

# 'Winning Time' Cinematographer Todd Banhazi on Taking a Maximal Approach to HBO's Telling of the Showtime Lakers



Cinematographer Todd Banhazi came to HBO's *Winning Time* with a distinct set of challenges. Including how to shoot NBA-level basketball in a believable way, how to make actors look like all-time great basketball players, and how to capture a distinct moment in time that heralded a cultural zeitgeist when sports became big business, athletes became celebrities, and capitalism became all-consuming. To do so, Banhazi took a maximal approach to shooting the show that came with high risk, but also high reward. That high-wire act paid off as *Winning Time* garnered critical acclaim, a large viewership, and a second season from HBO. Banhazi also

received an Emmy nomination for his work on a show that takes a maximalist approach to the visual aesthetics.

In our conversation, Banhazl and I talk about the genesis of that approach and the difficulty involved in pulling it off. As Todd shares below, with *Winning Time* the only rules were whatever felt right and served the story.

**Awards Daily:** Your work has a lot of variety. In particular: you shot both *Hustlers* and *Blow the Man Down*—they couldn't be more different stylistically. I was thinking about your versatility in that regard before we even get into *Winning Time*. What is your approach going from project to project like and sorting out what does this film or series need?

**Todd Banhazl :** It always comes from the script, and it always comes from the specific needs of that movie. I always feel like the movie is telling us what it wants to be. I like the idea that each movie has its own look and its own world. That's why *Blow the Man Down* and *Hustlers* and probably *Winning Time* look so different because the scripts and the needs and the way that we want to tell the story visually were so different. I think we are always in service to the needs of the project..

**Awards Daily:** Right, I don't think you could shoot *Blow the Man Down* the Sam way you did *Hustlers*. (Laughs).

**Todd Banhazl:** I love the idea that there's no rules. You create visual vocabulary for an audience and then that's it. You make the rules of the world and then you go. *Blow the Man Down* wanted to look like a salty seaside thriller—like a rusty fishing knife. *Hustlers* wanted to have this larger than life quality.

**Awards Daily:** What really fascinated me was that you worked on both

**the documentary *They Call Me Magic* and *Winning Time*, which are obviously projects that are connected by theme and subject matter. Which did you shoot first?**

**Todd Banhazi:** I actually only shot two days on *They Call Me Magic*. I filled in for the DP. It was such a cool experience, because I had been working on *Winning Time* for so long. I think we had done the pilot on *Winning Time* and we were prepping the show. Then we stopped for the pandemic. It was just really cool for me, because we got to interview Magic. We had spent so much time with our *Winning Time* version of Magic so to spend a moment with the real person was a really beautiful experience.

**Awards Daily: How did one project inform the other for you? Going from working on *Winning Time* to *They Call Me Magic*. *Winning Time*—a dramatization to a documentary and back again.**

**Todd Banhazi:** *They Call Me Magic* just reminded me how magnetic Magic Johnson is and how much of an incredible presence he is to be around.

**Awards Daily: It was interesting too because a lot of the same sequences in *Winning Time* were also in *They Call Me Magic*.**

**Todd Banhazi:** It's so funny because *Winning Time* almost has no archival. It definitely has no archival of the players. We recreated all of that and that's why we used mixed formats. We found these formats and often used the cameras from the time period. We used the actual cameras that shot the basketball games back in the eighties to reproduce the games and also used them narratively.

The idea was to make footage that looked like the actual archival except now we have our actors there, but for an audience you're blurring that line. Our influences and references were the actual archival from the time. It's not

surprising to me that that's the footage that exists in *They Call Me Magic*. We played with that as an aesthetic.

**Awards Daily:** What I really loved is that there were times when watching *Winning Time* and you're watching game footage and it's like you're watching it on TV, but it's like you're watching it on an old shitty 1979 TV. As a person who got into basketball right around that time, it was like I was watching it on the first TV my parents got me when I was a kid. Obviously that aesthetic is very intentional. Did you have any concerns that the shifting film stocks that you were using would be distracting for viewers?

**Todd Banhazi:** You know, no. I wasn't concerned that it would be distracting because it's in the DNA of that show. It's in the scripts, this idea of juxtaposing different viewpoints and there's this kaleidoscopic quality in the scripts. It always made sense to me and I think to Adam McKay as well from the first moment that we were talking about this project that the mixed format thing was in the DNA. I think the show wants you to be able to see these mythic iconic figures of our culture, and also see them as stripped down human beings at the same time.


Like you were saying, you can see the game and it looks like the actual game from '79 on your crappy TV, and then all of a sudden you're in the game. You're there, the camera's there, it's on film. It both brings the past alive and also activates your memory of the past. It can be nostalgic and present at the same time. That's just what the show needed.

**Awards Daily:** The challenge of shooting athletics on film can be very difficult. I talked to Max Borenstein for *Winning Time* as well. I was saying casting is hard enough, but you have to find actors that are tall enough to look representative. They don't have to be 6'10", but they

have to be tall enough that they can be made to look 6'10" on film. Then they also have to act, they have to be able to play basketball and then you have to shoot the game of basketball. I believe in the history of television and film, there aren't really that many movies about basketball that capture the rhythm of the game as well as *Winning Time* does.

**Todd Banhazi:** It was probably the biggest challenge that we had. You're not just shooting basketball, you're not just shooting NBA basketball. You're shooting Showtime, the most legendary basketball of all time with the most legendary players of all time.

**Awards Daily:** It ain't *Hoosiers*, right?



**Todd Banhazi:** It ain't *Hoosiers*.  
(Laughs). The balletic quality of it is so high, and the speed of it is so high, the grace of it is so high. It took a lot of work. Our actors were trained to not only play basketball, but to play like their players. Quincy Isaiah was trained on how to dribble with his hand really high up off the court just like Magic. Solomon was taught how to shoot the sky hook like

Kareem. Part of it was just all the months and months of training and then it becomes this balance of our actors and our basketball doubles.

There's height doubles, there's height shoes, there's certain camera angles we know we can and can't use. It just becomes this game of what every shot can give you that ultimately becomes like old-fashioned filmmaking. All the elements combined create that magic. The rollerblade operator did a lot. We

would do these switch outs where we would have a rollerblade shot where you'd be on Quincy's face and you'd wrap around and Quincy would do something incredible and as we'd come around, we'd switch into the basketball double without cutting. Then you could go down the court with the basketball double who is taller and has more of the classic Magic frame, and then he would dunk and then the camera would wrap around and we would switch again and then you would land on Quincy's face. It's like these dances.

**Awards Daily: It sounds so complicated (laughs).**

**Todd Banhal:** Actually, the most complicated thing, other than the basketball, was just selling the basketball players' heights in normal narrative scenes. Not only do they have to be their famous heights, but they have to be their famous heights in relation to each other. So it becomes this game of what technique do we use to sell those heights? Sometimes doorways were built lower, sometimes beds or chairs were built shorter, but a lot of times it came down to either lifts or apple box highways or forced perspective. Again, it's never one technique, but when it's combined in the end you forget and the illusion holds.

**Awards Daily: You also have to make sure that you are shooting their performance too. That you are getting not just the movement and the athleticism, but the facial expressions—the emotion of the games and the players too.**

**Todd Banhazl:** That was the whole thing about getting inside the game emotionally and understanding not only what's happening basketball-wise, but also what's happening between players, and between the characters. It becomes about those looks and those dynamics of Magic wanting to pass to Kareem, but Kareem is playing an older style of basketball, so Magic sees

that Cooper's, open and it's obvious that Cooper would be there, but he wants to get it to Kareem, but Kareem's not having it. Those dynamics need to happen. It became about getting the camera physically inside the game with them. That's another reason for the rollerblade operator, because he could get the camera right here, but he could also keep up with the speed of the game.

**Awards Daily:** This is also a challenging project because there is a lot of straight comedy in it, but also a lot of the comedy is satirical. There is a mixture of history and fiction. Also you have to be able to balance some level of pathos, like with Sally Field's character and Kareem's struggles to open up. There are all these shifting tones and there's some pretty in your face moments in this too. Big titles come on the screen and tell you exactly what was going on. Trying to balance these shifting tones effectively had to be a real challenge.


**Todd Banhazi:** Totally. It was a big swing. I think everything about this show was kind of experimental, including the tone. It's a maximalist approach. The show wants to be loud and larger than life and flashy, and at the same time it can be really emotional and hold these big heavy themes about America. I think it comes from Showtime era basketball being a show of its own. Jerry Buss coming and taking over the team—there is all this masculine bravado and confidence in the team, in the style of basketball, in Magic. We wanted the show to have that same kind of bravado and cockiness even, and at the same time the show wanted to also show these people in a really vulnerable way. Those two things clashing together creates that tone.

**Awards Daily:** I remember thinking as I was watching John C. Reilly play Jerry Buss, "what if Donald Trump was a cheerful person?" That is very much what John C. Reilly is getting across here. This wheeler and dealer kind of B.S. artist and playboy who is also human and terribly

worried about his mom. There's a lot going on just in that performance. There's a lot of comedy too. John is a first among equals in this ensemble. John landing that performance, and the shooting of that performance correctly is key to the entirety of everything that goes on. If Jerry Buss isn't right in this it's hard for anything else to be right.

**Todd Banhazi:** The whole reason I think the show works is because of John's performance. He was born to play Jerry Buss. It's wild. In that way, he's just brilliant and working with him, there's so much generosity there. For us, it's about playing with him. It's about letting him do this amazing thing and letting the camera play. It's like where is he gonna look at the camera, how do we play with him and then he can find us. Especially on the pilot, with me and McKay, we were trying different angles to see what would be the best angle for a character to talk to camera or for Jerry Buss to steal someone else's shot.

**Awards Daily:** I kind of lucked into this when I was talking to Max, I said the use of different film stocks actually reminded me of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* and *JFK*. He pointed out to me, which I didn't catch, that Hank Corwin, who edited both of those films, also did the pilot episode. That he helped set the template.



**Todd Banhazi:** Very much so. Oliver Stone's work, those two movies, were a major inspiration to me. They were proof to me that you can mix formats mid-scene in these jazzy ways and it just serves to bring the subject matter even more alive. McKay and I started developing this style and this idea

together before I really realized that Hank was going to be a component in it.



When we shot all of these things in the pilot, a lot of it was experimenting. We had ideas that the 35mm was going to be the main format with the most bravado and cinema, and then the 8mm was going to be time and place and fake archival. We knew that the Ikegami TV cameras from the eighties were for the basketball games, and we were also going to try them inside the scenes and see if that could also be like another paintbrush. Then Hank took it and it's complete jazz. He really used it not like salt and pepper. He used it full on and integrated into the DNA of the show, which is what I'd hoped they would do, but I never dreamed that they would use as much as I wanted them to, but they did and it became part of the show's language.

**Awards Daily: Those movies are two of my favorite movies ever.**

**Todd Banhazi:** I remember *Natural Born Killers* cutting from an anamorphic shot, he's eloping on the bridge and it's this massive crane shot over this bridge, and then it cuts to them in black and white and they're like kissing. Man it's this cultural memory of these feelings, memory of pop culture ideas of these moments.

**Awards Daily: Then about midway through the film breaks into a demented sitcom for about ten minutes with Rodney Dangerfield. I see a lot of movies and a lot of television and every once in a while you see something and think, holy shit anything is possible. *JFK*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *Winning Time* kind of reminded me of that feeling like you said that there aren't really rules. The rules are the ones that you create when you're making the thing.**

**Todd Banhazi:** I agree. Once you're shooting it like that it becomes so freeing, and, I hope, to your collaborators as well. You're giving all these tools and paintbrushes to the operators, to your directors, to all your key collaborators, to my lighting team. So you have all these choices—what

inspires you? What feels right in this moment? McKay always said to me on this show if it feels right we should do it. That's the energy you want.

**Awards Daily: You were one of two cinematographers. Multiple cinematographers work on series all the time, that's not unusual. But because of the type of show you were shooting, I imagine your collaboration, your notes, your pass offs to each other had to be really strong and clear.**

**Todd Banhazi:** Yeah. Neither Mihai (Malaimare Jr,) nor I had ever worked with another cinematographer. Neither of us come from TV so it was a really cool experience for us. Especially on a show like this, it became about us just sharing our notes and what was inspiring us so intensely in the beginning. We created a DP cinematography guide that detailed the formats and how we used them and why. It's sort of like a guidebook that you're supposed to take it and run with it. The reason I wanted Mihai to do the show is because I have so much respect for him and his work. I didn't want just another DP shooting the show, I wanted an artist who would make the show their own. Each episode kind of dips its toes in different time periods and different looks, so it asks the filmmakers to create different styles and looks per episode. Each episode is kind of like a mini movie in that way. We basically just celebrated and traded ideas together and got to watch each others' dailies and get really excited.

**Awards Daily: When you were using these different filmstocks and different footage, was there ever a thought that you have to have a rhythm to it? If you don't use that more grainy stock through a large portion of the episode, it's more jarring when you do use it. There has to be this ebb and flow of going in and out of these styles that is a style of its own. I imagine that was part of your concept, how to make this feel consistent.**

**Todd Banhazi:** I think it just comes down to there's an internal logic to it. We know on a larger thematic scale why these formats are used. If you apply those rules to the script, if you match the script you end up ebbing and flowing with the script. Then it becomes about checking each others' math. Max Borenstein on these tone meetings talking about "We're thinking about this look for this scene" and talking about the reasons why. As long as it was aligned with the intention of the writers, then you were probably in the right zone. Then I think there are times when it's also cool to just say "Fuck it, let's try it." If it doesn't work we won't use it.

There were times of "You know, I think this closeup needs to be black and white" and you can talk about the intellectual reason why—you're just in the moment. The performance this guy is giving there's something about it that wants to be black and white. If we can all just lean into the idea that this feels like a really good brushstroke to give the show right now. If it works great. If it doesn't work, we're shooting three cameras. (Laughs).

**Awards Daily:** It's always hard to make a project, not only about real people, but about real people who are still alive. I talked to Max about this a little bit. Obviously there's been mixed feelings and some very negative—especially in terms of Kareem—about the show itself. I have tremendous respect for Kareem, not only as an athlete, but as a person so you want to listen to that voice. I remember thinking when you get to the end of the series and the way he is with Spencer Haywood, I wonder if he watched enough of it to see the full arc. I think by the end of it, he comes off really well. Did it cause you any consternation being very aware that these people are still walking around—except for, of course, Jerry).

**Todd Banhazi:** Yeah, but I think outside of the real people and how they would feel about the show, just the show in general I think we knew we were

making a very maximal, loud show. We were taking a big swing, so we expected some people to hopefully love it and we expected some people to feel like it's unwatchable. I think that's kind of what happened. I've heard both sides, people that are really excited about it and people that say it constantly takes me out and I can't get into it. That's a really valid opinion. I think both are interesting.

In terms of the real people, we have so much reverence and respect for them as you were saying not only as players, but as human beings. I was always just trying to shoot these characters with as much empathy as possible. Things that happened with Haywood and Kareem are so important to me in the show. They are my favorite parts of the show. I don't know if they've gone on and watched the rest of the show—I hope they have, because I feel like we made our best effort to tell their stories with as much empathy and accuracy to the larger truths of their life.

**Awards Daily:** There's wonderful detail. One of my favorite memories of Magic and Kareem was that first real game that they played together. Kareem makes the last second shot that wins the game and Magic runs up to him like they just won the National Championship and Kareem's like we've got 81 more of these. That's accurate. I can see if somebody at the beginning of the show had a hard time with it, but I just feel like if you stay with it you end up in a different place.

**Todd Banhazi:** I hope so too. That's also the point—that you start with these larger than life mythic characters who can also be kind of more comedic, especially Kareem's character. Then you are surprised to find out, as it develops, the richness of each character.

**Awards Daily:** There's a lot of humanity in it by the end of it for sure.

**Todd Banhazi:** Jerry Buss too.

**Awards Daily:** Very much so. All of these characters start out one way and they change, without the changes taking away from who they are at their base.

**Todd Banhazi:** That's what we do as people, right? I think a big theme of this show in the main characters is that you have these characters that are dealing with their traumas by trying to build empires at the top of the mountain. They realize when they get to the top of the mountain, it doesn't actually fill that hole inside. It's like continuously trying to accumulate wealth or fame or power or status, all these ego things, none of which actually solve the thing they are looking to solve.

**Awards Daily:** Overall, the show's critical reception has been really strong. There's obviously some outliers and some mixed reviews, but in the main, pretty darn strong. It must feel good. Granted, you don't spend all your time worrying about critics because god knows, you'd go insane. That being said, to take a big swing like you said, and then to have it overall be so well received, and the ratings were fabulous too, so it wasn't like no one was watching. You got a strong critical response along with strong viewership.

**Todd Banhazi:** It's cool to see culture react to something that you were a part of. It's a wild thing to experience. I'm glad that people like it, but I'm more happy that there was a lot of conversation about it from both sides. The things Kareem said about the show, I think are really intelligent and interesting. So the entire conversation has been really great to me.

**Awards Daily:** Speaking of culture, the other thing the show captures is a turning point in history, particularly for NBA basketball, which was considered a failing sport at the time, and then not only blew up bigger than ever, but also reflected the changes in our society in terms of race,

**celebrity, and business as well.**

**Todd Banhazi:** That's the big theme of the show and I think that's the big motivator for the visuals as well. This feeling of this big change and sort of opposing forces that were happening in America at the time. It was being represented in the NBA and in sports, but it really was talking about capitalism, the way race and capitalism interplay. So for us, yes, in the style that's one of the reasons there are these hard contrasts, because that feeling can be felt in the image. It's also why for me skin tone and skin texture were probably the most important thing of the visual style for me. It's not just about skin tone or color, it's about the way skin looks and feels. It's about the glow and the shine.

There's a human quality like a glowing, shiny, somewhat even greasy humanity that we wanted in these characters' faces. That came down to the film stocks and the hard light and we also worked with our hair and makeup team to make sure that the way skin looked had not only a glow but also like a raw humanity in it. I think when you're dealing with characters that are so larger than life and play such a big role in our cultural memory, you really want to make sure that at all times they also look like beautiful, imperfect human beings.

**Awards Daily:** You can almost feel the Carter/Reagan shift as you're watching *Winning Time*. Carter was seen as the depressing malaise speech guy. Then Reagan brought in this sunny optimism. The eighties became the capitalism decade. I think that's something that you captured here very well, that moment in time when everything became a business, including the personas of the athletes reaching an extraordinary level of celebrity.

**Todd Banhazi:** Yes. This is the beginning of shoe culture with athletes.

Athletes and shoe deals. This is the beginning of players making huge salaries. This is the beginning of that power shifting from the owners to the players. And you're right, athletes becoming celebrities. It's a major moment in our cultural history.

**Awards Daily:** And so...you got an Emmy nomination. (Laughs).

**Todd Banhazi:** I did, it's crazy.

**Awards Daily:** I think we live in a time when, and I hate using this word but I guess it's the standard, there's so much content out there. A show finding an audience is challenging enough. Then to have it be seen by enough of your peers that they recognize your work, it must feel great to be seen and to take such a huge swing at a project and have people go "That's really good work."

**Todd Banhazi:** Yeah, it's beautiful. I think the entire experience of making this show was such a risk, stylistically speaking. So for me, there was all this joy of making this show, not only testing and figuring out the style and the looks but also communicating that and giving permission to my collaborators to lean into this style together. To see it not only seemingly work for audiences, but to see my community react to that has been so beautiful and rewarding.