

Production Slate



The scheming Barbara (Tina Casciani) aims at her prey in the *Femme Fatales* episode "The White Flower."

Dangerous Beauties

By Michael Goldman

In many ways, the risqué Cinemax series *Femme Fatales* can be viewed as a prototype of how tightly budgeted television production can succeed in the era of digital tools and ridiculous turn-arounds. Each half-hour episode is shot at a single practical location in the Los Angeles area with a single camera, a Red One (with the Mysterium-X chip). There are one day of prep and three days of actual production (and the occasional pickup shoot) per episode.

What makes the challenge more complex is the fact that *Femme Fatales* is an anthology series, so characters, locations and stories change with each episode. And it all has to be done in the context of a visual aesthetic inspired by the moody photography in such films as *T-Men* and *The Big Combo* (both shot by John Alton, ASC), *Body Heat* (Richard Kline, ASC), *Bound* (Bill Pope, ASC) and *Basic Instinct* (Jan De Bont, ASC).

"Every three days we have a new script, new characters and new actors," says director of photography Roger Chingirian, who was in the midst of shooting the series' second season when he spoke to AC. "And the producers want a different look for every episode to support the individual story. We have a set approach, but not a set look. That's difficult to do in three days, but we have a great

team, and we've all become quite good at it. We do a tech scout on each episode and discuss tools, colors and how best to use the inherent qualities of our given location, but mostly it's about changing style and color palette and developing effective camera moves."

During location scouts, the team makes key decisions about the look and shooting method for the episode at hand. They always carry a six-lens set of Arri/Zeiss Ultra Primes and an Angenieux Optimo 12:1 (24-290mm) zoom lens. They usually record to Red Raid hard drives, and occasionally employ a Canon EOS 7D with a PL mount (modified by FGV Schmidle) for specialty shots.

Chingirian, who does his own operating on the show, says his main tool in maintaining high production value is his lens package. "During my interview, the one thing I really pushed the producers on was lenses," he recalls. "The lenses mattered more to me than the camera. It's all about the glass. Going in, we didn't know what kind of spaces we'd be shooting in, but I had a low-budget background, so I knew we had to have a zoom. And quite honestly, the Optimo often saves our schedule."

In fact, the Optimo has been dubbed "The Daymaker," according to 1st AC Kyle Klutz. "It's really the workhorse for us," he says. "We put it on a dolly track at the end of the day, and we can get wide shots and tight shots all with the same lens."

Layering a noir aesthetic over episodes that vary wildly in

Femme Fatales photos courtesy of True Crime, Inc., and Cinemax.



Left: Nurse Violet McReady (Christine Donlon) preps for revenge against Laz (Robert LaSardo) in "Bad Medicine." Right: Beth (Carlee Baker, left) and Darla (Anya Monzikova) hatch a plan in "Something Like Murder."

tone — hard-boiled drama, comedy, horror — is probably the biggest challenge the filmmakers face. Some of this aesthetic is achieved as one might expect: with less light, lots of silhouettes and plenty of contrast and diffusion. “But we also want our actresses, the femmes fatale, to always look glamorous,” notes Chingirian, “so sometimes it’s hard to go as dark as we might want. In those situations, we’ll have them come in and out of light, for example, but really, a lot of the show’s look is achieved with color contrasts.”

For example, several episodes have been set in hospitals. “We aren’t afraid to shoot on a location with institutional-green walls and really go with it, mixing up color temperatures along the way,” continues the cinematographer. “We’ll also add and take away light in shots. Our colorist at Tunnel Post, Sebastian Perez-Burchard, and I will later take it further if necessary.”

Gaffer Steve Lundgren says the look “is all about playing with shadows and highlights in deep backgrounds. We often position practicals such as Christmas lights, sconces and floor lamps beyond the main action to create depth, so we don’t get stuck without a solution at our [various locations].”

Chingirian uses camera placement and movement to not only highlight the blocking of each scene, but also to maximize the strength of each location. “We

recently shot a robbery sequence in a 1930s Art Deco bank that had incredibly high, ornate ceilings,” he explains. “We put the camera on the ground so we could angle up on our actors and get all that architectural detail in the frame, and it was a great visual. That’s how we take advantage of practical locations; we’ll walk in, identify its best features and then figure out how to enhance those with camera angles and lighting. If it requires a specific piece of gear, we’ll try to arrange that.”

A heist-gone-wrong episode, “White Flower,” was shot mostly in a small space in the old *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* building downtown, and the filmmakers “strived to utilize a constantly moving camera in order to allow the confined space to become a character of its own,” says Chingirian. “Key elements of the approach involved using a Fisher dolly on dance floor and adding foreground elements to make the space come to life. A malfunctioning neon-sign lighting effect staged outside one window [achieved with practicals and additional lamps on flicker boxes] added visual interest and noir ambience.”

In the supernaturally flavored episode “Haunted,” he continues, “we essentially added a horror aesthetic to our noir approach to suggest a haunted house. Our director said he wanted to get as close to a Hammer Films look as possible, so we experimented with negative space, creating

a layering effect by framing the audience’s attention toward the actors in the scene while keeping the edges of the frame in complete darkness aside from firelight and candle effects.

“We usually choose locations that we can play for exactly what they are, but also play as more than one thing,” he adds. “We’ve shot in a warehouse that also doubled for an alley, and in a mansion that also doubled for a park. Those are things we do all the time. That’s how we make our schedule and give the show a ‘bigger’ look.”

The production carries a fairly extensive tungsten and HMI lighting package, which allows the team even greater flexibility in solving creative and logistical problems. Indeed, the collaboration between Chingirian, a former gaffer, and Lundgren accounts for many of the production’s solutions.

Lundgren explains that the lighting strategy is about “working in layers, maintaining contrast while creating separation by adding kicks and hotspots in the background. We also use a number of small practical sources that can easily be dropped into the background for separation.”

For night exteriors, the production tends to use an 18K or 20K Fresnel mounted on 60’ or 80’ Condors, along with 1.2K Firestarter Par cans to highlight particular buildings or vegetation.



Left: Working on a breakaway prison set while shooting the episode "Behind Locked Doors," cinematographer Roger Chingirian (at camera) angles in on actresses Ana Alexander (on bunk) and Kit Willisee (at door). Right: Actor William Gregory Lee, portraying a bank robber, delivers his lines as Chingirian frames his shot.

"Our night looks vary dramatically from episode to episode," says Lundgren. "For 'Help Me, Rhonda,' we had to shoot an action scene at night on a narrow, rope bridge crossing a deep gorge. The location was a ranch out in Big Tujunga, and we created a classic moonlight effect by driving an 80-foot Condor up a hill overlooking the ravine and blasting two 24K Luka Lights [gelled with Daylight Blue] from there. We used some Nine-light Maxis, Baby 5K Fresnels and Firestarters on the ground to supplement.

"When we're shooting in a clean-looking suburban area," continues the gaffer, "we tend to do a bit of uplighting around the perimeters using VN5P Par 56s and Par 64s on beaverboards, along with a number of 300-watt stake lights."

Day interiors are usually lit with 18K Fresnels, 6K and 4K Pars and small HMIs, almost always through windows. These are sometimes supplemented with daylight-globed Kino Flos. "Larger HMI units are usually topped from the inside by using diffusion frames," Lundgren says. "That way, faces are modeled while we maintain a hotter streak on the subject's body and across furniture and objects. We do quite a lot of shaping to take the light off walls. We often mold keylights for day interiors by shooting a 400-watt Jo-Leko into a 4-by-4

muslin bounce, sometimes with a 4-by-4 frame of diffusion in front to create a small booklight. We try to avoid using Kino Flos for day interiors in order to maintain contrast, and we also sometimes bring in negative fill to further control the ratio."

On the episode "White Flower," the crew used off-the-shelf, bug-repelling lights as a practical solution in the background "to create an interesting, rather dirty look that we mixed with Cool White overheads and edges, while keeping keys white," says Lundgren.

While shooting the episode "Killer Instinct" in an industrial part of downtown L.A., the crew found several 50-watt metal-halide exterior streetlights in a Dumpster near their location. "We wired them up and used them as practical uplights in the background of a warehouse," says the gaffer.

Naturally, great care is taken in lighting each episode's actresses. Lundgren explains, "Female subjects are generally keyed with 45-degree diaphraged Kino Flos or Barger Baglites with an added layer of diffusion, or sometimes we use a book light comprising a Source Four [Leko] bouncing into 4-by-4 muslin with Opal 250 in front. We prefer to use keys that wrap, rather than adding fill in order to further maintain a solid contrast ratio. For further glamour, we add strong backlights. If the woman has

darker hair, we tend to use tungsten units with a layer of diffusion inside doors, and if the hair color is lighter, we'll usually go with a tungsten unit with a Chimera, or even diaphraged Kino Flos, depending on the environment."

Klutz notes that Chingirian also has an extensive filter package at his disposal. "One of Roger's favorites for shooting the women is the Hollywood Black Magic filter," Klutz says. "The Red's resolution is so high that it reveals just about everything, so we have to take off curves with something in front of the lens."

Chingirian emphasizes that a key component of the creative approach on *Femme Fatales* is decisiveness. "I've become a big believer in that," he notes. "Find a direction, do as much of it as you can in-camera, and presume your decisions will hold up. With our tight schedule, you can't say, 'Let's keep trying things.' You have to make a decision and run with it."

TECHNICAL SPECS

1.78:1
Digital Capture
Red One
Arri/Zeiss Ultra Prime, Angenieux Optimo