

# Heaven Can Wait



Nicole Hirsch Whitaker and James Whitaker detail their collaboration on the Epix series *Perpetual Grace, LTD*

**By Laretta Prevost**

**The Epix series *Perpetual Grace, LTD* is a darkly comedic caper, a neo-noir rife with silhouettes, symmetry and backlight — and even its fair share of black-and-white. Created by Steve Conrad and Bruce Terris, the story follows James (Jimmi Simpson), a disillusioned young man who’s been tricked by a magician (Damon Herriman) to try to pull off an identity-theft caper that tumbles awry in a series of twists and turns, each of which seems to introduce another bizarre character. As James juggles this supporting cast’s needs, it becomes increasingly clear that the old couple he set out — or was set up — to swindle has a trick or two of**

their own up their sleeve. Indeed, Pastor Byron Brown (Ben Kingsley) and his wife, Lillian (Jacki Weaver) — affectionately known as “Pa” and “Ma” — are decidedly intent on amassing their treasures on Earth, heaven be damned.

As the law closes in on the characters, the filmmaking arrests the series’ viewers. Wide shots are sweepingly “Western”; close-ups capture characters dead-center, bathed in broad keys with a sharp edge and no fill; overhead lamps trail off in a blur of bokeh filtered through smoky atmosphere. And as the plot twists and thickens, shots and angles are repeated, the callbacks sending thrills of recognition through an audience delighting in James’ plight.

Behind the scenes, the filmmakers demonstrated patient commitment to their cinematic style, maintaining their high standards across the 10 episodes on an eight-day-per-episode schedule. Cinematographer Nicole Hirsch Whitaker was behind the camera for Episodes 3 through 10 after James Whitaker shot the first two episodes; James went on to direct Episodes 3, 4, 7 and 8, with Conrad directing the remainder.



◀ As the series *Perpetual Grace, LTD* unfolds, it becomes clear that Pastor Byron Brown (Ben Kingsley, right) and his wife, Lillian (Jacki Weaver) — aka “Pa” and “Ma” — aren’t the innocent couple they first appear to be. ▲ James Whitaker (left) served as cinematographer for the first two episodes. ▶ Nicole Hirsch Whitaker (with viewfinder) shot the remainder of the series. ▶▼ Co-creator Steve Conrad (right) directs Jimmi Simpson (portraying James).



“I couldn’t imagine working without the Whitakers,” Conrad says of the cinematographers, with whom he had also collaborated on the Amazon series *Patriot*. “They are visual artists. To make a quality [project], you need good intentions and hard work, as well as talent and artistry to distinguish yourself from other films. Jimi and Nicole have a strong work ethic and a calm manner, and they have a tremendous amount of talent.”

“If Nicole and I differ photographically,” James Whitaker muses, “it’s [in the fact] that she comes from a strong background in still photography and she leans into making beautifully abstract frames, while I tend to lean toward strong symmetry. We have found a fantastic balance in our craft,



Unit photography by Lewis Jacobs. All images courtesy of Epix.



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▲ James is pulled into a plot by Pa and Ma's son, Paul Allen Brown (Damon Herriman, far right). ▼ From left: Gaffer Jeremy Oliver, Nicole Whitaker, James Whitaker, A-camera operator Cedric Martin and A-camera dolly grip Dustin VonLossberg.

and we push each other to find the best way to approach the story through filmmaking. There is a deep level of respect in our collaboration that is rare."

"There's no shot that isn't designed or graphic," Nicole Whitaker adds. "Everything was planned. There was no 'grabbing' anything.

"Steve loves simple shots where

a lot happens, and then complicated shots where people are still," she continues. "We always created a shot list, but still, when I would come to work, I didn't always know exactly what he was going to want to do that day. He is constantly creating storyboards and forming new visual ideas overnight, so we had many tools at our disposal. Most days we would carry a Technocrane or Grip Trix with

a [stabilized] head. We always had a Ronin and a Steadicam, as well as other tools in the grip truck, thanks to Jim Shelton, our incredible key grip. This allowed Steve and me to create and carry out his vision on the day. But I love that when I see the show, it still feels very organic. Sometimes it's harder to get to that organic place unless you have those tools — and a wonderful line producer who understands why we need them, as well."

The characters are often shown small and alone in the frame, as though they're looking for their place in the world. "We were interested in the psychology of the landscape,"



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## TECH SPECS

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2:1

Digital Capture

Arri Alexa SXT, Alexa Mini

Vantage Hawk V-Lite Vintage '74 1.3x anamorphic, MiniHawk; Cooke S4/i; Keslow RayBender; Angénieux Optimo

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James Whitaker says, noting that the filmmakers would wait for the sun to reach the right angle before they would shoot. Conrad adds, “We wanted the light to do things for us rather than have us at its mercy.”

**Among the filmmakers’ visual inspirations** was the work of photographer and painter Saul Leiter — an influence that manifested onscreen with the use of water on windshields, dust, and dirt, all of which served to add texture to the image. And the series’ Western vibe, evidenced in its color palette and sweeping wide shots, grew out of such references as *The Wild Bunch*, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*.

Flashbacks are presented in black-and-white. “We knew we wanted the flashbacks to be noir-ish,” James Whitaker says. For these scenes, the filmmakers looked at the films *In Cold Blood*, *Down By Law* and

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“So much of television now is simply following the actor around,” says Bruce Terris, who served as co-showrunner alongside Steve Conrad. “Alternatively, you can design a shot to increase the tension of the scene. James and Nicole are rooted in the story, not just thinking about what’s the most beautiful way to film, but always thinking about how to shoot a scene to best convey the story points and illuminate the characters. That’s what makes them magical cinematographers.”

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*Dead Man*, as well as the photography of Michael Kenna and Joel-Peter Witkin, the former known for his silvery landscapes with deep blacks and textured highlights, and the latter for his hauntingly beautiful depictions of the macabre.

Company 3 senior colorist Sean Coleman joined the Whitakers for camera testing and helped them develop their LUTs for the series. The filmmakers were interested in making heavy use of blacks, adding contrast

while still holding onto detail, and embracing yellows, browns and desaturated skies — a look that helped to smooth the transitions in and out of the black-and-white flashbacks. The Whitakers remained involved in the show’s color through the final grade. “I feel like half of our work as cinematographers is in the DI,” James Whitaker notes.

As Nicole Whitaker would be behind the camera for eight of the 10 episodes, “we wanted her to have

► The pastor stands outside Our Lady of Perpetual Grace Church. ▼ Uncle Dave (Kurtwood Smith) walks outside of the Browns’ barn.



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▲▲ Car headlights backlight Pa as he searches for Ma.  
▲ Scotty Sholes (Hana Mae Lee) walks down the street in Half Acre.

ownership of the overall look,” James Whitaker says. “I’d scout and run locations by Nicole. She helped with LUT creation and lens selections, and she pushed me to set the camera to 1,600 ASA for some extra grit.”

The show was shot with Arri’s Alexa SXT and Alexa Mini cameras, which captured 3.4K ArriRaw and were framed for a final 2:1 aspect ratio. Vantage Hawk V-Lite Vintage ’74 1.3x anamorphic primes were the

production’s primary lenses, while flashbacks were predominantly shot with Vantage MiniHawk Anamorphic Hybrid primes. “The 55mm [Vintage ’74] with a +1 diopter was our preferred lens for close-ups,” Nicole Whitaker shares. “Wides were a 24 or 28mm. We generally shot one camera, but we used B camera as often as we could without sacrificing the A camera’s shot or lighting.”

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“The Vintage ’74 anamorphics flare in unusual ways,” James Whitaker offers. “They break up the flare so it sort of shreds across the lens. They create an image that is a little more painterly and less real.”

“On the MiniHawks,” he continues, “we’d generally expose at a T1.7 or 2 for a ‘hot’ feeling, as the highlights bloom out a bit. That is also where the bokeh gets most interesting.”

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In a flashback scene early in the first episode, would-be grifter-magician Paul lures James into a scheme to relieve Paul’s parents of the \$4 million swindled from their church community. A wide interior shot of a bar shows James and Paul at opposite ends of the frame as the camera slowly pushes in. A similarly symmetrical and slow-moving wide shot captures the men again when the conversation continues outside. As Paul tightens the net, hard cuts between the interior and exterior setups show him a few seats closer to James at the bar, a few steps closer outside.

The scene then switches to close-ups within the conversation. “As an audience,” James Whitaker notes, “we are meant to feel we’re now with the characters, we’re with the story, and now these two are partners in crime. When Steve and I direct, we get very specific with camera movement and placement. We know exactly where we are going to cut and where we want these pieces to be used.

“Lighting-wise, this scene was pretty simple,” Whitaker continues. For the interior, gaffer Jeremy Oliver replaced overhead bulbs with spottier sources to create hot spots on the bar and subtly bounce light back up and onto the actors. “We played the scene silhouette-y and shadowy,” Whitaker explains. “It’s a shady conversation that happens in darkness.” The key side of the actors’ faces was underexposed two stops; a dimmed Arri SkyPanel S360 through a 6’x6’ frame of Full Grid gave a back/edge light to Paul that reached across the bar to James.

Two condors, each with one S360, were used for the bar’s exterior. The actors faced toward camera in the wide shot, and the lights were positioned as back-crosses, giving each actor an edge, and keying them when they turned toward each other. The S360s were the only sources for the scene, save for a fill card used when

the camera moves into a medium two-shot. “Generally I like to keep things simple,” Whitaker says. “Simple doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s not expensive, but just one or two things doing the work.”

During prep, the S360s were tested to ensure they were bright enough for night work. “As long as you don’t need a huge throw, they’re really brilliant,” Whitaker offers. “They’re soft already, you can run them remotely right from the camera’s position, and you no longer have to worry about staging color frames up in a condor.

“Prep is the best place for you to shoot the movie in your head,” he continues. “Usually I have a thousand questions for the writer or director about why we are where we are in the story — where’d this person come from? And that might give me a clue about what I can do visually to enhance the character’s psychology.”

**Nicole Whitaker points to a memorable scene from Episode 106, “When Doves Cry,”** when waffling sheriff Hector Contreras (Luis Guzmán) helps Pa chop down a tree in order to silence a crying dove so that the men can hear the calls of Ma, whom Hector has buried alive — with a breathing device. Shot in the dead of night, the scene is full of silhouettes and bursting flares. “I’m a huge fan of Todd Hido, whose work has a soft ambience and feels like it’s been shot at dusk, with some kind of warm light at play,” the cinematographer says. “We thought it would be fun to try having the primary light for the scene be the car headlights.”

Open-faced 1K tungsten units replaced the car’s actual headlights and were powered by a small battery in the back of the car. Providing further ambience, two “moon boxes” were positioned above the frame, each fitted with two SkyPanel S360s surrounded by 10 SkyPanel S60s that were aimed outward at 45-degree



James Whitaker on location for a cold and snowy day exterior.

angles, all set to 8,000K. The resulting setup looks simple onscreen and gave both cast and crew considerable freedom of movement while shooting.

In another scene, Glenn Pirdoo (Dash Williams), the teenage employee of a pawnshop, treks across a desert under the dubious assumption that west is always to the left. Having suffered blunt-force trauma to the head, his vision is severely impaired. “We tested at least 15 different combinations of filters to find our ‘Glenn look’ for the character’s POVs,” Whitaker recalls. The filmmakers ultimately landed on a mix that included the Vantage Bethke Effect filters Dandelion and Kojak Red as well as Vantage’s Glare Effect D filter — with Vaseline placed

directly on the filters — all paired with a Keslow RayBender modified Cooke S4 lens. The resulting images are full of sharp flares, distortion and shards of red.

Glenn’s trek was captured via drone — provided by Copter Kids and outfitted with an Alexa Mini and Angénieux Optimo 15-40mm (T2.6) zoom — and Steadicam, as well as with an Alexa Mini on a DJI Ronin 2 stabilizer attached to a pipe that could be carried from alongside the camera, taking the weight from the operator. To lend a distorted, wide-lens look to close-ups, a +1 diopter was used with a 45mm or 55mm Vintage ’74 lens, enabling the lens to be positioned mere inches from the actor’s face. →

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“What we do for a living is so much fun,” Nicole Whitaker says. “We’re so lucky. I love going to work, and I love people. But even when you’re having a great day, the work can be really hard. So having people who keep me happy and support me is so important.”

James Whitaker adds, “We could never have created such an amazing show without the hard work of our crew — key grip James Shelton, gaffer Jeremy Oliver, A-camera operator Cedric Martin, B-camera operator and 2nd-unit cinematographer Shasta Spahn, A-camera 1st AC Sebastian Vega, B-camera 1st AC Sarah Galley and DIT Ryan Kunkleman. We worked in tough, cold conditions, and they were all there 100 percent every day. We can’t thank them enough.”

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Sheriff Hector Contreras (Luis Guzmán) stands beside an ice-cream truck.

typically bouncing an Arri M40 or M18 into an 8-by-8-foot bleached muslin and then back through a Full Grid or Magic Cloth diffuser." Magic Cloth, he adds, is "just beautiful because it smooths things right out."

"I tend to like to get my diffusions as close to the actor as possible," he continues. "We shot largely single camera, so the camera could be 4 feet from the actors and I could get a diffusion frame super-close, and that gives the light a glowing quality. That also allowed us to get negative fill super-close to control our contrast."

"The joke in the lighting department was that they didn't make a light soft enough for the Whitakers," Oliver says affectionately. "We added several layers of diffusion to every light, starting with Magic Cloth, then an intermediate layer of Opal, with another layer of 216, 129 or Opal just off camera."

**In general, softening filters were not** used on the show. Instead, James Whitaker says he prefers to soften close-ups with lighting and during the digital grade, and he further notes that he will almost always change his light source between a wide shot and a close-up. "That

might sound time-consuming, but when you get it down to some sort of science, you can light a close-up with this methodology within 10 minutes," he says. "When I light close-ups, while I will occasionally use an LED, my preferred light is a book light. It can be tungsten or HMI,

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“I loved working with the Whitakers,” Oliver continues. “They both have a different yet beautiful approach to the craft of cinema. Jimi was very surgical and specific in his approach, while Nicole allowed things to be more fluid. It was all in the support of the writing and directing. It was probably the most creatively fulfilling experience that I’ve had on set.”

Nicole Whitaker muses, “The most important part of my job as an artist and storyteller is to make sure that my work is not only beautiful, but also relevant to the story that we are trying to convey. If the images don’t drive the words on the page, you will lose your audience — and if no one wants to see what we work so hard to create, then I haven’t done my job.”

“The only way I react on set is by my gut,” James Whitaker says. “It’s becoming second nature, finally



**Pa and Ma stick together through thick and thin.**

— how can we separate foreground from background, perfect the key, perfect the background, get that wall dark quickly?” And, despite his work as a director, he adds, “I will be a cinematographer until I die. I love the work so much. It’s fascinating to me.”

*A Q&A with Nicole Hirsch Whitaker about her career up to and including Perpetual Grace, LTD can be found at [bit.ly/graceac](https://bit.ly/graceac), and a podcast with James Whitaker discussing his work on the Steve Conrad-created series Patriot can be found at [bit.ly/patriotacpodcast](https://bit.ly/patriotacpodcast).*

