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Kris Belchevski with the cast of *Jean of the Joneses* filming an interior scene.

## Kris Belchevski Transforms Toronto into Brooklyn for *Jean of the Joneses*

By Fanen Chiahem

*Jean of the Joneses*, Toronto-born writer-director Stella Meghie's first feature film, is a comedy-drama profiling a multigenerational Brooklyn-based family of women who find themselves at a crossroads. The film's titular character, Jean (Taylour Paige), is the main focus – a young literary sensation whose romantic troubles seem to have stalled her ability to produce a follow-up success. Meanwhile, the women are rocked by the arrival of the family patriarch who shows up unannounced at a gathering only to drop dead on the doorstep. In trying to unravel the mystery of her recently deceased estranged father – and give him a dignified funeral – Jean leads her family to uncover and face some un-

comfortable truths and buried secrets.

When associate member Kris Belchevski, who shot the film, read the script for *Jean of the Joneses*, he was drawn to the freshness of it. "It was an all-female cast and different from other scripts I've come across," he says. "There were all these comedic moments, which you can frame as anything, but then there are all these really tender moments between a mother and a daughter, or a girl and a potential love. These kinds of moments were interesting for me in terms of how we were going to show them with lighting and framing."

Although Belchevski and Meghie did not know each other previously, the director was impressed with the cinematographer's reel. "He is just very under-

stated and very elegant with the way he lights things," Meghie says. "He's not trying to overdo it; he's trying to make it feel as natural and as appropriate as the story needs. And for me, my story is an understated comedy, and just the way he lit seemed to speak to the story I wanted to tell. We both kind of have the same philosophy on film and framing and just wanting things to be beautiful and comfortable."

Despite being a Brooklyn-set story, most of the film was shot in strategically selected locations in Toronto. "If it were up to Stella, we would have shot the whole thing in New York, but it's just too expensive," Belchevski says. Meghie instead sought to find in Toronto "those older buildings that fit in

Credit: Tom Adenry



Jean considers a potential new love interest.

and have the kind of vibe that feels New York or Brooklyn," she says. "And Kris was great for that too because he kind of knows New York and also has great taste, so it was always nice on scouts to have a sounding board in someone who not only could talk to me about the pros and cons of shooting in a space, but also on a taste level if it felt right for the story."

After settling on a location, the crew would complete the look by changing street signs, putting up U.S. flags and avoiding Toronto landmarks. "Stella stressed this a lot, that we couldn't show anything a Toronto audience would recognize," Belchevski says.

Sometimes during the shoot, though, the crew would lose locations at the last minute, and Belchevski, a Toronto native, was able to suggest locations that would work, sometimes just an hour before they were scheduled to shoot. "Then it was, 'Okay, we have this exterior location, how are we going to photograph it so it looks like New York? How are we going to light it?' So you have to be creative that way, and it was interesting in that respect."

Taking stylistic cues from iconic New York directors like Woody Allen – relying on strong performances playing out in front of the camera, and minimal cutting, for example – not only informed the aesthetic but also worked for the

film's modest budget. "I try and fit as much of the master into the frame and keep the action in the whole scene. I remember we shot a scene with our main character Jean and her little niece, and I think we ended up laying 200 or 300 feet of track, and we just did the whole scene like that and at the end it just pans through a door," Belchevski says. "It's just interesting when you don't have cuts because you allow a lot more of the performance. The performance is what it is at that point; you're not trying to hide anything within a cut. It just becomes really seamless, and if you've got a really good performance it becomes really engaging."

He says he operated the camera mostly on sticks to achieve that aesthetic, employing just simple pans or tilts. "It's kind of cool, though, because when the camera does move, it becomes quite powerful. Because the audience just gets used to the camera being kind of pinned to one position and then it has to pan around," he says.

Belchevski suggests that having a cast of experienced actors goes a long way for a cinematographer working with a modest budget and tight schedule. "We worked with some very experienced actors [including Michelle Hurst, Gloria Reuben and Sherri Shepherd], and they were instrumental to knowing how to block a scene. Sometimes it's tough to

block a scene, and when you have very experienced actors they go, 'Okay, I'll just go here and then I'll do this here.' Or you can just tell them, 'Hey, I'm having a little bit of trouble keeping the frame and we want to keep it all in one shot,' and they say, 'Okay, cool, I'll do this and this,' so that was really helpful from my end."

For the single-camera shoot he selected the ARRI AMIRA, supplied by Affiliated Equipment. "All the ALEXA family cameras are essentially the same sensors in different boxes. They can do slightly different things, but it was a good camera for this because it's a little more efficient than a regular ALEXA. It doesn't take as much battery power, it's lighter and it's easier to move around. We shot 3.2K, and based on Stella's references, we shot it 1.85 as opposed to 16x9."

His lens choice was the Zeiss Super Speed MK III "just because they're older glass," he says. "Stella and I talked about how we didn't want the film to feel too sharp and too clinical. So we went with an older series of lenses just to give it more of a softness."

William F. White provided a small lighting package consisting of some small tungsten lights and Chimeras, which came in handy for some of the many interior scenes in the film. "For interior stuff, usually I'd use an overhead Chimera, like a large 5 by 7 foot Chimera, but it wasn't a very deep Chimera so you could plug it up to the ceiling and it wouldn't fall into the frame. And a lot of it was shot with two 4Ks, one at the back of the house and one at the front of the house. We'd keep those going once the light dropped and we were able to extend the day a bit more."

His main tools for lighting, however, were "a lot of practicals and diffusing and position fixtures," he says. "And then at night it was interesting because Toronto has the same colour, those same orange-y sodium vapour lights as New York, so it worked well. The only thing we had to be conscious of was not to show the streetcar power lines."

Belchevski recalls how he lit a morning scene with Jean and her love interest who have just spent their first night together: "It was completely natural light; I didn't turn one light on. I remember we wanted to play it one way and I said to Stella, 'Let's play it towards the windows because it will be really beautiful; it will be like morning, there will be this calmness and you'll feel really connected to it because you're not faking anything.' Then we ran the whole scene in one take with no cuts. We shot that in the afternoon as the sun was going

Jean's individuality through her sense of style, dressing her in bold scarves, embroidered jackets and animal prints. "I leaned a lot on the wardrobe stylist. She was amazing. She created these beautiful costumes for Jean, and I kind of fed off that. So the costuming was mostly what affected the colour palette," the cinematographer says.

Meanwhile, Meghie searched diligently until she found the stylish interior locations and props that she wanted in the film to serve as a backdrop to the personal drama, whether it was a pre-war loft with exposed brick walls or a plush blue couch melting into a deep blue wall. "I kind of just didn't settle until I found the right things to shoot," she says. "I just was very demanding even with our budget to make sure it looked the way I wanted it to look. And then within those spaces,



Kris Belchevski with writer-director Stella Meghie.

down and then just tagged it in the colour timing so it looked a little bit more like morning."

The biggest lighting setup was the funeral scene, which was shot night for day, Belchevski says. "We had to get some bigger fixtures, M40s and 4K fixtures, and punch those through the windows and up on scaffolding," he recalls. "And the reason for that was we shot in a real funeral home and we couldn't shoot during the daytime in case they had someone come in, so it had to be done at night. We asked the funeral home if we could start putting up scaffolding during the daytime, and they were fine with that as long as we were mindful of people coming in. It was one of those scenes where we had to get a proper generator and light it up."

Belchevski says the film's strong colour palette was dictated mostly by costume designer Avery Plewes, who expressed

helped create the vibe and helped craft the shots that made everything look beautiful, even in spaces that weren't necessarily beautiful."

Belchevski notes that Meghie's unwavering dedication to her strong visual and narrative sense was ultimately what got the film made. "She was incredibly specific, which is one of her strengths," he observes. "It was the fact that she wrote the script so she knew the characters inside and out, and she has a very strong personality. She's like, 'This is how I want it,' but she was still cool and very collaborative. For her to be that strong about it and then to also be able to take advice was great. And that's what makes a director good to work with. The person just has to be cool; they have to have a good aesthetic and a good sense of style, and then the drive to put that through. She didn't take no for an answer a lot of the time." 🍷

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