

DP Vittorio Zorini on the explosion of colors in “Bang Bang Baby” with ARRI equipment

Cinematographer Vittorio Omodei Zorini talks about creating the psychedelic atmosphere of Amazon’s crime series “Bang Bang Baby” with the ALEXA Mini LF and ARRI lighting on set in Italy.

Produced by Amazon Studios, Italian series “Bang Bang Baby” tells the story of a teenage girl who discovers the truth about her criminal father and becomes fascinated by evil. In collaboration with DPs Daria D’Antonio and Timoty Aliprandi, Vittorio Omodei Zorini, cinematographer of films like “Gli equilibristi” and “Brutti e cattivi” and series such as “Diavoli,” creates a mesmerizing world of new light and colors in 1980s Milan. In the interview, he talks about illuminating the set with ARRI lights and shooting in wide format with the ALEXA Mini LF.

Into which world does “Bang Bang Baby” take us?

The series is told from the point of view of Alice Giammatteo, a fatherless teenager who suddenly discovers that her father is alive and belongs to a prominent ‘Ndrangheta family. From that moment on, her identity and her life change profoundly. Visually we tried to create a world of new light and colors seen through Alice’s virgin eyes.

Where did you shoot and for how long?

We had about 15 set days per episode for ten episodes. Six episodes were directed by Michele Alhaique, two by Margherita Ferri and two by Giuseppe Bonito. I photographed the first four episodes all directed by Michele Alhaique, four episodes were photographed by Daria D’Antonio and two by Timoty Aliprandi. There was great collaboration and teamwork that allowed us to give “Bang Bang Baby” a strong identity and visual coherence. The first phase of Alice’s story takes place in Bussolengo, in the provincial areas of Lombardy, and then proceeds to 1980s Milan, which we recreated mainly in Rome. The locations include Calabria, which was also shot mainly in Lazio, the region around Rome. Unfortunately, we shot in the toughest period of COVID-19 and it was not easy to move from region to region.

What guidance did you get from director Michele Alhaique?

We did a lot of preparation work because we wanted the series to have a very strong identity. It is a period story of a particular era, namely the 1980s, seen through the eyes of a young girl who comes from the provinces and finds herself catapulted into a glittering, colorful, and, in its own way, intrusive Milan. That world needed to be perceived as modern—not to evoke the past but the future. Alice finds herself looking at her new identity, new places, and new stories, witnessing an explosion of color and brilliance contrasted by areas of uncertainty and darkness. We tried to be excessive in our choices, unafraid to step on the gas. As references we took directors and films that describe reality, but with a borderline look: the Coen brothers, Paolo Sorrentino, Paul Thomas Anderson, certain things from “Euphoria,” looking for our own way that was a bit excessive but still anchored in realism. The camera was always very close to the face of the protagonist because we wanted to look at the world through her eyes and interpret what she sees, rather than observe it as a spectator.

How was your experience with the ALEXA Mini LF?

We are very satisfied and proud that we made this choice. The wide format gave us a lot: It allowed us to shoot with wide-angle lenses but with depth of field closer to medium lenses, providing great cleanliness and quality. We were always with 21 or 29, very close to the characters, to render a somewhat distorted idea of reality.

Were there any special situations to handle during the shoot?

Michele is a director with clear ideas regarding storytelling through images: He always knows exactly which shot determines that precise moment of a scene. He doesn't shoot and then leave the choice to editing. This translated into a constant search for the right shot with the right light management. From time to time, this led to somewhat complex situations that felt challenging.

Do you remember particularly challenging scenes?

In the beginning we shot in Civitavecchia, in a large abandoned prison, where we were dealing with significant spaces. We were starting from scratch with set design and lighting. Set designer Tamara Marini and decorator Alessandra Querzola did a great job. In Civitavecchia we shot the scene where Adriano Giannini meets his daughter in prison for the first time. An important moment that we wanted to emphasize with light, as well as Alice's introduction into the 'Ndrangheta family. There were also many scenes shot on location, such as those in Alice's and Grandma Lina's house. We wanted the latter to be a place frozen in time; a Milan of color and excess, a kind of cave, an old house where light and color were elements that only came from the outside. Alice's house, on the other hand, is characterized by pastel colors: pink, orange, brown. Initially it is the only warm place for her. Then the girl changes, and with her, on an almost unconscious level, so does her gaze and the contrast becomes more obvious. In some of Alice's mental journeys we tried to recreate visual atmospheres of 1980s American series such as "Family Ties" or "The Bionic Woman."

How did the ALEXA Mini LF handle the various lighting situations?

Very well. The series has a lot of dark areas and prominent blacks, but at the same time strong lighting. The interiors are always lit from the outside. The camera, which is very versatile, responded extremely well, with a great reading of the blacks and the ability to contain the highlights. It was definitely the right medium. We tended to work at 800 ASA, the camera's native ASA, which also offers the great convenience of having internal ND filters.

How did you control the camera movements?

We tried to have a form of classicism: very little handheld camera shots and many dollies with sometimes very complex movements. The camera was always in motion, with movements that allowed us to get close to Alice's eyes and then follow her gaze with continuity.

Did you tend to work at a particular T-stop or did it vary a lot?

I almost always work at very open apertures and exploit the lens to its maximum brightness. With Supreme, I worked a lot at 1.5, an aperture I particularly like because it allows me to have little depth of field. Working with the camera so close to the actors and with open apertures allowed us to be very selective with focus. We almost never used the zoom, precisely because we were so close to the actors.

What was your lighting system?

I always use ARRI lights, I'm a big fan of them. The M-Series is very convenient, I often use the ARRI M90 and M40, and the ARRI SkyPanel LEDs which are now irreplaceable. I really enjoy working with the console and making light variations during the take. The ability to control the brightness and color of the LEDs with apps and the phone has become very important to me. I would have a hard time having to do without these tools.

To what extent did you use monitoring on set?

Together with DIT Andrea Curiazi, I work a lot with LUTs on set. With the digital medium you can have a creative discussion with the director thinking about the final result already on set. This is a crucial step for me, because I tend to make the choices on set and not in postproduction. We did a lot of preparation work to build an LUT with colorist Claudio Del Bravo to deliver a job as complete as possible on the shoot.

How did you watch the footage?

I work a lot with stills, more than with dailies. The guys working with me would sort them by episode and scene, and I would reconstruct, as we shot, the episode in the form of a still.

Do you have any other projects ahead?

I recently finished shooting the first three episodes of "The Good Mothers" directed by Julian Jarrold. On this project, I worked with ALEXA Mini LF and the ARRI lighting kit as well. I really appreciate ALEXA's color separation in a somewhat pastel world. I tend to work very softly with light, so I need precision in color separation and clean images. On this, the ALEXA comes to my aid by simplifying my work.