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INTERNATIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHERS GUILD

MAGAZINE

I WANNA DANCE WITH SOMEBODY + YELLOWSTONE + GENERATION NEXT





Julia Swain

BY PAULINE ROGERS
PHOTO TOBIN YELLAND

There was never anything more that young Julia Swain wanted than to be around films – and their ability to immerse people in new and exciting worlds. As such, every job she had growing up was connected to filmmaking, including working at a movie theater during high school so she could watch films for free, operating news cameras as a teenager and then diving into narrative and commercial work while attending film school.

Shooting was what she wanted to do – made a little harder during a very rough patch of poor health in college. “I had to do months of chemotherapy, and the ability to keep shooting small projects when I was feeling well enough kept me pushing forward toward my goal of being a professional DP,” she shares. “I wanted to be the best visual storyteller

and leader I could be, to have a camera in my hands and be lighting as much as possible. The more I shot, the more directors and producers I met, the more I was able to be selective about the work I chose.”

Attending UCLA for her MFA helped position her to shoot at higher levels. She learned from such cinematographers as Mandy Walker, ASC, ACS; Bradford Young, ASC; and Rodrigo Prieto, ASC, AMC. “It was such an informative experience to watch other cinematographers lead sets,” she reflects. “Artists I admired did not just come and talk to us – they lit the soundstages with us and made us work. Unless you’re on a crew, you don’t get to see other cinematographers on set, so it was invaluable to watch the best of the best shoot and delegate to their teams.” Swain was also able to win fellowships and

scholarships that connected her to more mentors, including the first ASC Vision Scholarship.

Her early focus in filmmaking began with short films, which have been integral to finding her voice as a storyteller. “[Shooting shorts] allowed me to dive into feature films by having a range of genres to present and the ability to create consistent looks and tell poignant stories,” she explains. “I shot a short with my dear friend Ryan Jow for a feature concept, *Windfall*, where I learned how much I love to play with color and how it elevates emotion. *Mary Meet Grace*, for Faryl Amadeus, taught me how to create visual tension and speak to subtext. I’m all about diving into subtext: what’s not written on the script’s page and how we as filmmakers allude to it visually.”

Swain's first breakout began with the SXSW festival hit *Lucky*, which, she says, allowed her to make a statement with the kinds of movies she wanted to make. "It had something to say about the experience of women that had not been tackled in this way before," Swain details. "It was not only visual but ultimately very surreal. We shot it in 15 days, and to give it the most sophisticated look we could, we had to have a solid plan and move quickly. I remember my key grip, Brendan Riel, made a rig on the roof of the main house location that could swing from the front yard to the backyard. Suddenly, our moonlight for the night exteriors on either side of the house was up much faster. It was innovations like that across all my departments that allowed us to push what we were able to accomplish in such little time."

The film also allowed Swain and Director Natasha Kermani to develop a process together. "We learned that even though we pull references initially to get our points across to the studio, we aren't ones to copy technique. Instead, we find a lot of what we do organically and keep it rooted in the script without constantly referencing other work. *Lucky* was also

our first feature together and when you have to move that fast on a film, everyone is looking to the director and DP to get the job done and make their days. We were in it together, pushing each other creatively and problem solving when things would change on us. A deep trust was formed."

Swain joined Local 600 in 2021, allowing her to transition into more Union work. It was important to get to this milestone, she says, and to be able to do bigger shows and films in the future. This year alone she shot three movies that will all be released in 2023: *The Wrath of Becky* (BoulderLight Pictures), *Scrambled* (Megamix/Lionsgate), and *The Mattachine Family* (Huckleberry Media). "All of them had incredible filmmakers behind them and great scripts with meaningful things to say," Swain says proudly. "I was able to get heavily invested, which I think is imperative when taking on a movie for months at a time. I'm excited for audiences to experience them."

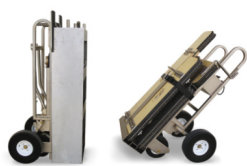
Currently, Swain is preparing to work with Kermani on an adaptation of *Abraham's Boys*, by Joe Hill, for which she says, "We are hoping to push the boundaries of period photography and lighting

by using colors and techniques that are not as common for a story set in the early 1900s."

Swain offers solid counsel for those who contemplate filmmaking yet often eschew shorts, indies, and festivals. "These will remain important going forward," she says adamantly. "Shorts and smaller features are more accessible to cinematographers starting out and help shape their portfolios. You can try out techniques on smaller projects that you may not have done otherwise, and find what you're drawn to in terms of visual language. They connect you to filmmakers with similar tastes and goals. Ultimately, you open doors for yourself by working hard on things you can invest in fully."

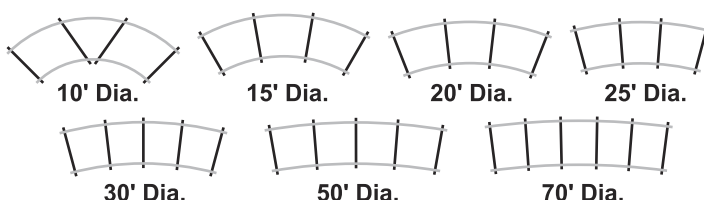
"Festivals, too, connect us and allow us to experience films from all over the world that we might not have been exposed to otherwise," she concludes. "They give indies a platform and bring filmmakers together. Most importantly, the short films and indie features you choose should be projects you truly care about. You are showing the world the type of work you want to do and your voice as a storyteller." 🌈

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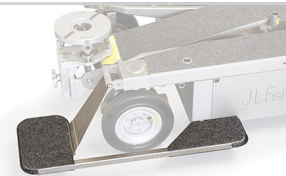


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