

BY PETER  
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# THE RIGHT MEDICINE

## Gale Tattersall Provides Visual Continuity on *House*

**J**ust as feature films are considered a director's medium, an episodic TV series belongs to the creative team formed by the writer/producers who conceived the show and successfully pitched it to the network that airs it. But with various directors helming different episodes, the producers often depend on a cinematographer to provide visual and stylistic continuity. Such is the case

with the Fox network's *House*, the popular medical drama starring Hugh Laurie that starts its fifth season in the fall.

Gale Tattersall has served as the cinematographer on about 40 episodes. A seasoned veteran who has shot dozens of high-profile commercials and a score of features, Tattersall often labors long hours capturing the unique look of *House*. *Exposure* recently caught up with the busy cinematographer during an afternoon break in the filming; he was planning to continue working until midnight. "Being a director of photography on a TV show is nothing like doing commercials, where you can get a bit of a break," he says. "It's a fairly relentless run."



*House* (Hugh Laurie) tries to piece together the events leading up to a bus accident that leaves him with a concussion.

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Greg Gayne/FOX

*Chase (Jesse Spencer) works to save a patient who was seriously injured in a bus crash.*  
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*House* is shot at Fox Studios, near Century City, on a range of 35mm Arriflex cameras, including the Arricam Studio (ST) and the Arricam Lite (LT) systems. Tattersall uses Fujifilm Eterna 400T stock exclusively, both for interiors and exteriors, occasionally pushing it to EI 800 if low lighting situations require it. “I like it better than other stocks,” he says. “One of the reasons I enjoy the Fujifilm look is that it’s softer than the other stocks available.”

**T**he cinematographer uses Cooke S4 primes and he carries a set of three Angenieux Optimo zooms and generally uses Tiffen Black ProMist filters because “they give the image a more cinematic and less ‘electronic,’ or ‘video,’ look for television. I used to use more but discovered that I need less of the ProMist when I shoot with Fujifilm.”

*House* rents much of its equipment from Keslow Camera in Culver City. “They’re unbelievably supportive, innovative and technically top of their field,” says Tattersall.

During his tenure on the show, Tattersall has worked with about a dozen directors. “This season the number has been distilled down to a select few,” he says. “They’re the ones who know more about the style of *House*. It’s difficult when you bring in directors who don’t know the show and don’t know the pitfalls of shooting on our sets.”

One of the big challenges in shooting *House* comes from having to deal with a great deal of reflections. “Our sets are quite problematic in some ways,” Tattersall explains. “We have massive amounts of glass. You can get into terrible trouble with that. Take a glass door. If someone pushes it coming into the room and then somebody else pushes it again going out, that takes out another 100 or 200 degrees of area where you can have a light because it would be reflected. The directors familiar with the show know how to avoid those sorts of issues.

“On top of being creative and understanding the script, directing TV is also about time management,” Tattersall adds. “If you don’t spend your time wisely you won’t make your schedule, and suddenly you have an awful lot of people breathing down your collar.”

Tattersall notes that in addition to cinematography his role has included helping new, unfamiliar directors get things right. Most accept his advice. "Others fight it because they want to put their own mark on something," he observes, "which is fair enough, but knowing what gets us into trouble and what doesn't help keep us on schedule."

**F**amiliarity with the show's visual language is a key to avoiding trial and error. "Much of our difficult shooting is in House's outer office, where they all discuss symptoms and go over case histories," Tattersall explains. "You often have five or six actors all facing in different directions, like spokes of a wheel, and one of them might be African American, another one might be Indian, and so on. It's sometimes problematic, lighting-wise, just to make sure everything works, and at the same time that it's not completely flat.

"And for me, that's what it all comes down to," he continues. "It's all very well making pretty pictures, but in the end it's basically television; it's all about focusing the audience's attention onto the actors' faces. If your eye is torn away to look at something else, that's a failing of the photography. You must direct the eye to the part of the frame you want people to look at. It's all about brightness, balance, clarity and shaping. I hate flat lighting. I love to create more of a three-dimensional effect."

Post for *House* is done at The Post Group in Hollywood, where Colorist Eric Johannessen has worked on the show for the past two years. "He's a wonderful color 'timer,'" says Tattersall of the colorist, using traditional film terminology. "He knows the show so well now; he knows I'm going to say things like, 'Take down the doctor's white coat.' The 'timing' is becoming easier and easier just because he's so experienced at doing what we need, and in this day and age that's really where half your work is."

Tattersall, however, regrets that he doesn't have enough time to attend the grading sessions. "I'm never there," he says. "Eric does a first run at it, which I watch in high-quality video and make notes on what changes need to be done. That's the only way I can do it on a show like *House* because I'm the only director of photography."

He notes that on some other TV dramas there are multiple cinematographers. "That would enable me to go to the timing sessions," the cinematographer suggests, "but now, unless I never got any sleep, it's not possible. Most of us TV show cinematographers face an ever-increasing problem: we are stuck with the 'eight-day-schedule syndrome.' The trouble is that this yardstick was probably invented way back when they did shows like *Bonanza* and they shot wide shots of four guys on horses with very crude lighting. But they got away with it because it was viewed on a screen that is now shamed by most laptop displays.

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*House* assigns Foreman (Omar Epps, L) to give the team performance reviews. Also pictured: Kal Penn (C) and Peter Jacobson (R).  
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Isabella Vosmikova/FO





(above) House (Hugh Laurie) walks away from a serious bus accident  
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(right) After the accident, House struggles to recover his memory. Also pictured Olivia Wilde (R) and Peter Jacobson (C).  
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eight pages a day at the quality we are now obliged to shoot. Believe me I know, because [features are] what I used to do.”

*House* goes from film negative via Thomson Grass Valley Spirit DataCine straight into the digital realm, where it stays throughout post-production and distribution. Seeing it on a large screen is rarely an option,

but that’s just what happened recently during an Emmy Awards event at Hollywood’s high-end Arlight theater. “They projected it digitally onto a 60-foot screen and it was mind-blowing,” Tattersall says. “I watched it with my mouth open and suddenly realized that I had missed so much by having never seen it this way before.”

**F**or Tattersall, shooting on 35mm film is really the factor that permits such a high-quality and nuanced image. “One thing about digital [imagers] that I really dislike is that once you get above a certain exposure it just cuts off,” he says. “The wonderful thing about overexposure on film is that it allows you to capture more detail. Cinematographers traditionally rely on overexposure because if you overexpose on film you always hit a safe place, but if you underexpose you get to a dangerous place because of grainy shadow detail, lack of shadow detail and flatness. This is exactly the opposite of what one needs to do to shoot with digital cameras, but it’s the opposite of what I’ve done my whole career.”

Tattersall is generous in giving credit for *House*’s success to the entire cast and crew. “The camera crew is wonderful—Operators Tony Gaudioz on A-camera and Rob Carlson on B and First Assistants Don Carlson on A-camera and Paul Bode on B,” he declares. “But of course, there are also so many others. Quite a few of the other crew have been here longer than me, since season one: people in the art department, in set dressing and in the props department. One of the first assistant directors has been here since day one, as have our producers, including Katie Jacobs and our main writer, David Shore, who came up with the idea.”

He adds that working with the writers, directors and everyone else on the show is a joy. But he admits he has particular awe for the actors. “My job is hard enough,” Tattersall says, “but when I look at Hugh Laurie having to memorize eight pages of dialog three days in a row—it would take me a month to do that! It’s a miracle to learn dialog perfectly, work out the character, pick up the cues, look where you need to look, all in perfect continuity—it’s amazing anybody could do that.” □