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## **‘Californication’ leaves no trail of tape**

### **Arri Alexa allows show to shoot on reusable memory cards**

By Peter Caranicas

Now shooting its fifth season, Showtime’s “Californication” is a case study of the huge technical changes rocking TV production.

Shot digitally from the outset, the dramedy, centered on the bad-boy novelist character played by David Duchovny, has adopted new types of cameras each year, going through three Sony HD models, then Panavision’s Genesis, and now, for season five, the Arri Alexa.

“Every time cameras got better, the producers let us upgrade,” said d.p. Mike Weaver, who has shot every episode except the pilot. He feels he’s finally reached the point where the cameras’ dynamic range—the ability to capture light and dark parts of an image in the same frame -- is close to that of film.

Another big change: the show no longer uses tape. Alexa “allowed us to wade into the waters of tapeless workflow,” said co-producer Tom Keefe, who’s also been on the show from the start. Everything is now recorded onto reusable memory cards.

“We shoot 14 minutes, pop the card out, pop a new one in, and continue,” said Keefe. To prevent any losses, the content on the first card is backed up twice before the card is used again.

In another stab at efficiency, following a cost analysis, producers decided to bring the dailies process inhouse and turned to FotoKem, the show’s post house, to rent a nextLAB unit. Keefe describes it as “a box on rollers” designed to streamline dailies, editorial and finishing for content that’s captured by increasingly popular data-centric cameras such as the Alexa, Red and Canon DSLR’s.

But while “Californication” has adopted cutting-edge technology for image-capture and dailies, it follows a more traditional path when it comes to color correction. Instead of adopting the trend of on-set coloring, Weaver prefers old-fashioned collaboration with the lab colorist, Tom Overton at FotoKem’s Keep Me Posted facility.

“When we started the show, we tried to color on-set before handing it off to Tom,” said Weaver. “But after a season, Tom said, ‘Honestly, what I’m doing here is undoing what you guys did.’ You couldn’t isolate the colors on-set. If you wanted to warm up a scene you had to put a stain over the entire frame. So this year I’m not doing any on-set colorizing at all. I’m handing the raw material over to Tom. He knows my eye.”

While on-set color grading doesn’t work for him, Weaver added that “a lot of guys do it because they want absolute control and they’re afraid of the producer getting involved, changing the look of something midstream.”

With five seasons behind it “Californication” will have 60 episodes in the can—but for Keefe it’s more like 120. After each Showtime episode is locked, “production” begins on a sanitized version for free TV, which entails dialog replacement of about 100 lines per episode with the voices of the original actors, all of whom have to be brought back into the studio.

“They’re not thrilled to do it,” said Keefe, “and there are a lot of elements to keep track of. For me it’s a gentle form of masochism.”