

# incamera

January 1999

ALSO FEATURED:

- Cine italiano**  
The 1989 winner at the Venice Film Festival
- Equinox**  
A TV series for South America
- A Touch of Frost**  
The long-running UK TV series
- Not One Less**  
A Chinese film
- The Ladies Men**  
One story - but three versions - from Canada

Law & Order - The TV series



Professional Motion Imaging

**W**hen he read the script for **Harlem Aria**, Keith L. Smith was enthralled. He enjoyed the script and welcomed the opportunity to shoot an upbeat story that takes place on the streets and interior environs of Harlem, a well-known Manhattan neighborhood that is generally stereotyped as a rough, downscale community.

"I really love Harlem and the street feel of New York," Smith says. "I was looking forward to putting it all on film."

**Harlem Aria** revolves around Anton, a young Harlem resident enraptured by opera. His misadventures, brought about by alliances with shady yet colorful characters, form the core of the story. The film culminates with Anton performing in one of his beloved operas and becoming a sensation.

"It's a really sweet story with a lot of heart in it," says Smith.

Smith is a native of New Orleans, and was a basketball player for that city's Xavier University. When a TV news crew did a story about the team, Smith was "mesmerized" by the cameraman and decided to explore career opportunities in that field. After receiving his degree, Smith worked as a television photojournalist in New Orleans. On a lark, he applied to the American Film Institute (AFI) program and was surprised to be accepted. After his initial year, he won the AFI's prestigious Remy Martin Student Award, the first time it had been won by a cinematographer and first year student.

Smith began his career crewing with Oliver Stone and Cinematographer Robert Richardson ASC (another AFI alumnus) on **JFK**. He continued to work with Richardson on the films, **Heaven and Earth** and **Natural Born Killers** (also directed by Stone), and **A Few Good Men** (directed by Rob Reiner).

"I was an assistant cameraman with Bob's crew, and having the opportunity to watch him with Oliver was an incredible opportunity," says Smith.

Richardson and Stone made an indelible impression on Smith.

"There were times [shooting **Harlem Aria**] when my back was up against a wall and I'd draw on my memory of what Bob Richardson did in those types of situations and how he solved problems," he says.

During the past four years, Smith has been involved

# Smith captures New York look for **Harlem Aria**

**"You don't compromise just because your back is against the wall. You use your brain, trust your instincts and find a way to get it done"**

**"You can create a beautiful, romantic look or an ominous, foreboding look that gets the audience on the edges of their seats just by the placement of light"**

in a number of independent shorts and features. "It gives you an opportunity to think on your feet and solve problems as they are happening," he says. "One of the things I love about cinematography is that intensity."

There are a number of night exterior scenes in **Harlem Aria** that capture the essence of the story. The budget dictated a minimalist approach to lighting, but Smith wasn't about to compromise the integrity of the images. It was important, he says, to capture the visual flavor and texture of Harlem at night.

He says that was among the lessons he learned from watching Richardson at work. "You don't compromise just because your back is against the wall," he says. "You use your brain, trust your instincts and find a way to get it done."

One person in particular on the crew was instrumental in helping Smith film **Harlem Aria**, Gaffer Ben Plotkin. "He has worked with me as gaffer on several of my projects, including **Harlem Aria**," says Smith. "He is my right hand man and is such a great collaborator. He is the one person I can turn to in the heat of the battle. And he is always on and in good spirits despite the long hours and physically draining work on crew people."

Smith let the available street lamps set the mood and motivate the scenes. "We had a few small units hidden around corners and behind cars," he says. "I like big pools of light penetrating dark areas and

using realistic rim light. In a lot of ways, cinematography is like sculpting: you're editing things out and creating different kinds of moods. You can create a beautiful, romantic look or an ominous, foreboding look that gets the audience on the edges of their seats just by the placement of light."

One of the things he learned from Richardson was to trust his instincts and experience even if that required him to bend or break conventional rules. Many or most cinematographers shooting on dark streets with limited lighting resources and a tight schedule would opt for the fastest available film. Not Smith. "I wanted to get as much information as possible on the negative, including details in shadowy areas," he explains. "I knew the Kodak (Vision) 320 film would dig deep into the shadows and also give me real color saturation. Most important, the blacks stayed black. That was a key to setting the proper moods for those scenes."

The difference in grain between the Vision 500 and 320-speed films is relatively slight, but Smith felt that was an edge he needed in those scenes.

As an African-American, Smith was proud to be involved in a project that focused on the Harlem community in a positive way. "There's a lot of heart and magic that exist in inner city communities like Harlem," he declares. "Those stories are not being told. I want to tell those stories and let people see that slice of life of the African-American community. There aren't a lot of African-American cinematographers, so I appreciate the opportunity to help tell that story."

▼ Cinematographer Keith Smith.

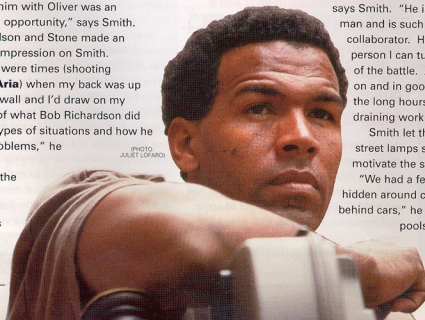


PHOTO: JARRET LOFARDO