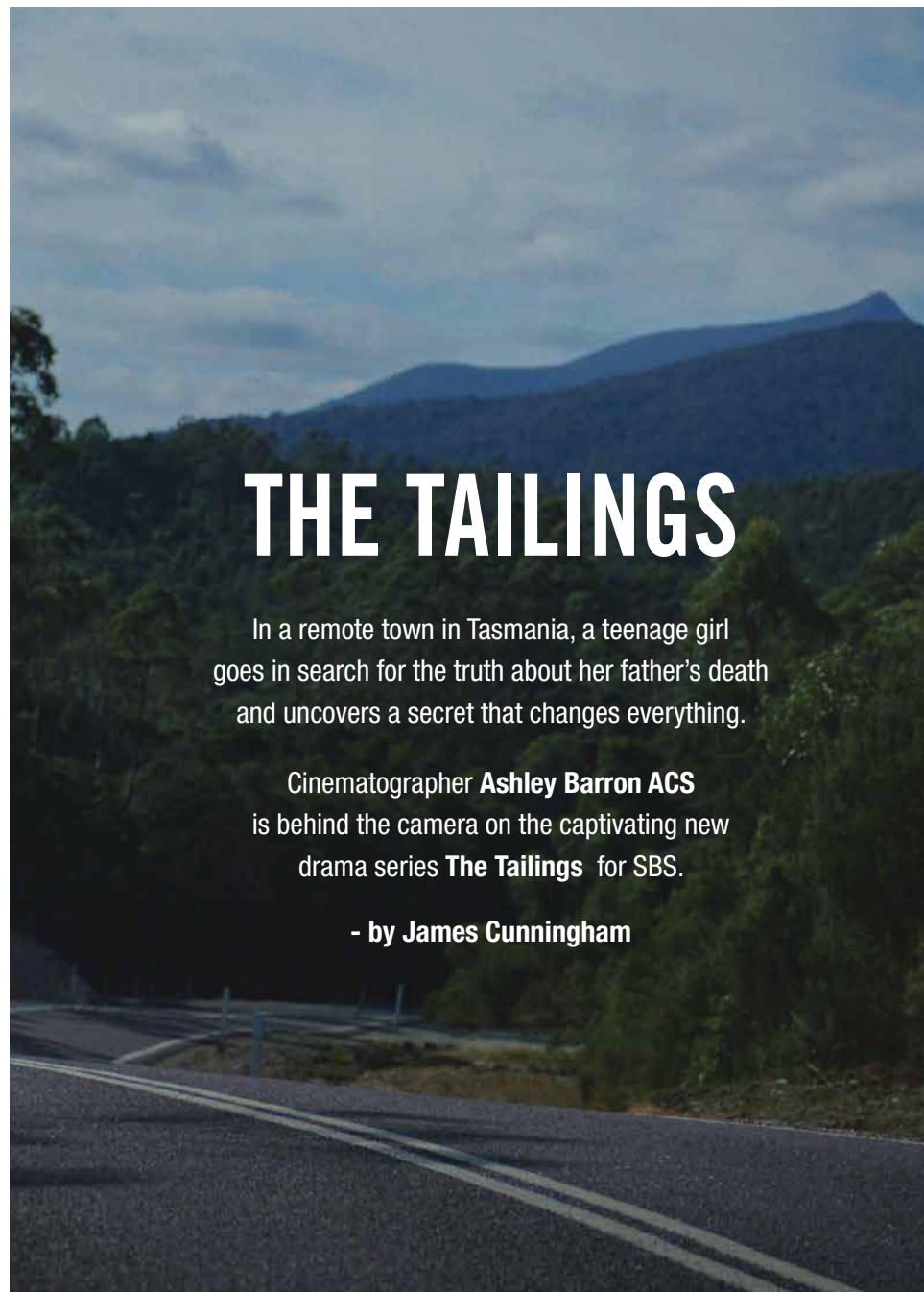




A scene from 'The Tailings' - DOP Ashley Barron ACS



THE TAILINGS

In a remote town in Tasmania, a teenage girl goes in search for the truth about her father's death and uncovers a secret that changes everything.

Cinematographer **Ashley Barron ACS** is behind the camera on the captivating new drama series **The Tailings** for SBS.

- by **James Cunningham**



Ruby (Mabel Li) in 'The Tailings' - DOP Ashley Barron ACS

Cinematographer Ashley Barron ACS (*One Less God*) was approached by producer Liz Doran to meet with herself and director Stevie Cruz-Martin. Not having worked with either of them, Barron jumped on a Zoom call with the two of them just before the London lockdowns.

"I'm very much drawn to character driven pieces where setting is as much a character in itself," explains Barron. *"The incredibly layered and soulful nature of the story was something I had been looking for, but I could also relate to it."* Barron grew up in a small town and with a small family, with multilayered communities, with stories and secrets, and with a strong father-daughter relationship at its core. *"Then came my collaborators!"*

Production designer Alicia Clements joined the creative team and provided a visual treatment that was almost word-for-word what Barron and Cruz-Martin had spoken about at length. *"The director and I had discussed a 'cinematic documentary' aesthetic similar to the HBO miniseries Sharp Objects (2018, cinematography by Yves Bélanger CSC and Ronald Plante CSC). An approach that requires integral collaboration with production design to create a world that the actors can embody."*

Cruz-Martin shared the months of conversations that herself and screenwriter Caitlin Richards had, in order to give Barron and Clements an idea of the background of *The Tailings* and the world in which it's set. *"The three of us also spent weekly Zooms discussing each scene in each episode, each character, each space,"* says Barron. *"I had frequent conversations with Richards, and with costume designer Yolanda Peas that further evolved our understanding of the characters, their world and where each department was coming from. It was exactly how I like to work..."*

'holistically engaged'."

For Barron, this 'cinematic documentary' approach felt grounded and meant something that felt textured and lived in. *"As I was in Tasmania and our kit was coming from Sydney, I had to conduct remote camera tests with the cooperation of our first assistant camera Luke Marriott at Camera Hire,"* says Barron. *"He tirelessly filmed himself, by himself, and then uploaded the files over many nights for us to review. I created a blind test for the director and it was a unanimous decision to film The Tailings with the ARRI Alexa, rating at 1280 ISO."*

"I also knew that the sensor would handle the 360° degree world that we'd created, and the uncontrollable situations that were thrown at us at speed. I also knew that the camera's form factor and user features would allow me to focus more on breathing with the actors."

Which is exactly what Barron did. That camera hung off the cinematographer's body on the EasyRig over the course of the fourteen day shoot. *"I didn't want to take it off,"* says Barron. *"Not only did we have a relentless schedule which saw at least two and three daily location moves, but I also feel that a camera on the shoulder renders a dynamic flow on set. I operated myself because that world was in my DNA and my reactions would be natural reflex."*

Barron's camera department was helmed by Marriott, who had worked on many other Tasmanian filmed and produced television shows. *"It was exciting to be able to bring such a project to Tasmanian crews and give an opportunity to much emerging talent,"* says Barron.

The Tailings is firmly set in a remote Tasmanian mining town reeling from the recent death of a miner, and follows his



Jas (Tegan Stimson) in 'The Tailings' - DOP Ashley Barron ACS

daughter Jas (Tegan Stimson) who refuses to believe his death was accidental. *"What is essentially a true crime story also focuses on the mining town and its effect on the natural environment,"* explains Barron. *"We specifically worked towards highlighting the delicate balance between the man-made and the natural. The landscape was always featured in our exterior compositions. We didn't just want to feature the landscape in a 'Tasmanian noir' style; we wanted to give the island state a feeling of hope, agency and community."*

With the tight schedule being what it was, Barron's workflow with Cruz-Martin was a 'divide and conquer' as the cinematographer dealt with lighting whilst the director considered coverage. *"We would spend each morning going over the director's desired shortlist for the day, watch a rehearsal in the space and see what fit best based on what we saw,"* says Barron. *"It became quite an unspoken process on set after extensive pre-production. I can count only a handful of times where the director disagreed with a frame or lighting choice of mine."*

Considering all the challenges the production faced, Barron has many favourite scenes. *"My favourite has to be the night scenes in episode one, and an alleyway scene with character Sean (Nic English) and subsequently in his home, in episode two,"* the cinematographer reveals.

The actual location of the alleyway was lit by a single street lamp. *"The way that we wanted to cover the location, there was just no way to light the alleyway within the budget,"* says Barron. *"The council even changed the lightbulb in the streetlight to a brighter one for us."*

Barron shot some additional camera tests and the cinematographer sent them to colourist Trish Cahill who developed a look-up table that reached into the shadows and

de-noised the image. *"All we needed to do was add a little eye light,"* says Barron. *"The subsequent scene in Shaun's kitchen had to match to that location in both aesthetic and in texture. I had to apply an approach that was built for an uncontrolled location to a controlled location, continuing to push the underexposure. It worked. It not only represents the story and the mood of the scene but represents me as cinematographer and storyteller."*

Barron's involvement as cinematographer in post-production started in pre-production as soon as Cahill came on board. *"Cahill was invaluable during pre-production, building look-up tables and collaborating on tricky lighting scenarios,"* says Barron. The two discussed frequently their visual approach to *The Tailings*.

"I was sent edits as they happened and was involved in a four-day colour grade, remotely, from a suite at The Editors in Sydney while Cahill was in Melbourne due to Covid restrictions," explains Barron. *"Our main aim was to tread that balance between coming-of-age warmth and mood of the investigative drama."*

Many of Barron's challenges were outside of the cinematographer's control. *"I'm not sure I would change anything,"* concludes Barron. *"I feel like all of my experience as a cinematographer not only led me to The Tailings but equipped me to successfully approach, manage and handle this project. I'm so proud of what we've achieved."*

Ashley Barron ACS is an international, award-winning cinematographer and accredited member of the Australian Cinematographers Society.

James Cunningham is editor of Australian Cinematographer Magazine.