



## THE CANARY

By Pauline Rogers / Photos Courtesy of Noah Rosenthal

According to writer/director Karl R. Herrmann and his long-time friend and cinematographer Noah Rosenthal, the subconscious theme of their new short film, *The Canary*, is an allegory: Humanity today exists in a kind of purgatory, much as it did in the time of the film's period location: the High Sierra ghost town, Bodie, CA.

"We are alive while much around us is dying," offers Herrmann. "Crops wither from drought, famine plagues developing nations. While we may think we've struck metaphoric gold in this new technological age, this reality is in fact illusory and could quickly become a nightmare from which our species might not escape."

Rosenthal says a similar kind of nexus is where *The Canary's* hero, Orville Combs (Matt O'Leary), is placed, running from the mine he bought to his home at night, elated from striking it rich toward the end of the Gold Rush. As Rosenthal describes: "The moment is so much more impactful because we got to capture a real piece of mining history shooting on the streets of Bodie."

Once upon a time, visitors could wander through the real mines and low-ceilinged saloons and stores, recalling a sense of claustrophobia and intensity real miners once felt, in what is now a California State Historic Park. It was a town of larger-than-life characters, made infamous by 19th Century tall tales from San Francisco-based journalist and humorist E.H. Clough, who penned *The Bad Man from Bodie*.

"The town still exudes a sense of life," Rosenthal explains. "And it's like time has stopped. "During the day the structures are alive in the

golden light of the Sierras. Then, toward night, with the temperatures dropping, the sun below the mountain, the town is cast in the eerie blue light of dusk and things feel different.

"This is what we wanted to work for us in this scene – the contrast between the town as we had previously seen during the day, and the cold emptiness at night, emphasizing Orville's struggles homeward in his mind."

In *The Canary*, Combs has just escaped a horrible death and has emerged from the mine triumphant with the gold. He's on his way home to his wife. Or is he?

"That's what we lead the audience to feel," Rosenthal adds. "However, as filmmakers, this scene is a continuation of the gray area we established in the mine, a real practical mine back near Los Angeles, with no flyaway walls or ceiling panels. We shot handheld inside as Orville became exhausted, frustrated, and perhaps even delusional – and then continued his journey on the streets of Bodie."

Rosenthal says he and his crew knew they had to take advantage of the historical locations to create the highest possible production values [acceptance into the Sundance 2015 Shorts Program was pending at press time]. "We were a tiny company," the Guild shooter recounts, "unable to bring up the necessities for big night exterior work shooting in a state park. Heck, we couldn't have even afforded it, so timing the day, lenses and our camera package was extremely important to achieve this sequence.

"Thanks to help from Panavision Hollywood's

## Replay



Mike Carter, we were able to take a look at different options to support the classic look Karl was after,” he continues. “We knew that the 2.40:1 aspect ratio was what we wanted to shoot, but we were curious about how anamorphic versus spherical would get us there in the older lens options.

“Looking at the tests, we decided to pair the Panavision Ultra Speeds with the Alexa, knowing that we could push to 1600 ASA, if needed. These lenses allowed us to get the quality of light to sell this abandoned feeling. It was a very narrow window of time to pull off the dusk-for-night sequence – and the goal of the shot was to move throughout the town with Orville as quickly as possible to support his emotional state. Once the light was how I wanted, we simply kept rolling until we ran out of light.”

Rosenthal says such indie projects are always fun, especially working with his friend, actor Matt O’Leary, “who really understands the camera and how it moves.”

The sequence, like the story itself, was also an allegory: *The Canary* began on a unique historical premise and journeyed a new route for independent filmmaking.

“It was a crash course on how to use social media to market and raise funds for a film,” Herrmann states.

“A trailer is a requirement to raise funds through Seed & Spark,” he continues. “We didn’t want interviews. We wanted footage. Thankfully we were doing that exploration

at Bodie. That teaser was a valuable aspect to our fundraiser, as our potential supporters could get a glimpse of what our finished film might look like – and not simply our pitch.”

This trend toward crowd funding to finance independent productions of all sizes is an exciting one; in the process of raising money, the filmmakers are not only solidifying their vision, but also building awareness and the support of an audience. During this phase, Rosenthal was able to experiment with new technology, shooting the Bodie winter exteriors on his Blackmagic 2.5K Cinema Camera and a set of older Olympus Zuiko Prime Lenses.

“These shots initially made up the crowd-funding trailer, but ended up intercutting perfectly with the Alexa footage to create a passage of time and add yet another layer of production value within the final piece,” Rosenthal concludes. “This isn’t something we would have been able to do in principal photography – through crowd-funding we actually started discovering our ‘look’ and added some more scope to the movie.”

*The Canary*, like its subject, may well make its own brand of history. It has successfully navigated a road from imagination to completion and will, hopefully, gain recognition from festivals and other independent venues, while recreating a cautionary historical tale its creators believe is applicable to our times. ☘