

# Sound & PICTURE

Vol. 26 No. 2

## The Raid 2

A duo of cinematographers lens an epic sequel.

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Emma Roberts as April

# Palo Alto

DP Autumn Durald recounts the subtleties of lighting a love story.

by Kendra Ruczak

Cinematographer Autumn Durald teamed up with director Gia Coppola to lens *Palo Alto*, a dark drama about troubled teenagers. Three storylines intertwine as the film paints an intimate portrait of adolescence in suburbia.

April (Emma Roberts) is a shy, wholesome high school senior. She often babysits for her soccer coach, Mr. B. (James Franco), known for being too friendly with the girls on the team. Introverted artist Teddy (Jack Kilmer) harbors an unrequited love for April. He spends his time with his unpredictable best friend, Fred (Nat Wolff).

Emotions run high as Teddy ends up with a DUI and April falls

into a secret affair with Mr. B. Fred becomes increasingly reckless as he pursues Emily (Zoe Levin), a lonely girl who seeks validation through promiscuous behavior. The characters are pining for love and acceptance, but they encounter painful obstacles along the way. *Palo Alto* is based on a short story collection by James Franco, which Gia Coppola penned into a screenplay.

Durald grew up with an avid interest in photography and cinematography. She explored film classes while majoring in Art History at Loyola Marymount University, followed by an extension course in cinematography at University of California, Los Angeles. She took a

hiatus from her advertising job to work on sets, helping out wherever she was needed and focusing on the camera department. Soon she was accepted into the cinematography program at American Film Institute (AFI), which launched her career. Durald names Woody Allen as an inspiration for becoming a DP, and she admires the work of Gordon Willis, Harris Savides, Roger Deakins, and Conrad Hall.

Durald and Coppola collaborated for years prior to working on *Palo Alto*, shooting fashion films and commercials for Diane von Furstenberg, Opening Ceremony, and other top labels. "It was a natural progression that led us to working together on



Cinematographer Autumn Durald prepares her next shot with Teddy (Jack Kilmer)

this feature," Durald says. "I love the poetic nature of Gia's work. It feels very real, but also kind of dreamy."

Production started a year after the cinematographer signed on to the project. "It allowed us to go over ideas and talk about what we wanted to do." The team had two to three months for pre-production and location scouting when the film was greenlit. "It was hectic, but it had been on our brains for awhile," Durald recalls.

Durald immediately loved the script. "I hadn't read anything in awhile that spoke to me on that level and had the kind of real, raw feel about what it means to be a teenager." She aimed to tell the story by making it feel honest and accessible. "I would say my cinematography has a lot to do with how I emotionally respond to something in front of the camera. If I'm looking through the eyepiece and it doesn't feel real to me, then how is my audience going to believe it?" she asks.

For visual references, Durald looked to iconic teenage dramas

from the 70s and 80s like *Last Picture Show*, *American Graffiti*, *Over the Edge*, and *The Outsiders*. She and Coppola also referenced still photography, especially the work of Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. "We had a huge bank of images that Gia had pulled and images that inspired

**"I love the poetic nature of Gia's work. It feels very real, but also kind of dreamy."**

me. When the production schedule was pushed, that bank of images grew and grew." All of her references were shot on film, whether they were movies or stills. "We obviously couldn't shoot on 35mm for budgetary reasons, but it was very important to build that kind of texture and history into the film." This fueled the decision to use a 1.85 aspect ratio, a look that felt familiar and visually pleasing. "It kind of hearkens back to those old John Hughes films," she

explains.

When setting the look of the film, Durald chose a color palette with a softer overall tone and lighter contrast. She recalled her own memories from high school to establish the look of the night exterior shots, focusing on the foggy, warm glow of sodium vapor lamps.

Durald and Coppola created a shot list on a daily basis and storyboarded the larger exterior sequences. She had a basic plan for each scene, which she augmented organically after watching the blocking. "The structure was there, but we definitely adjusted it after seeing how the actors moved within the space." One of the advantages of Durald and Coppola's frequent collaboration was the ease of setting shots. "We are definitely always on the same page," says Durald.

*Palo Alto* had a tight 30-day shooting schedule, reshoots included, with a wide range of locations throughout the Los Angeles area. The team aimed to shoot as chronologically as possible to show emo-





*Mr. B (James Franco) on the practice field at school*



*Setting up lights for a night scene outside the school*

tional progression, but this luxury was not always available. "On something small and independent like this, you just have to make schedules and locations work, and there are a lot of other factors that come first," she mentions.

Durald chose to shoot on the RED Epic. She tapped Angénieux Panavised zooms for two camera action scene days. To capture larger exterior shots, 1970s Panavision Super Speed lenses were used most frequently. "I'm a big fan of that glass. It gave a softer, more poetic

nature that was very important for us to build into the digital image," she explains. The 40mm Prime Super Speed was the favored lens, which made the characters feel accessible without being too wide or unflattering. It was a warmer glass, so it was especially pleasing for skin tones. "It feels very real to me," she explains. Durald preferred to shoot wide open, favoring T1.2 or T1.4 to pull in as much ambient light as possible and keep a low ASA. As is her general practice, she brought all the nighttime scenes down to 500

ASA. "It was nice to start at a lower base, bring the light up for that ASA, and then be able to stretch in further in post," adds Durald.

She operated the camera herself, and used a dolly for the majority of the shots. She also used a shoulder mount or handheld grips for more intimate scenes. "It was important for us to have that kind of poetic flow and feeling, which we created with the dolly and some of the handheld work."

Gaffer Brice Bradley was an essential part of her workflow on set. A similar taste in lighting allowed the pair to work together smoothly. "If a key light was a stop over, I would give him a look and he would know. He was definitely in tune with the story, characters, and how the light should fall emotionally in the scene," she says.

Durald also worked on set with her DIT, Jonathan Bouknight. Shooting RAW gave the team greater flexibility, and REDCINE-X was used to grade for the monitors and adjust color temperatures. "It was more basic calibration and working in camera with the RED's metadata," Durald explains. Editor Leo Scott was located in the UK for part of the shooting schedule, so dailies were uploaded to him for quick assembly.

A house party sequence posed



*In the car with Fred (Nat Wolff) © Teddy (Jack Kilmer)*

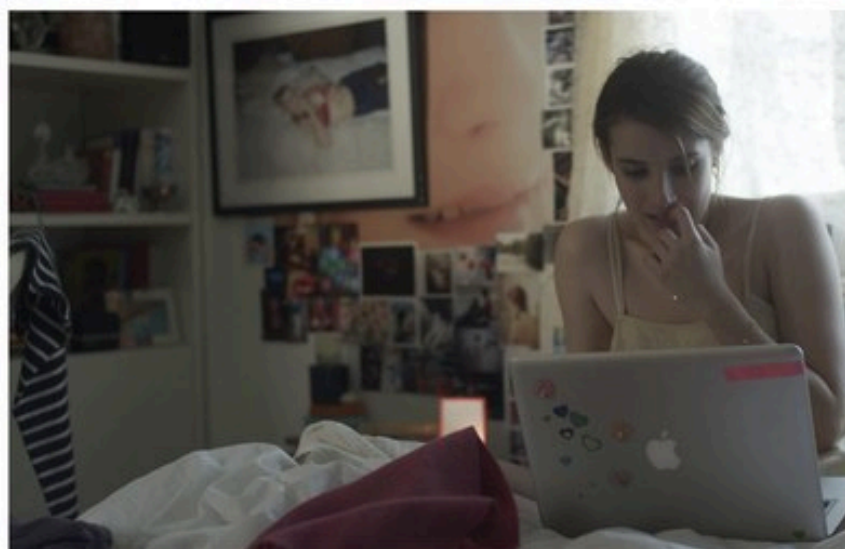
an interesting lighting challenge. Because they were shooting in a small house with a large group of actors, Durald worked with her gaffer, Brice Bradley, to light everything from above and maximize the space. They built soft boxes with dimmers and skirts, mounting 500w tungsten bulbs on batten strips. The largest units were 6'x6', and were hung from the ceiling of the living and dining rooms. She also worked with production designer Sara Beckum Jamieson to place practical units in corners for backlighting. "It was important to keep the lighting out of the way of the kids, so they could move around and feel like they're at a party," Durald explains. It allowed her to move the camera freely throughout the house, and gave the director plenty of space to work with the actors.

For a scene in which Emily invites Fred into her bedroom after school, the color palette and lighting played heavily to the mood. The production designer transformed a boy's bedroom by decking it out with girly décor. "It has a pink glow, which is very important for Emily's character," Durald explains. She added sheers to the windows and set up an Arri 4K HMI PAR outside, pointing in. "I warmed the unit so it had that kind of late afternoon vibe to it."



*Some of the car rigging for exteriors*





April (Emma Roberts) inside her bedroom



April (Emma Roberts) with Mr. B (James Franco) inside her home



April (Emma Roberts) with Mr. B (James Franco) kiss for the first time

She added a 4x4 Kino in the room to extend the ambient window light. She also backlit the actors, opting to forgo a front key light. Insert shots of Emily's childhood belongings highlight her vulnerability in this scene. When Fred abandons Emily after a romantic tryst, she feels emotionally used. The lighting is decreased at this point to show the passage of time, and the backlighting becomes more obvious. "It feels right for her to be more silhouetted because it's an intimate moment," Durald adds.

Emily and Fred's relationship reaches a breaking point during a nighttime scene. He tries to coax her into a swimming pool and she refuses, leading to a violent confrontation. The scene is lit by ambient light from the pool, which Durald enhanced by placing two 1K Hydra PAR units under the water. "We had my best boy get into his scuba suit to set it up," she remembers. She shined a Leko from the roof of the house into the pool water, which reflected onto the actors' faces. "The water is moving and reflecting a texture onto Emily's face, and you can see it on the trees as well." She bounced two 5K tungsten units into 12'x12' bleached muslin and placed them off to the side to provide extra fill light.

**"It was really important to me to light these scenes to look as natural as possible."**

In another interesting exterior night sequence, Teddy and Fred decide to cut down a tree with a chainsaw. It happened to be a foggy night during production, so the location took on an extra glow. "All of our units were lighting up the atmosphere, so it's really beautiful," Durald explains. Practical light from a nearby school was accented with a 9-light half soft frost backlight and a PAR can. An umbrella bounce provided a key light.

Durald used a different shooting approach for a soccer practice sequence with April and Mr. B. Two RED Epics captured this scene and



*The mobile car rig*



*DP Autumn Durald with director Gia Coppola*

Durald chose Angénieux zoom lenses to create a longer, distant look. Throughout this scene, April is feeling jealous as Mr. B. flirts with her teammates, a tension which is accentuated by the more voyeuristic shot choices. Though sunny weather was anticipated, an unexpected fog enhanced the gloomy vibe of the scene, lit only with natural light.

The film weaves several fantasy sequences into the narrative. "It was nice to do those handheld and just get in the moment and be with the characters," Durald explains. When April and Mr. B first begin their affair, she lapses into her thoughts. We see April gazing out a car window, moving her hand in the wind. It feels very surreal, like a daydream or memory. Producer Sebastian Pardo drove the car and director Gia Coppola sat in the front, while Durald operated the camera in the backseat with April. Coppola has a specific photographic reference for this shot, which Durald emulated by capturing only the blue dusky light before sunset. No additional fill was added.

In another fantasy scene, Teddy imagines he's running around in the forest wearing an animal costume, like a page straight out of a Maurice Sendak children's book. The team found a woodsy area behind a main shooting location for this sequence. Playful natural light enhances the whimsical feeling of the scene. Durald followed Teddy with a handheld rig while Coppola called out directions.

During nighttime driving sequences, Durald rigged 1x1 Arri LoCaster LED panels to the car. She even used an iPad screen for extra illumination when needed. "It was really important to me to light these scenes to look as natural as possible," she recalls. While shooting on a process trailer, she rigged additional flashing lights to mimic passing street lights and traffic signals.

In a pivotal scene near the end of the film, Fred and Teddy meet with a drug dealer at a parking structure. Fred is going through an emotional breakdown, and Durald amplifies the mounting tension with her shot choices. During blocking, she chose



shots that highlighted Fred's instability. "He's short-sighted and looking off-frame to the right," she explains. You don't see any reference to connect him to the other characters. She enhanced the drama by shooting each character in their own single, showing that none of them are relating to each other at this point.

**"My favorite part of the movie is the ending. I think they did a beautiful job of putting everything together."**

Later, when Fred's dangerous behavior continues, Teddy fears for his safety and asks to be let out of the car. He walks by himself, finally connecting with April through a text message. He's partially lit by LED lights along a stretch of the Los Angeles River. Durald positioned the camera on a nearby bridge behind Teddy for this shot. She used

an Angénieux zoom lens, smoothly pulling the frame up and back as he walked away. The final shot uses VFX to show Fred driving against traffic on the highway. "Hands down to the post guys on that one. Obviously he's not really driving the car, post inserted a production plate," she explains. She shot footage of a highway from an overpass near Hollywood. She provided stills of Fred's car as a reference, and the VFX team replicated it onto the plate in post. "My favorite part of the movie is the ending. I think they did a beautiful job of putting everything together." Though she usually feels critical about her own work, watching a cut of the ending was a surprise. "I felt like just a viewer, and it made me feel really good about it."

Durald has stayed busy after wrapping *Palo Alto*, with projects including an Arcade Fire music video shot on location in Haiti. "It's just such a beautiful landscape and culture out there," she says. For the

music video she used brand new Arri Alexa XT black & white infrared cameras mounted with Panavision G-series anamorphic primes. Arri shipped the cameras directly from Germany to CSC for the shoot, so Durald's was one of the first U.S. production teams to get their hands on them. ☺

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