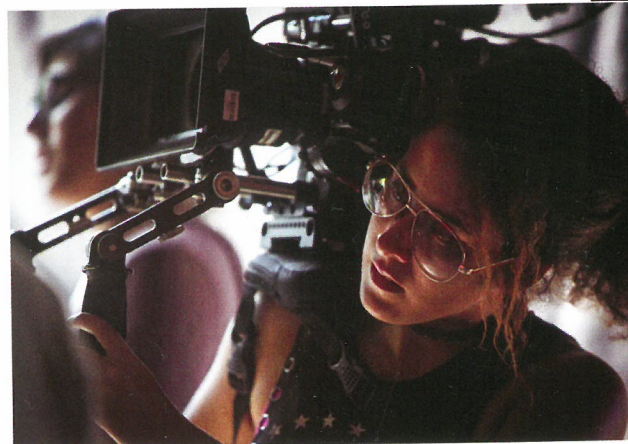


Stars Align



AC checks in with three Rising Stars of Cinematography from past years to discuss their current projects, and inclusion and mentorship in the industry

By Patricia Thomson

Our recent March 2020 issue included the fourth installment of AC's annual Rising Stars of Cinematography, so we thought it was time to check in with some of the promising directors of photography selected in previous years. From our 2017 roster (AC Feb. '17), we caught up with Carmen Cabana and Kira Kelly, whose respective TV series — Hulu's *High Fidelity* and Netflix's *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker* — recently commenced streaming. And one of last year's Rising Stars, Anka Malatynska, chatted with us about shooting Hulu's *Monsterland*, scheduled for release later this year.

Carmen Cabana *High Fidelity*

"When it comes to love and music, everything is enhanced, richer, bolder — just full of life," says Carmen Cabana. Her latest project, *High Fidelity*, is very much about

love and music, coupled with a rich, bold look.

Created by Sarah Kucserka and Veronica West, the show is a gender-flipped version of Nick Hornby's 1995 novel and Stephen Frears' 2000 big-screen adaptation (shot by Seamus McGarvey, ASC, BSC). This time around, it's a female record-store owner (Zoë Kravitz) who's been dumped and is struggling to rebound.

This role reversal "refreshed the story," says Cabana, who shot all 10 episodes of the series. "I loved that the production wanted to do a female-gaze version, with a female protagonist who shows women's perspectives on the dating world."

On the show, Rob (short for Robyn) addresses the camera directly, mulling over the quandaries of romantic love. She often does so while striding through the streets of Crown Heights, her semi-gentrified Brooklyn neighborhood, where practical locations were shot.

"*High Fidelity* was about making the camera feel like a friend walking right next to Rob, chatting," says Cabana. "That's why the camera had a close proximity, little foreground and wider lenses." The cinematographer shot with dual Arri Alexa Minis, framing for 1.78:1. She used customized Panavision Primo lenses, "which produced beautiful flares." She often exposed at T4 to retain some depth in

the background except when getting inside Rob's head, "when we were always wide open." That's when the "Magic 50," as Cabana dubs it — a 50mm Zeiss Super Speed — was put to use. "We used the Magic 50 every time we wanted to blur the background and get very close to Zoe's face to isolate her from everything else and just connect with her emotion." Angénieux Optimo zooms were occasionally used as well.

As for that rich, bold look, "I wanted a glossier, more magical version of Brooklyn, but to preserve the elements that make it so charming and appealing," Cabana says. "For instance, the color of lighting was 100-percent based on reality." She played off the color mix on Brooklyn's streets: neon signage on old storefronts, and streetlights that were enhanced with Arri SkyPanels or gelled PAR cans to extend their light farther. For interiors, inspiration came from musical sources. For example, all of De Salle's club scenes "have the color palette of a Pink Floyd homage concert featuring drummer Nick Mason that I attended in my spare time during prep," says Cabana. "The light show combined four or five colors, but they co-existed well without looking like a circus." Another inspiration was album covers. "They pop so much," Cabana says, "and I wanted a reference for colors that could live with



◀ Clockwise from left: Cinematographers Carmen Cabana, Kira Kelly and Anka Malatynska. ▲ A club scene from Hulu's *High Fidelity*, shot by Cabana.

each other." She cites Kiss' *Rock and Roll Over*, Led Zeppelin's *Celebration Day* and *Houses of the Holy*, and Syd Barrett's *The Madcap Laughs* as some examples.

Color is Cabana's sweet spot. "As a woman, and being from Colombia, I find that color is my preferred paintbrush when it comes to telling stories, although certain stories, like my upcoming [Blumhouse-Amazon] film *Nocturne*, call for a desaturated look and a muted palette," the cinematographer notes. When using colors, she never hesitates to dip into Surprise Peach, Moss Green, Cerulean Blue, Henna Sky and other hues that aren't often used. *High Fidelity's* numerous nightclub and bar scenes gave her

plenty of room to play. "The clubs were my paradise. I was like a kid in Candy Land!"

Kira Kelly

Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker

Imagine *The Great Gatsby* by way of the Harlem Renaissance with snippets of Busby Berkeley thrown in. That's *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker*, a four-part limited series that tells the story of America's first female millionaire, who made her fortune in hair-care products for black women.

"It was my first period piece, which I was so excited about," says

AC: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about change in the industry, especially for female cinematographers?

Carmen Cabana: I'm optimistic for sure. If I compare now to 2005, when I started in the business, it feels like there has been at least a 15- to 20-percent improvement, at least in my own experience. That's baby steps, but it's definitely on the upswing.

So many of us have been doing really good work and proving we can deliver on time, deliver good material, tell a story, handle a set with big challenges, and be leaders. I think producers are finally starting to look at us on more equal terms.

We have a bit of a crisis, though, in electric. You find a lot of women in camera, but it's very hard to find female electricians, grips and gaffers who are experienced and available and remain in G&E. We need more women in that field, and we need more workshops and opportunities to train them.

I think there's a shortage because of the bullying from some [male] electricians and key grips that's been happening for years. A lot of women have just left the field or exist in the shadows or move to the camera department. If you think about it, every day we're on set is already a battle — against time, against the elements, against specific challenges — so to have to fight a battle for respect on top of that can truly drain you. Coming up, I faced a lot of discrimination from certain gaffers — they wouldn't respect me or do what I asked. That inspired me to become a gaffer myself, so nobody could lie to me and say, "We don't have that," or, "We can't do it like that," because I knew what we had in the truck and ways to get something done.

So I want to encourage more women to stick with it. Do what you love and don't be afraid to stand your ground.

Carmen Cabana photo courtesy of the filmmaker. Kira Kelly photo by David Lee, courtesy of Netflix. Anka Malatynska photos courtesy of the filmmaker. *High Fidelity* photo by Phillip Caruso, courtesy of Hulu. *Self Made* photo by Amanda Matlovich, courtesy of Netflix.



A fantasy sequence from Netflix's *Self Made*, shot by Kelly.

Kelly of the production, which was directed by DeMane Davis and Kasi Lemmons, who each helmed two episodes. "I'd been looking for a period piece because it's such a challenging thing for a DP to do." It was extra challenging in this case because the fact-based series, which debuted in March, also incorporated fantasy elements into every episode via interstitials. In one example, we see a boxing match between Walker (Octavia Spencer) and her rival in a smoky arena; in another, dancers surround Walker in a Busby Berkeley-style configuration in the factory she's about to open. "These were ways to get into Madam Walker's head as the story turns inward," says Kelly, who shot all four episodes. "Each episode has a different look for the interstitial. We wanted these to be a place where we could tap into some fun visual elements." There are also

other imaginings, like Walker's memories of her enslaved parents picking cotton.

From the start, "the showrunners, Janine Sherman Barrois and Elle Johnson, were clear that they did not want a period piece that was sepia-colored," says Kelly. "They wanted to make this story alive for right now, and they wanted a very colorful, saturated world." While the research department gathered period photos showing the era's hairdos, dress and cultural milieu, Kelly assembled her own look-book with more wide-ranging references. "My office walls were covered with images that included Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Annihilation*."

Working with production design and costume, Kelly says, "We were able to find a palette that was colorful and saturated but not jarring. Madam

wears a lot of jewel tones, beautiful emeralds and sapphires — very rich colors that pop really well."

The cinematographer's soft, directional light complemented that palette. "I wanted the lighting to have a very natural feel because I knew we were going to be pushing so much color into the sets," she says. "We wanted the colors to play on their own."

The stylized interstitials broke from that approach, with bold pink backlight and runways of purple light in the dance scenes, or searing white spotlights and deep shadows in the boxing ring. "We were trying to make them as dramatically different from the main story as possible."

Lenses underscored that difference. For most of the two-camera shoot, which was captured at 4K, Kelly coupled Sony's Venice with Panavision T Series anamorphic primes, but she switched to C Series anamorphics for the interstitials "because the characteristics of those lenses helped to visually distinguish that material from the main storyline."

Anka Malatynska *Monsterland*

In the year since her Rising Star profile in this magazine, Anka Malatynska shot what she considers to be her breakout project: *Monsterland*. "It's one of the most exciting projects of my career," she says. "It allowed me to do things visually I haven't been able to do anywhere else. You can't do magical light portals on every series!"

The eight-episode anthology is an adaptation of Nathan Ballingrud's short-story collection *North American Lake*

Monsters. The stories are grounded in blue-collar settings and populated by people struggling with lost jobs, broken homes and personal shortcomings. But each story injects a bit of the supernatural; vampires, werewolves, fallen angels, lake monsters and more ambiguous beings intrude and push characters toward redemption — or not.

"The core look is realistic," says Malatynska. "[The story is] something that could be happening down the street from your house, yet there are these fantastical moments, which gave me permission to take things to a more magical place."

For those moments, the creative team took inspiration from Gregory Crewdson's staged color photos, which often feature unexplained beams of light in familiar settings. But for the series finale, Malatynska paid homage to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. She explains, "I used *Close Encounters* as inspiration for the magical light portals that our characters step into in their living room and then step out of and into [a] grand [location]. It was light cue after light cue after light cue. Every episode called for spectacular lighting [to] signify the monsters and paint this magical world."

Creatively involved from the start, Malatynska alternated episodes with



Malatynska and students.

Anette Haellmigk, who also shot the pilot. "Anette and I were both hired in August, right around the same time, and we immediately began collaborative conversation," she recalls. With executive producer Mary Laws serving as showrunner, the two-camera show was shot in New York with Sony's Venice (capturing at 4K in the 2:1 aspect ratio) coupled with Leica Summilux-C primes and Angénieux Optimo DP Rouge zooms.

"We used mostly LED lighting, which helped in moving quickly," Malatynska says. "A lot of our key

lights were side lights, or what I call Rembrandt light, which allowed me to cross-shoot in many situations and feel good about it."

Shooting an episodic thriller with otherworldly visuals gave the cinematographer room to stretch both technically and creatively. "It was exciting," she says. "I didn't have to do three-point lighting, I didn't have to worry about fill light, it could get edgy, and it could get incredibly beautiful and completely fantastical." ♦

Why Mentor?

Anka Malatynska has mentored hundreds of students through workshops and teaching jobs. Many stay in touch long afterward, texting or emailing whenever they need advice. For Malatynska, that's not a bother; rather, it's a continuing inspiration. "You forget how exciting it was to start on this road, and by mentoring students you're quickly reminded," says the cinematographer, who hails from Warsaw, Poland.

Malatynska was mentored by James Chressanthis, ASC, GSC, who had in turn been mentored by ASC members László Kovács and Vilmos Zsigmond. Chressanthis directed a documentary about the famous Hungarian cinematographers, *No Subtitles Necessary: Laszlo & Vilmos*, which he hired Malatynska to shoot. "They were always mentoring, always giving back, always teaching students," she recalls. "It wasn't, 'I'm giving up my career and now I'll teach'; it was, 'This is the way a craft lives on.' A craft is passed on from master to student, and you learn by apprenticeship."

"I'm a nobody from a Communist country," Malatynska continues. "If you'd told me as a kid that I'd be in Hollywood working as a cinematographer one day, I'd be like, 'No way!' A big reason I'm here is the great teachers I had who were also mentors."

Malatynska tries to get mentees on set whenever possible, even if only for a day. On *Monsterland*, she had a young woman from Arizona shadow her for a week. "It's those [opportunities] that are the entryway to a career," she says.

But she notes it's not just students who crave these experiences — she has seen an uptick in female directors wanting to get their hands on a professional camera before tackling their first gig. "It's basically to demystify the technology and not feel like your cinematographer can walk all over you on that first network series," Malatynska says. So she has added pop-up camera workshops to her mentoring activities in her effort to change the world for the better, bit by bit.

AC: Is episodic TV where the action is now, especially for women and people of color?

Kira Kelly: They talk about this being 'the golden age of television.' We're at a point where there's a lot of television and streaming options. That's wonderful because more shows need to fill jobs. All this work is out there, so it's a great time to be a DP.

You've worked on other series that were female-led, such as *Queen Sugar* and *East Los High*.

Queen Sugar was my first studio job. I got that job because Ava DuVernay said, 'This is the DP I want to work with.' [DuVernay also hired a directing team of 35 women for *Queen Sugar*'s 55 episodes.] I think there are more and more cases of women hiring other women and bringing each other along.

Madam C.J. Walker was seriously one of the most inclusive crews I've been in. We had women and black women all over the [set]; it was pretty wonderful. I remember one meeting where we were all talking about hot combs, which play a big part in the story. There was one white guy who put his hand up and sheepishly asked, 'What's a hot comb?' We all had to laugh — including him. It was a nice moment. We're like, 'This is good! We're teaching people things.'

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