

Honest Beauty

BY FANEN CHIAHEMEN

The new series *Conversations with Friends* follows a set of Dublin college students navigating fraught romantic and family dynamics. At the centre of the series is Frances, a smart 21-year-old aspiring writer (played by Alison Oliver) and provocative, self-assured Bobbi (Sasha Lane), whose tight friendship is tested when they become entangled with Nick and Melissa (Joe Alwyn and Jemima Kirke), an attractive couple in their 30s. The series, airing on BBC Three and Hulu as of this month, was adapted from Irish author Sally Rooney's 2017 novel of the same name, and helmed by the same creative team as the critically acclaimed romantic drama *Normal People*, adapted from Rooney's 2018 novel.

Conversations with Friends was shot mainly in Belfast last year, with Irish DP Suzie Lavelle BSC (*Vikings*) and Oscar-nominated director Lenny Abrahamson (*Room*) crafting the look of the first five episodes, while Bobby Shore csc took over for Episodes 6 through 10 working with director Leanne Welham (*His Dark Materials*).



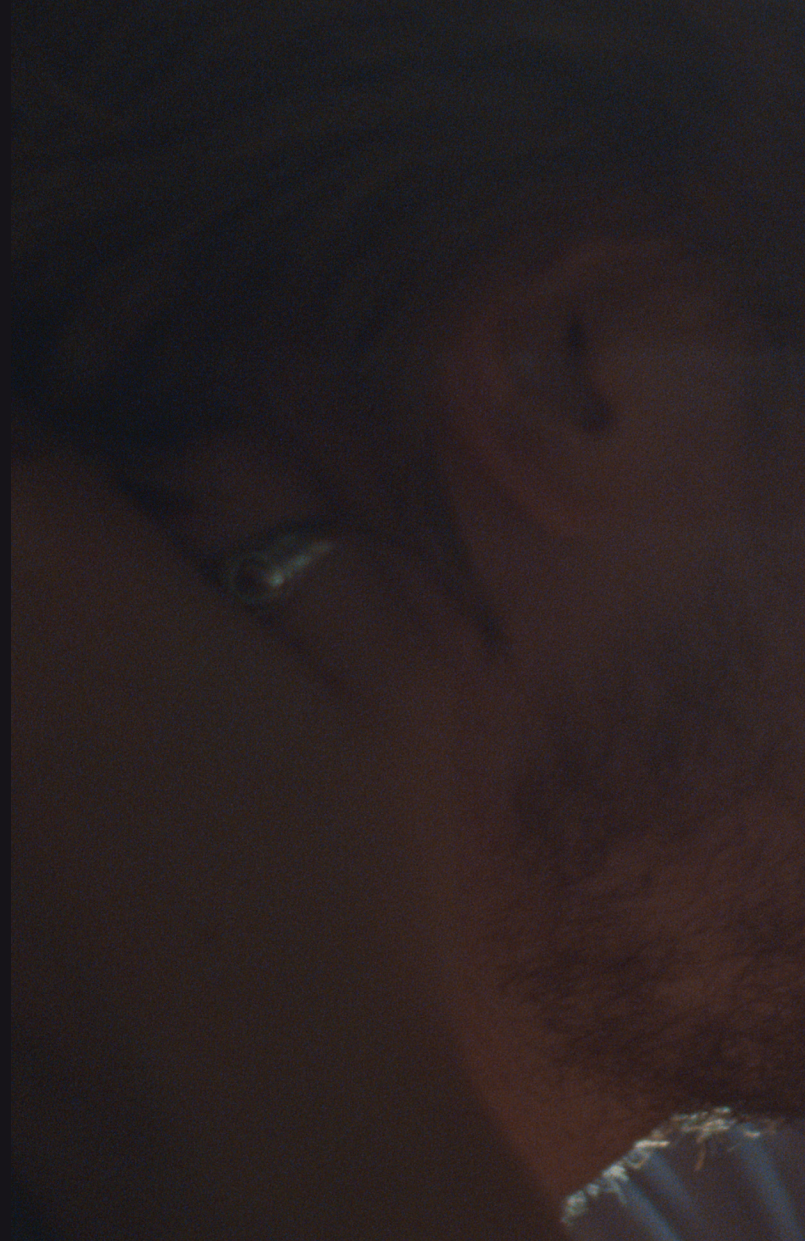


Shore says he had not sought much television work in the past few years, but something about the creative team's approach to *Conversations with Friends* enticed him. "I think I actually shied away from TV quite a bit because I find that the schedule can dictate and drive so much of the creative vision, where it becomes about shooting 14-hour days and pointing as many cameras at the action as possible," Shore offers. "And what I loved about this show was the phrase Lenny always used – lo-fi, low key and honest. So shooting single camera, shooting 2-perf 35mm, shooting 10- or 11-hour days, and having eight days per half an hour episode, we just had time to really be very intentional and specific with the ways that we approached the visual language, giving the actors a lot of room and time for blocking and to find the performance, and for me and Leanne to really hone in on the right frame and lighting for each shot."

"All of prep was spent poring over the script, going over the locations and asking a lot of questions: 'Should this be handheld? Should it be locked off? What lens should this be on? What does the light want to feel like? And putting in the time and effort into planning everything we thought would work tonally, so that on the day we could throw the whole plan out and still know exactly how to approach the scene," Shore says. "And as the episodes and the story progress, we wanted to bring our own perspective to what was happening while being very truthful to the aesthetic, tone and feeling that had already been set. It was really interesting to shoot episodic television like that; it felt very creatively engaging."

Lavelle, who was also the DP on *Normal People*, did extensive lens testing in prep with Abrahamson. "We had used the K35s on *Normal People*, so myself and Lenny knew the glass well, but neither of us had used them with film," she says. "So we shot tests with our main cast to find the right lens for each character. I also do pretty comprehensive light/contrast and flare testing at this stage."

"What was really interesting was there wasn't this need to visually embellish the image. It was an extremely simple, non-technical approach, and there was something just inherently textural and analogue about it all in terms of the image quality, which shooting 2-perf on older lenses perfectly complemented," Shore maintains.





Using the Arricam LT, Shore's camera operating provided another way to achieve the desired look. "It was very important to be emotionally close to Alison while still maintaining both her relationship with Nick as it develops, and her relationship with Bobbi as it evolves," Shore explains. "So it became a very interesting back and forth in terms of figuring out the right place to put the camera in any given scene. We wanted to be with Alison the entire time but also portray both relationships as they develop together."

Lavelle and Abrahamson had made the decision during prep to use long lenses for wide shots "as a way of placing our characters in their worlds," Lavelle says. "So we shot lots of long lens tests around our city locations at day and night and ended up using 180 mm prime for a lot of our scenes when Frances walks through the city. It really helped us immerse Frances in Dublin.

"We were very interested in the effortless feeling you can get from shooting film, and we felt the 2 perf field of view – which is only 1.6 times bigger than S16 – felt very naturalistic and had a bit of European arthouse feel, which I think suited Lenny's style of quiet filmmaking, where we try and keep the filmmaking invisible," she adds.

Motivated camera moves and sources were an integral part of the visual grammar of *Conversations with Friends*, according to Shore. "No crane shots, no unmotivated camera angles. In the 45-day schedule, we mainly shot either handheld or locked off, and we used a dolly move only twice," he says.

A naturalistic lighting approach was adopted as well, with available light used as often as possible with only bounce boards or some negative fill.

"I wanted the light to always feel as real and natural as possible," Lavelle says. "Lenny was very interested in using front light, and I really enjoyed the challenge of trying to do that well in a set build whilst trying to keep the floor clear of equipment and having a free roaming handheld camera. Due to COVID, we ended up building the sets for Frances' Dublin apartment and Nick and Melissa's house. It was a challenge to get enough light in the studio to be able to soften it enough to keep it natural. I am a big fan of tungsten lights, and for this show I used predominantly tungsten heads and didn't bring any small fixtures into the sets. Tried to keep all the gear outside and light through the windows, giving the actors as much realism and freedom as possible."

Shore recalls one of Lavelle's edicts about lighting. "She kept on referring to wanting to embrace the cold light of day," he says. "And that didn't have anything to do with the colour temperature at all. But more so to ask how do we portray the intimacy in the show with a lot of thoughtfulness and respect while also making the actors very comfortable. And what she meant by cold light of day was a lot of front light. And immediately as she said it and then showed me a reference, I was like, 'I totally get what you're saying. It's like there's nowhere to hide.' If you're going to show two people as they're falling in love and getting physically intimate and close with one another, what better way to do it than in a frame and an image that's softly front lit where you can see every detail? This translated into shooting a lot of the intimacy scenes with a roving handheld camera, sometimes shooting takes as long as 10 minutes – a full 400ft mag at 2 perf – and lighting the space more than lighting the actors. We would capture every detail, every moment we needed, but in a long take while often intentionally jumping the line and moving all around the actors to best find those most important moments of closeness."





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"Leanne was obviously very aware of this aesthetic choice and would be very open and collaborative to making sure that we could block things in a way where the motivated light source could become something frontal," Shore says. "And it's interesting because I think intuitively it goes against everything that you're taught as a DP where everything should be backlit and everything should be kind of pretty. I feel like the look of this show was unbelievably right. And very, very honest. But I think also very beautiful, too, in its simplicity"

Achieving this soft, naturalistic quality of lighting on the sets took a lot of firepower, according to Shore. "Every window had at least two Arri T12's outside of it, pushing through multiple frames of diffusion usually a layer of grid cloth and then bleached muslin, along with more than 40 SkyPanel S60 space lights to create a soft ambient skylight pushing into either side of the set and lighting up the translight that wrapped around it. Because the sets were built as real locations, with no wild walls or ceiling, we needed to push in a ton of light to make it feel like it wasn't lit at all."

A somewhat simpler approach was taken for the night work. "We would usually turn on a practical or two and then hid light mats wherever we could on the floor, stuffed into a corner somewhere, and covered in layers of raw muslin to create a source-less looking light that would feel really naturalistic.

"Because so much of the night exterior work was either long lens or roaming handheld, we'd sometimes just shoot with whatever lights already existed on the street, or I'd work really closely with the wonderful art department and place practicals (often sodium vapour lights) into each location in a way that would work with how planned to shoot the scene," he adds.

Coming onto a thematically intimate show halfway through the season, Shore had to build trust with the cast relatively quickly. "Alison was one of the most open and giving actresses I've ever had the chance to work with," he says. "One of the reasons why I love to operate is that I think physical proximity to the actors is the most important aspect of building trust and respect amongst one another and can really create a space for the actors to feel safe and secure enough to be vulnerable. Alison, to her credit, really opened up to me quickly.

"The cast was great," Shore continues. "They were just so nice and so warm and welcoming, especially Alison and Sasha. It felt like such a strong collaboration. Suzie and Lenny really instilled a good sense of creative freedom as well, obviously within the framework that they had developed, but it always felt very collaborative. It felt like there was a very specific sense of trust amongst everyone and was by far one of the best experiences I've had." ❖

