

Manhattan



A Q&A with Richard Rutkowski about the TV series *Manhattan*, soon to begin its 2nd season on WGN America

by Jim Hemphill

Unit photography courtesy of WGN America

The WGN America series *Manhattan*, which follows American scientists who are secretly at work on the atomic bomb in Los Alamos, N.M., in the 1940s, established itself as one of the most eye-catching dramas on television right out of the gate. John Lindley, ASC, won an ASC Award for the pilot, and Richard Rutkowski, who came aboard the production for the fifth episode and finished out the season, received an ASC Award nomination for the season finale, “Perestroika.”

Rutkowski has also distinguished himself as the principal director of photography on another period TV series, *The Americans*, and he came aboard *Manhattan* after getting a call from executive producer Thomas Schlamme, who had directed some episodes of FX’s espionage drama. (Schlamme has also directed episodes of *Manhattan*, including “Perestroika.”)

Last summer Rutkowski returned to New Mexico to begin prepping *Manhattan*'s second season, for which he is the principal director of photography. *AC* recently connected with him to discuss his work on the series.

***American Cinematographer*: When you joined *Manhattan* last year, how much of the look had been set and how much was still evolving?**

Richard Rutkowski: I would say that throughout the first season, the ground under our feet was a little unsteady in terms of what the nature of the show was: Is it a history show? Is it a science show? Is it a drama? We were always trying to determine the most appropriate form of storytelling for the material. But in general, I would describe the style of the show as classical, a little reserved. When I came in, the immediate challenge was that there were still scenes and sequences that needed to be shot for the preceding episodes, even the pilot. There were various reasons for this, including rewrites — the writers were often coming up with new ideas and new endings — and also set construction. Of course, a cinematographer coming into that situation wants to perfectly match the work that's already been done. John Lindley is a very good cinematographer, and the last thing I wanted to do was seem sophomoric by comparison! At the same time, the first thing one of the producers said to me was, 'Richard, we're gonna have to do this on schedule.' By the time I came on, they had spent a lot of time and money establishing this world, and they couldn't afford any more overages. So, I had to live up to what John had done and do it on a seven-day schedule. I have to say, I was very happy that both the pilot and the final episode of the season were recognized by the ASC, because I think that indicates we kept a consistent approach from stem to stern.

Is there a second unit that helps you stay on schedule?

Rutkowski: Yes, we have an extremely capable second unit led by our A-camera operator, Jeff Greeley. Often he has an entire tandem day to shoot with a complete crew. But in terms of keeping on schedule, the single most important element is the cast. I have an outstanding crew that I never have to wait on, and we never have to wait on the art department, either — everything is always dressed and ready to go. So, it's a matter of the actors

coming to the set ready and flexible, and they are every time.

In terms of crew, I have to say that it can be difficult for a cinematographer to come in and work with a crew that another cinematographer hired, but John picked an amazing camera team, plus the very talented Jim Tynes, our gaffer, and Pat Daily, our indispensable key grip.

What are some of your techniques for achieving a sense of scope and period on such a short schedule?

Rutkowski: Simplicity. The major source in this part of the world is what it was back in the 1940s: sunlight. The light in New Mexico skies is and always was magic, so that's your base level. Then we work in period tungsten. There's an understanding that everything will be lit practically at night, and practical light will look dimmer and cruder than it is today. We try to keep it very simple — single source, not a lot of edge light, not a lot of backlight — and we try to honor the environments as they were. Most of the period look is just dictated by what would have been there at the time. Tommy Schlamme had the entire campus built, dressed and rigged with practical lighting throughout, so in any situation and anywhere on that set, my dimmer board operator, Jake Cottrell, can pull out his iPad and adjust lights for me.

How many cameras do you typically use?

Rutkowski: Almost always two, and sometimes we'll have a third if the scene allows it.

What are you shooting with? Tell us about your camera package.

Rutkowski: We shoot on the [Arri] Alexa, and this year I've started using an Alexa Mini, too. It's half the size, a third the weight, and it can run up to 200 fps and capture in Arri Raw without requiring external hard drives. The Mini also has internal ND filtration, which can be a real advantage in the bright light of the New Mexico desert; it keeps the setup quick and means less weight for handheld and Steadicam work. I initially thought we'd use the Mini mostly for handheld, but more often we have it on the Steadicam or on a remote head. For lenses, we're using what we used last season: Zeiss Ultra Primes and four zoom lenses. The Zeiss [LWZ.2] 15.5-45mm [T2.6] is a real workhorse and good in matching the primes, and we also use an

Angenieux [Optimo] 45-120mm [T2.8], a Fujinon [Alura] 45-250mm [T2.6], and an older Cooke 18-100mm [T3], which I just adore because its slight imperfections and slight reduction in overall sharpness play beautifully in HD.

Are you shooting 2K?

Rutkowski: I am this season. We shot 1080p ProRes 4:4:4 last year, but the added resolution of 2K gives us a lot more flexibility to reframe or stabilize a shot [in post]. I think 2K is becoming a standard for television; it definitely gives you a much better master for all the deliverables. Also, the lower end of the curve is extended in 2K; I see more detail down in the darkest parts of the frame. Our wonderful colorist, Pankaj Bajpai [of Encore Hollywood], was instrumental in helping us create the look of the show from the beginning, and he is a key partner in our efforts to maintain a very specific palette.

You said simplicity is the key to your lighting strategy. Is that true for camera moves as well?

Rutkowski: Yes, I always try to keep things simple, not only because I think it looks best, but also because simple is usually faster. Our camera moves are dictated by the actor's movements. I want the move to feel as natural as a human eye looking around. I don't like shots that are camera conscious.

How much prep do you have on a typical episode, and how do you approach that process with a new director?

Rutkowski: Because I'm the principal cinematographer, I'm not able to prep with the director full time. Our prep together usually involves a weekend lunch or dinner. We look at the script, and if it introduces a new character or situation I focus on that immediately, because I want to figure out how we're going to treat that and integrate it into the world we've established. I talk to the director about the style of the show and explain in practical terms what has to be accomplished on our seven-day schedule. By the end of those conversations, the director and I usually find a common position from which to work. Ultimately, you can talk and talk about how things should go, but the moment it all comes together is on the first day —

really the first scene, when I see the director and actors together and how they relate. I quickly get a sense of how a director likes to work, and then my job is to give that director what he or she needs to get the day's work done.

Can you describe how you're approaching some of this season's new characters?

Rutkowski: We've got a few new characters, notably Col. Emmett Darrow [William Petersen] and Nora [Mamie Gummer], a member of the Women's Army Corps and a love interest. Darrow needs to look commanding and fearsome; he's a zealous believer in 'the American way.' We emphasize his stature with low angles, and we found that more contrasty half-light brings a fierce aspect to Bill's face, which can look friendly in other kinds of light. And with Mamie, who has a pale, refined look, we add the occasional touch of beauty light, but because her character is concealing dark ambitions, we sometimes give her a more dramatic backlight to emphasize that side of her.

What are some of the other things viewers can look forward to this season?

Rutkowski: The principal change in this season's action is that the atomic bomb comes to fruition, and in doing so becomes a tangible character. The story integrates this historic development with the continuing drama that's unfolding among the main characters. There are some dramatic situations involving a spy among the group that come to a head. From a photography standpoint, our main focus has become trying to convey the thoughts swirling in these complex, brilliant minds. In the writing, the thing unsaid is often the true focus of a scene.

Let's talk briefly about your ASC-nominated episode, 'Perestroika.' What was it about that episode that allowed you to do your best work?

Rutkowski: To be honest with you, I was exhausted by that point in the show! But I think 'Perestroika' does a great job of examining how something that started in very crude circumstances on a hill outside Santa Fe became an enormous national-security apparatus, the tendrils of which are still with us today — they're probably listening to us right now! [*Laughs.*] It's like a genesis story for the NSA, the CIA, and a government that thinks it's a good

idea to keep all these secrets. ‘Perestroika’ puts all that in perspective. In addition to the great writing, I also liked that in directing the episode, Tommy [Schlamme] wanted to do a lot of scenes in one shot, which isn’t done very often in television. Because of that choice, the episode has a very strong point of view, and that allowed me to light and stage some very poetic shots.

You know, we’re all out here in the desert, away from our families, and there’s a certain amount of mystery surrounding what we’re doing — WGN is a fledgling network, and *Manhattan* is a show that not everyone knows yet. But everyone is working very hard to make the best show we possibly can. So to a degree, the production mirrors the experience of the show’s characters. I think that connection between the story we’re telling and the life we’re living comes across on the screen.

The new season will premiere on Oct. 13.