

WHITE BIRD IN A BLIZZARD

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Indie director Gregg Araki is known for edgy films about American youth like MYSTERIOUS SKIN, SPLENDOR and THE DOOM GENERATION. His latest feature WHITE BIRD IN A BLIZZARD, follows 17 year old Kat Connors as she deals with the sudden disappearance of her mother. Araki reteamed with his KABOOM cinematographer Sandra Valde-Hansen to lens the film starring Shailene Woodley, Eva Green, and Christopher Meloni. Says Valde-Hansen, "WHITE BIRD is Kat's journey that is very introspective. This is a challenge for a cinematographer, because the narrative is built around what is going on in the character's head."

Valde-Hansen admits what drew her to the project was another chance to work with the talented director. "I will move mountains for Gregg because he is a true visionary, whose work has inspired me for many years," she says. "It didn't hurt that the script took my breath away...The script was a poetic dream."

Production shot on location in Los Angeles, capturing in ProRes 4444 Log C on ALEXA. Here, the cinematographer talks to us about creating visuals for this dark coming-of-age story.

Tell us a little about your background.

I grew up in a first-generation, Filipino family who instilled a maxim of having absolute passion towards what you want to do with your life. My parents are both nurses and they hoped that I would follow that same path. From a fairly young age I was drawn to the camera. I was a bit of a shy kid growing up; the camera allowed me to be behind the scenes and become an observer. It was very easy to express my thoughts and ideas through the camera, which ultimately led towards my dream of becoming a filmmaker.

I started out as a camera assistant in Florida right out of undergrad film school (Florida State University) with every intention of climbing the ladder towards becoming a DP through the camera department. I worked my way up from loader to 1st AC and operating on low-budget indies, commercials and industrials. However, after eight years of camera assisting, I hit a glass ceiling and realized the work in Florida was not going to get me to my goal. If I wanted to become a cinematographer, I would need to dedicate my life towards this career path. So I applied to the American Film Institute Cinematography program. I was ecstatic when I got accepted, so I moved my entire life across the country to attend AFI. At AFI, I was able to learn from some fantastic mentors, including, Stephen Lighthill, ASC; Steve Poster, ASC; Alan Caso, ASC and Nancy Schreiber, ASC who have all been crucial to the development of my career.

What did you discuss with the director early on regarding the film's look?

When Gregg first contacted me, he wanted to do the opposite of what we did on KABOOM. He did not want the super glossy, uber stylized, bright and colorful palette that defined the world in KABOOM. Gregg wanted WHITE BIRD IN A BLIZZARD visual approach to be poised and controlled, almost classical filmmaking. Because WHITE BIRD was a pseudo critique of 80s American suburbia, Gregg wanted to evoke a very minimalistic visual style.



The minimal approach played a huge part in visually creating the narrative of the film. Gregg used films like KRAMER VS KRAMER and ORDINARY PEOPLE as references for WHITE BIRD. We aimed to make the film visually stark. Lighting and composition were based on precision and grace. With this in mind, taking what exists in the space and accenting/taking away from there was the best approach. The Connor House set is where the visually starkness played a huge role. Todd Fjelsted (our fantastic production designer) built the interior of the house on the stage and we shot the exteriors at a practical house. Todd and Gregg spoke about keeping the decor to a minimum and very pristine. When the mother disappears the house always remains the same, not one piece of furniture is touched. Knowing this, my approach to lighting was based on windows and practical fixtures in the space.

The film takes places over three decades 1970s-1990s. Eva's character, the mother, is the homemaker whose absolute goal is to create the perfect home. Through design, costume and lighting, Gregg wanted it to look like a glossy 1950's "happy homemaker" TV commercial. I created a retro look, based on 70's Sears catalog advertisements that we applied to the scenes in the early stages of her marriage to give it a that warm, glossy glow. As time passes, the Connor family goes further into chaos. I aimed to show how their world starts out seeming so perfect (warm sunlight streaming through windows) and then eventually falls apart (darker, more subdued, more contrast). I wanted it to feel very natural and seamless with the passage of time.



DP Sandra Valde-Hansen and 1st AC Kevin Akers on set (left). The DP frames up a shot (right). Photo credit: Brittany Meadows.

Why did you shoot on ALEXA?

The ALEXA is my absolute favorite of the digital cameras. To go beyond the technical aspects of the camera, the ALEXA, in my opinion is the closest camera to film (which is still my preferred format). The ALEXA has such a wide dynamic range. The fall off to white and black is so smooth and seamless very similar to what film can do. I chose the ALEXA not only, because it is my camera of choice, but because of its true ability to be able to shoot quick and sometimes right off the truck. Because of its range, this camera sees so much beautifully. Working with a director like Gregg Araki, who knows exactly what he wants, he expects to work quickly but produce beautiful images. The ALEXA allows me to do this.

Also, Gregg wanted WHITE BIRD to have somewhat of a subdued color palette. With the ALEXA, I was able to create a few looks very easily via ARRI Look Creator. On set, Gregg was able to see these looks right away. Our post facility, Siren Digital Studios, were then able to take those looks and create our dailies with what we were all watching on set. Overall the ALEXA's workflow is so easy and seamless, making the process so simple for both production and post.

Besides its ability to capture beautiful images, the ALEXA is ergonomically the best digital camera out there. For most of the films I do, handheld always comes into play and ALEXA's comfortable form allows me to handhold the camera with ease.



Valde-Hansen (center) and crew go handheld with ALEXA. Photo credit: Brittany Meadows.

What were you going for with the look of the blizzard scenes?

We did not have any intention of creating realistic blizzard scenes. These scenes are surrealistic representations of Kat's thoughts and dreams. We wanted the blizzard scenes to have an expressionistic beauty to further bring the audience into Kat's head. We shot this scene in an empty warehouse space, so there was not a grid to hang lights from. We wanted to create an even, soft light that envelopes the entire space and Kat, all dressed in white. The most efficient solution for us was an 8K tungsten tube balloon light from Sourcemaker. Once we had the balloon light set, we could easily move quickly through the setups. This was absolutely key, because in the last setup of our blizzard scenes the art department had to raise the set onto a platform, so Eva Green could emerge from the snow. It was super eerie and poetic. I had the best time shooting the blizzard scenes.

The scenes with Kat and her friends show a wide array of skin tones. How did ALEXA render these different complexions?

I love how the ALEXA handles skin tones. It was definitely a challenge having to light three very different skin tones that covered the full range of the complexion spectrum. Shailene Woodley has radiant skin. Any light you throw on her, she glows. Mark Indelicato's tan skin and Gabourey Sidibe's ebony complexion rendered so well on the ALEXA. The scenes with Kat and her friends are key to the film's progression, because they do offer some comic relief to Kat's spiraling world. It was very important to capture every nuance and expression in their faces, because both Mark and Gaby definitely can bring hilarity and lightness to the scene. The ALEXA allowed me to stay true to their faces and their comedic energy.

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I try to request the assistant director to not do any nude scenes early on in the production schedule, not only are the cast and crew still getting to know each other, but I too I'm still learning the nuances of the actors' faces and how their skin tone reacts to light. After the first few days, I know where an actor's skin tone likes to live in terms of light readings and on the waveform. With nude scenes, I can have my lights pretty much set before the actors arrive, so we can shoot right away. I always try to imagine myself in the actor's position. I admire their skill of transforming themselves into these complex characters, putting themselves and their feelings out there for all the world to see. Combine that with doing this without their clothes on is a particularly admirable accomplishment.

Clubs in Gregg Araki movies always feel real compared to more glitzy depictions of clubs we usually see. How did you shoot the club scenes?

In the script, Gregg wrote about the pounding pulsating colored lights, as the two teenagers discover the spark between them. Because the goth club was the type of club you would find in a suburban strip mall or rundown warehouse, we needed the lighting to reflect that as well. However, when Kat and Phil dance, we wanted to feel as if the two teenagers stepped into their own world - everything melts away except for the throbbing lights and the mesmerizing music.

My amazing gaffer, Chris Carroll and I decided to use rock n roll par cans to light the dance floor. The room was painted black with very low ceilings, so there was nowhere to light from above. My brilliant key grip, Ravi Gahunia, suggested we go with floor trusses and stagger the par cans on the trusses. I thought this was a perfect, simple idea, because not only was this the most efficient, but it was key to the narrative. I wanted the audience to feel the lights throbbing on their faces as we dance around Kat and Phil, so the audience can feel that spark as well. With some party gel, flicker boxes and a couple of folks on hand dimmers, we had our club scene. I also threw in my personal disco ball (never leave home without it) and party strobes to give the club that DIY feel, but still keeping true to creating the synchronicity between the characters.



I'm extremely proud of the club scene, where Shailene and Shiloh first dance and feel that instant attraction. Whenever that scene plays, I smile because everything is synchronous from the performance, to the lighting and to the music. It's one of those scenes that creates a visually emotional spark, which I'm so happy about.

Is there a scene that you are especially proud of how it turned out?

When Kat says goodbye to her father...Gregg had this brilliantly simple shot of Brock, her father, small in the frame standing in the wide expanse of the fairly empty airport. We were shooting at an abandoned terminal at Ontario airport. It is a pretty incredible place. Because our resources were small, we had to rely on the available daylight and then enhance from there. This was challenging because we had a crucial scene to do that was very dependent on the sun. I knew from my scouts that the best time to shoot this scene would be after 2 p.m., because the sun would be streaming through this gorgeous stained glass window and create some beautiful colored patterns to the scene. So we scheduled the shot to happen then. Chris Meloni's wave goodbye is so gut-wrenching and poignant to his character and having the actual sunlight streaming through all in the right places, makes for a very tragic bittersweet moment. This was a classic case of the sun being at the right position at the most opportune time and everything/everybody working in sync with all the elements.

WHITE BIRD IN A BLIZZARD is now available on demand and screens in theaters Oct. 24.

-- An Tran

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