



Photo main: DP Vernon Layton BSC and inset (yesterday..)



# POETRY OF MOTION

## AN INTERVIEW WITH VERNON LAYTON BSC

**N**ever say never. After more than 30 years as an award-winning cinematographer of shorts, commercials, TV and features, Vernon Layton had hung up his light meter for the last time, as far as he was concerned.

Then, while in his latter-day capacity as a financier of various enterprises, he was assisting the path of a new movie into production, Layton suddenly found his fellow filmmakers giving him an appreciative eye.

The producer of the film Jonathan Rae and director John Roberts, asked if he would consider lighting it. Layton explained: "I really had no plans to light another film but the DP they had in mind wasn't available for their schedule, so I agreed after some persuasion."

Which is why Layton is now currently in production on *Day Of The Flowers*, happily, he admits – as Director of Photography. He's shooting on 3-perf 35mm ETERNA 400T – "it's a very gentle stock and looks lovely – and Super F-64D. I would have chosen higher contrast stocks, but we are transferring via a Digital Intermediate, so I can put any amount of contrast into the images later. It's like using a moving version of Photoshop."

An ambitious romantic comedy road-movie, shooting in the UK and Havana with a cast including Eva Birthistle, Charity Wakefield and acclaimed Cuban ballet dancer

Carlos Acosta, *Day Of The Flowers* is just the latest rung in a fascinating career ladder for the tireless Layton.

The heat and humidity of present-day Havana could not be further removed from his first celluloid recollections when, as a young child during the war, flickering images from a 9.5mm centre-perf camera were projected onto a white sheet in the family sitting room.

They'd been shot by one of his uncles who, while serving as a radar operator on the aircraft carrier *HMS Illustrious*, captured "astonishing" footage of ships sinking around him.

Some years later, while studying for a Fine Art Degree – after defying parental ambitions for him to follow in engineering footsteps – Layton first tangled with cinematography himself courtesy of his father's handsome 8mm camera, having already begun to get a taste for stills photography at college.

The latter stood him in good stead when he managed to land his first job as an unpaid assistant to the legendary stills photographer, Cornell Lucas who'd just swapped his Pinewood base for the Flood Street studio, where as well as his signature portraits he also did high-end fashion and advertising work.

Lucas was, says Layton, "a hard taskmaster but it was great training. Eventually he'd let me borrow all the new cameras with fantastic lenses. As long as I'd write the ➤



# VERNON LAYTON BSC

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◀ camera reports for the manufacturers, I could use as much stock as I wanted over the weekend and do all the printing I needed."

What the job didn't give him, though, was a union card and once he left Lucas that was the Holy Grail. This finally was achieved, not without some considerable difficulty, after working in the labs at Kays Processing.

However, his big break came when he was accepted as a trainee camera-operator at Rediffusion, at the time the ITV contractor for London and the surrounding counties. Based at Wembley and at Holborn Kingsway, Rediffusion's varied output ranged from top quality drama to pop programmes like *Ready Steady Go*.

As well as shooting classic plays and filming the likes of The Beatles,

and that he thought that to be a focus puller would be retrograde. He wants you, she said, to be his operator. I was amazed."

The two first paired up shooting tests of Ian McShane at Bushey Park Stockyards in preparation for Tony Richardson's *Ned Kelly*. "It was really great being behind a film camera again," says Layton.

In the event, he and Lassally didn't actually do the film (with Mick Jagger as the Aussie outlaw) instead working together on other features and documentaries. It was Lassally's prompting which then led to his moving into lighting on, first, cutting edge documentaries then shorts and finally commercials.

Inevitably there was also a return to television, this time shooting hit series like *The Professionals*, which also, via Tom Clegg, one of the

*The Young Americans, The Englishman Who Went Up A Hill But Came Down A Mountain, High School High, I Still Know What You Did Last Summer, Blackball*, (which included his ingeniously own first photographed, the photoshopped London cityscape for a square mile sequence actually filmed on the Isle of Man) and the cult favourite, *Seed of Chucky*.

It was during a longer 'prep' than expected on a film in Romania, that, having been invited to join the producer in the production office for a few days, Layton became interested in the nuts-and-bolts of the business side of things.

In due course, Layton introduced director John Roberts with whom he'd worked on the popular BBC drama *Station Jim*, to producer Jonathan Rae, with the intention of helping Eirene Houston's *Day Of The*



Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix, he particularly remembers being behind a live camera for one of the small screen's most famous occasions, David Frost's notorious trial-by-television of the insurance fraudster Emil Savundra.

When, in 1967, Rediffusion broke into two becoming, respectively, Thames TV and London Weekend, Layton took redundancy but, of course, found himself at yet another crossroads. After a spell at British Transport Films, it was another great cameraman who helped set him on a new path.

Says Layton: "A friend of mine knew Walter Lassally and suggested I show him my work. I got an introduction via his agent who asked me if I could arrange to run some of my stuff for Walter. I was also asked in what capacity I wanted to work with him and I said 'focus puller'.

"She phoned me a few days later and it was a most memorable call. She said Walter had seen my work

programme's regular helmers, led to Layton shooting his feature DP debut in 1979 with the gritty real-life crime thriller *McVicar*.

"For a first film, it was a tough one to light. They had a vast prison set, which filled J Stage and part of another at Pinewood and it had to be lit in such a way that you could move the camera anywhere with minimal extra lighting. It was an awesome challenge."

Then as quickly as his career had moved into top gear so it stalled, as far as films were concerned, when Layton went into a self-imposed hiatus for family reasons.

Almost a decade would pass, then after shooting *Poirot* for Brian Eastman, he was back on feature films again and since then his CV on both sides of the Atlantic – not to mention some remote parts of Eastern Europe – has been deliciously eclectic.

His films include *Under Suspicion*, *Red Hot* (for director Paul Haggis),

*Flowers* script get made. As it happened, Rae had already read the script and the plan to make the film was hatched.

Working with camera operator Tim Ross, a close friend and fellow camera assistant from BTF days, Layton says, "I've really enjoyed DP-ing again."

Will this be his swansong? "Maybe," he laughs. "After the many recent successes of Chris Jones' Oscar short-listed, *Gone Fishing*, I'm going to help out later this year with another short. So who knows?"

QUENTIN FALK

■ *Day Of The Flowers* is being originated on 35mm Fujicolor ETERNA 400T 8583 and Super F-64D 8522



Photos main: Eva Birthistle (left) and Charity Wakefield in *Day Of The Flowers*; far left: Vernon Layton on set of *Seed Of Chucky*; with Charity Wakefield; Carlos Acosta in *Day Of The Flowers*; scene from *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*; above inset l-r: Portrait of Vernon Layton by James Layton; scenes from *Under Suspicion* and *McVicar*