Worldwide Producing Partners

an interview with Valerie and Simon Griffith, Blue Moon Productions

also

THE ICE MAN COMETH
by Bradley M. Look

FLY, CAMERA, ACTION
by Paul Adams

BEHIND THE SCENES AT HBO
by David Heuring
As if digital capture didn’t have enough challenges already.

KODAK VISION3 250D Color Negative Film 5207/7207 is the newest member of the KODAK VISION3 Film platform. Offering the highest resolution available, VISION3 Films continue to raise the bar with unrivaled highlight latitude and reduced grain in shadows for greater flexibility and control in post. Combine that with film’s proven archival capabilities and you have the state-of-the-art image capture medium that others can only aspire to. Why try to emulate film when you can have the real thing? Film. No compromise. Learn more at www.kodak.com/go/250D
SONY NEW XDCA M HD422 SERIES
The new PDW-F800 CineAlta® camcorder and PDW-F1000 deck expand the capabilities of the MPEG HD422 codec, with both offering a frame rate of 23.98P natively in 1080 mode and multi-format recording flexibility as standard - including standard-definition recording to support legacy formats (MPEG IMX, DVCAM/bm) and 4:2:2:1 HD content. They also provide multi-format (1080/720P) recording, as well as HD/SD conversion and cross-conversion during playback between 1080i and 720P. Users can record HD content (approximately 95 minutes at 50 Mbps) to the dual-layer SOG version of Sony's optical Professional Disc™ media, model PFDS20LA. The camera and deck can also handle content on P2F-25A single layer discs.

ANTON-BAUER GOLD MOUNT TO SONY PMW-EX3
The GR-EX3 on-camera Gold Mount allows Anton/Bauer’s Dionic 90 or Hytron 50 battery, extending the camera’s run times and improving balance. The GR-EX3 also comes standard with an Anton/Bauer PowerTap connector, which allows the powering of an on-camera light, wireless receiver, or any other 12V accessory. The 90 Wh, 14.4V Lithium-Ion Dionic 90 provides up to 6.5 hours of run time while the Hytron 50 battery offers up to 3.5 hours.

FUJINON PL MOUNT ZOOM LENSES
The Fujinon 18-85mm T2.0 (Model Number HK47 X18F) are the first of the PL Mount zoom lenses in the series introduced. Three other zoom lenses in the PL series include: the 14.5-45mm T2.0, 24-180mm T2.6, and 75-400mm T2.8 – T4.0 - with an anticipated delivery of December 2009. Fujinon’s PL Series was developed with an advanced optics design to maximize image capture capabilities of current and rapidly emerging 35mm motion picture film and digital cinematography cameras.

CONGRESS GOES HD
Professional Products Inc. has completed Phase I of the U.S. House of Representatives high-definition video production control room upgrade project for the House Recording Studio located in the new Capitol Visitor’s Center in Washington, D.C. The primary goal of the system is to record-live archive live events within the House. The production control room consists of a 4 M/E HD production switcher, a 24 channel audio console, two HD character generators, and a multi-image video production monitor system that consists of 10 57-inch LCD display monitors and a video processor. Existing HRS HD cameras, remote camera controllers, and microphones are integrated into the control room.

PANASONIC LOWER COST P2 CARDS
Panasonic announced a new line of P2 solid-state memory cards designed to significantly reduce the cost of the P2 file based workflow. The new E-Series includes 16GB (model AJ-P2E016A), 32GB (model AJ-P2E032A) and 64GB (model AJ-P2E064A) P2 memory cards, which provide superior quality recording for an average of five years of normal operation. Incorporating a newly-developed technology, E Series P2 cards transfer recorded content at even higher speeds (up to 1.2Gbps) than current longer life models. Built with an aluminum die cast casing, P2 cards provide superior durability compared to plastic-based memory cards. When recorded once daily, at full capacity (100%), the cards will continue to record for up to ten years. The 16GB and 32GB E-Series P2 cards will have a suggested list price of $420 and $460 respectively. The 64GB E-Series P2 card will be available in August at a suggested list price of $998.

PANASONIC AV-HS450 SWITCHER
Panasonic’s new addition to its popular multi-format switcher lineup, the new AV-HS450 HD/SD live switcher, is an expandable, high-performance switcher offering 16 SD/HD-SDI standard inputs with a unique built-in, dual-screen MultiViewer, multiple layers, four aux busses, two Picture-in-Pictures (PiP), shot memory, and 3D effects for both background and key inputs. With 16 built-in frame-synchronizers, four built-in up-converters, four SD/HD-SDI output ports and two scalable DVI outputs all as standard, the HS450 offers a powerful modular platform with expandable capabilities for enhanced performance and ease of operation. The HS450 switcher is designed to provide versatility, economical, 10-bit 4:2:2 HD or SD live switching for both live studio and mobile production systems worldwide.

HD UBQUITOUS GLOBALLY BY 2012
On a global basis, shipments of HD set-top boxes, HD camcorders, Blu-ray Disc players and video game consoles are expected to triple between now and 2012, as “HD becomes the ubiquitous video standard worldwide,” according to Suppli, a consultancy based in El Segundo, Calif. Global shipments of “HD-capable” equipment will rise to 202 million units by 2012 up from under 69 million in 2008. The study finds that within three years an estimated 53 percent of STBs, camcorders, video-disc players and game consoles being shipped globally will be HD-capable (up from under 22 percent in 2008).

If you dream of shooting 10-bit 4:2:2 master quality but believe you can’t afford it, the new AG-HPX300 P2 HD camcorder changes your dreams into reality. With a $10,700 list price, the HPX300 is the world’s first affordable 10-bit 4:2:2 camcorder. And there’s nothing even close. With a standard 17X interchangeable lens and newly-developed 3/3" 2.3 megapixel 3-MOS imagers, you can record 1080 and 720 HD as well as SD content using master-quality AVC-Intra, DVCPRO HD, DVCPRO50, DVCPRO and DV compression — all with the benefit of P2’s faster, independent frame, file-based workflow. As rich in creative features as it is in style, the HPX300’s innovative, low profile, shoulder-mount design lets you shoot freely through a beautiful, master-quality world. It’s no longer a dream. The HPX300 is here. Visit www.panasonic.com/p2hd.

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They first met in Fiji, re-acquainted in Denver, rendezvoused in London, backpacked across Africa, married in Italy, moved to New Zealand, relocated to Denver, and settled in Seattle. That's how Valerie and Simon Griffith, both avid travelers, became husband and wife and currently the producers of two separate PBS world travel series, Art Wolfe's Travels to the Edge and Rick Steves' Europe. David Thompson, Editor of HighDef Magazine interviewed them during a brief break in their schedule.

Tell me about your company.

V: (Valerie): You are looking at Blue Moon Productions as it consists of Simon and me. We are a very small video and television production company here in Seattle, Washington. Most recently we've been employed by Edge of the Earth Productions for Art Wolfe's Travels to the Edge, now in its second season. It's an HD travel adventure photography program.

S: (Simon): It is just the two of us and we're both freelance producers. I also have a pretty regular gig with Rick Steves doing a European travel series. I've been involved with eighty some-odd shows and still going strong. I do other freelance work as well and I also help on the Art Wolfe series. I help assist Val with some of the technical stuff.

V: We are a very small team. I have a producer role in the pre-production and post production.
The only thing that I don’t do is go out into the field with the crew. I hired the crew and, with Simon’s assistance, put together a great team of people. I help set up all the shoots and figure out the complicated travel arrangements. There is a lot of permitting to do along with visas. I am greatly assisted by Chris Eckhoff who is Art Wolfe’s Business Manager. On the series she’s the Executive Producer, wearing lots of hats working directly with Art. We work very closely together on the pre-production stuff. On post, I work with three different editors who edit all of the shows remotely at their homes. We go to various post facilities to finalize each episode. I don’t go on location other than vicariously, partially because our producing season is so short based on budgetary constraints.

S: I’m a freelance series producer for Rick Steves’ Europe and have been with him since 1999. I got my start with Rick when he asked me to go to an area that he was not familiar with which was Egypt and Israel. After that experience Rick wanted to know if I would like to do more shows. I’ve been with him ever since. It’s been a very interesting process because he’s very consistent and probably one of Public Television’s favorite personalities. He produces 13 new shows every two years like clockwork. It’s the same tiny little team including the cameraman, Rick and myself. Rick knows where he wants to go and he knows what he wants to do. In our case it is quite different from the Art Wolfe series. We go out with pre-written scripts or at least very good guidelines that we shoot from. We will often drop elements or add elements, but it is pretty organized. Because of the way Rick is and how he runs his business, we are extraordinarily efficient. We have a very low shooting ratio because we know what we’re after.

With such a tiny crew, I tend to do everything and our roles overlap. We all know what we’re looking for. I carry a ton of gear as well. Part of Rick’s travel philosophy is to teach his travelers to travel light, something he has us emulate. Considering that we are shooting in HD and HDCam with minimal lighting equipment, we are probably one of the lightest weight crews out there.

What are the similarities and differences in your freelance jobs?

V: The pre-production process for both of us is not too dissimilar and the post is very similar. Simon works from a fairly tidy script and...
the edit kind of falls into place. For Travels we take between 25 to 30 hours of footage and watch it all. Then it’s up to us to find some kind of rhythm and develop a story by pulling out all the best sound bites. We use music in a very innovative way. Then there are Art’s still images which we incorporate into our shows. We have this organic process that just sort of happens in the edit. That’s the part of it that I love the most. It’s all a surprise. Because I haven’t been in the field, I don’t know what we’re going to see. Sometimes it’s challenging and sometimes it is an embarrassment of riches. It just depends upon the location. Sometimes the weather has not cooperated. We shot a show up in Northern Australia in the Kimberley which is very rugged and it consists of beautiful deep gorges and red rock, but the light is only good for about an hour on each side of the day. The crew was traveling everywhere trying to shoot a show in two or three hours.

S: Rick Steves’ Europe is more of a formula show. One show that was a bit of an exception was a one hour special we did on Iran. That was the one case where it was closer to the manner in which Val produces. Usually Rick is a walking encyclopedia because he knows a place and has been there before. None of us knew what was around the corner. We were writing as we went, structuring it in the field. We ultimately put together a great show with extraordinary positive response.

V: The other thing that Simon does with Rick that’s interesting is something they call “scrubbing their script”. They’ll shoot and then they will be driving and they will be refining the script based on what they shot that day, based on what’s going on in Rick’s and Simon’s brain. It’s a constant process of polishing.

S: We also include the camera guy. There is never a down moment for the three of us. You are constantly revising the script. So when we come home we have a script that we can start editing to. When Val’s tapes come home it is just the beginning. Neither Art nor Rick participate in the editing process. They will both view rough cuts and make minor suggestions, but generally entrust the post process to others.

Has Art Wolfe’s Travels to the Edge always been produced in HD?

V: From the get-go it has been produced in HDV with Canon H1 cameras. They are small, light, rugged and durable which is the reason we use them. We use an interchangeable wide angle lens along with a regular lens. The first season we edited native so we stayed in HDV. The second season we reduced render times by converting to a smaller file format.
I was concerned how the HDV would hold up. What we discovered is that if a scene is fairly well lit and well shot, and you are not pushing HDV in terms of wanting to do lots of effects or composites, it does very well. The colorist we use at Victory Studios, Seattle is John Davidson and he has been very impressed with the consistent quality of the HDV footage. With his help, we’ve achieved the gorgeous images that the Art Wolfe series demands.

What are the pluses of using Highdef?

S: When you see a close up of a flower or other things in nature, the imagery is stunning, and wide shots hold up so much better than in standard definition.

V: It’s really important when your show is about a photographer and his images. The video has to look as good as the stills. We use a lot of stills in each episode, somewhere between 35 and 40 images. When you are dissolving off a still to moving footage you want it to be as seamless and beautiful as possible and with HD it does.

What does the future hold for both shows?

S: There are no guarantees, but Travels has been very well received and we’re looking forward to jumping back into production for season three in January 2010.

V: Rick Steves’ just keeps on going and going. He has this extraordinary synergistic relationship between his books, his TV show, his tours and it just all works together. We’re going to Eastern Europe later this spring for Casey’s real-time analysis and reaction of the situation. The P2-based Panasonic system was the visionaries behind the film.

Winston filmed primarily on the Panasonic HPX500, and paired it with the Fujinon 42x zoom for the long-lens wildlife photography in Yellowstone. Also, he says, “Our B-camera operator took advantage of the compact size and great image quality of the Panasonic HVX200 for the vente footage of Casey.”

The biggest challenge for the film crew was capturing Casey Anderson’s presenter-driven story along with the classic nature shots of the wild grizzlies — all in extraordinary harsh conditions. Winston says, “We were able to do this by always shooting on two cameras. One captured the grizzly bear behavior on a long lens, keeping a safe distance from the animals, and the other was for Casey’s real-time analysis and reaction of the situation. The P2-based Panasonic system worked great for this and stood up to the extreme conditions that included blizzards.”

Describing his most memorable moments during the shoot, Winston says, “Watching Casey literally ride Brutus, an 800 lb Grizzly he had raised from birth, was incredible, but the highlight for me was filming the bears in late summer as they fed on army cutworm moths. It was a spectacle of nature unlike any other, seeing as many as 20 bears in a single day!”

For more information on Casey Anderson, visit natgeotv.com/grizzly.
Recently, I was asked to participate with three other makeup artists to demonstrate our interpretation of extreme exposure to the cold for a Makeup Artist Craft meeting. All four of us came up with such varying degree of vision when the demonstrations were completed. It was a real learning experience for the audience members to watch as we applied our skills giving each of our models personal distinctive touches.

I decided that the experience was such an interesting one, that I should recreate a portion of that exposure makeup for this magazine, as the topic comes up so seldom.

First, I cleaned my model’s face with a mild astringent. Once this dried, I applied a light coating of Derma Shield over the entire face and neck. I then used a variety of temporary tattoo inks (i.e., such as Reel Creations, Premiere Products Skin Illustrator, and Temptu) and a soft filbert brush to contour the face and neck. (Photo 2) I first used a grayed purple that had been mixed with some blue. Isopropyl alcohol was mixed with some of Telesis Gelled Alcohol. This gave me more working time so that inks could be better blended on the skin. To further enhance the blue cast to the skin, Graftobian F/X Aire Teal was thinned out with alcohol and applied to the skin using a large round brush.

Further details were stippled on the face to create flush marks around the nose, the front of the cheeks, as well as on the ears. Using a small 000 pointed brush, broken veins were added on top of the stippled areas. The face was further enhanced with broken highlights and airbrush stipple.

Moving on, it was now time to seal the makeup with a light misting of Green Marble Sealer. This step was then followed by a light stipple of thinned down Gafquat to the entire face and neck using an orange stipple sponge. (Photo 3) This application imparts a chapped skin effect that subtly enhances the makeup.

Finally, it’s time to add the snow effects. Slightly thinned down Gafquat was brushed into the eyebrows using a disposable mascara wand. This was also done to the sideburns. A thin strip of clear plastic was glued to Clayton’s right earlobe. Gafquat squirted onto the plastic strip and allowed to drip so as to form a small icicle. (Photo 4) K-Y Jelly was stippled onto the face and neck, after which Ice Powder was pressed into it. A product called Ultra Ice was then spatulated into the hair. Next, hair spray was sprayed over the hair so that shredded plastic snow, which was sprinkled, would get affixed to Clayton’s hair. Clear mascara was brushed into the lashes before white flocking fibers were carefully added to them. A lace mustache that had been prepped the day before was glued on. The makeup was finished with a light spray of water, which caused the Ice Powder to swell and look as if Clayton had some wet snow stuck to his face.

Model Clayton Stang undergoes extreme exposure to the cold.
The media production department for the National Basketball Association’s Miami HEAT got its first taste of high-definition video this fall during the recent NBA Europe Live Tour, a series of exhibition games the league organized to expand the sport’s visibility to international audiences.

Recognizing the opportunity to capture a unique moment in the franchise’s history, the department sent two ENG crews equipped with Sony XDCAM® HD and Sony’s HVR-Z1U HDV camcorders to document the entire trip. The HEAT played one game in Paris and in London, and the footage that was shot with the XDCAM PDW-F355 camcorder was used as an episode of Inside the HEAT, the team’s flagship anthology series that aired on Fox Sports Net’s regional network in the southeastern region and on NBA TV.

Their positive experience in Europe convinced the group that HD production was the right move for the future, according to Ed Filomia, Senior Director of Broadcast Services for the HEAT Group. They recently took delivery of Sony’s newest optical disc camcorder, the 2/3-inch XDCAM® HD422 PDW-700 camcorder, and the PDW-HD1500 deck, which Filomia said will become the group’s primary HD production system.

The HEAT Group first started using XDCAM standard-definition technology in 2005, during the team’s “Red Zone” playoff run that season. “We had a camera and a few decks that we used to shoot, archive and preserve those games, and we’ve been acquiring on the XDCAM platform ever since,” he said.

Filomia said that the workflow benefits of the XDCAM system have saved a lot of production time and resources over the years, but one of the technology’s biggest benefits is its long-term archival capabilities. “My ticket holders, my premium seat holders, are already living in an HD world,” Filomia said. “So it’s important that we keep them in that world when they’re here.”

A Few Good Tools

Writing about a few tools that make capturing images in HD a bit easier and more consistent provides me the chance to brag on some equipment I use in the field. First, all good HD begins with a common point of reference. DSC Labs Chroma Du Monde Chart has that covered. Next, I enjoy Zeiss and Fujinon for great glass. Behind the glass I prefer P200/1, R, F23, especially the F23. The only way to enjoy the great images is with a great HD monitor. eCinema has that covered especially with the new Pro-2310 and dare I say the DPX-2310. Now to the “itty bitty.” The sword in the hand of any good DP or DIT is the scope, a “must have” if quality is at all a concern. Leader’s LV380 has some amazing new ways to look at an image making you feel like Geordi from Star Trek with the cool glasses that see unlike anyone else on the bridge. Now if that’s not available at the rental house, likely they will have the LV375 that most are familiar with. Make sure to ask if it has the new Cinelite and Cinezone tools built-in.

Nothing moves quite like a camera in the hands of a good team on a Super Technocrane. When it comes to post, remember that it has a strong effect on the images you help create. So make sure your post folks understand the direction you are going. After that it always helps to go see the environment in which the DVD’s of your dailies will be viewed so the person that would fire you when the images don’t look good can be educated on the “dark room equals better images” concept. Edgewise is where I get my HDCAM and SR tape, Filmtools for the expendables and YesWatch for the wraptime. By the way, I am not paid for the plugs but I love the products and I’m happy to share.
What does a hummingbird see? To be able to view the world from any vantage point, to be omnipresent and inconspicuous at the same time, has been a Holy Grail. To capture that sensation, filmmakers have been using a variety of technologies over the years. A popular one is the eye-in-the-sky where a self-stabilizing, swivel-based camera is mounted onto a helicopter. While this method produces sweeping panned and tight shots, the helicopter’s propeller wash and noise level prevent the camera from getting us up close and personal.

Another technology widely used is a camera tracking system driven by a motor/pulley combination. Essentially, the camera travels along like a cable car as it tracks the action below. It’s limited in its range, but there are no downdrafts. Finally, there is the familiar boom and crane shot consisting of an articulated arm that can raise, lower, and swivel the camera through all planes in relation to the subject matter. Its only limitation is the length of the boom.

Stemming from this search for a hummingbird’s point of view emerged a new technology: Low Altitude Remote Controlled (LARC) HD video, consisting of HD cameras mounted on miniature electric helicopters. Vortex Aerial, spearheaded by Christopher Schuster, is at the forefront of LARC development. Following extensive flight testing and powered by the latest innovations in Lithium Polymer technology, the radio controlled aerial platform units are coupled to Panasonic and Sony HD broadcast cameras.

When a San Diego real estate developer wanted to promote his high rise, he opted for Vortex’s aerial 360 degree spherical panorama package. He wanted to bring the customer to the building’s interior, exterior, to the surrounding cityscape, to the streets below, and even to the azure skies above. He wanted to showcase his building within the context of a sparkling city. Using a broadcast quality camera mounted on one of Vortex’s remote controlled helicopters, we produced an immersive world which showcases the building in relation to all points around, below and above. For an added interactive feel, the CGI interior of a floor was coupled with exterior views to create a virtual world in which clients can fly in and out of a suite.

When the proprietor of a golf course wanted to showcase his sprawling 18-hole property, and capture the exhilaration a player gets from a well placed strike on a golf ball, he opted for the bird’s-eye-view package. The shoot was taken on a clear day with just the right atmospheric conditions. After touring the property for best possible angles, Vortex mounted a broadcast quality camera to the small remote helicopter and tracked an imaginary ball’s trajectory from the tee to the putting green. Other angles included a soaring shot from the interior confines of the club house climbing to a commanding elevation for a seamless bird’s-eye-view of the property.

Promoting a motocross race is a different story altogether. Although the electric choppers are deployable from any terrain and can outmaneuver their full scale counterparts without the noise or the prop wash, there is still the issue of real time through-the-lens monitoring. Vortex uses real time video down linking to wireless body-worn mobile video receivers to keep key personnel free to move about while focusing the cameras on their targets. This allows the operator control over the camera to take horizontal and vertical (and all points in between) tracking shots with maximum elevations of 400 feet and speeds of up to 60 mph. Although this is new, companies like National Geographic, DISCOVERY, ESPN, and SPEED are already using this technology for their programming.

For more information contact Paul Adams: vortexaerial@live.com; www.vortexaerial.com
Sony Drops FED for Good

Sony officially abandoned plans to purchase a plant and equipment to develop its Field Emission Display (FED) technology in February because it couldn’t locate funding for the equipment. Sony owned 37.8% of Field Emission Technologies (FET for short, Tokyo, Japan; www.fe-tech.co.jp). The company was spun out of Sony in 2006 and devoted to developing and releasing a commercial 26-inch FED TV by the end of this year. Sony reportedly has already begun liquidating its remaining FED assets.

The technology itself is superior to LCD in many ways, particularly high contrast levels and very fast response times. FED depends on the light emitted from electrons striking colored phosphor, the same principle as the display bench mark for half a century. CRTs. This emissive approach to displays is one of PDP and CRT emissive technologies, that is until OLED TVs have rendered the CRT-like technology unable to compete against the LCD manufacturing juggernaut with control rooms now stuck with LED backlight based designs might surprise Sony’s
devoted to developing and equipment to develop plans for such monitors but as Ken Werner pointed out back in September, “That conclusion might surprise Sony’s Professional Division, which is energetically promoting and widely distributing its BVM-L230 23-inch Professional Master LCD Monitor, which, at an MSRP of $25,000.” So in the end, the dramatic improvements in mainstream flat panel displays may have rendered the CRT-like quality technology unable to compete against the LCD manufacturing juggernaut with control rooms now stuck with the choice between relatively slower LED backlight based LCDs or PDP emissive technology, that is until OLED TVs hit the scene.

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The Real Story

by David Royle

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Nighttime is the realm of the unknown. Children are afraid of it, envisioning monstrous creatures under their beds. Criminals mask themselves in it, shrouding their actions in dark corners and deserted alleys. And as viewers learn from Animal Planet's new series Night—animals love it.

Okay, maybe not all animals, but as host and animal trainer Brandon McMillan explains, some of the world's most dangerous predators are nocturnal. In Night, McMillan is tasked with finding these creatures, hoping to catch a glimpse of the inner workings of nocturnal nature. To navigate through the darkness, he and his crew utilize technologies like thermal imaging cameras, military-grade night vision and infrared beacons, without sacrificing the quality of HD.

"Filming true HD meant we were hauling big, heavy, shoulder mount cameras through the harshest environments on the planet...in the dark," said videographer Clint Lealos. "Our first night in Peru, we set out on a journey to a salt lick deep in the jungle to find vampire bats. That meant slashing our way through the jungle with Panasonic HDX-900s on our backs. At that point, we would have been very happy to be shooting SD with DVX-100s, but we love to suffer for our craft."

With the night vision attachment adding six inches to the length of their 400mm lens, Lealos and the crew struggled with the cameras, but all for the aesthetic value of the series. The nighttime technologies, mixed with the series' graphics package, often invoke thoughts of a military reconnaissance mission, creating a gritty realism that's appealing to viewers. However, for host McMillan, the importance of these gadgets goes past aesthetics to a much more pragmatic reason—survival.

"Many nocturnal predators have natural night vision—including most big cats," said McMillan. "The night vision we use in the series is just an attempt to level the playing field with science."

For more information on Night please visit www.animalplanet.com.
Behind the Scenes at HBO

by David Heuring

HBO was the big winner at the 60th Annual Primetime Emmy Awards in September 2008. Ten of the 28 Emmys presented went to productions made by and aired on HBO, and the individuals who created those programs. The cable channel has been the perennial champ in the nominations race as well.

Cynthia Kanner is vice president/head of postproduction at HBO Films, with responsibility for original movie and miniseries productions. Kanner says that the quest for quality affects every decision, from hair and makeup to the choice of format and workflow. “Our methods begin with the decision to make really good films,” she says. “So when we’re choosing the best place to shoot a film, for example, the question is, ‘What is going to give us the look that is truest to the story,’ as opposed to, ‘Where can we shoot this the cheapest’ Of course, budget is a factor, but it’s a balancing act.”

“We put a lot of time and effort into understanding each project, to determine the right format to tell that particular story,” explains Kanner. “Generation Kill (2008), for example, was a big miniseries with lots of visual effects. We shot that on Super 16 because that allowed the cinematographer, Ivan Strasburg, to bring the cameras and the audience inside the Humvees.”

HBO’s use of the Super 16 film format dates to 2001, when director Frank Pierson and cinematographer Stephen Goldblatt, ASC, BSC collaborated on Conspiracy. "The workflow has improved significantly since then, especially the visual effects aspect,” says Kanner. “The stabilization technologies as well as some of the enhancement software and the improvements in film stock have alleviated many concerns.”

Recent examples of HBO original projects produced in the Super 16 format include Walkout, Life Support, Recount, Elizabeth, and the forthcoming Temple Grandin. Longford, a biographical film about a controversial British lord in the 1960s, is one example of several recent HBO films that also aired on the BBC. “We used the same workflow for Recount and Temple Grandin,” Kanner reveals. “They were both produced in Super 16 format, transferred to high definition for editing, and output to film. Making a production look spectacular is as much about how you light it as it is about which lenses you use, your set design is, and your costume design — all of those things. Oftentimes, you have to put so much effort into making HD not look like HD.”

“The Digital Dilemma report from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences says that it’s cheaper to archive on film than it is to archive in a digital format. We archive original camera negative, DI negative, or interpositive, and in some cases, internegative. Until there is a perfect digital archival format, how do you know if the machine is going to exist in seven to 10 years, let alone 25 or 35? After we go to all the trouble of licensing music, effects, clips and all of that, are we going to be able to access it? That’s why our policy with original films and miniseries is to deliver a film element.”

Another factor is the potential for future improvements in display and delivery systems. “Right now, our budgets only allow for 2K scans,” says Kanner. “But as 4K televisions and other devices approach, one wonders whether today’s DIs are going to look good enough.”

“We put a lot of care into our projects,” Kanner adds. “It’s not just about getting product out there. We really get to make films because we are passionate about them. So whether it’s designing a workflow, choosing a soundstage, or dealing with a DI house, the ultimate goal is to make something of quality.”

Above: Cynthia Kanner, vice president/head of post production at HBO Films.

Right: Actors Denis Leary (L) and Kevin Spacey (R) in a scene from Recount.

Photo by Gene Page/HBO

Photo by Paul Schiraldi

Queen Latifah (L) and Wendell Pierce (R) in a scene from Life Support.
The Weinstein Company (New York, NY) will produce a concert film based on Cheech and Chong's current “Light Up America” reunion tour and shot with Panasonic’s new VariCam 3700 (AJ-HPX3700). Two back-to-back concerts given in San Antonio, covered with eight VariCam 3700s and two AJ-HPX3000s, will comprise the majority of the finished feature-length doc.

At their peak in the 1970s, Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong represented the mainstream embodiment of the attitudes and lifestyles of the underground drug culture. “Light Up America” is the duo’s first stage show together in a quarter-century. The concert film is directed by Christian Charles, with Shane Hurlbut, whose credits include Swing Vote (with Kevin Costner), Semi-Pro (Will Ferrell), We Are Marshall (Matthew McConaughey) and Terminator: Salvation (Christian Bale), as Director of Photography.

All the concert footage was shot (in 1080/24p in AVC-Intra 100) on March 14 at the Majestic Theater in San Antonio, TX. The camcorders, rented from Abel Cine Tech, were set-up in full wireless configuration only four hours before the first show. “With the Cheech and Chong project, our objective was to impart a cinematic scale to a performance that is essentially two guys and two chairs,” said Charles. The VariCam 3700 teams VariCam’s renowned filmic look, variable frame rates, and subtle tone control with master-quality, 10-bit 4:2:2 AVC-Intra solid-state recording and a host of new features, including the Film Rec 600% gamma setting, which allows professionals to fully capture the camera’s extensive color range and detail, especially valuable for linear color correction in post production.

Jeff Clark, the Digital Imaging Technician on the project, utilized the HPX3700’s Film Rec 600% gamma to take full advantage of the AVC-Intra recording. “I used a DSC chart to paint the look and matrix, and was able to hold really good purples and red brick colors. The colorimetry in most cameras wouldn’t be up to that, but the HPX3700 made them look real pretty.”

Cheech and Chong’s Light Up America Tour

by Brian Cali

The VariCam 3700’s wide dynamic range assured optimum performance and latitude, despite lighting extremes and lack of time to balance exposure.
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