

BRAD RUSHING CSC

ON SHOOTING

COOK COUNTY

By Fanen Chiahemmen



Photo Credits: Paul Armstrong

Brad Rushing csc (foreground) on the set of *Cook County*. Right page: DOP Brad Rushing csc photographing a frenetic chase sequence from the back of a Kawasaki 4x4 driven by stunt coordinator Mark Chavarria.

The drug crystal methamphetamine and the havoc it wreaks on users' lives may be a daunting subject for an uninitiated director, but after working on a script over the course of a year, filmmaker David Pomes felt confident about taking on his first feature. "We'd done our homework as far as research and it felt like we were authentically covering the topic," the Houston native says of debut film *Cook County*. When cinematographer and fellow Houston native Brad Rushing csc read Pomes' script, it was clear to him that the director's hard work had yielded "a really powerful, dark, gritty, raw story," he says.



Cook County portrays a family in a small East Texas town whose lives have been damaged by their use of meth. Seventeen-year-old Abe (Ryan Donowho) is a recovering addict living with his abusive meth-addicted uncle, Bump (Anson Mount), who is a dealer and also a father to a six-year-old girl named Deandra. Abe's father and Bump's older brother, Sonny (Xander Berkeley), enters the mix when he returns home from a two-year stint in prison, seeking to salvage his relationship with his son and extricate him from the toxic environment created by Bump.

Such a pressure cooker of an existence gives rise to scenarios that may be hard to watch, but Pomes was determined not to shy away from the reality of living in such circumstances. "I wanted to close in on the characters and give an aesthetic that was visceral, guttural, raw and hot-looking," he says. One of the ways to achieve that, the director felt, was by shooting in Super 16. "It seems like there's more of a documentary film style look to it," he remarks. "They used to shoot all the old documentaries in Super 16." Rushing – whose credits include dozens of high-profile music videos (Moby, Nelly, Britney Spears) – appreciated Pomes' choice. "I'm of the generation that I started my career shooting film, and digital is the newcomer for me, so it was very natural for me to be shooting film. With Super 16 you have more depth of field than with a Super 35 mm frame or sensor, which is something we controlled and used to our advantage."

Creating a visceral experience was paramount to Rushing's approach to the cinematography on *Cook County*. "The lighting is

really primal and raw," he says. "To me it was intrusive in a way that laid bare the reality of these characters' lives. For example, based on a lot of research that the director did, people who get on this drug methamphetamine develop severe paranoia, and one of the manifestations of that with our character Bump is that he's got stuff all over the windows of his house. He has foil and newsprint up on the windows, and I really wanted to be able to light through the windows. So we came up with an arrangement whereby the paper's slightly pulling away from the window and there's a hole in the foil, and so I was able to punch a little bit of light through there. I would put really large HMI lights outside those windows – we had a 12K HMI Par and two 4ks going through the windows – and then really hard, strong shafts of light would come through those holes and light up the characters' faces. I also would flare the camera sometimes with it."

Highlighting the abundant sweat on the characters was another way to heighten the immediacy. The story "takes place in East Texas where it's very hot during the summertime," says Rushing. "And also, one of the characteristics of this drug is it makes you sweat, so David wanted the people to look sweaty. And there's this wonderful glint that you get off of skin when you light it and it's sweaty. It's a nice sheen that you get in kick angles when you're backlighting or you're three-quarter lighting, and also if you have a big bounce in the front just to add a little bit of fill, it'll pick up the glitz of the droplets of sweat off a face, and that was what we were really going for. I think that sort of detail brings the atmosphere of the setting alive for the audience."

From left, actors Rutherford Cravens, Ryan Donowho and Anson Mount setting up for an intense scene in *Cook County*.



The lighting was also effective in illustrating the way the lives of the three main characters – Abe, Bump and Sonny – clash. “To me the lighting in this movie was very much an analogy of the reality of the characters’ lives,” Rushing explains. “For instance there’s one scene where Bump and some of his associates are doing meth in the living room, and Abe and Deandra are in the bedroom. Abe is putting Deandra to sleep and he goes to the door and looks through a crack in the door, and he’s completely in the dark except for this little bit of light that’s coming in and hitting him with a vertical streak down his face and one eye. For me that was really symbolic of the fact that he was at that moment in a very dark place, and the allure of the drug was beckoning to him.”

Rushing created a lot of contrast in the lighting with the use of dark shadows and flares, and rarely did he use what he calls “big, soft beautiful light.” The exception is one interlude in the middle of the film where the storyline calls for it, he says. “Abe’s father, who’s an ex-convict, comes and takes Abe and Deandra to Houston to stay with relatives, and it’s this whole other way of life there. They’re living in the suburbs. These people are very religious; they take them to church, and it’s a much more nurturing environment,” Rushing explains. “So in those scenes I did work with softer, broader light and lower contrast. And the other really distinct thing was that in 90 per cent of the movie the camera is completely handheld. Even on the dolly shots I would hand hold the camera. But in the scenes in Houston, in order to contrast it and give a more stable feel, the camera was always on a tripod or mounted directly to the dolly so that it did not have that frenetic shakiness that’s in the rest of the movie.”

When it came to shooting day exteriors, the film’s budget ruled out the possibility of any additional lighting, and Rushing had to make the best use of daylight. “The expansiveness of the blocking just would have been impractical on our budget to try and light those scenes,” he says. “So I would be very deliberate as to the time of day that we were shooting, and I would pick the time when the light would be right for those locations. I worked

with David and the assistant director to schedule those scenes during the right time of day. For the day exterior scenes, in addition to timing our shooting so that the sun was in the optimal position, we also used bounced light and negative fill to control the shape.”

Night exteriors, however, were trickier to light given the film’s budget, so in some scenes Rushing opted to shoot day for night. “I’m always a bit skeptical of shooting day for night because you really have to be precise with it or I don’t think it comes off well,” he states. “[But] we didn’t have the money for something like a Musco light, so we would have had to go in with small lights and hide them, and we really didn’t have the time to set that up.” Describing how he achieved the day for night shots, Rushing explains, “There’s one scene where Sonny is sitting in his truck and he’s going through want ads looking for a job, and there’s one shot that David wanted, a very wide shot of the truck in the middle of the forest at night. And to get that wide shot of the forest it would have either taken a long time to light it up well so that I’d have some mid-ground, foreground and background in it, or I would have gone in with one or two lights and it wouldn’t have had the depth, and it would have looked like a low-budget film. What I offered to do was to shoot it day for night. I found a part of the forest that was nice and shady where we had the sun coming through the trees, which gave us nice dappled backlight. And then I hid a pretty powerful little Dedo light in the truck, and because I put [the truck] in a shadowed area with shafts of sunlight coming through, and it was reasonably dark even for daylight, I was able to bring that light inside up and make it kind of bright so that it looked like there was a dome light on his truck. And when we went into colour correction on the DI, I had them put a power window around the front windshield of the truck and brighten it up even more inside and then darken the background and give it a bit of a blue cast.

“The other thing I like to do with night scenes,” Rushing continues, “is I like to de-saturate the colour a little bit, and the reason for that is the way the human eye sees. You’ve got rods and cones in your eyes, and rods see luminance and cones see colours, and cones are not as sensitive to light as the rods are, so as luminance goes down and it gets dark we lose our colour vision at night. So when you’re photographing something, if you de-saturate it a little bit and give it a little bit of a blue cast, I feel that gives the best approximation of moonlight.”

Rushing notes that he appreciates being able to do this de-saturation process digitally. “I started in this business before films were scanned and colour-corrected digitally. Colour correction options were limited to the balance of cyan, magenta and yellow with printer lights, and there were many things you could not do, like de-saturate colours or manipulate contrast. The advent of digital colour correction has made a huge difference,” he says.

Reflecting on the differences between shooting film and digital, Rushing says, “The thing that I like about shooting digitally is I light to the monitor and I build up my lighting and my colouring based on what I see, and I find that’s very accurate. And when I get into colour correction I really have what I’m expecting to work with. With film you’re going a lot more on faith, and I don’t really use the monitor. The video assist on film is more for the director because you just can’t trust what it’s telling you. It’s better to look through the camera or to use your own eye. I definitely use a light meter more when I’m shooting film than when I’m shooting HD or digital. Sometimes the light meter may tell me that a ratio is right, but it just doesn’t look right to my eye. In those instances I ultimately trust my eye because there are more things that can affect apparent brightness than the incident light level. Things like skip angle.”

On *Cook County*, Rushing opted for the ARRIFLEX 16 SR3, which was provided by Camtec in Burbank, California (“We were able to get a better deal flying the camera in from California than we could get locally in Houston,” he says.). For film stock he used Eastman Kodak VISION3 500T 7219 for interiors, and KODAK VISION2 50D 7201 for day exteriors. The lens package included Zeiss Primes 9.5-50 mm T 1.3 zooms, a Canon 8-64 mm T2.4 zoom, and a Canon 11/165 T 2.5 zoom. “We didn’t use the zooms a whole lot,” Rushing says. “I have to say I’m a little bit old-school sometimes in that I don’t like zooms that look like zooms. Typically if I do a zoom in a movie I hide it in a dolly shot. But there’s a moment at the climax of the film where Bump bursts through a door. And David wanted a snap zoom into Bump’s face. At the time I was a little averse to it because of my disinclination to use zooms, but after we shot it and when I saw it cut in, I thought it was just a fantastic punctuation of the emotional energy of that moment. I thought that was a really good use of the zoom. And I have to say I give David a lot of credit for having good instincts and having done his homework and really preparing to direct this movie.”

Rushing was in fact impressed with Pomes even before starting on the project. “It’s pretty frequent that I speak to people setting out to do their first feature, and usually they’re a little bit clueless, and David had really thought things out and done his research. He was very honest about what he didn’t know and what he wanted and where he was seeking some guidance from me. He was very collaborative,” Rushing says. 🍷

16mm: An Expressive Tool for Cinematographers

By Justin Lovell

The use of 16 mm in filmmaking has dwindled significantly. It is no longer seen as the only acceptable alternative to shooting on 35 mm. As cinematographers, it is about choosing the right texture to tell a story. Most recently, 16 mm is being selected for aesthetic reasons much as an artist may choose watercolour over oil paint, or cotton canvas over linen canvas. While the digital empire has attacked 35 mm by trying to emulate it in every way possible, few digital cameras are out to emulate the look of 16 mm. A number of cinematographers, including myself, have worked with hand-cranked 16 mm Bolexes or Filmos and have been quite successful in utilizing these cameras to add a dimension of film to a dominantly digital era. Independent films, documentaries, and even network television series are embracing the small format film. The freedom of 16 mm allows cinematographers limitless opportunity to create a world of artistic expression. Superimpositions, cross-processed gritty textures, organic light leaks, and dust specks are all part of this emotional medium. 16 mm: it is in a world of its own.

Justin Lovell, an associate CSC member, runs www.Framediscreet.com, a collective of cinematographers and studio specializing in 2K data scans of 8/16 mm and online colour grading. 🍷

Ryan Donowho in *Cook County*.