

Short Takes



Miah (Kitana Turnbull) embarks on a journey through her home to track down a monster fueled by her parents' arguments in the short film *Monster in a House*.

Beast Hunters

By Debra Kaufman

When Michael Helenek moved to Los Angeles five years ago, he posted fliers at film schools, offering to work as a cinematographer on graduate-student projects. Christiano Dias, who was attending New York Film Academy, gave him a call, and the two worked together on Dias' first graduate film, *King Eternal*. So it was a natural next step for Helenek to shoot Dias' thesis, *Monster in a House*, about a young girl named Miah (Kitana Turnbull) who embarks on a journey through her home to track down the monster that appears when her parents fight.

Dias had two specific visual ideas for the project: The audience would never see the monster, and the movie would at least appear to comprise one continuous shot. "My jaw dropped," recalls Helenek. "But then I thought, 'He's the director and my job is to make this work for him.' It became an amazing challenge." Dias' rationale was that a seemingly continuous shot would support the idea that Miah can't run away from the monster and the family can't run away from their problems — so why should the audience be able to cut away from a shot? "Chris is a really talented storyteller, and very imaginative, which is exciting for me," says Helenek. "His ideas are fantastical, which lets me experiment a bit."

Setting out to attempt one continuous shot required meticulous preproduction planning, beginning with the location; the filmmakers ultimately found the ideal two-story house in Chino Hills, east of Los Angeles. "The doors were definitely wide enough for the Steadicam operator, [Orlando Duguay]," Helenek notes, "and there

was enough space for the actress and the operator following her to run." Once they had the location, Helenek and Dias blocked camera and actors into the storyboarding that was already underway. "We had every single composition storyboarded," says Helenek.

Early on, he sent the storyboards to Duguay, who would use the Red Epic Mysterium-X camera package from Dias' school. "I was happy to have a high-quality motion-picture camera with a substantial dynamic range that could capture the range of light and dark that we put in front of the lens," says Helenek, who notes that they shot in 4K to RedMag SSD cards at a 5:1 compression ratio.

When determining the right lens for the project, "weight was a consideration," Helenek says. "A very large zoom lens would have been too taxing for the operator." In the end, he picked an Angenieux Optimo DP 16-42mm (T2.8). "The focal range seemed to be most appropriate, and it ended up working well," he notes.

To shoot *Monster in a House* in real time, Helenek knew lighting would be the chief challenge. "We needed to light and rig for every single storyboarded shot, throughout the house, ahead of time," he explains. The production had the location for five days, but, the cinematographer adds, "there was so much real estate [to light] that we needed three full days for rigging and electrical."

Because the camera would cover 360 degrees, Helenek planned to rig almost all the lighting on the ceiling. Neither Eddie Rubio nor the late James "Slim Jim" Ballard — who served as key grips on the production — had yet been hired when the tech scout took place, so Helenek created architectural drawings with length and width dimensions for every room. "That enabled us to order the proper speed rail and wall spreaders to support the overhead light-

Unit photography by Sam Zhang, courtesy of the filmmakers.



Top: Miah's parents, Joe (Joseph Bottoms) and Emma (Lisa Roumain), bicker yet again. Bottom: Cinematographer Michael Helenek (far right) checks the lighting and composition on a rehearsal day.

ing," says Helenek, who thanks Cinelease for providing more than 50 lights, nearly all of which were rigged. The primary overhead units were Arrilite 750s. "Since it's an open-face fixture, it has a beam spread that fills its attached Chimera," he says.

Lighting from above prompted Helenek to frame for a 2.39:1 aspect ratio. "The ratio was chosen for stylistic and compositional reasons," he says, "but also out of necessity. Because of the lights in the ceiling, we needed a very horizontal aspect ratio."

Necessity also drove Helenek to shoot at a T5.6. "Miah was running and our blocking marks couldn't always be placed or seen very well," he explains. "Oftentimes there was a wall between the Teradek transmitter [on the camera] and the receiver that our first AC, Alex Grossfeld, was using. The T5.6 didn't make [maintaining focus] easy, but it gave us a cushion in some tight spots — and the greater depth of field worked stylistically, as well. We had a few compositions with Miah's parents [Joseph Bottoms and Lisa Roumain], where the greater depth

of field allowed us to see both of them clearly."

Helenek and his crew blacked and tented the windows, where a few moonlight and streetlamp units were placed. "Inside the tents that covered our downstairs windows, we placed Kino Flos to create moonlight glow, a Martin Atomic 3000 to create lightning effects, and a 1K Fresnel with yellow gel to create an abstract streetlight," Helenek relates. Inside the house, for the scene when Miah descends the stairs, the production utilized fabric grids of 20, 30 and 40 degrees on the Chimeras for light control and to create a dark, moody feeling. "These grids also prevented Eddie and Slim Jim from having to rig solids off the wall spreaders, which were already near capacity in terms of weight," the cinematographer adds.

The fantasy element of *Monster in a House* takes flight in scenes set in the garage and kitchen, the latter of which Dias describes as "a nighttime jungle." For the kitchen, Helenek and his crew built a large soft box over the area that Miah explores; three 8' single 5,500K Kino Flo tubes filtered with 1/2 CTO were rigged above an 8'x8' skirted Full Grid frame set 2' over the girl's head. "The massive source wrapped beautifully around Miah's face, since she was so close to it," says Helenek. "It also provided a general ambient light." A K5600 Joker 800 through a cucoloris and Half White diffusion provided the backlight.

In the garage, Helenek wanted a

Top, from left: Second AC David Mori, Bottoms, Steadicam operator Orlando Duguay, Helenek, director Christiano Dias, art director Becky Hughes and Turnbull prepare to rehearse the kitchen-jungle scene. Bottom: Turnbull stands beneath the overhead soft box rigged inside the garage.



large overhead soft box to light the entire space. "This time, however, the light level needed to fluctuate, so instead of Kinosticks, we opted for a tungsten book light," he says. Gaffer Chris Ford and his team rigged four 2K open-face nook lights — fitted with Waterfront Green gels and routed into a 12K dimmer to generate a pulsing effect — off the center beam of the garage, and aimed them straight into the white ceiling. Turnbull would then pass under an 8'x12' Light Grid frame, and Helenek further tweaked the lighting by adding "a makeshift control grid out of strips of Duvetyne in the direction Miah walked to increase contrast on her face," he says.

On the fourth day, after lights had been rigged, the team put in significant hours running blocking for the actors and the Steadicam — and that's when they discovered that doing a single continuous shot wasn't going to work. "We realized we

had to transition from high mode to low mode to get the camera angles we needed," says Helenek, who notes that they ended up with five cuts. "I had already thought about cut points, just to be well-prepared. I had prepped Chris for the possibility that we might need to do that, and in the end he was fine with it. He knew if we hid the cuts well, they wouldn't be apparent to the ordinary viewer."

One of Helenek's favorite images on the project is when Miah hides under a table. "Since she stops momentarily, it was really the only chance we had to bring the camera up close to her face," he says. "We were on the 42mm end of the lens, fairly close to our minimum 2-foot focus." The cinematographer thus had the chance to create more "intimate" lighting, placing a 5,500K Mini-Flo under the lip of the table, just above her head, and covering it with layers of bleached muslin. "We expanded

the excess muslin past the light, so it doubled as a bounce when Miah shone her flashlight up into the bottom of the table," he says. Ford also rigged an MR16 with Pale Yellow gel to the back end of the table, in order to backlight Turnbull's hair. A yellow-gelled 1K tungsten unit was aimed through the window behind the table to light the background chair, and to provide motivation for the light of the MR16. "The final lighting element was the LED flashlight that grazes Miah's cheek," the cinematographer says.

Helenek recalls that colorist Eric Schrecongost — who performed the grade with Blackmagic Design's DaVinci Resolve 11 — asked Dias and the cinematographer if they wanted him to dial out the green light of the flashlight, "but we opted to keep the green in," Helenek says. The cinematographer further reports that color correction on *Monster in a House* was fairly simple. He notes that Schrecongost was able to darken the garage and increase the saturation of the turquoise gels, "but we didn't have any major color corrections. We played with the contrast a bit and Chris wanted to add some glow to the highlights, but most of the exposure choices were native to the original footage."

Monster in a House has played at more than 20 festivals, garnering honors including the Best Cinematography award at the 2015 Los Angeles Independent Film Festival.

To watch *Monster in a House*, visit www.monsterinahouse.com. ●