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Flame On

Cinematographer Lisa Wiegand creates a dynamic look for NBC Television's Chicago Fire

By David Heuring

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Dick Wolf's sterling track record in television gives him carte blanche to dream up and try out new stories. The creator of *Law & Order* calls his latest, NBC's *Chicago Fire*, "a classic, adult, platinum drama." The show is set in a firehouse, but it's not procedural or "fire of the week," he says. Although firefighting is often depicted, Wolf insists that the series is built around the characters and their interactions.

The *Chicago Fire* pilot is slated to air on October 10. The series features a large ensemble cast that includes Jesse Spencer, Taylor Kinney, Charlie Barnett, Eamonn Walker and Monica Raymund, and while the pilot sets up some tension between characters, there's also plenty of action. Cinematographer Lisa Wiegand, who

brings experience on television series like Dollhouse, Detroit 1-8-7 and 24, must capture the human interplay of the cast, as well as the spectacle of firefighters doing their dangerous work.

The city of Chicago has been extraordinarily supportive, providing actual fire and paramedic vehicles, along with personnel to maintain and drive the trucks. Even Mayor Rahm Emanuel is getting in on the action with a cameo. The city gave the production access to an actual firehouse for the filming of the pilot.

For the episodes, production designer Craig Jackson designed a spacious version of the firehouse, which was built at Cinespace on Chicago's West Side. Technically, an episode is done in eight days, but there's a lot of overlap. A total of 13 episodes will be in the can by mid-December.

According to Wiegand, she wanted to create a look that was truly modern. She did extensive testing to determine the photographic properties of various fuels, as well as the best methods for shooting fire.

Wiegand says that Wolf describes the look of the show as "urban heroic," adding, "I interpret that as a realistic feeling with a touch of gloss. There are so many reality shows and documentaries out there using handheld cameras, so people are used to that language and that aesthetic. I feel that if we did this show without employing handheld cameras, it just wouldn't feel immediate and real enough. It would feel stoic and outdated."

Wiegand shoots the show with ARRI ALEXAs, using multiple cameras for scenes with the entire cast, or on action and stunts. All the camera gear is supplied by Keslow Camera. The main lens package consists of Angénieux Optimo zooms—15-40mm, 28-76mm and 45-120mm. Zooming during a shot—sometimes obviously and sometimes hidden in a move—is part of the language. Unlike *Detroit 1-8-7*, though, the look is not grainy, gritty or desaturated, and the handheld operating is more controlled, sometimes settling on an actor or a two-shot for conversation. Lensing tends to be wide and close, which better shows off the Chicago locations.

A camera operator Reza Tabrizi plays an important role. "He will talk with the director about his ideas for how to make the action all flow together and how to incorporate the second camera," says Wiegand. "There's so much to do on this show. If I had to pick and design the shots, then work with lighting, grip and effects, we'd never get the show done on schedule. There's so much to get. So we work more like a British system, with plenty of give and take."

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When it comes to lighting, Wiegand uses a range of tools and approaches. She often uses 20K beam projectors to depict sunlight in the large firehouse set, and fluorescent and LED sources on stands for closer work on the actors' faces.

Practicals in the ceiling provide additional illumination. A hard ceiling on

the firehouse set helps create a sense of realism, and the wide-lens approach helps show it off.

Cinematographer Lisa Wiegand on the set of Chicago Fire.

One rule of thumb is that the camera always accompanies the characters, never arriving at a fire before the firefighters. For driving shots, Wiegand and her operators are with the characters as they navigate the city streets. Fire truck interiors provide the camera team with a bit more elbow room to light and shoot than a normal vehicle. Fluorescents and LED lights are often the lighting solution in those situations, as well. Mixed color temperatures are part of the show's visual signature.

"I really wanted to make a new, modern-looking show," Wiegand continues. "When I first arrived in Chicago, I was looking for ways to anchor it to the current time period. I walked around with my still camera, and I noticed that there are so many different lighting elements and color temperatures in this city. They're in the process of changing the streetlights to LEDs, so everywhere you look, things don't match. You can be inside a building, and none of the bulbs in the ceiling are the same. It was like that in the real fire station where we shot the pilot. I decided that was something I wanted to show in the series. I'm really aware of that, and I'm constantly mixing color temperatures and fixtures, and I think that will tie it to this time period. Right now, cities and homes are in a transitional period in terms of lighting sources, and I wanted to show that. In five years, big cities will probably be all LEDs."

For the pilot, Wiegand did extensive testing to determine the photographic properties of various fuels and the best methods for shooting fire. Now well into the first season, she has found that fire tests have become part of her routine. She began by studying the penultimate of fire movies, Ron Howard's *Backdraft* (1991), shot by Mikael Salomon, ASC. That film had also been shot in Chicago, which means that a significant subset of Wiegand's crew worked on it.

Fire on the set is mainly practical lighting, and Wiegand estimates that only 10% of the fire is created in visual effects. For Wiegand, fire is the main reason that the show is shot with ARRI ALEXAs because the cameras can hold highlight detail extremely well.

According to those crewmembers, the safety regulations are stricter now. Wiegand says she's always asking fire-effects coordinator John Milinac for more fire—"because it just looks so awesome"—but part of Milinac's job is knowing where to draw the line. Fire on the show is mainly practical. Wiegand estimates that only 10% of the fire in the show is visual-effects fire. The majority is created using a wide variety of devices, most of which burn propane. Propane burns cleaner and brighter, but is considered less photogenic because of those qualities. Occasionally, propylene is used as fuel because it burns dirtier and looks better because it displays more varied hues. Dirtier fuels are more likely to be used in exterior situations where big fireballs are safer and less likely to cause breathing issues.

An exterior scene of a burning multi-story building, shot on a night with a low-hanging mist, sold Wiegand on the ARRI ALEXA. "Fire is the main reason the ALEXA is the

perfect camera for the show," she says. "That night, there was a fog over the city, and you get the bounce-back of the sodium vapor lamps off the low clouds. I had to set the *f*-stop to catch the detail of the flames, and it held all that detail. You may not be able to get it in one-light dailies, but you have to treat it like a negative. When we went into the online, all that information was there. I could bring those highlights down and open up the shadows. I could see the darkness in the sky and how the sodium vapor was hitting the light fog, and all the detail in the fireballs was visible. It was awesome. I really don't think you could get all that detail with another system. We used some DSLRs locked off for fireball explosions, and they just didn't hold any of the highlight detail. So now, all our extra locked-off stunt cameras are ALEXAs, too."

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The ALEXAs are set up to record Apple ProRes 4444 files to onboard SxS PRO cards. Wiegand currently works without a digital imaging technician on set. Her on-set rig includes two 25-inch Panasonic monitors and a Leader LV5770 waveform monitor. She captures a still of the waveform monitor and a thumbnail of the image for every setup so she can refer to images later if need be to "remind myself of what was working and what wasn't working," she says.

Wiegand's setup also allows her to remotely ride the iris with an eye on both images, as well as the waveform monitor. This technique lets her adjust on the fly for dark areas of the set, for sudden changes in the fickle Midwestern weather or for differences in skin tone in the cast. Cam-Wave HD systems are used to wirelessly deliver images on the set.

Editorial, which is headquartered in Los Angeles, creates and times the dailies using FotoKem's nextLAB system, an end-to-end system for file-based productions. The editorial team creates dailies, taking their cues from JPEG images that Wiegand manipulates using ARRI's Look Creator software. Dailies are sent back to Wiegand in the form of ProRes HQ files. For the online process, she makes notes about brightness, color, cosmetic cleanups or anything that needs touching up by a digital artist. Later, she sees a second pass.

nextLAB is used for the show's media management, archive, sound sync, color and dailies transcoding. The editorial crew imports VFX EDLs into nextLAB and applies the right color recipe. VFX plates are delivered to SPY Post and Keep Me Posted, FotoKem's boutique facilities, for finishing. Everything is then sent to Universal Studios Digital Services, where it's optimized for conform and final color grading.

"It's difficult working so far from the post," she says. "Everyone is looking for ways to save money. If I don't have good communication with postproduction, I literally go nuts. I'm sure I'm driving all the post producers insane, but it's part of my job, now more than ever. With our current workflow, there's a lot of room to play with the look. But that also means there's a lot of room for getting it wrong."

All things considered, Wiegand loves her job. "My crew is so great—the Chicago crew, as well as the people I was able to bring from my normal crew," she says. "We're just kicking ass on this show. It's really good. Everybody is very happy with it so far, and I'm very excited for audiences to see it."

***To learn more about* Chicago Fire*, visit www.nbc.com/chicago-fire*.**

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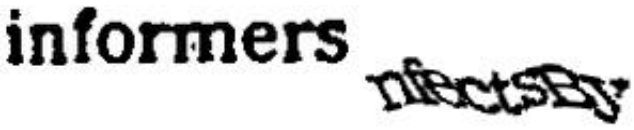

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