

# Post

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## COVER STORY - HDTV SERIES

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Each season, it seems more series are switching to HD, and this month *Post* caught up with a number of shows — one comedy, one sci-fi, and two dramas — that recently premiered in or made the switch to high definition.

There are a variety of choices out there for acquisition, and whether it's a release from Sony, Panasonic, Arri or Red, producers have their own reasons for acquiring footage digitally.

Some love the instant feedback that allows them to immediately see what they've shot on-set. Others like the high quality and flexibility that allows for push-ins and re-framing. And for some, digital acquisition is simply a lower-cost/no-sacrifice alternative to film.

### **NURSE JACKIE**

Nurse Jackie is a new Showtime series that stars Edie Falco as a dedicated but imperfect nurse who often takes matters into her own hands, despite ethics or

hospital policy. Throw in her dependence on pain killers and an affair with the hospital pharmacist in the break room, not to mention a family at home, and there's plenty of drama to keep things interesting.

Freelance camera operator Vanja Cernjul is director of photography for the series and has been on-board since episode 2. In fact, he was instrumental in selecting the camera for the HD series — Arri's D21 — which marks his own entry into HD production, having spent most of his career shooting film.

Post caught up with Cernjul right after he finished shooting Season 1, which began airing in June. "I'm a freelancer and I had a chance to work with Edie when she was a guest star on *30 Rock*," he explains. "That's how I met her. I think it was my work with *30 Rock* that got them interested [for this series]."

"My prior experience with HD was very limited. My background was mostly 35mm film and the only experience I had before this was a pilot I shot with the *Genesis* for CBS, and a pilot for ABC in Los Angeles called *Bad Mother's Handbook*."

Cernjul says the D21's optical viewfinder attracted him to the camera. "Because of my background with film, I wasn't used to lighting by the monitor. The optical viewfinder was a very important tool for me. Most HD cameras have digital viewfinders, which you can't see very much. They are not very reliable in terms of color and contrast. Basically, you can see what's in the frame and what's out of frame, so the optical viewfinder was something that immediately got me interested. I did a little test with the camera and I was very pleased with how the skin tones came out right from the camera, without being processed or anything."

He adds that the image the camera captured appeared to be the most flattering for the show's star.

Nurse Jackie shoots four days at Kaufman Astoria Studios and one day on location. For Season 2 the show gets a new stage that allows for more sets. The first season included only the large hospital set and Jackie's apartment.

"I was shooting everything," Cernjul says of the first season. "We had very little second unit. We had an insert unit because there are a lot of macro shots and surreal shots whenever Jackie was using drugs. So these shots were usually shot by my B camera operator, who then became a DP for inserts."

Nurse Jackie is a single-camera show, but three D21s are on hand at any given time. "We have three camera bodies and we used two whenever we could. The third body was basically a back-up body and a Steadicam body."

The Arri D21s are rented from Arri CSC, and footage is shot to Sony SRW-1 tape.

"We shot in Log C and the master is 4:4:4," says Cernjul. "Then we color correct in 4:2:2. We did a test and realized that it would be much easier for everybody and we didn't think we lost much information."

PostWorks in Manhattan handles picture and sound finishing on the series, including dailies, online and color correction. "It's like my second home now," jokes Cernjul.

The show is edited as a commercial-free, 30-minute episode. Colorist John Crowley uses Pandora Pogle to achieve the final look. The show is delivered as a 1080i master.

"One thing that we are hoping to do is spend more time on location," Cernjul says of the upcoming season. "We've also improved the monitoring situation. We are using Barco monitors, which, for me, is a great improvement. We started when CRTs were no longer available, and have been looking for the right monitors for a long time and now. We finally have something that we are happy with. They come closest to the CRT and now I feel that I am looking at the same image that colorist John Crowley is looking at."

### **THE CLEANER**

A&E's *The Cleaner*, which stars Benjamin Bratt as William Banks, was inspired by the true story of extreme interventionist Warren Boyd. The show, produced by CBS Paramount, centers around Bratt's recovering addict character, who is faced with balancing his efforts to help others get clean, with his own rocky personal life and the ghosts of his addictions. It recently concluded after its second season. Jay Silverman was an executive producer on the show, and is also closely tied to its concept, being involved with Warren Boyd in an

intervention that affected his own family. Today, Silverman operates his own commercial production company, Jay Silverman Productions ([www.JaySilverman.com](http://www.JaySilverman.com)) in Hollywood, which, in part, influenced the show's decision to shoot with the Red One digital cinema camera.

Silverman owns a Red One and saw a number of benefits in shooting with Red on Season 2, following a first season using the Panavision Genesis. "I was using [Red] to do TV commercials a year and a half ago, and when we were shooting Season 1, I brought it in and showed the guys and did a side-by-side [comparison] with the Genesis, and all of us were very impressed," he notes.

Silverman says the team was quite pleased with the Genesis and with the quality they achieved in Season 1, but with the show's second season came an increased challenge to cut costs while keeping quality high. The Red One, he says, seemed to be the answer.

"I am executive producer, and like any producer I am concerned with the bottom line," says Silverman. "When I introduced them to this camera, they were all in awe. One of the things that was huge was the 'umbilical cord' issue with the Genesis. There wasn't anybody who didn't agree that [the Red] was a hundred times easier to use. You can pull the camera off the tripod. The tether is a humongous disadvantage to a filmmaker who works impromptu. What filmmaker doesn't want to just grab a shot real quick?"

Because *The Cleaner* is a cable show, Silverman says the team had "no choice but to figure out ways to be economical. We didn't want to shoot Super 16, so I think shooting Genesis was a decision that was made when shooting the pilot. It was a look that we all thought would be great."

The *Cleaner* was shot with two cameras, and just the difference in rental cost between the Genesis and the Red was considerable.

Cameras were rented from Keslow Camera ([www.keslowcamera.com](http://www.keslowcamera.com)) in Culver City, CA, and the show was shot on the CBS/Radford lot. Silverman says a typical episode involved five days of shooting on the lot and two on location.

Denny Hall was director of photography for the show and says *The Cleaner* was the first time he worked with the Red One. "Myself, the producers, and the post staff were all extremely pleased with the results. I screened some tests shot with the Red camera at Keslow Camera in Los Angeles shortly before we started principal photography, and my interest was immediately piqued. It appeared to be a compact, user-friendly system, and with our seven-day schedule, that is what we needed to give the most possible time to our directors and actors."

The *Cleaner*'s sets included the main character's surf shop and home, a 300-foot facade that could be used for day or night shots, the large rehab center and a mini mall, which Silverman says actually doubled as production office space.

"If you know anything about episodic television, the most illustrious aspect of production would be to make every show look different," says Silverman. "You can really tell when shows are done on the cheap, because they never leave the stage. You see the same sets over and over again."

The show was cut in the production space on the lot by three editors working on Avid systems. Modern Videofilm ([www.mvfilm.com](http://www.mvfilm.com)) in Burbank helped with the workflow and prepared elements for the Avid edit. The studio also provided color correction. Final delivery was a 1080i show with a stereo mix.

And be it the Red or the Genesis, Silverman says the flexibility that these cameras offer is unlike anything he's seen in the 20 years he's spent shooting 35mm.

"Whether we are talking about *The Cleaner* or my own business — you shoot a show and you forgot to do an insert?" he suggests. "I just go downstairs and do it, and it looks exactly like the stuff we shot on the day of. That's just unheard of."

## DOLLHOUSE

DP Lisa Wiegand, who spends eight days shooting each episode of Fox's sci-fi series *Dollhouse*, took time out on a recent weekend to discuss the show, which is mid-way through production on its second season.

*Dollhouse* stars Eliza Dushku as a member of an illegal, underground group of individuals who've had their personalities wiped clean. These "Actives" are then imprinted with new personas and are hired by wealthy, powerful and connected clients to become whoever they deem necessary.

Much of the show takes place in the *Dollhouse*, where the Actives are programmed and reside during downtime. The show also follows them on location, during their engagements. Five days are spent on the lot and three days are used for location shoots.

Wiegand, who served as second unit DP on 24, has been working on *Dollhouse* since the last episode of the first season — an episode that never actually aired here in the States but appears in the DVD collection. The first season was shot on film, and that last episode — "Epitaph 1" — was shot using Sony PMW-EX3 XDCAM EX HD camcorders. The second season has since switched over to Panasonic AJ-HPX3700s, with footage being captured onto P2 cards.

"It has a totally new look," says Wiegand of Season 2. "I think last season was a little softer. This season has a lot more darkness to it. There's a lot more saturation of the colors and a lot more hand-held work. It's a more edgy feel in general."

The decision to switch to HD, she notes, stems from a number of reasons. "They wanted to be able to have a more immediate feel to the whole thing. They like the contrast and feel of HD, and having the more lightweight cameras. And they love having the ability to view HD monitors on-set and see what they are really getting while we are shooting. And, of course, budgetary reasons. I'm sure that has something to do with it, but I don't think it's the only reason."

The choice to use the Panasonic AJ-HPX3700 was Wiegand's alone. "It was all driven by me personally," she notes. "The producers didn't really know what system they wanted to go with. There were pluses and minuses for the EX3s, [but] I didn't feel that a prosumer-based system was reliable enough to sustain [this] type of work."

The Sony F23 was tested, but they wanted something with more freedom and lighter weight. Wiegand also likes the flesh tones captured with the Panasonic camera.

The show shoots 1080p, and the P2 card's capacity has never been an issue. "We get 40 minutes on a card and with film you get 10 minutes on a roll, so it's definitely not an issue at all. We rarely get to the point where we've gone the full 40 minutes. We'll be downloading stuff before that."

*Dollhouse* shoots on four stages at Fox, and Stage 19 is the largest, with the multi-story *Dollhouse* seeing much of the action. Camera set-ups include a crane, a Steadicam, handhelds and dollies. The show rents two 3700s from Panavision Hollywood, and when more cameras are required, they rent Panasonic HPX-3000s, which also capture to P2 media.

All back-up is to hard drives. One drive stays in the camera department and one goes to post. The show is cut at offices on the Fox lot using Avids. Burbank's Level 3 Post ([www.level3post.com](http://www.level3post.com)) handles the online and color timing, which can be a challenge considering how dark they try to go. "[Senior colorist] Larry Field times all of my episodes," says Wiegand. "Some of the darker stuff can be difficult, and we do try to go very, very dark, so [I'm] sort of trying to get to that communication point with Larry where I can say, 'How dark is dark?'"

VFX for Season 2 are slightly less in number, says Wiegand. The Imprint Chair, where Actives are programmed is one reoccurring effect. The chair is lit with blue LEDs, and Wiegand says the lights are not full spectrum, requiring further effects.

"We've been experimenting with rear-screen projection for driving work," she adds. "There's a good amount of greenscreen." While most of the monitor graphics are shot practically, the large screen that drops down from the ceiling in Topher Brink's (played by Fran Kranz) office, the Dollhouse's genius programmer, is simply a piece of glass that needs effects applied.

### **THE SUITE LIFE ON DECK**

Disney Channel's comedic *The Suite Life On Deck* is a spin-off of *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, starring twins Dylan and Cole Sprouse. The show ran for three years, highlighting the boys' antics at a fictitious luxury hotel in Boston, where their mother was a lounge singer. On Deck takes the boys, along with young hotel heiress London Tipton (Brenda Song) and hotel manager Mr. Moseby (Phill Lewis) from the show's luxury hotel setting to that of a cruise ship, where they've signed up for a semester at sea.

*The Suite Life On Deck* recently entered its second season. Frank Sackett is an associate producer for the show and had a few days off from shooting this season's 28 episodes (there were 21 in the first season!) when we caught up with him.

"I've worked in HD before," he says of the show's transition this season. "Walter Barnett, who is the line producer, did a pilot and did a little test, and was able to flesh out the cameras at the facility. It's been pretty painless and we're really happy with the final product."

*The Suite Life On Deck* is shot at Hollywood Center Studios, and according to VP of engineering David Maxwell, the four camera systems used are Sony HDC 1500s with the HDCU1000 control unit and RCP920 remote panel. The cameras are controlled by the MSU950 master set-up unit.

Disney, says Maxwell, requires the 23.98PsF format, so the show is recorded using Sony HDWM2000 HDCAM HD VTRs. A Ross QMDX Vision 4 MLE switcher is used along with a Yamaha PM1D digital mixer for managing the show's audio.

The show is delivered as just one master, "So we have to do the best of both worlds," notes Sackett of producing a 16x9 that includes a 4x3-friendly version. "We were adamant that, on-stage, we set up all the monitors so that we shot and composed 4x3, and protected 16x9. We're trying to keep all of the action within the 4x3 space. We protect and make sure there is no equipment in the 16x9.

"Jerry Dunn, who does our set design, was pretty quick in picking up any of the nuances that would be picked up in high definition," Sackett continues. "We've assembled 16 episodes so far, and per episode, I might have two or three little fixes where I have to do a blow up of something that might have sneaked in the 16x9."

The show shoots all day Thursday and part of the day Friday in front of a live audience, who get to see early cuts from the day before. "It's kind of like a play," says Sackett. "We do everything in order and it brings a lot of energy to the set, and the actors are always a lot better in front of an audience."

Most of the action takes place on the ship's enormous sky deck, though there is also a lobby set and two cabins that get re-dressed as necessary. All of the shooting is done on-set, and one episode for this season proved to be particularly challenging, when the show's stars fall off the boat and end up on an island.

"It's a very complicated episode," he notes, which includes shooting a lifeboat scene surrounded by water, "and it's a two-parter. We did not shoot that in front of an audience."

Visual effects for the show are minimal, with most involving stock shots of a Disney cruise ship, which needs to be places in different ports.

"Per episode, we have three to eight stock shots, and if they are out to sea, we have a bank of about 12 shots that we can use — day and night," says Sackett. "I just finished a Swedish episode and I needed to find stock to put the boat in Sweden and London. We've put the boat in places where there aren't usually big ships," Sackett explains.

As for the budget challenges that come when transitioning to HD, Sackett says the team "had to open it up a little bit this year. They told me, what I did in SD, I have to do in HD. Some things are a little easier, as far as visual effects. It's easier working in a 24-frame world, but at 16x9, you have more area to cover. They are always tightening the belts on us. Next season, we'll already have a lot of our stock shots done."

Post for the show switched studios this season: they are now using Westwind Media ([www.wwm.tv](http://www.wwm.tv)) in Burbank for video assembly. Audio has been posting at Larson Sound for the past three years.

Offline is performed at *The Suite Life On Deck* headquarters, with editor Jim Miley working on an Avid Meridien 10+ system. The offline is cut as a 30-frame project, and when it is assembled in Avid Symphony Nitris, it's converted to the 24-frame format. Audio is mixed in 5.1. Final delivery is an HDCAM master. The show is delivered long before it actually airs, allowing time for foreign language dubbing.