



# The Handmaid's Tale

Supervising sound editor Jane Tattersall builds a sonic dystopia for Hulu's new original series.

by Jennifer Walden

Hulu's new original series *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, is set in a dystopian future in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead. The United States' democratic government has been overthrown. Women are stripped of their rights, and no longer have control over their lives or their bodies. Any woman able to bear children is re-educated and sent into service as a 'Handmaid,' a surrogate for an important family wherein the wife is unable to conceive. In the series, a Handmaid named Offred (Elizabeth Moss) shares the story of her previous life and her current existence in Gilead.

The state of Gilead is meant to be purer than that of the past era — both ethically and environmentally. The world has changed from freewheeling and chaotic to strictly regimented. "In Gilead, it's like being in an old-fashioned idyllic world. We have birds chirping happily. There's no noise

pollution. You see cars drive by, but they're electric instead of having gas engines. The thought is that the world became very polluted and so Gilead has worked hard to create inventions that are more energy efficient," says supervising sound editor Jane Tattersall, at Tattersall Sound & Picture in Toronto, Ontario.

The house that Offred lives in looks like an old-fashioned Victorian home, with lots of wood and glass. There is a large kitchen with a large table, but it has modern appliances like a dishwasher and a refrigerator. "They're in the modern era, with modern appliances, which you hear," says Tattersall. "The women who work in the house are called Marthas. They dress in conservative, somewhat dowdy clothes. But it's not a period show. They look very puritan but they're not pumping water by hand or anything."

In contrast, the world of Offred's memories

is alive with music playing and people laughing. Executive producers Bruce Miller and Reed Morano wanted that past to sound boisterous and free. "There were no restrictions on people and so they just lived as they wanted. It's a very busy, lively world. When we cut to Gilead it is very controlled. It's very pretty but it is very stark," says Tattersall.

Before starting on the show, Tattersall met with Miller, Morano (who also directed the first three episodes), and MGM executive Warren Littlefield to go through the first episode and discuss key concepts for sound. She says, "It was absolutely fascinating that three different roles of executives/producers gave almost a whole day and all talked so intensely about sound. They had very strong opinions. They were very enthusiastic about what we should do. They wanted us to explore where sound could go, to be bold and not be tentative when putting sounds in. They wanted it to be an acoustically visceral experience for the audience. I've never had that come from such an executive level, that much knowledge of and enthusiasm for the power of sound. It was the coolest thing."

Also in attendance were the re-recording mixers Lou Solakofski (music/dialogue) and Joe Morrow (sound effects/Foley/backgrounds), dialogue supervisor David McCallum, co-executive producer Sheila Hockin from Take 5 Productions, music supervisor Michael Perlmutter, and the rest of the sound team.

One of the initial questions they discussed was what to do for the flashback transitions. Offred spends a lot of time alone in her room, reflecting, especially in the first episode. She jumps to past experiences, either her own memories or how she imagines other's experiences to be. "The kind of cliché thing to do for a flashback is to make it sound a bit echoey. Reed Morano said that she likes reverb but she didn't want it to sound too cliché. So she asked if we could use something that was like reverb but not reverb," says Tattersall.

Morano referenced a sound that



Elizabeth Moss stars as Offred



Capturing Steadicam footage on location



Yvonne Strahovski stars as Serena Joy

Images courtesy of Hulu





Left to right: Andrea Rusch [assistant mixer], Dale Sheldrake [ADR editor], Lou Solakofski [dialogue & music re-recording mixer], Sheila Hockin [producer], Krystin Hunter [assistant dialogue editor], Jane Tattersall [sound supervisor & sound designer/sound editor], David McCallum [dialogue supervisor], Joe Morrow [fx & foley re-recording mixer], Brennan Mercer [sound designer & sound fx editor], Kathryn Blythe [post coordinator], Corie Cuddeon [post-production supervisor], & David Caporale [Foley editor & assistant sound fx editor] in front



Offred (Elisabeth Moss) remembers a happier time with her daughter in a flashback sequence



Janine (Madeline Brewer) arrives with Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd)

she heard musician Panda Bear use in the "Tropic of Cancer" video on YouTube. Tattersall describes it as "a wind-type sound that was probably made from a musical instrument as opposed to being a real wind sound. It's this tonal yet natural sound, very evocative of loneliness." Tattersall created a similar sound to help distinguish the flashback transitions throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Sometimes a sonic aspect of the incoming flashback will precede the cut — not just a sound from the scene but a bold and emphatic design element with a touch of reverb to help mark the transition. Tattersall says, "Reed [Morano] wasn't afraid of using creative sound design, for example that wind sound. There were other sounds too, like rumbles, tones, crackling static and cigarette burning sounds, and even electronic sounds."

Tattersall, who worked with sound designer Brennan Mercer, describes the extensive flashbacks in Episode 3: "It's all about brutality and pain. In the present world, a Handmaid is being punished for disobeying the rules. The sequences cut back and forth between that and the past where we see the gradual stripping away of the identity of women as individuals. There's a big riot and an attack on the demonstra-



Shooting a scene with actress Ann Dowd

tors by the authorities who have taken over the government. We return to the present and see the Handmaid in court where she is sentenced and taken to her place of punishment. Then you see what happens to her. It's very brutal and shocking but it's not graphic. It's very serious. The sound underlines the brutality, yet the present, which is quiet and peaceful, sounds no less brutal," says Tattersall.

In some cases, the sound team could pre-lap source music from the upcoming scene over the transition. For example, in the first episode, Offred is in Gilead, sitting in her room and thinking about the past. She remembers a time in college when she, her close friend Moira (Samira Wiley), and a group of friends are in a park, smoking weed and listening to music on a boombox. "They are all laughing and talking about this woman that Moira has met, who she is kind of infatuated with. Offred (formerly June) and Moira are laughing and giggly. The music from the boombox precedes the scene and then it continues through her memory," says Tattersall. "Everyone wanted the music to be really loud and give energy and vitality to the memory, so we had to do a music edit so that the lyrics didn't conflict with the dialogue between Offred



The handmaids participate in a shaming circle



Shooting a close-up shot of Elisabeth Moss





Ofglen (Alexis Bledel) and Offred (Elisabeth Moss) shop for groceries



Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) lectures Offred (Elisabeth Moss)



Joseph Fiennes stars as The Commander

and Moira. The music and the dialogue gave the scene a messy, free quality that is totally missing in quiet, controlled Gilead."

In addition to Offred's flashbacks, the audience hears a running commentary of her thoughts. There are layers of voice-over, from the thoughts she's thinking to insights that help inform the viewer. At times, Offred interrupts her voice-over by speaking out loud, and occasionally what she's saying is intentionally contradicted by her voice-over. "There is quite a lot of voice-over. It's a signature of the series, and reflects the book. It was a complicated dialogue job," attests Tattersall. "The idea behind the voice-over is that Offred has recorded her story using a cassette recorder and so the sound quality of the voice-over is evocative of a cassette tape. It's a little bit low-tech sounding but the processing is very subtle," she adds. "Her voice quality is still rich."

The sound team initially discussed recording the voice-over to a cassette tape, and then playing that back. Re-recording mixer Solakofski even acquired a tape recorder for that purpose but it never got used. Instead, dialogue supervisor McCallum had the voice-over recorded using three different mics: a large diaphragm condenser mic traditionally used for voice-overs, a shotgun mic, and a lavalier mic to give Solakofski several options to work with on the dub stage. "We experimented and then in the end, we went with two Schoeps boom mics, one close and one a little more distant because the large diaphragm mic was just so close-up and sounded too much like traditional VO. Lou [Solakofski] came up with a sound that everyone was happy with. The processing was determined on the first episode and carried throughout the season," Tattersall says.

The series offered great opportunities to showcase Foley, especially in the first episode, since Offred's room and the house are so quiet. It's an old house with creaking floors, so as Offred walks down the stairs there are the sounds of her footfalls

and distinctive stair creaks, which were achieved using a combination of Foley and sound effects. "In the first episode, there's a close-up of Offred's hand on the banister and it's touching the wood as she descends. You absolutely want to hear that. That was Foley," says Tattersall. "Offred's life is so circumscribed and contained so that each movement, each touch, we wanted the audience to really feel that and to know what it is like for her."

For Foley, Tattersall turned to Footsteps Post Production located north of Toronto in Uxbridge, Ontario, and Foley supervisor David Caporale. As part of their coverage, they created specific footstep sounds, from the very precise and controlled clicking of high heels worn by the Commander's wife to the unsexy, clumpy boots of the Handmaids. In the edit, Tattersall often combines the Foley with the production sound "because people can get very attached to their production sound,"

she says. "We line up the Foley to be exactly in sync with the production sound so that we can use both. We want precision and detail from Foley and the very real sounds from production sound."

Once the editorial was completed on an episode, Tattersall turned it over to re-recording mixers Solakofski and Morrow. For the first episode, Morano, Hockin, and Miller attended the playback. Series composer Adam Taylor was also in attendance. Everyone from the producers to the mixers felt it was important for the composer to be there, given how significant an effect music can have on the tone and feeling of a drama. "We thought it would be beneficial for Adam [Taylor] to meet the people who were going to be mixing his music into the other sounds. We wanted to have a good dialogue going between all of us and allow him to trust us with his score," she says.

Each episode of *The Hand-*

*maid's Tale* is quite different from the others, both in storytelling and in sound requirements, notes Tattersall. "I got such a pleasure from sitting down and watching the next episode. You get totally caught up in the story. Then you have to go back and start thinking about what the sound can do. Everyone really felt that the sound was important for the story and not just a necessary ingredient to get the show done. It was very satisfying," she concludes. 🎧