

SHORT TAKES



In the short *Escape*, Meadow (Ana Grace Knight) is haunted by intense memories of past abuse.

Trapped by Trauma

By Laretta Prevost

The short *Escape* gives visual form to the play of memory — how flashes can come upon us suddenly and overpoweringly, how one intense recollection can lead to another, how past experiences can be linked on a visceral level. Directed by Caryn Waechter and shot by Nicole Whitaker, the movie tells the story of a woman who's flung into a remembered swirl of past sexual, emotional and physical abuses; as she confronts these demons, she begins to change the trajectory of her narrative.

Meadow (Ana Grace Knight) is at a business dinner with a group of men who are higher up in the company. The gender power dynamics, combined with an offering of champagne, trigger a memory of sexual abuse in her childhood — and the present moment slows down as the memories swirl up, tracing the hard path that has brought Meadow to where she is today.

Whitaker's cinematography credits include the features *Chasing the Blues*, *Rhino* and *Amateur Night*; a segment of the documentary *Cobain: Montage of Heck*; and episodes of the series *Patriot* and the upcoming *Are You Sleeping*. Additionally, she received an Emmy nomination for her work on the documentary *Girl Rising*. She also shot Waechter's horror feature *DeadCon*, and it was during postpro-

duction on that project that the director asked Whitaker to join her on *Escape*.

Escape's power is found in its tonal quality, which stems from its rich imagery, off-speed camerawork, poetic editing and haunting sound. Waechter and Whitaker prepared extensive shot lists, and they also kept reference images on hand while shooting to remind them of the tone they were trying to achieve. "We have used images for inspiration on both films we have worked on together," the director offers. "This works well because I'm visual, and in some cases images can convey more than a paragraph of words."

"Caryn has an amazing visual sense," Whitaker affirms. "She really knows what she wants. It was a wonderful experience and a lot of fun collaborating on this project regardless of the intense subject matter — almost like having a co-cinematographer."

Waechter and Whitaker had played extensively with color on their feature, and they were excited to venture further down that road for *Escape*. "It's a short," says Whitaker, "so it was easier to create a concrete palette that started in a certain place, with calm neutral tones, and as Meadow becomes more tormented and goes down the rabbit hole of self destruction, the color palette gets stronger. For the fight scene in the bathroom, we made the bathroom pink and the room outside green to show how someone in her situation feels trapped, and how we remember past situations

Escape photos by Caryn Waechter, courtesy of the filmmakers.

more vibrantly than they actually were in real life. We really pushed a lot of the color, and it worked well to give a sense of different times in Meadow's life, as well as the intensity of her feelings.

"Adam LoNigro was instrumental as gaffer on *DeadCon*," the cinematographer continues. "We spent a lot of time working out the color palette and what tools to use on that project, and we were able to bring that experience — and Adam — to *Escape*."

For most of the short's nighttime scenes, the workhorse units were Arri's SkyPanel S60 and S30 LED fixtures. "We never would have been able to use those lights without the help of Illumination Dynamics and LiteGear's Mike Bauman, both of whom donated gear to our feature last summer," the director shares.

The SkyPanel, Whitaker says, "has changed my work as a cinematographer. You don't have to wait to change gels for color temperature or light levels; you can just dial in a setting with an iPad or on the fixture and find a level you like. Because it is so simple and fast, it really opens up many possibilities to play with light and color."

For the aforementioned bathroom scene, the filmmakers used the existing incandescent practicals in the bathroom and simply wrapped them with Lee 332 Special Rose Pink gel. To light the outside wall green, Whitaker and LoNigro worked with a SkyPanel S60-C, adjusting "the color wheel by eye, based on what Nicole and Caryn liked," says LoNigro.

Elsewhere, for a sexually violent scene set in a hotel room, an S60-C set to emulate Lee 182 Light Red was positioned inside the room to supplement a red-gelled M18 outside a window, with just a bit of silver bounce to accentuate Knight's eyes. "Our setups often consisted of only one or two sources," LoNigro reflects, "allowing us to give the actors the space that they needed and the time necessary to bring what you see on the screen."

For daytime scenes, Whitaker and LoNigro relied on Arri's M-Series lights — in particular, the M18 and M40. "We'd always start with a unit behind our subject," the gaffer says. "We would then use a [LiteGear] S2 LiteMat 4 or 2L for just a hint of fill light or a twinkle in the eyes." Other lights — rented from Sparta Grip — included 2' and



Top: This bathroom interior was lit through Special Rose Pink gel while an Arri SkyPanel was used to make the outside room green. Above: Cinematographer Nicole Whitaker prepares to capture Meadow's point of view.

4' Quasar Science Crossfade LED tubes; an 800-watt Jo-Leko; a 750-watt tungsten Leko; and an array of small tungsten units, from 150-watt Fresnels to 2K Juniors and Mightys, as well as 24" and 36" paper lanterns.

The filmmakers shot with an Arri Alexa Mini provided by Keslow Camera. They worked primarily at an ISO of 800, with the occasional use of 1,600, and captured 3.2K ProRes 4:4:4:4 XQ, framing for the 2.39:1 aspect ratio. Shooting with an aperture between T1.3 and T2, Whitaker carried a set of Zeiss Super Speed Mk II

primes, along with an Angenieux Optimo 24-290mm (T2.8) zoom as a long-lens backup. For a close-quarters car interior, a Sony a7S with a PL mount was used with the Super Speed primes.

The entire movie was shot at 60 fps, allowing Waechter and editor Robin Gonsalves — who also edited *DeadCon* — to play between slow motion and real time. The editing is essential to the feel of the piece, with objects and reflections serving as transitional elements that transport Meadow down a fast-paced memory lane.

Reflections and soft focus abound



Top: Young Meadow (Allegra Copeland) is in the family bathroom when she hears her parents fighting. Above: Meadow sits next to her older cousin (Aidan Milsted).

throughout the short, and atmosphere was added to nearly every shot with a 1/8 Classic Soft filter in front of the lens. The cinematographer says she approached her handheld operating “like a dance in slow motion in order to be more intimate with the actors. On our last project, we were very stylized with all of the camera movement. This time Caryn wanted the complete opposite.” In addition to being handheld, the camera was also occasionally used on a slider or a small dolly.

Escape was shot in and around Los Angeles. A key element to the movie was its primary location: a house, rich in texture,

that worked for scenes set in both the 1980s and '90s. “Every single room had perfect wallpaper and light fixtures,” Whitaker recalls. “One of my favorite shots is of young Meadow [played by Allegra Copeland] in the bathroom. There is a slow dolly past the shower, and she goes to the door while her parents are fighting. I love the composition, and the wallpaper, and how the light works in that scene. We only used a LiteMat in the shower and the practical in the bathroom. Sometimes, as a cinematographer, you think about taking away the practicals, but if you use what’s there, at times it’s the best work you do. You have to do smaller projects to

remember what you can do with very little.”

“Nicole is smart and passionate, and she’s such a positive, no-stress worker, which I love,” says Waechter. “That energy allows us to be creative and to create beautiful imagery instead of panicking, which never helps. That’s when the magic happens, when your passion and respect for one another shine through; that allows space to create.”

Whitaker notes that the final grade was performed “at Company 3 with Sean Coleman, who is amazing. He colors on [Blackmagic Design’s] DaVinci Resolve. He added the perfect finishing touch to the project.”

Writer Meredith Littas based *Escape* on her own experiences, and the filmmakers were committed to honoring the truth of the heavy material. “As we were shooting, we realized it wasn’t just her story,” the director says. “Some women spoke up and said, ‘Wow, I had a similar experience’ — such as being sexually abused in a taxi while others watched. It was cathartic to talk about it. Some guys just could not fathom that this could happen to anybody.”

Behind the scenes, the filmmakers made a conscious effort to hire both female and male crew for the production. “It is really important to make that effort, to reach out to other cinematographers and get those recommendations,” says Whitaker. “It was wonderful to have both men and women on set. It opened up a conversation between all of us about the subject matter. The only way this business is going to change is if we support each other.”

Motion pictures offer a powerful sensory experience, and in the case of *Escape*, the filmmakers’ use of the medium allows viewers who haven’t personally experienced the disempowered positions that it depicts to feel a sense of empathy. The movie illuminates the insidious ways that past abuse can affect an entire life. “The power of film is that it makes people feel,” Waechter reflects. “That’s why I love making movies. I love to feel — to feel alive, to feel what it is to be human.” ●