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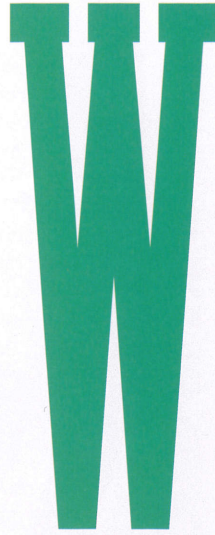
STARZ'S NEW HALF-HOUR DRAMA SET IN EAST LOS ANGELES, IMPLODES
FEMALE LATIN STEREOTYPES, WITH COLOR, TEXTURE, AND STYLE TO BURN





VIDA LOCA





When STARZ approached writer/producer Tanya Saracho (*How To Get Away With Murder*, *Looking*) about developing the new series, *Vida*, they told her it would be about gentrification, Chipsters (Chicano hipsters) and Millennial women in East L.A. The idea intrigued Saracho, who was born in Mexico and gained fame as a playwright in Chicago. “I wanted to humanize us – Latinx,” she describes. “To portray us as true to life: flawed, fierce, flailing, fighting, female. I want a normalized, realistic notion of Latinx queerness, fully-fledged and true to life – as I know it. And I want Latinas front and center, for once.”

Once STARZ and Saracho fleshed out the story of two sisters (Melissa Barrera and Mishel Prada) coming home for their mother’s funeral, and discovering that she’d recently married a woman, as well as confronting the changes in their neighborhood, the search was on for a production team. Saracho consciously sought out women who could support this vision. The show’s casting director, composer, head of post, art director, costume designer, and AD’s are all women. The writers and directors are mostly Latina and mostly women.

Saracho also wanted a female DP. “The way it looked, the textures, the way it was shot, all had to serve [our] aesthetic,” she explains. “We are a colonized people, and that story is written all over our skin tones – in different shades. It was important to not wash us out or saturate us but to get as near to life as possible.” Her choice was

Venezuelan Carmen Cabana.

A key aspect to the story was the portrait of the Boyle Heights neighborhood and the Mexican culture in Los Angeles. Cabana and production designer Ruth Ammon spent time walking the area, learning about the natural aesthetic – the quality of the light on the buildings, the murals, colors, and textures. “[The area is like] an explosion of shapes and color, but at the same time, the colors are faded from the intense L.A. sun, from dust and the passage of time,” Cabana observes. “There is also a melancholy [feel] because, within the same wall, you can see layers of old murals or old paint under new art, and very soon all that will be completely gone and replaced by Starbucks and who knows what else.”

Cabana became interested in the street lighting at night because, like the rest of the city, the East L.A. neighborhoods are transitioning



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DP Carmen Cabana

from warm sodium vapor to white LED's. "You have that combination of sources within the same block," she explains. "Also, there are neon lights that decorate businesses, as well as the bare light bulbs that illuminate the street vendors."

The other preproduction conversation was skin tones.

"Tanya is Latina and understands all the skin tonalities," Cabana continues, "so we paid close attention to the tones to emphasize them as a statement of our diversity. During the camera test we tried several filters – cosmetic rouge, cosmetic burgundy, rose, salmon and sometimes 1/8 CTO. We assigned gels to the different characters and, of course, when we had them all in a room, we had to settle for just one choice."

Cabana and her 1st AC, Michael Chomieniec, did extensive camera testing to find the right balance to support these unique visuals. "We ended up with two ALEXA Minis, with primarily Cooke S5 lenses as well as different specialty lenses like a 100 macro, zooms, and a Super Baltar 25mm for shots that called for flares," Chomieniec recalls.

"We decided on handheld for an organic, down-to-earth feel, which, shooting mostly wide open, was quite a challenge in a number of sequences," he adds. It's something that focus puller Kira Murdock thoroughly enjoyed. "There was a hefty amount of close, minimum focus, or with diopters wide open on Cooke S5s and macro lenses," Murdock relates. "Very shallow depth of field and very intimate with the actors in their most emotionally charged scenes. I was impressed with how they were able to let the camera go so deeply into their personal space."

While handheld mostly dominated the aesthetic, Cabana also decided on integrating tools like Steadicams, raptors, Technocranes, drones and more. "But we would use them in a way in which they wouldn't call too much attention to themselves," she explains. Integrating these tools early on also opened a path for the new directors' ideas. For instance, Rose Troche, director of Episode 4, wanted a full 360 with the characters appearing in different places.

"I thought that was such a great way to tell a story that normally would just be captured as a montage, but she came up with a single shot idea, and it was a lot of fun," Cabana explains. "The camera had to spin very slowly in one direction, and the characters had to run past it in the opposite direction and find their places before the camera would get to them."

To achieve this in a low ceilinged bar location, for example, lighting had to be invisible. Cabana asked Key Grip Oscar Garcia to make some drawing cutouts that they could put on the face of the SkyPanels on the stage so that, when the characters saw them, they would just look like cool artistic lights in the bar, not a piece of film equipment.

"I also bought several water projectors from Amazon that I had been using in my bedroom for my own amusement, and noticed that they cast these great flares," Cabana continues. "They're lightweight and cheap, and you can control the colors with a remote. That's the backlight that you see at the end of that 360 sequence when the two girls come together."

Episode 3, directed by Rashaad Ernesto Green, also had



Vida showrunner Tanya Saracho (right) on location in East LA with lead actresses Mishel Prada (left) and Melissa Barrera (center)

some stunning visual moments. One, in particular, is when Eddy (Ser Anzoategui) is chatting and smoking with her neighbor on the rooftop, and Emma (Prada) overhears the conversation.

"The crew lit the rooftop with two color sources," Cabana describes. "One recreating the blue moonlight mixed with sodium accents behind the characters and near the right corner of the frame, which is where the stitch was going to happen. The camera work consisted of a slow Steadicam by Dave Frederick [SOC], a push-in on a two-shot behind them. That would become a single of Eddy, and then she would exhale a large puff of smoke and we would tilt up with it and pan to the right as if the smoke also traveled right."

This became the transition point for a 50-foot Technocrane shot of the smoke coming down, and with it the camera, then a zoom out to reveal Emma smoking at the fire-escape stairs.

"We wrapped around her face to show her expression, and the shot would progressively widen as we zoomed out and retracted all the way to the bottom of the building," Cabana adds. "The end frame is a beautiful wide, low angle of the building and the city lights."

Lighting the sequence was challenging. Sodium vapors were rigged on the top of the building, which also provided flaring. Down on the street were larger Tungsten sources going through layers of diffusion and shaped to have enough shadow areas to give the walls volume.

"The most complex part was how to light the actress's face in a favorable way and without casting shadows from the crane," Cabana states. "We settled for rigging a small LED light above the lens so when the camera looked at her directly, she would have a good eye light, but when the camera wasn't on her, the intensity of this light would be so subtle that it would not affect the textures of the building."

Yet another unique sequence opens Episode 6 (also directed by Troche). One of the sisters, Lyn (Barrera), is getting a "limpia" (spiritual cleanse). The concept was to create a black vault with different spotlights and have the bathtub and candle in the middle.

Cabana cross-keyed with Lekos and PAR cans





Director of Photography Carmen Cabana (L)

rigged above, so they could dolly around.

“The problem was that the space wasn’t large enough, because half of it we had to use for a green screen sequence, and we had a very packed day with complex setups,” the DP recalls. “Since the limpia was very specific and required rehearsals, we didn’t have enough time to make the bathtub and other elements blend with the dance floor and so forth on a circular dolly, so we adjusted the camera language and broke-up the scene in beats that still had beautiful camera movements and told the story. I love how Steve Porter at MTI colored that sequence; he brought this beautiful glow to the skin and gave it a gorgeous surreal aspect.”

Viewer be warned: there is a lot of sexual content in *Vida*. And while it may be a natural fit for the story, it was definitely a challenge for camera. “With sexual-content scenes, there is a balance achieving the technical aspect of it while also making everyone, including the cast and crew, feel comfortable,” Cabana describes. “Humor and respect go a long way.”

In fact, Episode 2 features a graphic sequence that needed strict camera/actor coordination. Director So Yong Kim wanted a shot that traveled from a bird’s eye view of a man’s face (Jackson, played by Anthony De La Torre), down his chest to end behind Lynn’s head. “The tricky part was to perform this camera movement in such a way that you would hide the sock that the actor had to wear around his privates, and even more challenging was to have the remote head move through his legs!” Cabana explains, “and make it all look natural.”

The rest of the sexual-content scenes in this series are a little looser. Most are handheld and fluid with the actors. The camera doesn’t watch rehearsals because these sequences need to feel organic. If they are messy, the camera can be messy. Or as Cabana puts it: “The camera becomes an extension of what is happening between the actors, and it needs to be as free as possible.”

Department coordination on *Vida* is, by necessity, very close. Once the elements are captured on set, the DIT hands the dailies over to MTI using JPG’s and LUT’s of pre-established looks to apply grades for review purposes on set.

“Production sends raw camera original data, where it is loaded onto a SAN and processed via MTI Film’s






Cortex software,” describes Porter. MTI’s Mauricio Tassara applies a dailies color pass. These DNX 36 dailies go to editorial, and they retain the camera original files for post.

“Once the show is cut and locked, editorial provides MTI with EDL’s,” Porter adds. “MTI loads these into an Avid Flame system and assembles the show using camera original. The conformed show then comes to me in a one-to-one compressed MXF format for final grading. Carmen and I work very closely on the final look.”

Cabana, who praises the teamwork on *Vida*, calling the show “everyone’s baby,” says the series also makes a strong statement to the larger industry – a group of women as department heads can collaborate and create a successful show. “It’s not about undermining the talents of men,” she adds. “It’s about proving to anyone who ever had doubts about the talent and capacity of women, that we can do it all and we can do it extremely well.”

In fact, many interviewed for this article expressed pride in a show that represents Latinas in a different light. All agreed stereotypes were broken through complex, true-to-life characters; boldness goes hand-in-hand with the upfront LGBT theme. And the ground-breaking should continue for *Vida*’s second season, for which Saracho promises more intricate and realistic stories, as well as unique visuals.

“*Vida* has had a great response, and now that STARZ renewed us, we have almost double the episodes,” Cabana concludes. “For that very reason, we are introducing another eye to the show by bringing in cinematographer Ava Berkofsky, whom I met during an interview for *Insecure* and fell in love with her personality. Ava and I did a rear projection test together and got along so well, we make a great team. I respect Ava’s work and I want her to find a very welcoming home on *Vida*. I can’t wait for all the beautiful things we will create in Season 2. Now that we are starting to get the screenplays, we are going to turn our office into a gallery.” 

LOCAL 600 CREW

SEASON 1

Director of Photography
Carmen Cabana

A-Camera Operator
Conner Vandeer

A-Camera 1st AC
Michael Chomieniec

A-Camera 2nd AC
Miguel Torres

B-Camera Operator/Steadicam
David J. Frederick, SOC

B-Camera 1st AC
Kira Murdock

B-Camera 2nd AC
Katie DeTemple
Bianca Garcia

C-Camera Operator
Jeffrey Carolan, SOC

C-Camera 1st AC
Chris Collins

DIT
Julio Saldarriaga

Utility
Matthew Borek

Still Photographer
Erica Parise

