



The Bletchley Circle

John Pardue on using ALEXA to create the mood for a crime drama set in 1950s London

Produced by World Productions for ITV in the UK, *The Bletchley Circle* is a three-part television series shot by cinematographer John Pardue using ARRI ALEXA cameras supplied by ARRI Media and a lighting package supplied by ARRI Lighting Rental.

When the team behind *The Bletchley Circle* met to discuss the look of a crime drama set in the early 1950s, they eschewed a bright, post-war, optimistic look for a more austere, repressed England.

"Andy De Emmony [director], Mike Gunn [production designer], Anna Robbins [costume designer] and I discussed at length how to make this period look work – the pre-1960s modernity was creeping into England, but our story was anchored in Bletchley and the war, and there was still rationing and a 'make do and mend' feel to everyday life," says Pardue. "The three elements of set design, costume design and lighting worked very well together – Mike and Anna used muted colors, which I complemented with a mix of practical lights and a very soft daylight through windows for interiors. I created a low-key mood with the lighting, an almost permanent 'end of day' feel. The mix of tungsten and daylight in the interiors also gave the film a distinctive style."

Despite the period setting, Pardue chose to shoot the drama on ALEXA. "Clearly we didn't want it to feel digital but the ALEXA has quite a filmic look for a digital camera," he says. "I've shot on film for many years and I still love that medium, but the ALEXA gives good latitude and handles mixed color very well, and it's simple to use. It's definitely my favorite digital camera, and it was really the obvious choice for this project."

Pardue also chose to use Cooke S4s, selecting them for their slightly lower contrast feel and ability to bring a cinematic quality to digital material. Pardue used nearly the full range of Cooke S4s, particularly favoring the 21 mm and 40 mm focal lengths, and used a black frost diffusion filter to add more softness to the image. He also used an Angenieux Optimo zoom lens.

Pardue's lighting choices were not dictated by the medium. "I lit the drama as I would have for 35 mm, I didn't need to make any concessions for shooting digitally," he says.

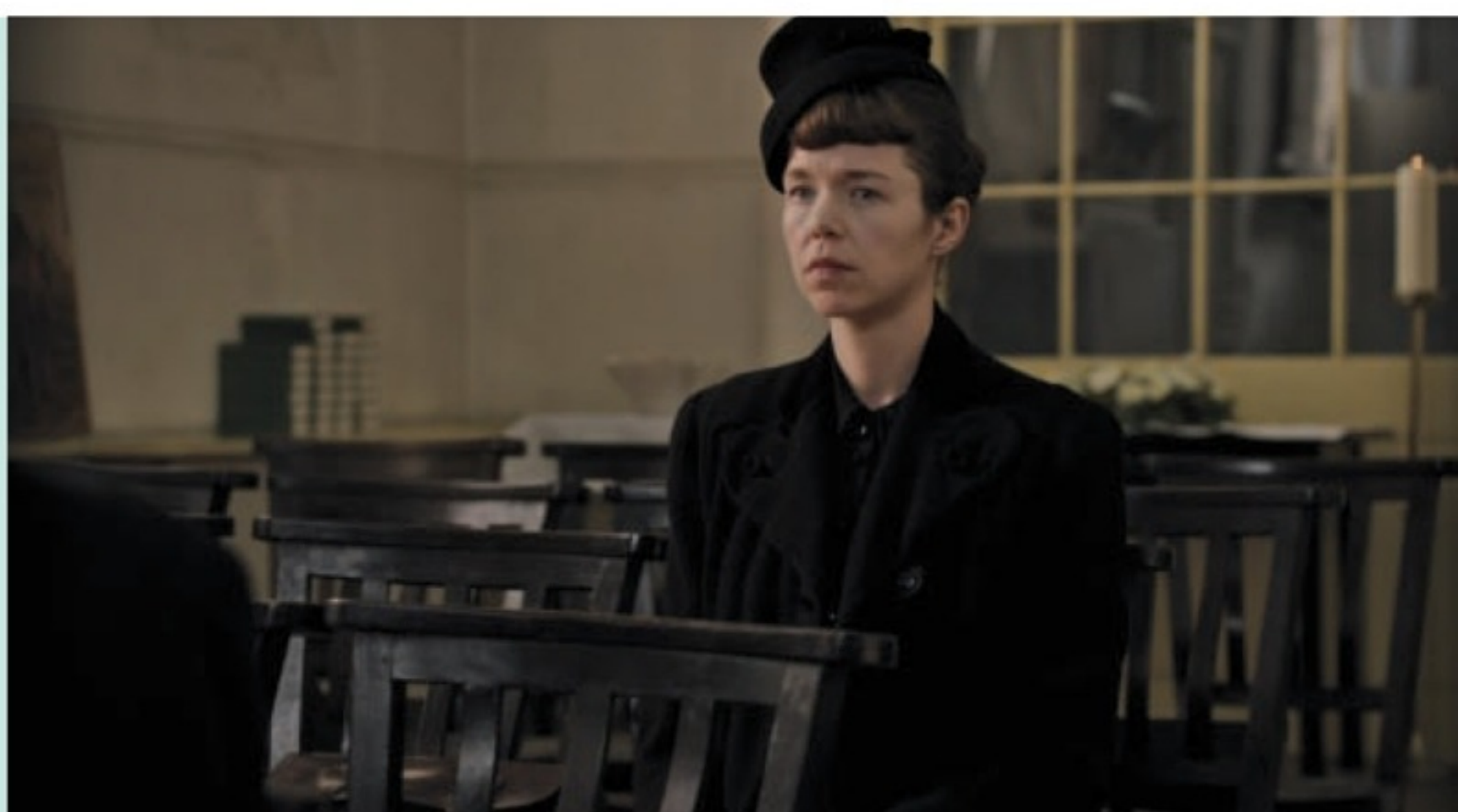
"The ALEXA beautifully reproduced the muted colors used in the design of the drama. I find that it responds like film to color temperatures; it looks very beautiful with a cold light on faces, but can also retain the detail of a darker night interior."

The Bletchley Circle is a crime drama, which sees ex-wartime code-breakers utilizing their skills to solve a murder. Several scenes take place at night or in dark houses, with a shadowy and chilling feel – in particular in the last episode as the main character, Susan [played by Anna Maxwell Martin], encounters the 'Anderson shelter murderer'. The director, Andy De Emmony, and Pardue felt it was important to visually switch from Susan's suburban domestic life to the dark world of a deranged serial killer.

"You have to be careful with darkness for TV as it can be 'mushy' – you need to have contrast within the darkness, and of course be able to show the audience enough of what is happening – it's often more 'the idea' of darkness," Pardue observes. "There was a sequence where Susan followed a trail of oil lamps; the ALEXA handled it very well, creating enough contrast in the shadows while the darker side of her face was defined and didn't fall off. In another scene where Susan enters a very dark flat with a tiny amount of light coming in through the windows, we could still see the glint in her eye. The ALEXA allowed us to capture Anna's nuanced performance and create the required tension – plus of course, shooting digitally meant there was no problem with graininess in the blacks."

Pardue chose to shoot to a LUT of Rec 709 throughout, which worked to retain the required look and meant minimal changes in the grade. Pardue explains his choice: "Very early on, we committed to doing as much on set as we could. We knew the kind of look we wanted and the Rec 709 LUT gave us a pretty good basic set up. It kept everything very simple, and by playing to the LUT set up for the ALEXA you play to the strength of the camera."

"We did alter the color temperatures quite a lot, for example if we were doing a night scene and wanted a moonlit feel, we found it in the color



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temperature rather than doing it in the grade later. We knew from the rushes that we had achieved the look we wanted in camera so, when we got to the grade, colorist Sonny Sheridan at The Farm did a fine job to build on what we had achieved by using Rec 709 as a basis for his grade."

The two TV Logic reference monitors on set were also set to the LUT, as were the monitors being used in the Avid edit suite in Dublin where assembly edits were created. Pardue used the monitors with the LUT applied as a reference for the lighting, and sometimes had DVD rushes for particular scenes, but more often De Emmony and Pardue reviewed the rough cuts on De Emmony's iPad on the morning car journey to the set. "I haven't had many opportunities in the past to have those discussions before you get to work, but it was a great way to get into that mindset, discuss what we had, make decisions and get on with the day," Pardue recalls.

Pardue did most of the operating himself, with an occasional 2nd unit for certain scenes covered by cameraman Mike Parker. "Andy is a very experienced director, he knew how he wanted to build the shot and shoot it, and he's generally a one-camera director," says Pardue. "In *The Bletchley Circle* there's

a lot of information to gather and puzzles to solve, which visually could have been rather boring, but we kept the camera moving with quick cuts to retain the tension and urgency. Then we would slow down for more emotional scenes."

Schedules were tight throughout the shoot, with limited time to capture several scenes on the Bluebell Railway and at St Pancras station. As Pardue explains, "We shot most of the drama in the train carriages handheld over two days – the ALEXA is well-balanced which made it easy to move around. We also had half a day to shoot a complicated scene at St Pancras avoiding the Eurostar and other modern furnishings to create a 1950s station full of steam trains and busy station life, seamlessly cutting back to cheated cutaways that we had shot at the Bluebell Railway."

The Bletchley Circle was a tough shoot with a tight schedule, and shooting 'period' in London comes with its own set of problems. However, the team were very pleased with what they achieved. "The ALEXA was a good choice for this project and we were all really pleased with the way it looked in the finished grade. It was an easy camera to manage digitally and comfortable to move around and operate." ■

Wendy Mattock