

Run Rabbit Run - Key Grip Peter MacDonnell and Bonnie Elliot ACS - PHOTO Sarah Enticknap



SHINING GIRLS RUN RABBIT RUN

Cinematographer Bonnie Elliott ACS | Director Daina Reid

Interviews and article by Tim Oxford



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Cinematography strikes a fine balance between art and science. This formula elides the role of psychology in the artform. As cinematographers, we're often left to decode aesthetic impulses and preferences while our working relationships tend more as director's companion, sounding board, and champion for their vision.

Recently, I surveyed *Shining Girls* (2022) and *Run Rabbit Run* (2022). Created in ongoing collaboration with director Daina Reid and cinematographer Bonnie Elliott ACS. The projects provide a glimpse or cross-section of the duos working relationship spanning local and Hollywood productions, small streaming platforms, industry titans, and across limited series and features.

Their initial working relationship dates back to Syfy's *Hunters* (2016) and continued into Stan's *Romper Stomper* (2018), although Reid cites Elliott's work in *Seven Types Of Ambiguity* (2017) as sparking a sense of affinity. ***"There's an opening sequence in the pool ... it's all the bubbles, and you don't know what's happening ... and I remember being drawn in straight away. ... I remember being captivated by the ambiguous poetry of it, but also the great practicality of it — there's no bullshit to it."*** Elliott points out Reid's background as a performer and the qualities that brings to their work together. ***"The thing that I enjoyed about her from when we first started working together was her ... commitment to authenticity within scenes. I really liked that. I guess it comes from having been an actor and having to be inside a scene and for it having to make sense."***

Shining Girls, an eight-episode limited series on Apple+, centres around Kirby Mazrachi (Elisabeth Moss). Chicago Sun-Times archivist processing trauma after surviving a brutal attempted murder. The body of a woman found in the subterranean systems below Chicago with similar circumstances to Kirby's attack, causes her own investigation to discover her assailant. Crossing paths with Dan Velazquez (Wagner Moura), a one-time hotshot reporter at the paper. Together, they strike an uneasy alliance to solve the case, working against a moribund police department and Kirby's own PTSD disorientation and shifting perception of reality.

Speaking of the experience shooting in the U.S. during 2021 as Australia entered the Delta lockdown and returning home became a fraught possibility, Reid notes. ***"We were there for five months, and it was a long slog in Chicago. All jobs have their difficulties and it's always great to have that really strong visual and psychological ally with you. [Bonnie is] making amazing decisions visually to solve so many problems. I feel in such safe hands when I'm with Bonnie."***

"Episode 3 in any series is a corker ... it's just the way the stories naturally evolve."

The series drew visual references from the essentials of 1970s paranoia cinema, with *Klute* (1971) cited as a key source both from the production and set-up director/DOP. Reference by Reid and Elliott, as "being with someone but then watching them." *The Conversation* (1974) cited as a further reference for the sense of surveillance and *The French Connection* (1971) sharing common urban visual DNA between New York and Chicago's elevated train systems.

Reid and Elliott collaborated to shoot four of the eight episodes and when asked about the challenges and opportunities offered by following the work of Michelle McLaren and Robert McLachlan ASC CSC (set-up Director and DOP for episodes one and two). Reid observes, ***"Episode 3 in any series is a corker ... it's just the way the stories naturally evolve."*** Several of these episodes, including the



Run Rabbit Run - Lily LaTorre - PHOTO Sarah Enticknap



Run Rabbit Run - Sarah Snook, Lily LaTorre and Damon Herriman - PHOTO Sarah Enticknap

pivotal Episode 03 (“Overnight”) and Episode 06 (“Bright”) serve to put the series on its head and allow the director/cinematographer duo a degree of freedom in establishing a new look within the pre-existing initial look established by the first two episodes.

Shining Girls was shot with the Sony Venice in 6K RAW full frame mode with Zeiss Supreme Primes. “Bright” focuses on a post-WWI period setting. Showcasing a magnificent Art Deco theatre as a key location that connects the many time strands of the story between the distant past, the past of Kirby’s youth, and the 1990s present-day setting. Utilising the Uptown Theatre in Chicago, shuttered since 1981 apart from appearances in *Backdraft* (1991) and *Home Alone 2: Lost In New York* (1992). The theatre presented both in the 1920s setting as a resplendent gilded theatre and the late 1980s/early 1990s as a decaying rock venue. Elliott notes this was her favourite location across the project, pointing out that what we see onscreen as the venue is merely the foyer for the main cinema auditorium, designed by production designer Kelly McGehee to appear as a nightclub in full.

“I’d be sending her shots and then she’d be writing back ‘more blood, more of this’ ... and so I had this joke that she was Daina “More Blood” Reid!”

An unexpected detour found Elliott following in the footsteps of Weegee, (The professional name of the 1899 Austrian born New York news photographer with a sixth sense for arriving at a crime scene before police) and forensic police photographers. Elliott citing the desire for authenticity as a convergence point for her and Reid. Episode 03 (*Overnight*) revolves around a critical scene that finds Kirby and Dan discovering murders that fit the pattern and span a wide timeframe in the cold case department of the Chicago PD. This realisation for the characters depicted through the archival files and crime scene photography, rather than flashbacks or separate scenes, which is a ***“massive visual storytelling plot point,”*** as Elliott notes.

To preserve authenticity, Elliott began deep research into crime scene photography from the turn of the 20th century through to the LAPD archives from the 1950s. Observing tension between the explicit nature of what images document alongside the workaday banality: Rulers and instruments of measurement, the tired homicide detective pointing at a body within the wide area of the murder scene. Through research, Elliott developed the idea of showing these images in montage. Nesting the more gruesome images amongst the shoe leather procedural forensic photographs. Creating ‘flashes’ that contextualise the violence and furthers the impact of the turning point in the story. To this end, Elliott found herself drafted into the role of crime scene



Run Rabbit Run - Lily LaTorre - PHOTO Sarah Enticknap

photographer, shooting the various recreations herself and collaborating with Reid. ***"I'd be sending her shots and then she'd be writing back 'more blood, more of this' ... and so I had this joke that she was Daina "More Blood" Reid!"*** Reflecting further, Elliott notes that, ***"I am very proud of the sequence, ... they are disconcerting and real and ... the violence hits home in a way. You don't see a lot of it, but you see enough to be really shocked by it."***

Elliott noted that as part of the experience of working within the American production model, she worked with an all-U.S. crew, and it marked her first time not operating her own camera. Looking back on her approach to that new experience, she comments, ***"You need to participate in this new world and see what it's like to just work in the system that they've got set up, ... there's things to get your head around about the way the departments work, and the scale is bigger."*** Embracing the challenge, Elliott found herself in a different position. ***"It gave me a chance to sit at the monitors with my gaffer next to me and the dimmer board op with this little iPad and ... I really got to be very detailed about lighting in a way that was great".***

From the lighting team, Elliott highlights the work of gaffer Addae Shelby ***"An absolute legend, who helped me to "Think big" and ask for a lot of 18Ks!"***, accompanied by board op Trevor Kodat, ***"Who was always by my side for last minute trims to levels,"*** and, enjoying, ***"the delights of having a rigging gaffer for the first time, Mike Dambra,"*** who possessed the critical skills of both being, ***"incredibly reliable and always had tips on good places to eat in Chicago."*** Elliot mentions A Camera Dolly Grip, John Hudecek, ***"A veteran of the Chicago industry and absolute gentleman, [who] was incredibly precise and could adjust his timing very accurately, [having a] great feeling for shots."*** For the cinematographer navigating their experience away from the camera, and in the imaging tents, she was accompanied by her trusty DIT Filip Dvorak. ***"...Fine company at the monitors with his great sense of humour, as well as colour."***

Elliott reflects on incorporating camera operators into her process, ***"Given how much I love operating and how hard it was to let go, I was lucky to have such talented people to work with, who really listened and got onboard with what Daina, and I were trying to do."*** As her "great allies", she draws attention to, A Camera/Steadicam operator, Sebastien Audinelle, who had a background in music which Elliott says she felt in his, ***"Excellent timing and fluidity of his work with the rig."*** B Camera operator, Spencer Gillis was always thinking about the story and had excellent crane technique. Despite this change in working technique, Elliott happily notes that, ***"I did operate a couple of times on some shots."*** She really wanted to shoot a scene at the end of Episode 3 (*Overnight*) where Dan is really drunk. ***"We did long handheld takes, adding more crowd and changing lighting states, which was super fun!".*** For a scene in Episode 6 (*Bright*) involving an 80's video camera Elliott shot the VHS runs. ***"We started on video feedback on the TV screens in the 80's club set.***



Shining Girls - Bonnie Elliott ACS operating VHS - PHOTO Supplied by Bonnie Elliott ACS

I found the vintage 80's camera on eBay and loved getting to operate it."

Following *Shining Girls*, the collaboration continued with the local feature *Run Rabbit Run*, a psychological horror film rooted in the cyclical tensions of mother-daughter relationships. Elliott notes that, ***"Parenthood is a very pressured experience ... there's not a lot of honesty about it. I thought the script had some interesting things about the difficulty of parenting and certainly that sort of single-parent dynamic."***

Written by author Hannah Kent, the film follows single mother Sarah (Sarah Snook), and daughter Mia (Lily LaTorre). Sarah finds her life disrupted by precocious Mia's claims of a different identity based on a past life. Set against work as a fertility doctor and Sarah's estranged relationship with her mother, *Run Rabbit Run* mines the dual territory of motherhood and the inevitable separation and alienation within parent-child relationships. When discussing the genre aspects of the film and audience expectations, Elliott laughingly observes that as an audience member, she's, ***"a bit of a wuss and [doesn't] love horror,"*** but that in her reading of the screenplay, it isn't quite a horror but closer to, ***"A ghost story, a supernatural thriller, if you had to give it a name."***

In developing the distinctive look of the film and incorporating references into her process, Elliott remarked that, ***"The earlier***



Elisabeth Moss & Wagner Moura - Shining Girls - Director Daina Reid, DOP Bonnie Elliott ACS



Jamie Bell & Madeline Brewer, (in the Uptown Theatre) - Shining Girls - Director Daina Reid, DOP Bonnie Elliott ACS

days of Internet searching for frames often lead to strange little Internet rabbit holes that you would go down," a process of chance that she has continued, and which led her to discover a range of early large format colour photographs. In a key example by Otto Pfenninger, which she describes as having a, ***"Velvety purpley blue in the blacks."*** This photo formed an important early reference when conceiving of the look of *Rabbit*. As a direct result of the reference, the unusual depth of field generated by the large glass plate photographic process encouraged Elliott to shoot large format on the ARRI LF for the project, to isolate focus. The purple tint in the shadows of these photographs also inspired the colour palette of the film.

The ongoing visual metaphor in *Rabbit* is a festering wound sustained by Sarah when bitten by the mysterious white rabbit as she attempts to foist it over the back fence. Sarah's situation deteriorates, we see her examine the wound, ringed in oozing and purple pale pus.

When discussing the sustained colour palette, Elliott explained how this reference translated into a key visual idea; that the entirety of the film should itself feel like a bruise—the film starts with a blue/purple cast, counterbalanced with elements of yellow (particularly in the scenes at Mia's primary school), the cool tones reflecting the clinical ordered world that Sarah has built for herself and her daughter.

As the film shifts into the second half and relocate to a country house, the palette becomes overtaken by the yellow, in the same way a bruise shifts colours as the haemoglobin degrades through the process of phagocytosis. This colour scheme encapsulated by the distinctive hue of the hallway of the country house, a key space within the house draws characters further into the space or where drama occurs on either side of a doorway. Production was able to replace glass windowpanes in the doorway and the final colour, ***"Was more intense than I imagined it being, but I kind of loved the strangeness of the colour that we landed with. It has this kind of ... it's like a sort of magenta purgatory."*** Additionally, supplemented during the day interior scenes, as Elliott pointed out that Best Boy Damien Seagar ***"Actually sews a lot of textiles for projects and he made a beautiful one to mimic***



Madeline Brewer - Shining Girls - Director Daina Reid, DOP Bonnie Elliott ACS



Shining Girls - Trevor Kodat and Bonnie Elliott ACS in the Uptown Theatre - PHOTO Supplied by Bonnie Elliott ACS



Shining Girls Director Daina Reid in Chicago - PHOTO Bonnie Elliott ACS

the soil of the South Australia location to cover the green lawns around the interior house location, so the bounce had a lovely warmth."

During the night interior scenes, the new colour doorway glass echoed and amplified by the lighting in the hallway and fulfills Elliott's palette scheme and visual metaphor by evoking the later sickly amber stages of a bruise, creating the impression of, ***"A place where weird things could happen."*** The characters feel almost set in amber, trapped in a cycle of distress and violence that propels them toward inevitable ends.

The duo noted a key dynamic in their collaboration as Reid's preference for darker genre material and Elliott's sensibility. Elliott remarks, ***"We have this nice complementary thing where she's very into genre and I'm very into more arthouse, emotional kind of cinema. ... There's something nice about the way we come together in those moments."*** For her part, Elliott referenced a remark passed along to her via one of her mother's friends who felt, ***"Bonnie's images always have a lot of tenderness in them."*** Bonnie observing, ***"I'm interested in intimacy with characters, I think that's probably a thread in my work."***.

Together, this combination gives Reid and Elliott's collaboration rare power, encapsulated by this metaphorical interpretation for the film — a representation of internal trauma, presented through the textual metaphor of the wound as well as in Bonnie's subtextual visual conception of the colour palette.

Elliott shot *Run Rabbit Run* on ARRI Alexa Mini LF using ARRI Raw 4K. The film lensed with Panavision Ultra Panatar lenses, with Elliott observing that the 1.3x squeeze large



Elisabeth Moss & Wagner Moura - Shining Girls - Director Daina Reid, DOP Bonnie Elliott ACS



Run Rabbit Run - Rayner Cook & Ella Kroning on Set - PHOTO Bonnie Elliott ACS

format anamorphic's were, ***"Old, beautiful, and very rare. I was super lucky to get them. Special thanks to Ann Lyons at Panavision for that!"*** The team also called into action a Century Shift & Tilt lens on occasional special shots. Rounding out the camera team were 1st AC Rayner Cook, who Elliott describes as "wonderful", noting they also did some Drone shots on the DJI Inspire, ***"When we didn't have the fabulous Heliguy team and the heavy lift drone."*** The 2nd AC was ***"the hardworking Ella Kroning."*** Serving as Gaffer was new collaborator Jesse Moyes, ***"excellent to work with, joined by my long time Best Boy Damian Seagar and they made a terrific team."*** The camera department's key grip, ***"the terrific Peter MacDonnell, who I had previously worked with on a low-budget feature called* Undertow *(2018) that was mostly handheld. I was thrilled to discover he was a master of the creepy dolly shot, Daina's favourite!"***

Reid and Elliott's next collaboration is a limited series, (6 Eps) for FX by Hulu, called *The Veil*, which reunites the duo with actor Elisabeth Moss on a deadly adventure that takes place between London, Paris, and Istanbul, as one character tries to keep a deadly secret and the other must reveal to save thousands of lives.

Though details for this new project are under wraps, I took the opportunity to ask Reid and Elliott if there was a dream project best suited to their collaborative relationship. They arrive at similar terrain, with Reid mentioning *Arrival* (2016) as a template, ***"I love speculative fiction and genre, but I love it in a certain way ... and it's that true human way. That, to me, is almost the perfect film. Bonnie's sensibility would deliver that in bucketloads."*** For her part Elliott, after expressing her desire to do a period piece (producers, take note), elaborated. ***"I would love to see Daina make another movie ... she has talked about a science fiction project which I think sounded really interesting ... I really loved* Arrival*. That, to me, was such a great piece of filmmaking and to get to make something that was in a genre space with her, but that I could bring a sort of a grounded emotional quality to the visual language. That, to me, would be a nice project to do together."***

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As a final note, I pose the question to Reid about the nature of their collaborative relationship, on an emotional level. She responds: "***There's a freedom in it for me ... there's a real trust and I just go, 'I don't think there's any end to this person's creativity'. We can just keep on exploring different things. ... I love being on that journey with Bonnie and ... it's definitely a happy place to me."***