

The Dark Stranger

D. Gregor Hagey csc Lights a Shadowy World

By FANEN CHIAHEMEN



The *Dark Stranger* is a contemporary story of a troubled artist haunted by her own artistic creation. In an attempt to recover from a recent trauma, a young woman, Leah, pens a graphic novel from which a mysterious character emerges and begins to take over her life.

While the title hints at the film's psychological thriller and horror elements, writer-director Chris Trebilcock says that to him the story is really about an artist struggling with depression. "The whole genesis of the story was what if depression was manifested in a character," Trebilcock, whose film received the Brian Linehan Foundation Award, says. "The whole theme of artists fighting depression is something I've wanted to deal with and do in an original way in a story."

Trebilcock cast Katie Findlay in the lead role, with Enrico Colantoni and Stephen McHattie as co-stars. For

cinematography, he turned to D. Gregor Hagey csc with whom the director had worked as a second assistant director and who he felt had the experience to shoot *The Dark Stranger*. "In the prep for shooting I did a really detailed shot list for the entire film, and then we went through the shots together and he was very good at trying to accommodate what I was going for but also making suggestions to help think it out visually and augment what I wanted," Trebilcock says.

Because *The Dark Stranger* is a first-person narrative "and we're seeing the story unfold through Leah's eyes, I wanted the cinematography to reflect her mood and feelings as the story evolved," Trebilcock says. "So at the beginning, visually, I wanted it to feel very drab and confining, and then as the Dark Stranger enters her life, the lighting changes and becomes moodier and slightly more colourful, and also a bit menacing, and then there is a little more colour that comes in throughout the film, and at the end there's the warm tones when she manages to overcome the Dark Stranger."

While taking some visual cues from other iconic scary movies – the director and DP watched films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Spider* before shooting – Trebilcock put his own spin on *The Dark Stranger*, including animated sequences. "I'm a big comic book fan and I love graphic novels," he says. "And I love using different realities to get at

where the main character is. I'm also a big fan of the fantasy life that we all carry within us and how that reflects our waking life around us. I think it's an innovative way to get at some of those issues and feelings."

Hagey explains that in *The Dark Stranger* there is more than one reality in which the story takes place. "There is the real world where the main character, Leah, interacts with her family, and then when she's alone there is this other reality where this evil dark presence starts haunting her. And then there is the reality of her art work that comes to life. So that gave me a lot of leeway to play with some different creative ideas. How to subtly show the different realities, and in the end of the film they all collide," Hagey says.

With 90 per cent of the National Screen Institute-funded film shot inside a multi-storey house, Hagey says he wanted the smallest camera "that gave the most bang for my buck, and the [RED] EPIC and SCARLET are great little cameras," which he used interchangeably.

"In the normal reality we used the SCARLET with the FUJINON zoom because it's very light and small, and the quality is good and it would allow me to quickly change frame sizes without having to swap lenses," he says. "I just wanted to maximize versatility versus weight and size. Because working in a house can get really difficult if your cameras get too big and heavy. It's also a



Credit: Sophie Giraud

great lens for handheld work.”

For the B camera, Hagey mounted the EPIC onto a Cambo Ultima view camera, which uses medium format lenses. He opted for the view camera because it allows you to swing and tilt, to shift the lenses and to control focus and perspective. On *The Dark Stranger*, Hagey and his team also used it to add distortion. “It’s a very powerful tool,” he says.

The view camera offered some creative possibilities that were ideal for the film. For example, he used it in scenes in which Leah feels the presence of the Dark Stranger so he could shift the focal plane to enhance the sense of paranoia. “You can have just one eye in focus, or you can control where the focus is,” he explains. “It also allows you to manipulate where the camera sensor is to add distortion. So I could have the camera at eye level to the character and tilt my camera sensor backwards to make it feel like we’re underneath her looking up, or vice versa. Selectively controlling focus and adding distortion to the shots

definitely creates an uncomfortable and slightly disturbing image.

“The beauty of the EPIC is you can switch lens mounts,” Hagey continues. “So I have a custom lens mount that goes on the EPIC, and I have a custom dovetail that goes onto the view camera’s rear standard. The view camera also has a custom O’Connor bridge plate that goes onto it so it integrates with everything. The front standard has a rod mount on it, so you can mount a follow focus or a matte box and use your normal accessories on it,” he explains. “It’s something I built a couple of years ago and have only used on shorter projects. This was the first long-form project I’d really used it extensively on. And it was a lot of fun to use it.”

Manoeuvring camera and equipment in a house was tricky, and, thankfully, Hagey had on hand a 3-foot slider and a doorway dolly. “It’s just basically a piece of plywood with some wheels,” he explains. “We ended up using the 3-foot slider a lot. It was a great way



Top: D. Gregor Hagey csc (left) preps a scene on *The Dark Stranger*. Bottom: Stephen McHattie in a still from *The Dark Stranger*. Previous page: The cast and crew on the set of *The Dark Stranger*. Next page: Lead actress Katie Findlay in *The Dark Stranger*.



to add movement to the shots. It was a very basic approach, nothing fancy, just trying to maximize what angles we could shoot with very basic tools.”

Hagey says he kept the lighting on *The Dark Stranger* “fairly small,” mostly using Kino Flos, as well as Rifa lights – a soft tungsten box made by Lowel. “The Rifa is a very pretty light, and we had a 4K and a 6K for the day scenes’ windows.” He describes how he lit a night scene in the laundry room of the house. “We tented the basement windows and used daylight

Kinos with cyan 30 gel to have a cyan moonlight on the windows. And on the inside we had a Rifa light through a frame, to give a warm amber tungsten keylight,” he recalls.

“A lot of the creepiness in the film takes place during the day and there are some scenes where there’s a fairly bright wash of sunlight coming in from a window or lighting up a room. And even within a brightly lit scenario some really dark disturbing things happen,” Hagey says. “In some ways it’s scarier when strange things happen and you can very clearly see everything around you, like in *The Shining*.” So sometimes inside the house, “we’d bounce Kino Flos into foam core and side light whenever we could. And we would also use the Joker bug light with a chimera. It was a pretty straightforward approach to the lighting. We only had a modest budget for lighting, so I just used a few tools in different ways to try to get different effects.”

As for practical lights, Hagey used them more as set dressing than sources of light. “It was just something we could turn on in the background occasionally as needed. I’m not a fan of having practical lights for day scenes. We tended to keep them off for day scenes. And then for night scenes we’d turn them on,” he says.

Most of Hagey’s discussions with production designer Lisa Soper revolved around the colour of the walls and the set dressing, and they agreed to paint the walls of the house in darker colours that would contrast skin tones. “I find it much easier to light when the background walls are darker tones than skin tones,” Hagey explains. “It allows the character to separate from the set more easily. [Soper] came up with this great colour – this kind of cyan gray colour for one room which looked amazing for the climax. Then there was a red room as well, which looked great, I thought.”

Hagey also gives a nod to first-time director Trebilcock of whom he says, “He is probably the most polite man I know. He’s an extremely humble individual. It was a real pleasure to go into work and know you really like the person you’re working with.” 🍷

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