

Björn Charpentier, SBC shoots handheld anamorphic to capture a covert rescue operation for Brad Anderson's period thriller *Beirut*.

By Patricia Thomson



Friend in Need

Lebanon in 1982 was a tinderbox ready to explode, with its neighbor Israel on the brink of a controversial, wholesale military invasion meant to wipe out the PLO. This is the historic setting for *Beirut*, a taut political thriller from director Brad Anderson and cinematographer Björn Charpentier, SBC. Inspired in part by the 1984 kidnapping of CIA station chief William Buckley, the script, written in 1991, was an early one for Tony Gilroy, penned long before the *Bourne* trilogy, *Michael Clayton*, and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. The script sat undeveloped until *Argo* proved there was an audience for such fare.

Beirut begins with a prologue in 1972, when U.S. diplomat Mason Skiles (Jon Hamm) sees his wife killed by masked men who invade their home to extract a Palestinian boy the couple has been planning to sponsor. Ten years later, Skiles is working as a contract negotiator in Boston and has fallen deep

into the well of alcoholism. One night he gets a message summoning him back to Beirut. The CIA needs a negotiator for the release of an American hostage, a high-value agency veteran — and someone Skiles was once close to. From there, the story speeds along as Skiles faces a negotiation deadline while struggling with his memories and the bottle, not knowing whom to trust among his handlers, supposed allies, and foes.

Anderson wanted a look that felt real, raw, and in the moment — something suggesting documentary, but cinematic in composition and optics. He wanted it fast-paced on screen and needed the same on set. “As is usual for my films, there was not a lot of time or money,” says Anderson, who had 34 shooting days, which had been shortened from 37 with no scenes dropped. The director intended to use two cameras and available light whenever possible, and he wanted a director of photography who was quick on his feet and good with creative

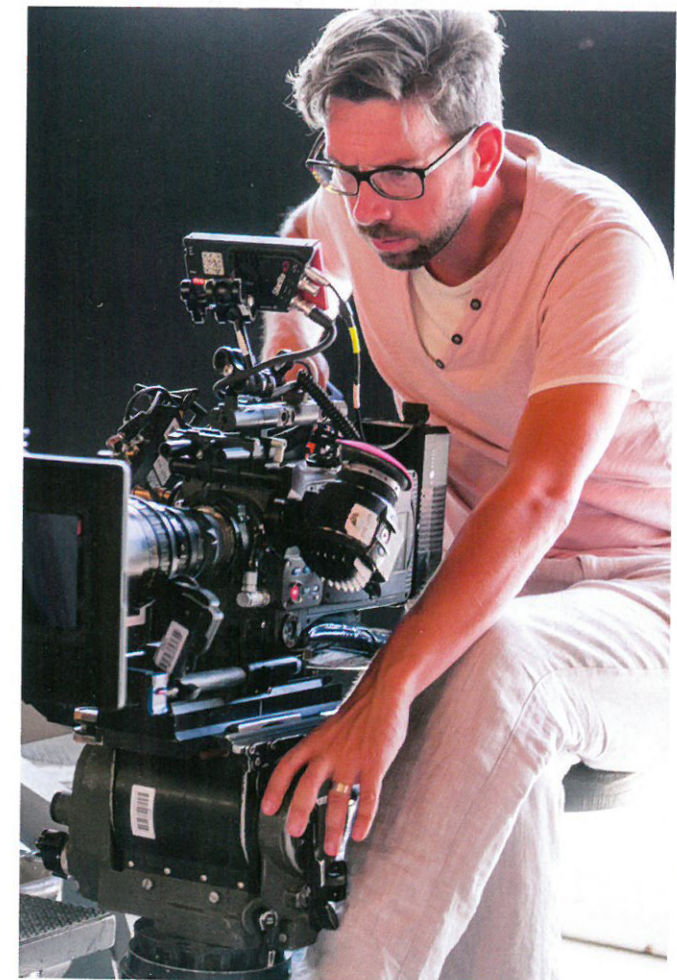


solutions, as there would be no shot lists, no rehearsals, no marks.

“I also wanted someone who could operate the A camera so we could move quickly,” Anderson says. Open to new talent, he hired Charpentier, an award-winning Belgian cinematographer with a background in commercials (who was featured in *AC*'s 2017 “Rising Stars of Cinematography” roster).

Though this would be Charpentier's first feature as director of photography, he had some strong selling points. Not only was he “an amazing operator,” in Anderson's view, but he also owned his own gear, including an Arri Alexa XT and two anamorphic prime sets. “It was one-stop shopping with this guy,” the director says. But what clinched it, Anderson recalls, was “when I looked him up online, there was a photo of him with the camera on his shoulder, rollerblading behind [two nude bicyclists]. It was like, ‘This guy's gung-ho, man. He'll do anything to get the shot.’”

Even better, Charpentier's anamorphics were vintage Russian-made Optica Elite MK-IVs and Japanese Kowa Prominar — optics that the filmmakers felt were ideal for a



Opposite and above: Former U.S. diplomat Mason Skiles (Jon Hamm) must face his tragic past when he is summoned back to Lebanon to help rescue his erstwhile best friend in the political thriller *Beirut*. Left: Cinematographer Björn Charpentier, SBC eyes his frame.

Unit photography by Sife Eddine El Amine and Mohammed Kamal, courtesy of Bleecker Street.

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Right: Skiles arrives in Beirut. Below: Charpentier shoots a military tank with a handheld rig. Bottom: The cinematographer lines up a shot on a city street.



1980s look. (See sidebar, page 54.) Charpentier packed these, along with his Alexa, an Angenieux HR 25-250mm (T3.5) with anamorphic back-end, a 2x IB/E doubler for use on the primes, and, as emergency backup, his Cooke S2s and S3s (ultimately never used), and set off for Tangier.

While they considered other coastal Mediterranean cities, Tangier had all the right elements to stand in for war-ravaged Beirut. Both had a French-colonial history and were a “Paris in the Middle East” popular with mid-century jetsetters. “Tangier is also war-torn and bombed out,” Anderson reports. Parts had been intentionally destroyed after city officials discovered that drug money was funding the construction of illegal apartments; to prevent squatters, the city bulldozed the half-built shells. One such rubble-filled neighborhood was used for the film’s climax at the Green Line, Beirut’s Christian-Muslim border.

Tangier also offered “a kind of saturated light that comes through the smoke and dust,” Anderson says. “We were really interested in that. The beauty of Morocco is that you always see the sun in the sky. We tried to keep the sun in the lens — flared out when it needed



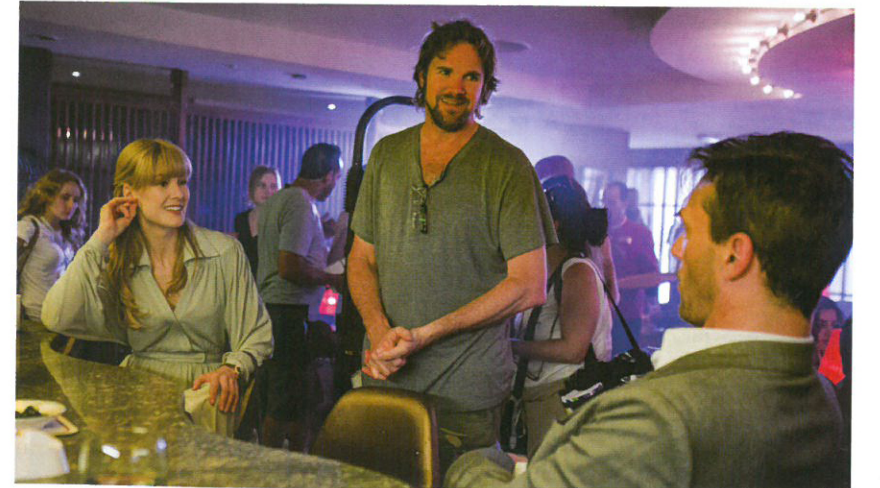
Left and below: Under cover of a garden party, CIA field agent Sandy Crowder (Rosamund Pike) escorts Skiles to a secret meeting. Bottom: Director Brad Anderson confers with Pike and Hamm.

to be — to give it that heat.”

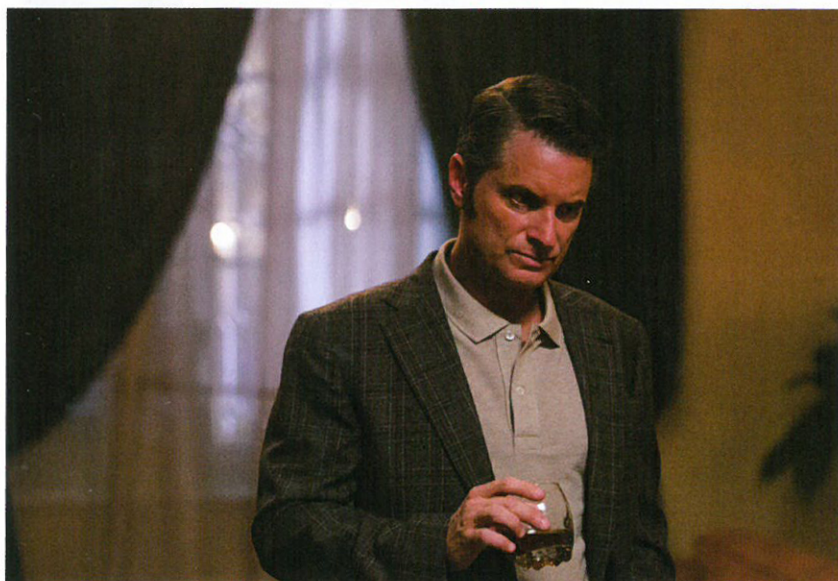
While Morocco’s movie studios are elsewhere, Tangier has a decent filmmaking infrastructure. “The *Bourne* films and *Mission: Impossible* might go for a few days,” says Anderson, “but I think we were one of the first to shoot a full film in Tangier.”

During their four weeks of prep, Charpentier spent most of the time with production designer Arad Sawat and supervising art director Ian Bailie, figuring out how to build lights into the locations so two cameras could shoot 360 degrees with sources in frame. “I light my scenes for the scene, not the shot,” the cinematographer says. “The actors thanked me, because they could stay in character. They didn’t need to go to the trailer for a half hour and wait for relights.”

The fact that *Beirut* was shot handheld also kept things rolling along. Charpentier brought in Belgian operator Olivier Merckx for Steadicam/B camera, but the rig came out only three times. A crane was deployed just twice, and a dolly was used on occasion. The rest was mostly spontaneous footwork. “We had a general idea of what the



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Ambassador Frank Whalen (Larry Pine, top) and political operative Gary Ruzak (Shea Whigham, above) review the situation with Skiles.

action would be, but we didn't really determine camera angles or pans, so [my camera movement] was very intuitive," the cinematographer says. "Sometimes it was a fraction too early or late, but it made it real, more documentary-style."

The cinematographer praises his Romanian focus puller, Iurie Bustiuc. "He was my lifeline. We shot without rehearsals on a 75mm anamorphic, handheld, going all over the place on gut feel. We didn't use any marks, either, because we wanted to give flexibility to everybody. He nailed every single shot.

Because of him, I could do whatever I wanted and I knew he had my back."

A 75mm Elite MK-IV lived on A camera for the majority of the shoot, while 50mm and 100mm alternated on B camera. "The advantage of shooting anamorphic is I don't need to do that many lens swaps between a wide shot and a close-up," Charpentier says. "I could use the same lens. I generally like to have this compressed feel and to pan my camera inside the room, so I prefer to be slightly longer in the lens. When the camera follows the action, it gives

more energy to the scene — and more freedom to me — and I am able to work fast."

Charpentier designs his own accessories, including a filter tray thick enough to hold a +1 diopter. "So even within one shot, I can drop in my diopter, do a tighter close-up, and just pull it out when I pull back," he says. "I can do all that while rolling. That's what Brad liked. It's a fast pace in the edit, but he also wanted to have that energy on set."

This on-set speed imperative is one reason Charpentier eschewed LUTs and went with the familiar Rec 709. "If I'd used a LUT, I'd always be double-checking my scopes afterwards," he offers. The cameras recorded ProRes 4:4:4:4 XQ onto 512GB Codex XR Capture Drives, which were then copied to hard drives.

When lighting, Charpentier set three rules for himself: no moonlight, no backlight and no fill. "I wanted to keep away from all the traditional ways of lighting, but keep it cinematic," he says. He wanted his nights black, and was happy to let action play in shadow or silhouette. (The equally dark *Sicario* [AC Oct. '15], shot by Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC, served as a reference.)

To get the very most out of the light, Charpentier asked the production designer to paint the walls with a satin finish — and the makeup artists to give the actors a reflective shine, so colors would reflect on skin. (Here, David Fincher's *Gone Girl* [AC Nov. '14] and *Seven* [AC Oct. '95], shot by Jeff Cronenweth, ASC and Darius Khondji, ASC, AFC, respectively, served as inspiration.) "That's why I always had [an Arri] Rota Pola Frame in the camera, to play around with the amount of reflection on the face or walls," Charpentier says. Other than the camera's internal NDs, that polarizer was the only filter used. "I didn't want any softness or diffusion. The movie plays in the 1970s and Eighties, and by using glass from that period, it already gave me that look."

The filmmakers stayed faithful to

the look in the color grade as well — a five-day endeavor at Technicolor PostWorks New York, where colorist Sam Daley graded with Blackmagic Design DaVinci Resolve Studio 12.5. At one point, Charpentier recalls, "Brad came in and asked to change everything 'just for the fun of it.'" They spent half a day experimenting with a bleach-bypass look, but ultimately, the cinematographer notes, "I told Brad, I don't want to push this high-contrast, desaturated look because it's going to be 'a look,' whereas now it looks like a movie that was shot in the 1970s."

Three particular locations typify Charpentier's approach to lighting. When Skiles and his handlers first meet the terrorists to negotiate a prisoner swap, it's a daytime scene at a bombed-out hair salon on the city's outskirts, with Syrian mortars exploding in the distance. "This was the location that used the most lighting outside the walls," Charpentier notes. There being no electricity in the terrorists' hideaway, he motivated light through an open door and a small curtained window. Two 6K HMIs pushed light in through the doorway and the window, while a 4K bounced through the window of the next room. On the ceiling were two Arri SkyPanels augmenting light on the principal actors. "We added narrow light grids to the SkyPanels, so the light was very directional, without much spill," the cinematographer says. "We added some ambient smoke as well."

The filmmakers had considered building this on a stage, which would surely have been more comfortable than the cinderblock farm garage they ultimately used. The space was hot, crowded, and a rain of dust fell from sand-filled pantyhose every time a special-effects mortar exploded. Making matters worse, it was Ramadan, leaving Moroccan crewmembers without water or food until sundown. "It was brutal," Anderson admits. "But in those kinds of situations, the toughness of the shoot seeps into the feeling of the scene. It had an uncomfortableness to it, which came out of the fact that it really *was* uncom-



Top and middle: Skiles, Crowder and CIA agent Donald Gaines (Dean Norris) prepare to meet with the hostage-takers. Bottom: Charpentier captures a wide shot.

Optics Spotlight

Handheld Anamorphic



Over the last two years, Björn Charpentier, SBC has shot with anamorphic lenses on all of his projects but one — and always handheld, despite the popular notion that the lenses are too heavy for such work. For *Beirut*, he hoisted a 45-pound package — an Alexa XT fitted with a 75mm Optica Elite MK-IV — onto his shoulder for well over half the shoot, swapping to more compact Japanese Kowa Prominar anamorphics “depending on the mood of the scene and sometimes for practical reasons,” he says. He purchased his set of Elites four years ago, and the Kowas specifically for this production.

Regarding the Elites, Charpentier notes, “It’s a very soft-contrast glass that I like very much. I don’t like my blacks too crushed.” Adding to their unique look, “they don’t have a classical blue-streak flare; it’s more like a veil. They’re sharp on the eyes, but still soft on the skin tones. And they’re fast.” While mostly set at T4.0 for the production, that faster capability was essential to pushing the edge of darkness in *Beirut*. “I have a technician in Belgium, Olivier Tordeurs, who maintains my lenses, and he reorganized every glass element so I can use my anamorphics wide open with little loss of contrast and sharpness.” Due to the fragile mechanics of the Elites, Charpentier sends them for maintenance every six to 12 months.

The vintage Kowas came out for small interiors, cars and high-energy sequences. “Every time there’s danger or suspense, I used the Kowas,” he says. Regarding their more aggressive flare, he adds, “It’s a white, transparent, horizontal flare. Kowas are a bit colder in the look, but in color grading that’s easy to correct.”

The cinematographer visited a personal trainer for lower-back maintenance before heading to Morocco, in order to achieve proper posture for the long haul. “Let’s face it,” he says, “a commercial is a three-, four- or five-day shoot. Now suddenly it’s 34 days.”

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Charpentier shoots from the hip.

fortable. You’re never going to re-create that kind of gnarliness on a back lot in Culver City.”

The CIA situation room — a windowless interior in the basement of the U.S. Embassy — made multiple appearances. “We were going for a different look in that world,” Anderson notes. “It’s a very cool, green-toned look, in contrast to the exteriors of Beirut, which veered more towards a warmer, gritty, smoky patina.” Because the scenes there required a lot of camera movement, Charpentier used the lighter-weight Kowas and lit for 360 degrees. “Everything there was a practical,” the cinematographer attests. “We didn’t bring an eyelight, Kino Flo or SkyPanel — not one professional film light.”

Built inside a school, the spy bunker was keyed with the kind of green-tinged fluorescents popular in the 1970s. “Daylight-balanced 765 fluorescent tubes that were uncorrected, meaning there was a lot of green in them,” the cinematographer describes. “I thought in Morocco it would be really easy to go into an old warehouse and find those lights, [but] we had to ship them in from Germany.” These old fluorescents hung over the main office, while 10,000K classic 4’ household fluorescents lit the glassed-in, soundproof inner sanctum. Warmer 3,200K tungsten desk lamps,

all on dimmers, dressed the office space, and several red control lights added accents. “All those gave me a mixture of colors, but also depth in my frame,” explains Charpentier, who set the cameras at 4,800K, and shot at T2.8 and 800 ISO. “It gave me a very rich atmosphere.”

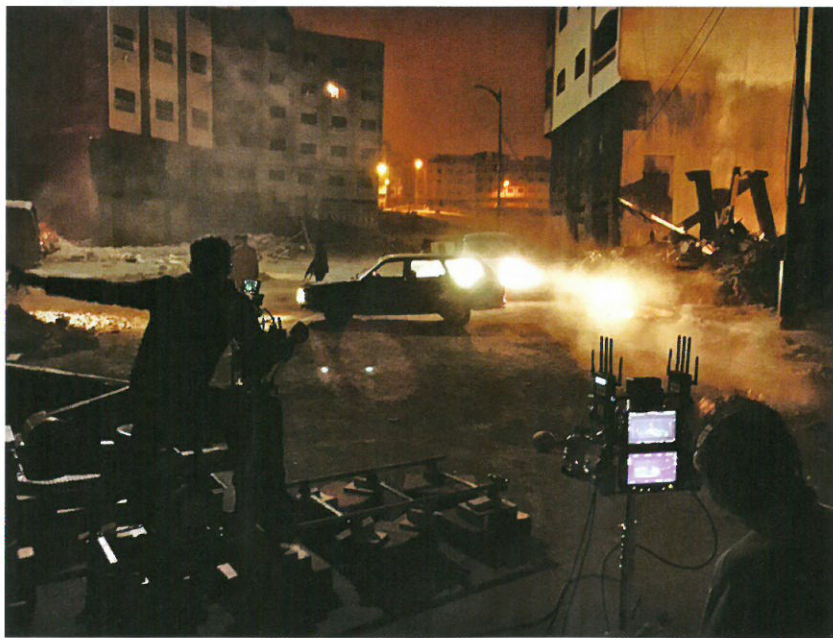
By far the most complicated sequence was the movie’s climax, when the characters converge at the Green Line for the prisoner exchange. This bombed-out no-man’s-land wasn’t supposed to have any electricity — nor moonlight, per Charpentier’s rules. Adding to the challenge, the director wanted some select 48-fps shots, and everything needed to be done in two short summer nights.

“I begged Brad to give me one broken streetlight to have some motivation for light, because otherwise it’s pitch black,” says Charpentier. They also incorporated a burning car — and thus began the layering of light and color temperatures. “Because we had this [mercury-vapor] streetlight in the center of the frame where the exchange happens, I put a SkyPanel [at 5,200 Kelvin and dialed in with 46 points of Green] on top of an adjacent building, which gave me a little toplight [motivated by] the streetlight.”

The bulb in the streetlight was

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Operatives Raffik (Mohamed Attougui) and Crowder stand guard during the prisoner exchange. Streetlight-motivated toplight is provided by an Arri SkyPanel atop an adjacent building.



replaced, the cinematographer explains, because “I did not want to have sodium on the faces or in the film, unless it was in the far background. That is why I replaced all the lights with mercury lights to have a green/blue look instead of the orange one.”

Taking inspiration from Barry Ackroyd, BSC’s work on *Green Zone* (*AC* April ’10), Charpentier opted to shoot the wides in silhouette, backlight-

ing the background buildings with Dinos and adding smoke. “When doing the close-ups, I had a very small LED panel to give something in the eyes. We also had bomb explosions close by, on both angles, with Dino lights creating that bomb effect.” The climax was shot with Elites set at 2.8.

Anderson adds, “In general, it was lit so we had a 360-degree set, which was great! It meant we could really cook

along and get as much coverage as we needed.”

The director further notes that he couldn’t have been happier with his choice of cinematographer, whom he dubbed “the ‘Energizer Belgian.’ I lucked out. Björn has a bottomless level of energy and enthusiasm, and he keeps the crew and cast super excited. I’d work with him again in a heartbeat.”

Charpentier concludes, “Honestly, this was one of the happiest shoots I’ve done. I was surrounded by talented people — Jon Hamm and Rosamund Pike, a great art director, a great crew, and a director who knows exactly what he wants and gives you freedom. My agent said, ‘Don’t think it’s always going to be like that!’” ●

TECHNICAL SPECS

2.39:1

Digital Capture

Arri Alexa XT

Optica Elite MK-IV,
Kowa Prominar,
Angenieux HR

MARYSE ALBERTI
CHAPPAQUIDDICK

BJÖRN CHARPENTIER, SBC
BEIRUT

BRENDAN UEGAMA, CSC
RIVERDALE

American Cinematographer

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A QUIET PLACE

CHARLOTTE BRUUS CHRISTENSEN AND
ACTOR-DIRECTOR JOHN KRASINSKI
CRAFT A VISUAL LANGUAGE

PLUS:
2018 ASC AWARDS RECAP

