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LONGTIME *FARGO* DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
DANA GONZALES, ASC, MOVES INTO THE
DIRECTOR'S CHAIR FOR SEASON 4 OF THE
AWARD-WINNING CRIME DRAMA.

BY PAULINE ROGERS
PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH MORRIS

PEACE

It's Kansas City, circa 1950.

To keep a truce, two rival crime families strike an unusual bargain: Loy Cannon (Chris Rock), the head of the Black crime family – mainly migrants who have fled the Jim Crow South for points north – trades his youngest son Satchel (Rodney Jones) to his enemy Donatello Fadda (Tommaso Ragno), the head of the Italian mafia. In return, Donatello trades his youngest son Zero (Jameson Braccioforte) to Loy. The uneasy alliance works – until Donatello dies during routine surgery, and Josto Fadda (Jason Schwartzman) takes up his father's mantle and attempts to stabilize the alliance. Enter Gaetano (Salvatore Esposito), Josto's brother, who has built a ruthless reputation in Italy. And, as is wont to occur with this superlative show (led by its award-winning executive producer, Noah Hawley), Season 4 of *Fargo* seamlessly melds murder, mayhem and chaos with stories of immigration, assimilation and social commentary.

Hawley, who was the driving force behind bringing the production back to the U.S. from Canada, says "Fargo is so much of a show about America, and we decided this season we needed to shoot here. Canada is more like England. It just couldn't look like any American city at this specific time. In Chicago, there are so many locations – turn in any direction, and it's easily Kansas City in the 1950s."

Director of Photography Dana Gonzales, ASC, who has been with the series from the beginning, heartily agrees. Chicago fed his creativity as Gonzales probed how to bring Season 4 to life. "It's all about finding the capture device and lenses that will best help us tell the story and photograph the texture and aesthetic we have in mind," he explains. "This season, it was the ALEXA LF Mini, which dictated the choice of lenses."

Gonzales tested everything from vintage to modern glass. He then introduced different

filters with color and diffusion qualities that would pair with the LUT he created with colorist Tony D'Amore at The Picture Shop and DIT Ryan McGregor.

As 1st AC Chris Wittenborn, SOC, recounts: "I remember prepping the first test day at Keslow and seeing 100 different filters I had never heard of stacked in neat little piles, and the Zeiss Radiance Supreme prime lenses close by. The Radiance Supremes were great lenses from my perspective, as changes could be done very quickly, and their size and weight helped with all the gimbal work. They are sharp but not in a sterile way, and there's also a smoothness in the highlights that's pleasant with the large-format capture."

With cameras, lenses and filters chosen, Gonzales turned to the workflow.

DIT McGregor says that "working with Tony [D'Amore], we traded LUTs created through DaVinci Resolve to mimic vintage





Kodachrome and Autochrome film stocks and development processes. Due to the specific color qualifiers for skin tones and primary colors, we had to break the usual on-set workflow and use the LUT before our CDL correction – that way we would not contaminate the qualifiers. The limited grading control on set forced us to get the color and contrast correct with lighting and camera.”

McGregor says each ingredient of the recipe was essential to the final result.

“If you saw the image with the Kodachrome LUT applied but without the special color and diffusion filters, it looked completely wrong,” he adds. “There’s no recreating that look without the filter package.”

Gonzales asked Chief Lighting Technician Mike Moyer to determine the lighting package. Moyer says he went with strong single sources, with reflected fills or no fill at all, to “better control light off walls and to stay loyal to the natural sources in any given scene. I feel we were conservative in the number of lights we used, and

because of the number of sets, we had improvised backings and what we saw out the windows,” he explains. “There was no money left for trans-lights in most cases, and we had to use creative shadow and color to keep the windows looking plausible. We used a lot of industrial mercury vapor lights rigged in theatrical scoops to create the green that dominates a lot of the exteriors.”

For Season 4, Gonzales wore two hats: he would shoot episodes 1, 2 and 9 and direct 5, 6, 7 and 11. Guild Director of Photography Pete Konczal shot episodes 5, 6, 7 and 10; Gonzalo Amat, ASC, shot Episode 8 and Erik Messerschmidt, ASC, shot Episode 11. Paula Huidobro, AMC [ICG Magazine September 2020], shot Episodes 3 and 4. Gonzales also brought in his A-team of operators: Mitch Dubin, SOC; John Connor (who helmed the second unit); and Tim Milligan (who has been with the series since the first season).

Gonzales treated Episode 1 as a pilot, establishing the period tones and new characters. “We started the season

with our main narrative, Kodachrome look, introducing the moral compass of the season in character Ethelrida,” he explains. “She narrates how we get to our 1950s period, starting with the 1800s immigration of Jews, early 1900s Irish, 1930s Italians and our Black American protagonists in the 1950s. Each period was photographed differently with changes in capture, filters and color correction. For the 1800s, we used a modified ‘hand crank’ Arri 416 camera and old Angénieux lenses with skip-bleached and cross-processed Ektachrome. For the early 1900s and 1930s, we used a special Autochrome LUT with each period, using very rare colored filters that are no longer available.”

At the end of each sequence, there is a transition back to the 1950s Kodachrome look “that utilized our special LUT and another very rare colored filter with strong diffusion concept,” Gonzales adds. “Another special treatment was photographing the black-and-white mugshots in the episode. These images were captured using the very old Astro Berlin lenses



DIT RYAN MCGREGOR SAYS THAT WORKING WITH COLORIST TONY DAMORE, “WE TRADED LUTS CREATED THROUGH DAVINCI RESOLVE TO MIMIC VINTAGE KODACHROME AND AUTOCHROME FILM STOCKS AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES.” AS SEEN IN THESE CHARACTER PORTRAITS, PAGES 80-83.







TRAILER

HD

“Fargo is so much of a show about America, and we decided this season we needed to shoot here. In Chicago, there are so many locations – turn in any direction, and it’s easily Kansas City in the 1950s.”

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER/WRITER NOAH HAWLEY



on an ALEXA LF. This, paired with a special LUT, created stunning portraits, giving history to all our main characters.”

Prepping with Gonzales was key to Pete Konczal’s efforts to sustain the look in his four episodes. “I came to visit the set during the first two episodes,” Konczal recalls, “and was very cognizant of Dana’s close collaboration with [A-Camera Operator] Mitch Dubin. The first shot I saw involved the camera starting on Loy Cannon’s porch. The shot faces the street, capturing Loy’s car arriving in front of the house, then follows him out of the car, walking up and entering the house to have a conversation with his wife, Buel. This happens as the camera stays on the porch, looking through the porch window inside. My first thought was, wow, Mitch just combined four shots into one, and it’s so beautiful.”

Konczal says Dubin’s creative input was always apparent. “It’s amazing how cinematic and unconventional Mitch’s work is,” he continues. “There’s a motivation to his shots and a ballet between him and the actors. And it’s not just him executing physically demanding shots; it’s that he also understands where the camera needs to be to best tell the story. Mitch’s operating in the first two episodes set the tone for the entire season. Our camera team was so lucky to get him back when we went in to finish the last two episodes.”

When it came to lighting, Konczal referenced a book of photography by Saul Leiter entitled *Early Color*. “Dana lent it to me,” Konczal comments. “What stuck out to me was how each photo focused your eye to a particular place in the frame. A big part of my discussion with Dana was that we would have to be lighting as if we were using a reversal film stock, with little latitude. We would be grading more in points of red, green, and blue, just like in the lab. Every color choice was made to work in concert with the look. A great example is the character Constant Calamita and his red coat. You are drawn to him as his color separates him from the rest of the frame.”

As a director, Gonzales devised a challenging one-shot for Episode 5 that would start wide in the back of the club, facing a jazz band on stage, then move in tight on the piano player, drift over to the drummer, and come back to the trumpet player, and, in doing so, reverse the camera to face the audience.

“The camera then continues to travel on to a tight two-shot of two of the main characters, who are in the back of the room,” explains Konczal.

Moyer says it was a favorite shot to light. “We used theatrical Fresnels that would have been period in 1950, using saturated gel on 500-watt units that cost ‘bupkis’ to rent and were focusable. That was extremely rewarding,” he describes.

“We also used amber, red and blue gels that were period-corrected,” adds Konczal.

To achieve the camera movement, grips Art Bartels and Steve Mulcahey brought in a 20-foot Technocrane on track, with a Ronin as the remote head.

“That shot was an amazing team effort,” adds operator Tim Milligan. “A-Camera Dolly Grip Mike Moad coordinated the shot between four grips. We were literally scraping the techno bucket up against the wall, wrapping around the trumpet player, revealing the room to have the techno bucket one inch outside the right edge of the frame, all perfectly timed to the music. I live for this stuff.”

At the end of the episode is a dramatic scene between Constant Calamita (Gaetano Bruno) and Doctor Senator (Glynn Turman) at Spud’s Diner. Konczal says he and Gonzales knew it would set off a chain of events that impacted the rest of the season. “So we wanted it to feel iconic, timeless, and, most importantly, tense,” Konczal adds. “We decided to put wooden blinds on the diner windows as a means of visually isolating the characters and forcing them into that moment. This also enhanced our noir look, as the late-day sun created shafts of light, often silhouetting them. Dana focused the scenes’ point-of-view onto Doctor Senator and laid out a plan of coverage that allowed us to draw closer and closer to Doctor and Calamita the deeper we went into the scene.”

Konczal describes a locked-off transition from late day into night that leads into a key emotional moment from Loy Cannon. “I had been using a good deal of Tungsten Maxi Brutes over HMI’s for day exteriors,” he continues, “and I think the warmth it added to the cool ambience made the dusk scene very special. There’s a ‘Tell-Tale Heart’ feeling to the entire scene, and I am very proud of the look we created.”



“We did that episode with a 99-percent monochrome finish, fashioned after 1950s Kodak Tri-X film with its special formula.”

DANA GONZALES, ASC

For his episode, Gonzalo Amat was blessed with a big action scene, made all the more challenging by the limitations of shooting in an always busy Union Station. The action begins with Zelmare and Swanee fleeing the city, with Deafy after them. With the help of a police force, Deafy corners them.

“Of course, twists happen when Odis arrives,” Amat explains. “We wanted to do something visually appealing that matched the real lighting of that location at the time. We would also have to provide enough stop to shoot high speed and all the way to a 5.6 for the Leitz Telephoto Lens system. *Fargo* takes a very interesting visual approach to violence, where it’s not showing the actual violence but depicting it more abstractly. That’s why we did a lot of camera movement, and high speed to capture the frozen moment in time and expand the suspense.”

Moyer says they lit the scene with two tungsten SourceMaker balloons. “We used Lightning Strikes to emphasize the gunfight,” he adds. “It’s a trick I learned from Michael Ballhaus [ASC] on the shootout in the final sequence of *The Departed*.”

“The balloons could be dimmed down, and I could get the color that I was aiming for, which was a very warm period tungsten mixed with a gaslamp look,” Moyer continues. “We put the balloons on a lift, so it would be easier to move and then not have the lines in the shots. We carried this color to the exterior, where we gelled all of the city streetlights on the block, and then added LED uplighting of the columns.”

Amat says that for the moving shots previous to the shootout, “we used a dolly with a Ronin, which was a time-saver when it came to track or dance-floor complicated moves. For the interior and exterior, we had A-camera on a 50-foot Technocrane. It let us deal with the complex shots and with the blocking spread on two floors. We then had a B and C camera on dollies. The idea was to build as much tension as possible.”

Gonzales and the team broke visual format in one stunning episode in the series by shooting in black and white. “We wanted to get a cinematic feeling of its own story – kind of an homage to *The Wizard of Oz*, with tornadoes, ending with colored filters,” Gonzales explains.

“We isolated the characters of Rabbi and Satchel and their escape from the Fadda family after Rabbi double-crossed them. His protection and education of young Satchel are most important. We did it with a 99-percent monochrome finish, fashioned after 1950s Kodak Tri-X film with its special formula. I once again created a multi-faceted organic and post workflow to drop the audience into a special narrative. We used the ALEXA LF Mini, Zeiss Radiance lenses with another cocktail of filtration, and special monochrome LUT’s created in Blackmagic Resolve.”

McGregor says the LUT’s developed a Kodak Tri-X film look, again with special color filters on the camera. “With Resolve Live on set, we were able to adjust the color channels to selectively manipulate the contrast to brighten skin tones or darken the blue skies,” he shares. “We saved these looks as 3D LUT’s to import into Pomfort’s LiveGrade for on-set viewing as well as DRX files so that Tony could further manipulate the look in the final grade. We had our dailies lab technician, Patrick Bellanger at Picture Shop, add film grain to further set the feel of true black-and-





LONGTIME DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY GONZALES (ABOVE/BOTTOM SHOOTING PILOT) ALSO DIRECTED FOUR EPISODES IN SEASON 4.



DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY PETE KONCZAL (SEEN LEFT WITH GONZALES DIRECTING) SHOT FOUR EPISODES IN SEASON 4. HE AND GONZALES KNEW THEY WOULD BE LIGHTING 'AS IF WE WERE USING A REVERSAL FILM STOCK, WITH LITTLE LATITUDE. WE WOULD BE GRADING MORE IN POINTS OF RED, GREEN, AND BLUE, JUST LIKE IN THE LAB.'

white film for the dailies and editorial files.

"Dana used many color filters and ND grads in-camera to direct the eye and create the illusion of a storm that is brewing throughout the episode," McGregor continues. "A favorite moment was a day exterior where Dana called to A-Camera focus puller Chris Wittenborn to add another filter."

"If there is one place you don't want to be in February, it's the central plains of Illinois," Wittenborn laughs. "Temperatures in the low teens and winds so strong, they blow the snow off the ground into your eyes. A flat landscape of dormant cornfields as far as the eye can see and nowhere to hide."

Wittenborn says he had gotten about three dozen new filters for the episode, "and we didn't have time to test anything. It was the first shot of the episode, a big wide shot on a 12-step ladder in the middle of a cornfield. Dana was in the tent on a walkie telling us what filters to drop in, take out, move here, move there, et cetera. He keeps adding filters, and we were frantically moving the trays back and forth, taping filters to the lens, turning grads up and down. When it was all over, we looked at the side of the matte box that holds six filters, and there were eight filter tags - we have all six trays full, one filter taped to the lens, and another to the front of the matte box. Eight filters! We were so proud that we were able to keep up and give Dana everything he asked for. Then, over the walkie, we hear him say, 'Guys, how many filter slots do I have left?'"

As if capturing *Fargo's* fourth season wasn't complicated enough, the team was hit with an unexpected curve ball when COVID shut them down with two weeks of work left.

"Six months later, we returned with the

original crew and a complete second crew to shoot simultaneous episodes," Gonzales reflects. "The industry safety guidelines were not yet available, so the production developed its own [strict] rules to keep everyone safe. With a little shuffling of production staff, they decided to split the block into two episodes with two directors. They isolated even more by setting up a complete location unit and stage unit - the actors were the only people going back and forth between units."

Director of Photography Erik Messerschmidt [ICG Magazine August 2020], who shot the final episode with Gonzales directing, says that "safety was our chief concern. And fortunately, the protocols were very clear; and with the combination of testing and PPE, we all felt very safe and could concentrate on such a critical episode, as it's basically where we kill everyone off," he smiles. "We had large sections in slow-motion vignettes as the world is coming to a close for all our characters. It was a great opportunity to work in gestured light and a lot of shade. We wanted to be painterly with shaped and structured light."

Messerschmidt's approach was motivated by practicals, often pulling walls for the vignettes, removing audience, and compressing the image with the longer lenses to give the shots a more two-dimensional look. One of the most striking exteriors is when Josto gets revenge on several enemies and lights a car on fire.

"We were on location near Lake Michigan, and it was drizzling and overcast," Messerschmidt remembers. "We used the GF-8 crane and Ronin as the camera platform, on a 30- to 40-foot track, pulling a single shot. We timed it near dusk, and it was beautiful."

Messerschmidt admits that *Fargo's* style

pushed him out of his comfort zone.

"Dana gave me a lot of freedom within the specifics of the style he had set, so that was very exciting," he adds. "We did an homage to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* using the grade and filtration in the sequence where Josto and Oraetta are killed. Dana referenced the opening of *Apocalypse Now* for the sequence with Jason drinking in the Democratic Club."

"For that, we put the camera on the dolly," Messerschmidt continues, "and gave Jason (Josto) the freedom to look in different directions. This is where operator Mitch Dubin shines. He talked to Mike Moad, and the two instinctively followed Jason's improvised movements."

Gonzales readily admits Season 4 of *Fargo* had its challenges, "with COVID being at that forefront," he concludes. "No one had worked in a COVID environment, and defining the work protocol was both scary and inspiring at the same time. Everyone was committed and wanted to finish what we started as they were all true fans of the show. My camera department - Mitch Dubin, Tim Milligan, John Connor, Bella Gonzales, Brian Osmond, Chris Wittenborn, Hunter Whalen, Eric Arendt, Shannon DeWolfe, Ryan McGregor, Eva June, and Chris Summers - inspired me every day with their work ethic and smiles."

"Set lighting - Mike Moyer, Natasha Major, Addae Shelby, Jerry Tran, and Sammy Bertone - and our grip department with Art Bartels, Steve Mulcahey, Ed Titus, Mike Moad, and Billy Allegar, just to name a few, made our success possible," Gonzales concludes. "It wasn't just a technical and artistic success, but a profound statement of the human will and what a Union crew is capable of when a once-in-a-lifetime crisis challenges every breath. That was the real heart of Season 4." 🌈



LOCAL 600 CREW

SEASON 4

Directors of Photography

Dana Gonzales, ASC
Peter Konczal
Gonzalo Amat, ASC
Paula Hudebro, AMC
Erik Messerschmidt, ASC
John Connor (2nd Unit)
Bella Gonzales

Operators

Mitch Dubin, SOC
John Connor
Tim Milligan
Bella Gonzales

A-Camera 1st AC
Chris Wittenborn

A-Camera 2nd AC
Eric Arndt

B-Camera 1st AC
Hunter Whalen

B-Camera 2nd AC
Shannon DeWolfe

DIT

Ryan McGregor

Loader

Chris Summers

Digital Utility
Eva June

Still Photographer
Elizabeth Morris

Digital Utility
Eva June

POST COVID
CAMERA CREW STAGE

A-Camera Operator
Mitch Dubin, SOC

A-Camera 1st AC
Chris Wittenborn

A-Camera 2nd AC
Eric Arndt

B-Camera Operator
Bella Gonzales

B-Camera 1st AC
Andy Borham

B-Camera 2nd AC
Ron Ruanphao

DIT

Tom Zimmerman

Loader

Chris Summers

Digital Utility
Eva June

POST COVID
CAMERA CREW
LOCATION

A-Camera Operator
Brian Osmond, SOC

A-Camera 1st AC
Hunter Whalen

A-Camera 2nd AC
Shannon DeWolfe

**B-Camera Operator/2nd
Unit Director of
Photography**
John Connor

B-Camera 1st AC
Betsy Peoples

B-Camera 2nd AC
Josh Ramos

DIT

Ryan McGregor

Loader

Mark Irion

Digital Utility
Rinkesh Patel