



CASE STUDY

## Up in the air with VariCam 35

Location: Los Angeles, USA

Product(s) supplied: **VariCam 35**

## Challenge

To create a dramatic look while shooting at night with little light, maintaining a raw and naturalistic image.

## Solution

The use of Panasonic's compact camcorder, the VariCam 35, renowned for its classic colour reproduction and for bringing progressive workflows to the production industry.

*"It was mostly about creating a natural palette with a low contrast gamma curve, so the film had a softness to it."*

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**Polly Morgan**

BSC



**6 Balloons, a grimly effective Netflix drama tells the story of a young woman, played by Abbi Jacobson, who attempts to help her brother cope with his heroin addiction.**

The American drama was written and directed by Marja-Lewis Ryan and shot by cinematographer Polly Morgan, BSC, (*Spinning Man* and *The Intervention*) using a number of [VariCam 35](#) cameras.

The Netflix feature film, which stars Abbi Jacobson and Dave Franco, had its premiere at this year's South by Southwest film festival in March and began streaming on Netflix in April.

Hailing from West Sussex in the south of England, Morgan always knew she wanted to work in movies. As a teenager, a film crew descended to the countryside she lived in and used her farmhouse as basecamp. After looking through the camera's viewfinder for the first time, Morgan was hooked. "It was a really magical experience for me," she says. "As I grew up, I got into photography and when I left university, I started working as a PA. It all kind of went from there. I was a PA, and then I was a camera trainee, and from there I moved to 2nd AC." Morgan eventually went to Los Angeles to study cinematography at the American Film Institute.

After receiving the script for *6 Balloons* from her agent, as well as the look book which Marja-Lewis Ryan had created, Morgan was very impressed. "We met for coffee and after talking, we realised we were on the same page," explains Morgan. "We agreed that the film had to be really raw and real. It couldn't be glossy."

When developing the look of *6 Balloons*, Morgan was inspired by the work of still photographers like Nan Goldin, Todd Hido and Ryan McGinley whose styles she describes as naturalistic and textured. "We didn't want the audience to be aware of the cinematography," she explains. "We wanted the viewer to feel like they were on the journey with the two protagonists – a bystander forced to witness the events that unfold. We didn't want the film to look perfect, but to make it feel immediate so people could emotionally respond to the story and feel the sense of drama and panic unfolding."

Like most indie films, Morgan's biggest challenge was time, shooting the movie in four weeks with a 3-year-old lead and a schedule full of night work, in and around a car in rough LA neighbourhoods. The hardest part of the shoot was the final scene of the movie, where Katie's car fills up with water. "The end sequence shows our two main characters in a car as it fills up with water, a symbolic representation of Katie's mental state," explains Morgan. "We had to figure out how we were going to put these two actors in a car and fill it to the top with water in a safe and shootable way. We ended up with 3 versions of the same car. One to shoot in around LA, one to submerge in a tank and the other to seal and fill up with water at the actual location."

With Netflix's 4K mandate, Morgan selected the [VariCam 35](#) and was excited about the camera's ability to shoot at high ISOs. During prep, she shot day, night, interior and exterior tests at the actual locations they would be shooting at and created a show LUT with her post house, Local Hero, in Santa Monica.





With a small budget and a limited lighting package, shooting at a higher ISO really helped while driving around at night when Morgan wanted the lighting to be interactive. “We wanted to feel the real-world sources from the street – the passing cars, the ambience coming through the windows,” explains Morgan. “When we went down to Skid Row, it was all minimal lighting. We couldn’t light expansively down the street. We didn’t want to disturb everyday life for those people living down there. We did it run-and-gun and we had to be very sly about it. Since the [VariCam](#) can basically see in the dark, it opens up a whole new world for what can be captured with minimal or no lighting.”

For lighting in the car, Morgan employed a process trailer and mounted ARRI Skypanels to create the look of stop lights, which were a story point. There were no lights inside the car with actors, because Morgan wanted the lighting to be soft and subtle and to feel the changing colours on the actors faces from the outside. “The 5000 ISO really helped us capture great details in completely naturalistic situations,” continues Morgan. “I really think it helped to make the film feel more authentic. Skid Row is a very intimidating place to go at night and to experience how the people lived there was a really harrowing experience for the entire crew. It’s very sad to see so many people suffering as much as they do.”

Although Morgan shot at high ISOs for night scenes, she found the noise pattern when dialling down from 5000 base to 2500 closely matched the native 800 ISO. “You couldn’t really tell the difference between that and 800 and I was really impressed at how 2500 saw more than what the eye sees at low light levels,” explains Morgan. “Our aim was to infuse the image with as much texture as possible. There are plenty of flares and a lot of foreground, we were always shooting through or over things. As the movie gets more intense, there’s really no frame that you would call clean and I think shooting at a higher ISO fit the textural mandate perfectly.”

Morgan shot the film in 4K, capturing 12-bit 4:4:4 AVC Intra files to P2 cards. She also shot in anamorphic using Cooke Xtal Express prime lenses. “They’re such beautiful lenses and they have so much character to them,” says Morgan. “It fitted in with our textured painterly feel. We also used a unique vintage 55mm macro lens which was employed to create the feeling of intimacy and claustrophobia.”

6 Balloons was graded at Local Hero by colourist Leandro Marini. According to Morgan, the grade was very similar to what the dailies looked like. “The look was created in camera. All the varying colour temperatures were maintained. The artificial and uncomfortable environments of downtown, or the pharmacy, compared with the safety and warmth of the incandescent light back at her house. We had done extensive tests and had good communication with Leo [Marini] throughout the shoot, so everything was in a pretty good place by the time we went in for the grade.”

“Overall, I’m pleased with how the film came out,” concludes Morgan. “I think that the manifesto for the cinematography, to keep it raw and naturalistic, to help the viewer connect and empathise with the characters, was the right approach and something all departments worked hard to achieve.”

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