

Dana Gonzales, ASC and Bella Gonzales Create More Screams in Space for *Alien: Earth*



The two-episode finale of the FX Network series *Alien: Earth* was distinguished by a unique partnership: It was directed by Dana Gonzales, ASC and shot by his daughter, Bella Gonzales.

Dana serves as an executive producer, episode producing director and cinematographer on the series, and Bella is one of three additional cinematographers, along with David Franco and Colin Watkinson, ASC, BSC.

The finale was not the first time Bella had collaborated professionally with her father, or with *Alien: Earth* showrunner Noah Hawley. The father/daughter duo had contributed to multiple seasons of Hawley's series *Fargo* (AC July '24) and *Legion* (AC July '18). "I operated for a few days on *Legion*, then I did five days for *Fargo* Season 4 on C camera," recalls Bella, who went on to shoot Episodes 3 and 4 of the latter show for Season 5. "We had so many tandem units that our

B-camera operator split off and became the A-camera operator. I was on B with [operator] Mitch Dubin. When they bumped me up to do additional photography, that was the start of my shooting relationship with my dad."

Early Inspiration

Dana first invited his daughter to set while he was working as a focus puller for cinematographer Brian Reynolds on the gangster drama *Gang Related*. "It was Tupac Shakur's last film — he was shot seven days after the film wrapped, and it truly affected me," he recalls. "My wife brought Bella to the set; I have a picture of her next to the camera as a weeks-old baby." (See page 85.)

Bella's earliest memories included visiting her father on set for *Man in the Chair*, his first feature as cinematographer. "I must have been 7 or 8. I remember being put on the dolly with key grip Manny Duran pushing me

and sitting with director Michael Schroeder. That became my whole childhood. I was a quiet kid, and I loved to watch everything. I loved the hustle."

Dana noted his daughter's engagement. "It was a 12-hour day, and I kept asking, 'Are you okay?' But she loved it. That right there told me something about her. It can be the fork in the road for most people visiting a set: Some find it boring, but Bella loved everything about it. A couple years after that, she gravitated toward still photography."

Budding Cineaste

The family darkroom kindled Bella's interest in still photography, one of her father's passions, and she developed a sophisticated taste in movies that included — when she was 4 — *The English Patient*, shot by John Seale, ASC, ACS (AC Jan. '97). "We laugh about it now," she says. "I didn't see *Star Wars* until I was 25, but I

had seen the foreign 'best picture' from every year. I grew up a little differently!"

At age 19, Bella enrolled in the cinematography program at the American Film Institute, which is typically a postgraduate track. The intense, two-year bootcamp gave her hands-on experience shooting motion-picture film and fed her interest in learning new disciplines. "I knew cameras, but I wanted to learn about what we could build with grip gear. That's still part of my job that I love."

She started working in the industry as a camera operator and recently served as cinematographer on the Hulu feature *Pizza Movie*, the miniseries *The Twisted Tale of Amanda Knox*, and the Lionsgate feature *Centurion: The Dancing Stallion*, directed by her father.

"Story First"

Dana says, "When Bella goes off and does her own projects,



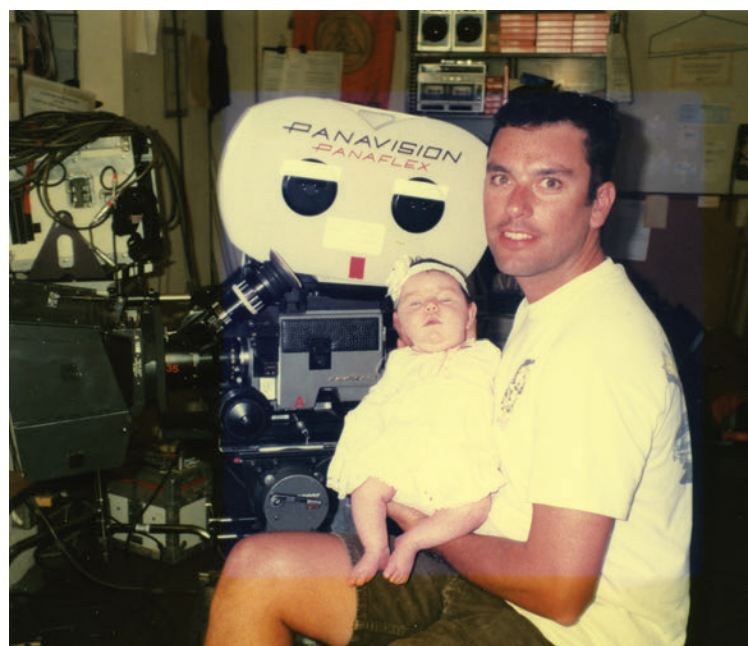
Opposite: Morrow (Babou Ceesay) with a xenomorph. This page, above: Bella Gonzales and Dana Gonzales, ASC on the set of the *Maginot* spacecraft. At right: Baby Bella with dad on her first set.

I notice she comes at those projects in the same way I do — through the math of it all, filtration, lighting, choice of lenses.” Bella adds, “That’s always led by the story. That was No. 1 growing up: story first. When you work that way, those choices become natural.

“I developed my own tastes, and I’ve had the opportunity to learn from a lot of DPs, but the first DP I learned from was my dad,” she continues. “The way he lights, the way he approaches people, and how he’s loved

by crewmembers — I modeled myself after that.”

Dana attributes a large part of his narrative-driven instincts to his work with Hawley, whom he met when the showrunner was crewing up for *Fargo*. The opportunity demanded an immediate response. “I read the script at lunch,” Dana recalls. “It was fantastic. I got on the phone with Noah, and I wanted to hear what he had to say. When we met, I saw something in him that I trusted, and that became a catalyst for our relationship.”



Picture Partners



Clockwise from top left: Nibs (Lily Newmark), Smeed (Jonathan Ajayi) and Curly (Erana James) make a gruesome discovery; Kirsh (Timothy Olyphant) with an alien specimen; Joe (Alex Lawther) amid a crisis; Wendy (Sydney Chandler) on the run. At left: The crew captures a scene featuring Slightly (Adarsh Gourav) and Wendy chatting under Kirsh's watchful eye. Opposite: Dana Gonzales sets up a shot with Cameron Brown (in xenomorph suit) and Lawther.

Alien Immersion

When *Alien: Earth* is shot entirely in Thailand. When the crew began production in Bangkok, which entailed intermingling Thai crew with the core creative team, the actors' and writers' strikes impacted plans. Dana convinced his daughter to join the team. "I really needed her help," he recalls. "At that point she was already a DP, and her agents weren't interested in having her shoot splinter units or 2nd units, so the shakeup with the strikes became an opportunity. Noah was happy to have her there. She flew out, they drove her right to the set, and it was game on."

In addition to shooting Episodes 7 and 8 with her father directing, Bella shot large-scale 2nd-unit footage for other episodes, including an opening montage with the "facehugger" parasite and the adult xenomorph. Her familiarity with the *Alien* franchise dated back to AFI, where Michael Pessah, ASC had screened a 35mm print of Ridley Scott's seminal film, shot by Derek Vanlint, CSC (*AC Aug. '79*). On her flight to Thailand, she revisited that film, along with James Cameron's *Aliens*, shot by Adrian Biddle, BSC (*AC Aug. '86*), and David Fincher's *Alien³*, shot by Alexander Thomson, BSC (*AC July '92*). "I watched the first movie on the plane three times, the second movie twice, and the third movie once," she recalls. "When they brought me to set, I was so into *Alien* mode I thought I was hallucinating! The *Maginot* [spaceship] set was built through stages so you could walk through the ship. They had already shot most of Episode 1, and I had the privilege of watching all the dailies. Three days later, I was shooting a facehugger."

Valued Collaborators

Dana, Franco and Watkinson familiarized Bella with the house style. "I wanted to make sure they were proud of the work I shot for their episodes," she says. "I had this beautiful job working as a DP, getting to learn from these people." The show LUT the creative team had developed with Company 3 supervising colorist and ASC associate member Tom Poole facilitated speedy integration, she adds. "The *Alien* LUT responded like film, so it was easy to apply. My job was to feed that LUT. People love the halation and the blooming highlights of the show. I studied that hard, hard light of *Alien* and compared that to the LUT to see where the values sat. The halation only hit the highest of highs. We tried to set that up so that it looked natural to the way a film negative responded."

In addition to the visual aesthetics, a large part of the series' impact rests on cyber protagonist Wendy (Sydney Chandler), who develops a unique connection with the alien. The actress became a valued collaborator. "Sydney's work ethic, her understanding of the material and her ability to bring it on the screen were incredible," asserts Dana. "You see that in the nuances of her performance, especially in her eyes and the way she rendered Wendy's decision-making, and her arc through the season. It is a female-centric franchise — following Sigourney Weaver's role in *Alien* — so it made perfect sense to make Wendy this mother figure through the show. Beyond her singular performance, she made that [theme] really resonate among the group of actors."

Chandler's performance was also key to capturing action sequences. "This show was very much a dance in the way the operators and the actors worked



AOTO

HOLLYWOOD'S BEST-KEPT LED SECRET

AOTO POWERS 33% OF THE WORLD'S
VIRTUAL PRODUCTION STUDIOS

33%

of the Global Market
AOTO Electronics Virtual Production
Studios



iF DESIGN AWARD 2022
Sustainability Award
Winner

Sustainable,
Renewable-
Powered
LED Panels

H:A SMPTE
Corporate Member



www.aoto.com
949 421 3104

AOTO Electronics
led@aoto.com

Tech Specs: Aspect Ratio | 2.4:1
Cameras | Arri Alexa 35
Lenses | Hawk V-Lite, V-Plus prime and zoom, Macro; Servicevision Scorpio;
Arri/Zeiss Master Prime



Above: Joe and Wendy fear the presence of a xenomorph (opposite, top). Below: Boy Kavalier (Samuel Blenkin) studies a mutant sheep (opposite, bottom) that's been corrupted by an extraterrestrial parasite.



together,” Bella says. “Sydney made that dance so easy, moving the camera and telling the story with her performance. Being a young woman, having the pressure of leadership on your plate, I totally felt that in her role.”

Unforgiving Terrain

The two-episode finale demanded creature work and visual effects in unforgiving rainforest locations. “The jungle was brutal,” notes Dana. “Between the temperature and the rain, it really tested your love for the film business.”

In addition to those challenges, the tropical settings featured xenomorph action in daylit jungles and caves — a departure from the franchise’s spacebound chiaroscuro effects of strobe lights and steam. “One of the places we scouted was a cave that had a lower layer with snakes at the bottom,” Bella says. “Dad sent me down in there to get a shot with the xeno, so we trudged in and waited for the right light. A lot of the jungle shoot was about waiting for the right time of day so the xeno could be backlit. We did bring lights, which we used for the battle [in Episode 7], but we kept lighting minimal. A big thing about the show was moving the camera without restricting the storytelling.”

One particular sequence was key to the series’ themes. Dana explains, “When Wendy makes a connection with the xeno after it brutalizes those soldiers, you see the power she has over this creature, and there is a big dynamic shift. That was very much written into the experience. If we’d covered that with flashing lights, darkness and atmosphere, I don’t think it would have resonated. We had to pick our battles



in the photography. Do we make it all about lighting control, or do you make it about performance? For me, it was storytelling first, and if somehow the lighting, the darkness and flashing lights made sense, then we featured them. That moment in the story was

pivotal and a controversial *Alien*-fan moment. But, without giving away what happens in Season 2, it was the beginning of many things that will happen with that relationship.”

With preparations for the next season underway in the

United Kingdom, the production is regrouping with Dana as series executive producer and producing director of Episodes 1 and 8, and Bella working with director Uglu Hauksdóttir and new crew on subsequent episodes. “I know Bella’s episodes are going to be

seamless because of her work on the first season,” says Dana. “She understands what Noah and I are thinking. You can’t buy that. I guess the fact we share the same DNA makes it even more fitting.”

