

Right: Fisher Willow (Bryce Dallas Howard) struggles to escape high society and her family legacy in *The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond*, shot by Giles Nuttgens, BSC. Below: The filmmakers chose locations in Baton Rouge and Donaldsonville in Louisiana to stand in for 1920s Memphis, Tenn.



A Tennessee Williams Original

by Iain Stasukevich

Tennessee Williams' *The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond* takes place in the waning years of the Roaring Twenties and tells the story of Fisher Willow (Bryce Dallas Howard), a young Southerner struggling to free herself from Memphis high society and the corrupt legacy of her father. After being pressured by her Aunt Cornelia (Ann-Margret) to attend a season of debutante parties, Fisher chooses Jimmy Dobyne (Chris Evans), a handsome, salt-of-the-earth man working on her father's plantation, to be her escort. Their differences are more than just financial, but they are drawn to each other.

As a Southerner and lifelong fan of Williams' work, director Jodie

Markell felt a kinship with the script, which was originally written for Elia Kazan to direct. (The project was never produced.) "I wanted to wrestle Williams back from *Masterpiece Theatre*," she says. "He was always edgy and on the fringe, but these days people don't think of him in that way." In the script, she continues, "you can feel Williams exploring how to tell a story in a way he couldn't in plays. I feel like he was enthralled by the idea of letting his characters go out into the world as opposed to being stuck in one setting."

Like Markell, cinematographer Giles Nuttgens, BSC wanted to give the material as much room to breathe as possible, which is why he suggested filming in the anamorphic format. "When shooting in 'Scope, the edges are just as important as the middle of the frame," says Nuttgens. "I make full

use of both edges. If the characters are always in the center, the audience can get lulled into a false sense of security, but if they're working the whole frame, it energizes the scene and forces the audience to follow the action." Markell adds, "We really liked the idea that two characters could share the frame and interact for long periods of time without [us] cutting away."

Production designers Richard Hoover and David Stein worked on the film, with Hoover, who had designed theatrical productions of Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and *Not About Nightingales*, the first on the job. Locations were scouted in Louisiana, where Baton Rouge and Donaldsonville eventually filled in for Memphis, Tenn. "The story needed a luxurious, hot, swampy Southern feel, and Memphis today is too modern," explains Stein. Many of the scouted locations were old enough to be period correct, and in most cases, the New Orleans-based crew was able to move right in without making too many changes. "Our resources were limited, but we tried to give the movie a very strong sense of place," says Hoover. "It was all about what we could find and what we could add to it."

To create a look that wouldn't appear too modern, Nuttgens chose Panavision's E-Series lenses and used Tiffen White Pro-Mist filters to soften contrast. "A hyper-contrasty look belongs to today, and modern audiences



Top: The filmmakers often blocked action so it would play on both edges of the anamorphic frame, as seen in this frame grab of Ann-Margret. "If the characters are always in the center, the audience can get lulled into a false sense of security, but if they're working the whole

frame, it energizes the scene and forces the audience to follow the action," says Nuttgens.

Middle: In keeping with the period feel for the debutante parties, Nuttgens kept his sources warm. Bottom: Nuttgens employed a Tiffen White Pro-Mist filter to soften the contrast for this encounter between Jimmy Dobyne (Chris Evans) and Willow.



are getting used to really sharp images," he notes. "I didn't want either of those things. I wanted to maintain the full latitude of the film stock we were using." When filming began, the filmmakers weren't planning on finishing with a digital intermediate, so Nuttgens carefully controlled filtration, lighting ratios and printing levels to create the images he and Markell had in mind. (After prin-

cipal photography wrapped, production decided to do a DI; colorist John Dowdell at New York's Goldcrest Post worked on the digital grade.)

Special consideration had to be paid to what the light would look like at a debutante ball in 1928. Film lights and practicals were kept warm. Many of the locations were historic sites, which meant that the production couldn't

mount fixtures to the walls or hang them from the ceilings. Lighting from the floor indoors posed some challenges when it came to blocking the actors and the camera. "I try to limit my imprint on the set," says Nuttgens, who does his own operating. "I feel an actor should come into a set that feels completely real, and if they're surrounded by technology, that works against them. Often the camera had to do 180-degree pans, and it was difficult to get the ambience that would allow the actors to work completely free of distractions."

Nuttgens relied heavily on practicals and used as few lamps and flags as possible. For day interiors on the plantation where Fisher and her aunt live, he keyed from windows, using 18K HMIs through two 12'x12' layers of Full Grid. He found that this sufficiently diffused the light but still gave him a proper exposure. (All interiors were shot on Kodak Vision3 500T 5219.) Day exteriors, filmed on Kodak Vision2 100T 5212,





Above: Willow climbs the steps to a Halloween party, the last ball of the season. Below: Nuttgens (holding viewfinder) and director Jodie Markell prepare for the party.

were lit the same way. Night exteriors were lit with tungsten Maxi-Brutes through Full Grid. "Whatever we did had to work within the restrictions of the real period locations," says Nuttgens. "We had 28 days to shoot the entire film, and we weren't always able to prelight, which put an enormous amount of pressure on the crew."

Whereas Fisher's life is idyllic, Jimmy lives with his alcoholic father in a ramshackle cabin, and his mother lives in a local mental asylum. Nuttgens gave the asylum a darker, colder look than the film's other settings. "A mental asylum is a terrible place, and it was probably worse in the 1920s," he muses. "We lit the location with HMIs shooting through windows, with no fill, and I underexposed by two-thirds of a stop on the key side. We used very clear, hard light to cast shadows across the wall."

After weeks of dragging Jimmy to parties in an effort to win his affection, Fisher convinces him to take her to one more, a Halloween party. They bicker on the way there, and Fisher leaps from the car as they arrive, losing one of her aunt's diamond earrings in the process. She blames Jimmy in front of everyone and disappears in a huff to the second floor. There, she turns to her friend's bedridden Aunt Addie (Ellen Burstyn) for comfort. For this scene, which comprises about eight pages of dialogue, Markell and Nuttgens devised a slightly stylized approach. As Fisher sits at the side of the bed, she falls into a reverie, and as she wonders aloud, the lights in the room (4K softboxes and 2K Chinese lanterns) dim until only Fisher is visible, with a single shaft of light hitting her face. "It's a very long scene, and I wanted to give it a different feel, like a

portal opening into another world," says Markell. Adds Nuttgens, "There needed to be some kind of visual shift, a theatrical one, during her long monologue, and a lighting cue was the only way we could do it." He considered using a follow-spot for the effect, but opted instead for a snooted 2K Fresnel through 250 diffusion.

The Halloween party scene marked the only time the filmmakers were able to obtain permission to pre-rig the location. Key grip Richard Ball rigged the main hall with beams, and gaffer Paul Olinde hung 4K softboxes that could be used interchangeably as key lights, fill and backlights. More softboxes and 2K Chinese lanterns were rigged in the parlor. "We used about 12 softboxes overall," says Nuttgens. "With 5219, that kept us at about T4 the whole time."

Reluctant to return to the party after her outburst, Fisher helps herself to some opium from Addie's medicine cabinet. She goes downstairs to find that everything has changed. To suggest her altered state of mind, Nuttgens' crew covered the softboxes with Fire Red gels and the floor-level Chinese lanterns with CTS. "She is supposed to be glowing — her perception of the world has changed," says the cinematographer. "Her spatial awareness changes greatly, and we had to convey that without effects."

Despite the project's challenges, "I think everyone involved with it was enticed by the great Southern poet," Nuttgens concludes. "When you're working from a script written by Tennessee Williams, you approach it with a certain amount of reverence."



TECHNICAL SPECS

2.40:1

Anamorphic 35mm

Panaflex Platinum

Panavision E-Series lenses

Kodak Vision3 500T 5219,

Vision2 100T 5212

Digital Intermediate

Printed on Kodak Vision 2383