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Short Takes

Shot and directed by the filmmaking team of Zak Forrest and Chad Liebenguth, the music video for The Deftones' "Sextape" follows two girls through an aqueous phantasmagoria created with a bevy of in-camera effects.



Creating an Underwater Dreamscape for "Sextape"

By Iain Stasukevich

In the music video for The Deftones' "Sextape," two girls cast spells and chase each other through time and space in an aqueous, dreamlike state. The project offered the directing duo of Zak Forrest of Chad Liebenguth the perfect chance to further evolve their experimental, boundaries-pushing style, which they've been honing across a string of collaborations, including the recent video for Squarepusher's "Delta-V."

Answering *AC*'s questions jointly via e-mail while working on a project in Krakow, Poland, "ZFCL," as Forrest and Liebenguth call themselves, explain that they operate as a two-man team, with one person shooting and the other lighting, and they constantly rotate duties to keep things fresh. "This allows for a quicker understanding of the action with almost wordless communication, creating a synergy that lets each person develop his own vision with constant input from the other," they write.

The filmmakers' first instinct with "Sextape" was to shoot in 3-D, but when the single was fast-tracked for European release, the filmmakers found themselves without the necessary time to prep the effects they had envisioned. "It was a complete unknown whether our techniques would have translated [to 3-D]," they say, noting that they have all but shunned CGI in favor of in-camera effects. "We believe the audience knows when it's not real, even if it looks real. When they see something that truly existed and was photographed, they get a greater sense of excitement."

The duo has worked exclusively with the Red One digital camera since its release in 2007. "We've always been impressed with

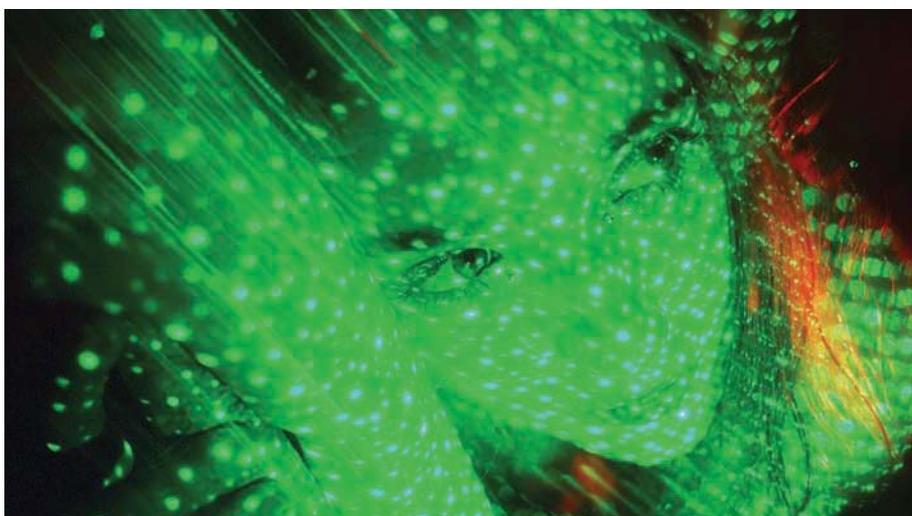
the images produced by the [Red One's] sensor," they write. "Even as far back as Build 14, while some parties were complaining about the camera's inconsistencies or aberrations, we were inspired by those same qualities and sought to harness them. Experimenting with different noise levels and dynamic-range values within the same piece accentuates the camera's high-end qualities and allows one to appreciate the aesthetic uses of its so-called weaknesses." (For "Sextape," the duo worked with a Red One fitted with the new Mysterium-X sensor.)

The filmmakers tend to design their projects so that each "scene" comprises a single camera setup; once the camera starts rolling, there is almost no downtime, requiring everyone to stay in character until the directors feel that they have everything they need from that scene. "The longer you stay in that world, the better the material gets," they explain. "Before the Red, we shot on 35mm, and the scene was always at its best right as the film ran out. Even now, we'll shoot for hours with the Red, and it still feels like the real magic is happening just when the camera finally runs out of juice."

Forrest and Liebenguth recorded in the Red's 4K setting for normal-speed and time-lapse shots, and in 3K for slow motion. However, some scenes were deliberately processed with a half-standard de-bayer algorithm that inhibited image detail from the camera's sensor. (Other scenes were processed with Build 16 or Build 30 at both half and full de-bayer, specific to each shot.) "We look at it like choosing different film stocks," the filmmakers explain.

The dreamlike state the two girls enter is depicted as a glittering underwater world crisscrossed with aquatic vegetation; the filmmakers shot the underwater scenes in a 4½'-deep sand-colored swimming pool at a private residence. To shoot underwater with the Red,

Photos and frame grabs courtesy of the filmmakers.



Top and middle: Rather than manipulating color in post, Forrest and Liebenguth worked with particular spectrums of light and settings in their Red One to achieve their desired look as they shot. **Bottom:** Liebenguth operates three lights, including an Epson video projector connected to a RedRocket.



Forrest and Liebenguth tested the pliable, shallow-water T-Bag, but because they needed more dynamic control over the camera's buoyancy, they opted to employ the Gates Deep Red housing, provided by H2O Photo Pros in Irvine, Calif. The housing allowed the camera to float in place when it

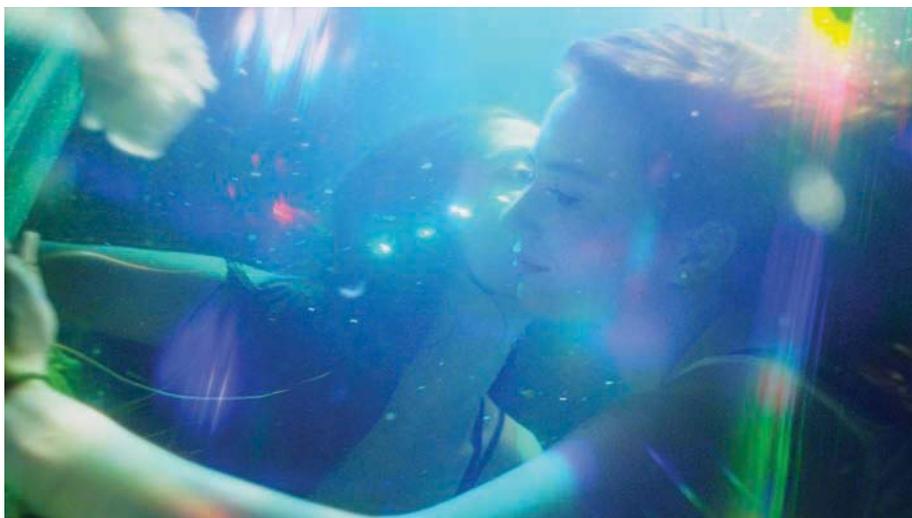
was let go, and it also enabled Forrest and Liebenguth to achieve what they call "crazy operating," spinning upside down with the rig as they held their breaths underwater and the actors swam in front of the lens.

Though most of the shots were planned out in advance, there was a lot of

experimentation on set as the directors toyed with different ways of capturing images so they wouldn't have to be manipulated in post. (In fact, Forrest and Liebenguth did not do any color correction on the final edit, opting instead to color-correct in-camera for each shot.) For example, they continually changed their lighting setups over the course of the three-night shoot. On the first night, they used an array of LEDs and Source Four Lekos (rented from R&R Lighting in Silver Spring, Md.) run through either a 4- or 8-channel Elation chaser board. (The speed of the sequence was based on the lights' arrangement, what happened in the shot, and the camera's frame rate.) By the last night, though, they were using only a single light at a time. "We were always trying to outdo our setups and lighting from the previous night," the filmmakers comment, adding that they consider lighting to be as much of a character as anything else in front of the lens.

The Lekos were used for shots both under and above water, and the filmmakers strove to use just the fringes of the fixtures' red and blue halation to create hallucinogenic colors and patterns in frame. Additionally, for underwater work, they sealed battery-powered flashlights, Litepanels Minis, Litepanels 1x1s and Zylight LEDs in military-grade zipper bags, and Chauvet Scorpion GBC laser strobes were aimed from above the tank to cast geometric patterns of light through the watery environment. Forrest and Liebenguth explain that they tried to "invert the lights' inherent qualities and, in turn, create new ones. If you're attentive to what the camera is doing, you can react accordingly, moving the light with or against the movement of the camera to enhance the action of the light, speeding it up or slowing it down."

Forrest and Liebenguth used their personal set of Zeiss MKII Super Speed lenses, including a 50mm featuring a screw-in rear element. They had specialty "broken glass" rear elements fabricated by Duclos Lenses in Canoga Park, Calif., and "depending on which element was screwed into the lens, we could choose the placement of the haze and scattered lighting," they explain. During prep, they also developed a method of creating two-dimensional rainbows with fluctuating densities by using a combination



Top and middle: Underwater sequences were shot with the Red One in a Gates Deep Red housing and various fixtures sealed in military-grade zipper bags. Bottom: Forrest readies multiple fixtures above the swimming pool used for the video's underwater action.

of specialty prisms. After discovering the Gates Deep Red housing, however, they realized they could make the rainbows feel more three-dimensional by arranging the prisms along the curve of the housing's acrylic dome.

Certain scenes in "Sextape" have a look reminiscent of the "night vision" settings on some DV camcorders; the effect was achieved in-camera by lighting with a pure green spectrum of laser light and applying a -100 magenta tint in the camera's image settings. "We fell in love with the subtle texture the single channel gave us for those scenes, preferring the natural color, saturation and noise levels of the Mysterium-X sensor to performing the color correction in post. We've always loved what happens to brighter colors when they clip in the older firmware builds, and we lit certain things with that in mind and processed them with older versions of RedAlert."

This approach is apparent in the middle section of the video, as memories flash by while the characters literally pull on and become entangled in the fabric of the storyline. "We wanted these scenes to have the futuristic sense of nostalgia you might find in a [William] Gibson-esque home movie from the future," the filmmakers say. "We achieved this by shooting Redcode 28 processed with Build 16 at a half-standard de-bayer, which gave us a lower resolution and noisier image, and also gave the highlights a pleasingly dissonant clip gradient."

While editing "Sextape," Forrest and Liebguth eschewed all computer effects, transitions and fades in favor of straight cuts. "We try to get it to a point where the images simply morph into one another and the narrative flows across the screen in one continuous, kinetic piece," the directors remark. "A stronger, deeper narrative always emerges in the editing process. Because the video was not shot upfront with this in mind, this new narrative is hidden and we are the only people who know the secret stories of each video."

Erratum

Gaffer Paul Samaniego's name was misspelled in our September Short Takes column ("Taking Arri's Alexa to the World Cup," page 12).