



New Wave:

Kris Belchevski

Gets Romantic in

The Weekend

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By Fanen Chiahemem

Photos by James J. Robinson

Cinematographer Kris Belchevski first collaborated with Toronto-born writer/director Stella Meghie on the 2016 Brooklyn-set comedy-drama *Jean of the Joneses*, featuring a multigenerational family of women at a crossroads. That film, which was shot in Toronto for New York, screened at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival and went on to receive two Canadian Screen Award nominations, including one for Meghie’s screenplay.

Belchevski and Meghie returned to the festival last year with their second collaboration and Meghie’s third feature, the romantic comedy *The Weekend*. In the film, Zadie, a heartbroken but acerbic stand-up comic, played by former *Saturday Night Live* cast member Sasheer Zamata, decides to spend the weekend with her ex-boyfriend Bradford (Tone Bell) and his new girlfriend Margo (DeWanda Wise) at a countryside bed and breakfast. They are soon joined by another man, Aubrey (Y’lan Noel) – himself still nursing the wounds of a recent breakup – and it quickly becomes clear that the weekend will be anything but a relaxing getaway.

“I think what excited me most about the script was the characters,” Belchevski says. “I mean, there’s a sense of absurdity to the whole situation. It’s almost like a Woody Allen film.”

The Weekend was shot on location, mostly in Malibu, over just 13 days, which at first sounded daunting to Belchevski. “Stella called me about it and said we have this many days. Then she was like, ‘But don’t worry about it, I wrote it all mostly based on one location,’ which meant there were no unit moves. So she was being somewhat pragmatic with how she wrote the film. That gave us a fighting chance.”

Nature had other plans, though, and they weren’t prepared for what they found when they got to the persimmon orchard that’s a crucial setting for the film. “When we first saw the location, the persimmon trees all had leaves on them. It was beautiful, you could have put the camera anywhere and it would have looked good. But the night before we started shooting, all the leaves fell off. Maybe we found a couple with leaves, but the bulk of the orchard was bare,” Belchevski recalls, laughing.

Fortunately, they were saved through their rigorous scouting. “Stella and I were both like, ‘Let’s do a bit of hiking and find some good shots.’ We just kept walking, and we were able to find these really beautiful landscape shots. So that was really helpful,” he says.

Without the crew or the money for lighting, the location was also ideal for using bounces to light in the exteriors. “California is very consistent with the sun,” Belchevski notes. “We did have one day where it was a bit smoky from the fires that were nearby, but it was mostly bounced light. And then the nighttime stuff was obviously lit with small units. The inside stuff was usually lit with tungsten bulbs, ring lights, whatever made it seem natural and real.”

He and gaffer Steve Kagan also custom-built ring lights for certain interiors. “We grabbed a case of beer, some In-N-Out burgers and spent the day just building ring lights at the gaffer’s house and it was really great,” Belchevski recalls. “We’d use them in dinner scenes, anything in the living room. Basically, they were suspended above in 360-degree lighting, and then we wrapped them in muslin, usually bleached muslin, and it just kind of feels like a big source, but it doesn’t feel lit, it just feels more like it’s a unit in the room. It wasn’t something where I

could ask the production design team to install some specific light that I could maybe use as a practical just because we didn't have the money, so we just sort of took that approach."

While the look of *Jean of the Joneses* was more static, the structure of *The Weekend* called for much more movement. "I found that we really used zooms a lot [on *The Weekend*]. We used a lot of slow zooms and a lot of quick zooms for comedic effect," Belchevski says, recalling an early scene when Zadie surreptitiously watches the handsome stranger played by Noel get out of his car as he arrives at the ranch. "We just knew we were on the right path for zooms after we did the take and everyone started laughing. Just that little camera move added so much to the humour. It was really tongue in cheek; it was really nice."

Belchevski shot the film in 2K on the ALEXA classic, using two sets of Primos, one lightweight zoom and one heavy zoom. "Panavision in L.A. were very accommodating and really helped us out," he says. He operated the A camera and had a B camera on set, primarily for backup because of the distance to Panavision. "It would have been a three-hour roundtrip to get a camera, which would just blow your whole day," he points out. "I think one of the challenges of making the film was probably being in Malibu, being isolated, so if you needed something it was a thing. It wasn't coming in 30 minutes; it was coming in a few hours."

Belchevski crafted the film's rich autumnal colour palette on his custom LUT. "I very rarely use filters," he notes. "I don't think I used a single filter other than NDs. The LUT I have tends to be quite rich, not saturated, but rich texturally and in terms of the colours. For example, yellow, when you see it through this LUT, it doesn't feel saturated, but it's got that richness."

One of the passages in the script that most stood out to Belchevski featured the two couples walking and talking in the persimmon orchard. "I got excited about that, and Stella got excited about my excitement," he says. "I was just like, it would be cool if we did whip pans and just kind of keep it almost like jazz music. The camera's just going to go wherever it goes and that



Meghie with Bell, Wise, Zamata, Kym Whitley (who plays Zadie's mother) and Noel.



Meghie and Belchevski.

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suits the chaotic nature of how these characters are all talking. They're having personal conversations, and it's all happening in this sort of jumpy, crazy weird time frame."

Thanks to the skills of Steadicam operator Sam Law, they were able to pull off the effect. "He was fantastic," Belchevski says. "This guy was walking backwards on 20-degree grades during the pan. It was incredible. Stella and I, we turned to each other and were like, 'Thank God.' It would have been a disaster if you had someone with 10 per cent less ability. I'm not even kidding. Because you're outside, you've got these grades, you've got twigs, you got rocks, you got holes you can put your feet in, and you'd see sometimes he'd step in a hole, but he'd hold the shot. You realize you're lucky if you're going in with a Steadicam person you don't know. He really saved our butts that day."



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The other scene that intimidated them was a dinner scene in which all four leads sit around a table talking. “That scene scared Stella and I so much we planned it so well that we finished the day like three hours early,” the cinematographer recalls. “It was a lot of pages, a lot of dialogue, a lot nuances to the dialogue. It's one of those things if it doesn't gel, if the nuances don't come through, they can come across as awkward. But we planned out so well how we were going to photograph it, and we had such a good plan that we finished the day early.”

Shooting with Meghie a second time was “a delight,” Belchevski says, and the experience she has gained as a director clearly shines through. “Stella does, like, two or three takes. I remember asking her, ‘How do you get through it so quick?’ And she goes, ‘It's all in the casting. If I haven't cast the right people, if they're not nailing it by the third take, I've made a mistake,’” the cinematographer recalls. “So she was able to just get what she needed. There was that real confidence. She always had that confidence, but now it's confidence with experience. It's a real focused force that she has. I'm looking forward to the next one, actually, because it feels like it's getting better and better and better. She knows what she wants. That's the best.” 🍷

Zadie and Bradford take a walk.