

American Cinematographer

The Man Behind the Mask

A key sequence in *Vanilla Sky*, shot by John Toll, ASC, underscores the central character's existential torment.

by Jay Holben

In *Vanilla Sky*, Tom Cruise stars as publishing tycoon David Aames, an affluent and attractive playboy who enjoys a charmed and hedonistic lifestyle. His footloose philandering and careless ways catch up with him, however, when he discovers the accuracy of the maxim "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

Just after meeting Sofia (Penelope Cruz), a dream woman who just might encourage him to settle down, Aames is lured into a near-lethal car ride by his occasional lover Julie (Cameron Diaz), an unstable woman with whom he has attempted to maintain a sexually charged but casual relationship. Feeling jilted and enraged by Aames' sudden and obvious passion for Sofia, Julie decides to end her own life — bringing Aames, quite literally, along for the ride. Through an inexplicable stroke of luck, Aames survives the ensuing crash, but he emerges from the incident with horrible facial damage. While suffering through a long, torturous period of self-loathing, Aames slowly tries to piece his life back together with the help of a psychiatrist (Kurt Russell), but the process sends him into a mind-bending spiral of fantastic circumstances that may or may not be real.

Adapted from Alejandro Amenabar's film *Abre los Ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*), *Vanilla Sky* allowed director/writer Cameron Crowe to take his penchant for angst-ridden

characters to the next level. Behind the lens for this complex tale of self-discovery and atonement was director of photography John Toll, ASC (*Wind, Legends of the Fall, Braveheart, The Thin Red Line*), who had previously teamed with Crowe on the critically acclaimed *Almost Famous*.

During one particularly gut-wrenching sequence in *Vanilla Sky*, Aames has emerged from his long stretch of self-imposed solitude to reintroduce himself to Sofia, the woman he's been dreaming about ever since the fateful accident. The two meet at a crowded nightclub, where Aames' best friend Brian (Jason Lee), who had introduced the two before the accident, joins them.

For the nightclub sequence, shot at the Brewery in downtown Los Angeles, Toll and gaffer Randy Woodside were assisted by theatrical lighting designer **Lee Rose**, who had previously worked with the cinematographer/gaffer team on the concert sequences in *Almost Famous*. **Rose's** diverse background includes theatrical lighting design, rock concert design, and television, music-video and feature-film work. "I wanted something new to me for the club," explains Toll. "Randy and I decided that using theatrical lighting equipment could be an interesting approach for the scene. Based on our previous experience with **Lee**, we knew that his expertise and specialized experience with this type of equipment and rigging was exactly what we needed. We all scouted the location together and

talked about different ideas based on the staging that Cameron and I had worked out, as well as the general look of the scenes that we had discussed. We came up with a general plan and asked **Lee** for suggestions for specific equipment and rigging."

Rose worked closely with Woodside, and the duo delineated their responsibilities in vertical terms: **Rose** was responsible for everything that would be rigged overhead, as well as background and atmosphere lighting, while Woodside would work from the floor to light the talent. Given nearly a week at the location before the cameras rolled, **Rose**, collaborating closely with the production's rigging crew, began by flying seven runs of box truss and interspersing them with 6-light Par 64 bars and Diversitronics' 3,000-watt strobe lights. He then peppered the rigs with High End Systems' Cyberlight Turbos and their smaller sibling, Technobeams, which provided moving light sources throughout the club. "I went with moving mirror instruments as opposed to moving fixture instruments simply because I wanted the versatility of speed," explains **Rose**. "The moving mirror instruments can make much more quick and sporadic moves than a moving fixture, and that would give John and Cameron the flexibility to get what they needed no matter what the demands were."

Coloring for the instruments evolved over the course of the first day's photography. "Although I knew I wanted the scene to be cool in tone, I wasn't quite sure of the exact

palette,” offers Toll. “When we first got there, we were experimenting with more mixed color, but the more I saw, the more I moved toward using various hues of blue and simply turning off everything else.” Some of the cool shades with which the team experimented were Lee 119 as a dark blue, Rosco 79 as an intermediate and Rosco 68 as a light blue. The Lee 119 was eventually abandoned as being far too saturated with too much light loss, while the Rosco 68 became the dark blue, with full CTB providing the lighter hue from all of the overhead sources.

The nightclub sequence was shot on Kodak Vision 500T 5279 rated at 400 ISO, at an average shooting stop of T2.8. (The majority of *Vanilla Sky* was photographed on Kodak EXR 5293 200 ASA film.)

When Aames enters the club to meet with Sofia, he strides in to the pulsating thump of a heavy techno beat while wearing a prosthetic mask — a eerily featureless facsimile of his own face, fabricated by his doctors in lieu of repairing the damage Aames suffered in the accident. Sofia is made very uncomfortable by the mask and Aames’ rather cavalier attitude, and soon excuses herself to go to the ladies room, leaving Brian to confront his friend.

After an aggressive and emotionally blunt conflict, Aames refuses to unmask himself and dismisses Brian, moving away to a second bar at the opposite side of the club, where he proceeds to drink himself into oblivion. To punctuate the characters’ separation, Toll lit the second bar primarily with 2900°K Kino Flo sources. The key source is the milked Plexiglas surface of the bar, which was lined with 2900°K Kinos; Woodside also added Kinos behind the liquor bottles to add an extra punch to the background. Resting atop the bar was a metallic frosted fixture lamped with standard cool white fluorescent globes. The neutrality of the tungsten color temperature in the deeply saturated blue nightclub serves to accentuate the harshness of Aames’ disfigurement as he pulls off his mask to drink. “I wanted something in the room to be different,” Toll explains. “At the beginning of the scene the characters come together, but they get separated as Aames retreats. I wanted to punctuate the dramatic context of the scene.

“Additionally, I just wanted something not to be blue!” he adds with a laugh. “I thought the blue tones were looking great, but I didn’t want the whole room to look that way because I felt it would be far too monotonous. Our approach ultimately served to accentuate the idea that Aames has separated himself from Sofia and Brian.”

In addition to the trusses rigged into the Brewery’s ceiling, **Rose** added six 15’-tall vertical box trusses on rolling bases, each with its own Cyberlight Turbo and two Technobeam fixtures, as well as two spherical strobes. These towers could be moved easily into any position very quickly to provide background elements or punctuation that Toll and Woodside needed to fill out each shot.

To highlight the key action on the floor, Woodside limited his palette to fluorescent fixtures, using just four “flavors” of Kino Flo sources ranging from 2900°K Tungsten to 5500°K Daylight; in addition to regular cool white fluorescent fixtures peppered around the architecture, the gaffer also positioned theatrical blue tubes and SuperBlue spike tubes. For the majority of the Brewery’s deep brick walls, Woodside placed Image80 Kino Flo fixtures on the floor to up-light the bricks, which were lamped with either the theatrical blue or SuperBlue units. At times, these sources were seen in shot and provided hot areas of separation for the gyrating dancers moving throughout the club.

“When we got to the location on the first morning of shooting, **Lee** had pre-rigged all of the overhead lighting, and it basically took us about three hours to set the look and start shooting,” Toll says. “We used the overhead Pars as basic wash and to bring up the base level of the smoke, and we then added in the moving lights for sweeps and to punctuate other areas. We used the moving lights as both stationary sources and for moving across people on the dance floor as needed. When we got into areas around the bar, we rolled in our towers and used those for punctuation. It was all pretty efficient and we could move very quickly. I would be working with Randy setting lights for principal foreground action, and **Lee** would stand by the camera; I would ask him for changes in the background, which he would do over the radio with the lighting-board operator.”

“The overall rig was laid out in a zone system,” offers **Rose**, “so that no matter where we went in the room, and no matter which direction John was shooting from, I could always give him something from any angle.”

“**Lee**’s experience was indispensable,” Toll continues. “The fact that he had worked on films, in theater and in rock ’n’ roll was great, because he understood what we were talking about and could quickly translate it to the board operators. **Lee** would ask me what stock I was using, what the ASA was, and what stop I wanted to shoot at, and when I gave him that information he understood what I was talking about. It was like having a second gaffer on the film, and he and Randy worked off one another beautifully. It got pretty busy at times, as these types of scenes tend to, and they were constantly covering for each other when one or the other needed to be off the set somewhere.

“In the end, although it took us some rigging time to set up all of the theatrical lighting, this overall approach saved us quite a bit of shooting time. I think it was an ideal example of how to use someone with **Lee**’s expertise in combination with a great gaffer like Randy Woodside. I really needed both of them in order to move as efficiently as we did. Essentially, I needed a left and a right hand — one working from the air, and one working from the ground. I think the whole point of the collaboration was the number of choices it made available to me from the moment I first stepped onto the set. By having the set rigged as it was, and giving ourselves the ability to change the moving lights’ color, position, gobos and movement patterns remotely and from the ground, we were able to set the dynamic looks and general tone of the overall scene relatively easily. We could then finesse the principal talent lighting without worrying about the background at all. Giving **Lee** the time to set up this type of system properly and having him available on the set made us a much more efficient team. It allowed us to shoot a great-looking sequence in a minimal amount of time.” ■

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