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Short Takes

Luis (Nate Parker), an Iraq War veteran, holes up in a motel room to grapple with post-traumatic-stress disorder in *Lu*, a 10-minute short written, shot and edited in 168 hours.



Casualty of War

By Peter Tonguette

German cinematographer Kay Madsen had long wanted to collaborate with filmmaker Korstiaan Vandiver, and earlier this year, he finally got his chance, but Madsen admits that he was slightly taken aback when Vandiver suggested that they team up on a short film for the 168 Film Festival. "It's a faith-based festival," Madsen says, "and I'm not a man of religion. I've been in two churches in my life, so I wondered what I would be getting into."

After agreeing to participate, Madsen had to wrap his head around another of the festival's requirements. It turned out that the "168" was not a metaphor, but rather a literal rule: "[They] give you 168 hours to write, shoot and edit a 10-minute short."

Madsen was game, but he did not immediately have to grapple with the logistics involved in a seven-day shoot because Vandiver first broached the idea in late February, and work on the film would not begin until May. After three months passed, Vandiver contacted Madsen to say they were hours away from production. "Korstiaan called me and said, 'It has started. I'm writing a script now. We want to shoot in two days,'" recalls Madsen.

There was no prep time, and although Vandiver had decided on locations for the project, which focuses on an Iraq War veteran suffering from post-traumatic-stress disorder, there was no time to scout them. The production could not afford movie lights, so Madsen had to trust that the available light in the locations, which were in Studio City and Culver City, would be sufficient. Madsen recalls, "I said to Korstiaan, 'You know what? Since this is a faith-

based project for a faith-based festival, I'll try to have faith in your choice of locations and just jump into it!'"

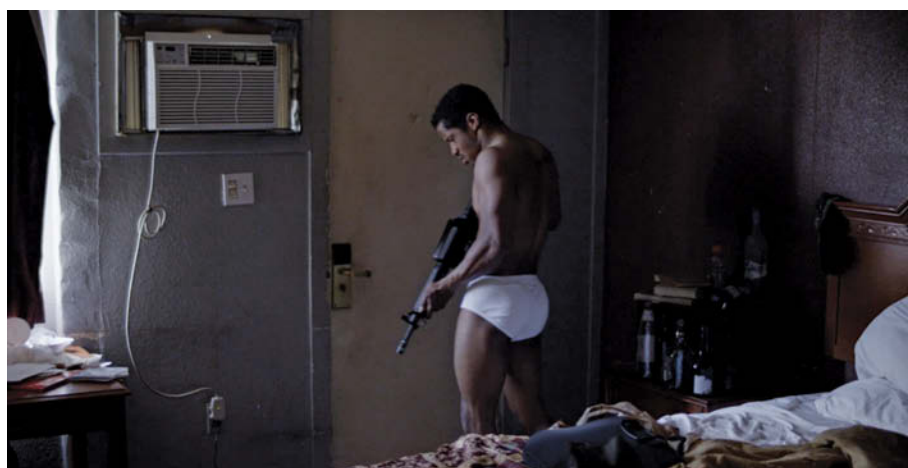
Lu is set primarily in a grimy motel room where ex-Marine Luis "Lu" Larham (Nate Parker) grapples with memories of a horrific incident he experienced during the war. When the filmmakers arrived at the designated motel, they found themselves at odds with the owner, who had developed cold feet about turning one of his rooms over to the crew.

Fortunately, contingency arrangements had been made at a second motel, so the team moved on. "The second one turned out to be much better, so that was lucky," says Madsen. Vandiver, whom Madsen describes as "a man of faith," did not call it luck. "He was always saying, 'Look, there's someone involved here who is helping us,'" Madsen recalls. "[My response] was, 'Yeah, okay, let's just make the best of it.'"

Madsen brought his own Red Epic onto the project, which he captured at 5K full frame. He says he appreciates the Epic's ease of use: "I like a very stripped-down, simple, lightweight camera that's also balanced, something that can sit on your shoulder easily for the whole day." Ergonomics proved especially important on *Lu*, which he shot entirely handheld. "I love operating the camera myself, especially on handheld shots, which become like an intimate dance with the actors. You almost feel like a member of the cast."

The cinematographer used a set of Lomo Illumina S35 T1.3 prime lenses. "They've been out in the field for four or five years, but they've been under almost everyone's radar," Madsen observes. "They have their imperfections, but that's actually why I love them. With modern digital cameras, the image can be almost clinical. I try

Unit photography by Louis Kreusel. Photos and frame grabs courtesy of the filmmakers.



Top: A flashback reveals the source of the vet's torment. Bottom: Lu rides out a long night at the motel.

to counter that by using lenses that have certain imperfections because I want the image to have a more organic feel.”

Because he didn't have the luxury of preparing a shot list or storyboards, Madsen carefully surveyed the motel room on the first day of shooting. While scanning for potential problems, he found only pluses. “There was a big window, which gave us keylight, and it had an opaque curtain, which helped us shape or cut the light.”

The curtain was either drawn to varying degrees or closed entirely, depending on the ambience Madsen sought or the

time of day he was trying to simulate. “For night scenes, we closed the curtains almost completely, allowing just a little bit of light to seep in and provide a ‘moonlight’ glow, and we changed the camera's color temperature from 5,600°K to 3,400°K,” says Madsen.

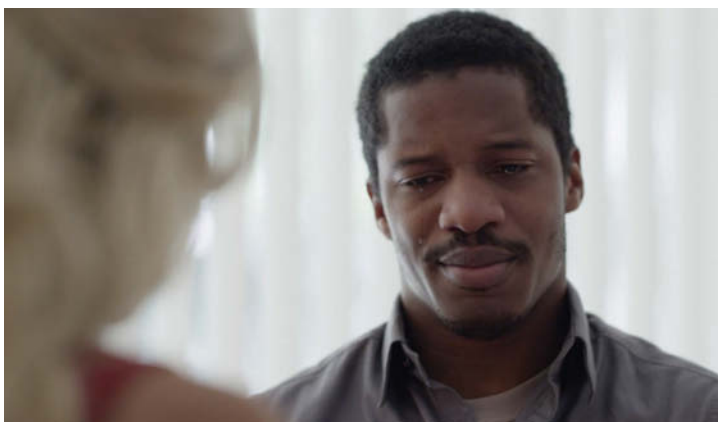
The night scenes were shot at T2 at ISO 800, and Madsen made creative use of the room's two built-in practicals. “The fixtures were slightly recessed in the ceiling, so they created nice pools of toplight and prevented spill from hitting the walls, which kept the backgrounds darker and helped

separate our foregrounds,” Madsen says. “The cool glow from the large TV set provided additional fill, and we put a 150-watt bulb in a cheap scoop to bounce soft tungsten light from the bathroom door into a dark corner of the room.”

The window curtain also proved useful as Madsen began planning an overhead shot of Lu lying in bed. To simulate a flash of lightning, a crewmember whipped the curtain open and shut. “It was a simple theatrical lighting trick,” Madsen comments. “We discovered the effect accidentally while we were playing around with the curtain!” The lightning dissolves into an arresting flashback that helps to explain Lu's troubled state of mind: a blindingly bright image of the soldier in his battle fatigues, pointing his rifle at a group of Iraqis. The action is obscured, but a bloodied hand is visible among the smoke and debris, indicating that the mission has gone wrong.

The motel room offered other pleasant surprises. In an early montage sequence, Lu is shown shadowboxing, doing pushups and drinking alcohol. To vent his angst, he punches a bathroom wall. The crew could not actually damage the wall, but they didn't have to. “When we explored the bathroom, we discovered these two big holes in the wall,” Madsen says. “So, we staged a shot with Nate

Top and middle: Lu is moved by a meeting with Mila (Saye Yabandeh), whose family he killed in Iraq. Bottom: Cinematographer Kay Madsen at work on location.



where we started on a close-up, with him punching the wall out of frame, and then panned down to show him pulling his fist back from one of the holes.”

Lu switches to its other main location for a sequence in which Lu seeks a measure of relief by visiting an Iraqi woman who survived the incident. Having relocated to the United States, the woman hosts Lu in

her bright, airy home.

Prior to Lu’s visit, as the woman contemplates a Webcam message he has sent, she walks outside to dip a foot in her pool, where the water is a strange shade of green. “The pool had turned green a few days earlier, after the pump went bad,” says Madsen. Instead of despairing, he and Vandiver considered the emotional subtext

the hue could lend to their story. “Green is the color of hope,” muses the cinematographer. “At the same time, a green pool is something that’s been sitting there without seeing a lot of care.”

The filmmakers were constantly on the lookout for small moments they could weave into their narrative. “The story is compressed into 10 minutes, so we wondered how to give it a bit of breathing room,” says Madsen. He cites a seemingly unremarkable shot of the woman taking a teapot off her stove just before she receives Lu’s message. To subtly suggest that the woman’s routine is about to be disrupted, Madsen framed the teapot more prominently in the foreground, making it the only object in sharp focus.

Madsen pulled focus himself most of the time, and he used shallow depth-of-field selectively. “Sometimes it’s great to isolate certain elements,” he says. “There’s one shot in the motel room that starts from a distance, and it’s completely out of focus as we walk in. Then we find Lu leaning on the wall, smoking a cigarette. We basically walk into focus.”

Madsen also served as the project’s editor, loading the 5K files into Final Cut Pro X. “With the help of a Red Rocket card, we were able to do real-time editing, but it’s not always easy to wear two hats.” The mandated running time of 10 minutes forced him to be ruthless with the footage, and on the final day of editing, the cut had to be reduced from a length of 17½ minutes. “We had some shots in there that we really liked,” he laments, “but there was just no room for them.”

Color correction was performed using a built-in FCPX tool “to crush the blacks a little bit, and to play with the saturation,” he says. “Apart from small adjustments, the final look is pretty much how it came out of the camera.”

Madsen and Vandiver managed to beat their deadline, but the cinematographer says they essentially turned seven days into 14 by working well into the night. Reflecting upon the experience, he says he doesn’t regret his leap of faith. “If the conditions are right, you can achieve great results with very little means. I like that lean approach to filmmaking.” ●