

# TIFF '19 Interview: Cinematographer Todd Banhazl on Contributing to a Breath of Fresh Air In “Blow the Man Down” and “Hustlers”

On the power of collaboration behind two films involving criminal enterprise so good they should be illegal.

By Stephen Saito

It would be a crime to describe the opening scene of “Blow the Man Down” in much detail, although it would be just one of many that piles up in the small Maine town as a pair of sisters (Sophie Lowe and Morgan Saylor) reckon with the hidden history of the place after their mother’s death in Danielle Krudy and Bridget Savage Cole’s wildly entertaining feature debut. However, it can be mentioned that there’s a simple pivot of the camera that opens up the world in such a way that it feels as if your eyes are opening for the first time, so much so that it awakens all the senses with the smell of the sea air and the clamor of lobster traps being pulled from the water suddenly wafting through the air.

While cinematographers specifically concern themselves with how a film looks, Todd Banhazl has long considered part of his job how it feels, from capturing the cool, elusive feeling of Los Angeles on even the most summery of days in Joe Burke’s “Four Dogs” to the hazy bond between brothers in Lauren Wolkstein and Christopher Radcliff’s “The Strange Ones.” Both his considerable range and his exacting skill to stitch a film’s tone into its fabric can be seen this week with two films bowing at the Toronto Film Festival, both unorthodox tales of female empowerment with “Blow the Man Down” revealing a town that’s been running for years on the backs of women who have been servicing any number of needs of the fishermen who dock there and “Hustlers,” Lorene Scafaria’s adaptation of Jessica Pressler’s nonfiction tome “The Hustlers at Scores,” starring Jennifer Lopez and Constance Wu as the ringleaders of a group of strippers from the famed New York club who plan to run the world after taking their Wall Street clients for a ride.

Both wickedly sharp comedies, the films differ in the size of their settings, but Banhazl makes both feel larger than life and on the eve of the film’s big debuts in Toronto, he spoke about contributing to two of the year’s most exciting films, developing their specific visual languages and taking pride in the stories he’s helping to tell.

## How did “Blow the Man Down” come about?

I have been friends with Danielle and Bridget for over 10 years and we made a billion shorts and music videos together, so we all came up together and I had seen early drafts [of “Blow the Man Down”] and was aware that they were working on it and they spent the better half of seven or eight years writing it and getting it financed, so when it came time to do it, I was so grateful that they asked me to do it. They are so talented and it just felt like it was the right thing for all of us to do together, and I believe in them so much, so it’s just been so incredible watching them rise up and make this amazing movie.

**This is the second time you're working with a directing duo following "The Strange Ones." Is it any different?**

It is. I actually love it because you hear the directors' inner monologue out loud because you get to hear the discussions that they normally have in their head between their partners, so it's a great way to understand the why behind all your directors' decisions. At the same time, you a DP becomes the third member of this triangle, so for me, it's about letting the directors find what feels right together and then coming in and helping elevate that further visually.

**What were your initial conversations about as far as the look?**

I know they started in a place of making a noir and really wanted it to be a movie the way when we were all kids we saw movies, so they are so about structure and plot and these amazing fundamentals of filmmaking and they really held to that and for me, it was this sensation of salty [air] and grime, so even before we really started talking about how we were going to make the movie, I knew that I wanted the movie to look like a salty bucket of fish guts. I didn't know how we were going to do it yet, but that what stayed with me forever was [this image of] a rusty fishing knife found in a bucket. I thought no matter what, that's the defining feeling of the movie visually for me and then from there we figured out the rest.

**Bridget had told me you got some special 16mm lenses to get that texture?**

Yeah, they did some scouting without me and then we all scouted a few towns in Maine together and when we did that, I brought a Super 8 camera, so when we started talking about how to create a look for the movie, my colorist and I actually based the look off of all that Super 8 footage that we came back with. I try to do as much of the work as possible in preproduction so that when we're shooting, it's like we already have the look. We already know what the movie looks like, so especially when they're editing, they have something that looks great and have something as close to the final product as possible. So in preproduction, it's about doing a lot of testing, trying to go to the real locations or at least locations that are similar and shoot with the right camera or the right lenses or at least as similar as possible and take all that footage to my colorist. I think of LUTs as film stocks essentially and with those film stocks, we can go off and make the movie. [For "Blow the Man Down"] we used old vintage lenses and we shot with an Alexa, but we used a mode called 16mm sensor mode, which basically combining lenses and filters and this older sensor and then matching it to the Super 8 footage of the fishing town. That's how we got our look.

**You also draw on seemingly organic colors that nod to a heightened reality of a noir. I'm thinking of the wonderful sequence set in a maze of lobster traps. How did you go about figuring that out?**

Totally. Our initial inspiration for the lobster chase scene was the bush maze scene in "The Shining," so we talked about how to do a sequence where the entire lobster maze was lit 360° so we could move the camera through it and we could hide with the characters. A bunch of people pulled off miracles for that to happen because we were very small movie and we had a small crew. Our art director Danny Walton built the entire lobster maze, maybe [with] a person helping him, but he created the maze based on overhead designs we had created together in a day, and my gaffer Josh Hensley and his team lit the entire space as if it was all lit by fishing worklights.

Then we mapped out the entire sequence together like it was a sports game, and the idea for the color is that they're kind of entering into hell, so how do you motivate this hellish feeling. For us, it was about motivating it from working fisherman lights, and the color orange in the movie represents men and fishermen, so those fishing lights in that maze sequence are like the most nightmarish orange in the movie.

I always felt "Blow the Man Down" up to that point in my life was the most successful creation of a world that I had been a part of and I know that it is because of the collaborations with all the different departments was stronger than I had ever experienced before. It really became about working from the ground up with the production design team and the costume/wardrobe team and lighting/grip to design this thing, like what the women's world looked like, what the color stories are between the men and the women, and it becomes about communicating to every department in as in-depth a way as possible, so people can bring their brilliant ideas to the table. That's what happened. Every single person that worked on this movie brought so much passion and talent to it, I think that's on screen.

### **Was it any different to move to a bigger production like "Hustlers"?**

We had a bigger canvas and bigger paintbrushes, but the same challenges exist. The scope increases, but that also means your ambitions and your dreams of what you can accomplish increase, so it just all rises together. When I look at "Hustlers," I see a movie that was just as hard to make as any small indie movie.

### **It looks like you could certainly be bold in your color choices. How did the ideas about the palette take shape?**

The strippers working at the club are covered in color, so for us, the first color story is that's actually when they're initially in their first place of power and these spaces are an indication of wealth, and the more the women rise up to power, their world actually starts looking a lot more like the men's world. Then as the system closes down on the women storywise – the police system, the economic system, you start spending time in spaces like courtrooms and police stations and places that are devoid of color, [often] metal and white and desaturated, and to me, it's really sad. The bad guy in the movie is the system. It's not the men or the women, but as the story naturally goes from a strip club and ends up in a much more systemic economic zone, the world they inhabit is drained of color, meaning in some way the system wins.

### **What was it like to light the strip club scenes?**

The strip club was crazy. We basically took over an active strip club and added all of our lights into it. What my gaffer Josh Hensley and his team did to light that entire space is just an unbelievable feat. The goal was to light it like it was a functioning strip club, so we set up different color looks so basically you could shoot anywhere and be able to say "Cool, it's 2007 and it's our dance number #3" or "It's 2011 in the club and it's dance #2," so it was like an active theme park that we could shoot almost like a documentary.

**Was it interesting drawing a visual parallels between separate worlds?**

Yeah, it's a very montage-y movie. It takes place over several time periods. It's being told to you in an interview, so we had a lot of repeating images of [the strippers] going fishing for guys at the bar and picking up new guys and then parallels between Wall Street dudes hustling their clients on the phone and the strippers hustling at the strip club, so there's a lot of work to be done to make sure we were drawing visual parallels between those two worlds. Repetitive shots, dolly shots, all that kind of stuff.

**With both these films going to Toronto, what's this time like for you?**

I'm really excited and just so proud for both of them. It's kind of perfect because they're spiritual cousins for me, visually dealing with photographing women in ways that we don't typically see onscreen and telling women's stories that isn't actively feminist, but is more just actively human. Both films had heavily female teams and for me, they were about listening and trying to learn from my directors and my actresses, so I think it's really beautiful that they're both playing at TIFF together.