

Made in Canada:

AMERICAN GODS



Orlando Jones as Mr. Nancy.

Above: Salim (Omid Abtahi) and Ifrit/The Jinn (Mousa Kraish) travel together.
Below: Crispin Glover (Mr. World) with Bruce Langley (Technical Boy).

By Trevor Hogg, Special to *Canadian Cinematographer*
Images courtesy of Amazon Prime Video

A recently released convict (Ricky Whittle) grieving the death of his wife (Emily Browning) becomes the bodyguard of a conman (Ian McShane), who meets with various business associates while travelling across the United States – the straightforward premise of *American Gods* takes on mythical proportions as acclaimed British author Neil Gaiman frames the journey around the deities of lore seeking to usurp the growing worship of technology and media. “We are essentially about a road trip,” notes Christopher Byrne, executive producer/director of the fantasy mystery drama broadcasted and streamed by Starz and Amazon Prime Video. “Shadow Moon (Whittle) and Mr. Wednesday (McShane) are going places and visit-

ing people trying to get them onboard. This is also, I would argue, a drug trip. One of the key things that I try to keep in mind as we make the show is the question: Did Shadow get out of jail and fall in with gods or drug addicts?”

Byrne was given the responsibility of overseeing the second season with essential support provided by producer Lisa Kussner and production manager Vair MacPhee. “My job is to take the cinema in the prose of the book and expound upon it; that has never changed,” explains Byrne, whose involvement with the small screen adaptation dates back to being the second unit director for the first season.

Another constant has been cinematographer Marc Laliberté csc, who shifted from the second to main unit to shoot the Season Two finale. “I got on the show a couple of months after it started Season One because Chris Byrne wanted a

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Mr. Town (Dean Cain) interrogates Shadow Moon (Ricky Whittle).



A scene in the House on the Rock.

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— David Greene CSC, ASC

full-time second unit DP to be with him.”

Four of the eight episodes, including the Season Two opener, were shot by Tico Poulakakis csc, while David Greene csc, asc looked after three episodes; both of them were encountering the world of *American Gods* for the first time. “Tico and I did second unit work on *Hannibal* together in Season Two,” Byrne states. “David came to *Hannibal* when Tico was unavailable. I brought Marc in when I was concept artist and second unit director for *12 Monkeys* for the four seasons of that show. They had an innate understanding of how I was going about the business of crafting the look of *American Gods* and know that I am completely collaborative. There is one thing that they all share in common, which is commercial experience. When you’re looking to make a deep sumptuous frame out of something that can be easily passed by in a day’s list of shots, it’s important to me to have DPs with a base understanding that there’s something more we can get out of this. Also, each of them has my respect for what they are bringing to the party, which is huge.”

During preproduction, the three cinematographers and Byrne met at Technicolor Toronto

with colourist Mark Kueper to discuss the visual language for Season Two. Afterwards, a series of camera tests were shot, and various LUTs were built by Poulakakis, Kueper and Byrne based on what they wanted to keep and change from Season One. Certain key aesthetics were developed, such as the look of magic. “There were times when Chris had a real vision and would say, ‘You know what the Northern Lights look like? I need that kind of vibe in the sky here,’” Kueper states. “What was different about this particular show is the 4K workflow, and the eyes of Mr. Wednesday and Laura Moon [played by Browning]. Ian McShane needed to look like he has a glass eye. Instead of going to VFX, we made eye mattes for all of his shots. They also wanted the eyes of the deceased Laura to look deader. She had makeup and contact lenses to make her look less alive, but there were eye reflections that seemed too lively, so eye mattes were made there as well to make them foggier, greyer and defocused.

“We have the tools now to do so many things in colour finishing,” Kueper notes. “In this show we did sky replacements, added flares, lighting effects and removed various distracting things



David Greene CSC, ASC



New Media (Kahyun Kim) in the bunker belonging to Mr. World (Crispin Glover).



Tico Poulakakis csc on set with director Deborah Show and A camera operator Mark Willis (in blue shirt) for the "Muninn" episode.

in the frame. As a team of colourists, editors, VFX supervisors and Chris, we would decide what shots we could handle and what shots would go to [visual effects company] Mr. X." Alternating between two aspect ratios was the means to tell the viewer whether they are in the narrative timeline. "16:9 is for the present story with Shadow, while 2.39:1 is for 'backstage,' which is when the gods step outside of reality, and flashbacks," Byrne explains. "We would frame for that on set." Cameras and lenses were supplied by Sim, with the footage being mainly captured at ProRes 4444 and 3.2K resolution. "We used the ALEXA Minis, Leica Summilux lenses, as well as Atlas, Hawk and Cooke anamorphics. Atlas is a newer brand with limited lenses at the moment. They gave us prototypes to use on the show," Poulakakis remarks. "With the Leica, we had a full set, which was 16 mm to 135 mm. At that point,



Yetide Badaki as Bilquis.



Mr. World (Crispin Glover), Mr. Wednesday (Ian McShane), and Shadow Moon (Ricky Whittle) in the diner situated at Motel America St. Louis.



Marc Laliberté talks to Christopher Byrne during the making of the second season finale.

there were only three Atlas lenses available – 40 mm, 65 mm and 100 mm." The shots can quickly shift from macro to micro, so the InnoVision Probe II lens was the staple of the second unit. The lighting package featured ARRIMAXs, M90s, M40s, 10K tungsten and 4K HMI Molebeams. "For interiors on the sets, we used a lot of SkyPanels because of their versatility. Instead of using big HMIs, sometimes we would use the SkyPanel 360, which is a big, soft light. For the forest battle scene, that was a bunch of cranes with LRX singles, which are 16K Pars that backlight everything," Poulakakis says.

The octocopter drone supplied by SkyMotion made use of Leica Summicron lenses to take advantage of their bigger image circle to cover the 6K imagery being produced by the RED DRAGON camera. "We used a RED DRAGON camera for anything that needed a higher resolution," Byrne explains. "We would generally fly it on a drone when we needed a god's-eye view of what's going on. The high-angle perspective is an important part of the language of the show, especially for Mr. Wednesday because he has ravens that follow him along and do his bidding. We also used the RED camera for the vision of Laura; it has an infrared style that Mark modified with a splash of colour that features blue for the sky and amber for Shadow."

Individual episodes were shot one at a time over the course of 10 days with Poulakakis and Greene alternating with each other. "There were also two tandem days where Marc would shoot leftover bits while I started prepping my next episode," Poulakakis states. "There were three DPs constantly working between main and second unit prepping and shooting an episode."

Sets were constructed at Revival Film Studios with three main ones being the diner, funeral home and bunker. Location shooting took place mainly around Toronto with the production crew travelling as far as Niagara Falls and Oshawa, as well as to the iconic roadside attraction House on the Rock situated in Spring Green, Wisconsin. "The budget was quite big, so when you did need to pay for a place you could," Laliberté states. "We shot a lot of stuff at the Spadina House, which is the basis for the funeral home/mortuary set. Our production designer Rory used that as his model to build the interior."

A major action sequence is the forest battle. "A lot of time and preparation from Tico and [second unit DP] James Gardner csc went into choosing the right location and equipment that would go in," Byrne notes. "We found a park setting that had a road where we could do high speed with a gator on the tracking shot, and another trail around the back where we could put in some bright lights. We were shooting high-speed photography, anamorphic and rain towers, which was a recipe for beautiful images if you get it right. It was an incredible two-day shoot that pushed our production to the max."

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Bilquis (Yetide Badaki) and Shadow Moon (Ricky Whittle) on an Asgardian beach.



A flashback to a battlefield in Ireland featuring Mad Sweeney (Pablo Schreiber).



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Mark Kueper, colourist

of view. We ended up using a lot of LED fixtures that had an old style feeling to them. We wanted to do a lot of colour changes throughout the show, and with LED fixtures you can change the colour to whatever you want. We accentuated the golden tones of those beautiful tungsten fixtures and footlights on the stage, as well as some cooler tones coming from other various sources.”

Three cameras were utilized during the principal photography. “We had one on a crane and two on a dolly in the crowd for all of the stage work. It was quite a complicated choreography, and we didn't want to put the dancers through that more times than what was necessary. The challenge was keeping the cameras out of each other's shots. We shot spherically using our normal Leica lenses but cropped the image to 2.40:1,” Greene says.

An in-camera approach was adopted for the fantasy sequences that would be digitally augmented by Chris MacLean and his visual effects team at Mr. X, along with major contributions by animation studio Tendril, led by co-founder Chris Bahry. “In September 2017, we were working on a process called rotomation to weave into the show somehow,” Byrne recalls. “When the studio brief came to try something more visually spectacular for the Hall of the Gods, we pulled out this idea. All of the gods in America ride the carousel, go through the porthole, enter Wednesday's mind, and go into the Hall of the Gods; it was inspired by Ralph Bakshi, who had done *The Lord of the Rings* in the late 1970s. We had the largest stage



Above: Ricky Whittle as Shadow Moon. Below: Lilquis (Yetide Badaki), Mr. Ibis (Demore Barnes) and Mr. Nancy (Orlando Jones) in a funeral home, which was one of the largest sets.

at Revival Studio with a 360 black environment, and fire to light the scene. Costumes were selected that would enable the actors to be separated from the background, but some of them also have black hair. By shooting ARRIRAW and working with Mr. X, we were able to separate the actors and still achieve the organic low light look that we wanted to have.”

“Jonathan Gaudet was the gaffer who saved the show,” Poulakakis remarks. “Mitch Holmes was the key grip. Mark Willis was the A camera operator and wonderful guy all around. Brad Crosby was the B camera operator. Barrett Axford was the focus puller for A camera. Brian White was the B camera focus puller. Joshua Jinchereau was the DIT.”

“The entire camera, grip and lighting crew were fantastic,” Laliberté adds, “The second unit gaffer Sami Hajjar and key grip Malcolm Nefsky did yeomen work for me, especially when I went onto the main unit. They stayed to make sure that the second unit – which was being filled up by directors coming up from Los Angeles and different DPs that were available here in town – kept a continuity, and that made a big difference to the show.”

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