

Josh Silfen dives into *The Big Bad Swim*

Director Ishai Setton and cinematographer Josh Silfen collaborated on several successful short films while they were students at New York University. They recently re-teamed to make the feature *The Big Bad Swim*.

A stripper with trust issues, a high school teacher going through a divorce, a police officer, an elderly woman, and an eccentric mother and daughter duo are just some of the 12 students enrolled in the Beginners Adult Swim class at the New London Recreation Center. This motley class is taught by the town's former Olympic hopeful Noah Owens (played by Jeff Branson) who slipped into a depression after his dream ended.

"Ishai and I read the script independently and came up with some ideas that led to the final look of the film," says Silfen. "We decided the majority of the film should have a cooler look, so we played our lights fairly blue. We also agreed that the film is about lonely people who use this class as a form of therapy, so the coverage consisted of wide master shots, and then tight close-ups using long

post-production. Silfen explains that the DI would aid them in creating the desired look in locations where extensive lighting and art direction were not possible. Faced with both limited time and money, Silfen notes that the amazing work done by gaffer Richard Ulivella and key grip T.J. Hellmuth was invaluable.

Silfen worked with an Aaton XTRprod, a set of Zeiss Superspeed Prime lenses, a Canon 11-165mm zoom and an ultra-wide T1.9 Century 6mm. His film palette consisted of Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 film, with the exception of the pool scenes where he used Kodak VISION2 250D 7205 film.

"A lot of the story unfolds at the indoor pool," says Silfen. "It was one of the locations where we unfortunately couldn't do a lot of set-ups because of its size as well as time constraints. It was mainly lit by the existing mercury-vapor lights, which are already fairly cool. We shot underwater scenes with the HydroFlex housing, which makes filtration a little more difficult, but that wasn't a problem because those lights are pretty close to daylight color temperature, and we were

be a little more interesting to have the camera locked down when it was underwater so we used a HydroFlex underwater tripod and head. I would hold my breath, go down and check the frame, come up, then hold my breath and go back down. I hadn't done any underwater shooting before so I did a lot of research beforehand. It was a great learning experience."

Other locations included a bar, Noah's house, a high school, a strip club and a casino.

"At the casino, we would light the one table that the characters were at, mostly with Kino Flos, and the rest was just what was there in the background," says Silfen. "The casino had a dimmer board that controlled all the lights in the place but



Above: DP Josh Silfen taking a meter read before shooting a scene from the film.



lenses to give a feeling of isolation for each character."

The entire film was produced over 20 days at practical locations in the Connecticut towns of Old Lyme and New London. The filmmakers decided to produce the film in Super 16 combined with digital intermediate (DI) timing in

shooting with the daylight balanced 7205. We basically just timed all the scenes to be a little cooler and got rid of the green."

Silfen did the underwater camerawork himself. "Most underwater cinematography that you see is handheld," he says. "In keeping with the feeling of the rest of the film, we thought it would

even when they were all at 100 percent, my light meter would still say error. We exposed for our characters, and relied on the latitude of the film to take care of the background. It ended up giving us a contrast that we really liked." ■

Above: The swim class from *The Big Bad Swim* shot by DP Josh Silfen.