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High-School Horrors

Brendan Uegama, CSC crafts a dark, saturated palette for the mysterious happenings of the CW series *Riverdale*.

By Rachael K. Bosley



You might recognize the names Archie, Jughead, Betty and Veronica, but in the television series *Riverdale*, which recently wrapped its second season on The CW, they aren't the same all-American teens that first sprang to life in Archie Comics. The show gives archetypal characters and settings a dark spin, a direction reinforced by a boldly colored, atmospheric palette.

Instrumental in creating that look this year was Los Angeles-based cinematographer Brendan Uegama, CSC, who was behind the camera on all 22 episodes of *Riverdale's* second season. (The first season was shot by David Lanzenberg and Stephen Jackson.) Uegama transitioned from shooting extreme sports to narrative drama about a decade ago, and he describes an early encounter with Jack Green, ASC as a formative one. "I had no contacts in the industry when I started out," he recalls. "My wife, Nicole G. Leier, who is an actor and director, was standing in at the time on *Are We Done Yet?*, which was shot by Jack Green; being a risk-taker, she brought me to set and introduced us. Jack and his son Peter, who was pulling focus, invited me to spend every day I could on the set, and I spent as many days as possible just observing and learning from them. I was just floored by Jack's generosity, and I still am; he has been very supportive of my career ever since then."

When Uegama spoke to *AC* from Vancouver, where *Riverdale* is shot, he had a few episodes of the season yet to go, and he was close to finishing one that would use *Riverdale*



High's production of the infamous Broadway flop *Carrie: The Musical* as a springboard for an entire musical episode. "It's definitely a bold new direction for *Riverdale*," he says with a laugh. "It was very creative and a lot of fun. We did it on our regular episode schedule, which is eight days. I have to give it to the cast: They learned the numbers really quickly and did an amazing job."

Uegama notes he was fortunate to be able to bring several of his regular crewmembers aboard *Riverdale*: gaffer Mark Edward Murphy; A-camera operator Steven Deneault; 1st ACs George Majoros and Duncan Vogel; and digital-imaging technician Elmer Ventura. "There are so many shows shooting in Vancouver now that there's almost not enough crew to go around," the cinematographer observes. "I'm lucky to have had such a great crew with me, most of whom I've worked with regularly in the past." Rounding out his key crew on the show are B-camera operator Doug Schwartz and key grip Randy Stamhuis.

When Uegama first met with



Opposite, from left: Archie Andrews (K.J. Apa), Betty Cooper (Lili Reinhart), Veronica Lodge (Camila Mendes) and Jughead Jones (Cole Sprouse) team up to solve the dark mysteries plaguing their small town in the television series *Riverdale*. This page, top: Jughead chronicles the town's strange happenings. Above: Cinematographer Brendan Uegama, CSC.

Riverdale creator Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, who is also the chief creative officer at Archie Comics, to discuss the look of the series, the word "atmosphere" came up often. "I had used a lot of atmosphere in some of my previous

work, including [the series] *Van Helsing*, and Roberto loved that," says Uegama. "He said, 'I want atmosphere in every shot all the time, inside and outside. I want it to be a character in the show; I want texture in every frame.'" ➤

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Right and below: In the Season 2 premiere, "A Kiss Before Dying," Archie rushes his father, Fred (Luke Perry) — who's been shot by the villainous Black Hood — to the hospital. Bottom: Archie vows to protect his father — and Riverdale — from the Black Hood.



Then, while prepping the Season 2 premiere, "A Kiss Before Dying," with director Rob Seidenglanz, Uegama hit on another idea. He recalls, "Rob and I looked at some of Roberto's other work, especially [the comic-book series *Afterlife With Archie*], which has bold reds and blues just washing the room, and we decided that heightened use of color felt right for *Riverdale*."

As a result, moonlight in *Riverdale*'s second season isn't merely cool, it's an intense blue — though the intensity "depends on whose story we're telling," says Uegama. "On average, our night look is either Full Blue and Cyan 90 [lighting gels] on tungsten [fixtures] or, for a really rich cyan color, Cyan 90 plus Cyan 60, which we use when the town is in an especially dark time. By contrast, moonlight at Betty's house is often Cyan 30 — a lot less saturated — to suggest the innocence most people perceive in Betty [Lili Reinhart]. Her household actually has more drama than any other home in Riverdale, so you could say it's a nice juxtaposition!"

"We've played with other blues this season as well, especially for scenes at Sisters of Quiet Mercy, where Cheryl



Left: Jughead and Betty meet during the day at Pop's Chock'lit Shoppe. Below: At night, Pop's is bathed in colorful hues motivated by the diner's neon lights. Uegama used RGB LED fixtures to realize the effect. Bottom: The cinematographer discusses a scene with Pop Tate himself, actor Alvin Sanders.

Blossom [Madelaine Petsch] is sent for conversion therapy," he adds. "To underscore the drama of those scenes, we used Congo Blue mixed with Half CTB to create a deep-cobalt-like moonlight."

The show's saturated color scheme is perhaps best showcased at Pop's Chock'lit Shoppe, a diner and gathering place bathed in neon. "I always love being in Pop's," says Uegama. "That's a practical building that was built on our back lot in Season 1. We have our own studio space in Langley [southeast of Vancouver], where we share a building with [the CW series] *Supergirl*. *Riverdale* has three stages, and Pop's is our only exterior practical set on the lot."

"Generally speaking," the cinematographer continues, "the main approach [to Pop's] is to set the ambient mood for the scene using the neon signs surrounding the diner as motivation. On the south wall of Pop's, there was a large, red neon 'Diner' sign, and at the beginning of this season, we replaced that with an RGB LED. It's quiet, and we can control the brightness of it, which allows us to hold detail when looking straight at it or brighten it up to augment the lighting of a scene when it's off-camera."

"For scenes in Pop's at night, I



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Optics Spotlight Summilux-C Primes

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Shooting *Riverdale* with CW Sonderoptic's Leica Summilux-C prime lenses was "an easy sell," says cinematographer Brendan Uegama, CSC. "Production had used the lenses in the show's first season, and I had used them on a commercial and loved them.

"We use all of the focal lengths on *Riverdale*, but I'm a big fan of the 21mm and the 40mm," he continues. "There are certain lenses you just fall in love with, and for me, those are the ones in that set.

"I think the 21mm has a great quality for our wider shots," Uegama adds. "The 40mm is my preference for clean close-ups. Sometimes, when we want to get two cameras working for medium shots and close-ups, we'll end up on a 65mm or 75mm for the closer size, but whenever possible I try to get close-ups with the 40mm. Because of the wider focal length for close-ups, the camera has to be fairly close to the actor. I think you get so much more energy out of that than you do when you're on a long lens from farther away. It just pops more; you see and feel so much more into the character. For that reason, I often use wider lenses closer.

"But," he concludes, "it all depends on the show and the visual approach."

— RKB



Uegama adjusts a practical table lamp for a scene between Martin Cummins (portraying Sheriff Tom Keller) and Apa.

tend to use a True ND 0.6 filter, as it holds the neon at a good level at my preferred T-stop, which for *Riverdale* is a T1.4/T2 split," he adds.

"Every window in the diner is outlined with red neon lights," Uegama continues. "Outside, on the under-hang from the roof, we built in a long RGB

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LED strip that runs across the whole front of the building, and we sometimes changed its color from red to blue, depending on the situation."

In one sequence at Pop's, Josie (Ashleigh Murray) and Chuck (Jordan Calloway) flirt and share a dance before her mother, Riverdale's mayor (played by Robin Givens), arrives and spoils the

moment. "For that, we used the exterior LED strip at blue to give a night-ambient kick off the Venetian blinds," says Uegama. "We actually shot the scene day-for-night because the schedule wouldn't allow for us to be there during the evening on that day, so our grip department had to surround the building with a duvetyen tent. The mood of the scene was flirtatious and fun, but I wanted the harshness of the red to feel prominent in the scene, so the red neon lights around the windows and the red 'Diner' sign played strongly.

"In the corner behind Chuck, we added a [K 5600 Joker-Bug] 800 with Cyan 90 to create a strong shaft of light through the windows," he continues. "All the overhead pendant lights were dimmed down to an exposure that felt right and gave them a bit of texture. They didn't do much to light up the room, but they did give the scene a warm color contrast, and they also provided motivation for the cast to be lit with warmer light. To do that, we pushed a Baby with a Chimera on it through a frame of 250 diffusion. It was a nice, soft source that looked great on Ashleigh and Jordan."

At the opposite end of the spec-



trum in terms of scale was a pair of night exteriors in Episode 9, "Silent Night, Deadly Night," that depict the death of the Black Hood, a serial killer who has been terrorizing Riverdale. In the first part of the scene, Archie (K.J. Apa) and Betty rush out to a remote area and are trapped by the killer, who forces Betty to bury Archie alive. Uegama recalls, "We had to bring Archie and Betty in through the trees and then show them landing at this grave and digging it up. It was a lot of work to do in very little time, and a 50-foot Technocrane really helped us get everything we needed.

"There was a dense stand of 40-to-50-foot trees right behind the actors when they arrived at the grave, and we placed most of our lights behind that to create very exaggerated shafts of light coming through the trees," he continues. "We used tungsten units gelled with Hi Sodium. We created moonlight fill with a lighting balloon from Novo Lighting, which made a custom cover for us in the world of our cyan."

After Archie escapes from the coffin, he chases the Black Hood out onto an old wooden bridge, where the



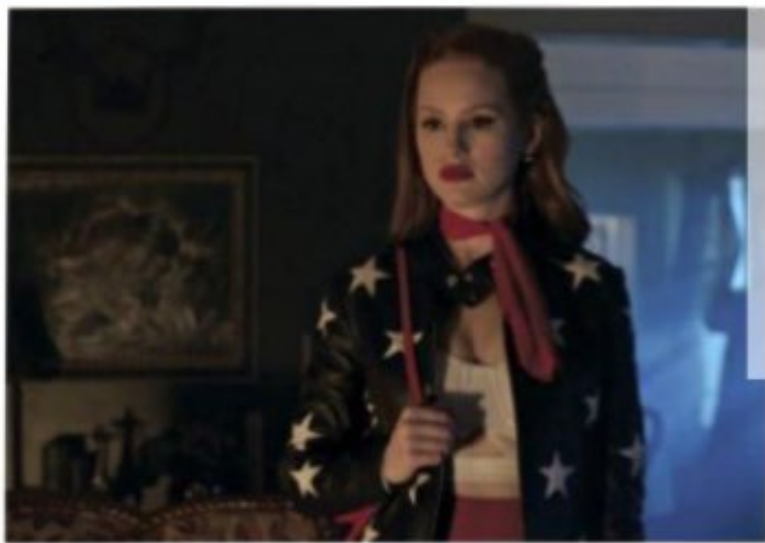
Top: In the episode "The Watcher in the Woods," Betty helps Jughead set up the office for *The Red and Black*, the school paper at Southside High. **Above:** In "Tales From the Darkside," Jughead finds himself in a stressful situation while trying to make a delivery to the neighboring town of Greendale.

killer is shot dead by Sheriff Keller (Martin Cummins). "For that sequence, we got some really great shots with a drone from RVRD," Uegama explains. "We were out over a river, and because the drone went so high, we had to light up a huge area. There were old streetlights at the location, which is actually a former ferry terminal, and our rigging

team put small PARs in all of those to create pools of light that the actors run through. There were some practicals built into the railings along the bridge, and we gelled those Burnt Yellow and let that do a lot of the work on the ground. On the far side of the river, we placed two 18Ks side by side to shoot across the water and create edges. We

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Right: Archie and his vigilante group, the Red Circle, rumble with the Southside Serpents during a rainstorm in the episode "The Town That Dreaded Sundown." Below left: Jughead talks with Betty about their breakup while she preps a car for a street race. Below right: Cheryl Blossom (Madelaine Petsch) has a disturbing conversation with her mother about her family's involvement with the Sugarman, the town drug lord.



had [an Arri] M40 HMI up in a lift behind the trees that backlit the bridge from the other direction, and a diffused 18K in the same lift to push away from us, into the trees, to add depth. We also had a few 5Ks and LEDs to help shape the light in closer shots."

In Episode 8, "House of the Devil," one of Archie's adventures with Veronica (Camila Mendes) takes the couple to an abandoned farmhouse outside town to investigate an old murder. As they walk through the cabin, lighting their way with flash-

lights, Archie reads from the original police report, and action from the past mingles with action in the present. "The unusual structure of that scene made the camerawork and lighting challenging, and it involved a lot of choreography," says Uegama. "Often, the two time periods are shown in one shot. For example, Veronica and Archie creep along the porch, looking in through the windows, and the camera is inside, dolly-ing with them from window to window. All in the same shot, we then pass through a wall to the next window

and suddenly we're in the past, and the killer is walking up the front steps and through the door and shooting the woman inside.

"In the present, it's a dark, empty cabin, and the only lighting is the flashlights and moonlight — but in the past, the murder victim is watching TV in her living room with lights on," Uegama continues. "So, we had to separate the two worlds visually even though we see them in the same shot." In post, the time periods were further demarcated by desaturating the past to appear as

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Right: Cheryl stands ready to start the street race in the episode "Death Proof." Below: The crew captures the race, in which Archie and Jughead face off against the leader of the Ghoulies, the gang that is producing and distributing a drug known as "jingle jangle."



black-and-white.

"For moonlight in the present day, we used one of our custom lighting balloons [outside] the window; [the balloon was] augmented with gelled 1.8K HMIs aimed through specific windows," Uegama explains. "About a quarter-mile down the road, we had a 20K with Hi Sodium gel on a lift, kicking in toward the cabin. Inside the cabin, I really wanted it to feel dark, haunting and mysterious. We used a lot of practical flashlight bounce off Styrofoam and placed a variety of small LEDs — usually 1-by-1s and custom LED strips that were very dimmed-down to maintain low light levels — in the areas the characters were exploring."

"For scenes in the past, we used mostly smaller tungsten lights. I like to use a lot of Fresnels because I find they have the nicest qualities. I often use battery-powered 1-by-1 LEDs when up close and I need to pop a little light in there quickly, but I prefer Fresnels. We also placed some covered wagons in the corners. For moonlight, we just had a few HMIs, both direct and bounced, pushing through the windows."

Uegama shoots *Riverdale* with an Arri Alexa package, and he notes that the camera is especially well suited to the range of ages and skin tones present in the cast. "The Alexa comes out of the

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Right: Archie and Veronica stand on stage at the Whyte Wyrms to perform the song "Mad World" for FP Jones' retirement party in the episode "House of the Devil." Below left: Director Kevin Rodney Sullivan and Uegama on the Whyte Wyrms set. Below right: Uegama preps a shot with camera operator Steven Deneault (operating the Movi rig) and dolly grip Phoenix Black (far right).



box ready to go for skin," he observes. "We rarely use filtration on the lens because we use so much atmosphere."

The production uses an Alexa XT in studio mode and an Alexa Mini on a Freelly Systems Movi Pro stabilizer, the latter of which captures "at least 20 percent of every episode," says Uegama. "It's a rare day when the Movi doesn't come out, and some days we're on it all the time. I've relied on it instead of the Steadicam for about three years now. I've worked with fantastic Steadicam operators in the past, but I

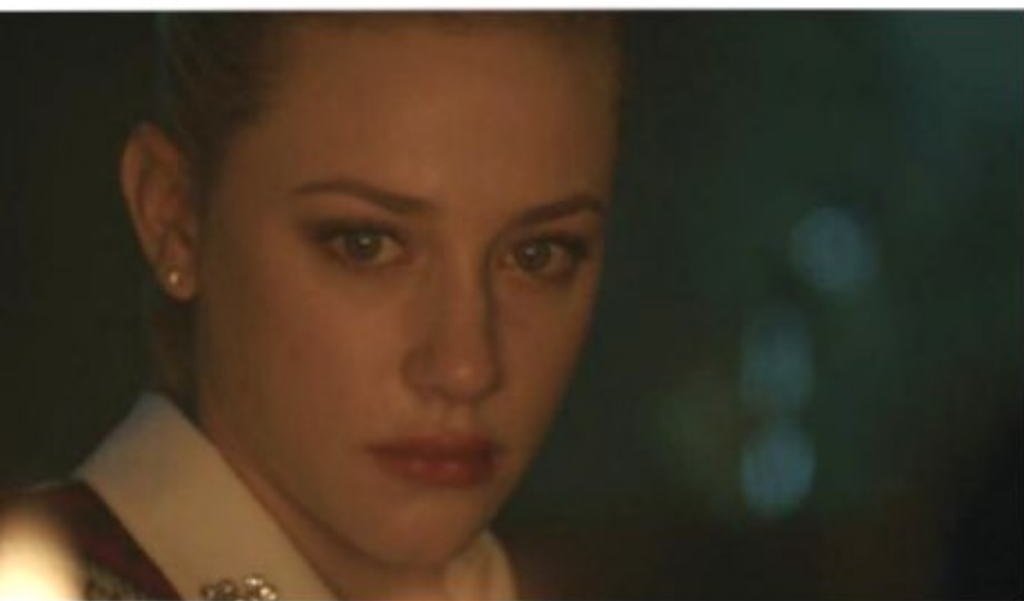
feel that what Steve Deneault does with the Movi is hard to beat. It's so much more open to spontaneous responses; you can be down on the ground and then up in the air very quickly, all in one shot, with a rock-solid horizon. And it never has a 'floaty' feeling."

Uegama shoots the majority of *Riverdale* with Leica Summilux-C prime lenses. (See sidebar, page 62.) "We don't carry zooms; we just rent them occasionally for specialty shots," he says. "We've used Angenieux zoom lenses, all ranges, maybe four or five

times this season."

For a surreal moment in Episode 13, "The Tell-Tale Heart," when Betty and her mother, Alice (Mädchen Amick), try to clean up a crime scene in their home, Uegama used Century Precision Optics' Clairmont Swing/Shift lenses. He explains, "The characters are frantically trying to scrub everything clean, and at one point Betty starts to scrub a bowl of red apples on the kitchen table because she's convinced there's blood on them. We used the Swing/Shift lenses to heighten

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Top: In the episode "Silent Night, Deadly Night," Betty struggles with the darkness she's discovered inside herself while searching for the Black Hood. Bottom: Betty is overwhelmed by stress in "The Tell-Tale Heart."

her reality, to play with focus and bring your eye to her and her mom in a way you wouldn't normally connect them. Because the Leica primes have such a beautiful, soft quality, as soon as you cut to the Swing/Shift lens, it's in its own world — it means something."

The murderer at hand is Betty's long-lost brother, Chic (Hart Denton), and Uegama says he particularly enjoyed lighting a key shot of that character shortly after he arrived in Riverdale. "We introduced Chic in Episode 10 ['The Blackboard Jungle'], and he's a little creepy. Betty is kind of

onto him and he knows that, so there's a bit of tension between them. That episode ends with Betty asleep in her room, and Chic walks in and just stares at her. The idea was to end the episode giving the audience the feeling that this character is creepy and potentially threatening. The first shot shows Betty sleeping, and then we cut to Chic standing by the door. We had our cyan moonlight coming through the windows for a nice, cold feeling, and behind Chic is this very warm tungsten light in the hallway.

"As he stands there, I kept him

almost completely silhouetted, with just enough light to register the expression on his face," Uegama notes. "When he walks into the room and leans in to look at her more closely, we created a little slit of cyan light for his eyes, just enough to make them the brightest part of the shot. We cut a thin slit in a show card, shined a light through it and tented it in, and then we worked with Hart to find that point where it would land on his eyes. When I watched the final edit, it almost gave me chills! Hart played the moment so well you could really feel the danger."

Riverdale's final color grade is performed at Encore Hollywood by colorist Shane Harris. Although Uegama has only been able to sit with Harris "a few times," the cinematographer says, "we have come up with a strategy that works for us. They send me a link for each episode, which I'll go through, using the timecode to reference specific shots and what I want adjusted. This has been a great solution thanks to our great post team.

"In general, I've always approached cinematography with the idea of 'natural' in mind," Uegama adds. "However, with *Riverdale* it felt right to introduce a color palette that is more striking and vibrant than I'd done in the past. The exaggerated colors and the shafts of light have become a character and support the show's overall visual approach."

Click here for a selection of lighting diagrams from the series.

TECHNICAL SPECS

1.78:1

Digital Capture

Arri Alexa XT, Alexa Mini

CW Sonderoptic Leica Summilux-C,
Angenieux, Century Precision Optics
Clairmont Swing/Shift