

Max Borenstein

SHOWRUNNER/WRITER/CO-CREATOR

WINNING TIME: THE RISE OF THE LAKERS DYNASTY

BY DAVID GEFFNER

PHOTO COURTESY OF MAX BORENSTEIN

Max Borenstein, Showrunner/Writer/Co-Creator

of HBO Max's new *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty* (page 32), was born the year after L.A.'s most popular sports franchise won the championship (1979/80), giving birth to the "Showtime" era. So how did he guide a TV series through a deep socioeconomic dive of a time and place that not only influenced West Coast culture but changed sports as entertainment? Borenstein, best known for his work as a writer on the *Godzilla/Kong* franchise, says it's all about the details. Whether it's Jerry Buss (John C. Reilly in full salesman mode) lunching with legendary Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach (a cigar-waving Michael Chiklis) at Barone's, a classic 80s L.A. restaurant, or a young Phil Knight (Olli Haaskivi) cajoling Magic Johnson – at a sneaker convention – to sign a deal with his fledgling shoe company, Nike, the showrunner's efforts at world-building are as immersive as TV gets.



And he empowers every department head and their team to emulate his passion. Borenstein describes *Winning Time's* pilot DP, Todd Banhazi, as a "full collaborator, without whom the show would be something else entirely." He lauds co-series DP, Mihai Mălaimare Jr., as a "kid in a candy store" when it came to using vintage formats like the Ikegami broadcast camera seen throughout the show, and credits C-Camera Operator/2nd Unit DP Justin Cameron, SOC, for providing the go-to moments in the editing room that the 35mm main coverage missed. *Winning Time's* exuberant, try-anything-once approach may have been kicked off by pilot Director/Executive Producer Adam McKay [ICG Magazine December 2021], but it's Borenstein who led the ship into uncharted waters, helping to find so many sunken cinema treasures along the way.

ICG Magazine: Most of your experience before *Winning Time* has been with the *Godzilla/Kong* franchise. How did that come about? Max Borenstein: Way back in 2007/2008, I wrote a movie called *What is Life Worth* about Ken Feinberg, who was the Special Master of the 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund. It was a realistic drama based on a true story, and although it didn't get made until just two years ago for Netflix, it did get me other jobs in Hollywood. One of them was writing a biopic script about Jimi Hendrix for Legendary Pictures, who wanted to develop a new version of *Godzilla*. Honestly, I didn't know the franchise very well – just the basics, which I thought were kitschy. But then I dove into the original film and got a better sense of what the franchise had originally been and how it had evolved. I started working with [Godzilla director] Gareth Edwards and stayed involved as [the franchise] expanded into the King Kong world. The whole experience has been amazing.

We had *Kong: Skull Island* [ICG Magazine May 2018] as our cover story, and the DP, Larry Fong, ASC, used a lot of modern tools to get a vintage 1970s look. Did any of that translate to *Winning Time*, which used a similar approach? The inspiration for *Skull Island* was *Apocalypse Now*, which, initially, was not supposed to be set during wartime, but I wanted that *Heart of Darkness* type story, and [director] Jordan Vogt-Roberts leaned heavily into the 70s theme. I've always been fascinated with time and place and being very specific with the details. And that goes for fantasy as well. I want to see, feel and understand those lived-in nuances of a specific world we're

building. That's extended into *Winning Time*. As the showrunner, one of the things I'm most excited about – in the realization on set as well as the writing – is detail. That can be turns-of-phrase, clothing, objects, restaurants, businesses. Not just for the sake of having them in there as Easter eggs, but you get drama out of those details. Going to a Sizzler buffet instantly throws us into the 1980s. So instead of just having two people talking at a table, those characters are now at the Sizzler sneeze-guard, and we're inside that time and place.

Having talked to many of your creative heads on *Winning Time*, that sounds like an ethos that rippled down through the show. Absolutely. Our production designer, Rich Toyon; costume designer, Emma Potter; and obviously our DP's, Todd [Banhazi] and Mihai [Mălaimare Jr.]; are kindred spirits who love creating that sense of texture. And it is that texture – at every level, but particularly visually and editorially – that is the trademark of this show. What Todd brought to this series is unique. I would say we are 100 percent on the same page, creatively. He understands that it's not just a show about flash and basketball. It's got many, many layers about what comprised this transformative moment in America – socio-economic layers, racial differences, gender specificity, cultural nuances, and for the cameras to have this almost Rauschenberg-like assembly feel, as you would in a documentary. And that's the way the script is written. Sometimes people are talking to camera, sometimes there's an animated segment, sometimes it's a very lived-in dramatic scene where there is no discernible breaking of the fourth wall or bold style. All of that mixed together creates the sense that there's this found time capsule, and we, as the show creatives, have assembled something artistic from found elements. That's what Todd, so brilliantly, brought aesthetically to the series.

I was surprised to hear that these many looks were scripted – it does feel like a doc the editors found in post. Yes, they were all scripted, but within that, we encourage everyone to add their creative sauce. Not only the actors with improvisation, but [C-Camera Operator/2nd Unit DP] Justin [Cameron, SOC], who's not just a brilliant operator but a joy to work with. Like Todd and Mihai, his general vibe on set is: "Yes to everything!" Not like, "I need to make sure I get footage for this note I was given." More like if I come over to them and ask: "Hey, we know Jerry West is haunted by past career failures. How

can that be better conveyed by camera?" They'd frame something up with his jersey, or trophy, or whatever is best motivated by story.

How did your editors embrace – or enhance – this rapid, multi-element style from the script? Hank Korwin edited the pilot. Hank's style not only helped form the template [for the series], with the layering of all of these multiple source elements that are in Hank's DNA, but it also helped to imprint the writing process on down the line. We had all these great editors throughout the show who were learning Hank's style, and I worked very closely with all of them. As you can tell from the pilot, the script is intricately crafted, and it only goes on from there with the series. There's never just a straight scene of dialogue. So, what that means is the action lines really matter! [Laughs.] Directors are used to crossing out action lines most of the time, like, "Oh, that's just a suggestion." Actors will ignore them. But that's not so in our script. They're not written as "this is how the scene should be shot"; they're written as "this is what the shot should convey, beat-by-beat." Todd would read them and understand that implicitly, and so would Justin.

Justin handled all the vintage format coverage. His enthusiasm when I interviewed him was undeniable. Justin not only came in every day having read the script, he *understood* the script. He was the sniper, who roamed around with the 8 mil or Ikegami and was immersed in so many details of not just character, but Rich Toyon's fantastic production design. So many times, we'd be in the edit and think, "Oh, we didn't get a certain moment that was needed from the main coverage, and now we need to manufacture it. We'd say, "Hey, let's look at Justin's footage to see what he got, and, inevitably, it was like, "Ah-ha! That's it!" The pan off Jerry West to the trophy, or the slight move to someone that told the story of that moment – Justin got it. The reason why the show has so much Ikegami, not for archival footage but within dialogue scenes, is that the camerawork Justin brought to those moments was fantastic storytelling. Likewise for Todd, who's on a headset with his crew, looking at the monitor with the multiple cameras and whispering to go get that moment that he invariably sees as such a superb storyteller. It's not just, "Let's use multiple cameras to get coverage." It was so much more with this entire camera team.

I wrote about *American Ninja Warrior* some years back [ICG Magazine May 2018] and was able to

visit the control room with DP Adam Biggs. That's a live event, where the story being told, albeit unscripted, was on-the-fly with many cameras. You bring some of that to narrative. Very much so. It's an immersive approach. Very much like that book from Coppola [*Live Cinema and its Techniques*] and how he wants to make a movie live, as they once did in television. Mihai worked on that project with Coppola with like 50 cameras – super interesting.

You mentioned how the Ikegami ended up being so prominently featured in narrative scenes – but it didn't start that way. Initially, the Ikegami was there for retro footage, and maybe we'd try a little bit of coverage. But then we fell in love with how it looked on the monitor, during the pilot, even though we always covered our bases with 35, as well as the 8 mil. I think what it became was a synthesis, in the pilot, of Todd's willingness to experiment, Adam's willingness to empower Todd, and Hank's willingness to just say: "I don't care if it's crappy old video, that's the best shot for that scene!" No one expected that result. A great example from the pilot is the scene with Magic and his father, which is not stylized. It's a simple moment where they are talking about life. We shot the hell out of it on 35. But the Ikegami brought us in like we were in the room watching a home movie. Rather than distancing you with style, it immerses you with style. Now, most TV shows don't have a style at all, or rather the style is a non-style. This show has a bold style that asserts itself and says, "Hey, I'm here." I feel like the reviews that have taken us to task for that are picking low-hanging fruit. Most [TV shows] they write about don't mention the style because... there is none.

That's true. On the flip side, pushing things as far as you do in this show – color, lighting, editing, formats – can risk being a distraction. I think once you commit to a strong style, as Todd and Adam did in the pilot, it's incumbent to give it meaning. That's the filter I ultimately apply to all of those style elements – in writing, camera, editing – as to what stays or goes. Not "Is it fun and stylish?" But is it providing a point of view or a twist that you wouldn't otherwise be able to achieve? So, while it may initially appear that Jerry Buss is talking directly to the camera to give you information about Jerry West, he's also giving you character information about Jerry Buss. That P.T. Barnum sales-pitch thing John C. Reilly does, leaning into camera, wagging his finger, is who Jerry Buss is. Half-charlatan, half-Horatio Alger story – that's why

he's talking to camera. It's not just a style trick. He's a hustler, and we're being hustled.

This show is based on real people, many of whom are still alive, and their character flaws are front and center. Where is that line between heightening a real-life person and turning them into a cartoon who's entertaining? It's what the judge said about pornography: "You know it when you see it," and everyone will see it a little differently. There are legal lines, and the HBO lawyers are well-versed in telling stories that are certainly much more controversial than the NBA's. Ultimately, for us, it's what feels true with a capital T. We know the facts of this story, but I always say: "The facts are the iceberg tip you see above the water." What that iceberg looks like underneath is not well-defined, even for the people who lived through it, because they only know their piece. That's the challenge – and the opportunity – afforded to us in dramatizing rather than making a documentary. We don't want to rearrange that world under the water's surface that doesn't feel true or doesn't fit. But at the same time, if we're not adding color, nuance and interpretation to help these characters make sense of what happened, then why bother?

TV is different from features in that the writer/producer is the constant, along with his or her DP's – not the directors who funnel through. I feel like this show takes that to another level. That's true. TV is a writer's medium because the showrunner – the writer/producer as you say – is there all the way through, whereas in features it's traditionally the director, or perhaps now on the big franchise films, the producer. With our show, it is very much a model in that way, particularly with Todd in that he created the look with Adam from day one. And while Adam is involved as a producer, he was less hands-on after directing the pilot, whereas Todd and Mihai are there every day. From the beginning, I've viewed Todd as a full creative partner without whom the show couldn't possibly be what it is. This show is not just about having a craftsman come in and execute what's on the page; it's about having a real artist bring their soul to bear and add to what's on the page. One reason the show feels so layered is that at every point in the production, people are encouraged to add to it. The norm I've found in the past is more for people to hit the marks; adding, yes, but within relatively tight constraints. Here we're like: "You want to shoot video? You want to shoot black and white? Let's go!" The vernacular of this show is to try anything and

everything, and I'm in that editing room protecting you, to the best of my abilities, if those choices fail. You've talked to the heads of departments and seen their enthusiasm and willingness to take creative chances. That's because unlike a project where they're tasked to realize what's on the page through their specific skill sets, here we're telling everyone to make what's on the page ten times better! It becomes infectious when everyone is trying to do the best work they've ever done.

Everyone on the team is a filmmaker with a story to tell. Absolutely. [First AC] Dave Edsall would often come up to me on set, geeking out about something he'd come up with and wanted to contribute. The energy on this set, at every level, has been that we have a really fun show, and we love the subject matter. But we know we have an opportunity to do something bigger and more interesting than the world would probably anticipate. There's no better high than walking onto a set where everyone is not just clocking in and clocking out – they want to keep raising the bar and make art.

Jeff Pearlman's book, on which the show is based, touched on some of the socio-political issues of the period. But you go way deeper. I'm thinking of Episode 5 with Kareem's backstory of his Muslim faith and desire to be an icon for civil rights. I appreciate you bringing that up. Jeff wrote the textbook on that era, and it's wonderful and readable. But we decided early on not to do the mini-series approach – just hit the big pieces of the decade and we're done in a few seasons. We wanted to treat these characters as being part of an evolving narrative, which meant going deeper than Jeff would have had the time or interest to do in a book like that. We did a lot of our own research and worked hard to make that happen. You mention the Kareem stuff – my co-writer and chief collaborator, Rodney Barnes, and I talked early on about how we could get into Kareem as a man. Not just on the court, and the stuff already portrayed about his difficulty with his teammates and the press, but what's beneath that. The same goes for Spencer Haywood, as his story comes to a head in the last few episodes. Jeff's book touched on Haywood's drug problems but didn't go much deeper. We want to learn about the traumas underneath all of these people and what motivates them to act the way they do. We wanted a show that's nuanced and thoughtful regarding race, class and culture, that hopefully will catch people by surprise. 🌈

FEATURE . 001



WINNING TIME



BY
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PHOTOS BY
WARRICK PAGE / HBO

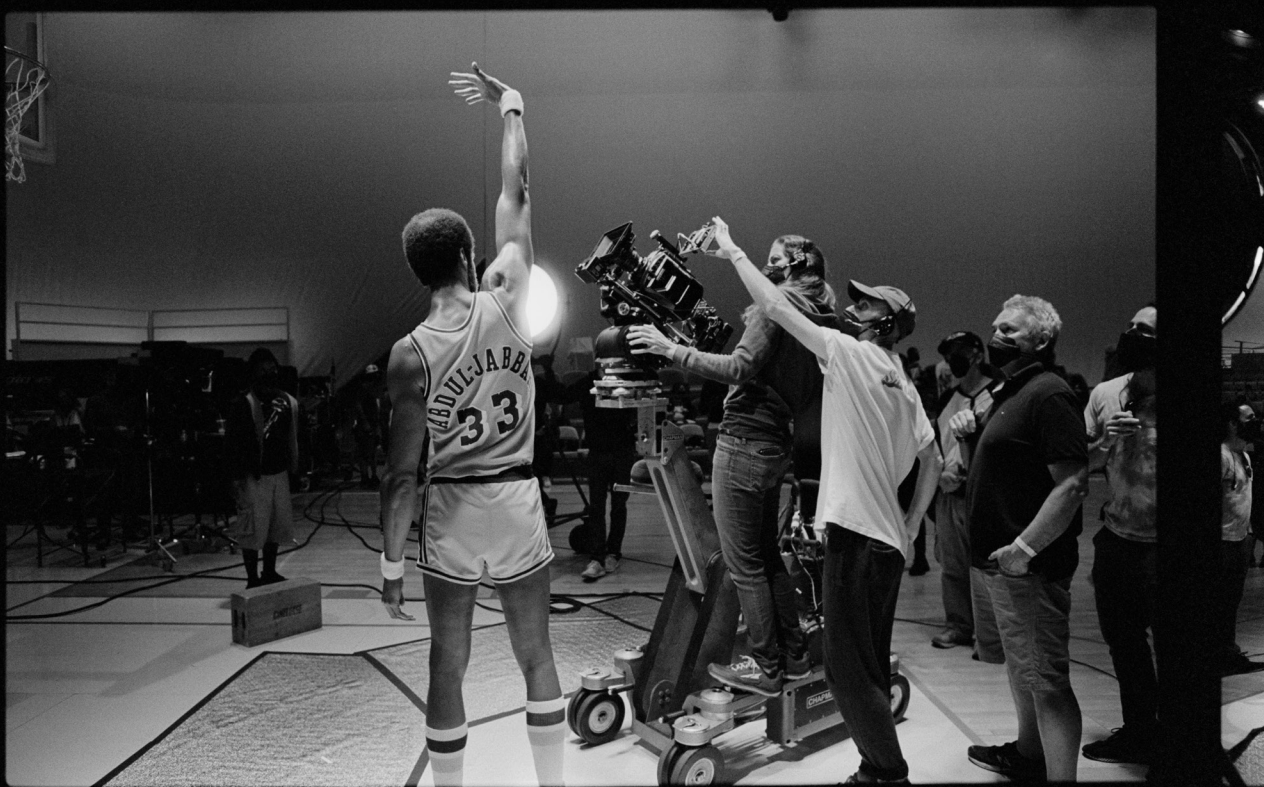
HOOP DREAMS

ADAM MCKAY'S NEW HBO SERIES, *WINNING TIME: THE RISE OF
THE LAKERS DYNASTY*, REIMAGINES A CITY AND SPORTS TEAM
FOREVER LINKED IN GLITZ, GLAMOUR AND GLORY.

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Hard-core basketball fans (like myself) and lifelong Lakers lovers (me, again) may be surprised by the depth of social, cultural and historical analysis in Adam McKay's new 10-part HBO series, *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty*. To be sure, this bold, visually brash show, lensed by Guild Directors of Photography Todd Banhazl and Mihai Mălaimare Jr., serves up copious amounts of sex, drugs, celebrity worship and the "Showtime" brand of hoops associated with Los Angeles in the 1980s – the city that Dr. Jerry Buss (a free-wheeling John C. Reilly) was certain would embrace the flagging Lakers team he bought and rebranded. But there's also a good amount of socio-political commentary in *Winning Time's* depiction of a league and franchise poised to forever change the business and entertainment of sports.



s Banhazl describes during a break from color-timing

Season 1's final episode with Company 3 Senior Colorist Walter Volpatto, "I had shot [the 2019 feature] *Hustlers*, which Adam McKay executive produced. And from our first conversation, this project was about recreating the pure joy [of the filmmaking aesthetic] back then. We loved the cultural and political dynamics of the script, and we wanted the same bravado that was on the page to be on the screen, and that we should shoot on film."

Not that a period story *needs* to be shot on film, Banhazl is quick to add.

"We wanted film because we knew we'd be pulling in so many looks – photos from the time, archival footage, news conferences, TV basketball coverage – and wanted to play with the formats associated with that time," he continues. "We originally thought 16mm Ektachrome reversal would be our main look. But that didn't give us enough room to modulate the image quality up and down as much as wanted to across different formats. So, we began testing 35mm to see if we could create a hybrid 35/16mm aesthetic. We realized that we were not seeking the look of reversal film stock, which Kodak still makes. Rather it was the look of a reversal film print as we remember it."

Digging deep into L.A.'s sports icons was the goal of McKay and Showrunner/Writer/Co-Creator Max Borenstein (*Exposure*, page 28). Whether it's a sullen Kareem Abdul-Jabbar struggling with political and religious short-comings; a foul-mouthed Jerry West and his near-cannibalistic obsession with losing; or a bare-chested, middle-aged Jerry Buss and his endless procession of "bimbos"; the characters in *Winning*



ABOVE/OPPOSITE: C-CAMERA OPERATOR/2ND UNIT DP JUSTIN CAMERON SAYS HE AND BANHAZL INITIALLY THOUGHT THE 8 MILLIMETER WOULD BE USED SPARINGLY FOR ESTABLISHMENT OR INSERT SHOTS. "BUT WHEN WE USED THE 8 MILLIMETER [IN THE PILOT] WITH YOUNG MAGIC AT NIGHT," CAMERON RECOUNTS, "WE QUICKLY REALIZED IT OFFERED SO MANY THINGS: TIME AND PLACE, NOSTALGIA, THE FEEL OF A HOME VIDEO OR DOCUMENTARY."

Time all have flaws writ large. Based on Jeff Pearlman's book *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*, the story highlights a pack of talented egomaniacs intent on grabbing life's big brass ring (aka an NBA Championship) for a variety of personal and professional reasons. Banhazl says the challenge was how best to recreate a time and place firmly burrowed in collective memory. Banhazl says the solution, photographically, to best recreate a time/place burrowed so deeply in collective memory, was to mix formats – withing scenes, even shots.

"Our original rule for using 8mm [the show used multiple 35mm and 16mm Kodak Vision3 stocks and Double-X black-and-white, as well as 8mm Vision3 stocks, including black-and-white reversal] was that it would set up time and place," Banhazl continues. "Establishing shots, inserts, helping the audience lose track of what was stock versus recreated footage. But then we started using the 8mm for narrative scenes and syncing sound with it. We called it the 'dad-cam' because it needed to feel like a dad filming his family barbecue. The more [the 8mm] was in close on a pistol grip, the more we began to like it for dramatic narrative moments."

C-Camera Operator/2nd Unit DP Justin Cameron, SOC, says using the 8mm system

(Beaulieu 4008 full gate with an Angénieux 8–64mm at f/1.9 and converted to Max8 by Pro8mm in Burbank, CA) was in stark contrast to modern workflows. "8mm can't be traditionally viewed on set," Cameron explains, "so there had to be constant communication between all the departments to maintain a visual language. Eight mm is a non-crystal sync format, and bouncing between off-speed and 24 frames per second creates havoc for a non-crystal motor, especially with such a narrow perf. So, we'd deal with power fluctuations, undesired ramping, and many other beautiful imperfections that make using 8mm so unique! I was in constant communication with our editors and worked closely with Sound and the AC's to clap slates and provide post with sound sync moments. Framing out unwanted areas of the stage/set/location was also tricky, because with the full gate extract, we were unable to see the entire image in the optical finder."

As the filmmakers describe, 8mm capture was designed to create a language that could be emotionally reactive and subconsciously nostalgic, with the format's limitations often enhancing evolution. "I couldn't find a ton of 8mm pointed at a basketball court during my 1980s NBA research," continues Cameron. "So, initially, Todd and I thought the 8 mm would

offer some establishing shots, and the video camera would dominate basketball coverage. But when we used 8mm for part of the pilot [a scene when young Magic is playing basketball with his father at night, in Lansing, MI], we quickly realized it offered so many things: time and place, nostalgia, the feel of a home video or documentary. Leading up to our first basketball shoot day versus the Clippers, Todd and I decided I should approach the 8mm format as if I were a documentarian hired by the Lakers. I was dressed in period wardrobe and can be seen on the bench, in the crowd, and basically everywhere! The 8mm format reflected an even more subjective and raw view of our world and its characters."

Another beloved vintage tool was born from researching NBA broadcasts circa the late 1970s and 80s. "Our first AC, Dave Edsall, was testing period systems like Betamax, VHS and broadcast tube cameras, specifically the Ikegami ITC-730A, designed for the 1984 Olympic Games in L.A.," Banhazl recalls. "We knew we were going to use the Ikegami for basketball games and news conferences. But in the pilot, we saw how exciting it was for narrative [also]. A close-up was vulnerable and stripped down. We decided to embrace



ABOVE RIGHT: BANHAZL (WITH PILOT A-CAMERA OPERATOR P. SCOTT SAKAMOTO) SAYS THEY VARIED HOW TO RECREATE REAL EVENTS. "WHEN WE SEE KAREEM IN [THE 1980 COMEDY HIT *AIRPLANE!*], [ABOVE LEFT] WE RECREATED THE MOVIE [IN 35MM] FRAME-FOR-FRAME, WITH THE EXACT KEY LIGHTS AND SHADOWS. OTHER TIMES, LIKE FOR MAGIC'S DRAFT ANNOUNCEMENT [LEFT BOTTOM] WE'D START WITH THE SOURCE MATERIAL AND BEND IT TOWARD SOMETHING MORE COMEDIC OR VISCERAL." [LEFT MIDDLE] JUSTIN CAMERON WITH "ZIGGY," THE 1980'S IKEGAMI BROADCAST RIG RETROFITTED BY 1ST AC DAVE EDSALL.



all these different formats – like having a big crane down in 35mm, and then cutting to a low-res video image in close-up. We wanted to depict these mythic icons we’ve known for decades in a new way.”

Mălaimare Jr., best known for such acclaimed features as *The Master*, *Jojo Rabbit*, and *The Harder They Fall*, was brought on by Banhazl with the tease that “*Winning Time* would be like making a super-long movie together,” he smiles. “And it was.” The DP, who was four years old in his native Romania during the Lakers’ 1979–80 season, said the series had one prime ingredient he loved. “Any time you can shoot with real period cameras, rather than trying to make a modern digital camera look period, that excites me,” Mălaimare Jr. adds. “When Todd said he used tube cameras for the pilot, I was like, ‘Okay, I’m in!’ That sounds amazing.”

“I remember a past project,” he continues, “where we wanted the actors to be filming themselves with VHS cameras, and the postproduction team was throwing all these digital options at us to replicate VHS. And we

said, ‘No, let’s just use the real thing no matter how many accessories are needed.’ I feel like we had the same approach here. Dave Edsall went to heroic lengths to make the Ikegami work, with results that are so beautiful. You can’t truly reproduce that look with modern tools. You need the real thing.”

“Heroic lengths” may be an understatement. Edsall, who met Banhazl more than a decade ago, recalls the exact moment when the Ikegami sped past its original purpose. “It was in the pilot – the golf course scene when Jerry West breaks his club and storms off the putting green,” Edsall remembers. “The Ikegami was set back and framed wide, before zooming in to end on a close-up on West. When we finished the scene, we all heard Adam [McKay] shout from the monitor: ‘Ikegami!’ Pretty much from that point on, it was every day, every scene.”

Not that the period tech was without issue. When one of the Ikegamis Edsall procured (off eBay) for the pilot went down after just three weeks, he realized he’d need to amass an arsenal to keep them in use. “I calculated we’d need one per episode,” Edsall laughs, “and that was fairly close as half ended up working and half were used for parts. By Episodes 9 and 10, which have a lot of basketball coverage, we were using six Ikegami cameras – two mounted on remote heads above the court, two mounted to the backboards that were set dressing and usable, and two on the floor.”

For the pilot, which was shot pre-COVID in 2019, Edsall says the Ikegami “was always tethered to a recorder because we were nervous about using modern batteries,” he smiles. “But once it became a hero camera, it had to function like the film cameras – with a Teradek wireless video and Preston wireless follow-focus. It had to be able to sit on a dolly, a slider, even the Technocrane, along with Justin going handheld. These old cameras are all metal, so I removed the side panel and had Panavision install a cheese plate so we could attach all the modern accessories. We also removed the existing eyepiece and gave Justin a seven-inch SmallHD monitor, which had frame lines for both 4:3 and 1:78. Anyone who walked on the set saw a 100 percent workable cinema camera. It was pretty cool!”

Cameron says early on the Guild camera team was “feeling out and being patient with” the Ikegami’s language, and its role within the main 35mm look. “For the pilot, I would pull my own focus and zoom while [C-Camera] First AC Gary Bevans would tend to the block battery and Pix system to make sure the signal was constant,” he recalls. “The on-set footprint was tricky, but our incredible A-Camera Operator, P. Scott Sakamoto [SOC], and B-Camera Operator, John Connor [SOC] on the pilot would create physical space for the Ikegami [ITC-730A, rated at 200 ISO] to work. We adopted the Ikegami HL-79 for low light along with the 730A for day scenes and basketball [with a vintage

Canon 9.5-143mm ENG zoom lens], as well as a dedicated focus puller for the Ikegami cameras when the show resumed in 2021. Todd and Adam liked the Ikegami working untraditionally off-axis, well below eyes and sometimes on the opposite side of the line. The microforce and zoom were always hunting for emotional moments to react to.”

Many of *Winning Time*’s best off-the-court moments derive from the vintage cameras’ varying aspect ratios and the NBA’s stature in the 1980s as a fledgling broadcast sport. One example, from the pilot episode, is when Lakers General Manager Bill Sharman introduces the team’s first-round draft choice, Earvin “Magic” Johnson (an uncanny Quincy Isaiah), who is flanked by Dr. Buss on one side and Jerry West on the other. Another, in Episode 6 (also shot by Banhazl), depicts Johnson, now a burgeoning superstar poised to be the next face of the NBA (along with Larry Bird), being pitched by various shoe manufacturers to wear their product, including a young Phil Knight and his new-to-the-market sneaker called Nike!

Banhazl says they referenced period material in different ways.

“When we see Kareem in [the 1980 comedy hit *Airplane!*, shot by Joseph F. Biroc, ASC], we recreate the movie [in 35mm] frame-for-frame, with the exact key lights and shadows,” he recounts. “Other times, like for Magic’s draft announcement, we’d start with the source material and bend it toward something more comedic or visceral.” Because photos and footage of Magic’s draft announcement were plentiful, Banhazl’s team could replicate camera placement and lighting, “including a classic TV zoom-in on Magic, which is period-accurate,” he adds. “But then we break from that when the camera pans to Jerry West and pushes in way too close, emphasizing his discomfort. With any of the vintage capture, we always wanted to remind the audience these events *did* happen, but at the same time we wanted them to engage with the moment as if it were happening now.”

As with the 8mm, the use of the Ikegami’s 1:33 aspect ratio for basketball-related scenes evolved. Cameron researched NBA arena camera plots of the era, and he watched “a lot” of 1:33 basketball games on ESPN Classic. “Along with the press conferences and post-game interview coverage, using 1:33 was crucial in creating the audience’s subconscious acceptance of ‘traditional’ NBA broadcast coverage from that time,” he explains.

“We created a camera plot of the Forum, which was the start of a rulebook,” Cameron details. “Due to set size and visual-effects limitations, the language of the Ikegami for games evolved. For example, the court broadcast angle began on a scissor lift, the Ikegami on a fluid head with a microforce, and that later changed to a remote head mounted

on a truss. Even later on, we mounted the Ikegami on a remote head high above the backboards – typically reserved for NBA playoffs and NBA finals of the period – and even to the backboards. Todd and Mihai and their directors would often break our own rules as the language evolved. During a timeout, we could find ourselves emotionally attached to a character in the 1:78 narrative mentality, then back in-game, a 1:33 broadcast position and language would take over. The juxtaposition of the ratios was another tool – used with the vintage formats – not only to create time and place but also to explore raw emotion.”

Mälaimare Jr. recalls watching YouTube footage in prep of a 1979–80 Lakers game against the Clippers, “where they had an operator up in the catwalks hand-holding an Ikegami and pointing it straight down at the court,” he smiles. “That inspired our use of the Ikegami, only now high up on a modern remote head to mirror the old NBA approach.”

Handheld 16mm was another key format for the basketball (which doesn’t ramp up until Episode 5 in San Diego). Operator John Lyke, a former pro snowboarder and in-line skater, was outfitted with a stripped-down ARRI 416 loaded with half-full magazines (roughly two-minute runs) and a backpack containing wireless video/follow-focus. Mälaimare Jr. says Lyke “could move much faster and get in much closer on Rollerblades than any traditional moving camera system. John could skate 360 all over the court and put us right into the action, or the huddles during time-outs. It was immediate and intense.”

Banhazl describes Lyke as “our secret weapon. We would design the plays on the court, and then John would come into our final rehearsals with actors, and we’d choreograph him in as another player. Particularly in the later episodes, when the Lakers find their flow together on-court, we wanted the camera to reflect the incredible speed and elegance of the game played at the highest level. Having John with a camera on skates allowed us to stay with the pace of the game but also keep the action specific and emotional.”

Other non-traditional tools included a special platform dolly, designed by Key Grip David Richardson, with an extra-wide track that allowed the actors to stay between the track and close to the camera covering their movements. “We used an image-shaker, which you typically see on car commercials,” Banhazl adds, “so that it would feel like the pounding of the game was shaking the floor, and low-angle prisms to cover the footwork.”

Regarding the frequent breaks with tradition, Mälaimare Jr. observes: “Many times, we as cinematographers want to make everything seamless. But for this show, the more the image formats changed, the better. The more the image was pushed beyond what seemed possible – color, resolution, grain, highlights, et cetera – the more we embraced

it! There would never be a reason for a broadcast camera to be in Jerry Buss’s home. But even with its lighting limitations, we just kept pushing it in tighter for close-ups. The same with the 8mm – the grain, scanning the film so the perfs show, instantly connects with something familiar.”

The willingness to cross technological boundaries is *Winning Time*’s strength. That’s abundantly apparent in the lighting and design of the many basketball venues the Lakers visit over the 1979–80 season. Those include a pre-season training facility in Palm Springs, CA from Episode 4 (shot by Mälaimare Jr.), with the Lakers staying at the Buss-owned Ocotillo Lodge; the opening game of the season at the San Diego Clippers arena from Episode 5; the iconic Forum (renamed the Great Western Forum after Buss could not make good on past owner Jack Kent Cooke’s debts); and the infamous Boston Garden, in Episode 7 (shot by Mälaimare Jr.); where the season’s greatest hoops dramas play out with hated rivals, the Celtics.

Production Designer Rich Toyon, who won an Emmy for HBO’s *Silicon Valley*, says making available stage space (during a busy L.A. production window) serve for all the venues was a challenge. “They asked if recreating the Forum [at L.A. Center Studios] was possible, and after some drawings and calculations, I realized we could fit in a full regulation NBA court and some seating. And because the majority of basketball games were shot from one side,” Toyon adds, “we built eight rows of arena seating that were just slightly steeper than the Forum. For the other arenas, we researched local advertising of the period and changed the court graphics. Unlike today, the backboards were all different, so we changed color pads, shot clocks, cameras, and stanchions to conform with each arena.”

Toyon insists the ask for multiple arenas on one stage would not have worked without a close partnership with VFX Supervisor John Heller and his team. “The Art Department put together a digital package for VFX that included all of the signage and court graphics, along with as much historical record of each game as we had,” Toyon continues. “We also did our own cut-and-paste backgrounds into the [green-screened] set so that VFX would have a clear understanding of what was needed. Often you do the shoot in July, and it’s not until March that the file gets opened. We didn’t want them to guess – we wanted to be as accurate as possible.”

Designing the Forum’s exterior was an even greater puzzle. With no access to the real structure (inside or out), Toyon’s team had to build a full-scale model of a section of the famed Inglewood landmark, which was then wire-framed by Heller’s VFX team and landed in the Santa Anita racetrack’s parking lot in





"OPERATOR JOHN LYKE COULD SKATE 360 ALL OVER THE COURT AND PUT US RIGHT INTO THE ACTION, OR THE HUDDLES DURING TIME-OUTS. IT WAS IMMEDIATE AND INTENSE."

CO-SERIES DP MIHAI MĂLAIMARE JR.



ABOVE/OPPOSITE: CHIEF LIGHTING TECHNICIAN JOSH HENSLEY, ILCS, RECALLS TALKING IN PREPRODUCTION MEETINGS "ABOUT HOW WE COULD PULL OUT THE GNARLIEST VERSION OF EVERY PERIOD LIGHTING ENVIRONMENT. WE WOULD GO TO DIFFERENT LOCATIONS AND SAY: 'THIS IS A TERRIBLE COLOR THAT NORMALLY EVERYONE WOULD HATE, AND WE'RE GOING TO TRY TO RECREATE IT!'"

Arcadia, CA. "All of the landscaping, parking lot lights and striping were added, and then Visual Effects ran with it," Toyon recounts. "We worked closely with Todd, Mihai and [Chief Lighting Technician] Josh [Hensley, ILCS] to build-in period sodium/mercury vapor lighting in the parking lot. John [Heller] was the one who guided what was needed for the model section. Josh's team created a large structure of LED's [LiteGear 2x8 LiteTiles] to get that famous Forum glow you could see from the 405 freeway."

Hensley, who took over for Michael Bauman after the pilot, brought a fluency with LED lighting that redefined how to approach period lighting. He says the goal in lighting the Forum (exterior model) "was to create a gradient for VFX that erased the line between what did or did not exist." As for the Forum's famous interior, it fixes Buss' burgeoning "Showtime" universe before a ball is ever tipped off. Scenes from the pilot – like a giddy Dr. Buss, whiskey bottle in hand, staggering out from recessed shadows to center court screaming "I fucking own this place," or Magic, touring the tunnels and locker room with Buss before wandering out, alone, to mid-court, where a rack of balls awaits – are mesmerizing. Hensley says these "after-hours" moments were staged with the idea that only the safety

lights were left on. "It was less about seeing the details of the court," he notes, "and more about shaping highlights specific to that period, where the older cameras couldn't necessarily hold onto the image. For those scenes, we used the ETC SolaHyBeam 3000 high-fidelity units, which are moving lights that create reflections to paint the scene, versus ambient light."

Buss' party-time hub, the Forum Club, was originally built by Kent Cooke "as a strange hybrid of the Roman Forum and Greek Agora," Toyon describes. "After Claire Rothman's renovation, it was more modest than you'd expect, given all the celebrities. Since a lot of this show is about ceilings visible in frame, we tried for as many built-in fixtures as we could – like the recessed red soffits, incandescent bar lights, and, of course, the disco ball."

A key scene in Episode 5 hints at the club's ultimate destiny.

An 18-year-old Jeanie Buss (Hadley Robinson), who's been working hard to fulfill her father's fantasies, debuts her hand-picked "Laker Girls." As red lights swirl (and the 1979 disco hit "Ring My Bell" booms), the scantily clad dancers, led by a teenage Paula Abdul (Carina Conti), preview the gyrating numbers that will change basketball's entertainment value forever. Hensley says they used Cine 5 Pixel Ribbon for all the red in the Forum Club

and for anything emitting from the bar. "The bulbs in the ceiling were based on a zone system, as we knew there'd be 20-plus actors in there and we couldn't do any tweaking," he says. "They were so hard they could easily destroy skin tones, even in 35mm, if people were under them. So, we outfitted the bulbs with flexible metal adapters to direct the light where we needed."

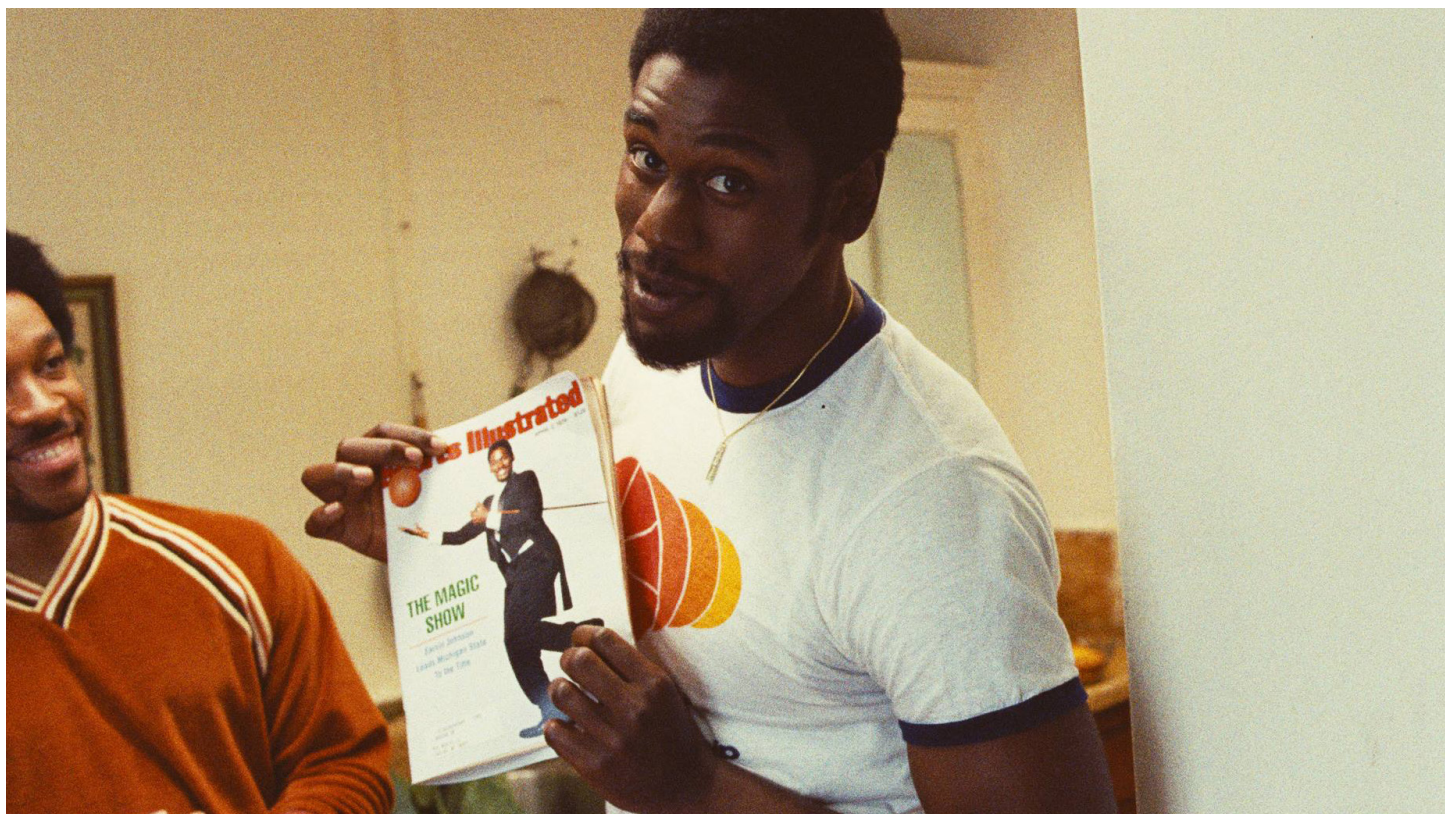
A similar challenge came with lighting the Forum's court, but on a much bigger scale. "With 400 extras inside the arena set, we knew we couldn't slow things down," Hensley adds. "So, we conducted tests with the workhorses of that generation – old HMI's and tungsten – to try and replicate the halide lighting; but we found the maintenance was not feasible. Pointed straight down, the reflectors would heat up, cauterize the metal, and explode the bulbs within 15 minutes!" Hensley landed on the show's hero light, the Cineo R15 LED, which, when stacked together, cast shadows on the court that were almost identical to those from halide fixtures. "And since the R15s are DMX controlled," he continues, "we could go from 15 to 75 degrees – soft and wide or harsh and direct – right from the board. We also needed to change the look for each arena without lifts, cranes or gels, and the R15s were great for changing the tone and shape to pull out the nuances."





"WE BEGAN TESTING TO CREATE A HYBRID 35/16
MILLIMETER AESTHETIC...WE WEREN'T SEEKING THE
LOOK OF REVERSAL FILM STOCK, WHICH KODAK STILL
MAKES. RATHER IT WAS THE LOOK OF A REVERSAL
FILM PRINT AS WE REMEMBER IT."

PILOT/CO-SERIES DP TODD BANHAZL



The Local 728 electric team implemented the R15s in a zone system that – while not exactly mirroring the Forum’s famous spider-web array – still placed them diagonally every 13 feet, as players passed through. “If anyone was at the top of the key, in the paint, or at the three-point line,” Hensley notes, “they were most likely standing under or close to a fixture. Whenever they were in-between the fixtures, you’d get these multiple shadows on the head and neckline that felt just like the old halide lights.”

Toyon says Banhazl and Mälaimare Jr. were “godsend” when it came to creating designs that supported the bold (often garish) colors that defined the period. “These DP’s both loved reflective surfaces, and that’s not always the case,” he explains. “Mirrors, shiny metal, all the surfaces that were so key to the period, not to mention all the fluorescent lighting in the Forum offices [and everywhere else] that Josh’s team sourced or duplicated with LED’s. I appreciated their work so much and loved the collaboration.”

Cameron sends just as much love back

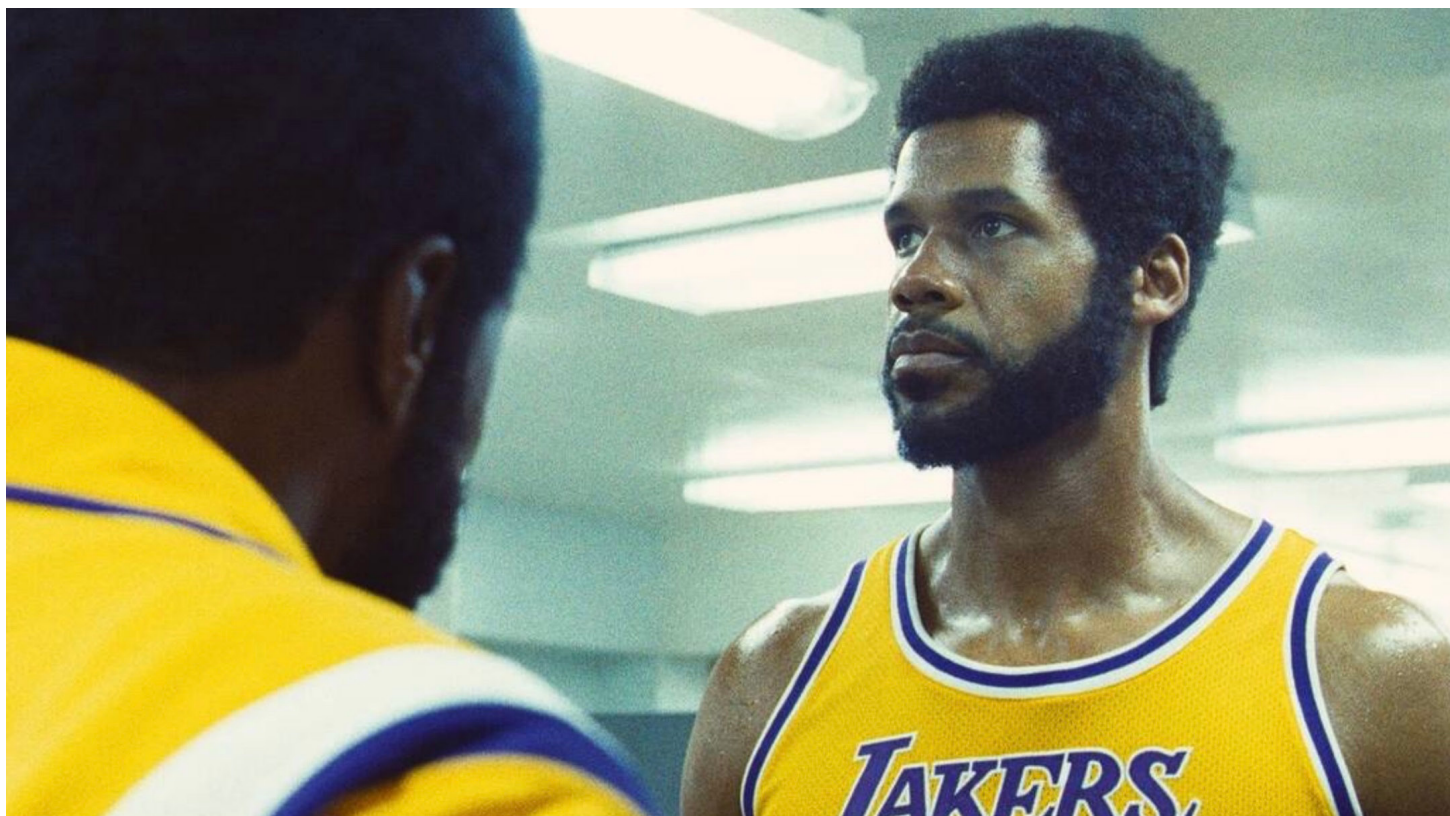
Toyon’s way. “Second Unit had so much fun creating the flashback pieces, as with Kareem and Bruce Lee or Walter Cronkite. Thought and care were put into every set piece, every piece of paper had a backstory and the world Rich and his team built allowed all of us to be fully immersed.”

If the Forum represents the story’s Luke Skywalker, the infamous Boston Garden, which the Lakers visit during a mid-season road trip, is Darth Vader. As seen in Episode 7 (shot by Mälaimare Jr.), the arena (and its fans) is filthy with racial bias. Lakers guard Norm Nixon (Nixon’s son, DeV Vaughn) shares a history with his younger teammates that features grainy black-and-white footage of the Garden’s ancient pipes and rats scurrying through a decrepit visitor’s locker room. Lighting the famous parquet floor, for which the art department laid an entire court over the Forum set, was a two-tone approach. “The parquet court is highlighted in one color and the ambient surroundings in another,” Hensley

recalls. “That contrasted with the Forum, which was like a gladiator arena, where all the light was on the court and the crowd went into darkness. We had to lean into every available period image to source the Garden.”

As for the bruising war that defined the Lakers/Celtics rivalry, Mälaimare Jr. observes: “We had the basketball dialed in by the later episodes, with John on skates and [A-Camera Operator Sarah Levy] handheld with 16mm. The main issue was limiting the wide shots with the 8mm and Ikegami, as the green screen challenges were considerable for VFX. I loved shooting the Boston Garden. Our director, Payman Benz, is a huge basketball fan, and he used NBA2K [a video game] to dial in the 1979 season and players and show us camera angles!”

Another epic rivalry, Bird versus Magic (portrayed as white, racist Boston versus Black, star-driven Hollywood) underscores *Winning Time’s* biting historical analysis. Nowhere is that theme more focused than Episode 5, centered on Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (an intense Dr. Solomon Hughes). Directed by Tanya



Hamilton, we see images of a young Lewis Alcindor, in his parents' NYC apartment, being radicalized by TV images of a Black youth killed by white cops, and later, receiving his Muslim name and quarreling with his Christian father. The flashbacks are intercut with an adult Kareem praying in the Lakers' locker room, visiting a local mosque, and walking his mountaintop home with teammate Spencer Haywood (Wood Harris), all of which resonate with a visual intensity deeper than many "showtime" moments.

As Banhazl explains: "Each episode dips its toes into spending more time with a certain character and often flashes back to their childhood to see the traumas that have shaped them. Each flashback had its own look catered to the period's dominant advertising aesthetic – what did photos of the bought-and-sold American dream look like during that time, and how could we redefine those images? For Kareem's backstory in Harlem, in the '60s during the protests and when he first converted to Islam, we created a look that approximates something like a cross-processed reversal film print, and mixed that with Kodak Double-X Black/White film that was referencing real news footage of the Harlem Protests. The idea was to contrast a vibrant impassioned youthful color look with a harsh black and white news look. It was a sign of the changing times, and of the political and religious awakening for Kareem."

Taking risks with color was another slam dunk for the show. Whether it's the gaudy bands of Laker purple and gold inside the Forum, or the mixed vapor/halide lighting that once dominated America's outside spaces, *Winning Time's* filmmakers eagerly pushed imagery beyond where others will go. The night exteriors alone, including a pilot scene of a young Magic shooting buckets on a snowy East Lansing playground (which Baumann retrofitted with modern LED tech to create reflections on and around the court), are worthy of Emmy consideration. Hensley recalls talking in preproduction meetings "about how we could pull out the gnarliest version of every

period lighting environment in the show. We would go to different locations and say: 'This is a terrible color that normally everyone would hate, and we're going to try to recreate it!'"

Hence the blazing green light from the Forum parking lot in Episode 6 (shot by Banhazl) was impossible to "find in the wild with all the LED retrofits that have taken place," Hensley continues. "And we couldn't even find the period-correct mercury vapor to duplicate it in the spectrum of cinema lighting. So, we ended up using Robe ColorStrobes [LED theatrical lights] mounted on parking light poles every 25 feet that gave us an [ARRI SkyPanel] S30 equivalent, in terms of spread, but with this crazy green color to send the parking lot period vibe."

Mälaimare Jr. notes, "We were able to load all the look-up tables Todd and I built with Walter during camera testing into a RED KOMODO, which we used as our color reference camera on set. We could send screen grabs from the KOMODO to the dailies colorist as a reminder of what we were going for, with any tweaks on the KOMODO also informing which way to go, like subtracting or adding green for the Forum parking lot. Of course, film is more forgiving than digital, and in some examples, we could have gone even further to tear highlights and crush blacks. But, even pushing one stop, with the Vision3 500 in 35 mm, required a lot more light than, say, a 1600 ISO digital camera. I think having this arsenal of new LED technology was one reason why the night exteriors look so great."

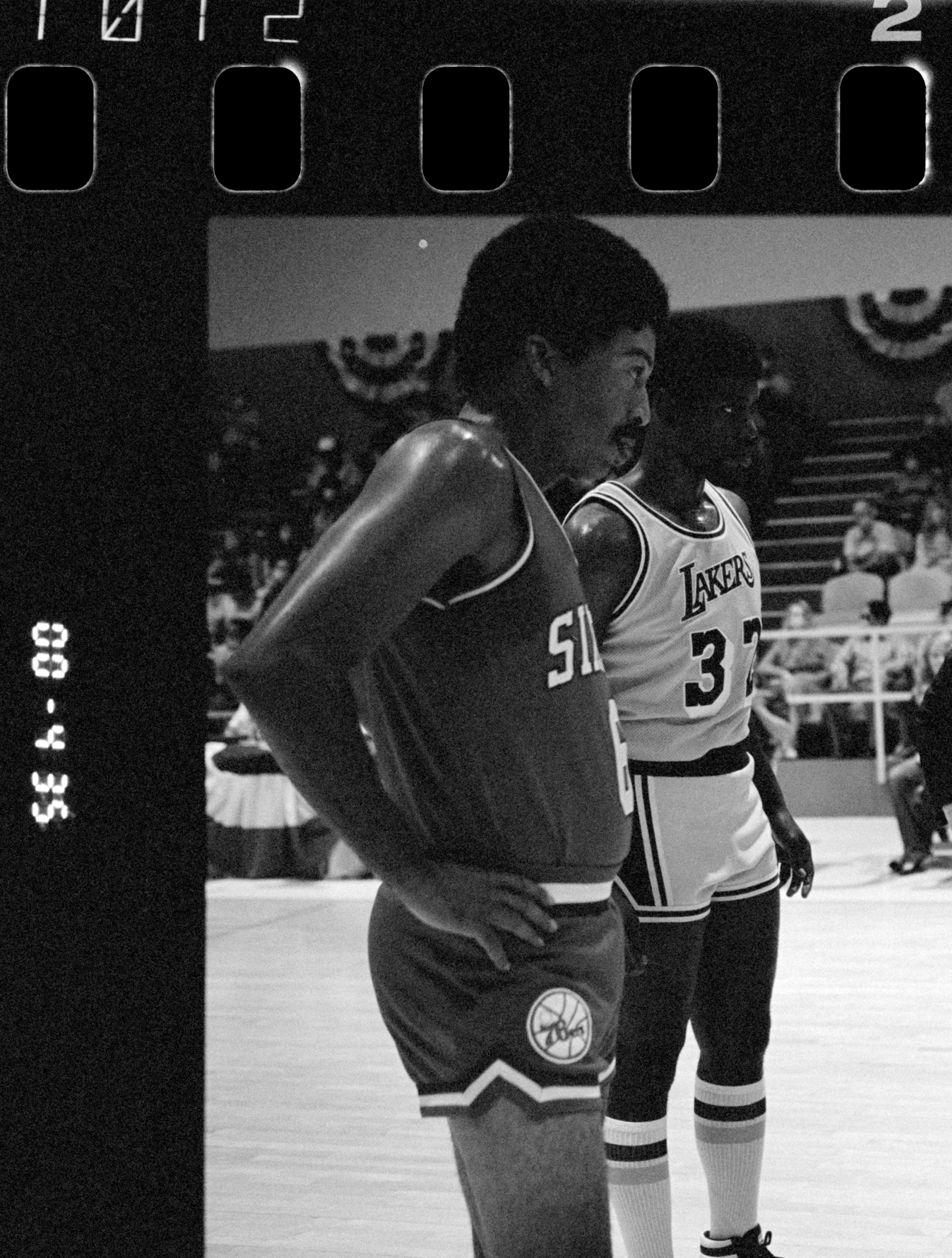
Other stunning examples include the pilot episode, when Dr. Buss takes Magic for burgers at an Inglewood-area drive-in; Episode 3 and 4 (both shot by Mälaimare Jr.), when Magic and Norm Nixon attend a Hollywood premiere, and, afterward, settling in at their pre-season Palm Springs training facility; and Magic and Dr. Buss sharing a quiet moment poolside outside of the Ocotillo Lodge (shot at the Sheraton Universal, which was closed down for COVID). One scene in Episode 4, where the new Lakers coach Jack McKinney (an impenetrable Tracy Letts) leads

the team on a night training run through the desert, epitomizes the lengths to which *Winning Time's* union crew went to get it right.

"We needed to feel the length and breadth of the desert at night, even as this crowd of people – of every possible skin tone – comes running up from far down this road," Hensley remembers. "The budget wouldn't allow for a Condor every quarter mile, so we had two lifts, 120 feet in the air with 18Ks, with one spotted to pick off Joshua trees in the distance, and a Pettibone rig with S360s and mover lights – Elation Monets and HyBeam 3000s. Even with all that, it was insanely difficult to figure out how these guys would not be completely lost to camera [in a dramatic wide shot] until they were, like, 30 feet away."

Hensley's team ended up pinpointing a 200-foot range per moving fixture to help carve out the length of the road with a wash of different lighting units. "That meant some six or seven beams, which we expected to be casting hard lines everywhere," he adds. "But the blending tools within the movers are so precise, it was like watching Photoshop in real life! With the long lenses, you pretty much have to light by eye, so I ran the entire length of the road – a few times – to try and see where the separations [of light beams] would be. But there were none."

Going the extra mile to replicate a pivotal moment in the intersection of sports, culture, business and racial equity is what *Winning Time's* filmmakers say they valued most. Like DI Colorist Volpatto skillfully adding in gate weave, "so that it feels like we're watching prints from an older projector – and that's on top of all the great period print LUT's he helped us create," Banhazl concludes. "Walter was also the one who suggested we not have Fotokem dust-bust the negative, so all the dust and hairs normally blown off the film stayed on. Ideas like that contributed to this overall approach Adam instilled that if it felt right, we should just go for it! Walter's work is a non-stop showcase of non-traditional looks, all used to sell the authenticity of a time and place and the larger-than-life characters in our story." 🌈



KODAK 400TX

LOCAL 600 CREW

PILOT

Director of Photography
Todd Banhazi

A-Camera/Steadicam Operator
P. Scott Sakamoto, SOC

A-Camera 1st AC
David Edsall

A-Camera 2nd AC
Jason Alegre

B-Camera Operator
John Connor

B-Camera 1st AC
Scott Johnson

B-Camera 2nd AC
Nick Nikides

C-Camera Operator/2nd Unit DP
Justin Cameron, SOC

C-Camera 1st AC
Gary Bevans

Loader
Rachel Wiederhoeft

Utility
Jacques Vincent

EPISODES 2 – 10

Directors of Photography
Todd Banhazi
Mihai Malaimare Jr

A-Camera/Steadicam Operator
Chris Haarhoff (Episode 2)

A-Camera Operator
Sarah Levy (Episodes 3 – 10)
John Lyke

A-Camera 1st AC
David Edsall

A-Camera 2nd AC
Jason Alegre

B-Camera Operator
Sarah Levy (Episode 2)

B-Camera/Steadicam Operator
Dominic Bartolone (Episodes 3 – 10)

B-Camera 1st AC
Scott Johnson (Episodes 2 – 8)

B-Camera 1st AC
Arturo Rojas (Episodes 9 & 10)

B-Camera 2nd AC
Arturo Rojas (Episodes 2 – 8)

B-Camera 2nd AC
Ryan Jackson (Episodes 9 & 10)

C-Camera Operator/2nd Unit DP
Justin Cameron, SOC

C-Camera 1st AC
Gary Bevans

C-Camera 2nd AC
Mimi Phan

Loader
Emily Goodwin

Utility
Mario 'Rio' Allen
Brandon Johnson

Still Photographers
James Clark
Benjamin Kaller
Warrick Page