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Greg Middleton Creates Two Distinct Worlds of Love and Courage for Paul Gross's Passchendaele

by Don Angus

Mud. Sloppy, gooey mud. It almost stopped Greg Middleton csc in his tracks as he filmed Paul Gross's $20-million First World War epic, Passchendaele, in Alberta last summer and fall. It was tough slogging through the muck and the wind-driven rain. The rain was from hoses; the wind was for real. The sunny blue skies were another problem.

Middleton, the award-winning Westerner based in Vancouver, spared a few minutes to talk by cell phone as he waited to board a seaplane destined for northern British Columbia. Fishing? No, another shoot - and he had only just wrapped a miniseries, "Sea Wolf," in Halifax the previous week.

"Yes," he said, he was planning on attending the world premiere of Passchendaele at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 4. It's the second consecutive year one of his pictures has been selected to open the festival. Last year it was Jeremy Podeswa's Fugitive Pieces, but he couldn't attend because he was shooting Passchendaele.

The director of photography said it was special to work with a man of Gross's stature in Canadian stage, television and cinema. Gross is writer, co-producer, director and star of the
big-budget (at least by Canadian standards) romantic drama, due to be released in Canadian theatres in late fall - perhaps on or about November 11, Remembrance Day.

Gross has worked towards this theatrical story of love and courage for over 10 years. It's much longer if you count back to his boyhood when his grandfather told him sometimes grisly stories of his experiences as a soldier in the 10th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force at the Battle of Passchendaele (also known as the Third Battle of Ypres) in 1917. The movie is based on his grandfather's accounts of the fighting.

Middleton had never worked with Gross before and, unlike the director, knew little about the battle, or the war, before signing on. However, he quickly grasped Gross's vision and read as much as he could to catch up on the 1914-1918 conflict.

In pre-production, Middleton and Gross talked about the look of the feature in both its romantic and tense, heavily dramatic moods - love and life on the home front and hate and death in the Belgian trenches. "The two worlds were quite distinct in what we were going to film in them and what they were going to feel like," the DOP said.

"All the scenes set in Belgium, especially in the last third of the film, were shot in completely rainy, muddy conditions, with a lot of dramatic elements - like people in wool, army uniforms covered in mud. The clay-soil mud stuck to everything." It was difficult to shoot in the rain - hundreds of gallons of water sprayed over the set - and keep the blue sky of a beautiful day out of the shot or from reflecting off the soldiers' faces.

"I tried to come up with an interesting colour for the battlefield stuff, harking back to actual descriptions of what the colour looked like," Middleton said. He decided to shoot all the battlefield scenes on Fujifilm's Eternia 400T low-contrast, colour negative film stock. "Both day and night on one film," he said. "I wanted to introduce a little bit more physical texture. We weren't going for an extremely gritty or grainy look, but there's just a different texture to that lower-contrast film. I think sometimes it helps to strategize with some of those characteristics built into the photography, through the choice of film stock and processing."

The battle scenes "were a little bit more de-saturated because Paul and I discussed various ways to try to make the two worlds distinct. The major clash, visually, between the two parts of the world is very powerful. The film is a war romance; we shot the landscape outside Calgary the way it is, beautiful and lush."

For the softer, warmer, romantic look and feel of home, the DOP chose Kodak Vision2 5218 500T and 5212 100T. Middleton said he shot Passchendaele with Panavision cameras and a set of Primo primes. The Millennium XL was A-camera and the Platinum was B-cam. The crew used three cameras for the battle scenes and had a second unit, headed by Danny Nowak csc, with two cameras for about two weeks. "Danny's a huge World War I buff, so it was a great thrill for him to be involved," Middleton said.

As for Paul Gross, the DOP said he had never seen anything quite like his director. "Paul is an incredibly talented writer and has an incredible amount of energy. I can't think of anyone who could accomplish what he managed to do - write, produce, direct and star." The cinematographer said he would grab a few minutes with Gross in the morning before a shoot and for a few minutes on his way back to the trailer. "It's usual to have much more time with your director on set, but on many days this was not possible. We did have a reasonable prep, which proved to be invaluable. This allowed me to be able to make some decisions in his absence, because I had a strong idea of what he wanted."

So what did Middleton think was the one thing he could not have done without on Passchendaele? "Hard work," he replied, and he praised his crew.