

# Living Forever

## *(Ways to Live Forever)*

Under the direction of Gustavo Ron (*Mia Sarah*), the film *Ways to Live Forever* (*Vivir para siempre*) embarks on the difficult journey of addressing a drama while avoiding the tone that might seem most natural to it, and instead drawing a luminous, "sweet" atmosphere, albeit with chiaroscuro. It is a story that deals with a sad subject but seen from an aesthetically and narratively vitalist prism. That is why it avoids underlining the drama with light, and turns instead to a British environment, of natural light. The cinematography is by Miguel Pérez Gilaberte, a highly prestigious professional in the world of colour grading, who tackles his first feature film. With him we unpack the keys to the film, shot in Newcastle — a setting with few hours of that filtered English light.



From the film *Ways to Live Forever*. Director of Photography: Miguel Pérez Gilaberte.

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## Drama with a Luminous Atmosphere

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**I have known about your fine work as a colourist at Fotofilm Deluxe for some time now — both in photochemical and digital — in fact you have graded three films I shot, and we are about to grade a fourth together. I already knew you had previously worked as a director of photography, though I believe this is your first fiction feature. How did you become involved in *Ways to Live Forever*?**

To date, as a director of photography I had only shot five short films. In addition to the shorts, I studied several cinematography courses, combining them with my degree in Audiovisual Communication. I have particularly fond memories of the workshops in Maine (USA), which was when I shot on film for the first time (16mm).

It was while taking a course at the ECAM that the opportunity arose to start working as a colourist at Fotofilm, with my first assignment being a short film. In other words, I was training as a director of photography when I began working as a colourist. And of course, when cinematography is your passion, the laboratory world is very attractive. Before long I was already grading my first feature film — I honestly don't know how I managed it (laughs).

Although I have continued as a colourist since then — a job I'm passionate about — I have never ruled out cinematography. In fact, I have been using my holiday periods to shoot short films.

**Author: Oscar Durán**

Oscar Durán Bárcena is a graduate in Audiovisual Communication. MFA in Cinematography from the American Film Institute. Fulbright Fellowship 1999–2001. He works as a director of photography on feature films, documentaries, advertising and various audiovisual projects. Fiction filmography: *Las horas del día*, *La Soledad*, *Un tiro en la cabeza*, all directed by Jaime Rosales.



On the set of *Ways to Live Forever*.

***"I have had great cinematographers working with me in post-production. Each and every one of the operators whose films I have graded has taught me something new and different: from the most experienced to the first-timers."***

I became involved in this project through its director, Gustavo Ron. I already knew Gustavo from when I graded his previous film, *Mia Sarah*. At a certain point Gustavo asked me whether I would dare to shoot a feature film. And I said yes — provided I had the necessary preparation time, of course. And thanks to the generosity of the people at Deluxe, above all Juanjo Carretero and Guillermo Peña, who supported me from the very beginning, the dates at the laboratory could be arranged and I was able to spend three months dedicated to the film.

**From a cinematographic point of view, what did you discuss with Gustavo? What were your references? What film did you have in mind before you started shooting?**

The references were classics of British cinema and American independent film. We also watched many films by Clint Eastwood, for example. The atmosphere had to be bright but with chiaroscuro. With personality, but not excessively baroque. It is a sad story, but with a vitalist tone. Precisely for that reason, we did not want to emphasise the dramatic tone with light. In other words: a British atmosphere, natural light — although I must admit there are moments where I allow myself a more expressive approach. Just as music allows itself peaks of tension throughout a film, why not do the same with light if it serves the story.



Interior lighting: tungsten throughout for warmth and consistency.

**In the film's aesthetic fabric, something worth highlighting is that everything works very much as a whole — the cinematography, the direction of actors and the music seem as though they were made by the same person. It is a very compact film, which says a great deal about the director's skill in getting everyone working in the same direction. I liked the fact that in the cinematography, despite all your experience in grading, you have not been tempted to apply all the tricks you know. I think you have been very honest so that the photography does not stand out more than necessary.**

Indeed, the film does not have a purely realistic or naturalistic tone; it treats the drama in a tragicomic way, which is very British. The music and sound are not absolutely realistic either, and the cinematography goes in that same direction.

Quite right — the key lies with the director, not only in coordinating a team of people he trusts, but also in setting them a line of work, and hence the coherence of the film, which is Gustavo's achievement.

In my case, to start working I read the script, broke down the dramatic moments, and from that breakdown I sought the integrity of an overall light for the film but personalised for each scene. Something with coherence and intention at the same time. This was hard to carry through in practice — it is not the same to read the script and interpret it as to suddenly have the actors performing the roles, with a specific set, specific tones and costumes, and a specific acting register. It is in those moments that you realise the responsibility that a director of photography carries on a shoot.



Studio set lit entirely in tungsten.



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# Shooting on 35mm

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## What camera and lenses did you shoot with?

It was a Panavision camera but we shot spherically at 3 perforations, which saved us 25% on negative. I used lenses of great quality: the spherical Primo lenses. The equipment came from Panavision London and the camera was a Platinum. I must admit that the camera body was secondary to me — what I cared about was the quality of the lenses.

Shooting on 35mm was a decision that changed everything. The combination of the Panavision Platinum with Primo spherical lenses and the Kodak Vision3 negative gave the image a texture, depth and latitude that no other format could have offered. I fell in love with the quality of tungsten on that stock: warm, dense, with clean blacks that don't lie. And the latitude of the emulsion was extraordinary.

## What was the aperture you typically worked at for interiors?

I like to shoot wide open — I'm not sure if I learned that from you all (laughs). I know it's complicated for the focus puller, and Gustavo was always moving the camera, working constantly with the dolly, doing wrap-around tracking shots and small crane movements. I liked to work around  $f/2.4$ ; there were sequences where I would have hammered the lens to open it beyond  $f/1.8$ , despite the camera assistant's recommendations that those lenses perform best at  $f/4$ . In fact, I used ND filters on exteriors because I didn't want to stop down beyond  $f/4$ .



The kiss scene in the pub — shot with a contre-jour light to create a near-silhouette.

*"I like to shoot wide open. There were sequences where I would have hammered the lens to get beyond  $f/1.8$ ."*



Interior day: overexposed 1 full stop. Interior night: underexposed ½ stop.



The lighthouse sequence — one of the most magical moments in the film.

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# Working the Light

## How did you work the light for interiors and exteriors?

Everything that was studio work — like Sam's house — was lit with tungsten. For exteriors we used Kodak Vision3 250D 5207, while for interiors it was Vision3 500T 5219. I love the quality of tungsten. HMI can cause problems, shifting green or magenta, so I decided everything would be tungsten. I love classic cinema shot that way, and this film is a drama but with "sweetness", so in few scenes did I seek very aggressive contrast. I favour lateral light — always with something visible on the other side of the face. I like that light that lets you see one side of the face more than the other, but with detail in both eyes.

## In exteriors you have that filtered English light, and in interiors there is more sunlight — I think that is a good aesthetic decision even if it breaks strict realism. How did you handle the exterior seen through windows when shooting on set?

On set the maxim was to find elements that would not give it away. I considered overexposing the exterior. Usually the light in England is not hard, it is very diffused. But reviewing many English films I noticed they play with hard lights through windows, and I said "let's go for it". To simulate the exterior we had a painted backing at the back with different architectural elements and vegetation closer to the window. The house is an exact copy of the real location where the exteriors were shot.



Interior night: warm lights combined with cooler sources filtered with ¼ CTB.



The grandfather's ghost scene — a more dreamlike lighting treatment.

**There are sequences where you give different grading and lighting treatment — more expressive. The scene where the grandfather's ghost appears to Sam's grandmother comes to mind.**

In the scene where the grandmother recounts her encounter with her dead husband, the lighting approach was more like a fairy tale. Softer lights. I filtered with ¼ CTS, playing with more contrasted, more shadowy lights, but looking for points of high light in the frame to provide a certain glow. We planned to make the grandfather more ghostlike in post-production, and for that I used a plug-in in Lustre that desaturates and adds glow, applying it selectively to the grandfather's figure.

**Another scene that comes to mind is the one where the boy jumps on the bed with his parents — all blown-out whites, dense blacks and lots of glow in the highlights...**

I asked the art department to put white or bright neutral-coloured sheets. My idea was to bounce a 6kW HMI off a piece of Rosco soft silver mirror stuck to the ceiling, so that it fell on the sheets from directly above, blew them out, and lit the actors with its bounce — there could have been 5 or 6 stops of overexposure on the sheets — while keeping clean blacks in the facial features.



The church funeral sequence — eight 18kW HMI fresnels through six side windows and two rear windows, mounted on four cherry pickers.

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## The Church and the Lighthouse

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### **The church funeral sequence is always a challenge — how did you approach it?**

For the rest of the film I did not ask for large or sophisticated equipment — perhaps because I handled myself better with more modest elements — but for this location Gustavo took me to a beautiful Anglican church that was enormous. We had five hours of natural light, with windows that did not let much light through. And we did not want a dramatic funeral — quite the opposite. I thought about doing it with abundant light. I love directed lights, and since there were six windows through which to feed HMI, I asked for six laterals and two from behind — a total of eight 18kW HMI fresnels.

Something I had never seen together in my entire life. The producers tore their hair out, naturally, but that was what the dimensions of the church required. They asked me if I had heard of helium balloons (laughs); I said yes, they were very interesting, but in this case I wanted directed light from outside because a helium balloon, with the smoke in the church, would have dispersed the light — moving away from the photographic tone of the film. We used four cherry pickers: three lateral and one rear, with two 18kW units mounted on each.



Cherry pickers rigged outside the church with pairs of 18kW HMI fresnels.

### **What about the lighthouse sequence?**

It was a terrible location and not viable for shooting close-ups. So we shot the establishing and wide shots at the real lighthouse without artificial light, and then reproduced part of the lighthouse in a calmer exterior. This allowed me to light it better, because at its real location not only was it complicated to set up a bounce board — the wind was knocking over the tripods. The fill light was launched through the lower windows with small 4kW units.



Miguel Pérez Gilaberte alongside the Panavision Platinum on location.

**As a final professional reflection: you have shot your first feature film and, once it was finished, you returned to Fotofilm Deluxe. How do you see your future?**

The truth is I love my work in the laboratory. The film was made without any ambition of any kind — it was a dream to fulfil. Ideally, I would love to be able to make a film every two or three years and combine it with the laboratory. But, I insist, without any great pretensions. I am very happy at Deluxe and I love colour grading.

*"The grading approach is very classical, setting aside two or three more oneiric moments. My premise was to think of it as a photochemical film — with no subsequent alterations of any kind."*

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

<b>Format:</b>	2.35:1 3-perf
<b>Camera:</b>	Panavision Platinum & Canon Legria HF S10
<b>Lenses:</b>	Panavision Primo spherical lenses
<b>Negative:</b>	Kodak Vision3 500T 5219 & Vision3 250D 5207
<b>Visual Effects:</b>	Miopía FX
<b>Laboratory:</b>	Deluxe London & Fotofilm Deluxe
<b>Director:</b>	Gustavo Ron
<b>Production:</b>	El capitán pictures, Formato Producciones & Life & Soul Productions
<b>Producers:</b>	Martyn Auty, Javier Gazulla
<b>Screenplay:</b>	Gustavo Ron (adapted)
<b>DoP:</b>	Miguel Pérez Gilaberte
<b>Production Design:</b>	Jason Carlin
<b>Music:</b>	César Benito
<b>Costume Design:</b>	Susana Buxton
<b>Editor:</b>	Juan Sánchez