

Interview: Cinematographer Todd Banhazl Talks “Hustlers”

BY PAULA GOLDBERG

PremiumBeat: Todd, from the trailer for *Hustlers*, it looks like you were working with a pink, purple, and blue color palette with green (the color of money) unsaturated. Such an interesting choice to not pop the cash since, on the surface, the film seems to be about that — makes me think it’s a film less about commerce and more about empowerment? Am I off base, or what was the aesthetic for you and director Lorene Scafaria going into production?

Todd Banhazl: The movie is absolutely about the quest for power and control over one’s life, over anything else. Money is a means to that power, but sexuality is also a means to that power. We tried to remove green from any of the world, outside of the money. Green is not an indication of power in the film’s aesthetic. The saturated neon colors are an indication of power because the women are soaked in these colors when they are working — hustling the men, working the floor, taking their power back. The colors also relate to the gender politics in the film. The Wall Street dudes exist in clean, white spaces filled with glass and gold and all these glossy indications of wealth. As the women rise to power, they leave these colorful spaces and their spaces start looking a lot like their male Wall Street counterparts. It’s about wealth in that way, and the American Dream. The more money they get, the more the color gets drained from their world.

PB: Crime dramas are a popular genre, but they have been traditionally male dominated. How did the story, through the female gaze, alter your choice of composition, lens, and movement?

TB: We shot the film using all the crime drama techniques that we love from all our favorite movies. We didn’t use the female gaze as actively as you’d think. I mean, we were totally aware of it but . . . we shot the women taking control of the male gaze, and using it to their advantage. We shot large format digital because we wanted the strippers to look like superheroes on a 50ft screen, but we played around a lot with different lenses and resolutions, depending on whether the characters felt empowered or desperate. We charted their emotional journey by modulating the epicness of the image.

We shot the strippers like athletes, because they *are* athletes. We looked at a lot of sports movies as reference more than other stripper movies. I think, visually,

we stayed true to these characters' experiences and tried to shoot them like badass criminals that you love. The fact that we haven't seen many movies use these camera and lighting techniques — with lead actresses in the frame — speaks to why it was so exciting to make this movie.

PB: The film has some big personalities on screen, featuring Jennifer Lopez, Cardi B, and Constance Wu — women who definitely have been in the driver's seat of their own careers. From the perspective of the cinematographer, how does an ensemble work with so many star leads?

TB: It was so exciting to work with so many explosively talented humans. We were surrounded by so much power and talent every day. My job was to honor that and try to listen and watch and help complement their work and their characters via lighting and camera. It was a true collaboration, especially on a movie like this where both the actors and the team behind the camera were trying to represent women in a light [not] often seen on the big screen. We did it together.

PB: Who would you say is your most valuable bench player? I don't mean that in a disrespectful way to anyone's role in production, but the obvious collaborator is the director — how valuable to your communication about the work with the production designer or costume designer, for example?

TB: It will sound like a cliché but every single person on the team was my MVP. The trust and collaboration between departments was extremely thorough. Our production designer, Jane Musky, is a legend, and her work sings here. Lorene and I always said that the costumes in this film are the other character in the movie. I think *Hustlers* is our costume designer Mitchell Traver's finest work in his already-impressive career. Especially in a movie like this — where we are juggling so many tones and "gazes" — getting the balance right took full cohesion between departments. I'd also like to mention my Gaffer, Josh Hensley, and my entire [grip and electric] team. They pulled off miracles, and the movie looks absolutely huge, due to their talent and skill. When I look at the strip club scenes, I am in awe of what my team created. I've been color-correcting the movie, and I need to take breaks to text Josh and tell him that he is a genius.

PB: How does it work with your camera department? Do you tend to work with the same people?

TB: I work extremely close with my camera department, and I try to work with the same team, if I can. I've been working with my 1st AC Rebecca Rajadnya, 2nd

AC Tsyen Shen, and DIT Loic De Lame on movies and fashion stuff for years. On *Hustlers*, I was blessed with the camera dream team. My Operators, Stew Cantrell and Jennie Jeddry, became my creative partners on the film and invested themselves so deeply in the material. Our B Cam team, Nick Huynhand Jan Burgess, and our Loader/The Most Positive Human Ever Jeff Makarauskas, and our camera PA Antonia Colodro, who is a brilliant DP in her own right. It really was an embarrassment of riches for me. They are all my partners in crime, and they typically know what I want before I ask for it, but it's also an emotional thing. You take care of each other creatively, logistically, emotionally — the whole package.