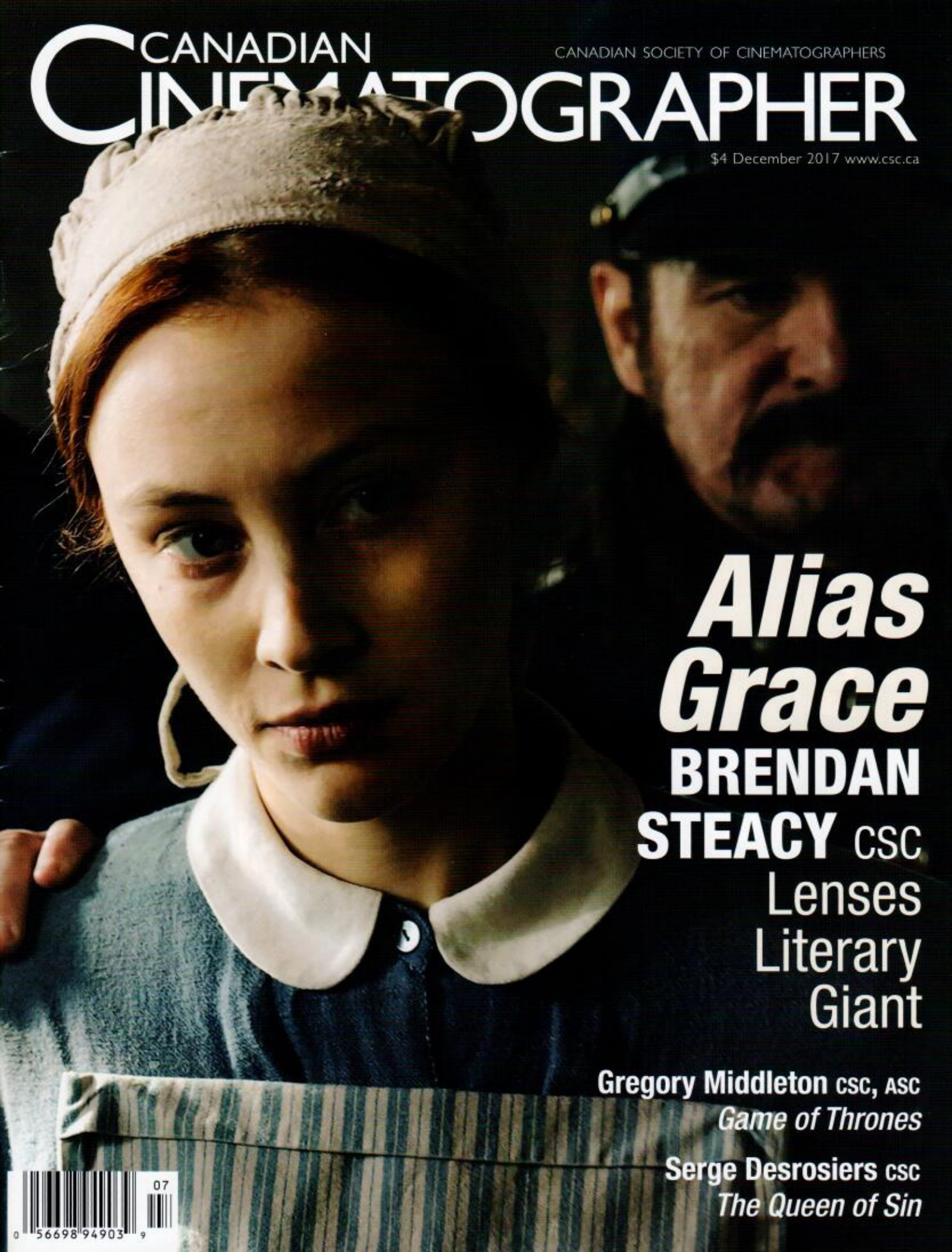


CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

CANADIAN SOCIETY OF CINEMATOGRAPHERS

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Alias Grace **BRENDAN STEACY** CSC Lenses Literary Giant

Gregory Middleton CSC, ASC
Game of Thrones

Serge Desrosiers CSC
The Queen of Sin





CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

A publication of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers

Celebrating 60 years of excellence

Fostering cinematography in Canada since 1957. The Canadian Society of Cinematographers was founded by a group of Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa cameramen. Since then over 800 cinematographers and persons in associated occupations have joined the organization.

The CSC provides tangible recognition of the common bonds that link film and digital professionals, from the aspiring student and camera assistant to the news veteran and senior director of photography.

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Credit: Sabrina Lantos/CBC/Netflix

Alias Grace: Brendan Steacy csc Lenses Literary Giant *By Fanen Chiahemen*



Credit: Courtesy of HBO

Game Changer: Gregory Middleton csc, asc Takes on Game of Thrones

By Trevor Hogg, Special to Canadian Cinematographer



Credit: Bertrand Calmeau

The Queen of Sin: For Serge Desrosiers csc Miniaturization is King

By Fanen Chiahemen

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Cover *Alias Grace*

Sarah Gadon as Grace Marks. Credit: Jan Thijs/CBC/Netflix

Alias Grace

Brendan Steacy csc Lenses Literary Giant

By Fanen Chiahemmen

When Margaret Atwood's historical fiction novel *Alias Grace* was first published in 1996, it won the Giller Prize that same year and was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, but it took some 20 years until the behemoth of a book was adapted for the screen. That task was taken on by Oscar-nominated writer/director/actress Sarah Polley, who developed a script after snapping up the rights to the tome. The fruit of her labour is a six-part miniseries of the same name, directed by Mary Harron (*American Psycho*, *I Shot Andy Warhol*), airing this fall on CBC before heading to Netflix.

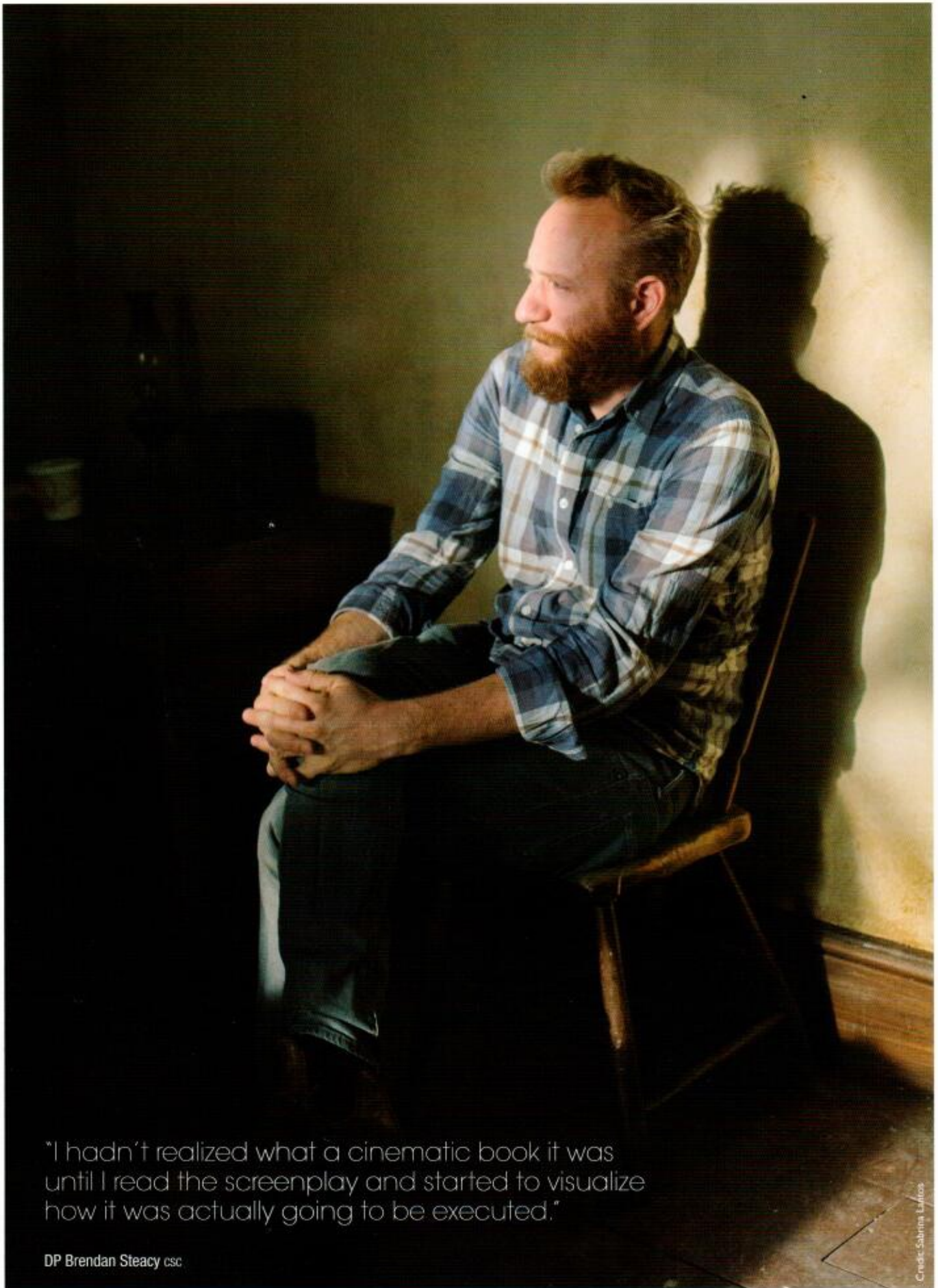
The central character of the story is teenager Grace Marks – an Irish servant and recent émigré to what was then Upper Canada – who, along with fellow servant James McDermott, is convicted of the 1843 murders of their employer, the wealthy Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. Years after her conviction, as Grace tells her story to Dr. Simon Jordan, who is tasked with assessing her sanity, the facts surrounding

the murder that led to the servants' convictions are brought into question.

DP Brendan Steacy csc, who shot all six episodes, says when approached to shoot the series he was "excited to work on an adaptation of a Margaret Atwood book that is so much a part of our literary identity. I hadn't realized what a cinematic book it was until I read the screenplay and started to visualize how it was actually going to be executed."

The miniseries was shot over three months, mostly on location across Ontario, with 25 days on stage. Unlike regular TV shows, the *Alias Grace* crew rarely returned to the same location more than once. "We would be in some locations for as little as a single day, occasionally shooting on three or four separate sets, and then we could just as commonly have four days in one tiny bedroom," Steacy says.

Many scenes were shot in historical homes, which Steacy describes as "a hugely challenging endeavour, as you can't make the sorts of adjustments that you're normally accustomed to. It was really difficult to cover any hints of modernity and to match



"I hadn't realized what a cinematic book it was until I read the screenplay and started to visualize how it was actually going to be executed."

DP Brendan Steacy csc

Credit: Sabina Laifox

Grace Marks is convicted of murder.

those locations to the stages, but it also meant in a lot of these spaces we couldn't do any rigging from above."

For example, scenes taking place in the home of the governor of the penitentiary – where Grace is hired out to serve as a domestic servant after her conviction – were shot in an historic

home in Hamilton, and they weren't allowed to put anything unprotected on the floors. "If you put anything down, you basically had to bubble wrap it; everything was fragile, everything was real," Steacy says.

"We did a lot of lighting through windows, which was consistent with the look we were going for, so that was fine, but when we got into some specific moments that required a particular feeling or mood, you still had to work with what was there," he continues. "We had some daytime scenes, for instance, where you could see three walls of a room full of people, and the window was either in the wrong place, or closed such that we weren't able to use it to light people's faces, and you can't build a grid, you can't use atmosphere, you can't even use tape on the walls. I remember begging Mary to let me leave an adjacent door open just to have somewhere to light from. There were a lot of those restrictions, but it was kind of cool; we worked around it and it helped keep the genuine feeling of those locations, and made for an interesting challenge."

The decision to light interiors primarily through windows was made because the world of *Alias Grace* is "pre-electricity," Steacy says. "They wouldn't even have had gas lamps in their homes. It was really candles and windows," and that reality served as the jumping-off point for crafting the look of the series. Also, Harron expressed an interest in naturalism in the lighting, which made Steacy think of the Dutch Masters of the art world when contemplating the visual aesthetic. "Our only record of how things looked prior to photography is through paintings," he says. "We obviously know how things look when they're lit by windows and candles, but it's interesting to see how people in various pre-electricity time



Credits: Jan Thijssen/CBC/Nordik

|| Our only record of how things looked prior to photography is through paintings. We obviously know how things look when they're lit by windows and candles, but it's interesting to see how people in various pre-electricity time periods perceived light and the general feeling of their world. While there are hundreds of years between those paintings and this story, it's remarkable how little the light in these worlds would have changed over the course of that time, compared especially to how rapidly electric lighting is currently evolving."



Credit: Sabrina Lencos

Sarah Gadon as Grace Marks

I Suddenly you realize what it means to be in the hold of a wooden ship rocking around on the ocean. You know they were really vile conditions and it was dark and wet, and it must have been a really horrible journey that people took to come to North America. It's something we all know happened, the journey Europeans took to get here, but as soon as you start visualizing the execution of it, you begin to reach a greater appreciation as to the full extent of it, and realize that it also has enormous visceral, cinematic potential."

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To keep the lighting true to the era, the sets had to be constructed in a way that facilitated side lighting. "You almost never light from above," Steacy says. "Windows are always from the side. Candles are usually at a place where you can light them, so rarely above your reach, which is great, I love working with side light. But it was interesting to have that always be motivated. A lot of times light sources were actually in the frame."

Production design was handled by Arvinder Grewal – who has worked with such directors as David Cronenberg (*Cosmopolis*), Deepa Mehta (*Beeba Boys*) and Paul Gross (*Hyena Road*) – and he was a valuable collaborator for Steacy on the *Alias Grace* shoot. "Arv was really conscientious about making sure he built sets that had windows in appropriate places," the cinematographer recalls. "I once asked him during prep if he could make a couple of windows higher for me so I could light people's faces from outside, and he agreed only after first wrapping his head around how that would work with the overall design of the home. He was amazing. He's fiercely loyal to verisimilitude and the historical accuracy of the set. He designed sets that made sense for the world they were in, and the challenges that presented for me also lent themselves really nicely to the naturalism that we wound up achieving as a result of it."



Top: *Alias Grace* author Margaret Atwood makes a cameo.
 Middle: Sarah Gadon as Grace Marks.
 Bottom: Kerr Logan as James McDermott

Steady used candles for night interiors, at times employing just a single candle, although he acknowledges that doing so was easier in transitional scenes. "But if it was a bigger scene with either more people in the scene or more dialogue, or we had to be more specific about where we were pointing the camera, we

would just augment very delicately. We'd start with just candles, and then we'd use mostly LEDs, which we warmed up to the colour temperature of the candles and placed over or behind them just out of frame. This allowed us the opportunity to get a little bit more shape or softness or whatever was required," he says.

A number of nighttime scenes in the script took place in moonlight, some of which Steady observes are "not supposed to be necessarily naturalistic. It's written in the script as an expressionistic memory of how bright the night was, so we used large sources on lifts and opened up the exposure a bit more than I may otherwise have done."

Exterior lighting varied depending on what the situation called for, the cinematographer says. "There were some scenes where it was meant to be overcast immediately after a rain storm, so we brought in large fabrics and cancelled out the sun and shot it using the remaining ambient skylight," he says. "Some things were as simple as a bounce card or even just a negative fill. It was all over the map. Because we had so many different locations and periods and many perspectives, we just worked with whatever made sense for the feeling and sentiment of that scene."

Steady shot with the Sony F65 to fulfill Netflix's 4K mandate and found that he appreciated the camera's colour space. "It had a really nice natural colour space; the blue channel was really impressive," he says. "Mary specifically didn't want a show that was all toned warm and sepia. She feels that's become the expectation of historical work, and she was interested in exploring blue a lot and keeping it more neutral and not falling into the default sepia world, so the blue channel was really important for that." He outfitted the Sony with Leica lenses, which he's familiar with and finds reliable and predictable with good focal lengths.

Alias Grace unfolds through shifting points of view, but the narrator is also fairly unreliable, recalling murders she may or may not have committed, and Steady took every opportunity to reflect this in his camerawork. "We tried to give subtle hints as to what was going on in given moments," he says. "We tried to pay attention to the perspective of the camera, the height of it and how wide the lenses were to indicate whose point of view it might be. But it's really subtle. It had to be subtle because we didn't want to be heavy-handed with it. It had to be something that just affects you emotionally without you being cognitively aware of it."

One of the biggest set-ups in the miniseries was the sequence depicting Grace's arrival from Ireland to North America, which was shot on a sailing ship brought over from Europe. The ship's interiors were shot on a soundstage set on a gimbal to simulate the ship's motions. Recalling the shoot, Steady says, "We shot a day in the harbour and then a day on the water mostly on the deck and around it, and then we shot a couple days on a stage where they built the ship's hold on a gimbal. The hold is 40 feet long and we're in a storm, so it's dark. And there are no windows because it's the hull of a ship. The only access to light are these two little hatches at either end. And as if two small holes weren't challenging enough, the sets were almost black, like really dark wood. I basically had to light a 40-foot ship with two small

holes. I just tried to cram everything I could into those two small holes, lighting with a combination of LEDs and HMIs, and we had some live fire down below like bare candles and candle lamps. We wound up having to invent several different looks because we were in a storm at night in sunlight, in dusk and then on a bright day. And they were all quite different-feeling moments. Also, when we did scenes in the sun the next morning, we wanted to feel the light changing as the ship moves, so nothing could be rigged to the ship. So we had all these lights crammed through these two tiny holes with nothing touching the ship. The scenes run contiguously, but it's meant to indicate a passage of time over a couple of days in a ship, during which [Grace's] mother dies, so there's a pretty massive emotional arc and a lot of things happening. So it was one of the things we had a lot of fun with. It was a really fun challenge."

It was such scenes that got Steacy excited about taking on the project when he first read the 300-page screenplay. "You start to imagine how you're going to execute it and suddenly you realize what it means to be in the hold of a wooden ship rocking around on the ocean," he says. "You know they were really vile conditions and it was dark and wet, and it must have been a really horrible journey that people took to come to North America. It's something we all know happened, the journey Europeans took to get here, but as soon as you start visualizing the execution of it, you begin to reach a greater appreciation as to the full extent of it, and realize that it also has enormous visceral, cinematic potential." 🍷

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