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Film Commissions: Production 21



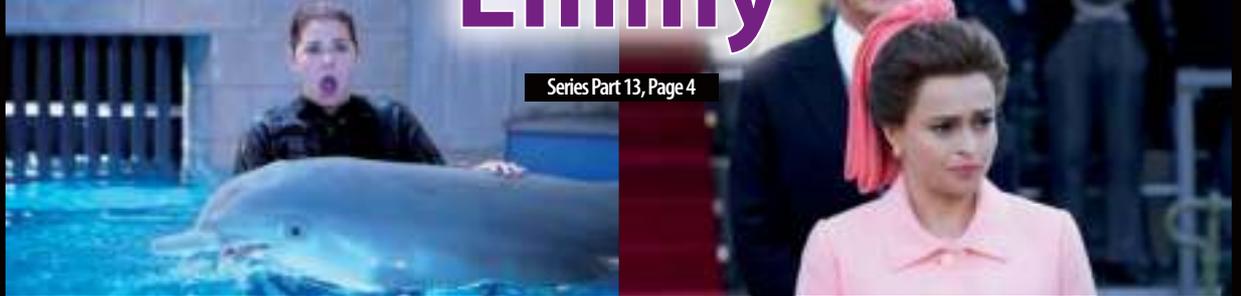
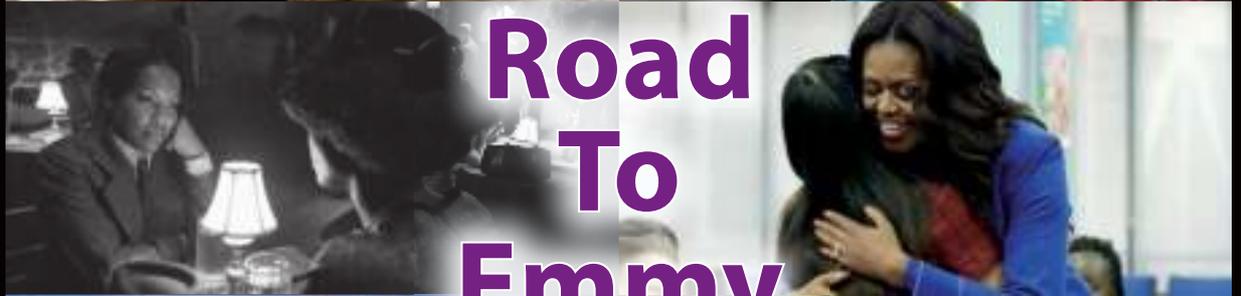
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## The Road To Emmy

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From top left, dockwise: Scenes from *Hollywood*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *Becoming*, *The Crown*, *Will & Grace*, and *Watchmen*.



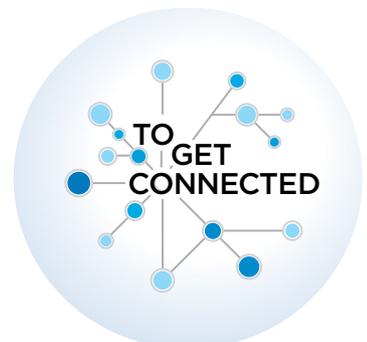
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*Da 5 Bloods*



Newton Thomas Sigel, ASC



Ollie Downey



A scene from *Hanna*

## Lensing Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* For Netflix, Amazon's *Hanna*

*Newton Thomas Sigel, ASC and Ollie Downey reflect on their collaborators, camera choices*

**By Robert Goldrich**

One DP reunited with consummate filmmaker Spike Lee, expanding their collaborative relationship from short to long-form fare.

Another took on the second season of a show—not always a coveted proposition—but saw major creative opportunity which as it turns out came to fruition.

Here are insights from Newton Thomas Sigel, ASC on *Da 5 Bloods* (Netflix) and Ollie Downey on *Hanna* (Amazon Prime).

### Newton Thomas Sigel, ASC

Cinematographer Newton Thomas Sigel, ASC has known Spike Lee going back to early on in their careers when both were coming up the ranks in New York. Sigel was making documentaries as Lee emerged out of NYU as a narrative filmmaker. Their paths crossed over the years, yielding a number of collaborations in which Sigel shot Lee-directed commercials. But they had never done a feature together, something Sigel—whose credits include *Drive*, *Three Kings*, and the BAFTA Best Cinematography Award-nominated *Bohemian Rhapsody*—had been waiting and wished for for these many years.

Then Sigel got a call out of the blue from Lee with the opportunity the DP had hoped for—to shoot *Da 5 Bloods*, a feature introducing us to four Black American war vets (portrayed by Delroy Lindo, Clarke Peters, Isaiah Whitlock Jr, and Norm Lewis) who return to Vietnam to find buried treasure, a chest full of gold bars, that they and their late squad leader (Chadwick Boseman) hid during combat duty. The

story takes us to largely unexplored territory relative to the much chronicled Vietnam War—namely the perspective of Black servicemen while delving into PTSD, greed, corruption, social and personal issues that impact these veterans and future generations. Meshed with news footage of the Vietnam War to today's Black Lives Matter movement, speeches from Martin Luther King Jr. and activists like Angela Davis as well as rhetoric from racist politicians, the film carries both historical and contemporary relevance.

It was a dream project for Sigel whose life was shaped in his youth by the civil rights movement and protests over the Vietnam War. Yet the DP feared he'd have to turn down Lee's invite due to scheduling. Sigel was deep into lensing the feature *Extraction* (Netflix), a commitment which would cut into needed prep time for *Da 5 Bloods*. But Lee was undaunted. "I remember Spike saying, 'we can do this, we're (filmmaking) veterans,'" said Sigel. "He believed in me. The war had a big impact on my growing up and to get to examine it from Spike's worldview and the perspective of African-American soldiers was a tremendous opportunity. It was also amazing to actually shoot in Vietnam where it all happened when I was growing up."

Lee and Sigel went with three aspect ratios for *Da 5 Bloods*. The movie's opening in contemporary Ho Chi Minh City deployed 2.40:1 widescreen, letterboxing on the top and bottom, capturing a clean, clear look at what Sigel described as "a modern, bustling place." Sigel opted for

the ARRI Alexa LF.

When the story hit the jungle, Sigel explained that the goal was to depict this all-encompassing environment. "The jungle was enveloping our heroes like a Venus flytrap," he said. Towards that end, a 1.85:1 aspect ratio was selected, which opened up the top and bottom of the picture, effectively making the canvas larger—with saturated greens and yellows for the jungle landscape. For this part of the feature, Sigel deployed the ARRI Alexa Mini.

And when moving to the flashback about squad leader Stormin' Norman (Boseman), the goal was to recreate the soldiers' wartime experience which meant a news crew approach from 1971. With journalists embedded in the war at the time, 16mm film would have been the choice. Sigel shot reversal film, a style used in that era, with a 1.33:1 aspect ratio, bringing the edges of the image in, resulting in a square nestled in the middle of the frame. Sigel shot with ARRI 416 16mm cameras, going with Kodak Ektachrome Reversal Film stock, heightening the battlefield environment through the textural qualities of celluloid grain.

Sigel is no stranger to lensing 16mm film, harkening back to his alluded to early documentary days. He remains a lover of shooting film. At the same time, he has diversified meaningfully into digital, notably with the Panavision Genesis camera years ago on *Superman Returns*. He then first experienced Alexa on *Drive*, which he regarded as "the perfect camera" for that movie. He was drawn to its performance in available light and a filmic

look which didn't have "the sharpness or harshness" that had normally been associated with digital cameras.

For Sigel a prime highlight of working on *Da 5 Bloods* was deepening his collaborative bond with Lee whom he describes as being one of the great American filmmaking masters. "Spike likes to work really fast. You have to be well prepared and ready to play," related Sigel. "He's very decisive yet very collaborative. He knows what he wants very much but he listens to you. If he likes an idea, he will be decisive in favor of it. So if you have an idea, you had better believe in it 100 percent."

At press time, Sigel was in post on *Cherry*, a feature he shot for directors Joe and Anthony Russo.

Like *Da 5 Bloods*, the aforementioned *Extraction* was a Netflix film. The Sam Hargrave action-drama, which stars Chris Hemsworth, broke in April and quickly became Netflix's most-watched feature debut to date, drawing 90 million household streams in its first month.

Prior to designing the look for *Extraction*, Sigel photographed *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the exquisite portrait of Freddie Mercury and rock band Queen. Sigel earlier told *SHOOT* that his biggest takeaway or lesson learned from his experience on *Bohemian Rhapsody* was simply "how much I love shooting music."

Sigel's seminal use of exotic film stocks and innovative negative processing methods on *Three Kings* laid a foundation for new avenues of cinematography. In 2010, he photographed Nicolas Winding Refn's Hollywood debut, *Drive*, which won the

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Best Director Award at Cannes and is universally praised for its imagery.

Sigel's other credits include *The Usual Suspects* and the *X-Men* movies for director Bryan Singer; Bob Rafelson's dark noir tale *Blood & Wine* starring Jack Nicholson; Gregory Hoblit's *Fallen* starring Denzel Washington; *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* and *Leatherheads* with longtime collaborator George Clooney; Terry Gilliam's *The Brothers Grimm*; and Alan Ball's directorial debut, *Towelhead*.

## Ollie Downey

Drawing DP Ollie Downey to the second season of *Hanna* were: the story that unfolded during the first season and being able to have a hand in where it would go next; his love of the feature film on which the series is based; and the opportunity to work with directors Eva Husson and David Farr, the show's creator, writer and EP. Downey wound up lensing the first three episodes of season two, all directed by Husson, as well as the season's last two episodes, helmed by Farr.

"Both of these directors were good reasons to get involved," shared Downey who affirmed that your directing collaborators represent "a big factor" in deciding whether to go for a job or not.

Season two debuted on July 3 and a little over a week later came the news that Amazon Studio had given the green light to a third season.

*Hanna* follows the journey of an extraordinary young woman, played by Esmé Creed-Miles, as she evades the relentless pursuit of a sinister government agency and tries to unearth the truth behind who she is. Following her discovery at the end of season one, Hanna now knows she is not the only woman with unparalleled skill and elite training to emerge out of the Utrax program. In season two, she risks her freedom to rescue her friend Clara (Yasmin Monet Prince) from the clutches of the Utrax program at their new facility, The Meadows, run by John Carmichael (Dermot Mulroney) and his second in command, Leo Garner (Anthony Welsh). Hanna finds help in the unlikely form of her previous nemesis, CIA agent Marissa Wiegler (Mireille Enos) who must protect both herself and Hanna from the ruthless organization she once trusted. Yet as Hanna delves deeper into the elusive

world of The Meadows and meets others like herself, including Sandy (Áine Rose Daly) and Jules (Gianna Kiehl), she begins to question her role in the larger context of Utrax's assassin program and ultimately, where she truly belongs.

Downey came into *Hanna* having to navigate a delicate balancing act, maintaining the visual foundation of the series created by DP Dana Gonzales, among others, from the outset of the show (Gonzales shot the very first two episodes) while adding to that look and feel in season two. Gonzales is a five-time Emmy nominee, the most recent nod coming last year for the *Hanna* pilot. He won an Emmy in 2016 for an episode of *Fargo*.

Downey described Gonzales' work on *Hanna* as "very textured, subtle and sophisticated." For Downey, a prime goal was "trying to capture that lovely sensitivity and bring it into the expanded world of season two." He observed that while season one is "a bit like a fairytale" with Hanna pursued by "wicked witch" types, season two "felt a bit broader," calling for a more "coming-of-age" style as we meet other girls who experienced what Hanna went through. "It's an expanded story that still needs that lovely sensitivity (from season one). We hung onto the handheld work, the softness of lighting, the look of naturalism but brought it into this bigger world."

This world was also set in distinctly different locations, observed Downey who noted that the initial season two episodes took place primarily in a big old country house in the north of England while the final two episodes were in Barcelona. "Both locations leave their stamp visually," said Downey. "Eva, the director of the first block of (season two) episodes, comes from an independent French cinema background. She has that softness and light Dutch that Dana (Gonzales) captured in the first season. That's important because as much as the show is part action thriller, it is also part coming-of-age story and about mother-daughter relationships that are intimate and sensitive subjects. Ava felt the approach should be even more naturalistic than the first season. She didn't want viewers to be aware of the lighting. We stripped it back further for a simple, hopefully sensitive approach, telling the story of what these young women

are going through in an extraordinarily strange scenario."

Barcelona posed some logistical challenges. Downey shared that it is Farr's favorite city and for the two episodes he directed they were shooting at least two locations a day. "We had to be precise. It was challenging moving about but at the same time incredibly rewarding, exploring so much that Barcelona has to offer," related Downey. "It's like we were the luckiest tourists in the world."

Downey deployed a pair of ARRI Alexa Minis for *Hanna*, explaining that the camera yields images with "the closest look to film of all the digital cameras. Some might disagree with that but to each their own." He paired the Alexas with Panavision PVintage lenses, providing "a peaceful and flattering feel. Even though this

is an action thriller, we wanted everyone to look great while keeping that softness and sensitivity."

For Downey the success of *Hanna* comes from the top with such influencers/architects as Farr, executive producer Tom Coan and series producer Laura Hastings-Smith. Downey said of Coan, "He lives and breathes the show, listens to everyone to get ideas. He does as much listening as talking." And with credentials that include producing director Steve McQueen's first feature, *Hunger*, Hastings-Smith brings "a brilliant eye," said Downey, to *Hanna*. The cast is also "brilliant," affirmed the DP.

*Hanna* adds to career lensing highlights for Downey which also span such television series as *Temple*, *Electric Dreams* and *Brittania*.

## Flash Back

**August 7, 2015** Cheryl Boone Isaacs was re-elected president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences by the organization's Board of Governors. Jeffrey Kurland was elected first VP; John Bailey, Kathleen Kennedy and Bill Kroyer were elected to VP posts; Jim Gianopulos was elected treasurer; and Phil Robinson was elected secretary. Boone Isaacs is beginning her third term as president and her 23rd year as a governor representing the Public Relations Branch....PRETTYBIRD has signed filmmaker Jason Zada, who's known for his immersive storytelling skills reflected in work for such agencies as W+K, CP+B, Leo Burnett, Saatchi, RPA, Y&R and Grey....Little Minx, the production house headed by founder/EP Rhea Scott, has brought the directorial team Sea Chant—consisting of the L.A.-based Carissa and Andrew Gallo—aboard its roster. Previously the directors were unrepresented in the U.S., working independently for varied clients.....

**August 8, 2010** Goodby, Silverstein & Partners has hired Rick Dennis as executive creative director on Chevrolet. Dennis will oversee all creative duties in the agency's Detroit office, working closely with executive creative directors Rick Condos and Hunter Hindman, who are both based in the San Francisco office of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners. Dennis began his career in the BBDO Detroit mailroom, segued into a copywriter at JWT and CME Detroit, and returned to BBDO as executive creative director. Over the course of his career, he has worked on a multitude of automotive brands including Jeep and Dodge.... Bill Oberlander has joined JWT New York as executive creative director, where he will oversee the Microsoft Commercial business. He joins a Microsoft team that includes Jeremy Postae on Bing and Jim Hord on Microsoft Office. Most recently, Oberlander served as chief creative officer/executive VP of Cossette New York. There he worked on Estée Lauder, Carlsberg Beer, and Cannondale Bikes, among other brands. Prior to assuming the lead creative role at Cossette, Oberlander was executive creative director at McCann Erickson, where he pitched and won the \$350 million Intel business. Before that, he also spent time at Ogilvy on Motorola, AT&T Wireless, Sprite, Ameritrade and Nestlé Waters.... Production house Mothership, a sister company to Digital Domain, has signed director Grzegorz Jonkajtys for commercial and music video work in the U.S....