

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

By Darek Kuźma

DP Jomo Fray collaborated with photographer-filmmaker RaMell Ross to adapt Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Nickel Boys* into a poignantly beautiful work of cinematic art.

When discussing *Nickel Boys* the first thing to acknowledge is the way it was shot by Fray. Shooting in 4:3 aspect ratio, Whitehead's evocative tale of two African American boys, Elwood and Turner, and their abusive ordeals at Nickel Academy, a notorious 1960's reform school, was translated by the DP into a mesmerising first-person, point-of-view experience.

Apart from a single scene when we see Elwood and Turner together, having mere seconds to witness both of their smiling faces in the same frame, the film consists of a collection of their interwoven perspectives, as they try to survive abuse by the school and its corrupt administrators. We perceive the surrounding world through their eyes. We endure the agony of the hard labour and corporal punishments they are forced to endure. We feel the comfort of plain hugs, and the ordinary displays of their blooming friendship, that help them to persevere.

"We didn't think of this production as a POV film, rather as a film shot with a sentient camera that immerses you in the characters' lives," Fray exclaims. "For us it was about capturing the feeling of sight. We wanted it to feel like there's a world on either side and you don't know what's going into the frame next."

"We're talking about two black men in the Jim Crow era of racial segregation in the US. They can't make eye contact with everyone, and can't always be looking around. We were trying to mirror the visual experience of being and moving through an oppressive system."

Fray admits that shooting this way was a daunting challenge but, as he was a fan of Ross's kaleidoscopic and humanistic view of the Black community in *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (2018, DP Ramell Ross) documentary, he cherished every second of it.

"I remember leaving *Hale County* screening feeling changed. I felt I needed to understand the mind of the guy who made it and I'd do anything to work with him," Fray reveals.

Fray values an extensive prep period to devise

a visual language that is right for a film and was elated to find Ross shared this mindset.

"RaMell and I had hours-upon-hours of discussions trying to think about the film at almost a subatomic level," he recalls. "Normal aspects of filmmaking turned into questions. What is transition? What is coverage? What is an establishing shot when you have no wide to bounce off? How do we understand where the characters are in a space?"

"We made a visual manifesto with a rule-set of how we wanted to approach the world or what we'd never allow ourselves to do. Our shot list was 35 pages, single-spaced, with every shot explained, for what we should feel and where our eyes should naturally go. During shot-listing we had a little DSLR and tested-out things like hugs or odd angles to understand what the perspective would feel like."

As Elwood and Turner interact regularly with people and objects that are not within their sight, designing the right camera movement was essential. But there are not a lot of films similar to how *Nickel Boys* was going to look and feel, forcing Fray to explore different paths.

"We saw films in the vein of Gaspar Noé's *Enter The Void* (2009, DP Benoit Debie SBC), and Robert Montgomery's *Lady In The Lake* (1947, DP Paul C Vogel ASC), which is considered the first POV-shot movie, but weren't influenced by them," he offers.

"If you think about how the human body goes through the world, our brain essentially stabilises images so that we perceive reality smoothly. We did countless camera tests to figure-out not how to make images that show what it is to be human, but rather to make image that look the way it feels to be human. Because of filmmaking grammar, handheld feels more inside a body than something more photorealistic to our experience, so that became our main tool."

"We ruled-out Steadicam, as it felt too much like a spirit moving through space, and we wanted people to feel there's a body attached to the image. So we also tested Snorricam, a camera device used in filmmaking that is rigged to the body of the actor, facing the actor directly, so that when they walk, they do not appear to move, but everything around them does. And we tested other types of body and chest rigs, plus remote heads, and used a combination of

all of them. Each time we did that, my key grip, Gary Kelso, and his team engineered custom-builds to get the specific shots we wanted."

Simultaneously, Fray and colourist Alex Bickel, at Color Collective in New York, worked on a LUT.

"Knowing how colour is going to be rendered in our world was as important to our way of presenting the characters' perspectives as camera movement," says Fray. "Due to our work in prep, when we went into post with Alex, 98% of the film had been done. We could focus on tweaking small things."

The Nickel Academy in Colson Whitehead's original novel was inspired by the soul-crushing events at the real-life Dozier School For Boys, but even though Ross's version is largely abstracted from that infamous facility, the filmmakers wanted to create a sense of place for the audience's sake.

"We shot in a former convent and created our own geography, but the camera was not to be manipulative, it was there to just gaze around the way a person would, with a bit of poetic sensibility to make it more cinematic. The film is about the abuses of the reform schools but retains a sense of wonderment in the face of inhumanity that is inherent to the human spirit."

Principal photography started in the fall of 2022 in Louisiana, and lasted for 32 days, with production taking place mainly in and out of New Orleans, plus nearby towns like Thibodaux, with structures such as a boxing ring built by production designer Nora Mendis.

The extensive prep period made Fray and Ross realise that Snorricam was ideal to shoot a small

“Every single take felt new and exciting”



chunk of the film in a third-person's point-of-view. We see Elwood in the 2010s, decades after his Nickel Academy ordeal, where the camera is rigged on his back, but we never see his face, only those with whom he talks.

"We talked at length about how to visualise Elwood's trauma without having a rupture between the imagery we'd been seeing up until then," Fray says. "What does such brutal abuse do to a man's ability to understand himself in the world?"

This was one of the reasons Fray wanted to shoot on Sony Venice using the lightweight Rialto extension. "Having so many different type of camera systems within the film, we needed a modular camera with great parameters that would allow us to make shots that felt organic."

The prep also brought a handful of surprises, as in the case of finding the lenses.

"I was testing like crazy at Panavision New Orleans. On one occasion, executive Steve Krul said he had prototypes of Panavision's new VA large-format spherical primes, and that I should really look at them. I did and, I'm not a religious person, but in that moment I truly felt like I saw God," he enthuses.

"VAs are the first sets of lenses Dan Sasaki engineered from the ground-up in a long time, and there was something about them that felt tonally quite different from any other optical design I've seen. They're lightweight and fast, more spherical and less telecentric in design, and they have this natural three-dimensionality thanks to which things pop-out. They suited our modular camera design and 4:3 aspect ratio in a way no other lenses would, especially the 35mm, and the 50mm, our hero lens."

Fray explains that one thing more important than immersing the audience in the world of Elwood and Turner was emotional honesty.

"The intense prep allowed us to be more improvisational on-set. I never give my first AC, Kali Riley, a mark of where I wanted to focus. We shot-listed everything to know what we were looking for and then explored different paths.

When operating the camera – whether it was A-cam operator Sam Ellison, RaMell, me or actors Ethan Herisse and Brandon Wilson equipped with chest rigs – we tried different things. Every single take felt new and exciting."

Fray also discloses. "In my projects, I always try to imbue the camera with my sense of vulnerability and perspective, but this time I needed to channel Brandon and Ethan's personalities and have the camera be as emotional, as invested, as vulnerable as they were."

This approach obviously influenced how Fray lit the film.

"We didn't have any lights built on sets. Almost everything was motivated from the outside with reflective light and different units. Every single set had to be 360-degrees and hold-up under the most intense scrutiny at every angle, because it was

“We did countless camera tests to show what it is to feel human”

impossible to say, we're here, or we'll go from point A to point B," he explains.

"I've always been deeply influenced by cinematographers like Néstor Almendros who used a lot of mirrors. What he did to light and the spread of light was incredible. That's why I never give actors any marks. I enjoy letting them go where their hearts are telling them and capturing the results in-camera. When they don't have a leash, they can do and see things that are so special, specific and electric."

Fray extensively used Dedolight's Effect and Lightbridge's CRLS systems to change the spread and the quality of light, and had 18K HMIs, ETC Source

Images: BTS photos by L. Kasimu Harris. All images © 2024 Amazon Content Services LLC. All Rights Reserved.

Fours, Fiilex and Astera fixtures, plus Creamsource Vortexts and Rosco DMGs in his lighting package. MBS was the lighting vendor to the production.

"We were lucky to have Bob Bates ICLS as our gaffer," says Fray. "He's a true artist, always honest and sensitive with light. He worked with Gary Kelso and key rigging grip, Moses Mott, to implement regular and custom mirrors/reflectors, and to create some incredible set-ups using different sources. Sometimes it was just one or two 18Ks with a jungle of mirrors around them, ricocheting or pulling-off light and sending it into different places. A first-person based visual style is already so artifice-heavy that we needed every other aspect of the production to be as low in artifice as possible. Also for the sake of actors."

Though *Nickel Boys* was not a walk in the park, Fray calls it a fulfilling experience.

"I'm an emotional DP. What's amazing about cinematography is that it's a tool for compassion, empathy and connection. Films like Lynne Ramsay's *Small Deaths* (1996, DP Alwin Küchler BSC/Lynne Ramsay), Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008, DP Sean Bobbitt BSC) and Wong Kar-wai's *In The Mood For Love* (2000, DP Christopher Doyle), each took my breath away. I didn't know you could articulate feelings in this way," he admits.

"But I'm also a son of scientists – my father was a physiologist, my mother a neuroscientist. I enjoy the technical aspect of creating something emotional. This was such a beautiful challenge as it pushed me to do something poetic and emotional, but also engineered and technical. We needed to have dual-track minds when talking technically about tools we wanted to play like jazz instruments."

And like jazz, impossible to describe to a person who have never listened to it, *Nickel Boys* is a film everyone has to filter through themselves.

