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Emmy-Nominated DP of 'Fargo' and 'Legion' on How to Shoot Cinematic Television

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Dana Gonzales, DP of 'Fargo' and 'Legion.' VIA DANA GONZALES

Fargo and *Legion*. These two FX shows couldn't feel more different, visually: while *Fargo* keeps the essence of the Coen Brothers films with wide shots and increasingly baroque styles (think of second season's De Palma-esque split-screen effect), *Legion* is a psychedelic trip through the mind of a mentally unstable mutant, David Haller (Dan Stevens). Both shows are from the same mind, however; showrunner Noah Hawley. Not only that, but the DP for both shows is the same man, Dana Gonzales, who is currently nominated for an Emmy for his work on *Legion's* season 2 premiere episode, "Chapter 9." Interested in how both visions came out of the same source, we reached out to Dana and interviewed him over email.

1. **What's your history that made you want to become a cinematographer? What movies/tv made an impact on you growing up?**

I was a kid born and raised in Los Angeles surrounded by the studios. My parents came from an impoverished upbringing and struggled from the very start to raise a family and find their place in the world, so they never talked about or pushed my sister and me to explore the arts as a passion or career. They always talked about working hard to make it, and I never really understood them. I always believed from an early age that anything was possible and live by that way today. My father starting a custom car shop in the 70s that became very successful and became the center of my life: I worked there on and off, hung out with his young employees learning how to come up with original design concepts and problem-solving. I was also an avid draftsman learning architecture, perspective and technical illustration in high school and junior college, where I was an art major. I had always been in honors art classes in high school and loved the freedom I felt in those rooms. So when an opportunity to work on a low budget feature came my way due to a customer that was getting work done at my dad's shop arose, my father said that I should talk to the producers to try and get a job. At first I was not interested as somehow I knew I did not want to work on a low budget film (I really don't know why) but after months of my father talking about it, there came the day the Persian producers were picking up their truck and asked me if I was interested in driving the truck on the film . (The truck held everything: camera, lights, wardrobe, etc.,). The production started the next day, and I said "Yes."

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The film *Hollywood Cop* was supposed to be a 30-day job and started with a full crew of AFI grads and low budget crew, but due to the Persian Director who needed a job and kept rewriting the script so he could shoot longer and get paid more, the film went four months. I became a 2nd assistant cameraman halfway through and was bit by the bug. The very first day when I parked the truck and started helping the crew unpack I had that same feeling that was so special in all the art classes: Freedom. I have always loved movies but making them and getting a job in the studios was never a possibility in my eyes, but after experiencing the process and meeting the different personalities involved I knew I wanted to make this my life's work. I went on to work as a 1st assistant cameraman on 40 plus features and various TV shows. Early on in my career I knew my goal was to become a cinematographer and I always believed it was possible, I started shooting shorts and spec commercials in between assistant jobs building a reel in a day when only film was available. It was a slow and expensive process that was full of struggle and hope.

Like stepping stones each project I shot lead to another one, and I eventually landed an agent due to my commercial beauty work. As I was still struggling to get narrative jobs I was operating and shooting 2nd unit for my friends on features; the Paul Haggis film *Crash* was one of those, and as a result of that success I landed my first feature film *Man in the Chair*. So to answer the question "Why did I want to be a cinematographer?": it was a process to reach freedom and ultimate possibilities while executing artistic expression, The oxygen of my life now and then.

2. **Where did you learn to shoot? Self-taught? What's your origin story?**

After I completed that first feature *Hollywood Cop* I knew I wanted to learn everything about photography, so I went out and bought a Nikon still camera and started shooting photographs. I read you had to shoot 10,000 pictures before you made a good image, so I started the process. Studying composition and exposure first, making the camera an extension of my being. When I did not have to think about the camera anymore, I could focus on how I wanted to make the audience feel with color, lighting and scene construction. The camera was not just a tool in my eyes but a necessary element for the world to see my imagery and have an emotional response. I am not a fan of photography but a fan of feelings, sympathy, empathy, tenderness, and sorrow. I feel the technical part of photography takes the back seat to storytelling every time and work hard to instill this in my process.

3. **What's your focal length preference? Because I noticed in *Fargo* and *Legion* you prefer to shoot in mediums, (though Fargo is a bit wider).**

I am a huge fan of wide-angle close-ups as I feel the audience becomes most connected with the characters. For *Fargo*, we started with wanting to pay homage to all the Coen Bros films, and their unique aesthetics. We rarely went over a 40mm in 3 season's of *Fargo*, and I believe the wide-angle vistas have the same connection as the close-ups. For *Legion* Noah Hawley and I went even wider using a 9.8mm combined with longer lenses to tell the story from the point of view of an "unreliable narrator." The work of Stanley Kubrick became the inspiration in lensing and tone. We employed the longer lenses to accentuate the love story of David and Syd which is at the root of *Legion*. There are no cinematic rules on *Legion* like *Fargo*, *Legion* should be a visual feast and is a love letter to art.

4. **You were recently Emmy-Nominated for an episode of *Legion*, what is it about this episode that made it stand out from the rest?**

Season 1 of *Legion* received no Emmy nominations at all partly because no one in the Academy saw it, so when episode 201 "Chapter 9 " was nominated this year it was a breakthrough moment. The Academy loves spectacles and the sophomore season premiere has all those elements. A bold new setting with new characters and of course a dance sequence. There is so much visual language used in this episode to kick off the season its hard not to stand out. All the episodes are unique, but this one hits so many notes and takes several risks. When I am photographing each episode I let the story and emotions guide me and make the final visual approach up at the last moment, almost improvised with sometimes being completely spontaneous much like performance art.

5. **Why do you think *Legion* was the only non-streaming show nominated in your category?**

I am not sure but *Legion* most likely has the smallest budget of any other show nominated in the one-hour drama category. Its hard to compete with those budgets as they shoot for more days and rely on expensive VFX. With *Legion* we do so much In camera and with full commitment to our concepts. This is backed up with the Studio, Network and all the producers. We do not do alternate safe versions of any scene and work in an atmosphere based on trust, this way the concepts thrive. Not many shows in basic cable work on this level so maybe the risk does not equal the rewards. With *Legion* I can throw all the paint on the canvas and stand back and see how the world feels about the art or at least start a conversation. This is not an approach many networks will allow so maybe that is the singular reason we are in such great company at the Emmys.

6. **Tell us more about your color choices. Do you develop your palette, who do you work closely with to come up with the iconic visuals? DIT or colorist or set designer?**

I think some of my previous answers reflect on how I make my decisions and process. I always think color has a direct relationship with feelings and how I want the audience to react. This is not new to cinematography at all, but maybe my strength is I do it over 10 hours of story, not just a 2-hour movie. I use color to make audiences subliminally reinforce where they are in the story, like in *Fargo* season 2 everytime someone is going to die there is a bit of cyan light in the frame. I do this on all my projects as I like audiences to grab on to the exact emotional place they should be at without any effort, just being part of the experience and journey. On the other side of this concept is know when to make this visual assault sometimes keeping the palette intentionally plain, so during the climax of scenes, you have the capacity to feel when these colors are introduced.

7. **How did you get involved with Noah Hawley, and what were your first impressions?**

I was introduced to Noah Hawley by my agent at the time Louiza Vick as they were looking for a DP on *Fargo* S1. I guess Noah saw something in my work at the time that spoke to him. I was hired after one phone call, and the rest is history. When I read the pilot of *Fargo* I was blown away how good and original it was, I knew that someone special was behind the adaption from big-screen to TV. From our first moments working together, I knew we had a special connection of wanting to create the best work possible. This dynamic continues today in all our collaborations. It is a unique relationship that might not come along again.

8. **There aren't two shows told more differently through their cinematography than *Fargo* and Legion. One has that very "dramatized true crime" Coen brother storytelling, where the world seems maybe ridiculous, but always objective. While *Legion*....well, I hope you don't mind me saying, I was a late adopter to the first season because it was so purposely obtuse, where you don't know what's real and what's in this character's head. Those are two very different ways to tell a story, visually. Can you speak a little bit about your process entering the mindscapes of *Fargo* and *Legion* and how you choose to reflect that visually?**

Again, I think some of my previous answers speak to this question, but I will say a bit more... With *Fargo* we had a bit of the storytelling language created by the original movie, our expansion in the storytelling came from Noah Hawley, John Cameron (EP) and I having a very similar aesthetic.

Cinematic concepts where used to make the show look and feel like a 10-hour movie. Going super wide, letting scenes sometimes play out only in 2 shots and moving the camera when to advance the story. The camera moves quite a bit on *Fargo*, but somehow people think it doesn't. The camera always focuses the audience on the main story points. For me, that is a success when the audience is not aware of the camera letting the story play out.

In *Legion* Noah and I fully developed the visual language in lensing and tone with production designer Michael Wylie being a significant part of creating the bombastic themes of set design and scope. Like I wrote in a previous answer we came from the perspective of an "unreliable narrator" while building on the Love Story. Whats real and what is not. We play with Aspect Ratio's to help the audience know they are in different places of perspective. Objective and Subjective/ Reality and in the mind of David/ Narrative, and Flashback. A constantly "Movable Feast." I feel like *Legion* will always be a "work in progress" because the story is ever unfolding and expanding. This challenge defines and creates the look and concepts of storytelling and always with a breath of fresh air.

9. **You're not only a Director of Photography on *Legion*, but you also directed a recent episode. How does the role between Director and Cinematographer differ? Do you think your work as a cinematographer better prepared you for directing?**

For sure being the DP and helping create the language of *Legion* has helped make me prepared to direct on the show as well. I know how to push the visuals to reinforce the story and how to shape the scripts to fit in this visual world that is *Legion*. When I prep with a director on any of the episodes I shoot they rely heavily on me to help them bring the concepts from the page to the screen. I know the characters and where they are and have been and are going and able to bring out the best of them. All the actors trust me and know me as I am part of the family. I think there was a comfort for everyone when I directed. As I will be directing another episode in S3, I look forward to be able to entirely shape my vision of what I think the show is. I am in a unique position on *Legion* to be a significant creative force that defines what the show is and how the story is told when being just the DP so it is not a huge leap to sit in the Director chair. My concepts come so much from who the characters are and the story being told that I believe it is almost easier to direct. I am always thinking about perspective and the audience and directing just streamlines my creative process.

10. **Is directing something you're interested in continuously pursuing?**

Yes, I am very interested in pursuing directing fulltime in Television. I have a few more goals as a feature film DP to realize and will continue to look for those projects I believe will speak to audiences but yes fulltime directing is a goal that excites me. There is a whole part of me that the world has not entirely seen and directing will tap into my primary artistic goals. I feel my maturity, vulnerability, and understanding of the world will help me be a great director and I am intoxicated thinking about it.

11. **What kind of projects are you working on now? How does the work differ from your work on *Fargo* and *Legion*?**

I just returned from Europe after shooting the pilot of *Hanna* for Amazon based on the movie of the same name, and am currently shooting and directing an episode on *Chambers* for Netflix. Both of these projects are entirely different as once again I am shooting *Hanna* an adaption from a movie with director Sarah Adina Smith and I bringing our sensibilities to the adaption. It is a significant international thriller told in 8 hours starring Joel Kinnaman and Esme Creed. For *Chambers* a dramatic thriller, I am coming in after the pilot and will serve as DP/Director on 1 episode and shoot an additional 3. Starring Uma Thurman and Tony Goldwyn for Netflix. Anytime I am on a project that Noah Hawley is not part of the process is somewhat different, I am a little out of my artistic comfort zone but am always up for the challenge.

12. **Who is really impressing you these days in terms of up-and-coming cinematographers?**

Erik Messerschmidt who shoots *Mindhunter* who shot my episode of *Legion*.

Steve Annis Adriano Goldman.

Alex Disenhof.

Christian Sprenger Julie Kirkwood Bella Gonzales (*My Daughter*), Stuart Winecoff and so many young DPs that I see their work on Vimeo.

13. **What are other shows or movies have impressed you recently from s cinematography perspective? (Or as a fan!)**

Mindhunter

Atlanta

The Crown

Babylon

Berlin

I, Tonya

2001 A Space Oydessy (Re-Release Florida Project Moonlight On body and soul.)

So many others ....

14. **What advice would you give to anyone interested in becoming a visual storyteller like yourself?**

My biggest advice I can give anyone trying to be a visual artist is dare to fail, stay uncomfortable and never play it safe.. trust your first instinct... never stop learning. When you're just starting out, shoot everything and make all your big mistakes. It's not the first jobs that will define you, but they will shape you. My biggest fear is not doing everything I did to get here, every low budget job, however painful. I learned something on every one the projects I ever did and or met someone I would go on to collaborate with.

15. **What do you WISH more reporters asked you about, regarding your work?**

I like the questions I just answered, what is my process? Who is Dana Gonzales? What defines me? Finding out about my art and what got me to this point. I pour my heart and soul into everything I do, I don't think I am more talented than anybody else, but I do know I work harder than everyone else. If you keep doing the same things you will for sure be great at them. I answer a lot of technical questions or show specific questions, but I think the world wants and needs to know who is Dana Gonzales, ASC.

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Drew Grant

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I spent the last six years at The New York Observer as A&E Editor. I've written for Maxim, Cosmopolitan, Decider and RealClearLife.com among others.

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OneTen CEO Debbie Dyson urged companies to prioritize the abilities of job candidates when hiring. Calendly's Tope Awotona, meanwhile, reinforced the value of employees as what can differentiate tech firms in the eyes of customers. Still other speakers highlighted the critical need for cognitive diversity and affordable childcare for workers.

Keep scrolling to read and watch the highlights.

HIGHLIGHTS

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TOPE AWOTONA

Founder & CEO, Calendly

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NICKLE LAMOREAUX

Chief Human Resources Officer, IBM

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Chief Learning Officer, Deloitte

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Chief Leadership & Human Resources Officer, Accenture

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