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SUNDANCE **2012**

SUNDANCE 2012

U.S. DRAMATIC COMPETITION



LUV / Photo by Bill Gray

GAVIN KELLY – LUV

ICG: LUV was your second trip to Sundance. How did the experience compare to *The Dry Land* a few years ago? Kelly: Actually, it was my third time. I had a short in 2005 called *West Bank Story*, a sprawling comedy musical set in the West Bank. It premiered at Sundance, toured festivals around the world, and ended up winning an Oscar two years later.

Wow. So, Sundance has been good to you. Incredibly good to me [laughs]. There is something so intimate and fulfilling about that first weekend there. You have this core group of filmmakers who have been through so much together, and you experience the build-up to the world premiere...[pauses] having *The Dry Land* and *LUV* both debut at the [1,300-seat] Eccles was so special. And Sheldon [*LUV* director Sheldon Candis] is a force of nature. He had lived with this story for so long, it's partially based on real-life incidents from his own family, so he was really emotional at that premiere. If you were there you could see it was a big love fest between his cast, crew and the audience.

I was there. And I heard him call out your name during the Q & A. [Groans.] Yeah. I mean, that question from the audience really surprised me. I didn't want to drone on about the technical aspect of the movie, so I just touched on the Hawk [anamorphic] lenses, because they were so crucial to what we did.

How so? Sheldon wanted a very cinematic and rich look – in handheld anamorphic. And there are a ton of night exteriors later in the film. We landed on these Hawk V-Lite prime lenses, which are very sharp and fast [2.2] and fairly lightweight. We worked with [Burbank-based] CamTec and were fortunate as there are not that many sets out there. Sheldon and I talked a lot about this soft and diffuse presence of light in the background, so the shallow of depth of field, working up close with the Hawks, turned out great.

The cast is entirely African-American, as was much of the crew. How did you get involved with the movie? We're both USC alums, but we didn't know each other at film school. One of the film's producers, Jason Michael Berman, is also a USC grad, and we had worked together on *The Dry Land*, so he made the introduction. Sheldon is just an incredible film geek, as am I. In our first meeting we talked about movies for a couple of hours before really getting into the script. Everything from *Training Day* to *Sophie Muller* to *Let The Right One In*, *Enter The Void*, *Mother* and many others. Although this film is set in a very distinct world, urban Baltimore, it's all told from the boy's point

of view, and Sheldon wanted to reflect that perspective. The events that happen are tough, raw and hard, but this 11-year-old boy is experiencing all of this stuff for this first time, so we wanted a soft artfulness that you would probably never see in an urban genre film.

If you were to write the textbook on how to make a low-budget indie film as difficult as possible, this is it: tons of locations, single-day story moving from day to night, a child at the center, all handheld anamorphic and an 18-day schedule. [Laughs.] It was very ambitious. We spent a lot of our three-week prep scouting all the Baltimore locations, so the logistics – picking the right locations that were also close to each other so we didn't have to do a full company move each day, for example – were so important. And when we committed to a look for a scene, we just went for it.

Do you have an example? When Vincent [Common] and Woody [Michael Rainey, Jr.] go to see Enoch [a drug dealer] at night. That was a key location. We could base ourselves near that old warehouse and tunnel for that scene, and then also nail down some day exteriors in the area. The [Enoch] scene is so dark and intense, and you only see glimpses of faces and action. I had to light the space rather than the actors, which was tricky with darker skin tones and all these moving parts.

They are waving flashlights around and the tension is incredible. We blocked it out, but left it all very loose. When the characters holding flashlights were on camera they became our source lights, which definitely pushed the edges of the Red cam. The rest of the scene we had an electrician with a Tweenie dancing just out of frame and directing the light. It was this crazy ballet in the middle of the night and really challenging.

Was the Eccles premiere the first time you had seen LUV with an audience? I'd only seen it projected in the DI theatre at Tunnel Post. Sheldon had seen it at Skywalker Sound. Since we shot Red MX, we could grade and master in 4K, then go down to HD-Cam for the digital projection, which looked great. To be there with a packed audience and to be sitting right behind Sheldon was a magical experience. That moment when the film has to exist on its own, after so many months of working on it in this little vacuum of cast, crew and DI, is always difficult. But like a child learning to walk, you just have to let it go and hope for the best. 🍀