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# Short Takes

For their entry in this year's *Transworld Skateboarding* "Skate and Create" video competition, director Ty Evans and cinematographer Marc Ritzema fashioned a post-apocalyptic junkyard filled with ramps and obstacles and lit with practical fire effects.



## A Blazing Skate Video

By Iain Stasukevich

Shooting skate videos is a lot harder than it looks. For starters, it's helpful to know how to ride a skateboard. The person with the camera often rides around after the skater, capturing difficult tricks while speeding down a steep hill or through a parking lot or playground. To frame a trick, you have to get the takeoff, the trick and the landing all in one shot. Between takeoff and landing, no editing is allowed.

Patience is key. On a bad day (or night), the skater might not land a single trick. The younger ones are easily distracted and less interested in what's good for the camera than they are in having fun. For these reasons and many others, the "go, go, go" method of shooting skate videos isn't particularly suited to the "hurry up and wait" of Hollywood filmmaking, but that hasn't stopped cinematographer Marc Ritzema and director Ty Evans from trying.

After making his mark as a skate-video director in the mid-1990s, Evans hooked up with Spike Jonze's Girl Skateboards company. He and Jonze co-directed two well-known skate videos, *Yeah Right!* and *Fully Flared*, sandwiching clever visual effects and explosive action sequences (shot on film) between more traditionally shot scenes.

Ritzema skated for Vans while studying film and communication at Biola University, but when he injured a knee ligament, his athletic career came to an end. "I had to concentrate more on my filmmaking," he recalls. "I worked for a couple of years as a projectionist and a grip and an electrician while doing everything I could to put together a cinematography reel."

His reel gained him admission to the American Film Institute in 2002, and two years later, on a shoot for St. Vincent's "Jesus Saves, I Spend," he met Colin Kennedy, the staff director/videographer for skate company DVS. Kennedy invited Ritzema to join him in the 2008 *Transworld Skateboarding* "Skate and Create" video competition. "I was able to go back to my roots and combine my knowledge of cinematography with skateboarding to help Colin win the competition," says Ritzema.

Ritzema's winning collaboration with Kennedy, along with their 2009 entry, caught Evans' attention. "Marc has an eye," Evans says. "He really knows how to design a shot."

Collaboration between a director and cinematographer is rare in skate videos, notes Ritzema. "Each company tends to use one guy, a director who shoots and edits his own stuff," he explains. "And some professional skateboarders only allow one director/cameraman to shoot them."

"Lakairomania" (referring to sponsor Lakai), Ritzema and Evans' entry in *Transworld's* competition this year, won the top prize. The concept sounds like a scene out of *The Warriors*: A gang of skaters in a post-apocalyptic world finds itself in a bombed-out junkyard filled with ramps and obstacles. They throw Molotov cocktails at the ramps, lighting them on fire, and then skateboard through the flames.

The budget didn't allow for a full crew, generator and studio lights, so the filmmakers lit using flame bars, flame cubes and fireballs, in addition to six narrow-beam Par cans gelled with Full CTB to provide contrasting color and highlight parts of the set. "This was the first time I've used a special-effects team as my primary lighting designers," says Ritzema. "We placed the flame bars and cubes in

Photos by Sam Muller and Mike O'Malley. Photos and frame grabs courtesy of *Transworld Skateboarding* and the filmmakers.



Top and middle: The skaters light up the bombed-out landscape with Molotov cocktails and proceed to skate through the burning wreckage. Bottom: Evans (in white shirt) shows Ritzema (wearing leg brace) and company the proper technique for throwing an incendiary bottle.



specific areas where we needed a fire element to silhouette the skater at the climax of the trick. From there, we'd fill the frame with other flame bars, sparks and pools of water to obtain as many layers of

light as possible." The Par cans were used to add detail and help the skaters see where they were taking off and landing when the set wasn't lit by fire.

Even before the cameras started

rolling, the filmmakers were feeling the heat. Each team usually gets nine days to complete a project, but because of the subject matter, fire marshals had to be on set at all times. The set was an industrial warehouse in Carlsbad, Calif. The fire permit only allowed eight-hour days, and weekend work was prohibited. Once the schedule was worked out, Ritzema and Evans had just four days to shoot.

Setups took place around one obstacle or ramp, and once it was lit on fire (using a flammable viscous paste called "burn butter"), six skaters sometimes had just two minutes to perform a trick. Ritzema describes the set as "total chaos. We'd have the skaters do their trick over and over. If they didn't land it, they'd run around the camera and try it again until the burn butter went out. Often we shot for two minutes with every skater and wouldn't land a single trick."

The pyrotechnics group monitored the heat in the warehouse to make sure the emergency sprinklers wouldn't activate. After a few applications of burn butter, they'd shut the set down and open up the warehouse to let the smoke and heat evaporate. It took about 30 minutes to reapply the burn butter, turn on the lights, and get the skaters back into the warehouse to do it all again. "We only got one or two setups a day, about 10 tricks, because it was such painstaking work," notes Ritzema.

For each scene, Ritzema set up as many as six cameras to capture the tricks from different angles. He used a Red One (shooting 100 fps with the Mysterium-X chip), a Canon EOS 5D MKII (at 24 fps), two Canon EOS 7Ds (at 60 fps), a Rebel T2i (variable fps), and a Panasonic AG-HVX200 (variable fps), shooting coverage from different angles. Using flames as keylight made it difficult to judge exposure during setup time, so Ritzema had to wait until a given scene was blocked and the pyrotechnics were ready to go. Once the skaters started their first run, he'd roll camera and check the Red's onboard waveform to make sure the exposure was proper, then run to the HD SLRs to match the look. By the time the athletes were ready for their second try, all the cameras were dialed in.

"On the very first shot, I exposed





Top and middle: A crane captures some of the skating action. Bottom: In addition to the flame effects, Ritzema employed narrow-beam Par cans gelled with Full CTB to highlight parts of the set.

more for the mid-tones and the detail in the ramps with the edging from the Par cans," recalls the cinematographer. "Once the flames burst, they were completely blown out. There was no detail in the flames, and you could see everything in the warehouse that you didn't want to see."

With the Red's sensor set to daylight-balanced 800 ASA, the shutter set to 90 degrees ("which makes the flames nice and crispy"), and a Cooke 18-100mm T3 zoom at T4/5.6, Ritzema found he could actually underexpose the image by as many as 3 stops. "It maintains the flames, and they were really nice and orange," he says. "I knew there was a ton of information in the R3D files that we could bring up later on—the little edgelights and things I did with the Par cans. We'd take the shot over to our DIT cart, which had a Red Rocket card, and start playing with it. The MX sensor has a lot of information in the tail of the curve, so we just lifted up the signal until we saw what we wanted."

Ritzema used the Canon 7Ds and 5D as secondary cameras. Although 80 percent of "Lakairomania" is Red footage, the HDSLR content ended up informing the final look of the video. "Because the Mysterium sensor has a much wider dynamic range, if we intercut it with the footage from the Canon cameras, we'd have to really compress it down," he notes. "But we nailed those 5D and 7D exposures to the point where we weren't really limited in what we could do with the Red."

When he spoke to AC, Evans was still editing the video, prepping it for a 4:4:4 online at Bandito Bros. in Los Angeles. "I don't even care if we win," he remarks. "It was such a great experience that I'm glad I got the chance to do it at all."

"This competition really helps [skate-video] directors see the value in working with a cinematographer," he adds. "I'd like to see that collaboration happen more often."

*The video is posted online at <http://skateboarding.transworld.net/>.* ●