

The Imperialists Are Still Alive!, shot by Magela Crosignani, follows Asya (Élodie Bouchez), a French-Arab artist living in New York. In this scene, Asya visits St. Nick's Jazz Pub in Harlem.



A Woman of 2 Worlds
By John Calhoun

The first shot in *The Imperialists Are Still Alive!* features lead actress Élodie Bouchez wearing a Keffiyeh around her face and nothing else. Cast as Asya, a New York visual artist of French upbringing and mostly Arab descent, Bouchez is also acting as stand-in for writer/director Zeina Durra, who grew up in London but whose ethnic background mirrors Asya's. The character is an expression of the filmmaker's own identity, that of a 21st-century woman who is not caught between Muslim and Western worlds but straddles them, easily navigating New York Bohemian culture while remaining vitally connected to the political realities of the Middle East and post-9/11 America.

The opening shot is certainly attention grabbing, but if one can look beyond the naked actress to take in the whole frame, other details may become apparent: grain, for example. The kind of grain associated with film, that is. *The Imperialists Are Still Alive!* is a low-budget indie shot not with a DSLR, but with that longtime indie stalwart, Super 16mm. "I didn't have to pitch it at all — Zeina was definitely committed to Super 16," says cinematographer Magela Crosignani of the film's director. "She did not want digital, nor did she

want 35mm. She wanted the images to be grainy, and she also wanted a lot of texture."

"I understand why someone might want to shoot digital, but I didn't become a filmmaker to shoot digital," says Durra. "I feel that film picks up something that digital can't, and that's what excites me."

Crosignani, who had previously shot some short films on Super 16mm, says, "I knew it was going to work well for us because of the small locations we were working in, and because we had to move so fast." Obtaining the proper texture was key. "Zeina showed me her thesis film, which she'd shot on 35mm at New York University, and said, 'I don't want it this clean.' She wanted something rawer." At the same time, "she felt that pushing 16 would be stylizing it too much. She wanted the grain, but didn't want to call attention to it."

The two collaborators had known each other since their student days at NYU; Durra was in the graduate-film program, and Crosignani, a native of Uruguay, was in the undergraduate program. "I was shooting grad thesis films, and I shot one that Zeina produced," recalls Crosignani, who went on to earn a master's degree in cinematography at the American Film Institute.

When Durra began prepping *Imperialists*, she interviewed Crosignani along

with other cinematographers. "Of all the directors of photography I met, Magela just understood me," says the director. "It's very important that a cinematographer understand your language, because then they want to help you get your film across."

"I really loved the script, and it seemed like an incredible opportunity for me to film in New York," says Crosignani.

Imperialists was shot over 23 days in early 2009, but this short burst of filmmaking followed an extensive preproduction process. Durra had many visual references to show Crosignani and production designer Jade Healy, including works by Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershoi (for the winter light), Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama (for his city shots), and a number of films. The French New Wave figured heavily, as did 1960s movies by Antonioni and Fellini. "Some of the references were from *La Dolce Vita*, which also had a main character moving through different strata of society," notes Crosignani.

In sharing her references, Durra made it clear that the graininess of 16mm was just a piece of the visual atmosphere she wanted to create. "She wanted a lot of texture in every location," says Crosignani. "For instance, she'd show us pictures of bathroom tiles and say, 'I want these tiles, but I don't want the wall to be this white; I



Top: Karim (Karim Saleh) and Tatiana (Katarina Muller) soak in the ambience at the hip Chelsea lounge Bungalow 8. Bottom: Asya feels a romantic spark with Javier (José María de Tavira), a Mexican graduate student.

want it to be dirty.” Consequently, scouting became a matter of walking around New York and knocking on doors to find the perfect locations. Asya’s Chinatown loft was discovered in this manner. “We had a lot of material to shoot in the loft or just outside it,” says Crosignani. “What caught Zeina’s attention at that location was the red on the stairs to the loft, and the texture of the walls.” She adds that a gallery was chosen because of the view outside its windows. “What was visible outside a window was

important to Zeina.”

Shooting with an Arri 16-SR3 and Zeiss Super Speed lenses, Crosignani used Kodak Vision2 250D 7205 for day interiors and exteriors and Vision3 500T 7219 for night interiors and exteriors. “That was a combination of needing the sensitivity of the film and not having enough money to light a block in New York City!” she notes. “A lot of our lighting was practical. We didn’t have large lights or Condors.”

The loft was challenging because “it

had really large windows, and we knew we didn’t have the budget to gel them, nor the time to change gels when necessary,” continues the cinematographer. “That’s part of what led me to shoot a daylight-balanced negative.” Filming at the loft took place over a week in February. “Some days were snowing and cold and cloudy, and others were like a heat wave,” recalls Crosignani. “It was tricky to keep [lighting] consistent without having lights outside — we were on the third floor. We used a lot of natural lighting and added to that inside, mostly with 2-by-4 Kinos rigged above the windows at an angle and Jo-Lekos [a 400-watt Joker HMI inside a Source Four], which allowed me to bounce light at more difficult angles.”

The story includes numerous street sequences, many of them at night. Scenes of Asya traversing the city streets with her boyfriend, Javier (José María de Tavira), are sometimes so dark that “you see the lights in the street but can’t really see their faces,” acknowledges Crosignani. “Zeina said, ‘I don’t care to see their faces; I want to feel as if they’re walking around Chinatown, and it’s not always lit.’”

Given that so many of Durra’s references were black-and-white, “I think if she could have muted the colors of the city, she would have,” the cinematographer continues. “But we knew we had to deal with sodium-vapor streetlights and the colors of Chinatown, so we decided to embrace and expand upon them.”

A series of bars also served as locations, and they are partly distinguished from each other by the use of color. The natural tones of scenes in the loft give way to the golden hues of the trendy Bungalow 8, or the blue-green of a neighborhood bar. At one location, St. Nick’s Jazz Pub in Harlem, the filmmakers even enhanced the existing color. In this scene, Asya has a cathartic moment dancing to an African band. “I wanted to separate that scene from the other colorful ones and push it even further, make it more red and more yellow,” says Crosignani. “The ceilings were very low, so we used some low-profile Pars, some batten lights and some LEDs that our gaffer, Derek Gross, owned.”

Another scene, in which Asya dances with Javier on an East Village street



Clockwise from top left: A scene set in the 90-year-old Nom Wah Tea Parlor on Doyers Street in Manhattan; Crosignani lines up a shot on another project; Asya and Javier share a close moment during a cab ride.



to music emanating from a nearby car, captures a somewhat different mood. "I felt the location lighting was too warm, and I wanted a little color separation there, so we added some cyan backlight," says Crosignani. "The flare from that adds to the romantic little moment while keeping it gritty. It's a New York exterior, and we're not beautifying the street, but there's a little shine in the background. There was a tonal range in the story — some scenes are pure love story, some more political and funnier — so there had to be range in the visuals. But the goal was always to keep it simple. Zeina doesn't like overcomplicated setups, and she doesn't like coverage at all."

Indeed, Durra says, "I think standard coverage is really taking away from the

potential of cinema's language." Most of *Imperialists* was shot handheld (with Crosignani operating) because Durra did not want to limit the actors' movements. The main lenses were the 12mm and 16mm "because Zeina wanted to be close in proximity to the actors but also wanted to allow for the cast to be part of the frame without having to shoot close-ups of each one of them," says the cinematographer. Sometimes the frame contains up to five actors, with extras often moving through the scenes to maintain the bustling city atmosphere. "Zeina wanted to show people walking around the frame in full-length shots because the way they are dressed also adds texture to the image," says Crosignani. "Even the cars passing through the

frame add texture. Zeina cared about details that are usually left for bigger-budget films, and that's part of what made this indie film exciting to shoot — there was never a sense of sacrificing the visuals to budget limitations."

The digital grade for *Imperialists* was carried out at Goldcrest, where the filmmakers worked with colorist John Dowdell. "The things we had to work on most were scenes that we shot night-for-day," recalls Crosignani. A breakfast scene at a Chinatown diner, for example, was shot after sundown. "There's a window in the scene, and we worked a lot on just getting that window to be bright, and balancing the interior and exterior to make it look as close to morning as possible. We also worked to get rid of the warmth and colors that you relate more to night. There were also some scenarios where we had to create windows, like some of the interior car scenes. A lot of it was just making sure the blacks were black."

Whatever format she uses, Durra is likely to continue carrying the torch for film. "I really believe in film," she says. "I believe something special happens when light hits the negative, something magical. People should understand that shooting on video is not just an economic choice, but also an aesthetic one. It's a distinctive choice not to shoot on film."

TECHNICAL SPECS

1.85:1
 Super 16mm
 Arri 16-SR3
 Zeiss Super Speed
 Kodak Vision2 250D 7205,
 Vision3 500T 7219
 Digital Intermediate