



King Tutankhamun (Avan Jogia, right) struggles to lead Egypt to glory while his closest advisors, friends and lovers scheme for their own nefarious interests in the miniseries *Tut*.

Re-Creating the Boy King's Reign

By Phil Rhodes

"My father was a carpenter, and my mother worked as a stenographer," reflects cinematographer Chris LaVasseur. "When I told them I wanted to go into the film business, my father said, 'You'll be a carpenter.' Nobody believed it." LaVasseur pauses for a moment, and then adds, "My second job, as a second AC, was on *Malcolm X*." From such auspicious beginnings, LaVasseur was well-placed to begin a career that has led most recently to *Tut*, a three-part, six-hour miniseries for the television network Spike that tells the story of King Tutankhamun (Avan Jogia), the Egyptian pharaoh who ruled circa 1330 B.C.

Having chosen to overlook his parents' cautious career advice, LaVasseur studied film production at Brooklyn College. "I worked at Camera Service Center in New York for about a year, scrubbing out cases. While I was there, I got into the union." On leaving CSC, LaVasseur's first job was as a loader on *Single White Female* under director of photography Luciano Tovoli, ASC, AIC, after which he quickly moved on to *Malcolm X* with Ernest Dickerson, ASC, and up the ladder of the camera department.

LaVasseur first met *Tut* director David Von Ancken on the series *The Following*, on

which LaVasseur shot pickups on the ninth day of ostensibly eight-day episodes. "We kind of clicked," LaVasseur recalls. "I'm a high-energy guy, and we picked up very quickly. Then I did the TV show *Hostages*, and again he came on to direct, and we shot a really good episode ['Sister's Keeper']."

Eventually, LaVasseur discovered *Tut* via his agent. "I texted David that I knew he was doing *Tut* and that I'd love to do it." After becoming aware of LaVasseur's interest, Von Ancken "pushed for me real hard," LaVasseur continues. "If it wasn't for David, I wouldn't have been on *Tut*. When he called and told me, I was like, 'Wow, this is our *Lawrence of Arabia*.'"

Given such lofty ambitions and the high demands of modern television production, *Tut*'s shooting schedule could generously be described as modest. To emphasize, LaVasseur points to Ridley Scott's historical epic *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (AC Jan. '15). Photographed by Dariusz Wolski, ASC, *Exodus* had a 74-day schedule and produced a two-hour movie. "We had 74 days to produce a six-hour movie," muses LaVasseur. "It was intense, but we were able to stay on schedule by using multiple cameras."

The production enjoyed the constant availability of two units, with three Arri Alexa Pluses — one built for Steadicam and two for studio or handheld work — carried by

each unit. LaVasseur confirms his keenness to shoot simultaneous coverage of the production's larger-scale scenes: "Anything with action or battle sequences, we'd go five or sometimes six [cameras]." Mark Vargo, ASC served as both director and cinematographer on the second unit, and would attend with the sixth camera at key times.

During a three-week prep period, LaVasseur and Von Ancken "spent many days on location in the desert working with stunt coordinator [Cedric Proust] on the battle-scene choreography and putting together shot lists," the cinematographer notes. LaVasseur credits the director with an efficient style: "We'd do [a shot] once or twice and he'd say, 'Moving on.' David, first AD Carl Ludwig and I worked very well together, which allowed us to keep moving."

Even a brief conversation with Von Ancken reveals that the director holds his cinematographer in similarly high regard. "I liked Chris' aggressive style," he says. "He got involved with operating and handheld — he wasn't sitting back at all."

That "aggressive style" was especially on display for *Tut*'s battle scenes. According to LaVasseur, Von Ancken "wanted the audience to be right smack in the middle of the action and feel what it was like to be on the battlefield 3,000 years ago." To help achieve such a perspective, both first and second units employed Blackmagic Design's Pocket Cinema Cameras with Panasonic Lumix G X Vario 12-35mm (f2.8) zoom lenses. The cinematographer continues, "We placed the Pocket Cinema Cameras very close to the action to get the best angles possible. In one particular shot, an Egyptian soldier actually jumped on top of me from a ledge while I was holding the camera." He adds that Vargo "designed very specific shots with the Pocket Cinema Cameras, such as attaching one to a bow and arrow."

Committed to making *Tut* as visual an experience as possible, Von Ancken notes that he "cut 65 pages of dialogue from the script. The writer, Michael Vickerman, isn't precious at all. I wanted to tell the story through pictures as much as possible." The director is quick to associate this ambition with his choice of LaVasseur. "Chris has an affection for classic, larger cinema. Big

Top: The crew films a scene with Sir Ben Kingsley (left, portraying Ay) and Jorgia. Bottom: Ay serves as the Grand Vizier to King Tutankhamun.



"Scope Westerns that let the picture tell the story. If I could have shot this in 2.35:1, I would have — but [the network] won't let you!"

Tut's camera and lens package was rented from Panavision in London and also included a full set of Primo primes; a Primo 11:1 24-275mm (T2.8); and Angenieux Optimo 15-40mm (T2.6), 28-76mm (T2.6) and 45-120mm (T2.8) zooms. "I really liked the 45-120mm Angenieux, but most of the time in the palace we stayed on the 11:1,"

notes LaVasseur. "Outside in the desert, one camera [typically] had the 15-40mm and one the 28-76mm. This helped in the extreme working conditions, as it was often challenging to make lens changes."

The Alexas recorded internally in ProRes 4:4:4:4 and the Blackmagic camera recorded 10-bit ProRes 4:2:2 (HQ) files. The pace of the production necessitated a straightforward approach to the on-set workflow. "We had a colorist, Trevor White, at the hotel," says LaVasseur, "so at night,

after we'd finished shooting, I'd go to his hotel room, he'd put a couple of frames up for me, and we would color-correct accordingly."

The show's expansive desert exteriors were shot around Ouarzazate in Morocco, often some distance from the crew's hotel. "Some of them were a two-hour drive," remembers LaVasseur. "Most of them were an hour plus." These scenes employed as many as 800 extras (duplicated in postproduction to look like 5,000). "And the production's expansive sets, which were built on the famous back lots of Atlas Studios where *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Kingdom of Heaven* were shot, also took a lot of filling," the cinematographer says. As an example, he notes, "The courtyard was 600-by-300 feet. We took full advantage of showing [production designer] Michael Hanan's work."

LaVasseur says his visual references came from a variety of sources on ancient Egypt, in particular the painter "David Roberts, who was there in the 1830s and started painting these oils of what ancient Egypt would have looked like. I printed them, and when I walked into Michael Hanan's office, they were all over his walls. It was nice to see that we had come to share the same points of inspiration for the show's vision.

"David, Spike and [production



Top: Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Cameras were used to capture shots amid action sequences.

Bottom: Cinematographer Chris LaVasseur contemplates a shot.



company] Muse stressed that they didn't want *Tut* to look like *Game of Thrones*," LaVasseur continues. "They didn't want a dark, desaturated, gloomy look. They wanted a bright, colorful look, especially in the costumes [designed] by Carlo Poggioli."

Given the remoteness of the location and the enormity of certain exteriors, the cinematographer explains, "when we did the big wide shots, we'd let [the lighting] go, and used available light. [For closer shots] it would be difficult to use a flyswatter overhead, so when I could, I would send a 20-by-20 [with] a double net and a Light Grid up on large stands — the net takes the intensity and the Grid softens the light. You pick and choose your battles. Obviously, the end goal is to ensure that the actors look good!"

LaVasseur and Von Ancken made an early decision to use a rougher, less-polished style in the desert, to contrast the chaos of the outside world with the more controlled

environment of the palace, which was built in Dino De Laurentiis' CLA Studios. "When we shot in the desert, it's a bit rough, and most of the time we went handheld," says LaVasseur.

"I tried to make the palace scenes slicker," he continues. "Everything's stable. I mostly used real flame when I was [shooting close-ups], and I'm a sucker for big light sources. I like book lights. Typically, I'll bounce a 2K Zip light into a 12-by Ultra-bounce, softened with a 12-by Light Grid in front of it, right out of frame. I'll use that light as a wrap and let the other side fall off on the dark side. I don't use that much fill." Inside the palace, LaVasseur used ¼ CTO gel to match tungsten lighting to practical flame and, he says, "when we timed it, I took the orange out just a little bit." For outside the palace, Lee 117 — a greenish-blue gel — was applied to "moonlight" sources in order to contrast with the fire-light.

LaVasseur's lighting package was split into provisions for either day or night shooting. "For the night package, we had six Maxi-Brutes, six Mini-Brutes, four 10Ks, four 5Ks, and an assortment of 2Ks, 1Ks and Inkies," the cinematographer details. For large-scale day exteriors, though, LaVasseur says he "had to fight for two Arrimaxes if I wanted to fill in the actors in order to compete with the intensity of the Moroccan sun." For one courtyard scene, he "blasted them right in [the actors'] faces through Light Grid. I don't like doing that; I didn't want to make [the cast] uncomfortable, but I wanted to see their eyes."

At press time, *Tut*'s final grade was about to commence with colorist Scott Klein at Technicolor in Los Angeles, where the trailer had been finished on Quantel's Pablo system. LaVasseur was scheduled to have a mere four days to supervise each two-hour episode. "I'll set up day exteriors, night exteriors — very broad strokes," he says. "Then they'll do a match, and I'll take a look at it."

Upcoming work for LaVasseur includes the series *Unforgettable*, a crime drama for A&E about a woman with a photographic memory. "[I've done] shows like *Nurse Jackie* and *Hostages*, so when the opportunity to photograph *Tut* arose, it was the perfect chance to shoot something different on a much grander scale. It was a very special project for me. If we did this in America, it would have been 30 extras, but it was like a DeMille movie — we had a thousand extras, it wasn't greenscreen, everything was real. Even on the back lots at the studios, there were people walking around with camels. It was like I was transported back to 1950." The viewing audience, of course, will be transported back rather further than that.

TECHNICAL SPECS

1.78:1

Digital Capture

Arri Alexa Plus, Blackmagic Design Pocket Cinema Camera

Panavision Primo, Angenieux Optimo, Panasonic Lumix G X Vario