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Mike Weaver on 'Californication'

Cinematographer recounts tech changes over five seasons

By Peter Caranicas

This week's In Production column looks at "Californication," which is now shooting its fifth season. Cinematographer Mike Weaver and co-producer Tom Keefe comment on the rapidly evolving technologies used in the production and post-production of the Showtime dramedy, which stars Danny Duchovny as a Los Angeles novelist with a troubled life. Below are excerpts from the full interview with Weaver, who has shot every episode except for the pilot.

Peter Caranicas: Talk about the cameras you've used on the show since the beginning.

Mike Weaver: The first year we shot with the Sony F900, the second year we used the Sony F23 and the third year the F35. That one had the 35mm-size chip, so we could use 35 lenses and have that kind of depth of field. The fourth season we used the Panavision genesis and now we're using the Arri Alexa. Every time the cameras got better, production supported an upgrade.

PC: What does better mean to you? Resolution? Light sensitivity?

MW: For my money it's the dynamic range, which has improved every year. Alexa is hands-down the closest thing to film I've seen. And what I mean by dynamic range is highlights-to-black ratio: you can see out a window and still hold information inside the house, which is eight stops under what you're seeing outside. When we first started we had maybe a 2-to-4-stop latitude. Now we've got about 14. That's huge.

PC: Do you also shoot film now on other projects?

MW: I go back and forth from film to HD. Coming off of film's latitude and going back to HD was very frustrating until this season.

PC: How involved are you in the color grading on set?

MW: When we first started "Californication" we had a DIT (digital imaging technician) and tried to color on-set, then hand it off to Tom Overton, the color timer at Keep Me Posted. He's terrific and he's been on the show like me since day one. But after about a season or two, Tom and I sat down and talked. He said, "Honestly, what I'm doing in here is trying to undo what you guys did on set and start over."

PC: Did you feel the same way?

MW: Yes, I was frustrated by the onset coloring as well because you couldn't isolate the colors. If you wanted to warm up a scene you sort of put up a stain over the entire frame. Now, even though years have gone by and we have more latitude with the cameras and more color space in the technology, I'm not doing any colorizing on set at all. I do create a LUT (lookup table, which consist of data indicating how you want the film to look) that gives you some sense of contrast and color for what you're watching on set, but I'm basically handing raw material over to Tom. He knows my eye and it's been working great.

PC: If on-set color timing wasn't satisfactory at the beginning, why were you doing it?

MW: It was just the accepted thing. At that time you were laying it down on tape and trying to give everybody an idea of what you were looking for. I was new to HD. But when I said this is a waste of time, why are we bothering with it, we abandoned it. Then we would just colorize enough so you didn't have a dir or producer walking around saying, "why is there all this gray."

PC: Why do you think on-set color correction has gotten so popular?

MW: It's not something I personally see a need for but a lot of guys do because they want absolute control and they're afraid of the producer getting involved in changing things or changing the look somewhere in midstream.

PC: Do you do all your color work at Keep Me Posted?

MW: Yes, if I can get there. The timing of "Californication" is odd. Most shows you shoot, they edit, you go in and color it. But on this show we shoot it, they edit, and everybody goes away for six months. So if I'm available I'll go over there and take a look. And if there's something specific that needs attention, like a look for a flashback, I'm definitely involved. But generally they send me hi-res copies on Blu-ray and give me plenty of time for my notes.