



# "Everything Was Heightened" for *I Love Boosters*

Natasha Braier, ASC, ADF brings passion and panache to director Boots Riley's color-saturated critique of the global fashion industry.

By Joe Fordham

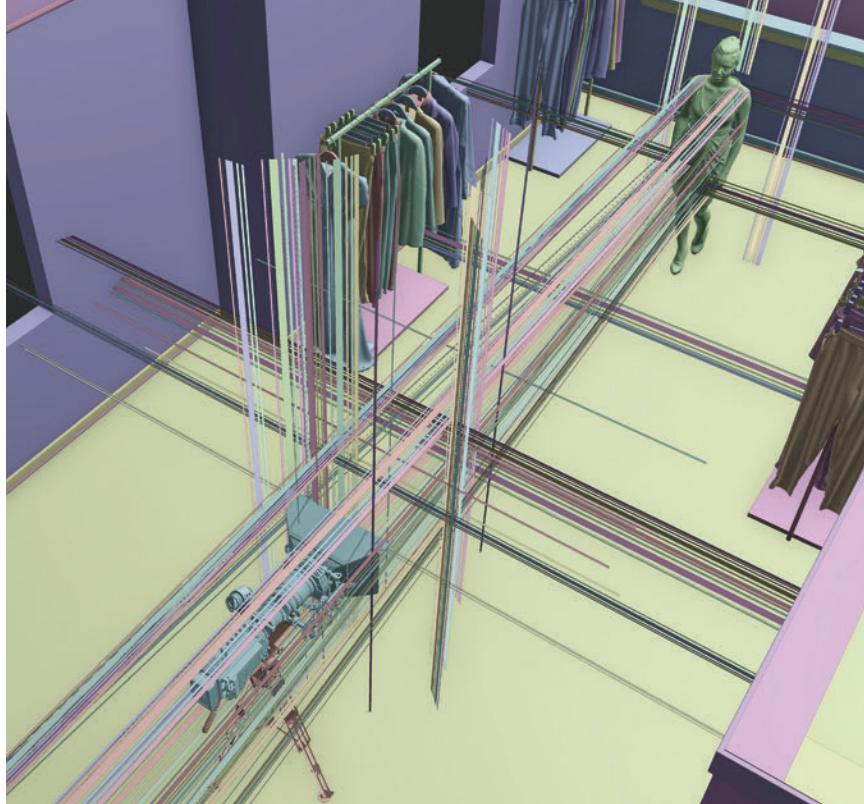
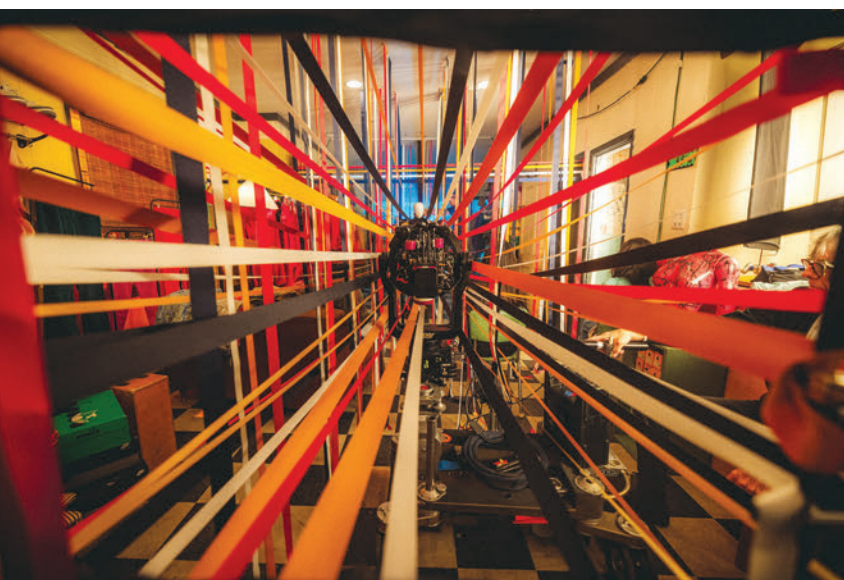




**B**oots Riley's 2018 directorial debut, *Sorry to Bother You*, blurred the lines between reality, music, politics and fantasy. His next production, the Prime Video limited series *I'm a Virgo* (AC Feb. '23), continued the trend, delivering a polemic about the Black American experience and capitalism with a tender heart and an eye to the absurd. Both projects caught the eye of cinematographer Natasha Braier, ASC, ADF, who was carving her own niche in visually eclectic dramas, including *The Neon Demon* (AC July '16), *Gloria*

Opposite, top: Corvette (Keke Palmer) is the leader of the Velvet Gang, a group of shoplifters, or "boosters." Opposite, bottom: The crew captures a scene featuring the gang wielding a "situational accelerator" to help topple a fashion empire. This page, top: Cinematographer Natasha Braier, ASC, ADF and director Boots Riley. Below: Riley eyes a frame for a scene set in Corvette's hideaway, an abandoned fried-chicken restaurant.





Top: A still featuring Corvette experiencing the effects of the accelerator device. Middle and above: The setup for the scene. Top right: A previs image for the scene provided by production designer Christopher Glass.

*Bell and Honey Boy* (AC Dec. '19; March '20). “Boots had called me for his previous films, but the stars did not align,” Braier recalls. “I thought he’d never call me a third time. Luckily, he did, and I dropped everything.”

The result of their collaboration, *I Love Boosters*, springs from a song of the same name by the Coup, Riley’s hip-hop band, about the Robin Hood-style phenomenon of “boosting” — i.e., stealing — haute couture and selling it at a deep discount to those who couldn’t normally afford brand-name finery. The film focuses on the Velvet Gang, a group of boosters comprising aspiring couturière Corvette (Keke Palmer) and her

friends Sade (Naomi Ackie) and Mariah (Taylour Paige), who join forces with a new shoplifter on the scene, Jianhu (Poppy Liu), who wields a futuristic technology. Together they work to bring down megalomaniac fashion designer Christie Smith (Demi Moore). Filled with DayGlo landscapes, science-fiction gizmos, a demon and an undertow of horror, the project solidified Braier and Riley as kindred spirits.

“My career has always been about choosing projects that excite me,” the cinematographer says. “I gravitate toward scripts I feel have something important to contribute to humanity and directors that have a strong point of view. I feel lucky to make a living with this art, but I also feel it’s a responsibility — we should be like Doctors Without Borders in our mission as storytellers. Ever since my first short films, I’ve tried to be in alignment with the stories I choose to tell, and those aren’t easy to find. When I read *Boots*’ script, everything made so much sense. I knew that I had to be part of telling this story.”

On his collaboration with Braier, Riley attests, “Usually, there’s somebody that needs to be holding me back, and I think usually there’s somebody that needs to be holding Natasha back. This one went to another place.”

### Baroque to the Max

Production designer Christopher Glass was prepping in Atlanta when Braier joined him and Riley at OFS Film, a studio built on the site of a former fiber-optics factory. The facility offered stage spaces for set builds and industrial-style service corridors, some of which the filmmakers employed as locations.

To guide the team, Riley provided storyboards for action sequences and a jamboree of multimedia inspirations. “The vision for this crazy visual feast came from *Boots*’ direction,” Braier says. “He pulled from art, music, painting and photography to guide colors and textures that were a Baroque maximalist exaggeration of our crazy capitalist society. Everything was heightened.”

Storyboards suggested a comic-book sensibility. “*Boots*’ drawings were rough but very clear on the language he wanted for camera, editing and music,” Braier continues. “Chris Glass interpreted from those

departure points — I like to call them that, not ‘references’ — and took them further to build a world. When I arrived, Chris was in the middle of sketching and drafting sets, and I joined in with discussions about texture, light and color — how much color was going to be from the sets, and how much I would add with lighting.”

In the film, lighting occasionally transforms drab urban locations with explosions of primary colors. An example is a convenience store that gaffer Josh Stern and his team rigged with two ruby-red Arri Sky-Panel S360-Cs to emulate the aggressive glow of the market’s rooftop signage at night. Other sets conjured mood with more muted colors, such as Corvette’s hideaway — a derelict fried-chicken restaurant where she lives with her accomplices — whose straw-toned illumination seeped in through the papered-over windows.

“Boots loves color,” Braier says. “It was very important for the movie to be a visual, cinematic feast, but also an emotional experience. He’s a political activist who communicated his ideas first as a young, revolutionary rapper, and now through his movies. But he’s aware that audiences are oversaturated with political discourse, and he believes emotion is what allows those ideas to actually land. So, it was extremely important that my cinematography was always grounded in that.”

Regarding the influence his musical background has had on his filmmaking, Riley observes, “The rhythm that I feel, which is necessary in a musical performance to keep people in the [groove], I’m using the same way when we need a camera to push in, or to set up a rhythm between deep-focus and flatter [long-lens] shots ... [I] use those same artistic impulses. Music is always a big part of it.”

### “Colors That Explode Your Mind”

Newest Velvet Gang member Jianhu’s secret weapon is a “situational accelerator,” a fantastical device — which she nicked from her workplace in China — with the ability to boost apparel at superhuman speed and perform a number of other colorfully explosive functions. The film’s imagery relied heavily on costume designer Shirley Kurata’s creations, which included outlandish street fashions that become enhanced when the accelerator malfunctions.

“Boots wanted this to be a roller-coaster of crazy colors that explode your mind,” notes Braier. “But by the end, he wanted viewers to feel a little bit more conscious about the world. My job with the lighting was to elevate what Chris Glass was building. Sometimes I would add to the super-extreme visual feast, like *Neon Demon* on steroids. But other times, the set was so over-the-top that I grounded it a little to connect with the characters. It was like playing jazz.”

On his use of color, Riley notes, “I’m looking for visceral reactions similar to what I would get from music. I’m going for something that gets your heart pumping.” He adds that his color choices were instinctive: “I just want to be in touch with how I feel about [color]. Not like, ‘I read this thing where they said, ‘red symbolizes *blah blah blah*.’ Because then you’re in your head and you’re wondering why other people aren’t feeling that same way because they didn’t read that same thing ... I don’t pretend how to articulate that color theory, but I knew what it made me feel.”

The Chinese garment factory was one of the production’s largest sets, filled with vats of colored dyes, sheets of fabric and clouds of powdery vapor. Braier compares it to the titular location in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. “I went with a fluorescent-lighting look, with Astera Titan Tubes, [like] you would see in a real factory, giving the lights a cyan cast, inking all the colors with a little contamination of green.”



### Expressionistic Optics

Braier selected the Arri Alexa 35 for the feature and considered using her preferred vintage glass. “I wanted to shoot anamorphic because I feel that helps to make images more filmic. My favorite lenses are the [JDC Cooke] Xtal Xpres designed by Joe Dunton, my mentor since my time at the National Film and Television School in England, and who sadly passed away a couple of months ago. Those lenses are so beautiful; every time I start an anamorphic project, I test every new anamorphic lens against the Xtals, and I’ve never found anything as beautiful.

“They have a special way of refracting the light and making skin look like porcelain,” she continues. “They also have astigmatism that makes everything 5-percent thinner. It’s a unique look, but you have to shoot them at T4 because they don’t define much. They don’t have very close focus, and for this movie I knew Boots wanted to shoot wide and close to the actors. Plus, we had a lot of dark interiors and night scenes where I needed to shoot very fast — less than T4. That meant I couldn’t use the Xtals.”

She turned to ASC associate member Dan Sasaki of Panavision. “I asked Dan to create some lenses that were as beautiful as the Xtals, to give me those skin tones while enabling me to shoot wide open and with very close focus.”

While at Panavision’s Woodland Hills headquarters, she noted wall hangings that displayed large-format monochrome prints of Golden

Above: Capturing a scene set inside a Chinese garment factory.  
Below: Riley and crew prep a scene illuminated by two red-dialed Arri SkyPanel S360-Cs, which enhanced the store’s rooftop signage.





From top: Head of makeup/makeup designer Jeremy Dell applies touch-ups to Palmer before A-camera dolly grip James H. Pair III (left) and B-cam dolly grip Tony Gandolfi execute an enhanced version of a classic dolly-zoom move.

Era Hollywood film stars, mostly created from photographs by George Hurrell. “I told Dan I wanted that look for my young actresses. That felt so romantic, nostalgic and timeless. Our movie, of course, is very modern, but it also has a surreal/sci-fi feel. I wanted to create a romantic look for the actors’ faces that would also allow close focus. And I wanted imperfections that felt like movies from Eastern Europe and the Middle East that were shot on film and processed in labs that were ‘cooking’ the negative — overdeveloped, grainy, dirty — like Emir Kusturica’s *Black Cat*, *White Cat* or Sergei Parajanov’s *The Color of Pomegranates*. We wanted that texture, which is very hard to do on digital.”

Sasaki built a set of lenses, starting with elements of 1950s Panavision B Series anamorphics combined with carefully selected elements to create custom softening effects. “We were playing with astigmatism to create more distortion on the edges,” says Braier. “That allowed me to capture clean images while using refractions to soften faces and flares.” Sasaki defined the astigmatism to affect specific regions of the image, which allowed Braier to compose shots with selective areas of focus. “For the 75mm focal length, which I like to use for medium close-ups, we created two different lenses, one designed to defocus the right side of frame and the other the left.”

### The Lithium Chorizo

Sasaki also assisted with the evolution of a lens-tinting device Braier has been developing since *Neon Demon*: the Chorizo. The small LED box contains six channels of dimmable RGB, daylight, tungsten and amber lights that, when affixed above a matte box, subtly illuminate the front element of a lens and influence its color. “The Chorizo is a little bit like the Arri Varicon [filter flasher], but it can fog shadows and contaminate the image, especially in the blacks,” Braier explains. To complement the Chorizo, Sasaki inserted a lithium-niobate filter — essentially an additional OLPF optical low-pass filter — as a rear attachment for the lenses. “We called it the Lithium Chorizo. It created [a softening of detail] that made skin tones appear more blended, like in the old-school photographs by Hurrell, although some strong highlights glowed with a 1980s feel.” Braier reports that she used the Chorizo “all the time. I only took [the lithium-niobate filter] out when we had very strong highlights and it created too much glow.”

The cinematographer also enlisted Sasaki to help achieve an in-camera effect that expresses Corvette’s infatuation with an otherworldly stranger (LaKeith Stanfield) who aspires to be her lover. Riley described Corvette’s point of view as a direct-to-camera perspective that appears to pulse like a heartbeat. To help achieve the effect, Sasaki made a “Love Lens”: a 50mm lens with a decoupled anamorphot attached to additional mechanics that could be rotated or canted in place, via a lever, to create distortion in the image.

First AC Matthew Horn used the lever to mechanically create the heartbeat “like a DJ,” Braier says. “In sync with the beginning of the pulse and with the iris closing, we turned up an eyelight that was mounted on the lens, dialed to whatever color I chose, while my DIT, Jonathan Carbonaro, closed the iris.” With this simultaneous lighting and iris shift, she explains, “LaKeith’s face would remain in good exposure, though with a different quality of light, as his background darkened. The

Click to watch a video of the enhanced dolly-zoom pictured here in action.



idea is that Keke's character is so taken by this stranger that the rest of the world disappears."

The search for an automated way to synchronize the exposure change was in vain, as Braier notes that she "needed 3 stops' difference, so it all had to be done manually, and it had to be at least 80-percent perfect. When Boots got LaKeith in front of the camera, we saw this was a very emotional moment for his character — he was crying in every shot, so that made it extra challenging. We had to be in sync and get it right on every take, because LaKeith was so amazing."

### Looney Tunes Velocity

The camera department also created speed-change effects — via in-camera speed and shutter-angle adjustments — in scenes requiring Corvette and her gang to zoom around on clothing heists with *Looney Tunes*-style velocity.

In another example of speedy imagery, moments of characters experiencing epiphanies feature an adrenalized version of the dolly/zoom effect pioneered by Alfred Hitchcock and 2nd-unit cinematographer Irmin Roberts, ASC for *Vertigo*. In addition to pushing in on a frightened character while counteracting the move with a zoom-out, key grip John Day created a setup that turbocharged the optical distortion and environmental displacement by physically propelling the actor through the set.

The rig used a camera on a motorized slider, which was in turn mounted on a dolly. "It was not a standard dolly," says Braier. "We created a big platform with wheels. That platform held the dolly with a slider and also held the actor, who was rigged to sit in front of the slider. We laid out about 60 feet of track. The platform sat on top of that, and Keke sat in position. On 'action,' we triggered the slider to simultaneously push in and zoom out on Keke, and at the same time we manually pushed the platform forward to travel her through the set."

Disorientation abounds in Christie's fashion-design headquarters, housed within a high-rise building built on an alarming slant — an enigmatic yet apt piece of set design for the film's surrealistic world. Glass designed the set — into which the camera reached in on a 50' Technocrane fitted with a Matrix remote head and a riser at the base — as a brightly colored executive office constructed at a sloping angle, so the floor was essentially a ramp, which made for challenging blocking. "Chris made many drawings and previsualizations for Christie's office," Braier recalls. "Should it be 30 degrees or 20 degrees? We had to take into account cost and safety, so we thought we'd compromise at



Top: Corvette contends with fashion designer Christie Smith's sloped office space. Middle, from left: Riley, stunt rigging coordinator Shawn Kautz, Palmer, stunt coordinator Chelsea Bruland and special-effects coordinator Matt Dengel prep for the scene, as Pair (in foreground) observes. Bottom: A look at the set build and the telescoping crane that allowed the camera to reach in.



Top: Braier and Riley plan their next steps for a sequence set at Christie's fashion show. Above: One of Braier's "notebook" pages, this one featuring plans for a scene in which Corvette is pursued by a skinless villain.

15 degrees — which Chris decided to incline more, to 17 degrees, with a forklift after it was built. When he constructed the set, it was crazy! We were all getting dizzy. Actors were harnessed, and Demi wore sneakers so she could walk without slipping. Nobody could wear high heels!

"I think [this set represents] how ultra-rich billionaires spend insane money on useless stuff — but it's all based on reality, just exaggerated. The building is inspired by the luxury Millennium Tower in San Francisco that was built wrong, and it leans. There are also buildings in New York City's Billionaire's Row that have all kinds of problems, including swaying too much in the wind."

Braier adds that a full *Looney Tunes* homage comes into play when Corvette tries to flee the slanted office, and her legs spin like the animated Road Runner's — an effect achieved with mannequin legs rigged to a wheel that was shot at different speeds and shutter angles.

## Stop-Motion and Miniatures

The film takes a Kafkaesque turn when Corvette encounters a squad of skinless people who have it in for her gang. To create skinless humans, Riley turned to stop-motion animation courtesy of Mystery Meat Media. Making use of storyboards and a red-suited stand-in, animation supervisor Ri Crawford worked with on-set visual-effects supervisor Nathan McGuinness and the filmmakers to plan the stop-motion action of each skinless character that would play against background plates. "We had shot the plates on set with a stand-in and then empty," Braier explains. "The storyboards informed the animation team exactly what each skinless human was saying in each shot." Mystery Meat then animated skinless people as stop-motion puppets. "Ri's team had worked on *Boots*' previous films," Braier notes. "We shot reference with the red-suited performer, and they took all the data they needed. We gave them references and the scale of the person in frame. They did an amazing job of replicating our lighting."

The third act escalates into a nocturnal street chase in San Francisco, with skinless pursuers and police cars careening after a truck containing the Velvet Gang. The way the sequence was envisioned, it seemed far beyond the financial scope of the production until Riley pivoted to another favorite medium, opting to expand the breadth of miniature work in the film beyond what he had originally planned. As the director had already decided to enlist the services of miniature supervisor and director of miniature photography Christopher Warren for a chase scene inside a mall, pursuing this strategy made sense. "During prep, we figured we wouldn't have two weeks to shoot this exterior chase sequence," says Braier. "Boots suggested creating it as a miniature as well, so we scheduled this miniature shoot after principal photography. We made a very precise storyboard, shot by shot, of what we needed, and we had a lot of meetings with Chris Warren, who built the sets and shot the miniature footage. Chris already had a street with the right style, but it was flat, so he went to San Francisco and photographed references, and inclined his street 20 degrees. He also made seven new buildings to complete the street for us, but the fact that he'd had the street on hand made it affordable. I couldn't attend the shoot because that took months — though I was there for the first couple of days — so I showed Chris my footage of the night exteriors before and after that sequence, and he made his miniatures match."

## Virtual Miniature Realms

To integrate Corvette and her accomplices into the chase, the production scheduled a virtual-production shoot at Fuse Technical Group in Los

**Tech Specs:** Aspect Ratio | 2.39:1  
 Camera | Arri Alexa 35  
 Lenses | Custom Panavision anamorphic prime

**Top:** Modelmaker Gene Warren III makes an adjustment to a San Francisco-street set built by miniature supervisor and director of miniature photography Christopher Warren and his crew. **Middle:** Steadicam operator Matthew Pearce, Riley and Braier plan a shot in an LED volume that will combine plates shot on the miniature set with live action. **Bottom:** Palmer and Naomi Ackie perform in front of the LED wall for a scene featuring Corvette and Sade attempting to outrun a gigantic ball of overdue bills rolling down the San Francisco street.

Angeles. Fuse producer Joseph White supervised a team that enabled Riley and Braier to capture principal performers against playback on an LED wall of the miniature settings and action. Braier notes, “For all the shots of the girls driving their truck at night, we shot in the volume using the miniatures as backgrounds. We used image-based lighting with Creamsource Vortex8s and Astera Titan Tubes, which were programmed with pixel-mapping of the plate [via Assimilate Live FX and Iris camera tracking]. I added other lights, but the pixel-mapped fixtures gave us interactive lighting on the actors with the correct color from the light and motion of the miniatures that appeared on the LED wall.”

To help integrate emissive and live-action lighting, Braier flared shots with live light sources, including light bars that simulated off-camera police vehicles. “We used those to flare the lens, so it flares across the girls in the car and across the [volume-generated] background at the same time. That contamination really helped to blend everything together and distract the eye. It was so fun to put people inside a miniature in virtual production. It was like the oldest film technique meets the newest!”

During the shooting of these final elements captured after principal photography, Craig Kief, ASC served as 2nd-unit cinematographer.

### Artistic Intent

“If what I am doing seems magical realist or absurdist, all I’m doing is heightening the contradiction,” Riley says. “I am hoping to create a visceral feeling that’s analogous to emotions that the characters are feeling.”

Braier’s collaboration with the director to help achieve this vision required a delicate touch. “The trick was to give the acrobatics of the cinematography meaning,” she says. “It’s easy to make flashy images, but here, that flashiness had to have meaning, and it had to always be tied to the right emotions and the right ideas. At the end of the day, the film is a Trojan horse for a very important message of unity and transformation that I feel we all need now. This is not a film about stealing clothes. That’s an excuse to get you on the journey.” 

*Read the full interview with I Love Boosters director Boots Riley here:*

