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Horror Spotlight



The Invitation | At the Table

By Sarah Fensom

Cinematographer Autumn Eakin maintains that a sense of authenticity is essential to horror filmmaking. “The jump scares and things like that have to work,” she says, “but you also have to showcase the story, the characters, and their chemistry in a way that the viewer deeply cares about, too.”

To that end, Eakin feels that her experience in documentary work helped inspire her creative approach to the horror feature *The Invitation* — and her dynamic with director Jessica M. Thompson (*The End, Unstoppable*), whose resumé also includes a substantial number of nonfiction credits. “Jessica and I are both big proponents of having an authentic feel when it comes to capturing actors and their performances,” Eakin says. “So, even with a movie like *The Invitation* — a fantastic, fictional story — I think having a doc background can inform that narrative work.”

The movie’s plot follows Evie (Nathalie Emmanuel), a young woman living in New York who has just lost her mother — her last known family member. After taking a 23andMe-type DNA test, Oliver (Hugh Skinner), a long-lost second cousin, pops into her life as if by magic. He invites her to a family wedding at a sprawling estate in the English countryside, and suddenly Evie has relatives, a brighter future ahead, and a romantic interest in Walter (Thomas Doherty), a mysterious family friend. But the event and its participants turn sinister, leaving Evie to fight for survival and make sense of her predicament.

Bending Genre

“We wanted the film to create a sort of genre-bend,” says Eakin (*Someone Great*, *Modern Love*), who spent about nine weeks shooting the film

in Budapest, Hungary. “Most of the movie is really a fairy-tale with Evie falling in love, but it becomes this Dracula story with an old-world visual sense.”

The gothic influence on the film’s narrative inspired vintage trappings. “The story is set in England, so there are castles and lots of luxury,” Eakin says. “It’s this ideal world — a kind of ‘period piece’ that’s actually set in modern times.”

The film’s departure from the rigid constraints of genre and period proved creatively fertile for Eakin. In the past, she’d shied away from shooting horror, but *The Invitation* changed her perspective on such material, and she’s currently shooting another scare-filled feature, *Insidious: Fear the Dark*. “I’ve found that I like shooting horror films, because you don’t have to stick to the ‘real world’ — you get to explore things visually that don’t have the same limitations as everyday conversations, or a modern dinner party.”

In fact, a “beautiful, epic dinner party,” as Eakin describes it, is a pivotal scene in *The Invitation*. It’s at this lavish dinner that Evie learns the dark truth about the wedding she’s attending, and the fairy-tale tone of the film descends more completely into horror.

Ominous Optics

Recognizing the importance of the scene — which was shot on location in a partial set built over the course of three days — Eakin approached the sequence with a thoughtful yet dramatic approach. “Normally as a cinematographer you think, ‘Okay, cool, dinner party: We’re going to have 12 people sitting around a table, there’s a main key light over the top, and then you just get coverage, coverage, coverage,’” Eakin says. *The Invitation*’s dinner party, however, required something more: The cinematographer estimates that the setup included about 25 to 30 guests, all

Opposite: Evie (Nathalie Emmanuel) walks a dark path in *The Invitation*. This page: Walter (Thomas Doherty) and Evie find romance.



in intricate costumes and masks, surrounded by elaborate production design that begged to be seen. “I just wanted to get out over the table,” Eakin says. Doing so led her to use “a lot of jib arm, and specialty lenses — particularly a Lensbaby.”

Throughout the film, Eakin used the Arri Alexa Mini LF as her A camera and a standard LF as her B camera, in combination with Arri Rental DNA LF lenses. “I was looking for something that had a clean quality but still had character,” Eakin says. “I like the way the DNAs render faces, and the falloff as well.” She also used the Lensbaby Composer Pro — a 35mm and 50mm — at various points during shooting, including “the moment when Evie realizes she’s trapped in a nightmare of false pretenses.”

Doherty’s character, Walter, undergoes a significant transformation during the dinner party. “Up till that point, we want you to believe that Evie is falling head over heels for this guy, so I wanted to shoot Thomas — this very chiseled, handsome gentleman — in a way that would help the audience feel him making a transition visually,” says Eakin. “So, we shot him with a wide lens and went tight on his face — using a 29mm DNA lens.”

Throughout the film, Eakin adopted the somewhat unorthodox strategy of using wider lenses when capturing close-ups of Emmanuel. “Because of the beauty of the locations and production design, I wanted to be able to see around her, even in close-ups,” Eakin says. This choice also furthers the sinister fairy-tale tone of the film, making Evie seem surrounded — at times, even dwarfed — by her ominous environment.

Shadows and Darkness

In dressing the set for the party scene, the production-design team installed an enormous elk-horn chandelier over the dining table. One of Eakin’s major innovations was to rig the chandelier to serve both a



practical and decorative purpose. “It spanned most of the table, which was probably about 15 feet long,” she recalls. “I had production design and my electricians work together to hang something that could be seen on camera and still work as my main lighting source. Gaffer Gábor “Hevke” Hevesi worked with production designer Felicity Abbott and set decorator Zsuzsi Sipos to rig seven or eight LiteMat Plus 2L units within the long chandelier, and the art department embellished the edges with garish garnishings to help add visual interest while hiding our units.”

To enhance the dinner’s ambience, Eakin also deployed Jem Balls for underlighting, as well as SkyPanel S60s positioned “only on the ground since we were shooting at a historic location,” she says. “In general, I wanted soft, soft lighting for the film that would then get harder when we were less in the fantasy world,” she says, “but the dinner party is a transitional point. I wanted the lighting for the dinner to make that scene feel like it was wrapped in a velvet blanket. I just made a choice to

Tech Specs: *The Invitation*

1.85:1

Cameras | Arri Alexa Mini LF, Alexa LF

Lenses | Arri Rental DNA LF, Lensbaby Composer Pro

Top and middle: A long table serves as the centerpiece for an elaborate dinner sequence. Bottom: Cinematographer Autumn Eakin on set.



double- and triple-break with frames of muslin and 250, even though the SkyPanels and Jem Balls we utilized were already soft sources.”

Eakin’s cinematic references for *The Invitation* helped guide her bold vision for the film. “I always come back to *No Country for Old Men* — a completely different kind of movie, but a great reference for not being afraid of shadows and darkness,” she says with a laugh. “I also looked at *Gretel & Hansel*, because it’s a great interpretation of the Brothers Grimm folktale that didn’t shy away from implementing bold colors.”

Recent horror films like *Ready or Not* and *Don’t Breathe* further influenced Eakin’s low-key approach. “They made me think, ‘Don’t be afraid to go too dark! You just need a little highlight in the eye and it’s fine!’”

Often, the key light Eakin used on Emmanuel was simply a bi-color Jem ball that was double-diffused or double-broken, with two stages of diffusion frames in front of a fixture. “Shooting horror and shooting darker, you don’t actually need a lot of punch,” the cinematographer says. “In fact, a lot of times we were bringing our light levels way down — like going down to two percent on the Astera tubes.”

Eakin is quick to note that she had a great DIT, Dávid Vécsey, who would let her know “if things might be getting a little too crunchy.” If so, she and her crew would raise the levels slightly, knowing she could bring them back down later in the final grade. “David kept me in line and wouldn’t let me get too ‘blocky in my blacks,’ as he liked to say,” she describes. “He would watch my contrast levels, and if he was worried, I knew I should be, too. So, I would raise the lighting levels slightly to protect myself.”

Lasting Partnership

Eakin had a great ally in Thompson. The filmmakers met a decade ago while working on Liz Garbus’ 2012 documentary *Love, Marilyn*. On that project, Eakin served as a camera operator for her mentor Maryse Alberti, while Thompson was an associate editor. “Unbeknownst to me, Jessica had been kind of stalking me since we first worked together on *Love, Marilyn*,” Eakin recalls with amusement. Thompson closely monitored Eakin’s career, and in 2016, she enlisted her to shoot *The Light of the Moon* — the writer-director’s debut feature, which had its world premiere at SXSW 2017 and went on to win the festival’s Audience Award.

“We tend to have the same sensibilities, so on *The Invitation* I never had to fight hard for a different kind of angle, or anything that was a bit weirder,” Eakin says. For example, Thompson was open to changing her mind when Eakin suggested other ideas, such as shooting in the 1.85:1 aspect ratio instead of in 2.39:1, or anamorphic. “Usually, it’s the cinematographer pushing for a wider aspect ratio, but I lobbied for 1.85:1. We had such beautiful sets and builds that it felt like we would lose some of the film’s grandness and production value if we had less verticality in the frame.”