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AS **MTV** TURNS 40, **CHRIS MCCARTHY** AND **NINA L. DIAZ** AIM TO REVIVE **VIACOMCBS** CABLE BRANDS FOR THE STREAMING ERA **BY CYNTHIA LITTLETON**

# AN EYE INTO IMAGINATION

MIXING GENRES AS WELL AS TOOLS, THESE RISING LENSERS ARE SHAPING TOMORROW'S MEDIA



## Carmen Cabana

"HIGH FIDELITY"

→ "I loved films from a very young age, but never even dreamed about working in the film industry," Cabana says.

The idea seemed far-fetched to someone hailing from a family of doctors and engineers, but an astrol- oger once told her that she should be a filmmaker or a motivational speaker. Cabana chose the artistic route. Her credits — she has more than 50 — include "High Fidelity," "Narcos" and Blumhouse's "Nocturne."

She stepped into telling the story of Pablo Escobar's reign of terror for "Narcos" in the show's second season. It was the first time she had worked in TV and the first time shooting in her home country, Colombia. With a story seeded in the drug world, Cabana's vision, she says, "was to be as natural, real and gritty as possible in terms of lighting. We had many ambitious sequences at night with characters running, so we leaned a lot on available light with obvious enhancements."

When she embarked upon Hulu's updated take on Nick Hornby's

"High Fidelity," New York was foreign to Cabana. So she set out as a tourist, venturing into neighborhoods, taking in Crown Heights, which is at the heart of the series. After absorbing the area, Cabana was inspired. "Crown Heights," she says, "felt like a great opportunity for a fusion of color, motivated by neons, sodium vapors, mercury lights and all the melancholia and texture of a neighborhood caught between the past and gentrification." To create the look, she used the Panavision CPD2 and CPD 3 lenses, which were softer, and nicer on skin tones.

Cabana switches genres often to avoid being pegged to one style and defined by one aesthetic. "I think it is my job to define and shape the look based on the story and not my personal preferences." She enjoys approaching new genres and figuring out the best possible lighting and framing choice. "Challenges keep the work interesting and fresh," she says. "Figuring it out is something I adore." — *Jazz Tangcay*

**"I think it is my job to define and shape the look based on the story and not my personal preferences."** Carmen Cabana

## Santiago Gonzalez

"BLACK IS KING"

→ Just as Ryan Coogler's "Black Panther" is a narrative superhero celebration of African culture, so Beyoncé's 2020 film "Black Is King" captures the essence of Africa through music and knock-out visuals.

One creator of those visuals is music-video virtuoso Gonzalez, whose collaboration with Beyoncé goes back to her 2016 visual album "Lemonade," for which he shot several segments as part of his journey through a pop culture pantheon that includes work for Drake, Khalid, Chloe X Halle, Bruno Mars and the Foo Fighters.

Gonzalez's imagination shaped multiple segments of "Black Is King." For the songs "Bigger" and "Find Your Way Back," he achieved a natural, organic feel that allowed Beyoncé's presence to shine through. In "Mood 4 Eva" he created lush, bright images to accompany the theme of "Hakuna Matata." For "Otherside," he used a large-format camera and lenses in combination with soft filters to yield a classic cinema effect. And in "Power," he deployed bold, fast camera moves to accentuate the contrasts of the production design.

The Mexico-born, South Texas raised, L.A.-based DP learned the theories of his profession at Boston University film school, where his studies included movies by such esoteric directors as Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noe and Nagisa Oshima. Then he turned to the practical side with a gig at local rental house Boston Camera. After joining Local 600, he moved to New York, where he became familiar with fashion photography and the RED camera.

Gonzalez is not married to any particular set of tools.

"I'm a bit of a chameleon and I like experimenting with various looks," he says. "When it comes to a favorite tool, I actually like to keep them changing. When I shoot a set of lenses too many times in a row I try to change it up. I feel the same way about cameras."

The cinematographer's inspirations include DP John Toll's "The Thin Red Line," which "made me aware of the eye behind the camera"; plus Gordon Willis, Darius Khondji, Christopher Doyle, Harris Savides and Roger Deakins.

"Black Is King" premiered in July on Disney Plus to rave reviews.

— *Peter Caranicas*



CABANA: PHILLIP CARUSO/HULU

**Jackson Hunt**

"BETTY"

→ Hunt discovered a passion for lensing while he was at Emerson College. "Someone invited me to a film set and I fell in love with the camera," he says.

"It's really satisfying right away instead of waiting to see the whole thing with the beginning, the ending and the sound. Cinematography is there in your face and the results are immediate."

The Atlanta native started his career in music videos, winning an MTV award in 2014 for shooting Beyoncé's "Pretty Hurts." Music videos are still among his most preferred

work. "I shot a music video for Solange Knowles in Africa. That was one of my favorites, just because we went to Cape Town, we got to see new things, there was a whole family vibe [and] it came together so well."

Another music video that stands out for him is Jake Bugg's "There's a Beast and We All Feed It." "We amazingly took the camera and put it in a van and ran around New Orleans."

Hunt was the DP on Henry Dunham's "The Standoff at Sparrow Creek," which played in the midnight section of the 2018 Toronto festival. In 2019, he joined the production of

HBO's "Betty," created and directed by Crystal Moselle, and shot handheld on location. He's prepping for the second season now and is also involved in a "very long, extended prep" for a World War II film Dunham will direct. "We were having all these conversations, and then the coronavirus hit," Hunt says. "So that's in the long term."

Working in the corona era has been different. "Everyone's been really diligent," he says. "You can take the class, people talk about what it's going to be like, but I'm curious to see what happens when we start shooting." — *Shalini Dore*

**Sherri Kauk**

"INSECURE"

→ Before Kauk even really knew what a director or a DP did, she knew her camera was the best way to help satisfy her curiosity and connect with people. "If I had a camera in my hand, people and societies let me into their world, they let me into their space," she says.

Kauk worked as a camera operator on prestigious shows such as "Insecure" (HBO), "The L Word: Generation Q" and "The Chi" (both Showtime), "Making the Cut" (Amazon Prime) and the documentary "Akicita: The Battle of Standing Rock," which screened at Sundance.

As DP, she shot CBS Saturday morning drama series "The Inspectors" and the SXSW feature "Loev," which has been picked up by Netflix. She was DP on Series 3 of Snapchat series "Endless Summer." Also on deck: doc "Vinyl Nation," about independent record shops.

Kauk, who graduated from AFI, retains a sense of wonder and fascination in her voice when she talks about the art and science of cinematography. When asked about her

favorite tools, she talks in technical detail about cameras and lenses, but also about the people she has worked with and who have mentored her.

"Institutionally, AFI is this expansive community. I met cinematographer Anka Malatynska [a fellow *Variety* 10 to Watch cinematographer] at AFI, and over the last decade we've crossed paths; last year I gaffed for her on a feature, 'Breaking Fast.'"

Her tools include a mood-meter app from researchers at Yale that she's rebuilt for her needs. She uses it when she breaks down scripts to help her with the characters. She also uses DP Rachel Morrison's Cinescope app. "It's become my camera on my iPhone. Even if I just want to take a snap today of the sunset. I'll actually use her app because it's so quick to set and communicate the mood and the feeling."

This year she expected to be working on a couple projects, but then COVID hit, and she's used the time to learn more about her craft, talk with other DPs and plan for 2021. — *Carole Horst*

**Michelle Lawler**

"THE SHRINK NEXT DOOR"

→ "I've been doing this for many years now and it's taken me a while to get through," says Lawler, who graduated from AFI in 2012. She started out shooting musicals and documentaries and even directed a doc called "Forever's Gonna Start Tonight," which won several awards, including at Outfest L.A. in 2010. "That was my on-ramp to filmmaking," Lawler says. But lensing was her true love, and after stints as a grip and camera assistant, she moved up to being a DP — and to Los Angeles.

"As a DP, I am always learning," she says. "The crew really supports you: I learn so much from my camera assistants, my gaffers and my key grips."

Lawler was an operator on "Insecure" for a couple of seasons. "My good friend Ava Berkofsky is the DP on that show, and then they brought me on to shoot season 4," she says. That was in 2019, when she also shot "Rust Creek," directed by Jen McGowen in Kentucky. "That was really fun, 'cause it was all handheld [with an Arri mini camera]. I was running through the woods handheld for a month."

Discussing tech tools, Lawler says: "I do love the Arri, I love the way it renders skin tone. I find the mini to be very versatile and user friendly."

Also last year, Lawler lensed Lena Waithe's BET show "Twenties" and the pilot for "Awkafina Is Nora From Queens." Next up for her: the Apple TV Plus dramedy "The Shrink Next Door," starring Will Ferrell and Paul Rudd, with Michael Showalter directing, from Gloria Sanchez Prods. It goes into production Nov. 9 in Los Angeles. "Moving forward, with COVID, it's always going to be an evolving discussion around what works and what doesn't," she says, adding that she will be tested weekly and there is plenty of sanitizer on hand.

Addressing inequality, Lawler says, "I feel that women have to work harder to prove themselves. In the past 10 years, things have gotten easier. I definitely feel there's more women in the room. I think there's more people of color in the room. It makes the project better."

"There's still a long way to go but in the last two years some people in power have pushed to think differently and not hire the traditional choice." — *Shalini Dore*







**Anka Malatynska**

“MONSTERLAND”

→ Malatynska discovered the power of photography growing up in communist Poland, where she pored over editions of National Geographic that provided her with vibrant, colorful pictures of the world. “I knew that a camera could be a ticket to exploring that,” she says.

That love for pictures brought her to cinematography. By the time she reached high school, Malatynska had discovered the power and emotion of Krzysztof Kieslowski’s “Double Life of Veronique” and Wong Kar-Wai’s “Chungking Express.”

Malatynska’s latest projects are worlds apart. Hulu’s horror anthology series “Monsterland” presented its own challenges. Creating it, she says, “was akin to making eight independent almost-feature films back-to-back with 10 days of prep in between.” Malatynska nonetheless found the experience to be “fast, furious and wildly imaginative.”

The series constantly required new locations, actors and storylines, and the project’s cinematography allowed her to explore the inner landscapes of humans through the camera lens. “Monsterland,” she adds, “is one of those rare and pivotal opportunities to

create true art and exercise my creativity within the television spectrum. The show is a cinematographer’s dream.”

Her work on director Mike Mosallam’s “Breaking Fast” tells the story of a practicing Muslim and the all-American guy Kal, who offers to break the fast with him during the holy month of Ramadan. Malatynska uses her lens and framing to explore their commonalities and differences. “The subject matter is provocative and timely,” she says. “It challenges stereotypes of Islam and the Muslim-American experience.”

Malatynska shot “Breaking Fast” on the RED Weapon 8K camera with Panavision Primos, using a specialized lens treatment in collaboration with Panavision’s lens team. Their goal was to “make the characters to jump off the screen into people’s hearts.”

“Anka was a great collaborator on this project,” says Mosallam. “She was quick on her feet and made things happen on the fly.”

Malatynska is mentoring future cinematographers, serving as visiting professor of cinematography at Northwestern University in Qatar; before that, she taught at Northern Arizona University. — *Jazz Tangcay*

**Cybel Martin**

“BLACK AS NIGHT”

→ Cinematographer Martin was presciently named after the 1962 foreign-language Oscar winner “Sundays and Cybele,” and film has always been in her veins.

But it wasn’t until she was studying film theory at the University of Pennsylvania that Martin learned cinematography. Since then, the DP has worked with the finest directors and mentors, framing the works of Dee Rees, Anthony Hemingway, Michael Goi, Adam Davidson and Spike Lee. She learned a lot, she says. “They make camera decisions with intent, always supporting the narrative, not just because it looks ‘cool.’”

Martin asks a lot of questions to get inside the director’s head so she can deliver their vision. She loves the director/cinematographer collaboration and prepares by surrounding herself with references from photographs to books

to film clips — anything that will help inspire the image she has to capture.

After working on TV series “The Rookie” and “All Rise,” Martin is wrapping the upcoming Blumhouse anthology series “Black as Night” in New Orleans.

The challenge for Martin was to “embrace the weather fluctuations, location restrictions and find beauty within those limitations. The production value we gained from New Orleans’ practical locations was immense.”

Whichever lens or camera Martin selects, the choice of gear is not about technical capability but the emotion it can express. “I chose my lenses because of their so-called restrictions,” she says. “Vampires are both aged and timeless, elegant with aberrations. My selection of vintage lenses reflected those attributes.”

— *Jazz Tangcay*



**“The production values we gained from New Orleans’ practical locations was immense.”** Cybel Martin



**Pawel Pogorzelski**

“MONA LISA AND THE BLOOD MOON”

→ As an avid amateur photographer himself, Pogorzelski’s dentist dad encouraged the young Pawel to take pictures. “And then I found out [about] cinematography and tried that and fell in love,” he says.

The DP was born in Poland, but his parents moved to Montreal when he was 2. He says he always gravitated toward his eventual profession. He was working as a gaffer in Montreal when he decided to make a break and pursue his dream at the AFI Institute “in hopes of like meeting the right director and collaborator. Luckily enough, I did. I

met Ari,” he says, referring to Ari Aster, with whom he made a splash with 2018’s “Hereditary” and 2019’s “Midsommar.”

Pogorzelski also interned with the Rodrigo Prieto. “You know, the best thing from Rodrigo was his work ethic, and how knowledgeable he is in all departments, and how focused and kind he is,” Pogorzelski says.

For “Midsommar,” a horror film soaked in sunshine, Pogorzelski and Aster looked to the films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. “We didn’t really want to emulate that look, but to be inspired by that look ... that kind of rich, saturated route

that we’re going for.” They tested the Alexa LS and [Panavision’s Millennium] DXL2, and went with the DXL2.

Pogorzelski also has “Mona Lisa and the Blood Moon” in the can from helmer Ana Lily Amirpour. “I thought it was a really exciting project and a really beautiful movie. And it’s challenging because we shot everything with really wide lenses.”

During the pandemic, he has “been doing a lot of portraiture on film on my Hasselblad and shooting 100 ASA and 160 ASA. It just taught me how difficult and how different a world it is to shoot film.”

— *Carole Horst*

MARTIN: COURTESY OF CHRIS VIOLETTE



## Azul Serra

“KISSING GAME”

→ Ask many cinematographers to name their favorite tools and you’ll get answers such as 35mm film, the Arri Alexa camera or a preferred Panavision lens. Ask that question of Serra, and the answer is “a good screenplay.”

Clearly, this Brazil-based DP places storytelling above technology. He says his profession allows him to “dive into the emotions of the characters, live out their love lives and fears. It’s like being on a boat sailing on an adventure to the unknown, surrounded by people I admire and want to be close to.”

Like many DPs, Serra learned many tricks of his trade at film school, but he firmly believes that “the art of cinematography only truly develops with practice and exchange. The experience reveals new layers of what it is to actually make cinema. It’s suddenly no longer about what camera, what lens or lighting. It’s more about people, relationships, listening and intuition.”

Serra is well known in Brazil, where his work spans commercials, TV series and features — and where he’s won

multiple awards. He has become known in the U.S. through Netflix’s “Kissing Game” — a series strangely evocative of today’s pandemic that’s set in a Brazilian cattle-ranching town where adolescents panic when they’re threatened by the outbreak of a contagious infection transmitted by kissing. Serra calls the series “a relevant and courageous project.”

Cinematographers whose work Serra admires the most include Roger Deakins, Greig Fraser, Bradford Young, Reed Morano and Gordon Willis. As his career develops, the DP plans to stick to his idealism, hoping to work on films “that make me thrive and transform as a human being, that help me better understand the world around me.”

To help support Brazil’s suffering film business during the pandemic, Serra launched a movement along with other DPs and directors to create a visual gallery.

The group is inviting artists to donate three photographs each. All sales proceeds go toward industry relief. — *Peter Caranicas*

**“The art of cinematography only truly develops with practice and exchange.”** Azul Serra

## Anna Franquesa Solano

“THE FAREWELL”

→ In less than a decade, Solano has acquired more than 25 credits as a cinematographer. Her eye for photography opened when she was growing up in Barcelona, taking photos and processing the pictures in a home lab. It was by accident that she stumbled across filmmaking. “I made a short film with a friend at my father’s home,” she says. “The apartment was surrounded by a patio with balconies in every room. The circular arrangement gave us the idea to make a film about isolation.” Once Solano found herself in film school in New York, she never looked back.

Her most recent work was on Lulu Wang’s mostly China-set “The Farewell.” The striking film from 2019 still resonates with indelible images. Scenes such as Billi’s (Awkwafina) trek to the hospital to prevent her Nai Nai (Shuzhen Zhao) from discovering her test results and the chaotic family dinners lingered with audiences because Wang and Solano had made the decision early on to use a wide-aspect ratio to catch those moments and capture as many family members as possible. She settled

on the Master Primes and Alexa Mini for gear. Other times, Solano held steady with her camera to represent that the family was perhaps hiding a secret.

The deliberate compositions of “The Farewell” are different from “Buck Run,” which was shot in Lewisburg, Penn., where the environment was very much a character unto itself. However, Solano’s lighting choices stayed the same. She chose a naturalistic approach, staying true to her environments. In “The Farewell” the interiors had fluorescent lighting. “It’s very common to have this kind of harsh and unpleasant lighting at home [in China]. We decided to keep it for the film but treat it, to make it feel inviting.”

“The Farewell” challenged Solano in many ways. She and her crew had to shoot in unfamiliar surroundings, sometimes in small spaces, in a foreign language, but she enjoys going outside her comfort zone. “It definitely made me a better DP.”

Ultimately, says Solano, her creativity comes from being able to articulate “the subtleties of written story into visual language.” — *Jazz Tangcay*

