

Ben Stiller produces a new show about a strange reality in which one person's escape is another's prison.

by Paige Bergen / Quotes Courtesy of

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“Who are you?” are the first words spoken in Dan Erickson's fascinating new Apple TV+ Original Show, *Severance*, and for the characters in it, the answer is not so easily found. Starring Adam Scott as Mark S., we follow this character's journey inside and outside the walls of the oppressive and all-powerful Lumon, a company where no one really knows what they do except for the fact that they sever their employees' brains so two separate versions of themselves may exist – one living life as a regular Joe out in the real world and the other trapped in an endless cycle of work until their “outie,” as the show's characters refer to it, resigns or quits or gets fired and their “innie” ceases to exist. But that's true of any job, right?

The alienating and yet all-too-familiar world of office life in *Severance* is portrayed by cinematographer, Jessica Lee Gagné. With an eye for Swiss architecture in mind, the set became an eerie, sharp-cornered playground to shoot scenes in. That, combined with super wide-angle lenses, created an ominous atmosphere in this static prison. “We wanted them to feel like they were being watched. We use remote camera heads a lot, so movements don't feel human,” says Gagné.

One might think that a show based half the time inside an office could easily become dull and monotonous, boring even the artists creating it. However, according to Gagné, the opposite is true: “[The office] is the best set. It was so photogenic. You could drop the camera anywhere and you'd have a shot. The green on the carpet helped create contrast, which would create shape — the awkwardness of it, the shapes.” Gagné goes on to thank the props team by saying, “Cat Miler is the most amazing props person I've ever worked with. Even the desk — that's a \$100,000 desk... stands on one foot, just

one support in the middle. And all those dividers are on pulleys. Our producer is calling it the diamond desk.”

The characters’ supervisor, Mr. Milchick, prowls around this “diamond desk,” surveying his underlings with a bobcat smile hidden behind an antique camera throughout various scenes. The actor who plays Milchick, Tramell Tillman, learned how to operate this camera with care and precision. “I had camera coaching where I sat with our props coordinators and they told me how to hold it, the angles in which to hold it, what the shutter does, how you have to flip it and which button to press, everything,” says Tillman, “Ben [Stiller] made sure it was very authentic, because if it wasn’t right and I held it at a different angle, or if I didn’t flick the lever to make it switch to catch the flash, then we had to do the shot again.”

Shooting scenes outside of Lumon’s walls, shots are captured by hand that masterfully creates the sinister feeling of being watched, while also allowing for more human moments with the use of close-ups. “There’s definitely a surveillance vibe on the outside; it’s just much more old-school, like a ’70s spy thriller,” Gagné says, “When you’re using a wide lens inside the office versus a long lens outside the office and you do a close-up, you’re changing your human perspective with regards to this person. When you’re wide, the camera’s closer. So that’s going to emphasize that energy, that proximity, that paranoia, because you’re physically with them. The longer the lens is, the more of a voyeur you are. The more distance you have, the less physically, emotionally implicated you are with a system, with a situation.”

As events unfold, Mark S. eventually finds himself in his outie’s Brother in Law’s house. Whereas all the other sets in and outside the office are coolly lit, this set is not. It is warm. It is home. It is salvation. However, Stiller prefers to sing the blues, says Gagné: “Ben [Stiller] doesn’t like yellow. The guy loves cold things. I love warmth... Ben hates tungsten, so I try to sneak it in. It’s a constant battle between us.”

Battles can be bloody, but in the end, rewarding. In this case, the carnage comes in the form of fluorescent lights, long lab-rat hallways, and scared people gaining courage to break out of the maze.