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Developing the Textured Beauty of Baz Luhrmann's *The Get Down*

BY JENNIFER WOLFE

The *Get Down*, Baz Luhrmann's musical drama series created for Netflix, chronicles the origins of hip-hop in the Bronx in the late 1970s against a disco-infused backdrop. The first six episodes debuted on August 12, with an additional six episodes to be made available next year.

Famous for hugely stylish extravaganzas like *Moulin Rouge!* and *The Great Gatsby*, Luhrmann is closely involved in the series as executive producer, and he directed the first episode. *The Get Down* tells the story of a group of teenagers coming of age in the fiery rubble of the Bronx in the late 1970s. At that time, a new musical style was emerging that combined dance, art, music and language. It didn't have a name, but the kids of the Bronx felt its presence.

The series stars Justice Smith as poet-in-residence Ezekiel "Books" Figuero, Herizen Guardiola as diva-in-training Mylene Cruz and Shameik Moore as Shaolin "Shao" Fantastic. Books and Shao forge a bond over their love of music

and dreams of making it big. Among the fictional characters, real-life icons are incorporated into this scripted tale of ambition, love and hardship. Hip-hop legend Grandmaster Flash, a character in the series portrayed by Mamoudou Athie, is an associate producer, while rapper and music producer Nas serves as executive producer and writes lyrics and music that help frame the narrative and give the story momentum.

Ten years in the making, *The Get Down* marks Luhrmann's first foray into television, and, with a price tag of roughly \$120 million, is reportedly one of the most expensive series ever to be brought to the small screen. The series was shot in 6K resolution by cinematographer William Rexer using a combination of RED Epic Dragon and RED Epic Weapon digital cinema cameras outfitted with Zeiss Master Primes and Compact Primes augmented by vintage Angenieux zooms and Tokina macro lenses.

Known for his work on OK Go's 2014 music video "The Writing's on the Wall" and Beyoncé's

2011 release "Love on Top," Rexer is no stranger to digital workflows. The DP has captured footage for countless commercial, television, music video and feature projects, and has worked with virtually every digital camera and format available over the course of his career.

"Baz loved the look of the RED Epic because of the larger 6K sensor, which is employed in both the Dragon and the Weapon," Rexer recounts. "The fact that you can shoot in 6K raw and ProRes at the same time, to the same card, is probably the biggest asset that the Weapon has to offer in terms of day-to-day functionality. The major difference with the Weapon is that it's lighter—they've improved it ergonomically and in terms of cooling and power consumption, but in terms of image quality, it was identical. In a year of production, we had not a single camera malfunction or a camera present any problems, which is pretty extraordinary."

The Get Down weaves fact, including archival footage of New York in the 1970s, with fiction, original music and re-imaginings of classic songs from the era. The overall look is gritty and textured, evoking the feel of older film stocks. Rexer worked with the colorists at Technicolor PostWorks New York to develop a custom LUT that would help prevent any sharp contrasts between the various formats. "We shot some test material and I brought it in and said, 'I would really like it to look like Kodak 5293,'" he recounts. "That film stock had a very nice feel around skin tones, and in particular around darker skin tones, yet it still retained contrast. The blacks still felt black and the whites still had a really nice feel to them. In the mids, and towards the bottom of the mids, it was slightly lifted. African American skin tones were represented very nicely."

For night scenes, Rexer established a separate LUT that placed more cyan in the shadow areas. "This was key, because in a lot of the archival material, they were struggling to pull cyan out," he comments. "When you see that older 1978-79



Shaolin "Shao" Fantastic (Shameik Moore), Ezekiel "Books" Figuero (Justice Smith), Miles "Boo Boo" Kipling (Tremaine Brown Jr.), Ronald "Ra-Ra" Kipling (Skylan Brooks) and Dizze (Jaden Smith)



After meeting aspiring DJ Shaolin Fantastic (Shameik Moore, pictured), Ezekiel's life changes. The boys couldn't be more different, but they forge a bond over their love of music and dreams of making it big.

material, there's a lot of cyan contamination. It's either got too much magenta or it's got too much cyan. They just couldn't get it out. Now you see it and you think, 'Oh, that's 1970s footage.' As soon as I put it in, Baz said, 'Oh my god, that looks like the '70s. That looks like our archival material.' Instead of trying to remove it from the stock footage, we put that look into our own footage."

Shot primarily using two cameras, *The Get Down* utilized Steadicam and Freefly MoVI rigs, and, because it's a Baz Luhrmann production, a 50-foot Technocrane. "We probably used the Technocrane in every episode," Rexer says. "All the dance numbers have the Techno in them. All of the

stunt sequences have the Techno in them. What we learned is that when you're in the street and you're attempting to make a period show feel big, you can't show 360 degrees. But if you take a 90-degree area and dress it well, and have movement across it so that you're starting in tight and keep pulling further back, the audience feels like they just saw 360 degrees. The Technocrane enables you to do that. If you had to lay dolly tracks down, you'd end up seeing the dolly track in the shot."

Musical sequences, featured prominently throughout each episode, come in two distinct flavors. There's the slickly lit, choreographed disco numbers at Le Inferno nightclub, which contrast

with the hot, crowded environment of the rap battles at the back-alley venue The Get Down. To capture footage for these scenes, Rexer employed as many as five cameras at a time, focusing not just on the central action but also on the reactions of the surrounding crowd members in order to provide an authentic intense party atmosphere.

Assisted by A-camera/Steadicam operator Jeff Muhlstock and Steadicam/MoVI operator Andy Voegeli, Rexer regularly rotated his crew so they would be familiar enough with the series to perform a range of duties. "Both Andy and Jeff are really A operators, and Andy does a bit of second unit work," Rexer details. "I brought Andy



Justice Smith and executive producer Baz Luhrmann on the set



Regina Diaz (Shyrley Rodríguez), Mylene Cruz (Herizen F. Guardiola) and Yolanda Kipling (Stefanée Martin)



Teen poet Ezekiel "Books" Figuero (Justice Smith) is in many ways the heart of the series. Despite his tough home life in the South Bronx, he's a dreamer who won't let his circumstances get him down.

in so he'd be familiar enough with our show that when we needed to do second unit work, I could elevate Andy into that position. It was like I had two A-camera operators at all times, which was fantastic."

While dramatic elements were covered traditionally, primarily with a Steadicam, the choreographed sequences were filmed using what Rexer describes as a "double approach." "One approach was to allow Jeff and the Steadicam to dance with the characters and be an active participant," he relates. "Baz will go out and dance and be like one of the participants in the event, and Jeff would watch that and then do it. We lit it using dimmers so we could be adjusting throughout. If Jeff was over to the right, we would dim the lights on the right-hand side and bring up the lights on the left-hand side. If Jeff moved around, those lights would all switch. We would do a full piece of coverage like that for each element of the dance.

"Then we gave Andy a pass at it with the MoVI, with a longer lens, which was more reactive and had a little more edge to it," Rexer continues. "What you see traditionally on a MoVI is a wide lens. In Andy's case, I would put on an 85 compact lens instead, which is pretty large for a handheld

deal, and he would do a pass in that way. But then we also had three or four observational cameras off to the sides, which we were using to capture reactions. Baz wanted all those pieces to have lots of energy, and to appear as if people from all ages were watching, were participating. He wanted to have as many choices as possible when he got to the edit room in terms of when to use the actors' material and when to go to the observational material."

The final element was figuring out how to make a small set feel huge and encompassing. "We took the MoVI rig and put a cable over the top of the whole thing and essentially created a cable rig and ran it directly overhead," Rexer says. "We did the whole number that way, directly overhead, cutting across the entire alley. It's a crazy bird's-eye view, but it's active, too. It never stops. It's twisting, it's turning. It's almost like the old Busby Berkeley numbers because the people below appear more like an art project than a crowd."

The production team sought a naturalistic look that also delivered a punch. "We wanted stuff to feel natural but then push it a little bit," Rexer says. "Nothing's way out there until you get into the clubs, because they were way out there anyway.

Everything's naturalistic, plus a little something special. Everything had to be kicked up a notch. When it wasn't, Baz would ask, 'What's wrong with this?' I'd say, 'I don't know, maybe it's missing some sexiness,' and he'd say, 'That's it!' One of the key tenets was that it could never feel like you'd seen it before. We approached every set, every lighting setup that way. We'd start with it being somewhat naturalistic and then we'd amp it up a little bit."

Rexer ultimately compares the production process for *The Get Down* to working on a film set. "This is not your traditional television show, for several reasons," he says. "One, it's a period show. Two, it's music. Three, it's Baz Luhrmann. We had 11 days per episode, which sounds somewhat nice and luxurious, but it's really not at all. Then we would end up doing some additional tandem days on every episode as well. It was tight in the sense that we had huge music numbers. We'd have 150 people who would all need to be in wigs and costumes doing big period numbers. Our choreographers would be working around the clock designing dance sequences. We'd have to work it out, light it and shoot it all in a day. It's like doing a major movie, but in 11 days." **dv**