions. The first problem was the stock: Kodak discontinued Eastman 5247, Rescher's stock, long ago, and the grain structure of the company's emulsions has changed dramatically in the intervening years. In the 1970s, the grains in Kodak stocks were composed of polyhedral silver-halide crystals; each grain had many multiple planes, rather like a clenched fist, and light tended to bounce off the crystals in various directions. But during the 1980s and 1990s, Kodak began to incorporate flattened, tabular grains (T-grains) into its emulsions. These grains could be oriented so that they would absorb more light, which meant that they could be smaller and less numerous, resulting in images with a less grainy appearance.

After doing a lot of research, Hoffman concluded that the best solution was to use Kodak Vision 500T 7279, underexpose it by one stop and then push-process it by one stop. "It might seem odd to go to a 500-speed stock when the 5247 was rated at 125," he notes, "but if I'd shot a 125-



The video for Cruna's "Take Me Higher," shot by Frey Hoffman, references the look of the 1973 film *Claudine*.



Cruna's girlfriend gets the surprise of a lifetime when the singer steps off the stage and spirits her away for a romantic night on the town. "These are ordinary people trying to make life and love work," observes Hoffman.

speed stock, the grain structure would have been so fine that even underexposing and push-processing would have gotten me nowhere near the grain of the original. I knew I had to have larger crystals, so I went with 7279."

Once Hoffman realized that capturing the essence of Rescher's work could be accomplished without reassembling Rescher's tools, he decided to work with other modern gear as well. Rescher shot *Claudine* with a Mitchell BNC and Cooke lenses, and Hoffman used an Arri SR-3 and contemporary Cooke primes, a 25-250 Cooke zoom and an Optex 8mm.

In planning the look of *Claudine*, Rescher and director John Berry agreed that because Carroll's character and her five children lived in a Harlem tenement, the lighting shouldn't look bright. "The tenements were mostly pretty run down and old, and I wanted to retain that look," says Rescher. "The main thing was to keep saturated colors out of the picture. On most of the pictures back in those days, everybody was splashing color all over the place, but a few of us were taking it off." Rescher recalls that on *Rachel, Rachel* (1968), he took the desaturation so far that his operator asked him why he didn't just shoot the movie in black-and-white.

To create a desaturated look on the Cruna video, Hoffman sought the assistance of colorist Carlos Rodriguez at Moving Image in New York, and showed him *Claudine* as a reference. The cinematographer also decreased sharpness and contrast in camera by using Tiffen Low Contrast #1 and a 1/8 Double Fog on the lens.

The most important element of Rescher's work that Hoffman strove to re-create was the lighting. On *Claudine*, Rescher tried to use practical or directly motivated lighting, and he was among the first to use soft light to key actors. At the time, soft sources were used for fill, and Rescher notes he was initially reluctant to use them for keylight because he feared the



Hoffman checks the light on his subject.

resultant images would be flat. "But I soon discovered I could control it," he says. "I had some of what I called egg crates made up by Frank Leonetti. They slid in front of the light and made it possible to direct the light. They weren't quite as easy to use as a conventional light, but they had a wonderful look."

To make his lighting as naturalistic as Rescher's, Hoffman lit every setting except the nightclub by enhancing practicals, with either Kino Flos with Cool White bulbs or a Lowel-Light K5BR fixture with EAL 500 watt or PH 213 250 watt bulbs, plus a few Tweenies. In the beauty shop, for example, he and his gaffer, Suzanne Carter, put Kino Flo banks between the existing fluorescent fixtures on the ceiling. "If we'd done all sorts of stylized lighting with color or highlights or gobos to punch up a shot, it would have worked against us," says Hoffman. "It would have looked like a trick, and we were trying to keep the visuals simple."

Claudine was shot on location in New York, and its makers captured much of the feeling of the city in that era. Rescher even rode through traffic with the show's B camera, an Arri IIC, clamped to the handlebars of his own bicycle. "That was one reason *Claudine* spoke to Coodie and Chike: it was consistent with what they've done throughout their work, which is capture the spirit of a place," says

Hoffman. "Take Me Higher" is set in Nashville, Tennessee, where Cruna grew up, and Hoffman tried to follow Rescher's lead by making the city a character in the video. "There are signature shots that people from Nashville will recognize," says the cinematographer. "They might only be in there for a few seconds, but they're special for the people who are from the area. For others, it's like a mini *National Geographic*."

Rescher says he was glad to give Hoffman some advice. "I always like to help young people. This business gets so complicated at times that it's hard to teach, because each situation is different. You can't just lay down rules; you have to look at a problem, analyze it and fix what needs fixing, and then move on to the next one."

To solve the puzzle on "Take Me Higher," Hoffman had to let go of many of the lessons he has learned. "It was a little scary initially, doing everything you're not supposed to do and knowing that the whole production was riding on it," he says. When the lead actress in the video first appeared on set, Coodie and Chike looked at the heavy makeup she was wearing and immediately asked to have most of it removed. "That could be used as a metaphor for the cinematography," says Hoffman. "We didn't put any makeup on it. It wasn't about showing off, and perhaps what we did can be a stepping stone for someone else." ■