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Shooting Bomb Girls With Eric Cayla csc

by Fanen Chiahemen



" Still from Bomb Girls. Courtesy of Muse Entertainment.

This month Global will kick off a six-part, one-hour series depicting what is perhaps an underexplored side of the Canadian experience during the Second World War. Set in the 1940s, *Bomb Girls* follows the lives of a group of women working in a munitions factory building bombs for the Allied forces fighting on the European front. Co-created by Michael MacLennan (*Flashpoint*, *Queer as Folk*) and Adrienne Mitchell (*Durham County*, *Bliss*), the series features such talent as Academy Award nominee Meg Tilly, Jodi Balfour (*The Sinking of the Laconia*) and Charlotte Hegele (*Murdoch Mysteries*).

While the prospect of shooting a period piece is usually daunting, Mitchell, who directed the first two episodes of *Bomb Girls*, embraced the opportunity to depart from her usual modern-day fare. "This was such an exciting thing because it had the potential to capture the *Mad Men*-esque vibe of going back into a period and finding a contemporary viewpoint and infusing it aesthetically with a contemporary modern perspective," Mitchell says, referring to the popular AMC 1960s-set drama. "The idea that these women went from making apple pies to making bombs, that extreme and the paradoxes and ironies that they lived with lent themselves to an exciting viewpoint. There was the sense that there was so much pressure to still be feminine. Wear lipstick yet make a bomb."



" Eric Cayla csc (left) with director Adrienne Mitchell. Courtesy of Muse Entertainment.

The prevailing atmosphere of the era that Mitchell discovered in research is in fact what inspired the show's visual aesthetic. "One of the women that we interviewed in Ajax, Ontario, who worked at a munitions factory said, 'We actually thought the Germans were coming here, to Toronto.' So it was very important that they were living in the moment – literally, smell, touch, sight, taste – 'cause you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow," Mitchell says. "To visually convey that, I wanted to make sure that the colours were almost hyper-real and very saturated and very alive. I really wanted to stay away from a sepia-toned, fuzzy, hazy, set-in-the-past kind of vibe; I wanted the colours to really be alive. "

To realise her vision, Mitchell tapped Quebec cinematographer and long-time collaborator Eric Cayla csc, who has shot multiple episodes of Durham County. Mitchell sent Cayla a lookbook featuring photos taken in the 1940s with Kodachrome stock, which emphasize reds and blues. Those images served as a palette for Cayla and Mitchell. According to Mitchell, Cayla is "very good at working with an idea and going with it. So once he and I started to look at the Kodachrome stock, he found a way to make it suitable for our show. We just started exploring colours, keeping it cooler and keeping the blues a really crisp blue. The red and the blues are the sort of hallmark colours of the series."

For Cayla, a little bit of nostalgia motivated him to explore the era visually. "I thought it was a nice period, and the premise was interesting," he says, adding, "It was about the period where my parents grew up. When I saw the Kodachrome lookbook, my parents had those pictures."

Mitchell, too, drew on visual depictions of the past for inspiration. Her film references were "movies that were contemporary but giving a '40s feel. Mulholland Drive is an example, so is Heavenly Creatures by Peter Jackson. They explored heavily with saturated colour in a vivid, haunting, hyper-real way," she says. Also, the 2001 Jean-Pierre Jeunet film *Amélie* served as an example of how images can be beautiful and at the same time authentic, according to Cayla. "We were looking for authenticity in the characters and in every home and everywhere we were going without it being flat. You don't want it to be realistic documentary style, you

want to control the look," he explains.

One of Cayla's approaches was to alter the lighting to reflect each principal character's personality or background. With Balfour's Gladys, a wealthy socialite who loves the glamour of Hollywood movies, "we decided to make it look like a very classic Hollywood period movie, so when I'm lighting her I'm thinking of that. It also goes with the location where she lives. Since it's a very wealthy family, it's very luminous, very rich," Cayla says. "So you've got the strong back light, you've got the conventional key light with the two eyes well lit. I used diffused Fresnel Mole-Richardson lights instead of soft lights, so it's a little harder, with sometimes more diffusion on the camera."



" Still from Bomb Girls. Courtesy of Muse Entertainment.

On the other hand, for Tilly's Lorna, a supervisor at the munitions factory who comes from a modest background, "it's more like a vintage look. So the deep greens and strong reds get faded out a bit. Lighting wise, it's darker, the lights are lower on the floor," Cayla says. "We used Chinese lanterns, bounced lights on the floor, so the lighting comes from lower areas and not high from the ceiling. I was also using Kino Flos with diffusion." For Lorna and the other less well-off characters, Cayla's reference was not Hollywood films but films of the French New Wave, and he referred to German expressionism for some exterior locations. "There are scenes where we have shadows on walls and more expressionism kind of lighting," he says, adding that it works well with the other looks and is not disconnected from the rest of the story.

Despite Mitchell's many collaborations with Cayla, on Bomb Girls she gained a new appreciation for his style. "What surprised me with him is he doesn't have to bring out the artillery in terms of over-exaggerating lighting a set. He can create very strong statements with minimal light. He's a painter. He just works with nuances and uses light like a paintbrush, and that's what surprised me and thrilled me every day working with him," Mitchell says.

With much of the show's action taking place in the munitions plants, Cayla needed to bring

that artistry to what could have been a bleak setting. "In the factory, we went for strong colours, strong blues and reds," he explains. "The whites I let burn because, again, when you look at the Kodachrome films back then, there wasn't much latitude, so as soon as you had white shirts overexposing from the sun it just burned. In those days factories were flat-lit; fluorescents started to exist, and they had overhead lights, so I didn't really go for realistic lighting, but I didn't want to make it fake either, so my references were fluorescents but not flat."

While shooting film was beyond the production's budget, Cayla found that the ARRI ALEXA gave him the latitude he needed. "Of all the cameras, ALEXA was a great choice, because it has a lot of latitude and options," he says. The tight schedule called for mostly two-camera shooting, which saves time, but it meant sacrificing some compositions and angles. The solution? "I try to create an atmosphere even in a close-up," Cayla says. "In a close-up, I try to give it volume, depth and atmosphere, through contrast, through the right choice of colours, the right angle of light that falls on a face, so it's interesting to watch. I try to give it more of a painterly look. I try to keep it rich all the time even in an insert or a detail of a book or something. And all that fast because you don't have time. Every setup has to be done in five or 10 minutes."

Saving money on film stock meant that Cayla could have more time in postproduction, and he in fact devised a system that simulated film shooting. "I'm deliberately shooting as if shooting film. Therefore there's no DIT [digital imaging technician]," he says. "I did some extensive tests with the lab and came up with three different setups for each ASA rating that I'm referring to when we're shooting. So I tell the assistants, 'Use setup A, B, or C for specific ASA ratings.' I have three setups at 1600, 800 and 200 ASA. So when I do a lighting setup if I'm outside or inside or whatever, I call for the ASA and setup. And that is followed up to the dailies, as if I'm on film. So then I see what I've shot, how I've shot it and how I have exposed it," he explains. However, that process necessitated him to be present at the colour timing stage. "I'd rather have a bit more time in post than using the time on set. It also would mean having another monitor setup on set. It's time-consuming, so I'd rather be beside the director talking about the shots, talking about what's needed and not on another monitor setting looks. So it's much more efficient on set."

"To me it's not just about the look and the lighting when you're a cinematographer for television, it's to tell the story. You're there to support the directors, writers, producers, and give them ideas on how you can shoot a scene and have all the shots needed to tell the story and to give a scene a lot of rhythm. So if you spend hours on lighting, you're beside the track, and it's not worth it. To me that's the challenge of a cinematographer on a television series more than on a feature," Cayla says.

Mitchell never had any doubt that Cayla could meet those challenges. When she signed on for Bomb Girls she knew she would need a director of photography "who could bring a very strong level of artistry to the show, who could think outside the box and who could do it in a way that still meets a demanding schedule," she says. "Eric Cayla is one of the only DOPs I've ever worked with who can combine those elements in such a seamless way." She adds, "It's so important to work with people that you have a history with because you have a shorthand, and that makes it so much easier when you get into big huge shows like this. I don't have to get into elaborate discussions. I can just show him a few images, and he understands and he gives me images. It's just a constant collaborative back and forth. We can move from the Durham County bleaks to that very vibrant sense of first colour. I just want to continue working with him on future projects."

Bomb Girls starts January 4 at 8 p.m. on Global.

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