

TECH TALK:

We know about Documentary on Digital video, but what about TV drama?
Production Notes from the DOP of "Blackfly (Season One)"

by Richard Stringer, CSC



In Nova Scotia with Digital Betacam on "Blackfly"

I spent my first summer in the new millennium in Nova Scotia shooting Salter Street's "Blackfly", a thirteen part comedy series for Global.

Being a new series, the budget was limited to \$300,000 per episode and a lot of that went to building a palisade fort and the many period costumes and props. Salter choose to shoot the series with widescreen Digital Betacam using Sony's 700WS camera. The line producer, Mike Mahoney, called me in as DOP/Operator because of my experience with film drama lighting combined with my video expertise on TV and corporate items. My stylized Mini DV video work on Discovery's "Exhibit A" has won CSC and Gemini awards.

The show is set in the 1780s at Fort Simpson Eaton (on Lake Superior somewhere). Ron James plays the title role as a "disaster prone opportunist", Colin Mochrie (Whose Line Is It?) plays a British officer, Richard Donat is the crazy fort commander, Shauna Black is his do-gooder daughter, James Kee is the Scottish shopkeeper, and Cheri Maracle runs the local bar. The directors I worked with were Michael Kennedy, Giles Walker, David Storey, Stephen Reynolds, and Andy Price.



Richard Stringer csc on set of “Blackfly” with James Kee (left) and Ron James (right)

I found working as DOP and operator on a fast paced, tightly budget series hard enough, but working in video made my job even more challenging. All my drama work in the past has been on film. I find today's film emulsions work very much like your eyes, which adjust to various levels of light. Video can be more susceptible to changes in light levels, especially in highlight areas (as with faces and brighter costumes) and therefore needs more lighting adjustment and control, especially in the complex world of drama where you have many subjects in a tight set and have to maintain critical lighting continuity. And exterior sunlight is very hard to control, especially when the DOP's preferred time of day is not a production management priority. In July and August, "high noon" was the look for most of the day. Also with film you just set the aperture - video cameras have many complex settings.

We only had one actor's stand-in for rehearsals. It would have been much better to have all characters represented in their costumes, especially with video - it just makes a tough lighting job tougher. But that's only one example of the problem with low budgets going hand in hand with the choice of video. Producers who choose video to save money, should really add extra shooting time, more prep time, and allow more budget room for other items that apply to video shoots -- but adding money to a low budget is a contradiction in terms!

Obviously, you must get the best image you can on set when working with video, so all light levels have to be as precise as possible. If a tight budget limits your setup time, you just can't get everything perfect. You do have some control in post with tape to tape adjustment, but not that much. With film, lighting can be quicker and simpler and the finesse in exposure adjustment comes later when transferring to tape. Of course, film and the transfer process cost more. On the 13 shows for Blackfly it would have cost \$250,000 more overall to have shot on 16mm film. I believe the new HDTV systems, which still costs less than film,

do give better tonal range in the highlights, so HD should be easier to work with.

On *Blackfly*, like some other Salter Street shows, we shot 16:9 widescreen while keeping the main action in the 4:3 format for today's telecasts. There are a lot of complications and misunderstandings with videotape widescreen formats. For instance, the resolution rating on a regular 4:3 Sony Digital Betacam is 850 but that drops to 680 for a 16:9 switchable camera which has to fit a narrower rectangle into the same space as the full 4:3. Then if you only use the inside part of the widescreen (the 4:3 section of that), then you are using even less of the CCD and the rating drops to 650. Now, 650 is still a lot better than several years ago, but there is a loss. It depends on what camera you are using but there can be differences with better resolution for either 16:9 or 4:3. The camera manufacturers are not clear on these specifications. This issue might be a problem if networks get fussy about resolution standards, especially with future HDTV transmission (which is the very reason why producers want to shoot a widescreen product). HDTV cameras use the same space as described above, but the chip's resolution is so high that even the 4:3 portion of the 16:9 picture exceeds the resolution of NTSC (our present standard).

In film, operators always shoot frame charts to confirm the show's format and to make sure the film to tape transfer framing is correct (sometimes this is called "rack leader"). Even in video, this is an excellent way of showing any cutoff from tape machines or monitors which can render a false and inaccurate framing. Some TV monitors show more on one side than another. With *Blackfly*, the VHS rushes were letterboxed, so directors appreciated my frame charts, which allowed them to mark 4:3 frame lines (or at least the corners) on their sets.

Salter Street and Global seemed happy with the result, especially once we settled into a satisfactory look for the show (they also added a "filmlook" process with the Avid Symphony). One of the problems in making the low cost route work on screen is that the next season the producers will simply say "lets stick with the video, it worked fine!". So by working hard to make the best of a difficult situation, I wonder whether I'm contributing to the concept that it "can be done" after all!

SIDE BAR -- HELPFUL HINTS

- As operator I always used an 8" colour monitor close to the camera. I could judge colour and lighting better than the B+W viewfinder and I had total freedom on dollies and pans (didn't have to keep my eye to the viewfinder).
- My assistant, Jamie Richie turned the camera on and off for me. Sometimes we missed a take - there is no obvious whirr and flicker with video! - you've got to watch tally lights, TC readout, or the cassette spindles to make sure you're actually rolling! There should a more positive on-off switch rather than the vague push button on the 700 camera.
- One time Jamie (working from the other side of the camera) hit the gain switch by mistake - so I decided to set the three gain switches to zero dB, to avoid a mistaken higher setting (this adds grain to the image). I found the camera rated at about 250 ASA in film terms.
- With film camera viewfinders, you can see beyond the frame to warn for incoming lights or boom poles. With the video camera you have almost no margin for error before something comes into the frame.
- We started using video zooms on the Sony 700 (a wide and a regular) but we found it impossible to get accurate focus (using the focus puller's method of distance settings by measurement). They are made for constant monitoring of focus by zooming in. So, we brought in a Canon "cine" style wide zoom lens which gave better results for focus - and also had much less "breathing" - a phenomenon of zoom like movement when changing focus. For long tele shots we just kept the regular video zoom.
- At least with video you see the final product on the monitor, which

is great for confirming the look with the director - "What you see is what you get ". This statement is not always 100% true - with the bad habit of monitor tweaking on set - but you also know "You can always get what you see"!

- We used a small Sony PD 150 Mini DV cam with 16:9 mode for some close up inserts and some special effects shots. It worked for quick cutaways (CU gun muzzle firing) but not on wider shots!

- I did alter camera settings in the menus a bit for a certain look, but when we brought in a second camera with no advance prep, we didn't have time to match it. Bad idea!

- We used very little soft filtration on the camera. To be able to play with a complete range of soft filters adds to the budget. Besides the producers didn't like the overly soft look. Fog on set was another budget issue - atmosphere smoke looked great on the set, but it took too much time and maintenance for our schedule. We shot two half hours in eight 10-11 hour days. We averaged 34 setups a day.

Find out more about Richard Stringer's work and articles at www.stringercam.com.