

# CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

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**André Pienaar** CSC, SASC  
*Len and Company*

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Karl Janisse *Dead Rush*  
Pasha Patriki csc *Gridlocked*

03



# Len and Company

# André Pienaar CSC, SASC

## Lenses Stylish, Heartfelt Comedy

By **FANEN CHIAHEMEN**

In the feature film *Len and Company*, Rhys Ifans plays a successful music producer, once a legendary punk rocker in the 1970s, now spending his crotchety mid-life in a secluded country house in upstate New York, trying to avoid family, friends and collaborators, with little success. The film is Montreal-born director Tim Godsall's first feature, but after having shot many commercials with him, DP André Pienaar CSC, SASC agreed to work on *Len and Company* even before reading the script. "He's an extremely accomplished commercials director and storyteller, and I have the highest regard for him," Pienaar says of Godsall. Although *Len and Company* is marketed as a comedy, the cinematographer says, "I think it's a fairly full-spectrum life story with emotion, family dysfunction, cynicism, darkness and loads of humour. In fact it's quite black and English in tone – the main character Len, is a British rough diamond with no filter. His language and his scowling attitude are pretty entertaining and bring lots of chuckles to audiences. But he's also incredibly engaging and attractive in his own offbeat way." Pienaar tells *Canadian Cinematographer* the process of bringing *Len and Company* to life.

**Canadian Cinematographer:** What did the director tell you he wanted as far as the visual aesthetic of the film?

**André Pienaar CSC, SASC:** Tim and I have worked together in commercials for many years, and I think the style he naturally gravitates towards tends to be fairly honest. Our look is really about being naturalistic and not overly dramatic, and keeping the lighting very honest and the lensing very natural. So *Len and Company* was an evolution of a style we have worked on before. Tim wanted the photographic style to be understated and quiet, simple and honest. At the same time, he wanted it to be stylish, elegant and composed. In a way, the film alludes to '70s-style filmmaking but with a contemporary aesthetic. It's a quietly intense and personal film, so we wanted to match that cinematically. It's also a comedy, so we had to find a subtle language to convey all the layers of the film.

**CC:** How did you approach and design the lighting?

**AP:** Very simply, the lighting on *Len and Company* needed to feel natural and believable. For me, lighting design is driven by the type of film, the story, the style and the language, and it's also very much influenced by the budget. Given that we had limited time and resources, the fact that we were going for a very natural available light look suited us well. So budget and



Credit: Patricia Homonylo

our stylistic intent married well to define the style. Even when I do have a comfortable budget, I often try to interfere as little as possible with existing light. I like to shape what's there, taking away and adding where necessary.

I used ambient daylight or strategically positioned practical lamps, augmenting with film lights where necessary. To this end, we paid a lot of attention in prep to practical lights, their positioning and the quality of their shades because a lot of the film happens at night and I wanted the rooms to light themselves as much as possible. I think there is a lot of skill necessary to use available light. It's not just a case of switching on the house lights and shooting. My gaffer, Jonah Hart, did a great job of manipulating ambient daylight and practical lamps. He and I have an understanding and a shorthand, which goes a long way when I am also operating the camera.

My typical lighting kit on a film like this is comprised of small HMIs, Kinos and LEDs. I also use ETC Source Fours and Dedo 400s with gobos for accent lights and bounces. I also like to

have an 18K up my sleeve for use during the day only when necessary – like extending soft ambient daylight during bad weather or at the end of the day. William F. White was most generous in providing us with an HMI package truck and some extras despite our limited budget.

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**CC:** How did the main location – a house in the countryside – inform your lighting?

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**AP:** The house was a treat to shoot in both practically and stylistically. It's a 19<sup>th</sup> century farm house with a modern addition designed by our production designer, Paul Austerberry. It's attractive and lived-in with a simple colour palette of natural materials – wood, brick, stone, leather. The house is well laid-out with windows all round, so we were able to take advantage of natural light for much of the film. We shot in every room in the house, day and night. The main room, where a lot of dialogue scenes happen, has a cathedral ceiling with wooden beams, which made a perfect place to rig a pipe grid for a few Kinos and small incandescents. While I don't often light from above, it helped speed things up and allowed me to put in some edges and accents without much fuss.

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**CC:** How did you decide on your camera and lens kit?

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**AP:** This was a particularly interesting part of the process. When we started the process, Tim was dead set on shooting the film on film. He showed me many examples of films shot on film, saying he wanted our film to have a similar quality. The producers and I felt that digital was better suited to our budget, as well as to our style and process, so Tim said, "Okay, prove it to me." So we set about doing exhaustive tests of formats, cameras and lenses to find the best possible formula of camera and lenses. We had seven cameras, including 35 mm film, Super 16, ARRI ALEXA and RED EPIC, with permutations of Zeiss, ARRI, Cooke and Panavision lenses. After viewing our tests on a screen at Technicolor, then on a big screen at Scotiabank Cineplex, we settled on the ALEXA with Panavision Primos. This gave us the subtlety of the film look that Tim was after. A week into shooting, Tim said, "I see no reason to ever shoot film again."

As far as lensing goes, we tended to stay in a natural range of 24 on the wide end to 75 on the long end. We occasionally strayed into the 20 and 100 world. Panavision was incredibly supportive of me and the project, giving us two cameras and everything we needed at bargain rates.

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**CC:** The film has a distinct colour palette. Can you talk about how you helped create that?

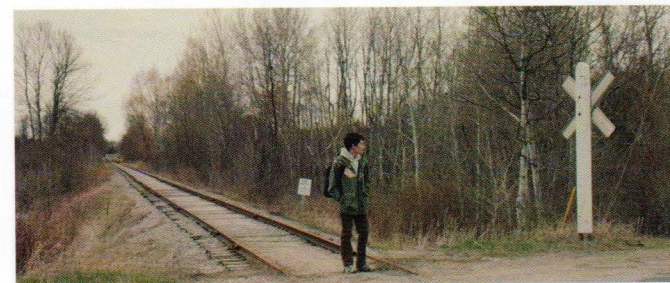
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**AP:** The film takes place from winter into spring, and we were lucky to shoot at the right time of year. The colours of the landscape early in the year were suitably bleached and monochromatic. So along with the colours of Len's world, well coordinated by Paul [Austerberry] and Tim, the whole film is in muted tones of brown and black and bleached vegetation. This is a signature of the film. Despite Len's urban background,



Stills from *Len and Company*.





Stills from *Len and Company*.



he is surrounded by tones of wood in his house, his furniture, his guitars, his mixing desk, the trees on the farm, as well as the bleached tones of grass, faded skies, worn leather, dry earth, snow and his faded black Porsche. All this contributes to a very simple palette. The colour in the lighting is equally restrained and monochromatic, and lighting contrast is also used with extreme discretion.

An important part of creating the palette is done in the digital suite. I always set the look with the on-set DIT. I don't use LUTs, I prefer to create the look from the Raw image. I oversee every shot on set so the cutting copy looks a lot like the final grade. This means all the screenings prior to final grade look good. Technicolor Toronto was incredibly supportive. Despite our low budget, they gave us the full treatment from extensive testing right through to a long session in final colour, including having us back after re-edits for final tweaks. Our Technicolor colourist Brett Trider did a wonderful job of understanding where we wanted to go, making for a pleasing and coherent look. I'm sure it can be frustrating for a colourist to exercise such restraint with colour and contrast.

**CC:** Can you talk about camera operation and when, if at all, you decided to shoot handheld versus dolly or Steadicam?

**AP:** Intuitive operating is gold for me. As a result, I have operated many of my own films. It's impossible for me to separate the lighting and the operating – they are part of the same photographic impulse. This is how I manage to translate my personal understanding of a film, a scene, a character. It's very personal. For me operating is deeply integral to the style and tone of a film. There is no such thing as "good" operating or "bad" operating – it's more whether it's appropriate operating. While Tim and I had every shot planned as handheld, or dolly or static, we also would go on instinct during the shooting.

We had two cameras running for most of the film. My other camera operator was Rob Barnett, who has worked with me for many years and understands my approach. He did a spectacular job, and I feel our two operating styles blended seamlessly. I have mixed feelings about two cameras – on the one hand it can significantly compromise lighting and eye-lines, but in many cases it can allow us to get our schedule as well as capture two angles on a scene that is improvised or particularly emotional. *Len* would not have been possible with one camera.

**CC:** Can you talk about the decision to shoot widescreen?

**AP:** I love 2.4 as an aspect ratio in commercials and I try to work in 2.4 whenever I can. I think it lends an elegance to the frame, and there's more spread across the frame so you have more design space to work with. I think it's a frame you can play with and there's a lot more variety available in the wide screen. It's great for two people; you can put them on opposite sides of the frame. Or with one person, you can either put them way on the side of the frame, or depending on what you are trying to say, you can put them in the middle. You can put one person in a landscape. There's a shot of Len walking down a country road at dusk, and he's angry and pissed, just a grumpy old bugger, and he's

walking towards the camera, and we had the camera dead centre in front of him tracking back, and he's just this man in the middle of a wide frame around him. You see the dark trees and the dark sky, and I think it's graphically beautiful. He's an imposing character, and I thought putting him dead centre shows how bullish he is and how angry he was at the time.

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**CC:** How would you describe the kind of work you aspire to as a cinematographer?

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**AP:** I want my work to be current. To me, the kind of cinematography that I love and aspire to and think is the best work around tends not to get awards. A good example is Alwin Küchler who shot *Morvern Callar*. To me, he's a great cinematographer who doesn't use old techniques. I would rather think about my image, and think "When is this happening? Who's my audience?" I think that's why [Emmanuel] Lubezki [ASC, AMC] has done such a great job, because he doesn't use those old-school tricks. It's too easy to have a pouch on your belt with 50 tricks in it. I almost like to forget what I've done and treat every day like a new day on set. That may be why at my age I'm still busy in commercials. I like change. Work would be boring if I was still doing things the way I did in the '90s.

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**CC:** So do you think trends come and go in cinematography just like in fashion?

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**AP:** I think it evolves through time as times go by and film language evolves. It even changes within the decades. When I was shooting commercials in the early '90s, they were so different from the late '90s. 1992 was quite different from 1996. I could pull commercials out of my reel from those years and show you how I changed. In the late '90s we were always using very long lenses, and in the early '90s we used wide lenses. Styles come back but reinvented. Just some years ago, maybe 10 years ago, there was a whole fashion with brown; everyone was wearing brown and coffee colours, and it was very mid-century, very '70s, but it had its own new twist. We don't go and repeat it, but we take its essence and we do something new with it. So, yeah, in all the arts, in play writing, in novels, particularly in clothing, fashion and interior design – like the whole mid-century revival, the whole Scandinavian thing in furniture design – it's all a revival but in a new way. You might have been 10 years old in the '70s, but now you're an adult, and you're designing stuff and you see it with new eyes, so it's going to be an allusion. Which is what I think *Len and Company* was; I think it was an allusion to the '70s but with a contemporary aesthetic. 🍷