

Mikkel Bratt Silset: Teo (and inset)



Going underground

Making sure viewers are not literally left in the dark was one of the key challenges faced by the makers of Norwegian drama *Valkyrien*. The director of the Walter Presents series tells **Paul Whitelaw** how Cooke's /i lenses helped him overcome the problem

NORWEGIAN drama *Valkyrien* is coming to the UK this month as part of Channel 4's prolific foreign-language strand *Walter Presents*. Set in modern-day Oslo, this ambitious mini-series from Norway's national broadcaster NRK is billed as part medical drama, part thriller and part love story.

It follows a doctor (Sven Nordin) running an illegal clinic in a subterranean bomb shelter, where patients include criminals, emergency cases and people who won't seek medical help from conventional hospitals.

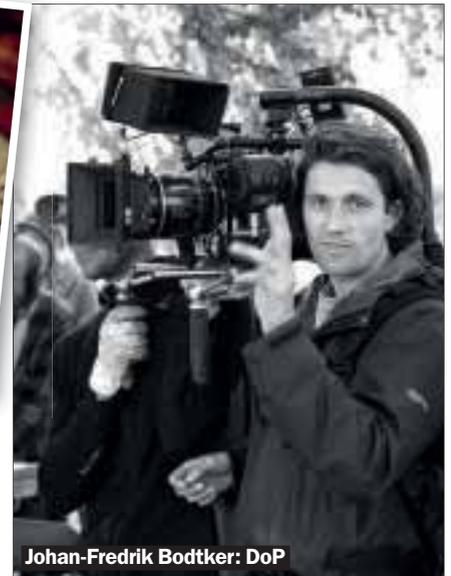
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ERIC RICHTER STRAND
DIRECTOR AND CO-CREATOR

Meanwhile, he must treat his dying wife in secret as he struggles to find a cure for her mystery illness.

The twin perils of shooting underground and on gloom-drenched sets were among the main challenges faced by director and series co-creator Erik Richter Strand and the crew. A fine balance between atmosphere and visual clarity was required to ensure that viewers were not literally left in the dark.

Alongside director of photography and fellow Norwegian Film School alumnus Johan-Fredrik Bodtker – who shot the first



Johan-Fredrik Bodtker: DoP



Sven Nordin: Ravn

exclusive Netflix series, *Lilyhammer* – Richter Strand overcame this problem by using Anamorphic/i and 5/i lenses from veteran British lens provider Cooke Optics, in tandem with two Arri Alexa cameras.

Valkyrien is one of the first television projects to benefit from the capture and use of /i lens metadata during production and post. This enables film and digital cameras to automatically record lens data while shooting, thus eliminating guesswork and providing a log of how a shot has been captured. It also streamlines the post-production process, as VFX decisions can be made on set.

“It certainly helps me because I can always see what lens we have on,” says Richter Strand, who shot 8 x 45-minute episodes over 110 days. “I can see the depth of field and focus. I can see all these things as they’re moving and changing in real time. The Cooke lenses have an old-fashioned feel, a kind of a crisp quality.”

He reveals that more than 60% of *Valkyrien* was shot handheld using the 75mm lens, with much of the remainder using Cooke’s 100mm macro lens.

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“The spherical lenses we used had an HD quality that we were not really fans of,” he says. “So we used anamorphic lenses in most of the underground scenes. They have that soft quality that gives it more of a cinematic feel. And they have a great depth of field and focus, especially the 75mm.”

Richter Strand’s two-person second unit crew captured most of the underground tunnel location footage using 40mm and 32mm lenses chosen by Bodtker, while the director was preoccupied with shooting the main clinic scenes on the studio floor.

Nevertheless, his pre-production visits to the tunnels directly influenced his overall approach to *Valkyrien*’s visual concept. “We

really liked the fact that even underground, in these wet, dirty locations, there’s vegetation,” he says. “There’s a lot of humidity and water dripping from the ceiling, so we came up with this whole elaborate idea of the underground as an organism.

“When we discovered that, it helped us to break things down into colour schemes, contrast schemes, lens choices, sound designs and lighting opportunities.”

When it came to bathing *Valkyrien* in an appropriately baleful light, Richter Strand opted for a semi-naturalistic approach.

“We needed to use a lot of practicals, because we didn’t want to just floodlight the set,” he says.

“It’s very specific. The lamps we put into the set are the lamps we used, with the actors acting around them, so we needed lenses that wouldn’t distort or give some sort of artificial effect. If you swiped the camera right [to the lights], it needed to be able to deal with the softness of the glass.”

Seamlessly blending the studio and location footage during post was another of Richter Strand’s concerns. “We needed to ►

make that transition smooth,” he says. “A lot of the visual effects we had were set extensions in one way or another, and we wanted to make the tunnels look like they bled into the studio set, rather than the other way around.”

Having never used /i lens metadata before, Richter Strand feels it gave him added confidence while shooting.

“It means you’re able to work and gauge your inner measure as you progress,” he says. “It took me a little bit of time to see how I could use it, but when you get really into it, you can have an intuition on lenses and the feeling you want to create.”

“In one episode, we have a lot of barrels and crates that have to be physically moved by the characters. We didn’t have as many as I wanted, so the visual effects team had to make extensions to duplicate them ad infinitum.

“That was planned out before we shot it, and it certainly helped that I could see the exposure levels and measure the distance between the things we were shooting.”

Andreas Herzog Grimso, camera manager at Norway’s largest supplier of film equipment, Storyline Studios, furnished Richter Strand and Bodtger with the Cooke lenses.

The facility also provided cameras, lights, audio and picture post-production and VFX services for *Valkyrien*. Grimso has been a keen /i user since the S4/i was first released in 2005.

“Using the lens data direct in [The Foundry compositing software] Nuke saves an awful lot of time,” he says. “The crew can work a lot more freely during the shoot, and it’s not always necessary for the effects supervisor to be present when they do certain shots. That’s why very early on we decided that we needed this data on all the effects shots.”

Grimso says that, since the Cooke 5 and anamorphic lenses use the same protocol, it was not difficult to exploit the metadata to their advantage. This proved especially useful when it came to the often costly and prolonged issue of VFX.

“At Storyline Studios, we have everything under the same roof,” he says. “We work very closely with the effects



Pål Sverre Hagen: Leif



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ANDREAS HERZOG GRIMSO
STORYLINE STUDIOS

department and we started talking with the effects supervisor about how we could do some sequences more efficiently and cheaply. These kinds of series are well-budgeted in production but not so much in post, so we need to find ways to cut corners.”

During post, certain key action scenes were completed using VFX matched to location footage. Grimso says: “There are

some specific shots in the tunnels, very close to trains, and most of them are digital trains. A lot of those action shots are handheld, so to have that data really helped the effects guys. It made their work a lot smoother and faster.”

However, even state-of-the-art digital technology is not immune to the unforgiving challenges posed by subterranean shooting conditions.

“The equipment usually played fine,” says Grimso.

“But we sometimes had problems with the wireless transmissions.

“These are mountain walls, so when the director is in the next room, no signal will go through.

But these guys could solve things on the spot, as you often have to do.”



Cooke: Anamorphic i/ lenses were used on Valkyrien