Sugar & Spice Director McDougall Shoots to Thrill

By Elizabeth Michaelson

Sugar & Spice is the story of friendship among teenaged cheerleaders. They're cute, they're popular, and they're not all that bright. But with their acrobatic skills, they're well prepared to rob a bank when the need arises.

The film opened in January, and is currently playing. Sugar & Spice's director, Francine McDougall (of bicoastal/International Production League of America, a division of Chelsea Pictures, which has offices in Los Angeles, New York and Sydney), talked about the logistics of shooting a feature and the importance of making sure her football scenes looked right.

In spring 1999, McDougall was actually attached to a project at DreamWorks. She told SHOOT, "We had begun casting and location scouting, but the script was being constantly rewritten, and that had been going on for months. I couldn't do any commercials and DreamWorks was never fully satisfied with the script." Then McDougall's agent called and reminded McDougall of a script she had read: Sugar & Spice. As McDougall recalled, "My agent said, 'They need a director right away-it's just gotten a green light.' I went in, had a meeting, and got the job the next day." McDougall left the other project and began preproduction on Sugar & Spice the following week.

McDougall said that she starts planning shots when she reads a script, and for Sugar & Spice, "I wanted things to look symmetrical. I wanted to play a bit on this perfect world [that the cheerleaders seem to inhabit]. These girls are pretty much good girls. So in their environment everything looks very symmetrical; it's got an even feel to it." This stress on mirror images ties into the emphasis on the dichotomy between the fluffy image of all-American cheerleaders and the movie's (albeit lighthearted) take on teen pregnancy and criminality. The tension works on another level, too: Sugar & Spice is both within the genre of teen comedy and a satire on the characters that pepper most examples of the group.

The 36-day shoot was tight, mostly because of the size of the cast: "I had seven girls in most of the shots," McDougall pointed out. "The time it takes with makeup and hair is phenomenal-I mean, just the touchups ...," she laughed. "You've got to shoot more, you've got to get more coverage, it takes longer to get everyone ready, you're adding additional close ups or mediums." Plus, "Nearly everything was shot on location in Minneapolis; we had five days on set. We had multiple locations every day. It's hard when you're running around with 70 to 100 people from location to location, day in, day out."

Her approach to directing was dictated by the needs of the particular scene, McDougall explained. "I storyboarded the more complicated scenes-[for example] there's one where a van speeds out of control, and dives through a parking lot." However, most of scenes she storyboarded were for the benefit of her crew: "Storyboarding really helps all the different heads of departments, especially the production designer and the DP. But I definitely have everything shot-listed before I turn up; in fact, I like to be shot-listed a week in advance. That helps the AD plan the schedule. And the more prepared I am, the more prepared everyone else is."

Unfortunately, some of the planning was for naught, and McDougall had to lose several of the carefully planned football scenes. She explained, "We shot two nights of football with 3,000 extras and I had an amazing shot list. It was actually meant to be three nights, but two days before we started on the football stuff, the line producer came to me and said, 'You know what? We're incurring too much..."
overtime; we're going to have to drop some stuff. It was either dropping scenes or sections of scenes or characters - you've got to work out what's disposable. We had about 15 more days of shooting, so I went through all the scenes in those 15 days and it came down to the football stuff, because it was really just action; it wasn't driving the story forward. But I was going to lose all these awesome shots I had planned."

But McDougall was reluctant to lose all of her football shots, so, "I fine-tuned the football stuff [that remained in the script], to make it look like I knew what I was doing." She was motivated not only by perfectionism, but because "the last thing I wanted to happen was for some guy to come up to me and say, 'You're an Australian woman; you don't know anything about American football. You don't even know how to shoot that.' " McDougall was determined not to be shown up: "This was probably the one setup that I spent an insane amount of time on, because there was no way any guy was going to come and tell me that," she giggled. "And I have to say, every guy that has seen my football stuff says, 'Wow, you know American football.' " McDougall gives credit to a few sources for her knowledge: "I got that book Football for Dummies, and I watched a couple of Super Bowls. It's important: Women don't usually get to direct football scenes and car commercials. So I took a lot of pride in my football."