

# River

## Adam Marsden csc

### Navigates a Film Shoot in Laos

By FANEN CHIAHEMEN



A young American volunteer doctor finds himself on the run in *River* which tells the story of a good deed gone awry in the communist nation of Laos.

In the frenetic thriller *River*, John Lake (Rossif Sutherland), a young American doctor volunteering for an NGO in a village in southern Laos, witnesses a sexual assault one night on a beach and tries to intervene. Things go awry – the assailant, an Australian tourist, ends up dead, and the doctor, implicated in the tourist’s murder, becomes a fugitive in the communist nation.

The idea for the film came about several years ago, when Timmins, Ont.-born filmmaker Jamie Dagg was travelling through Southeast Asia and reflecting on some of life’s difficult themes. “I was obsessed with the idea of unintended consequences – a particular action intended for a positive purpose has a negative unintended outcome, and I was thinking about how it relates to the hundreds of decisions we make on a daily basis. How some particular choice can very quickly escalate into something catastrophic and spiral out of control,” he says. “I was also interested in the fact that as people, we all have the capacity for violence within us. I was looking at the perfect combination of how adverse factors and violence can surface in even the most placid of individuals.”

He began writing the narrative while he was in Laos, and the country seemed like the perfect setting for the story he had in mind.

“It had everything I needed from a

plot perspective for the mechanics of the story, including a river dividing two countries,” Dagg says. “There is no shortage of beautiful islands in Southeast Asia, whether it’s Thailand or Malaysia or Indonesia, but they’re very different from the islands of the Mekong River in Laos. The islands off the coast of Thailand have crystal clear waters and white sandy beaches, whereas the islands of the Mekong are very murky; there are no beaches, just mangroves, and it really contributes to the oppressive feeling that I think much better suits the narrative.”

*River* is credited as being the first North American feature film to shoot in Laos, and Dagg says the country lacked the infrastructure, rental houses and experienced crew members needed for the production. “While they have some people that make films there, they don’t have the expertise,” the director says. “It’s not like Thailand where they have a fully-functioning service industry. In Laos we knew we weren’t going to have access to cranes or a lot of the other toys that people use when making films. They did have a department of cinema there, but they were completely overwhelmed by us coming over.” In fact, according to Dagg, the Laotian authorities had to create an entirely new visa class to accommodate the length of the crew’s shoot.

However, rather than be dissuaded



by the lack of resources and services in Laos, the director embraced it. "The story itself is raw and visceral, and I like those limitations we had. I think it makes complete sense to have shot the way we shot it regardless that it was the only way we could have shot it because of the lack of infrastructure," he says.

With the help of local producers from a well-connected company named Laos Art Media, *River* producers set about the process of getting the communist government on board with facilitating the film shoot, which required equipment and crew to be brought into the country.

"It was quite an extensive process. First you have to get permission and get the script vetted to make sure it's not critical of the regime," Dagg says. "Because the story is pretty apolitical in the sense that we're not really criticizing the communist government or anything like that they were pretty supportive of it. Then you have to get permission to scout there and to shoot there."

Perhaps the easiest part for Dagg was bringing DP and good friend Adam Marsden csc on board. "Adam has been one of my dearest friends for many years. He is so often more than just a DP to me; he is involved in whatever I'm writing from the very beginning, which is a great and rare relationship," the director says.

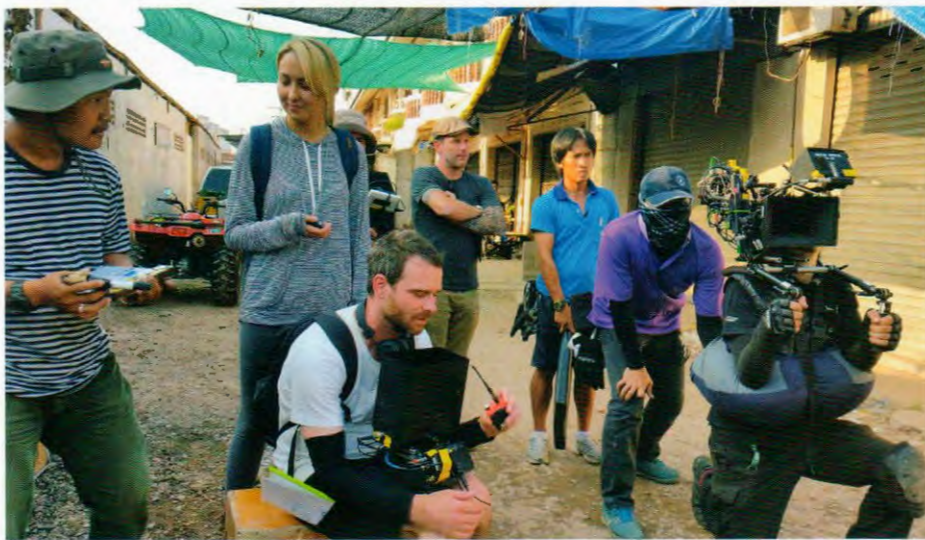
When Dagg and Marsden discussed *River*, Dagg's initial direction was that he "wanted it to feel very raw and visceral," Marsden recalls. "This man is in this country struggling for his life, and [Dagg] wanted that reflected in the photography as well. So we needed to obviously embrace the environment while having very limited resources."

Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2006 feature *Babel* was an inspiration for the team. "That was a very different film. I love the operating and lighting; it's very natural," Dagg says.

Marsden spent three weeks in late 2014 (*River* was shot in January 2015)

with Dagg doing intensive location scouting. "Because the film is predominantly daylight dependent, it was extremely important for us to schedule our shots around the right times of day to ensure the best light in any given location," the DP says. "We went through the script in its entirety to plot where we needed to be at the right times of day. By the time our first AD arrived in Laos, we already had the blueprint of our schedule."

Marsden's choice to shoot on the RED DRAGON was an obvious one due to the fact that "approximately 80 per cent of the film was shot handheld and with temperatures being between 30 and 40 degrees Celsius, we wanted to keep it as light as possible as to not kill our camera operators. The DRAGON was the lightest and most compact camera we could employ. We had two cameras running full time, manned by A camera operator Richie Moore and B camera operator Justin Beattie.



The crew employed many different camera platforms on the *River* shoot, Marsden says.

Both operators did a fantastic job and worked very closely together to execute often complex handheld sequences," Marsden says.

Post colour grading was done by Walt Biljan of REDLAB Digital. Having worked with Biljan for years, Marsden had confidence in the colourist who was an integral part of the final look of the film. "That being said, I feel strongly even in the digital medium to try and get as much on the sensor and in the metadata as possible so that the colourist has a solid starting point. I would always be balancing the camera to the general look of what the film should look like. I mean, obviously there would be some fine-tuning in final grade, but I was always balancing the camera for colour," Marsden says.

For lensing, Marsden chose to shoot with uncoated Zeiss Super Speeds. "We needed to go with a set of lenses that were quite fast so when we got into our

night scenes we didn't require a ton of light. As well we wanted to work with a lot of available light. We also opted for the uncoated Super Speeds because by removing the coating off the lenses, it gave us a hazy feeling which we felt helped convey a strong sense of the oppressive heat in Laos," he says.

Marsden and gaffer Adrian Mottram lit most of *River* with practical light sources augmented with Kino Flos often bulbed with cool white tubes, as well as small HMI, sodium vapour, Mercury Metal Halide and tungsten fixtures, which the crew brought in from Thailand. "Our approach was to try to keep it as natural as possible. We didn't want to pull the viewer out of the reality of the characters' situation. We didn't want to force too much light in; it was more about positioning our camera and actors in the right spots in relation to the existing light," the DP says. "It was a real pleasure working with

Adrian; he has a very intuitive sense of light and how it affects the tone of a film."

Scenes shot at a beachside bar feature a variety of different coloured lights, which Marsden noted was a common feature in the country due to the vast amount of insects. "We wanted to embrace what Laos is," he says. "There is such a multitude of different light sources and colour temperatures, and we needed to maintain that feeling. The lights existing in the bar had coloured bulbs. The coloured lights are used because they don't attract insects. They would use deep red and green lights because insects aren't attracted to those colour wavelengths, whereas if we were to use regular incandescent light bulbs that we would use in North America, the actors would be surrounded by the insects."

Ironically, in the film, insects can in fact be seen swarming the street lamps that

the production installed to illuminate the beachside pathways in night scenes, which Marsden says was not intentional. "Not having the resources of having film lighting, I took the approach aesthetically and practically of choosing to use lights that may be plausible. For example, when John is walking down the path outside the bar, we put up our own lights that would feel indigenous to the island. We ended up purchasing a large amount of fluorescent lights, sodium vapour lights and mercury vapour lights and installed them where needed. So the insects are a by-product in those instances," he says.

One of the instances when Marsden lit artificially was in the pivotal scene on the beach, which he says posed one of the biggest challenges of the shoot. "We shot in a small area and had very little power resources," he recalls. "That scene was to be motivated by moonlight, but unfortunately we couldn't put anything in the sky to emulate the

direction the moonlight would have come from, so we had to light from the ground. We had limited places to light from because we were surrounded by water. It made it very difficult to make the light feel naturally motivated. Rossif did carry a flashlight in that scene, which was the one motivational light source we had, but it was augmented with 1.2K HMI Pars running off putt-putt generators."

Aside from the technical difficulties, the crew also had to adjust to local customs and pervasive bureaucracy. A chase sequence shot in an open-air market over three days was shut down the second day by an inconvenienced local chief. The production finally got clearance again after government intervention.

"It's a communist dictatorship; just by nature there is a lot of bureaucracy and there are minders with you at all times to make sure you're not filming anything offensive and not straying from the script they've approved," Dagg says.

Despite those challenges, he says shooting *River* in Laos the way they did was worth it. In fact, he says, "the chaos behind the scenes contributed to what we've got in front of the camera. It really helps. If everyone was relaxing with a beer, the film would not have been the way it was. Also you are shooting in a place where everything is very fresh and vibrant. People aren't jaded; they are excited to work on it and help us."

Marsden concurs, "Because it's not a country that has been exposed to filmmaking, there was a lot of excitement about it, in terms of local vendors and homeowners and people being excited about a film being made there."

Dagg was named the winner of the 2016 Canadian Screen Award for Best First Feature (formerly the Claude Jutra Award) for *River* by the Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television. The award recognizes an outstanding debut from a first-time filmmaker. 🏆

# Silk™ 210

Pure, Soft White Light

Uncompromising Colour Quality  
and Exceptional Output



Designed to meet the requirements of the most discerning filmmaker, the Silk series LED lighting system has been specifically developed for film and video applications that demand extremely colour-accurate, high quality light.

With TLCI, CRI and R9 metrics in the high 90's, the Silk 210's high-volume light output is capable of producing 2400 lux with colour temperatures ranging from 2800K - 6500K.

Rosco's Silk 210 adds immense visual richness to any scene with an unparalleled soft texture. Let Silk bring your story to life.

**rosco**  
WWW.ROSCO.COM