

‘Stop and Go’ with Director of Photography Brenna Empey and Camera Assistant Tia Rosenlof

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Today, we're talking with Director of Photography [Brenna Empey](#) and Camera Assistant [Tia Rosenlof](#) as they take us behind the camera and dive deep into what it took to shoot *[Stop and Go](#)* (2021), formerly known as *Recovery*.

The film, starring writer-actors [Mallory Everton](#) and [Whitney Call](#), tells the story of two directionless sisters who brave a cross-country road trip with a single mission in mind; reach their grandmother at her nursing home before COVID-19 can. And, as you'll hear from both Brenna and Tia, it was a unique challenge to shoot – not only because the film takes place mostly on the road and in a car but also because it was nearly shot with entirely natural light.

Stop and Go, which currently has a fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes from both critics and audiences, received great praise during its **SXSW '21** premiere. A prominent reason the film has resonated with such a diverse and broad audience is its way of finding and bringing out the humor, laughter, and charm from those early pandemic days. After the madness we've all been through in the past two years, *Stop and Go* may just be that sigh of relief and much needed dose of laughter we're all in need of. It's the best road trip during the worst year.

From pre-production strategy to the big-screen success and beyond, this is Brenna Empey and Tia Rosenlof's inside story behind shooting *Stop and Go*, now available on-demand.



Take us back to the very beginning. What initially attracted you to the project?

Brenna:

When it comes to choosing a project, I'd say the decision is equally influenced by one, who is making the project, such as who I'll be working with, and two, the quality and intent of the project. I'd known Stephen, Whitney, and Mallory for a couple years already when they pitched *Stop and Go* to me, and I've always loved collaborating with them. They're clever writers, absolutely electric on screen, and all-around lovely humans. And since we were in the middle of COVID, making a comedy about it seemed unique and fun. Excellent people, a fun script, I literally couldn't say no.

Tia:

Brenna called and asked if I was interested – and I said yes! I really wanted to work with her and I knew it was a great opportunity. =

“...every time I’m reading a script for the first time, I definitely get ideas. I’m looking for tone, pace, and what sort of feeling we’re hoping to create with the cinematography.”

Brenna Empey



When you were first handed the script, was it at that moment you began to plan your shots?

Brenna:

In a way, yes! The first reading of a script always conjures up images. They’re not fully formed shots, per se, but every time I’m reading a script for the first

time, I definitely get ideas. I'm looking for tone, pace, and what sort of feeling we're hoping to create with the cinematography. I instantly felt like *Stop and Go* lent itself to bubbly, vivid imagery. My early conversations with Stephen especially suggested that we wanted some stark contrast between pre-COVID times and during-COVID times – so we decided to be handheld for the party scene, and mostly locked off on sticks for the rest of the film, indicating that life had in a way come to a standstill for these sisters.

“I felt like I was given the freedom to make the imagery look unique, a sometimes more dramatic look that you might typically see in comedy.”

Brenna Empey



Can you describe your process while working with Co-Directors Mallory Everton and Stephen Meek? How much direction did they give you, what did that look like, and how did you then make it your own?

Brenna:

I'm incredibly lucky to work with Stephen and Mallory on a semi-regular basis, so we entered the project with an established collaborative language. We really

trusted each other on this one, particularly because we were working within limitations of budget, scope, and resources. We definitely had to get creative, == and we were all wearing a lot of hats. That being said, Stephen and Mallory really let me take the reins on the cinematography, and I so appreciated that trust. From day one I was able to make choices about framing, lighting, and lenses that I felt excited and comfortable about. I felt like I was given the freedom to make the imagery look unique, a sometimes more dramatic look that you might typically see in comedy.

Tia:

Both are great people, they let me be pretty free with my focus pulling which really gave me more creative freedom. The communication on set was very open, I always knew what the subject was and who I should be focused on.



How did you go about preparing for each scene? Did you storyboard far in advance, simply discover it in the moment, or a combination of both?

Brenna:

It was definitely a combination of both. Most of our car interiors were planned out far in advance, but there were spur-of-the-moment compositions too. There ~~were~~ were literally moments where we'd be driving around, see something we liked, and jump out of the car to shoot a scene. The dream sequence where Mallory and Whitney end up in the middle of a field is one of those moments – and I love how it turned out. That field wasn't necessarily in the plans, but it took us by surprise during a drive, and we absolutely had to capture it. Then there's locations like the sisters' house, for instance, where we were able to properly scout and map out how and where we wanted to shoot. Moments like the match-cut from the birthday party to dull COVID-era life required careful planning, for instance.



A great majority of the film is shot in a moving car. What was unique about that process and were there any unexpected hiccups or challenges involved?

Brenna:

The car! One of the biggest takeaways from this film is how comfortable I am now at shooting and lighting cars. We used a process trailer for all of our car footage, for safety and flexibility with lighting – an excellent and needed tool. One of the biggest unforeseen challenges with the car is just how much planning and mapping out it really takes to capture that much car footage. We had to be conscious of which direction we'd be driving, where the sun would be at any given time of day, how smooth or bumpy the roads were, and what would be seen outside of the windows. We definitely ran into some hiccups on the way – mostly with sun position and direction, which caused unforeseen inconsistencies in a couple shots – but for the most part we feel great about our decisions. We probably would've captured a larger variety of angles, but with the limited schedule, we had to capture what we could!

Tia:

Pulling focus on a moving car while the subject is also moving always makes things a little more challenging – but it made me better for it. We did get pulled over once because we were going too slow, but we had permission to be filming so the cops grabbed a picture with the cast and went on their way.



What would you say was the most difficult shot to get in the film and how did you go about achieving it?

Brenna:

That's a great question! I'd say the most difficult shot was probably the top-down, bird's-eye shot of Jamie, Blake, and Erin toward the end of the film. We actually ended up shooting it at two different locations! The first attempt just didn't work in the edit, and we weren't happy with it because we hadn't been able to get the camera into the position we wanted. We had to re-shoot it on a pickup day. We suspended the camera between two combo stands on a piece of speed rail, and hiked it up as high as we possibly could into a canopy of trees. It was our scrappy solution to not having a crane or jib, and I think in the end we definitely got the shot we'd been hoping for!

Tia:

It was definitely the overhead shot of the girls lying on the ground. The location was insane, back woods, no path, and we just didn't have the right equipment to get high enough above them. We ended up doing re-shoots for that scene and I think it turned out much better.

That or the dance scene on the salt flats. Everyone was moving so fast, it was my hardest time pulling focus. =

“I’m going to be forever grateful we decided to take advantage of [the Salt Flats], because it’s one of the most iconic sequences in the whole film.”

Brenna Empey



What was the most unexpected shot you achieved that wasn’t planned for at all?

Brenna:

It definitely doesn’t feel unexpected in the finished film, but surprisingly, the dancing scene wasn’t originally going to take place at the Salt Flats! Stephen, Mallory and I had a discussion during pre-production about the merits and challenges of a road trip movie. One thing that kept coming up was landscape – we

shot this film in Utah, a gorgeous state with a wealth of unique scenery. We wanted to take advantage of the natural beauty we'd have easy access to, and that included the Salt Flats, so we had the thought to move the dancing scene there. I'm going to be forever grateful we decided to take advantage of that location, because it's one of the most iconic sequences in the whole film.



What was it like working with Mallory Everton and Whitney Call? Was it just endless fun on set?

Brenna:

Short answer, yes! We kept the work balanced with fun.

Tia:

They were very professional and we all put work first but they always had so much energy and great attitudes. It felt like we were all there just to have fun sometimes.

“We made some mistakes, but overall we tried to be clever and logical in how we shot this film, working with a light source we had no control over.”



From your experience, how does shooting a road trip comedy differ from other genres?

Brenna:

Well, the biggest thing is that you're not necessarily working with lights – you're working with the sun, and you're working with weather. It's a whole different ball game! We had very few scenes in an interior location, and that meant we had to do a lot of planning based on time of day, sun position, and weather. We had endless discussions asking, when do we need this scene to take place? Sunset? Dusk? Early morning? Midday? And then we'd have to design our schedule based on that. Movies aren't shot chronologically, and typically schedules are made based on makeup, wardrobe, art, cast availability, and so forth. It's not all the time that a schedule is created around the sun, and it was a challenge in some ways. I learned a ton and got pretty handy with the Helios app, which gives you a sun map based on date, time, and season at any given location. We made some mistakes, but overall we tried to be clever and logical in how we shot this film, working with a light source we had no control over.

Tia:

Every job is different, even among the same genres. But I like the new locations and watching the story progress across the state with them. There's no sense of familiarity which is exciting to me. I love seeing something I've never seen before.



How close does the final cut match up to your initial vision for how the film would look? Are there any positive differences in the end that you didn't expect?

Brenna:

The coloring! I tend to prefer more subdued color grades, with a lot of shift toward the monochromatic, but that type of grade just didn't fit the language of this film. We settled on poppy, fun colors, a lot of that stemming from wanting to embrace the fresh landscapes that make this film special. We loved Whitney's pink hair, the red rocks, green trees, blue sky, all of that. Toning down that inherent vividness would have felt like a shame.



If you had to go back and re-shoot the entire film again, is there anything you would do differently based on what you learned this first time around?

Brenna:

I think I share this sentiment with Stephen and Mallory – if we were to do it again, we definitely would've shot most, if not all, of our driving sequences on a green screen with a different type of car setup. It was fun to shoot on real roads with real scenery, but it was also incredibly time-consuming and challenging.

Tia:

With the same budget and crew size? For me, no. Though, I'm sure when I see it on the big screen I'll see some mistakes or areas where I would want a re-do, just so I could do better. But I'm happy with the first time. And I think everyone did their absolute best, so how could you really improve on that?

“It wasn’t made to make money or try any win awards. It was made because the creators wanted to make it — and that’s some of the best entertainment and art sometimes.”

Tia Rosenlof



What do you hope audiences take away most from the film?

Brenna:

Laughter is the best medicine!

Tia:

It's just a fun film made by great people. And that these types of films are made to bring up people's spirits. It wasn't made to make money or try any win awards. It was made because the creators wanted to make it – and that's some of the best entertainment and art sometimes.



Stop and Go is now available on-demand. To learn more, [visit here](#).

LISTEN TO BRENNA EMPEY & TIA ROSENLOF ON THE SORØ FILMS PODCAST

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