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THE BORGIAS

PAUL SAROSSY, BSC, CSC REVEALS PAPAL SCHEMES

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Vice at the Vatican

Neil Jordan and Paul Sarossy, BSC, CSC use digital capture to achieve Renaissance textures for Showtime's *The Borgias*.

By Mark Hope-Jones

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Sex, murder, bribery, simony and theft: not the usual pastimes of a pope, but Rodrigo Borgia, also known as Pope Alexander VI, was head of a family whose lust for power inspired Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. Emerging at the height of the Renaissance, the Borgias rose to become one of the most prominent and notorious families in Europe, with Rodrigo's occupancy of the papal office between 1492 and 1503 representing a high-water mark of Vatican corruption and greed.

Director/writer Neil Jordan spent a decade developing *The Borgias* as a feature film, but he eventually decided its scope and complexity would better suit a series format, so he struck a deal with DreamWorks Television. He then approached director of photography Paul Sarossy, BSC, CSC, whose work with director Atom Egoyan he greatly admired.

Sarossy earned an Emmy nomination for his work on the first season of *The Borgias*, which saw Rodrigo (Jeremy Irons) come to power and establish his iron rule, and the cinematographer has returned for the second season as well.

Jordan directed the first two episodes of both seasons, setting the tone for the rest of the narrative. "It was my job to provide a visual guideline for all the directors who would come afterwards by establishing a style with Paul and then leaving it in his hands to maintain through the whole thing," says Jordan. "The style basically demanded that directors commit to the dramatic dynamic of a shot and make that work, rather than gather loads of coverage."

Jordan's decisive approach suited Sarossy perfectly. "Neil's method was to shoot with prime lenses, as though he was shooting a movie — we'd set up a shot with the viewfinder, and that's what we'd shoot," says the cinematographer. "On TV projects, many directors love the idea of shooting with zoom lenses and adjusting the frame between takes. My ideal way of working is the way Neil does it, where we're constantly making very committed choices for the scene."

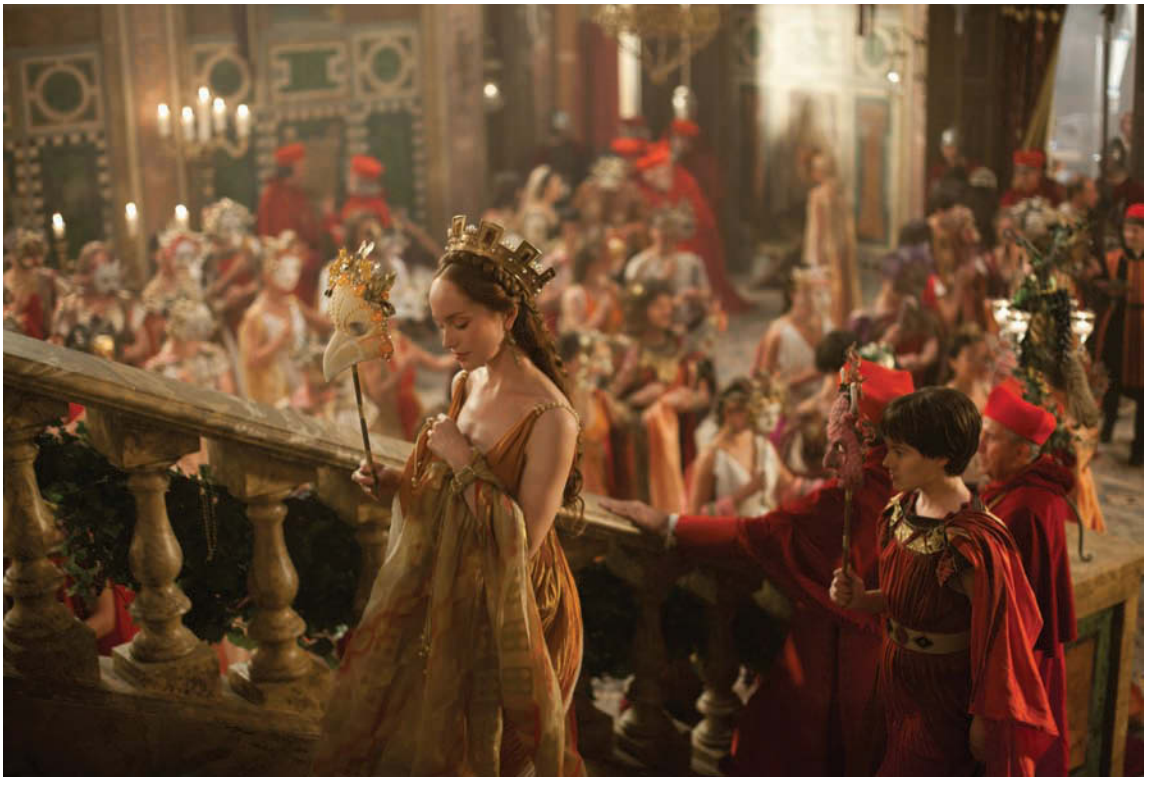
Opposite: Rodrigo Borgia (Jeremy Irons) ascends to the papacy and takes the name Pope Alexander VI in the series *The Borgias*. This page, top: Rodrigo sets aside his spiritual concerns to indulge his corporeal desires. Left: Director of photography Paul Sarossy, BSC, CSC.

Photos by Jonathan Hession, courtesy of Showtime.

Set during an era famed for extraordinary artistic achievements, *The Borgias* could not help but be influenced by Renaissance art. "We made as much reference as we could to the paintings of the period," says Jordan. "If you look at a lot of Renaissance compositions, you notice these serried arrangements of heads, generally of angels and saints, so I tried to stack compositions with just the heads and the cardinal's birettas when I was shooting things like the cardinals in conclave. In paintings of that time, you also often see people's feet; you see people in long shot rather than chopped off at the knees, so when we were photographing Rodrigo and various cardinals walking down those magnificent corridors, I made sure we could see their feet and their costumes trailing behind them."

Another aspect of incorporating

Vice at the Vatican



Right: Rodrigo's mistress, Giulia Farnese (Lotte Verbeek), tries to mask her emotions in the second season's first episode. Below: Cesare Borgia (François Arnaud, right) grows increasingly jealous of his older brother Juan (David Oakes), who enjoys his status as their father's favorite son.

Renaissance paintings and frescoes into the look of the show was recognizing the differences made by the passage of time. "There was a scene in a church that we tried to light entirely with candles," Sarossy recalls. "As we were shooting, it was getting progressively darker. I wondered if there was something wrong with the camera or generator, but it became clear that it was actually the smoke given off by the candles. It made me realize how much pollution must have been in the air at the time, and how our collective impression of Renaissance artwork is affected by the aging of those artworks. There are so many instances of paintings being restored and shocking people with how colorful and bright they originally were. So in terms of a look, we had to decide between colorful and bright or the grime of centuries. Ultimately, we tried to strike a happy balance between the two."

Smoke was an effective tool for achieving that balance: it was historically appropriate, it could be adjusted for each scene, and it helped obscure some details in the sets. Sarossy explains, "A lot of the Vatican apartments had frescoes, which we had to recreate with photo murals in the background. Neil was worried about whether they would work, so he was eager to use smoke in order to help mitigate the clarity of the [image]. As it turned out, they actually read quite well, but smoke became established as an ever-present factor. We used it to soften things and prevent too much examination of elements like the frescoes. You can control the amount of visibility and contrast by the degree to which you

backlight the smoke."

Much of the Vatican was rebuilt just after Rodrigo Borgia's death, most notably St. Peter's Basilica. To create the locations as they would have appeared during Borgia's reign, the production built sets at Korda Studios in Hungary. The budget precluded the construction of each individual location, however, so an innovative, modular solution was devised. Jonathan McKinstry, who served as supervising art director on the first season and assumed François Séguin's duties as production designer on the second, explains, "There were some sets that were fairly fixed because they were so distinctive, but for St. Peter's we designed the modules in such a way that they could become grand corridors, libraries or other spaces within the Vatican. We also had two other stages with modular sets where the rooms could be reconfigured, walls could be moved around, and decorations could be applied or removed to create different locations."

With sets continually being moved around, it was necessary to put most of the lights and cabling up on a lighting grid, with everything wired to a dimmer board. "The most important thing was flexibility in terms of lighting direction and intensity," says Hungarian gaffer Balázs Vákár. "Essentially, we put up enough lights to cover every type of shot so we could quickly change between them. Day by day, we'd check with the art department about which walls they intended to move, and then we'd make the necessary adjustments. We sent lighting diagrams to all the electricians, and when we needed to switch from one setup to another, I could speak to them over the walkie-talkie from the dimmer board and tell them which drawing to reference."

For Jordan, the modular sets had one significant downside. "The big problem with *The Borgias* is that you've got these absolutely magnificent sets, but there are very few ceilings because the lighting rigs have to be in place all the time," he says. "Even though I absolutely love the wealth of detail that we've accu-

Left: Sarossy confers with A-camera operator Mark Willis. Below: Willis and A-camera 1st AC Brad Larner frame up a shot with the Arri Alexa inside the Roman catacombs set.

Vice at the Vatican

Top: Sarossy holds court inside the set for the original St. Peter's Basilica, which was ringed with greenscreen to accommodate CG extensions. Middle: Director, writer and show creator Neil Jordan (right, in white shirt) works with Willis to set up a shot inside the set. Bottom: Floor units are bounced into silks to augment the ambience created by overhead space lights in the St. Peter's set. The modular set could be rearranged to create the Vatican library, war room, ledger room and more, "and the lighting had to be organized to consider all these different configurations," says Sarossy. Opposite page: A lighting plot for the set illustrates Sarossy's approach.

mulated in the sets and costumes, I do long for a ceiling, because a lot of the detail and beauty of Renaissance architecture was in the ceilings."

Though they are largely unseen, the fact that most of these ceilings would have been toweringly high played into Sarossy's hands, as it gave him greater scope to invent sources for the light coming from above. "We always had to remind ourselves that although our set ended at a certain point, the [ceiling] might actually be two or three times as high in reality," says the cinematographer. "The conundrum is always that you don't want to take more advantage of the absence of ceilings than would be natural, but the realities of the architecture meant we could use a lot of clerestory lighting. You might have a solid wall in the background, but it was reasonable, and very useful, to assume that a high window was letting light in."

Using simulated clerestory lighting necessitated a great deal of thought about the positioning of imaginary windows, though this was aided by Jordan's predilection for historical accuracy and extensive research. Sarossy notes, "We did a fair amount of study on the original architecture of Old St. Peter's Basilica, which helped a lot in terms of determining the direction of the light. For the interior, there was always a base lighting situation for day and for night, and most of those fixtures were hung from the grid. We had Molebeams coming through the side windows to produce a sun effect. Inside we had 10Ks preset to create various hits of sunshine and a big array of overhead spacelights reproducing the clerestory lighting."

In general, Sarossy worked with tungsten lighting wherever possible. "From a philosophical point of view, I try to work with tungsten lights because you can dim them and use them at different levels. But also, in the smaller situations, I find that tungsten lighting is far more articulate, with more choice in terms of small fixtures. I only go to HMI when there's an obligation to do

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Chem.disp./ Festékgyűjtő
Storage/ Raktár
Dimmer
Elefánt kapu /
24kW DINO- on Condor
T12 Fresnel
10kW Fresnel
2kW Blond
Space Light - 6k
Scaffold w. wheels - 10k
Condor -
12x12 Frame
20kW Fresnel or Maxibrut
- mini hrute (for greens/green)
- SKY PANS (BACKING)
STAGE 5

Vice at the Vatican

The production transformed Korda Studios' backlot into Rome and Vatican City exteriors.

so — when we're outside or on location."

Although most lighting was done from the grid, Sarossy took advantage of any opportunity to light from the floor. He notes, "Whenever we could afford to have lighting nearer to the situation, we'd have lights on the floor or on towers that could be moved around. We had a handful of different approaches depending on the scene or situation."

The smaller fixtures in Sarossy's lighting package allowed him to react swiftly to those situations. Vákár recalls, "Paul would come in and say he wanted a little floor bounce here or there, so we'd use a 300-watt or 650-watt fixture with white muslin that could be set up and then taken away very quickly."

The windows running down the side of the St. Peter's set were made up of small, opaque panes of glass in leaded frames. "It was fairly early days for glass technology at that time, so a lot of the windows would have been made of hand-blown glass," notes McKinstry. "We used real glass for a few close-ups, but we couldn't afford to do that throughout the set. Weight was also a factor, so we had them made out of resin or clear acetate."

These types of windows were prevalent in many of the sets, and they presented certain photographic challenges during the first season, which Sarossy shot with Sony's F35 digital camera. "Very often we couldn't use the windows as a source if they were in shot, because they would be too bright to look at," he recalls. "We'd have to dim them down, and the irony was that we were then adding another light somewhere off screen to [simulate] the window.

"But in season two, we've benefited greatly from using the Arri Alexa,"

Vice at the Vatican

Right: The pope visits a ravaged battlefield in the second season's fourth episode. Below: Steadicam/B-camera operator Marton Ragalyi guides the camera through the carnage.

he continues. "Its dynamic range is far closer to that of film, so we can have a window in shot that is actually lighting the characters. What started as a problem in terms of design and historical accuracy became something we could embrace."

"It was really interesting how the technology changed between the first and second seasons," adds Jordan. "With the Sony camera, it was almost like working with a film stock from 10 or 15 years ago, in that a lot of light was needed just to get a basic exposure for certain scenes. The Alexa is quite extraordinary; the sensitivity and tolerance of what I was seeing was just amazing."

Because of its recommended base sensitivity of EI 800, the Alexa has also made a significant difference in low-light situations. "When we had characters carrying lanterns through scenes in the first season, the lanterns had to be electrified," says Sarossy. "This year, we discovered through testing that a real candle provided enough light to not just be seen, but also to light the actor. It's really a watershed moment for cinematography. The increased sensitivity opens up all sorts of possibilities, particularly for a story whose palette is limited to flame-based sources and natural light. We found there were situations where we could shoot with a minimum of lighting intruding on the scene and the performances."

However, the camera's added sensitivity meant that more thought had to be given to achieving true blacks. "We have a story that involves clandestine conversations and secret plots, so what you don't see is as important as what you do see," says Sarossy. "We were almost obliged to find new ways of making people disappear in the dark because the Alexa sees so far into the shadows!

"You have to retrain your eye," he

Vice at the Vatican

Left: Sarossy extends his blessings over the production. Right, left to right: Willis, Ragalyi and Sarossy take a ride in the cart-mounted cage intended for Rodrigo's nemesis, Girolamo Savonarola.

continues. "Very often you'll think there can't possibly be enough light for an exposure, when in fact it's more than enough. So do you accept the light that's there, or find ways of improving it? It's the difference between illumination and lighting. With the increased sensitivity, lighting becomes like finding the sculpture in the stone: you're reducing rather than adding."

The cameras recorded ProRes 4:4:4files to SxS Pro cards, which were then dispatched to Colorfront, a digital lab in Budapest. Sarossy kept look-up tables to a minimum, combining in-camera color tweaking with tools such as 85 filters and polarizers. "Colorfront was absolutely amazing in terms of giving us immediate access to the images and the color work," says Sarossy. "They provide the cinematographer with an iPad that has been calibrated to the lab, so first thing in the morning I was seeing graded images from each setup the day before. I could even change the grade on the iPad and send it back to them, which allowed them to incorporate that new information."

Because of the tight schedule,

two cameras were often run simultaneously, and for action sequences still more were employed, sometimes capturing in different formats. "We had a wonderful sequence in season two where we re-created a Palio horserace on the back lot, and we generated a lot of different angles with the Alexas and Canon 5D and 7D DSLRs," says Sarossy. "One thing that was particularly surprising and wonderful was that the stuntman supervising the horse wrangling did a lot of rehearsals using a tiny Drift HD video camera. That camera is typically used for extreme sports, and we used it to get some great shots for the sequence. We put it on a boom pole, and while the horses are racing the camera is right in there among them, pretty much at belly level. Those are shots we couldn't have done any other way." The mix of formats also included 35mm film, which was used in an Arri 435 housed in a splash bag for a few underwater situations.

Postproduction for *The Borgias* was based in Toronto, where Sarossy worked with colorist Ross Cole at Technicolor. "I did as much in-camera as I could," notes the cinematographer. "We're now in an age where you can do all your flagging and netting in the DI suite, but I prefer to do it there and then [on set] and then just tweak the look [in post]." Cole had access to DVD copies of the offline edit, but he worked from the camera's original ProRes files for his grade. He notes, "Having previously finished all four seasons of *The Tudors*, I'd witnessed the cinematographer's challenge to use and/or emulate completely natural light sources for a period piece. For *The Borgias*, I strove to render a color balance that yielded the best look from Paul's remarkable photography."

Sarossy and Jordan agree that their firmly established style, the additional sets and the Alexa's performance have added scope and texture to the storytelling this season. "I think the second season is superior to the first in all respects," Sarossy maintains. "On one level, we were trying to maintain consistency with the look that had been established, but we were far subtler. We were able to exploit the successes of the first season and avoid the failings. Within that mix, the Alexa has allowed us to do so much more. We could revisit [certain aspects of the story], and the camera just brought them to life in a way that was quite wonderful and unexpected." ●

TECHNICAL SPECS

1.78:1

Digital Capture and 35mm

Arri Alexa, 435; Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 7D; Drift HD

Cooke S4, Angenieux Optimo

Kodak Vision3 500T 5219