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'Winning Time' Director on Building to the Rivalry Between Magic Johnson and Larry Bird in Season 2

Todd Banhazl made his directorial debut with Sunday's episode of the HBO series, which lays the foundation for the longstanding feud.

BY **BRANDE VICTORIAN** AUGUST 20, 2023 7:00PM



Magic Johnson (Quincy Isaiah) in 'Winning Time' season 2 WARRICK PAGE/HBO



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[This story contains spoilers from the third episode of season two of *Winning Time*, “The Second Coming.”]

Stepping into dictating the overall creative vision for the latest episode in **season two** of *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty* was “a natural progression” of the work Todd Banhazl has done on the sports drama about the emergence of the basketball franchise. So says the filmmaker who received an Emmy nomination for best cinematography for a single-camera series for his work on the **HBO** show in 2022. Yet when it comes to being the one who directed Sunday’s pivotal episode — which sets the stage for the decades-long rivalry between Lakers leading man Magic Johnson (played by Quincy Isaiah) and Boston Celtics’ Larry Bird (played by Sean Patrick Small) — Banhazl, says casually, “I think I got really lucky.”

“I think this whole season is building up towards this battle, right?” Banhazl tells *The Hollywood Reporter* in the chat below. “It’s like this *Lord of the Rings* thing where we’re building both storylines until they collide. Episode three, for me, is like our supervillain’s backstory, but at the same time, it’s also about humanizing him completely. I think by the time you get to later in the season, the hope and the goal is that you really understand both characters and you actually care about both of them too.”

How did your longevity as a cinematographer and on this series in particular aid you in making the leap to direct this episode?

I think I know what I need as a cinematographer from my directors to help me do my best work, so it was such a joy being able to help give my DP, Rick Diaz, who’s a close friend of mine, permission to do his best work and to be free to try things and experiment. Directing felt kind of like what I’d already been doing as a DP, I was just able to do it more broadly and be one of the emotional leaders and one of the creative leaders, and bring out the best in everyone, including the actors.

Often sports dramas rely heavily on the action on the court or field of whatever sport they’re portraying to move the plot along. *Winning Time* is much more story focused. Can you talk about that creative choice?

I think what *Winning Time* is really about is America. It’s about race and capitalism and how those two things interact, particularly at that time in America, and how that mirrors what’s happening now in America; what things have changed and what things haven’t changed. I feel like for us, the answers always come from the characters’ experiences. In some ways,

Magic versus Bird, or Buss versus Reid, or L.A. versus Boston is like the story of new America versus old America, or like Black versus white. It's all these different things converging, which is why I think it's so important that Magic and Bird personify those ideas, and why it's so important that ultimately, they become friends in the actual true story of their lives. This series is about those themes and those characters told through the story of basketball.

There's also a unique approach to treating some scenes as though they're documentary footage versus fictionalized depictions of real-life events. How is that technique important to the overall feel of the series?

We always wanted the show to feel like a collage of American memory. We wanted the audience to lose track of what we shot and what's archival, and the truth is, it's all what we shot. But that's what we want the feeling to be. The mixed format is a way to see these kinds of mythic-like characters from our culture as larger than life figures, and then also see them in this really stripped down, vulnerable human way. You're constantly confronted with different ways of seeing them.

Season one was focused on the Showtime era of the Lakers dynasty during Jerry Buss' first year as owner from 1979-1980. Season two now centers on the period from 1980-1984. What's critical about these years?

From my standpoint, the '60s and '70s had a little more romance. It was the team's first season winning with Magic and at the end of season one when they win, they ask, "What are you gonna do now?" And Buss says, "Well, I guess we do it all over again." But it becomes a lot more complicated now. It becomes a question of: What do you do when you're chasing these mountains and you get to the mountain peak only to realize there's just another mountain beyond? There's a very big existential question. Season two and stepping into the '80s is about stepping into more money, more power, the loss of innocence, and these two dynasties coming together.



Larry Bird, played by Sean Patrick Small. WARRICK PAGE/HBO

The end of the episode foreshadows the disruption of winning time, so to speak, that is Larry Bird. Why is there no series about the Lakers without his story?

There's no Magic without Bird and there's no Bird without Magic. They start off like mortal enemies, but really, they need each other, and they push each other to become better. The rivalry between the two dynasties is the rivalry between the two of them, and we all know that they actually become friends and that's what's so beautiful; they're actually two sides of the same character.

There are also these parallel surrogate father-son stories. This is the episode where Buss offers Magic a huge deal to be a Laker for the rest of his career and it really comes down to trust. Magic came in as a kid being mentored by Buss, and there's this limit with Magic's real father, who did such an amazing job raising him, but now there are parts of Magic being a modern young kid in this new world that he can only connect with Buzz about. Things like money, power, and a way of being in the world as a celebrity. And it's really tested in this episode because Magic's not a kid anymore and he's asking himself: Can I trust you? Do you really have my best interest in mind?

The same thing is happening with Bird with the tragedy that happens with his real father and him finding a surrogate father figure in Bill Hodges, his assistant coach, the first person to really see him and say, “I see your talent, and I see that you’re scared, follow through with it.” Ultimately, it becomes Red Auerbach who’s this other surrogate father-figure who really helps Bird transition into who he becomes. I think it’s interesting to see those two kinds of parallels running in the episode.

When the first season came out, some of the players took issue with their portrayals, as did Jerry West. Do you know whether sentiments have changed upon the release of season two?

I don’t know how they feel about season two. I do know that our intentions have always been to represent these characters with the most grace and empathy possible. I look at the Kareem episode in season one and there’s just always been a goal of letting these characters grow and showing all of the incredible things that happened during their lives. I don’t know that they’ve seen it since then. I hope that they’ve seen it and I hope that they like it.



Pat Riley (Adrien Brody) and Paul Westhead (Jason Segal) in *Winning Time* season 2. WARRICK PAGE/HBO

In addition to making your directorial debut this year, you also became a member of the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) in January. Can you speak to the significance of that milestone?

The ASC is an organization that I've looked up to my whole life. I remember when I was a kid and I wanted to make movies, and this horror movie came through my hometown. I went to try to get on set and I met the grips and they let me hang out and I got to hold a bounce board and I was so excited. One of them had an issue of *American Cinematographer Magazine* in their truck and I remember reading it and having no idea what anything meant but wanting to be part of that community. Being a part of the ASC feels like such an honor to be a part of that community that I hold in such high esteem. These are all the artists that have inspired me my whole life. There's no *Winning Time* without so many of the cinematographers that I look up to in ASC.

Are you looking forward to your next director role?

Absolutely. The big thing that I felt while directing this episode was, "Oh, I I'm a filmmaker," you know? There are these boxes that we kind of build for ourselves. Like I'm a DP, I'm a director, and I just kind of realized for myself, I just love this thing and I'm a filmmaker. So, whatever it's going to look like for me, the future is shooting things that I love, directing things that I care about. This makes me happy and it's filmmaking no matter what.

In thinking about that future in the midst of the ongoing **SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes**, are you hopeful about the value that will be placed on your work as a filmmaker when negotiations are said and done?

I feel like this is a moment in time that needs to happen and I really, really support what's going on with the strikes. I think we're at a real inflection point and I think the trick for me, and maybe for a lot of us, is to try to find hope and inspiration — self-generate hope and inspiration to make good work going forward when there's not a lot of that inspiration being reflected back to us right now. My mentor a long time ago told me the real trick in this thing is to stay passionate and stay hopeful and keep that fire. And I think right now it's hard for a lot of us to keep that fire because it's such an overwhelming prospect, what's going on right now. But that's the trick. And that's what I'm searching to do, while we're also figuring this out and fighting for a better system for all of us and for all artists.

Interview edited for length and clarity.

Season two of Winning Time airs Sundays at 6 p.m. PT on HBO and **Max**. **THR**

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