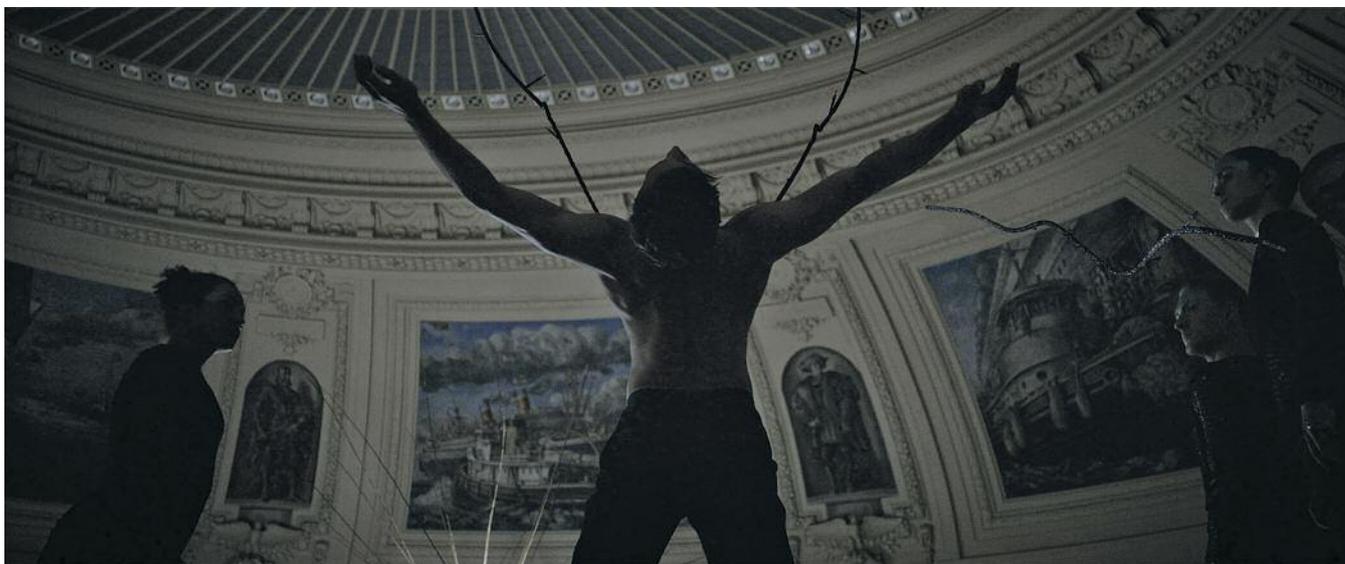


SHORT TAKES



Photographed by Oren Soffer, the experimental short *Opera of Cruelty* fuses fashion, music and choreography in a nonlinear narrative that slips back and forth between fantasy and reality.

Deeper Truth

By Derek Stettler

Fashion, music, choreography and cinematography come together to create the dreamlike audiovisual experience of *Opera of Cruelty*. This surreal experimental short was created for the undergraduate Advanced Production Workshop at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and was born out of writer-director Max R.A. Fedore's love of opera and theater. The title of the piece comes from a philosophy called "Theatre of Cruelty," which was popularized by the 20th-century French dramatist Antonin Artaud. It can best be described as a kind of theatrical exorcism for an audience, in which performance and art combine to transcend thought or logic, and shock viewers into realizing a deeper truth. In *Opera of Cruelty*, the largely dialogue-free narrative unfolds nonlinearly over the course of its 18 minutes to create what Fedore calls an "operatic nightmare," urging viewers to contemplate the themes of captivity and escape as the characters slip between fantasy and reality.

To help bring the complex vision to life, Fedore — who also plays the lead character in the piece — turned to fellow NYU alum and 2015 ASC Gordon Willis Heritage Award nominee Oren Soffer. Beyond the fact that the young cinematographer came highly recommended by Fedore's professor Mary Lambert, the director had been a fan of Soffer's work for several years. "I had been on a few sets with him when I was just starting out at NYU and was always struck by his professionalism and passion," Fedore says.

A freelance cinematographer currently working in the narra-

tive-feature, commercial, branded-content and music-video worlds, Soffer enjoys returning to shorts when he can, and was particularly excited to work on *Opera of Cruelty*, the kind of project he calls "soul food." With references to such films as *Nine* (AC Dec. '09), *Moulin Rouge* (AC June '01) and *Black Swan* (AC Dec. '10) — as well as the haunting styles of *Eyes Wide Shut* (AC Oct. '99), *Mulholland Drive*, *The Cell* (AC Sep. '00) and *Macbeth* (AC Jan. '16) — Fedore knew he needed to call upon a cinematographer who could capture that feeling on a student-project budget.

"I was a couple years out of NYU and not shooting student projects when this one came along," Soffer recalls, "but I had worked with Max on a couple of shoots before, and this project was different from typical student films. Not just in the ambition, but in how it would be executed."

To match the ambitious concept, the project employed an equally ambitious production schedule. Shot at the end of June 2016, *Opera of Cruelty* captured more than 50 separate setups over the course of two consecutive 12-hour nights in the opulent spaces of the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House — originally built as an official residence for the U.S. President. Following that, the production took a weeklong hiatus before moving to Kaufman Astoria Studios for three days.

Given the high cost of the Custom House location, the production had to move quickly and efficiently to capture everything they needed. Arri's Alexa Plus camera was paired with Panavision's SLZ11 24-275mm Primo 11:1 Zoom (T2.8), as well as a full set of Primo Primes; the rig was often used in conjunction with J.L. Fisher's

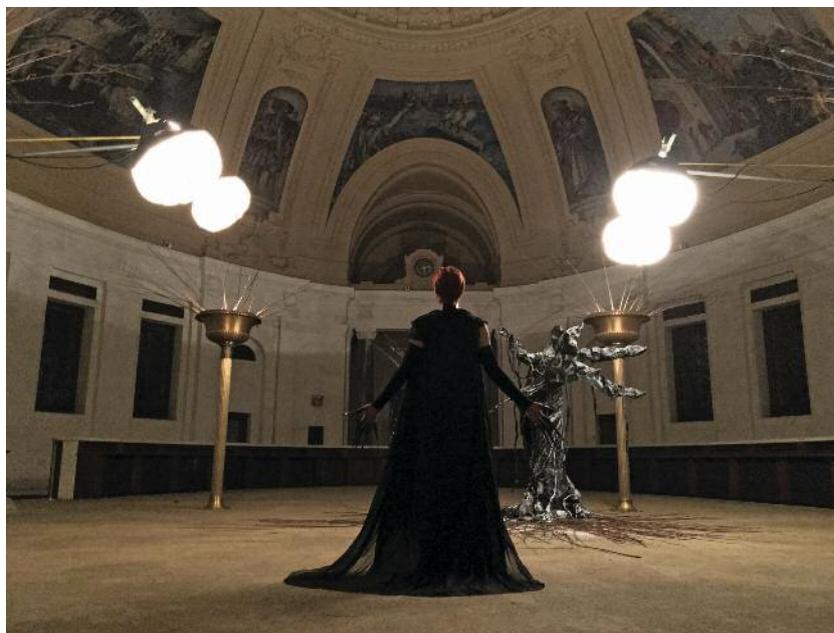
Images courtesy of the filmmakers.

compact Model 11 Dolly, which kept the crew light on its feet while achieving the “fluid yet precise” feeling the project required. Beyond increasing shooting efficiency, the Primo 11:1 also allowed for the slow zooms seen throughout the piece, which were achieved with the aid of Preston Cinema Systems’ Digital Micro Force 2 zoom controller. “We ended up doing those ultra-slow zooms a lot, and they weren’t always planned,” Soffer notes. “I just did them when it felt right because we wanted the camera to be constantly moving, whether on a dolly, zoom or both.”

For Soffer, this was all part of a larger goal to match his camerawork to the surreal nature of the story. “The camera placement and movement within each shot was felt out as we went along,” the cinematographer explains. “It was a very organic experience [reminiscent] of the way you cover performance in a music video. This approach kept my first AC, Max Batchelder, on his toes!” Camera and lens equipment was supplied by Panavision New York.

Soffer was admittedly “pretty stumped at first” by the challenge of lighting the Custom House, with its 50'-high ceilings and the inability to create rigging due to the historical nature of the location, along with the requirement of shooting at night. Compounding the challenge was the fact that Soffer would need to light the space entirely from house power, as there was nowhere the production could place a generator within the building, and they could not afford an outdoor generator on one of Manhattan’s busiest streets. Additionally, the house lights would not be usable because they created what Soffer describes as a “very bright and flat look. We wanted something moody and directional, and to control spill off the walls for a performance space that didn’t feel overly theatrical.”

To solve these issues, Soffer and gaffer Mike Kim devised a way to re-create the look of a helium balloon light using two light stands on wheels. Each stand supported a 20' Matthews Speed Rail Menace Arm kit with two 22" fully dimmable 1K Jem Balls on the ends, thus providing a rig that allowed for easy movement out of frame when necessary. “It really ended up working for us, because we needed a light-



Top: Soffer and gaffer Mike Kim rigged 1K Jem Balls from 20' Menace Arms in order to emulate the look of helium-balloon lighting. Above: Working in the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House in New York City, the crew captures a high-angle shot of Max R.A. Fedore, who directed and stars in the short.



Soffer frames up inside the Custom House location.

ing setup that we could leave up all night, yet would allow us to adapt and light very quickly with control over contrast ratio,” Soffer notes. “The Jem Balls were augmented with two 1K open-face Arrilites bounced off of 12-by-12 frames of bleached muslin on the ground, that could be dimmed up or down and moved around depending on which way the camera was facing, to add additional shape to the lighting for close-ups.”

This setup — along with the Alexa at 800 ISO, or occasionally 1,250, and the Primo Primes wide open at T1.9 — provided Soffer with more than enough light to get the exposure he wanted.

Due to the limitations of time and location, however, this particular rigging remained in the rotunda area of the Custom House. To light in other areas, Soffer reports that he made use of practicals augmented with “4-foot 4Bank Kino Flo units with tungsten tubes through 6-by-6 or 8-by-8 frames of muslin, as well as a Litepanels Astra Bi-Color 1x1 LED.” He controlled spill using flags. To create a spotlight effect when necessary, he opted for a 750-watt Source Four on the end of a Menace Arm.

On their last day at the Custom House location, a final complication arose when the production was forced to stop

shooting three hours early — leaving the filmmakers without their final scene. Soffer was thus tasked with re-creating the lighting from the Custom House a week later on-stage at Kaufman Astoria Studios, shooting against greenscreen with backgrounds from the Custom House composited via Foundry’s Nuke software. In the final cut, the transition from the real location to its on-stage re-creation is seamless, “unless you’re really looking for it,” Soffer says.

For the remainder of the shoot, Soffer and his team employed a large duvetyne-skirted softbox over the Kaufman set. The lighting arrangement comprised five 1K open-face Arrilites rigged to the ceiling and pointed straight down through 12’x12’ unbleached muslin. Soffer supplemented this with additional Arrilites when necessary, and 2’ and 4’ 4Bank fixtures pushed through bleached muslin for tighter shots and eye lights. The 4Banks were also brought in for the extreme close-ups that appear at several points in the short, which Soffer shot with either +1/2 or +1 Tiffen diopters on the Primo 100mm lens. For the fast-paced dance sequence in the project’s climax, Soffer overcranked to 60 and even 120 fps to allow for speed ramps in post-production.

During this sequence, Soffer also matched the shift from reality to fantasy by

switching from the precision of the dolly to the roughness of handheld, as he “wanted the camera to be a more intimate part of the dance, and capture the dynamics of the choreography,” the cinematographer notes. Intercut with this sequence are haunting shots of the two lead characters bathed in a beam of red light, provided entirely by a single red-gelled Source Four rigged to the ceiling and pointing down through haze.

To maximize image quality in a ready-to-edit format, Soffer shot to 64GB SxS cards in ProRes 4:4:4:4 Log C and framed for a 2.39:1 extraction. Since white balance would be baked-in, and Soffer wanted to avoid a pronounced color cast from the tungsten lighting, he opted to shoot at a color temperature of 3,200K in the Custom House and 2,600K on the Kaufman stage.

Color grading was performed by Erik Choquette at Harbor Picture Co. using Blackmagic Design’s DaVinci Resolve and a custom LUT that was based on reference images. The final deliverable for festivals was a 2K DCP.

Opera of Cruelty won numerous accolades at the 2017 Wasserman Awards — the culmination of NYU Tisch School of the Arts’ First Run Film Festival, the longest continuously running film festival in New York City — including the King Award 1st Prize, the Wasserman Award in Directing, and the Undergraduate Craft Award for Best Cinematography.

Being both the lead character and director of the piece, Fedore put extra trust in Soffer. “It was a blessing to work with Oren because he understood my vision as well as I did,” he says. “Due to the immense trust I had in Oren, I knew I could remain in character during my scenes and really live in the moment. I cannot wait for our next collaboration.” ●