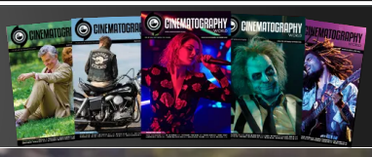
SUBSCRIBE
From just £44 for six issues per year
SUBSCRIBE TODAY


Nanu Segal BSC • Emily

MAR 23, 2023

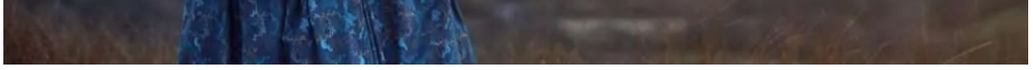
MOOR STORIES

By Natasha Block Hicks

Emily Brontë's first and only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, initially published in 1847 under her pen name of Ellis Bell, has been adapted for the screen over thirty times, but the author and poet's own life story is somewhat mysterious, largely documented posthumously through the sanitising filter of her older sister Charlotte's pen.

Search

LIGHT SOURCE FILM



Cinematographer Nanu Segal BSC joined us to talk about how she teamed-up with writer-director Frances O'Connor, an experienced actress stepping behind the lens for the first time, to imagine life into the gaps in Emily Brontë's story.

"The theme of *Emily* (2022) is about a young woman finding her identity as an artist and learning to how to express it," explains Segal. "It's a very beautiful process to work with a director who has also written the script, there's a suppleness to it. Both Frances and I are avid film fans, and discussing films was a great way to connect and find common ground.

"We wanted to create a visual language that was unapologetically cinematic"

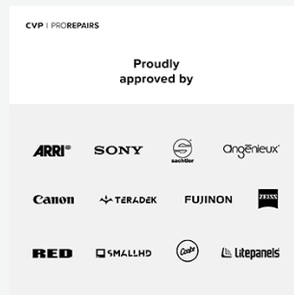
"We talked a lot about *Biutiful* (2010, dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu, DP Rodrigo Prieto ASC AMC) and *A Prophet/Un Prophète* (2009, dir. Jacques Audiard, DP Stéphane Fontaine AFC), which might not seem like first-reach references for a period film. But the mood and textures of those films, the way they were lit, and the immediacy of the filmmaking, have an inherent beauty that we wanted to bring into *Emily*."

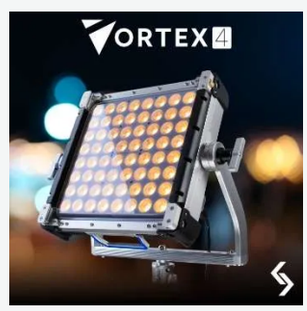
Some of the visual inspiration for the film sprang from the script itself.

"The Yorkshire Moors are absolutely incredible," marvels Segal. "We visited the house where Emily Brontë grew up, the Parsonage in Haworth (now the Brontë Parsonage Museum). We got to sit in the same place that she lived and absorb the landscape. It was transformative."

Filming in the same environment that inspired an untamed literary work such as *Wuthering Heights* was nonetheless challenging. The equipment chosen for *Emily* needed to be compact and purposeful, and the whole film unit maneuverable-enough to contend with the blustery moorland terrain and narrow single track leading to the principal location. Day-to-day logistics threatened to cut into shooting time.

"It was totally worth it," justifies Segal, "as Frances had found an amazing house for Emily Brontë and her family to live in."





Rapidly shifting atmospheric systems, powerful enough to smooth the rocks and stunt the trees, which are synonymous with the Yorkshire Moors, can act as both a cinematographer's muse and repeated vexation.

"The weather adds so much to the overall texture of the film," says Segal, "so we did really embrace that. But it was a challenge to remain flexible and adaptable to an everchanging environment."

The choice of equipment was very much informed by the promise of pictorial richness and the challenge in capturing it.

"Both Frances and I wanted to create a visual language that was unapologetically cinematic," Segal continues, "and for us that meant using Anamorphic lenses. We wanted to find a vintage set for the softness and the inherent aberrations you get with older glass."

The lenses needed to fulfil two parameters: they needed to be small and lightweight, since a large proportion of the film was to be shot handheld, and they needed to resist the tendency for Anamorphic flare.

"We were going to have lots of point sources in frame from candles, oil lamps and firelight," explains Segal. "I didn't want to have Anamorphic flares going through the actors' faces, distracting from the performances, or creating visually-cluttered compositions."

After extensive camera testing, the team settled on Hawk C-series Anamorphic Primes, teamed with a Sony Venice camera set to capture in 4:3 4K X-OCN ST, in Rialto Mode, supplied by Provision Leeds.

"I'd used both of those pieces of equipment on other projects," relates Segal, "but the combination was unique to this film. It was an instinctive choice to use the Sony Venice. I felt the colour rendition would suit Emily's world. We shot the whole film at 2500 ISO because that sensitivity setting brings some texture to the image, which felt right. "

The wish to favour handheld camerawork came early-on from O'Connor.

"It really made sense," agrees Segal. "We wanted the camera to live and breathe with the actors, to be engaged, rather than detached and observing the story at a distance. Although we didn't shoot *Emily* like a documentary, we took inspiration from that artform, shooting the narrative with a character-motivated feel to the operating. When you operate handheld, you can really fine tune to the nuances of the actors' movements."

"When you operate handheld, you can really fine tune to the nuances of the actors' movements"

Segal was keen to maximise natural and source lighting for *Emily*.

"I wanted the lighting to feel as real and motivated as possible," she explains. "I wasn't ever afraid to use available light, although in-practice that often needed to be supplemented for light levels and continuity."

Gaffer Gary Davies came to the production with his own inventory of Aladdin LED lights, so these were the natural choice for any augmentation of the available light, along-side larger units such as 18Ks and ARRI Sky Panel S360s.

"For the night work, I wanted it all to feel like it was motivated by candlelight," says Segal, "we had a lot of candles in the frame and we featured period-appropriate oil lamps as well."

To boost light levels while keeping the subtle fluctuation and tone given by candlelight, Segal and Davies created a dedicated rig where several candles could be mounted in front of a reflective surface, which would be positioned just out of shot.

"We called it the 'bird cage,'" Segal remembers, "it was essentially a film lamp powered by candles."

There are two scenes that came together particularly successfully in Segal's view.

"The first one is the 'mask scene,'" she details. "This was a scene that we spent a lot of time discussing and planning in prep. We really protected a part of the very tight schedule in order to have the time to shoot it in the way that Frances had envisaged it. When it was finished, I found it really exciting to watch the combination of the lighting, production design and SFX elements together with the soundscape and amazing performances."

The other scene that came together particularly well in Segal's view was the love scene.

"By contrast, that scene was quick and straightforward to shoot," says Segal, "but I love the intimacy and tone of it. It's a really tender, beautiful moment of two people coming together.

"It felt like Frances and I really connected creatively," Segal says of the project. "Her ideas would expand my own and inspire me every day on set. It was a very enriching collaboration."

Emily Brontë died in 1848 of tuberculosis at the age of 30, her health likely compromised by poor sanitation and the harsh local climate. Her premature departure, only one year after *Wuthering Heights* was published, leaves a tantalising question over what might have been, had she had access to better healthcare and been free of the institutional binds that forced her and her sisters to first seek publication of their accomplished works under male pseudonyms.

Nearly 175 years later, we are closer to casting-off the last of the fetters that have previously prevented equal representation in the arts. *Emily,* in both the film itself and its subject, is a timely homage to female creative expression.

RELATED POSTS

PGGB CEO Lyndsay Duthie to depart for new role at UCA

DP Michal Dymek awarded Golden Frog at Camerimage

Aputure introducing the Storm 80c and Storm 1000c

SUBSCRIBE

From just £44 for six issues per year

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

CINEMATOGRAPHY WORLD

FOLLOW US

THE ART AND CRAFT BEHIND THE CAMERA

PRIVACY POLICY | CONTACT

hello@cinematography.world

+44 (0)1428 746 375

© 2024 Cinematograpjhy World Magazine. All Rights Rreserved