

WHEN ART MEETS COMMERCE

An interview with Alessandra Scherillo

Just in case there should be any lurking doubt, Alessandra Scherillo declares fervently, "I want to light. If I just wanted to illuminate, I'd become an electrician on a building site."

One of the busiest and best commercials' DPs around on accounts as varied as Guinness, Nintendo, Ponds, La Senza, ASH, Vespa and Oil of Olay, thirtysomething Scherillo talks about her work with an undisguised passion which perhaps betrays her Italian upbringing.

"As far as I'm concerned commercials are my best creative option," she says. "I love doing them. They are my people. There is a precision and an art about them which I think is extraordinary."

Scherillo has arrived at this point in her budding career after a fascinatingly varied series of shins-up the industry ladder after first arriving in London 15 years ago without a word of English. Born in Verona, she was studying at university in Venice with a view to entering the diplomatic service so needed to add a language. Once over here she took a photographic course too which then led on to a postgraduate course in film production at Croydon College of Art. Winning a bursary and a training placement at Sammy's, Scherillo was,



thanks to a little help from tutor contacts, soon hard at work as a loader.

As a loader then camera assistant and focus puller, she worked on a vast range of material over the next few years ranging from commercials, corporates and promos to television drama and cinema features, like Michael Caine's *Blue Ice* on which she pulled focus during a hazardous night-time car chase sequence. Working with DP Nina Kellgren on the UK end of the shoot, Scherillo got an intriguing close-up of another major star - in this case, the director too - during *Looking For Richard*, Al Pacino's freewheeling documentary about Shakespeare's Richard III.

"Pacino? It was like he had hundreds of thoughts in his head all at one time and you just had to follow them. He'd say, 'shoot, baby, shoot.' He was definitely charismatic but it was like being in a tumbledriller all the time because he was so relentless," she recalls.

Altogether lower profile, but ultimately quite significant in Scherillo's rise-and-rise, was *Institute Benjamenta*, the first full-length live action feature from the Brothers Quay, better known for their stop-animation short films. Of this weird tale about a secluded school for servants, the Sight & Sound critic wrote... "tedium and repetition have never been so thrillingly filmed

before... it is stunningly photographed in black and white." Nic Knowland may have been its distinguished DP but the film earned Scherillo this telling plaudit from BFI Head of Production Ben Gibson who averred it was the first film "to make an artist out of the focus puller."

There were documentaries as well, which took her to locations as varied as Pakistan, Turkey, Belize and Cuba. Best of all was six months in Ethiopia on an award-winning anthropological series for the BBC called *Under The Sun* - "we were the BBC's first-ever all-woman crew. God, they'd have loved us to fail. But we did great work."

Then in 1996... "I felt I had gone as far as I could focus pulling and I kind of walked away from it. I tried to get some shorts but the industry was in crisis so I decided to apply instead for a DP course at the National Film & Television School in Beaconsfield."

Of her subsequent three years at the NFTS, Scherillo mixes tight-lipped discretion with faint praise as in "I did spend that time thinking about lighting and nothing else which was good. To give them credit, they made me think as a DP. I met some fantastic people and many of the students were very, very talented. I arrived there with high expectations and was a very demanding student."

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The undoubted highlight was her second year collaboration with director John McKay, who was completing his third. It was the result of an annual competition in which students were invited to make a Stella Artois commercial which if good enough would be shown before the main feature at the summer-long open air film shows sponsored by the "re-assuringly expensive" beer people.

McKay/Scherillo's winning contribution was called *The Price*. She explains: "There are these girls working in the fields and at lunchtime one



of them dives into the lake. As punishment she has her hair cut publicly in church by the priest. After that she goes back to work feeling very sorry for herself only to discover that half the other girls there went through the same experience. We get across the idea that Stella is not only expensive but that also people with attitude drink it."

"We shot it on location in Dorset near Dorchester and had to make England look like France, which was quite a challenge in itself. What we did was a credit to the agency for we



were able to spend quite a bit of time in each location to see what the light did. Then we chose the absolute perfect moment to shoot - early morning, late afternoon stuff. We used available light whenever possible and I invented a little thing to make it look like a Millet painting. We pinched the framing and the rhythm of the piece from Visconti's *The Leopard*. That commercial was cinema to me"

The film was initially a minute long but the agency liked it so much that they let it run four minutes. By the time Scherillo left film school a year ago to make her way again in the real world, she had *The Price* along with other commercials' work on a useful showreel.

"I suppose the difference between me and many of the other students was that I had already experienced features. My feeling now was that given the budgets and hours I



would not try and get into features unless the script was very special. Unfortunately most of the scripts



offered to you at the beginning of your career are very low-budget and don't have distribution deals.

"One of the more underestimated skills of being a good DP is reading a script. To recognise a good or bad script is, I believe, as important as doing a good job with your lighting because that's how your career advances. A lot of commercials' DPs tend to take the wrong film simply because they're desperate to do a feature. So not only do they come out of the circle of commercials, they then also don't achieve what they perhaps hoped for with the film."

Scherillo has shot around 20 commercials already this year, many on

Fuji because she's very keen on all the various stocks - "they allow for very complimentary skin tones especially with women." And despite her reservations about movies, she certainly hasn't ruled out a future move to features.

"John McKay has a film and my name's up for it. But as I've already said I'm not going to do any old thing. I've got scripts on my desk as we speak but they're not good. I want to tell stories. Visconti, Fellini, Powell and Pressburger - those are my references. If they are not cinematic, why do them?"



But her present focus is clear, as she re-iterates with passion: "You put yourself about if you're ambitious to do the work... and I did. I want to become one of the big DPs in commercials, and I'm not shy to admit it." Don't bet against her. ■ QUENTIN FALK

Photos above: Alessandra Scherillo's award winning *The Price* for Stella Artois; facing page: on location in Devon shooting *Danny Miles Is Leaving Home*.

Photos top: Alessandra Scherillo; above left: Alice Krige in *Institute Benjamenta*; above right: two scenes from the Vespa commercial; above: Al Pacino as Shakespeare's Richard III in *Looking For Richard*.