

Chat Room: Phedon Papamichael



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Cinematographer discusses Nebraska, his latest collaboration with director/writer Alexander Payne

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- ROBERT GOLDRICH

Phedon Papamichael, ASC, enjoys ongoing collaborative bonds with several directors as reflected in his last two movies: *The Monuments Men*, for which he was finishing the DI at press time; and *Nebraska*, which debuted earlier this year at the Cannes Film Festival where it was nominated for the Palme d'Or and won the Best Actor honor for Bruce Dern. Last month, Papamichael was a nominee for the best cinematography Golden Frog at Camerimage on the strength of *Nebraska* which shortly thereafter picked up six nominations at the Film Independent Spirit Awards.

Nebraska, which was shot in black and white, chronicles an alcoholic father nearing senility (Dern) making a road trip from Montana to Nebraska with his estranged son (Forte) in order to claim a supposed million dollar sweepstakes prize as touted by one of those ubiquitous marketing flyers. The son embarked on the shared experience with his dad in an attempt to patch up their relationship.

Nebraska is the third feature Papamichael has lensed for Payne, the first being *Sideways* and then *The Descendants*. Both won Payne and his colleagues Best Adapted Screenplay Oscars--*Sideways* in 2005, and *The Descendants* in 2012. *Nebraska* marks the first Payne-directed film that has been shot digitally (Papamichael deployed the ARRI Alexa M).

It was on *The Descendants* that the film's leading actor George Clooney saw first-hand the working relationship between Payne and Papamichael. Clooney was favorably impressed, so much so that he secured Papamichael to shoot *The Ides of March*, which Clooney directed

and starred in. Clooney served in the same dual role on *The Monuments Men*, and again turned to Papamichael.

Papamichael's body of work as a DP also spans *3:10 To Yuma*, *Walk The Line* and *Knight and Day*, all directed by James Mangold, as well as multiple films for Wim Wenders, including *The Million Dollar Hotel*, *Willie Nelson at the Teatro*, and *Ode to Cologne: A Rock 'n Roll Film*.

Also among Papamichael's cinematography credits is *The Pursuit of Happyness* directed by Gabriele Muccino, and *Cool Running* helmed by Jon Turteltaub. The DP's filmography also includes assorted spots.

The DP has additionally diversified into directing with such feature fare as *Lost Angeles* and *Arcadia*.

SHOOT: What was the biggest challenge that Nebraska posed to you as a DP?

Papamichael: Not all that much in terms of a major challenge. This was a simply shot film. With Alexander, we create this intimate, controlled environment where we don't have a lot of elements to deal with that can become problematic. Like most of his films, this was all locations, though there were some confined spaces. I spent a lot of time in the back of that Subaru [the road trip vehicle]. *Nebraska* was primarily an exteriors film.

Alexander almost has a dogma that when we do road work, everything you see in the film is shot in the correct order geographically. We shoot the actual route in the proper order. You'll never see a montage of driving shots where there is one that was shot further south or further north. The sequence is always accurate.

But the filmmaking is always flexible and we're able to act quickly and come up with things as we go along. We don't short list or storyboard.

In preparation for *Nebraska*, Alexander and I met in Billings. He picked me up in his mom's Toyota and we went on a three-day trip. We weren't looking for anything. He just wanted me to get an impression of the land, a feel for the vastness of it, the graphic value of the landscapes, and a sense of the different towns and the people. Coming from Omaha, Alexander already had a grasp of all this. He wanted me to also have that same feel. Often we'd drive into a town, and then go down main street to find it void of people. On our Midwest journey, it was as if the town people were inside watching TV. That experience touched on a loneliness, an isolation that was going on, which fed into the themes of the film. My first impressions on that trip helped me for the movie.

SHOOT: Your collaborations with Payne have all been successful--each with a sense of place, from *Sideways* to *The Descendants* to *Nebraska*. How did you come together with Payne to begin with?

Papamichael: When he was at film school at UCLA, I had also just moved to L.A. [from NYC after he had established himself in Europe as a still photographer]. I wasn't going to film school but there were opportunities to apply to work on shorts for film school students. I met Alexander back in 1985 or '86. To make a long story short, I didn't get the job. But we got a dialogue going. I met him and found we had a common Greek heritage. We both lived around the Los Feliz area and would run into each other at the Vista [movie theater]. I did end up shooting a different UCLA short that Alexander was working on as a boom operator.

A decade and a half or so went by. I was in vacation in Greece and I got a call from Alexander out of nowhere. He asked me if I wanted to shoot his next film. I said sure, that I'd be back in L.A. in about six weeks. He said fine. That picture was *Sideways*. He had earlier done *Citizen Ruth* and *Election* so I was aware of his work and was excited to get to collaborate with him.

We came together having taken different journeys and with different styles. Being a writer, Alexander is very analytical and observant. It took awhile to find our common language. But now we're on our third picture--this one a cinematic piece. We chose anamorphic which we did for the first time together.

SHOOT: What's next after wrapping *The Monuments Men*? **Papamichael:** I'm currently in pre-pro on a film I'm directing. But when you get into that world, there are a lot of variables. It can take a long time to get a project off the ground. I'll believe this project will happen when I'm actually on set. Even then, I'm certainly always going back to being a cinematographer.

My experience directing has been helpful to me as a cinematographer. It's helpful to have been in the edit room and to go through the full process of making a movie. Cinematography is so key that sometimes you fall into the trap of thinking it's the most important thing. But once you're in the edit room, for example, you see how things have to be paced, how your babies--your most beautiful shots--have to be killed. This has enabled me as a cinematographer to avoid generating shots that are not moving the story forward.