

The Best Work You May Never See: Douglas Avery Aims High For Lowe Vietnam And Vinamilk

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August 14, 2009, Robert Goldrich --- We open on a child riding in a bus, tying a gift bow around an individual mini-carton of milk. He then draws a heart on an inflated blue balloon. Next, he extends his hand out of a bus window, lets go of the balloon—which is now tied to the milk carton—and watches it float skyward.

Another child releases his carton skyward from a balcony. Soon this act of sending milk carton-carrying balloons to the wild blue yonder repeats itself kid by kid seemingly all over town. We then see the balloons hovering above a city skyline that's now densely populated with them.

Next we find ourselves in the countryside where kids are chasing after the balloons which are now descending. Juxtaposed with slices of everyday country life, we witness scenes of youngsters picking the balloons and their nutritious cargo out of the air.

A voiceover (in Vietnamese, translated into English for this story) relates: "Every time you buy our milk, we donate a glass to a child in need." As we hear this, we see a boy sipping out of a Vinamilk carton.

An end tag carries the Vinamilk logo.

Titled "Balloons," this :60 is part of a four-spot campaign directed by Douglas Avery of bicoastal Furlined for agency Lowe Worldwide, Vietnam. Production company on the job was Sudest in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The action unfolds to the accompaniment of a musical score out of Beacon Street Studios, Venice, Calif., that's a mesh of Asian and Western sensibilities, bringing a magical, charming tone to the spot. (See this week's Top Ten Tracks Chart coverage.)



"Raising the ante"

The Lowe Vietnam team was headed by creative director Robert Cohen. Director Avery was introduced to Cohen by a mutual friend, a freelance producer based in San Francisco. This eventually led to Avery getting the opportunity to direct the package of Vinamilk spots and to shoot in Vietnam for the first time.

"Bob [Cohen] is trying to raise the ante creatively, taking work to new heights in Vietnam and I'm gratified that he asked me to help," related Avery who's no stranger to lensing in Asia. But even with that experience, shooting in Vietnam was an education. "At first the plan was to take advantage of the crew having to drive from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) to Hanoi, which takes a couple of days along not so great roads. We figured that we could shoot some scenes along the way. But the local officials didn't like the idea of our shooting freestyle on the fly. So we had to shoot later, a couple of times even having to wait for local neighborhood permission."

"Balloons" was shot all over the country—Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, the Mekong Delta, Phan Thiet, Mue Ni and Hanoi. "It was amazing to see that much of Vietnam," said Avery. "At times the logistics were daunting but it was a good experience in the end."

The crew and resources were pulled from different parts of the world. For example there were assistant camerapersons flown in from Bangkok, cameras sent in from L.A., a production designer from France, a Vietnamese assistant director who lives in N.Y., and a DP, Marcelo Durst, who came in to do the job from Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Creatively Avery set out to mix bigger shots with intimate shots in making "Balloons." Avery explained, "We needed the scope but couldn't sacrifice the humanity. We didn't want this spot to come off as just lots and lots of balloons."

That "humanity" was reflected in the children's faces as a local casting service lined up youngsters for Avery to consider for the campaign. Only able to pick a dozen from maybe 30 or so on hand in a little house one night was "brutal, seeing the disappointment in some kids' faces," said the director.

Giant Steps

Venice, Calif.-based effects house Giant Steps did about 10 shots for "Balloons." "The scenes in which massive amounts of balloons were seen were all theirs," related Avery. "They did a lot of work in a very short, tight time frame."

Production designer Marianne Arsa was in charge of art department folk in Vietnam who rigged the balloons with makeshift fishing lines, pulleys and wires so that they wouldn't float away. The production didn't want to put helium balloons into the atmosphere given the negative environmental impact. A mixture of helium and water was put in the balloons to get a certain rise and fall, and to ensure that no balloons would disappear into the atmosphere.

Editor was Damion Clayton of **Rock Paper Scissors**, Santa Monica, Calif.