

# Points East

## Tony & Tina's Wedding: Nuptials on a Budget

by John Calhoun

A motion-picture adaptation of the popular audience-participation theater piece *Tony & Tina's Wedding* was recently shot in New York for a budget of less than \$2 million.



If there's a project that screams New York, it's *Tony & Tina's Wedding*, the long-running Off-Broadway show that involves the audience in its Italian-American characters' nuptials and reception. It was therefore important to director Roger Paradiso that his film version of the show be made in and around the city. "We were given the opportunity to shoot *Tony & Tina* in Canada, in Rome and in Germany," says Paradiso, who made his feature-film directing debut with the project. "But New York is so much a part of the story's fabric that I thought it would be a disservice to shoot somewhere else." On the other hand, the independently produced movie was budgeted at less than \$2 million — a small amount by any standards, and especially by New York's.

Yet *Tony & Tina's Wedding*, which premiered at this year's Tribeca Film Festival, was one of a dozen features that took advantage of a rare New York bargain in 2003: the East Coast Council's Low Budget Agreement. Under the agreement, the East Coast Council, composed of seven International Alliance

of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) union locals, grants concessions to projects budgeted at less than \$8 million. These breaks include access to union labor at reduced salaries and greater flexibility in the negotiation of contracts. The agreement has been in place since 1990 and has aided more than 250 projects since then, but the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting isn't convinced that its visibility is high enough in this era of runaway production. "I think a lot of people don't even know about it," says Julianne Cho, an assistant commissioner in the mayor's office.

But Paradiso, whose producing credits include *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *City by the Sea*, was well acquainted with the council's advocacy of low-budget production. "In 1989 or '90, when they were formulating the East Coast Council, I was making a short film," he recalls. "A couple of members said, 'As a favor, and to demonstrate this new agreement, would you consider doing the short as one of our projects?' We did, for a budget of \$20,000 or less, and they

used that to prove you can do film at an extraordinarily low price in New York if you have IA members, Teamsters, and DGA and SAG members supporting it."

There are no hard-and-fast guidelines for the details of the Low Budget Agreement, which also benefitted such recent productions as *The Woodsman*, *The Best Thief in the World* and *When Will I Be Loved*. "Each agreement is negotiated separately, and it depends on your budget, your resources and the type of film," says Paradiso. "Taking a very broad-based look at it, you're saving about 50 percent on salaries. There's also a mentality toward conserving manpower."

Paradiso also found other ways to save. Apart from some New Jersey locations, such as a church where the wedding sequence was shot, *Tony & Tina's Wedding* was filmed in the same Tribeca building that houses Paradiso's production company. "We shot the main set, a reception hall, on the first floor, which was vacant at the time," says the director. "Our landlady has always supported all of the artists in her building, and she gave us a break on it." There was no thought of taking over an actual reception hall, especially because the movie was shot over 15 days in the prime wedding months of June and July. In addition, "I wanted a two-week rehearsal period to go right into the two-week shooting of the reception, which is 75 percent of the script, and you'd never be able to get that kind of flexibility at a practical location."

To provide a cinematic equivalent of the play's interactive nature, Paradiso decided to shoot the film as though it were captured by an inexperienced wedding photographer who happened to be a film student. After looking at a





Cinematographer Giselle Chamma and director Roger Paradiso strove to give the film the look of an amateur wedding video.

number of reels, he chose Giselle Chamma, a New York University alumnus and native of Brazil, as his cinematographer. "The films she has done, including *Personals* and *Happy Hour*, are really quirky and personal, and she's got a very theatrical lighting style," says Paradiso. "Also, she does a lot of handheld work, and every shot in this movie was handheld."

Chamma recalls, "Roger said, 'I want to shoot 360 degrees, I want everything handheld and I want a lot of movement.' I thought, 'Okay, what am I going to do?'" The rehearsal period allowed her to prelight the set and discuss improvisatory staging options with Paradiso. For maximum flexibility, she used two Arriflex 16SR-3s (operating one herself) equipped with Canon zoom lenses. She also relied on the considerable focus-pulling talents of her camera assistants, Doug Hart and John McAleer, even though the idea was to simulate the ragged composition and focus of an amateur video.

Shooting digitally was never seriously considered. "Roger asked me what I thought of hi-def video during our first interview," recalls Chamma, "and I said, 'The camera is as big as 35mm, and it's the same amount of work lighting-wise.' Also, you sometimes have problems with [back] focus, and you have to have big monitors and an engineer. I advised him to shoot on film, finish digitally and project digitally." Paradiso took her advice and elected to shoot on Super 16mm. Chamma shot the whole project

on Kodak Vision2 500T 7218 and Vision 250D 7246, "and then we never touched the film," says Paradiso. "Post was a totally digital process, and Technicolor gave us some breaks."

Colorist John Dowdell worked with Chamma on the digital intermediate, which was done using Kodak's Telecine Calibration System. Then, rather than transferring back to film and making film prints, Technicolor made release prints of *Tony & Tina's Wedding* in the digital domain. "I think it's around \$3,000 for a film print," says Paradiso. "Right now, you can get an HDCam tape, the best digital screening format, for about \$700."

In the final analysis, however, it was the Low Budget Agreement that really allowed Paradiso to make the project the way he wanted. "In my opinion," he says, "it was as inexpensive a production of *Tony & Tina's Wedding* as you could do anywhere in the world." Chamma, who has high praise for *Tony & Tina* gaffer Sean Sheridan and key grip Pedro Hernandez, adds that there are a variety of reasons that union members are willing to work for reduced fees: "We're paid the minimum union salary, but we have full benefits and it's a short time commitment. That helps me get the crew. And if the movie makes money, we get paid our normal rates, plus a bonus based on box-office gross. But for sure, it's not about the money; people want to do creative projects, and a short time commitment makes those projects even more attractive." ■

## elite

### NEW 35mm format super speed prime lenses



9.6mm T2.1

12mm T1.9

14mm T1.9

16mm T1.6

18mm T1.3

20mm T1.3

22mm T1.3

24mm T1.3

28mm T1.3

35mm T1.3

40mm T1.3

50mm T1.3

60mm T1.3

75mm T1.3

100mm T1.6

135mm T1.9

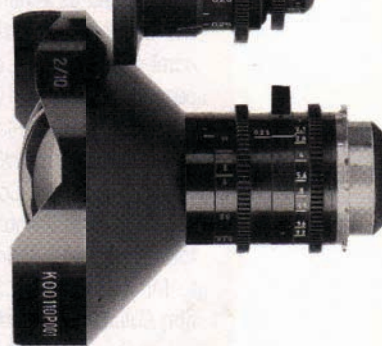
180mm T2.0

200mm T2.0



25-80mm Zoom 3.0

120-520mm Zoom 2.8



FOR MORE INFORMATION:  
**Slow Motion Inc.**

Tel: +1-818-982-4400 Fax: +1-818-982-8500

email: [slowmotioninc@sbcglobal.net](mailto:slowmotioninc@sbcglobal.net)

web: [www.slowmotioninc.com](http://www.slowmotioninc.com)