

# The Equalizer

BY PAULINE ROGERS  
PHOTOS BY BARBARA NITKE

## "I'm the one you call when you can't call 911."

Sound familiar? It was 1985 when Robert McCall (played by Edward Woodward) made this catchphrase popular for CBS TV's hit crime drama *The Equalizer* – so much so that Denzel Washington brought the characters into movie theaters in a feature version not once, but twice – in 2014 and 2018. What does a third incarnation of *The Equalizer* look like in 2021? The series debuted on CBS earlier this month with Robyn McCall (Queen Latifah) now coming to the aid of desperate New Yorkers, a woman with a unique skill set to help others who have nowhere else to turn. Her deductive reasoning is acute, and her physical prowess is

impressive, with Queen Latifah doing many of her own stunts.

There's rarely a lull in the action in this new reboot. Take the chase scene in the pilot episode, which features a transport van carrying a young woman named Jewel who's been wrongly accused of murder. McCall, on her motorcycle, roars out of an alley and takes off to pursue the van as it passes by. As she rides, she's talking via earpiece with her partner Mel (Liza Lapira), who is positioned on the fourth floor of a nearby parking garage.

When Mel shoots out the van's tires, it skids and turns to a stop. McCall pulls up, smashes the cab, and tosses a smoke grenade into the van to disorient the two police officers inside. She then gets into a bit of hand-to-hand combat with one of the cops, taking and disarming his gun. She returns to the back of the van, gets Jewel out, and they hop on her motorcycle, blazing off down a side alley as cop cars approach behind them.

So how challenging is an action scene like that to pull off, especially with COVID-19 safety protocols in place? Such requirements as crew and cast remaining ten feet apart, coronavirus testing five to six times per week, face masks, goggles, and face shields that fog glasses or goggles (it's cold in Newark in the winter) all make it difficult to see the shot or the monitor. Planning the stunt also had to be made COVID safe – plexiglass inside the van for cast and crew, and safety for all when a smoke bomb is set off. According to the creative team – Director Liz Friedlander, 1st AD Tony Phillippe, Stunt Coordinator Melissa Stubbs, and Director of Photography Gavin Kelly, who all help to break down the process – it's a challenging new normal.

"The first thing we learned was that the motorcycle rescue was way more sequence than we had time to shoot in one day," Phillippe recalls. "So we decided to break it into a main-unit day and a stunt-unit day." The team decision was to employ the main unit to capture Queen Latifah doing as much in the scene as possible, with the 2nd unit – led by Director of Photography Teo Maniaci – to shoot additional motorcycle action shots with stunt doubles. "It's one thing to see a figure in all black and a helmet kick some cop's butt, but it's way more exciting when she flips her helmet up, and it's Queen Latifah," Phillippe adds.

Friedlander and Kelly plotted the cameras in a leapfrog manner, "so that we would be shooting several pieces of the sequence at once," the director shares. Kelly says, "We shot Queen actually pulling out from the small alley on her motorcycle. Then we used the Road

Runner camera car, motorcycle tow dolly and a Scorpio 23-foot telescoping crane with Libra head for closer hero shots of Queen on the bike. We mixed in some Cooke Xtal Express anamorphic lens shots of her riding the motorcycle on this rig. The Xtal Express gave dramatic flares and texture for key, signature *Equalizer* moments in the pilot." (Kelly says the primary package was Panaspeed primes and various zooms on ALEXA MINI LF.)

**Four cameras were used for** the van's tire being blown, skidding to a stop, and the motorcycle action. "We had a mix of kinetic angles on long zooms on dollies, and then handheld angles placing you right in the middle of the action," Kelly adds. "There were three cameras on the ground and one up on the fourth-floor parking garage vantage point. We then went in for the tighter performance and action work with Queen, who did her own action work with the cops and Jewel around the van. We also did some further shots with Queen's stunt double of specific action beats."

Friedlander says that "part of the fun was planning out how to hide cameras from other ones. Our cameras stretched out over a city block, and one of the biggest challenges was cabling to monitors and the DIT so that we could watch. This resulted in even more 'fun' since it was also freezing and started to snow – on one of the shortest days of the year."

Kelly and Friedlander decided to shoot a 90-degree shutter for most of the action in the series, including this major set-piece, "to make everything feel crisp and hyper-real," Friedlander adds. "Gavin and I chose handheld to give even more of a sense of urgency. It forced us to make strong decisions – and move quickly."

With a careful shot layout, it fell to Stunt Coordinator Stubbs [ICG Magazine June/July 2019] to execute the action safely. Questions that were answered included who was real, who was stunt, where the cameras were, and what safety restraints were needed for cast and crew, with Stubbs' production-note sketches filling an entire book. To make sure the riding action was effective, Stubbs worked with Latifah to fine-tune her handling of the BMW motorcycle.

"Conscious of where Gavin placed the cameras, I turned to the key part of the sequence – the bike/van," Stubbs shares. "The NYPD van was the set. When the picture car department brought it in, someone forgot to check if the doors opened or the seat configuration in the back allowed Queen to pull





Jewel out. Of course, the van doors would not open, and the seat configuration made it impossible for her to get to the girl!"

Kelly sympathizes with Stubbs, whom he calls "unflappable," and was in constant communication with Safety, stunt people, cast, and Camera. "Filmmaking is a process of creative adaptation in real-time," Kelly describes. "It's art crammed into a pressure-cooker, and that's part of what I love about it. You have a solid plan, but you always know it's going to evolve once you're on set."

The director of photography says they shot other angles of specific action on the fourth floor with Mel sniping, while the van-door issue was rectified. "And there was a B-plan forming for what we'd do if the doors wouldn't open, of how we'd shoot around the issue and re-stage some of the action," he adds. "But fortunately, they finally got them open. There wasn't a minute to spare on such a packed day – so we just kept shooting."

A-Camera Operator/Steadicam Dave Isern, SOC, describes being on a long lens until the vehicles came to a stop. "After that, I went in close-range handheld with McCall as she stormed the police van," he recounts. "Later on, when we shot those close-up shots with the process trailer,

a mounted motorcycle would lean from side to side, to help sell the action."

Kelly sagely notes that "even when not in the midst of a pandemic, every member of the team has to be on the ball, thinking several steps ahead to bring an ambitious show to life, day to day, safely. During these COVID times, the challenge is greater on every level. You have to map-out and think everything through with protocols in mind."

That meant deploying a Local 600 camera team that functioned as one entity.

"Dave Isern on A-Cam and Rachael Levine on B-Cam, along with Blake Johnson on C, worked as collaborative operators," Kelly adds. "And our Key 1st AC, Ben Spaner, was the 'Zen master' in keeping things running smoothly with crew and camera packages, helped by excellent support from Panavision New York. DIT Tiffany Armour-Tejada always had my back as we moved quickly, juggling cameras and looks across many setups.

"I'm proud of what we were able to achieve in this dynamic pilot sequence," Kelly concludes. "It really helped establish the look, tone, and energy for the series. And it was a lot of fun! I know there were plenty of smiles behind all the PPE. At least I hope so." 🌈

## LOCAL 600 CREW

**Director of Photography**  
Gavin Kelly

**A-Camera/Steadicam Operator**  
Dave Isern, SOC

**A-Camera 1st AC**  
Ben Spaner

**A-Camera 2nd AC**  
Katherine Rivera

**B-Camera Operator**  
Rachael Levine, SOC

**B-Camera 1st AC**  
Filipp Penson

**B-Camera 2nd AC**  
Robbie Cline

**C-Camera Operator**  
Blake Johnson

**DIT**  
Tiffany Armour-Tejada

**Loaders**  
Peter Perlman  
Ivana Bernal

**Still Photographer**  
Barbara Nitke