



Burning



down the

House

F E A T U R E

02

BY MARGOT LESTER
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Guild Directors of Photography Carmen Cabana and Joe Collins turn up the heat for Apple TV+'s period New York City thriller, *City on Fire*.



A certain thrum and buzz permeate New York City, creating a tension – sometimes creative, sometimes cantankerous – that filmmakers can't find anywhere else. That frisson crackles throughout *City on Fire*, Apple TV+'s new episodic mystery thriller based on the eponymous novel by Garth Risk Hallberg and adapted and executive produced by Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage (*Gossip Girl*, *The O.C.*). The series, set in New York City circa 2003, revolves around NYU student Samantha (Chase Sui Wonders); the constellation of people in her orbit; including her love interest, Charlie (Wyatt Oleff); her all-time favorite band; her aspiring-anarchist acquaintances; and a mysteriously wealthy family. When Sam is murdered on July 4th, in Central Park at night, the connections between the disparate elements of her social circle are revealed.



Executive Producer/Director Jesse Peretz (*Girls*, *GLOW*), who has lived in New York since 1990, says he wanted TV viewers to “feel [the city’s] raw tension from the get-go. We were trying to create a sense of the city that felt real but also heightened. We wanted audiences to feel the inherent dangers of the elements of the city,” he explains.

To achieve that, Peretz, who directed Episodes 101, 102, 107 and 108, turned to directors of photography Carmen Cabana (*Resident Evil*, *Ms. Marvel*) and Joe Collins (*Easter Sunday*, *Super Troopers 2*), both of whom he worked with before – Cabana on Hulu’s *High Fidelity* and Collins on Showtime’s *Nurse Jackie*.

“I was confident they would fall into quick sync,” adds Peretz, a noted still photographer of rock musicians in his own right. “I think a lot about images and have a strong point of view about lens choice and composition – and how it affects the storytelling. But even though I have a strong sense of what I like photographically, I wanted Carmen and Joe to challenge me – always trying to make this show more photographically compelling – whether that was in big sweeping cityscapes and action sequences, or in intimate scenes between two characters in a small, confined space.”

Cabana and Peretz developed the show’s

look and feel, and she lensed Block 1 (Episodes 101, 102, 105 and 106). Collins joined the two in prep and for some of the initial episodes before shooting the remaining installments. The trio shared references and images to ensure a consistent camera language to tell the story of Sam’s seemingly unrelated New York worlds – unique subcultures that afforded the production team license to design different looks.

“We wanted the show to feel rich, saturated, intense at times and playful at others; gritty and also sophisticated; contrived and also juvenile,” notes Cabana, who was raised in Colombia and Venezuela. “For me, it is very important to be sensorially accurate to the story we are telling. This is not a tonally one-note show, so the key was finding a unifying melody among all these different notes...to make sure that it felt like one show with New York as the backdrop for all these very different characters.”

Collins says the look was not a traditional episodic style. “We pushed for interesting framing and coverage” that was more of a “beautiful, gritty independent movie style,” he shares.

DIT Julio Saldarriaga, a frequent collaborator of Cabana’s, who created the base LUT’s and was the dailies colorist, says the plan was to have New York City encapsulated in the color palette.



LEFT: DP CARMEN CABANA, WHO SET THE LOOK WITH DIRECTOR JESS PERETZ IN THE PILOT, NOTES THAT “THIS IS NOT A TONALLY ONE-NOTE SHOW, AND THE KEY WAS FINDING A UNIFYING MELODY AMONG ALL THESE DIFFERENT NOTES... TO MAKE SURE THAT IT FELT LIKE ONE SHOW WITH NEW YORK AS THE BACKDROP FOR ALL THESE VERY DIFFERENT CHARACTERS.”



“The look needed to have an edgy, New York feel,” Saldarriaga explains, “which, of course, is very visceral.” Because the budget didn’t allow for a DIT on every episode, Saldarriaga had to create as many LUT’s as possible on the pilot so the DPs would have sufficient choices during shooting. After trying different approaches, Cabana and Saldarriaga settled on a robust set.

“Once you create a look for a show you have to be kind of generalist because each set will have its specific conditions and will need to be adjusted accordingly,” Saldarriaga notes. And without a DIT on set for most episodes, Saldarriaga’s work on dailies was imperative to stay true to the desired look and feel.

In addition to the two cinematographers, the show had three directors. Joining Peretz were Liz Garbus (*What Happened, Miss Simone?*, *Becoming Cousteau*) and Haifaa Al-Mansour (*Mary Shelley*, *The Perfect Candidate*), each of whom helmed two episodes.

“Having two DPs – a shooting DP and the other DP prepping with the next director – allowed us to prepare for the big sequences in each episode’s storyline. And there were many,” offers A-Camera/Steadicam Operator Francis Spieldenner.

Since Samantha’s late-night murder in Central Park, which appears interstitially in several episodes, is the driving plot point, Cabana wanted a camera system that would perform well in lower light situations. “I had shot *Resident Evil* on the Sony VENICE 1 and liked its performance,” she recounts.

The VENICE’s dual ISO, internal ND’s, and versatility – like the Rialto mode – were also important advantages. For lensing, Cabana chose a full set of Panavision Primo Artiste spherical primes (27 to 250 mm), which neither she nor Collins had used before. Both were impressed by the lenses’ performance, with Cabana especially pleased with the Artiste’s reaction to flares. They shot 6K and a 2:1 aspect ratio.

As A-Camera 1st AC Mark Ferguson recalls: “Being a period show, we wanted to create

something that had a vintage feel without sacrificing the advantages of more modern advances, such as full-frame cameras, a fully digital workflow, and lenses that remained consistent and performant throughout their iris range and across the lens set. The VENICE and the Artistes complemented each other beautifully in these regards. Carmen and Joe also utilized specialty lenses and a great deal of stylistic filtration – solid color filters, Smoques, Glimmerglass, True-Streaks, and more – to achieve certain looks and styles.”

Those included the warm, saturated world of the wealthy; the dark, humid, urban look of Central Park at night; the greener, more fluorescent look of the police precinct; and the grittier, darker, amber world of the firebombers. Ferguson says the team leaned on “Tiffen 1 Chocolate Solid Color filters to push the feeling of heat from the city in the summer scenes and used Smoques to push the effect of on-set atmosphere.” Tiffen Golds also enabled day-for-night exteriors.

More foundational beats occur in the tenement, The Phalanstery, where Sam’s pyromaniacal pals plot, scheme, and test-drive their incendiaries, establishing early on that the “fire” in the title is more than metaphorical. “Fire and flame was a motif for our show,” Collins states. “Fire is mesmerizing, beautiful, hypnotic, spiritual and extremely dangerous, much like the story and characters. And it was a great editorial transition.”

Production Designer Aaron Osborne and his art department built a three-story set at Silvercup Studios North, in the Bronx, to serve as The Phalanstery, which Cabana says was unlike anything she’d ever seen. “Aaron has a great sense of texture, and when he designs he does keep camera movement in mind, so his sets have a wonderful flow to them besides just depth,” she offers. “Every nook and corner of that set was interesting. It was like a gritty Candy Land for a DP. For inspiration, I combed through some of the still photography from Jesse and also a former director of mine, Chioke Nassor. They both have a candid style of still photography that

inspired me.”

The Phalanstery is also where Sam and Charlie’s bond strengthens in a poignant New Year’s Eve sequence that both Peretz and Cabana count as a favorite. Charlie helps Samantha, who’s tripping on mushrooms, away from the party and into the basement to come down.

“They have such a lovely and intimate moment there and it’s a great juxtaposition to the energy of the party happening above them,” Cabana recounts. As Peretz adds: “He tells her he loves her, and she pretends she is asleep. The two of them did such a moving job delivering on the vulnerability of this moment.”

B-Camera/1st AC Blake Alcantara echoes the praise. “Every cast member was so exceptionally talented in and out of character. Wyatt playing piano during some downtime, Nico [Tortorella], Xavier [Clyde], Chase and Max [Milner] and Allie making us laugh. John Cameron Mitchell had fantastic stories and was a truly kind spirit. It was a blessing to have this cast.”

In stark contrast to the derelict surroundings of the Phalanstery stand the penthouses and opulent offices of the rich but troubled family. Cabana remembers how “the crowded scenes at luxurious locations were difficult because everyone had to look great, but we were limited in terms of rigging. We were in a real penthouse at a hotel, and the dimming system was way off. The hotel wouldn’t allow modifications, so we had to manually cover or diffuse every single light. We also couldn’t do wall spreaders, and I wasn’t fond of the available light created by the practicals, so it took some ingenuity with corner bounces and re-thinking our camera movements and composition so we could have a fighting chance with the lighting. [Chief Lighting Technician] Brian McLean and his team were great to work with. Brian is so sharp, and he came up with some great solutions.”

Another practical location was the infamous Don Hill’s, a tiny, slightly sketchy (in a good way) venue that was ground zero for New York’s rock scene in the early aughts. (The original club

closed years ago and now operates under a new name and management team.) Peretz says that “part of the magic of shooting in New York – besides all the insane characters you come across – is that there is a cultural awareness and history that is hard to top.”

Peretz and Collins were both part of New York’s club scene back in the day – Peretz as a musician (he’s an original member of *The Lemonheads*) and documentary-style still photographer, and Collins as a fan who spent many nights downtown catching various acts.

“Shooting live bands performing at the now-shuttered, legendary Don Hill’s as if it were 2003 was an awesome throwback,” Collins laughs. “At one point Jesse turned to me between setups and asked, ‘You feel like you just popped out of a time machine, buddy?’ I sure did! It was a surreal opportunity to travel back in time to an influential period in my own life, though it did sting a bit to be shooting a ‘period piece’ about something that didn’t seem that long ago.”

And it wasn’t just the venue that delivered *cinéma vérité*. The live performances were instrumental in creating an authentic vibe and bringing the soundtrack of the period to life. “I loved the Nicky Chaos concert because the music was so good and Max Milner (Nicky) truly put on a hell of a show,” Cabana says. “I wish the edit could have afforded to keep the full duration of the songs.”

Probably the most challenging sequence in the entire series spans the final two episodes and includes footage shot by both DP’s – at two locations and on the soundstage – with a full day of 2nd unit. The sequence featured three cameras (including handheld and Steadicam), and a 50-foot Technocrane with a Libra Head.

Because of the complexity of all the locations, including sequences shot during a simulated blackout, production secured an on-set DIT, Ilya Akiyoshi, for these installments.

The sequence begins during a bomb threat made by the guerillas. Charlie; Detective Ali Parsa (Omid Abtahi), who’s investigating Sam’s murder; and one of the firebombers, Sewer Girl (Alexandra Doke) are featured along with an

RIGHT: CO-DP JOE COLLINS SAYS THE LOOK WAS NOT A TRADITIONAL EPISODIC STYLE. “WE PUSHED FOR INTERESTING FRAMING AND COVERAGE” THAT WAS MORE OF A “BEAUTIFUL, GRITTY INDEPENDENT MOVIE STYLE,” HE SHARES.



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— E.P./ DIRECTOR JESS PERETZ

armada of bomb squad, SWAT and NYPD units.

Cabana shot the arrival exteriors in the Financial District and captured the interiors of Sewer, Charlie, and Parsa entering the building. Collins' unit shot the chase up the stairs and the office interiors. The latter was in a second location on a second day.

In this segment, Charlie stops Sewer for an emotional exchange discussing the explosive device perched on a window-washing skiff 70-some stories up. Then he decides he must defuse the bomb.

As Collins explains: “Shooting on the 40 and 65mm lenses at 6K, we were immersed with the characters, and felt more of what they were going through. Our close-ups weren't on a 125-millimeter from across the room; we were right in there with our actors, experiencing the emotions with them.”

Charlie's jump from the window to the window-washing cage was shot in a faithful recreation of the corner office that Osborne created on the top floor of the Phalanstery set.

As longtime New York City Key Grip George Patsos recalls: “We needed to create an exterior daylight look, and lighting was a challenge due to our restrictions on stage with the available space. Our actual set ran floor to ceiling, and we used every inch of our 40-foot-high structure. We covered the stage ceiling with approximately 70 LED Chroma-Q Space lights, then had a custom 50-foot by 70-foot silk fabricated to stretch under them to give us an overall feel of ambient daylight.”

The stage floor was painted green with plate





CARMEN CABANA



JOE COLLINS



footage that looked down toward the street. Because the Rosco soft drop backing had to be reflected in the facade of the building set piece, the crew hung the 40-by-80-foot backing on an I-beam curtain track with a 12-foot-radius curved pipe on each end so it wrapped around the edges. It was lit by a ring of ARRI 120 SkyPanels. Patsos' team rigged an ARRI 18K HMI in an aerial lift with a 1/2 CTO color frame to simulate sunlight.

Osborne's team constructed the window-washing rig that came apart in sections to accommodate various camera angles and stunt cable rigging, which was nestled among the SkyPanels and holes cut in the silk. VFX would remove the stunt cables and add the window washing cables in post.

As Charlie lands on the skiff, the city-wide blackout hits. Mirroring the real-life 2003 blackout, it begins in daylight and, as the tension rises in the different storylines at various locations, transitions into night. "We had a lot of discussions about how we should approach this technically," recalls Collins, who was living in New York at the time of the 2003 blackout.

"Daytime blackout was not an issue," he adds, "as we would need VFX help for traffic lights or storefronts. But for the night, it was too prohibitive to light and shoot night-for-night and then spend a gazillion dollars eliminating lights in post. We tested day-for-night filters with some success, but at the end of the day, we felt we could get the same results with LUT's via Ilya, and have more freedom to work the image in post. Ilya crushed it with LUT's and adjusted the color."

Concludes B-Camera Operator Eric P. Robinson: "The camera department worked as a close team with mutual respect for every department across the board. Any challenge we came up against was solved through teamwork and collaboration. No egos on this job."

Cabana concurs. "We had such a strong group on this show. A wonderful aspect is that the camera team had a previous working relationship so there was great rapport and collaboration. I want Guild members to let the show take them on a journey." 🌈

LOCAL 600 CREW

Directors of Photography

Carmen Cabana
Joe Collins

A-Camera Operator
Francis Spieldenner, SOC

A-Camera 1st AC
Mark Ferguson

A-Camera 2nd AC
Emily Deblasi

B-Camera Operator
Eric Robinson

B-Camera 1st AC
Blake Alcantara

B-Camera 2nd AC
Keith Anderson

DITs

Ilya Akiyoshi
Julio Saldarriaga

Loaders

Josh Munson
Kati Pérez

Still Photographer

Zach Dilgard

EP/DIRECTOR JESS PERETZ SAYS HE WANTED "CARMEN [CABANA] AND JOE [COLLINS] TO CHALLENGE ME - ALWAYS TRYING TO MAKE THIS SHOW MORE PHOTOGRAPHICALLY COMPELLING - WHETHER THAT WAS IN BIG SWEEPING CITYSCAPES AND ACTION SEQUENCES, OR IN INTIMATE SCENES BETWEEN TWO CHARACTERS IN A SMALL, CONFINED SPACE."