

From Gregg Araki's *Kaboom* to *White Bird in a Blizzard* DP Sandra Valde-Hansen Styles to the Story

By Valentina I. Valentini



Cinematographer Sandra Valde-Hansen

Cinematographer Sandra Valde-Hansen was introduced to filmmaking by her mentor Tony Foresta, a New York-based documentary filmmaker who cut his teeth during the cinema verité movement. In 1999, Foresta moved to Valde-Hansen's home state of Florida, where he offered her a job as his 2nd loader on *Alligator Alley*. This led to more work on various low-budget projects, and Valde-Hansen moved up to being a first assistant and eventually a camera operator.

"Because he came from this doc background, that's how I learned things," says Valde-Hansen. "Everything was natural light, minimal lighting, handheld, on the go."

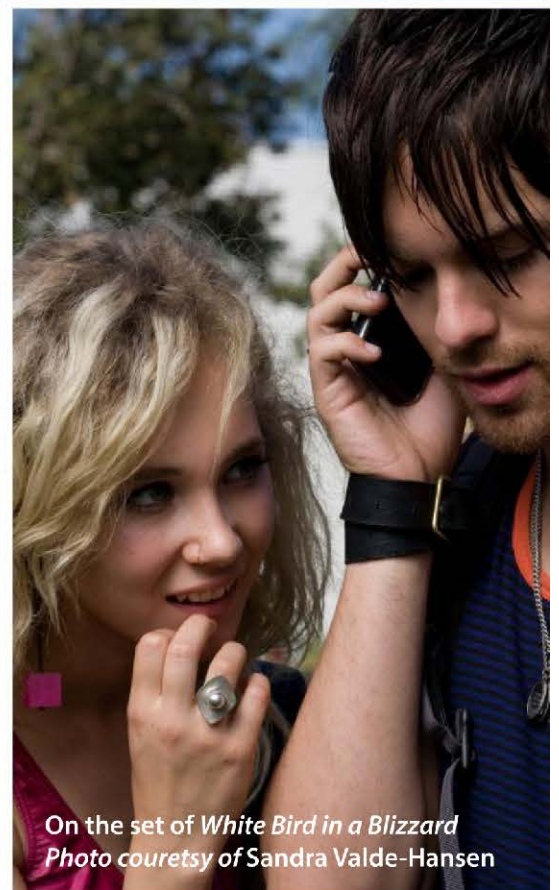
Armed with a desire to do her own films, Valde-Hansen began shooting student thesis films and other small projects. She also attended the **American Film Institute** and graduated in 2006. "Even there," she notes, "I found myself using very natural lighting and being drawn to scripts that were visually based in naturalism." As Valde-Hansen returned to work as a camera assistant and operator, in 2009 she got a call from her friend Producer Pavlina Hatoupis who was working with filmmaker Gregg Araki on his newest endeavor *Kaboom*.

Valde-Hansen discovered Araki's work at an art-house theater while she attended Florida State Film School. The filmmaker's aesthetically and emotionally colorful films were showcased in the era of New Queer Cinema. "I saw *Nowhere* by myself, [and] walking out of the theater I didn't know exactly how I felt about it," recalls Valde-Hansen. "I was absolutely drawn to the film. It was crazy, stylistic and made me never forget the name Gregg Araki. So when I got a call that he was looking for a DP, of course, I wanted to get my name in the hat, but in the back of my head I thought, 'There was no way I am getting hired for this.'" But Valde-Hansen did get hired, and through her work with Araki since *Kaboom*, she learned about her style of photography.

"[My style] dependent on the project, because the style comes from the story and the emotion the director would like to convey," Valde-Hansen explains. "As



Cinematographer Sandra Valde-Hansen (left)
on the set of *White Bird in a Blizzard*
Photo by Brittany Meadows



On the set of *White Bird in a Blizzard*
Photo courtesy of Sandra Valde-Hansen

the cinematographer, through lighting and composition, I need to be able to draw the audience into a world. Whether that world is naturalistic or stylistic or anything in between, my goal is to make the viewer believe they are there. Filmmaking is a sensory experience, and cinematography plays a huge part in that experience. My work is emotionally driven. Whenever I help create an image, I look for it to strike a feeling in the viewer."

In her career as a DP, Valde-Hansen has shot numerous indie films, such as *Fly Away*, *Hello Herman* and *Jewtopia*, before reuniting with Araki on his newest film *White Bird in a Blizzard*. Starring Shailene Woodley with a premiere at Sundance, the film is a bit of a stylistic change for Araki and could possibly be another indie breakout hit. "This film was certainly in a more reality-based place for an Araki film," offers Valde-Hansen. "I was able to bring my old influences into that production. The difference between this film and *Kaboom* though is that *Kaboom* was set in this alternate world with no real era to speak of. *White Bird in a Blizzard* is based in San Bernadino in the 1980s and '90s."

When Araki first talked to Valde-Hansen about the film, he mentioned creating a subdued color palette with very deliberate framing that would take a minimal-

istic, classic approach to visually creating the narrative of the film — the very opposite of the look for *Kaboom*. "We wanted the film visually stark and dramatic with much precision and grace with the lighting and composition," Valde-Hansen reveals. "With this in mind, using what exists in the space and accenting and/or taking away from it was the best approach. I didn't want it to feel like when the characters are sad [the look is] dark and moody, and then when the characters are happy it's bright and sunny. I wanted it to feel very natural and seamless with the passage of time... Greg wanted something more natural overall, but there's still this Goth club scene where we throw in a ton of colors, and even the blizzard scenes are in visual place beyond reality."

With over 50 credits as a cinematographer, with many on feature films, Valde-Hansen is well equipped and trained in her position as second in command on set. "I try and become as close with [the crew] personally as I can when I get onto a project," she explains about her collaborative process. "When you hang out with a director or anyone on your creative team socially, you begin to find out about similar interests beyond the film, which ultimately helps you see into their vision better and get into their heads more. Beyond that, there's a trust factor



Valde-Hansen on the set of *White Bird in a Blizzard*
Photo by Matt Kennedy



that gets built in that time and effort as well. I will start way before my paid prep time in order just to foster that relationship and be their right hand once we get on set."

When hired on a new project, Valde-Hansen is often asked about her preferred medium and she always suggests film. This sometimes gets her an understanding nod before the producer shakes their head, and sometimes gets her laughed out of the room. But if Valde-Hansen had her choice, she'd shoot on film every time. "That's not to say that I don't enjoy digital," she clarifies. "It is about the story in the end. We as cinematographers have to fight for the best format that is correct for that story, and if it's digital then I'm still going to put my best work into it."

While not working as a DP, Valde-Hansen teaches a master class at AFI. She's also involved in the school's application vetting process and finds it odd that the applicants' resumes show little to no film experience. "I think filmmakers in my age group are some of the last people that worked strictly in film at the beginning of their careers," Valde-Hansen laments. "It's very rare to find [an applicant] who has had film experience at all." She also notes that as she continues get work, the film budgets are staying the same, which creates a challenge in her ca-

reer and for everyone in the industry. "Everyone's scared right when they leave school," she says, "but my mentors were right when they told me not to be scared then, but be scared 10 years down the road."

Valde-Hansen remembers what it was like to be young and hungry, when a DP would shoot anything and do anything to shoot. "You will pick up the actors and do craft service just because you want to shoot," she says. "A \$100K feature is gold to you and your crew is on board for anything as well. Then you start doing a series of features well under a million and it's great... for a while." Valde-Hansen admits that it's been a tough challenge as crews start to join the union and get better paying jobs, and as some of the big guns come back from studio films to do \$4 million films. "This challenge keeps me on my toes," says Valde-Hansen. "It keeps me striving to work harder and be the best at what I do and love. I'm surrounded by people who inspire and encourage me, which I believe is a huge part of this career. I knew this was going to be a roller coaster ride and, as scary as roller coasters can be, the thrill of cinematography is absolutely addicting." *White Bird in a Blizzard* is scheduled for release this summer. ❖