

# SENSORS & SENSIBILITY

Achieving the Luminous Glow of Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship*



PHOTO BY BERNARD WALSH/AMAZON STUDIOS AND ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Whit Stillman directs a scene in *Love & Friendship*

**L**ove & Friendship is director Whit Stillman's adaptation of Jane Austen's early novella "Lady Susan," which was written in the mid-1790s but remained unpublished until 1871, well after the novelist's death. From Roadside Attractions and Amazon Studios, the film had its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January and opened in limited release on May 13.

Set in England in the 1790s—earlier than most Austen tales—*Love & Friendship* follows Lady Susan Vernon (played by Kate Beckinsale), a beautiful young widow who has come to her in-laws' estate to wait out rumors about her

liaisons that have been circulating through polite society. In this comical period piece, Lady Susan, aided by American expatriate Alicia Johnson (Chloë Sevigny), flirts and schemes her way through the social ranks, pausing only to snap up a wealthy but delightfully stupid husband (Tom Bennett)—described as "a bit of a rattle"—whom she'd originally intended for her daughter (Morfydd Clark). All's well that ends well for Lady Susan, who sheds her encumbrances, bests her adversaries, and lands a fortune in the process.

Shot in Ireland by Belgium-based cinematographer Richard van Oosterhout using a single ARRI

Alexa XT, *Love & Friendship* opens with a musical nod to Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*. The score, by composer Benjamin Esdraffo, was recorded under the direction of Stillman's longtime collaborator, musical director Mark Suozzo.

"For me, and I think for a lot of other cinematographers as well, the Alexa comes closest to the analog era," van Oosterhout comments. "I come from a background of shooting on film, and that's still more or less my favorite tool. But in the digital world it's the Alexa that affords some of those same attributes, and that's what influenced my choice."



Chloë Sevigny and Kate Beckinsale

The imagery is luminous, glowing with a rich, cinematic luster, and van Oosterhout's camera—outfitted with a set of Cooke S4 lenses—follows the actors outdoors in smooth walking-and-talking tracking shots that contrast with still interior shots that stop to observe the play of candlelight on their faces.

"I like the Cookes because they are really gentle and soft," van Oosterhout says. "They have a really nice out-of-focus falloff. Most of the time the digital format is quite harsh and sharp, and I think the Cooke lenses take that away quite a bit."

With very little time to prep, van Oosterhout made an extensive study of Stillman's previous work in order to absorb the director's visual language. "His film language is very simple," the cinematographer observes. "He doesn't like to feel the camera, and so everything is based on the acting, which I actually like quite a lot. For me, camera moves are a major point of departure in



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my work, but he tends to hold back in terms of camera movement. In *Love & Friendship* we went with much more camera movement than he had originally planned. Most of them were dolly shots, but in the end I think maybe we did a bit more than he was used to."

Taking advantage of the full sensor area of the camera, material for *Love & Friendship* was captured in ARRIRAW format with a 1.85 aspect ratio. "You can actually get it to shoot CinemaScope, like 2.34 or 2.39, but Whit really didn't want to have that format," van Oosterhout says. "He liked a square format much better than a wide format, so we ended up in between with 1.85. I think that serves the film very well."

*Barry Lyndon*, shot by John Alcott, served as an important visual reference for van Oosterhout, especially its scenes shot without electric lights. (*Barry Lyndon* takes place between about 1750 and 1789.) "I watched the film many times," he recounts. "*Love & Friendship* was the first period film from that time for me, so I was really happy to do it, especially night scenes and candlelit scenes. [*Barry Lyndon*] was also a nice reference to show Whit because in that period, obviously, there was no electric light whatsoever."

Night sequences in *Love & Friendship* were lit using a selection of Lowel Rifa-Lite and Chimera softboxes dimmed down to a minimum, which put



Xavier Samuel, Stephen Fry and Jenn Murray

out the reddish color of candlelight to augment the candles shown within the frame. Firelight atmospheres were employed to provide motivation for additional lighting.

Seeking to avoid a heavily stylized look for *Love & Friendship*, van Oosterhout turned to *Barry Lyndon* for color reference. "We wanted a really natural look, but then you end up with candlelit night scenes," he relates. "Color-wise, *Barry Lyndon* was a really nice reference to look at, because if you use only candles, then you get a really monochromatic image. That sometimes was a struggle for both of us, especially during the color

grade. Whit really wanted to have color added back in, but that wasn't always possible, naturalistically speaking. In the end, we met at the middle."

Applying various looks during post, van Oosterhout prefers to use a standard LUT during production. "I always use standard LUTs, and most of the time it's Rec. 709," he says. "And because I come from the analog world, I use my light meter. That's my main tool for lighting. My eye, of course, but the light meter gives me the information I need, and the monitor just can't do that. The Rec. 709 LUT is perfect for me and I hardly watch dailies on set anyhow. Never judge light on a monitor." **dv**