



**SHE,
THE
PEOPLE**



Three Guild cinematographers specializing in unscripted take home the Emmy for a timely new documentary on Apple's streaming platform.

BY **MARGOT LESTER**

PHOTOS & FRAMEGRABS COURTESY OF **APPLE TV+**

***Girls State* is more than a play-by-play of a week-long government camp for high school seniors. Beyond chronicling the process of forming a government, nurturing leadership skills and strengthening civic responsibility, the documentary, a sibling to the 2021 Sundance hit *Boys State* (also co-directed by Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss), showcases young women finding and using their voices to bridge racial and ideological divides. We see the teens process the 2022 Dobbs decision (which took away the constitutional right to abortion), grapple with disappointment for their own goals at the camp and ultimately seek common cause.**



“Both films are meant to explore political behavior and get interesting portraits of coming-of-age as a young man and woman,” McBaine shares. And, like human siblings, the two projects share DNA but are uniquely their own cinematic journeys. Each captures the action at programs that convene student delegates from across the state for an intensive experience in campaigning and governing.

“We do see some darkness in these programs,” Moss adds. “There were dirty tricks in *Boys State*. There’s anxiety and fear that limit the rights and freedoms of women in the country in *Girls State*. What’s unique about both films is that these young people are facing existential threats, but they’re still optimistic. They have every reason to be

disillusioned and cynical, but they choose to become activists and political agitators.”

Boys State won Primetime Emmys for Outstanding Documentary or Nonfiction Special and Outstanding Directing in the same category. *Girls State* earned Emmy nominations for 2024 Outstanding Documentary and Directing, winning the latter, and also taking home the trophy for Outstanding Cinematography for a Nonfiction Program. The film is shot in a cinema verité style. As Moss notes: “It’s not about coverage – we’re not looking for beautiful B-roll. It’s about earning intimacy and capturing big and small moments. This is the kind of work that can be hard and frustrating. You have to be comfortable stepping into this maelstrom.”

Some of the same crew returned from *Boys State*, including (one of seven) directors of photography, ICG member Thorsten Thielow. McBaine and Moss wanted more women on the crew, prompting the addition of Local 600 directors of photography Laura Hudock and Laela Kilbourn [ICG Magazine December 2017], both of whom possess deep experience in verité and documentaries. The filmmakers interviewed prospective subjects and paired each with a DP. While technical chops were crucial, emotional intelligence (EQ) was equally vital. “It’s emotional work,” McBaine describes. “These teenagers are going through a very stressful week. *Girls State* is a crucible for a lot of them. They were vulnerable. It’s such a stress test. We needed DP’s who have that kind of EQ on top of the



technical know-how.”

“Nobody sat down and blocked a scene, or went over a script to discuss and get creative over how a certain scene should visually feel,” Thielow describes. “We talked about interpersonal connections. We talked about boundaries. We talked about how the camera permits us to be there, so it doesn’t feel voyeuristic, or presentational. We want viewers to be invited in and experience all the things that are going on in each character’s story.”

A prime example was when Kilbourn matched up with Tochi Ihekona, a Black student running for attorney general. While campaigning during lunch, Tochi stops by a table of white girls, and one of them asks if she speaks Nigerian. She corrects them:

Nigerian isn’t a language; she speaks Igbo, one of the nation’s major tongues. A second girl challenges her. She repeats her answer. Another asks, “Is it weird if I ask you to say something?” “It is,” Tochi responds, followed by a hail of nervous laughter from all present.

“It was a very white space, and she was aware of it,” Kilbourn recalls. “As I come from the white side of things, I had to open my mind to capture her experience in her terms, not my experience. As documentarians, it’s about acknowledging exactly what they’re going through, as they’re going through it, to capture without impinging. It was important to me to get beyond my own history and experience, to be present, sensitive, and alert to hers. That’s what you should do for anyone, but you especially have to do it for

someone with differences from you that are important. They need to be framed appropriately, cherished and respected.”

The film is not a pastiche of sit-downs in controlled environments.

Prominent locations include the campus auditorium, cafeteria and classrooms, all navigated in the 100-degree heat of a Missouri summer. With so many spaces, inside and out, the opportunities for controlled lighting were slim. Instead, the filmmakers relied on what Thielow calls “the most simple techniques in cinematography. How do we use available light to our advantage; where can we take it away by turning off the overhead; where’s the window; and where



ABOVE / OPPOSITE TOP: THE LARGE SENSOR SIZE OF THE CANON C500 ENABLED THE FILMMAKERS TO GET CLOSER TO THE SUBJECTS, AND THE 2.39:1 ASPECT RATIO CREATES A FRAME THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE A CROWD. THIELOW SAYS "IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL VEHICLE TO TELL THE STORY, WHERE YOU COULD FORGET ABOUT THE TOP AND THE BOTTOM OF A FRAME, ESPECIALLY IN SPACES THAT WERE NOT VERY CINEMATIC, LIKE SCHOOL CLASSROOMS."

do I position myself in relation to the light?" Hudock says although *Boys State* was used as a reference for "what kinds of scenes and scenarios we might encounter, the idea was not how can we emulate *Boys State* but what might we be able improve upon or approach differently so this film can have a life of its own? One of the subtle changes was the choice of using a longer lens than in *Boys State*, which brings us closer to the girls and a more compressed and shallow image in combination with the full-frame sensor, which subtly can increase a feeling of intensity."

First AC Andrew Parrotte was lead gear wrangler, which included eight Canon C500 Mark IIs, one Canon C300 Mark III, and five Canon C70s with S35 sensors. Although the team carried an assortment of lenses, including 24mm, 35mm, 50mm, 85mm, and 135mm CN-Es plus two Canon 70-200mm, the majority of the film was shot on a 50mm prime (utilized on the C500 full-frame sensor) or 35mm (for cameras with Super 35 sensor). "Before principal photography," Hudock adds, "we had a discussion on how we might be able to maintain some level of consistency across multiple cameras and DP's. We decided to limit our focal length and f-stop to help create this constancy in framing and depth of field. I lensed my

subject's [Emily Worthmore's] story almost entirely with a 50mm prime averaging around a T2. Navigating a verité scene with a single prime lens added extra challenge to compose a frame not by simply zooming in but by also navigating the space while holding focus with a narrow depth of field. The 70-200 mm was utilized mainly in the assembly scenes when extra reach was needed and as the close-up lens for interviews."

Parrotte notes that although "any camera can work for documentary projects, if you can make it work in terms of budget and practicality with larger sensor cameras and cine primes, it'll visually make a difference." In fact, the sensor size enabled the filmmakers to get closer to the subjects, and the 2.39:1 aspect ratio creates a frame that can accommodate a crowd. "You can study not only somebody speaking but somebody else reacting to it," Thielow explains. "We used the foreground people to find the angles, the tension, the dynamic, the conversation and the nuances while we explored the space. It was a beautiful vehicle to tell the story, where you could forget about the top and the bottom of a frame, especially in spaces that were not very cinematic, like school classrooms."

Hudock shot mostly with the C500, a

camera she calls "self-contained, requires little or no accessories to operate and allows for a small build, which is important for most verité documentary situations. Internal ND's, assignable buttons for quick changes, and a lightweight body are great aspects in a documentary camera," Hudock details. "We needed lenses that could also work well in verité situations – lightweight and offered a nice portrait."

The choice was a departure for Kilbourn. "On verité, I use zooms and I love the flexibility of changing the composition without physically moving. On *Girls State*, we had to adjust the frame without adjusting it. There was a lot of focus-pulling and holding shots much longer than usual. You can't eliminate others from the frame easily. If you can't move, you have to find other ways to reframe, recompose, and change the focus to engage the viewer with the person you're interested in at that moment. Getting the frame right goes back to being alert and paying attention, so you move when it's a good time to move closer to create a different composition."

Kilbourn adds, "I think it comes back to trust – the directors' trust in us, the DP's, to get the story and the moments and the emotion involved, but also the trust between the cinematographers and the girls we





KILBOURN (ABOVE) SAYS "IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT THE GIRLS FELT SAFE WITH US AND OUR CAMERAS, THAT THEY FELT THEY COULD BE THEIR UNFETTERED SELVES. THAT WHETHER WE WERE CLOSE TO THEM OR FAR AWAY, MOVING OR STILL, WE WERE ALWAYS TRYING TO BE TRUE TO THEIR EXPERIENCES." COURTESY OF AURORA BRACHMAN

filmed. It was important that the girls felt safe with us and our cameras, that they felt they could be their unfettered selves. That whether we were close to them or far away, moving or still, we were always trying to be true to their experiences."

A project with multiple DP's and changing dynamics requires exceptional communication and coordination. That all happened in the production office, lovingly dubbed "the war room." As Parrotte notes, "While the lead 1st AC's job is heavily technical, that doesn't mean we can't get creative with how to organize the [production office]. For a job with so many moving parts, I started with getting a spreadsheet made up for Thor that had everything laid out: operator name, camera model, camera letter, camera color and verité or interview." As Thielow adds: "The teams convened with each other and the directors throughout the day as well as in a daily huddle to discuss developing storylines. It was important to know what was going on with the other characters so whenever they interacted, we had that in the back of our minds, 'What's the tension? What's that person going through?'"

(McBaine captured all this on whiteboards to help each unit anticipate where to be at various times and what to look out for.)

One of the storylines emerged just before camp began when details of the Dobbs decision were leaked to the media. It led the news everywhere, especially in Missouri, a trigger-law state. The leak and what it might mean was a major topic of discussion among the young women, showing up in candidates' platforms and the cases brought for consideration before the Girls State Supreme Court. As Moss relates: "Watching an all-female Supreme Court discuss issues around privacy was incredibly moving. They know they're both powerful and powerless. But they had the discussion and ruled on the case. Other young women need to see that vulnerability along with that moxy."

Another show of empowerment – on the emotional end of the spectrum – was just as captivating. Cecilia Bartin (to whom Thielow was assigned) engaged another gubernatorial candidate with a dance-off in the cafeteria. (Bartin went on to win the election.) "A few hundred girls were having breakfast and everybody was cheering," Thielow remembers. "There was a subtle competitive element [to the dance-off]. But

it was also very much a celebration." Thielow says such a wide range of scenarios is what makes documentary work so satisfying. "Experiencing such deep and complex moments that manifest themselves in visually and electrically charged scenes is a privilege to witness, and even to be a small part of telling their stories. That is why we wake up in the morning as documentary filmmakers."

More subtle encounters made an impact as well. "There's a quiet moment where some of the teens are hanging out, braiding hair and talking about what's wrong with the system," McBaine notes. They point out that the boys appear to get right to business building their government and politicking. They lament that the program isn't as rigorous as they thought it would be, more focused instead on surface-level "fluff" like cheers and dress codes. Their growing realization becomes a major theme of the film.

Moss and McBaine anticipated the differences.

What was surprising, McBaine adds, was the degree of disparity. "Arriving on campus, the counselors for Girls State have got tinsel headbands and pom poms," she describes.



ABOVE L TO R:
CO-DIRECTOR JESSE MOSS, DPS: MARTINA
RADWAN, DANIEL CARTER, LAELA KILBOURN, ERYNN
PATRICK LAMONT, LAURA HUDOCK, THORSTEN
THIELOW / COURTESY OF AMANDA MCBAIN

“That’s fun, but there was a tone difference that made me nervous for our kids who are formidable forces of nature in terms of what they know about politics and their passion for changing things. I knew there would be tension with the campiness of Girls State. What I didn’t know was the difference in financing or the cadence of the week – how long the training wheels were going to be on the bike. It was heartbreaking because it’s an awakening that isn’t unfamiliar to me and it was heightened because it was happening at a girls’ empowerment camp.”

As participants became more vocal and the counselors less willing to entertain discussions, it became clear it was a story to follow. “There was no avoiding it,” Kilbourn asserts. “And it prompted us to make more of an effort to cover Boys State more than we might have, because it was important to document these comparisons.”

Emily Worthmore made a similar decision, as she planned a story on the disparities for the camp newspaper. “After Emily lost the governor’s race, she found another path to victory by writing the article that called out the inequalities,” notes Hudock, who captures Worthmore interviewing adults and participants in

both programs, uncovering that the Boys State budget is three times Girls State’s. Worthmore confirms what one participant calls “secret, sneaky, possibly misogynistic viewpoints” that inform the programs’ design. She ends her piece with a call to action, writing, “It may be a long road to fiscal equity, and a solution to certain social injustices delegates feel exist, but by starting the conversation and bringing attention to differences between programs, Girls State and Boys State can become one step closer to equality.”

“They wouldn’t publish it,” Emily tells a friend, “but that would be cool in and of itself.” The article does run, although the editors soft-pedaled the title, to her disappointment.

“When most people feel like they have failed,” Hudock describes, “it’s hard to get back up again, but Emily jumped back almost immediately. Her resilience and desire to fight the system were inspiring. And even though we may differ politically, I saw an aspect of myself in her I could relate to.”

“My whole career has been me fighting the system,” Hudock continues. “Not just in the women’s rights stories I’ve captured but in my own fight for a place as a DP in

this industry. I’ve been an ICG member since 2003, and I’m so grateful to see things starting to change, and for amazing DP’s like Ellen Kuras [ASC], Mandy Walker [ASC, ACS] and Rachel Morrison [ASC], who have paved the way. It already feels like a completely different reality from 10 years ago, but we still have a long way to go. We will get there, but real systemic change takes time. Not surface-level changes, like, ‘Let’s all be PC on set and make sure women are getting on the interview list,’ but actually hiring them – for all kinds of stories. Real change will be complete when gender is no longer part of the conversation: both in the film and TV industry and in our political system.”

The visibility and representation spoke to Kilbourn, as well.

“These are smart, talented, capable young women with ambition and aspiration and goals,” she concludes. “To witness them engaging and interacting and having their opinions voiced and heard by each other was incredibly inspiring and very moving. We don’t hear enough about girls. We don’t give them the time, space and respect they should get in our society. To see them have this moment of visibility in *Girls State* was incredible to experience.” 🌈

LOCAL 600 CREW

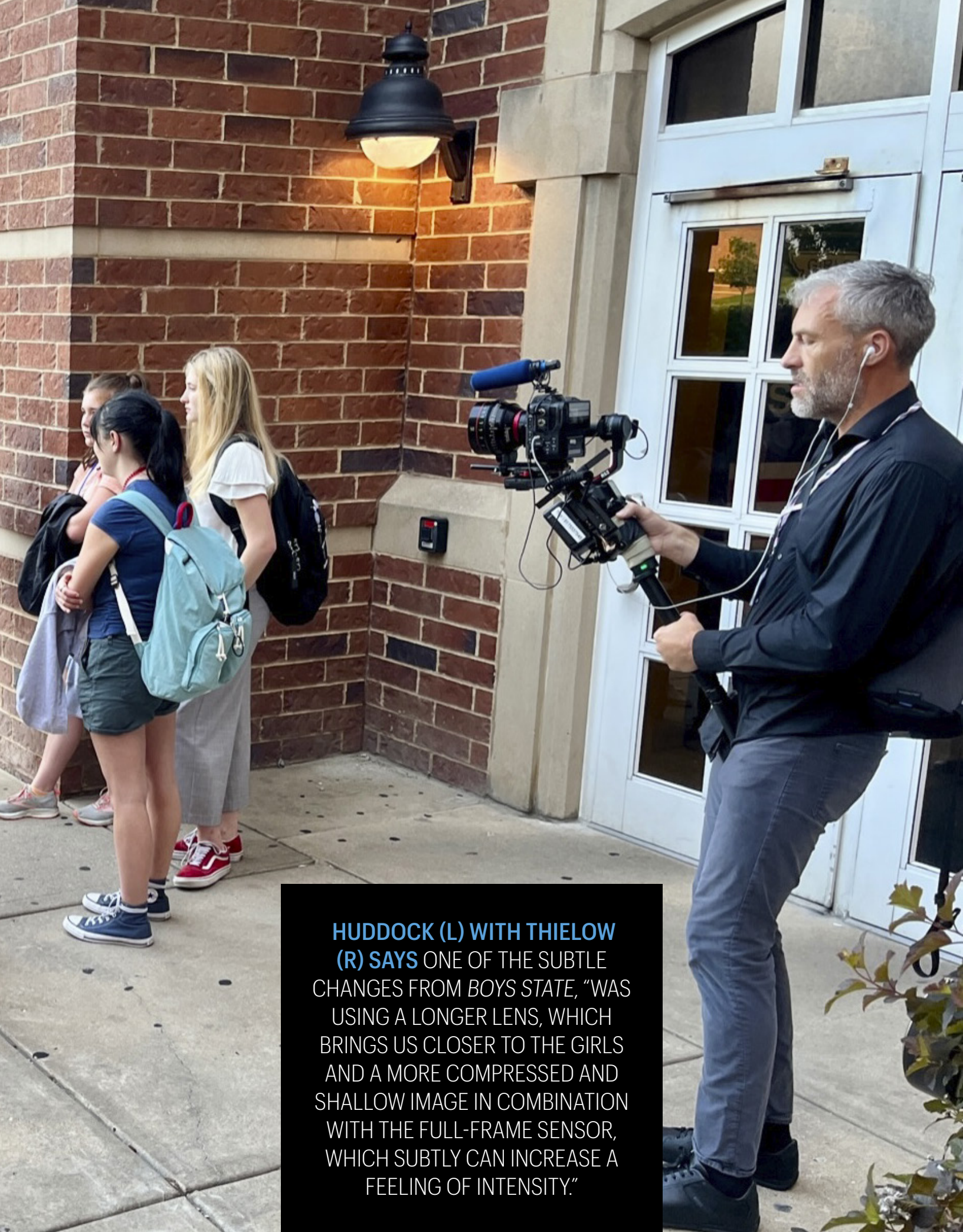
Directors of Photography

Laura Hudock
Laela Kilbourn
Erynn Patrick
Thorsten Thielow

1st AC

Andrew Parrotte





HUDDOCK (L) WITH THIELOW (R) SAYS ONE OF THE SUBTLE CHANGES FROM *BOYS STATE*, "WAS USING A LONGER LENS, WHICH BRINGS US CLOSER TO THE GIRLS AND A MORE COMPRESSED AND SHALLOW IMAGE IN COMBINATION WITH THE FULL-FRAME SENSOR, WHICH SUBTLY CAN INCREASE A FEELING OF INTENSITY."