

INTERVIEW: AFI Conservatory Alumna Mimi Leder on Directing THE LEFTOVERS

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

As an executive producer and director on HBOâ??s THE LEFTOVERS, **Mimi Leder (AFI Class of 1973, Cinematography)** brought her deft storytelling touch to the recent series finale. But her work has extended well beyond the prestige mystery series, with Primetime Emmy wins and nominations for ER, THE WEST WING and CHINA BEACH, and film-directing credits including DEEP IMPACT (1998), PAY IT FORWARD (2000) and the upcoming Ruth Bader Ginsburg biopic ON THE BASIS OF SEX.

AFI spoke to Leder about THE LEFTOVERS finale, and her work as a director. **Spoilers ahead if you havenâ??t seen season three of THE LEFTOVERS.**

Mimi Leder
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AFI: In all three seasons of THE LEFTOVERS, there has been more conversation than ever this year â?? especially now that the series has ended.

ML: Weâ??re all trying to wrap our heads around it. There are many endings. You film it, then you edit, then youâ??re done editing, youâ??re done mixing, then it airs and youâ??re done again. Itâ??s been quite an extraordinary time.

Thereâ??s perhaps more rallying around this season because more people have found the show. In the beginning, it lost a lot of viewers because it was rather bleak, but still wonderful. Season two came around and we very much worked towards moving to a new town, and I changed the palette of the show, the color, and very much opened up the scope of the show. The show, in its second season, got quite a lot of recognition. And then in the third season, we continued on to Australia and journeyed with our characters there. The reaction to the third season has been absolutely stunning.

AFI: Reportedly, series co-creator Damon Lindelof said that he measures the show in â??pre-Mimiâ?• and â??post-Mimi,â?• since you came onboard halfway into the first season. What do

you make of that?

ML: They brought me onto the show and I directed it the way I felt it needed to be, and I felt the show needed to be opened up in order to get in there in an even more in an intimate way. It had to allow the audience to breathe a bit. It was a great partnership with Damon Lindelof and Tom Perrotta, and their writing really spoke to me. We had a very special time doing a show about grief and loss, and hope and love. We all had this life-changing experience; we as a group of people in the exploration of faith, and â??what is the meaning of life?â?•

AFI: This also seems like a writersâ?? room in which no idea was too crazy.

ML: Oftentimes, it was like, â??Can we do this? Well, why not? We enjoy it.â?• Doing a show on a ferry with a sex orgy going on was really an examination of faith in the background of madness. Nothing was too crazy, at least for us. And the response has verified that for sure.

photo 2.jng
Carrie Coon in THE LEFTOVERS

AFI: You directed all three season finales. Was this the most challenging?

ML: They were all challenging. Season threeâ??s finale was, I would say, even more so, because it was the final episode of the series. It was a much quieter episode, and it had almost a comedic feel to it. It almost felt like a rom-com in some instances, and that was very freeing and liberating and really different for our show. In that way, it had to hit the tone just right with our characters, and always stay grounded, and always in the world of our â??leftovers.â?• But I tried not to be too precious about it. Thereâ??s always the pressure you put on yourself, when something feels a little bit more important, and thatâ??s where you can go wrong. I ignored those feelings, and always had the mantra in my head: â??Keep it simple.â?•

AFI: You did that beautifully, particularly in the closing monologue. Can you explain the decision not to provide a visual representation of the story that Nora tells about her journey to â??the other sideâ?•?

ML: We all felt that doing a visual representation of her story would make it feel less ambiguous, and we felt it was very important for her story to be told through Kevin listening to it, and him being our eyes, the audienceâ??s eyes. Kevin had to believe her in order for there to be an opening for love, for them to be together. One of the big themes of this season was our examination of our belief systems, the stories we tell ourselves to get through life. Noraâ??s story is her story, her belief system. Whether you believe itâ??s true or not is really unimportant. It really doesnâ??t matter. All that matters is that she believes it, and that he believes it, and to leave it ambiguous was most important for the audience in order for them to make their decision.

AFI: As a viewer, if you choose to believe that Nora visited this other world, then you get that sort of closure you crave from a series finale.

ML: There really are no answers. There are many answers to the meaning of life, but then again, there are many questions that will never be answered. If we knew all the answers to life, and to the journey, itâ??d be so boring. Part of the process of living is the exploration, and the journey, and thatâ??s what

THE LEFTOVERS, in many ways, was saying. And ultimately, it was this mad love story.

photo 3
Carrie Coon and Justin Theroux in THE LEFTOVERS

AFI: Another scene in the finale that was so well-directed shows Nora entering the â??LADRâ?• (low amplitude Denzinger radiation) device. Talk about directing Carrie Coon in that scene.

ML: We come into the world naked, and we go out naked. The script said â??naked,â?• and I didnâ??t want to shoot around her body. Thereâ??s nothing more beautiful than a human body, and I felt she was this little girl walking. She was completely vulnerable and fearless all at the same time, and I wanted to be with her, to always feel like she was walking towards us. I did a lot of shots that emphasized that, but I also wanted to be over her shoulder and behind her, and feel like we were absolutely with her. That was a scary scene. I just tried to keep it simple and powerful, with the big wides and the tights, and to stay with her emotionally.

AFI: Youâ??ve gone back and forth between TV over the years.

ML: Iâ??m in prep to direct a film called ON THE BASIS OF SEX, which is about the young years of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Itâ??s an origin story, and also about the first federal precedent declaring sex-based discrimination unconstitutional.

AFI: Whatâ??s exciting to you about returning to film?

ML: I donâ??t really differentiate one from the other, honestly. My approach to storytelling is always the same, whether itâ??s on a big screen or a small screen. Itâ??s all about the material. Films are projected big, but I really donâ??t approach it any differently [than a TV episode].

Prestige television has really evolved, and you see feature filmmakers going back and forth because thereâ??s great work to be done, great stories to be told, in television. Theyâ??re making less films, but I would venture to say there are more important stories being told in prestige television, even though Iâ??m making a very important â?? I think â?? story on film this year. Thereâ??s more opportunity in television to make these stories. Maybe thereâ??s too much. You cannot possibly catch up to everything. Itâ??s just overwhelming.



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