

CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

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THE WATER MAN

Matthew J. Lloyd CSC, ASC

PRETTY HARD CASES

Kristin Fieldhouse CSC



**FREE
ISSUE**



CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

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Fostering cinematography in Canada since 1957. The Canadian Society of Cinematographers was founded by a group of Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa cameramen. Since then over 800 cinematographers and persons in associated occupations have joined the organization.

The CSC provides tangible recognition of the common bonds that link film and digital professionals, from the aspiring student and camera assistant to the news veteran and senior director of photography.

We facilitate the dissemination and exchange of technical information and endeavor to advance the knowledge and status of our members within the industry. As an organization dedicated to furthering technical assistance, we maintain contact with non-partisan groups in our industry but have no political or union affiliation.

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Cover Caption: Amiah Miller as Jo in the film *The Water Man*.

Credit: Harpo Films, ShivHans Pictures

The Water Man

Matthew J. Lloyd CSC, ASC
Merges Life and Fantasy

By Trevor Hogg, Special to *Canadian Cinematographer*
Images Harpo Films, ShivHans Pictures

As part of the first online edition of the Toronto International Film Festival in 2020, acclaimed actor David Oyelowo had the world premiere of his feature directorial debut *The Water Man*. Oyelowo appears in front of the camera alongside Lonnie Chavis, Amiah Miller, Rosario Dawson, Maria Bello and Alfred Molina. The story revolves around a teenage boy (Chavis) searching for a mythical figure who might be able save his terminal ill mother (Dawson) by granting her eternal life. The family drama caught the attention of RLJE Films, which acquired the North American rights, while Netflix serves as the international distributor.

Hired to be the cinematographer was Matthew J. Lloyd CSC, ASC (*Spider-Man: Far from Home*), who partnered with veteran collaborator Sean Coleman (*Bird Box*) at Company 3 to grade the footage.

The elegance and intellect of Oyelowo, as well as his grace under pressure, impressed Lloyd. “David has obviously studied many of the directors that he has worked for as an actor and has absorbed a lot of that,” the cinematographer says. “He has a lot of resources to call upon when he doesn’t know something. It never felt like a true first-time director scenario.” However, the director also being a cast member did complicate matters. “David would be



Amiah Miller as Jo.

in costume, standing by the monitor directing and call, 'Action!' He would literally run into his own shot and then watch it in playback. It was amazing to see. He was very nimble," Lloyd says, adding that there was room for collaboration. "We spent a lot of time going through the script talking about what each scene was about, not necessarily the shot. There are certain punctuation shots that get you in and out of scenes which can be quite specific. But in terms of the general rendering of a scene, I don't find talking about two-shots and singles helpful because once you see the scene unfolding you understand what it is that you need."

Preproduction began in April 2019, while principal photography commenced outside of Portland, Oregon, in late May 2019 and concluded in early July 2019. "The one obvious challenge was the variety of locations that were going to be necessary," Lloyd states. "It was some of the deepest scouting that I've ever done where you're hiking. We would check our step meters at the end of the day and would be routinely doing eight to 10 miles of walking around. Very little of it is set or greenscreen. We shot in a real house and turned it into our go-to set. The house was reworked to serve the specific needs of the script. The only greenscreen work were the



danger sequences with the kids involving the horses, the log and fire. But the majority of it is true Oregon wilderness.”

The horses were real but layered and duplicated to increase their numbers. “The kids were pulled off with chroma screens so they could look like the horses were right on top of them,” Lloyd says. “The town scenes were captured in Estacada, Oregon. It was near to where we were going to shoot the house and had that main street vibe you would expect from the non-urban American landscape.”

Visual references and inspiration came from shooting, scouting, watching movies and looking at stills from past projects, according to Lloyd. “David

had things that he responded to in terms of types of shots such as how tight is a closeup or how wide is a wide shot,” he explains.

The Water Man was predominately captured with two ARRI ALEXA Mini cameras with a third camera brought in for complicated scenes. It was shot in 3.4K open gate and Cooke Anamorphic/i lenses from Koerner Camera in Portland. The visual effects sequences were shot spherical with Cooke S4 so that the lens mapping and focus falloff would not be as hard for Pixomondo to deal with when compositing. “We used the T5 Macro for most of the closeups in order to get closer than you usually can with an anamorphic lens without diopters.

This is an Adventure

Not one to shy away from challenging roles, whether it be portraying civil rights icon Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Selma*), MI5 agent Danny Hunter (*MI-5*), or providing the voice of Scar (*The Lion Guard*), David Oyelowo adds feature film

directing to his distinguished resume with *The Water Man*. According to the actor-director, a critical part of the storytelling is having an understanding and appreciation for cinematography. “Growing up watching films and being transported

by them, so much of that was tied to imagery,” Oyelowo says. “I’ve had the good fortune of being in the midst of seeing how the sausage is made, in terms of being on great film sets with great filmmakers. In some ways you lose a little bit of your awe around how these images are created. Truly great cinematography is when I’m still taken back to what it felt like to watch great images



Left and top: Amiah Miller. Bottom: (L-R) Lonnie Chavis and Amiah Miller.

The 40 mm was a good midrange,” Lloyd says. An important visual element was being able to isolate the characters of Gunner (Chavis) and Jo (Miller) in the landscape so the aspect ratio of 2.35:1 was chosen. “The traditional scenes were ProRes, which is fine for a 2K finish, especially when you have somebody like Sean grading it, and ARRIRAW for all of the visual effects.”

A fair number of LED lights were used like ARRI SkyPanels. “Most of the fire stuff is tungsten,” Lloyd remarks. “I used the Hudson Spider, which is a terrific instrument

that can be turned into a lot of different things with one head. It can become a big soft box or a harder parabolic thing. It has a lot of output and is flexible. The Sourcemaker 8x8 Blanket lights I used to clean up skin and fight off some of the green coming off

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David has obviously studied many of the directors that he has worked for as an actor and has absorbed a lot of that. He has a lot of resources to call upon when he doesn't know something. It never felt like a true first-time director scenario.

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for the first time on a big screen.”

It was through the eyes of directors that Oyelowo was introduced to cinematography. “I understand what a director is doing or has done in the past more so,” he says. “But I will say that Anthony Dod Mantle [DFF, BSC, ASC] made a great impression on me when I did *The Last King of Scotland* with him; in particular his style of structured imagery mixed

with cinéma vérité. I've worked with Bradford Young ASC on *Middle of Nowhere*, *Selma* and *A Most Violent Year*. Bradford is phenomenal at making black skin work well on film, especially when it is interacting with white people on screen.”

While performing in a short film shot by Matthew J. Lloyd CSC, ASC, Oyelowo decided that he wanted to collaborate with him on *The Water*

Man. “We shot it in five days, and I was so taken by how creative Matt was with his camera,” Oyelowo recalls. “It struck me that he was just coming off of *Spider-Man: Far from Home*. A cinematographer who is that nimble but also knows how to do scope and scale on huge movies is someone who has the whole package. I'm so glad that Matt felt the confidence to come on this



(L-R) Lonnie Chavis and Amiah Miller.

journey because he absolutely had what I wanted in terms of capturing the intimacy of the family but also the scale of the adventure.”

Oyelowo was able to leverage the visual effects expertise that Lloyd had gained from working on Marvel Studio productions. “The ambition lay in how we were going to be platforming the imagination of kids and the size of the world that

they were stepping into,” Oyelowo says. “I needed a cinematographer who could capture as much of that scope, scale and size in camera but understood the moments where visual effects would have to take over. The log crossing over the river was one of those moments where Matt’s experience with visual effects paid off. I’ve had experience working with visual effects as an

actor, but it is a different thing when you are building that. To have a cinematographer with a high level of confidence around how to do it was absolutely invaluable.”

The wilderness locations restricted the type of equipment that could be utilized. “Going on those location scouts with Matt was invaluable,” according to Oyelowo. “Matt understood quickly that he required



of the foliage in the forest scenes.” The light scheme for the house is moodier. “There is some heavy stuff happening there. Mom is sick. The family just got to town. Dad and son aren’t connected as ultimately they will be towards the end of the film. We tried to open up those ending sequences to make them feel daylight and open, so you feel a change happen visually in the house.”

Animated storyboards were created for the big sequences such as the forest fire and river crossings scenes. “You think about the blue-sky version where you can do anything and then assess what parts of that are going to give you the most scope and realistic effects,” Lloyd explains. “For example, when the kids are crossing a flowing river at height over a log, you have this impossible scenario of working with kids near a river that is moving fast enough. You know that every time we see the water it is going to be a visual effects shot. It is a matter of figuring out what is the ultimate number of shots that we want to invest in a scene like that to sell the peril and stakes to the audience. It becomes a combination of a real environment where you have everything leading up to the log shot in camera. You shoot them looking across a real river where Pixomondo put a simple composite of our set piece log without seeing too much of the water. You’re preserving your resources for the big shots in the sequence.”

Practical effects were utilized for the forest fire. “Most of the cover-

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It was some of the deepest scouting that I’ve ever done where you’re hiking. We would check our step meters at the end of the day and would be routinely doing eight to 10 miles of walking around.

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camera equipment that you could put on your back and literally go hiking with, but still have the type of lenses that gave us scope and the cinematic qualities that we needed and wanted. I never wanted the nature of our location in any way to detrimentally affect the scope and scale of the film. I relied heavily on Matt to figure out the kind of equipment that would enable us to be both

nimble and capture that scale.”

In the third act of the film, vibrancy gives way to desaturation. “It was to do with the fact that images inherently elicit a feeling,” Oyelowo remarks. “If you are looking at a frame that is vibrant with colour, it suggests life and hope. If you desaturate that same image, it extricates some of that hope. When Gunner [Lonnie Chavis] goes out

into the forest, he is full of hope about being able to save his mother [Rosario Dawson]. As time passes, that hope begins to ebb because it’s taking longer and more effort to find this mythical figure that might be the answer to cheating death. I wanted in a subtle way to diminish that feeling of vibrancy that we had earlier on in the film. By the end at the movie, that vibrancy is back. Even though

age is flame bars in the foreground giving you the effect of heat ripples,” Lloyd reveals. “Then a lot of lighting to produce the effect on the actors’ faces. We had a large tube pumping soft billowy smoke and fans to move it around; that was bumped up in the closeup to try to sell it without needing to see fire. We had the forest service with us for the whole time. When going into these areas you have to be specific as to where you want to be. It was a lot of packing things and carrying them in by hand. There weren’t a lot of vehicles to move stuff around. It was a labour-intensive operation to get in and out of those areas.”

Disorientation prevails in the cabin scene with the handheld camera motion, and lack of clarity and sharpness in the imagery. “It’s a limited depth of field where you only have one razor-thin section of the axis left in focus,” Lloyd says. “Things are falling off quickly. It helps to add to the mystery and hide the seams to some degree.”

Comic book sequences featured in the film were brought to cinematic life through animation. “They were well-identified in the script and were originally intended to be live-action,” Lloyd offers. “But it became clear that was not going to be realistic in terms of capturing the flood, and the aesthetic of the storybook element was pivotal to the film and was something that worked in well with those animation sequences. It was figuring out where they were going to go, and what shot would get you transitioned in and out of those things.”

The film’s colour palette goes from vibrant to monochromatic to reflect the coming-of-age adventures that Amblin Entertainment is known for, as well as the dark undertones of a fairy tale. “Most

of that idea of desaturation in the third act of the film was a David invention,” Lloyd says. “Once I understood what the elements were going to be there, in terms of the smoke and some charred woods that we found to work in, the desaturation started to make more sense and feel integrated. Sean Coleman did a fantastic job of subtly pulling more colour out as we drew to the climax and rescue.” One LUT was utilized by Lloyd and Coleman. “We had to do the DI remotely because the facilities were closed when we were finishing,” the cinematographer says. “That took some R&D in terms of how we would check the work and getting monitors set up in the house to be able to double check that everything was going according to plan. I like to get directors and producers in on it sooner than later because there are a lot of notes in the DI process.”

For Coleman, it was important not to radically change things in the DI such as with the comic book animation moments. “They build these sequences with colours that have been accepted and liked, so my job is to bring that to life without randomly changing things within that colour space,” Coleman says. The scene when the children are sitting around the campfire was shot day for night. “My job is dependent on what was done before I get to it. Matt did a fantastic job of lighting it,” he adds. “It comes out looking natural. I don’t know you can look at the scene and say that they shot it during the day. It is funny. The movie is colourful, but there is no part where we added in any colour. The colour was all baked in. We did take a lot out as David wanted the smoke to play in the forest and for it to feel like the fire was an eminent danger. There was a lot of manipulation with that stuff.

the circumstance hasn’t changed, what Gunner comes to learn is that love and seizing the hope of the day, as opposed to worrying incessantly about what might be tomorrow, is the thing to gravitate towards.

“I always wanted there to be these moments when the kids feel so tiny in the frame in these big environments,” Oyelowo explains. “The reason I wanted that

is to typify how insurmountable the circumstances they found themselves in. I wanted the shooting style to be fairly classic. We didn’t want it to get too handheld and juddery in that way; we wanted it to be poetic. I wanted to make a film where every time you can get a sense of what the story is and where the characters are by virtue of looking at a still frame. The

framing, the size of the characters within it, and where the camera is in the home or outside, these were all things that Matt and I talked about. Without him there I would have been completely lost.”

By Trevor Hogg



Top: Lonnie Chavis from the climactic scene in *The Water Man*.
Bottom: (L-R) Lonnie Chavis and Amiah Miller.

It was thoroughly thought out.” The fantasy and real worlds collide inside of the mysterious hut. “It morphs into a graphic novel aesthetic. I love that scene. It’s beautiful.”

Indispensable support was provided by A camera/Steadicam operator Matthew Moriarty, key grip Sean Devine and gaffer Edward Barnes. “In terms of challenges, it’s an adventure movie in the woods with kids,” Lloyd reflects. “You have restrictions on the hours the kids can work, and that time of year your best light is early and very late. You can’t have the kids on both ends. You’re always trying to find

ways to work outdoors that give you the best visuals but inside the parameters that have to happen for the logistics and execution. You work with the AD to schedule and come up with smart ways to give you the best shot and have it look like something special. For what we had to work with in regards to the visual effects sequences that Pixomondo executed, like the log crossing and horses, they were well done. I love Rosario Dawson’s performance and Amiah Miller in that abandoned mill with the graffiti, which was a special location. I was happy how that turned out.” 🍷