



The independent film *Greetings from the Shore*, shot by Mike Mickens, presents New Jersey in a seldom-seen light.

Dianne Brooks

Photo of Mike Mickens by Greg White; all other images courtesy of Hudson Mermaid.

One of the most common remarks first-time feature director Greg Chwerchak hears after people see *Greetings from the Shore*, a coming-of-age story set in a resort town on the Jersey Shore, is that it “doesn’t look like New Jersey.” In the movie, Jenny (Kim Shaw), a college student, returns home to Lavallette to make money at a summer job, and soon befriends a tough group of local fishermen, including a fatherly loner, Catch (Paul Sorvino).

In making the movie, Chwerchak, co-writer Gabrielle Berberich and cinematographer Mike Mickens, all New Jersey natives, set out to prove their home state is much more than the I-95 corridor and the run-down streets of Newark and Camden. The landscape presented in *Greetings from the Shore* comprises sunny skies, small cottages and appealing beaches.

Chwerchak wanted to give the modestly budgeted feature a romantic look, and Mickens, a veteran of action and horror films who started his career with Roger Corman, welcomed an opportunity to do something lighter. The cinematographer explains, “I loved the script, and I wanted my 8-year-old son to see a movie I’d shot. I do a lot of horror movies, so I was happy to be offered a nice, light project. Also, I grew up spending summers with my grandparents in Belmar [close to Lavallette], so I know the magic of the shore, and being able to put it on the screen was a great opportunity.”

Mickens brought his longtime gaffer, Ray Preziosi, and 1st AC, Donovan Mlcoch, aboard the project. His Arri camera package, provided by Arri/CSC in New York, comprised a 535B, a 435 and Cooke S4 prime lenses,

and he shot the picture in 3-perf 35mm, framing for 16x9 for the digital intermediate (DI) but protecting for 1.85:1 in case production decided to cut the negative.

The cinematographer filmed day exteriors on Kodak Vision2 50D 5201 and day interiors on Vision2 250D 5205, using Schneider Tru-Pol and ND filters to bring the stop down to T2.8 in both situations. “Some people think I’m crazy for polarizing day interiors, but it’s a great way to clean-up ‘greasy’ light when you have limited time and resources and a small crew — you might not want to set a flag or a silk,” he notes.

He filmed night scenes on Vision2 500T 5218, eschewing filtration and shooting wide open. He notes that the Cooke S4 primes were particularly good for this approach because “they’re extremely sharp and very hard to flare.” Given that production decided early on to finish with a DI, Mickens wanted to deliver a thick, sharp negative.

One thing Mickens has learned on low-budget shoots is that small budgets require very careful planning, and “cheat sheets” and “look books” are two of the weapons in his prep arsenal. The cheat sheets list every shot and its lighting setup, camera, lens and exposure, among other details. “You know exactly how the preceding scene was shot, so you maintain consistency throughout,” he says. “And if you do need to wing some aspects of a shot, you at least know your parameters beforehand. I also rely on drawing storyboards, especially if the scene is complicated. I was trained as an artist before I ever picked up a camera, and I find storyboards to be an essential planning tool.”

Mickens’ look book comprises still photos clipped from glossy magazines that illustrate the look he has in mind for the project at hand; he uses the book in his discussions with the director and presents his suggestions for how to light each actor. When working with well-known actors such as Sorvino, Mickens watches a number of their earlier films to see how they were photographed and then chooses what he needs. “That’s a good starting point for my conversation with the director,” he notes. “All of these sorts of details have to be decided before you start shooting.”

On *Greetings from the Shore*, Mickens spent a lot of time controlling ambient sunlight in order to achieve the romantic look Chwerchak envisioned. He shaped the light with large bounces, usually 12'x12' and 20'x20' frames of unbleached muslin on large stands. He used solids in those sizes to give dimension to faces and control the light kicked around by the sand. “Controlling light on day exteriors is a lot about taking light away to shape it properly,” he says.

It rained frequently throughout the 23-day shoot, and one day, production had to shut down for a time because flooding caused by heavy rain submerged much of their location. Because of the short schedule, however, shooting had to resume before the rain subsided, so Mickens found himself lining up several 12Ks to create a sunny day exterior amid the rain. In the scene, the actors stroll down the boardwalk; by hitting them with “sunshine” from the side, Mickens was able to avoid lighting the rain.

All interiors, including Catch’s houseboat, were built on a makeshift stage — a garage used by local emergency services for ambulances and fire trucks. Citing production designer Chia-Yi Renee Chao’s excellent work, Mickens notes that Catch’s houseboat was built with wild walls, and all the objects were wired to move in sync so they could be manipulated to mimic the gentle rocking motion of an anchored boat. Mickens lit the houseboat interiors with HMIs, mostly 1.2K and 4K Pars mounted on speed rail. “We needed to create the effect of sun coming through the window and had to be able to change the angle frequently to suggest the motion of the boat,” he notes. He shot these scenes handheld so he could add subtle camera moves to create the feeling of being on a boat.

A night scene in which two characters kiss for the first time presented a different sort of challenge. The scene is set on a beach with a pier close by in the background, and at the location, the pier was about 4 miles from the beach. Mickens explains, “We knew beforehand the location of the ‘first kiss’ scene, but we didn’t like that the pier looked so small in the shot. Also, we learned the pier would be shut down for the season before we were to shoot that scene. So, early in the shoot, we were filming another scene in which a character gets

drunk under the boardwalk; we had the whole pier lit up with two Condors, and all the neon lights on the rides were working. I grabbed the camera and shot a plate of the pier for the ‘first kiss’ scene, and because I had my cheat sheet, I knew I’d be shooting a master of the kiss on an 18mm lens about 15 feet from the actors, so I had Donovan set the focus to 15 feet on the lens, even though we were 200 feet from the pier. That way, the focus on the pier would be the same as when we shot the master of the kiss. We also had to flip the shot in post because we’d lit the north side of the pier, and we actually see the south side in the kissing scene.” Mickens credits most of his approach to gut instinct, formal art training, and an interest in “really looking at everything.” He notes, “My mother and brother are artists, and both of them encourage me to see things differently — to really notice details. I’m learning all the time.”