

Behind the Scenes of "Harper's Island"

Contributed by Bob Fisher

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The CBS drama "Harper's Island" blends cinematic production values with the excitement of a live reality TV show. The first episode opens during a festive, outdoor wedding celebration on a small island off the coast of Seattle, Washington. It's a happy occasion until an unknown assailant murders one of the guests. The tension continues to heighten as a guest is murdered in each weekly episode.

"Just before we shot each episode, a producer told the actor portraying the victim that it was their last show," says Cinematographer Rob McLachlan, ASC, CSC. "No one else in the cast knew who the victim was that week. The killer isn't revealed until the end of the final episode."

"Harper's Island" was conceived by Executive Producer Jon Turteltaub, who directed the pilot episode. It was produced as a co-venture by his company Junction Entertainment and CBS Paramount Network Television. The 13-episode series, which premiered on CBS-TV in mid-April, was shot on a forest-covered island off the coast of Vancouver, Canada. While most of the story unfolds at exterior locations, occasional scenes are filmed in a sheriff's office, a bar and a teahouse pavilion. The only sets were a few rooms and the lobby of a hotel.

As the show's DP, McLachlan brought a wealth of insight and experience to the project. He was born in San Francisco and mostly raised in Vancouver, where he studied fine arts and filmmaking at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. He began his career shooting local commercials and environmental documentaries for Greenpeace, and earned his first narrative credit in 1987 for the TV series "Seahunt." He has since compiled some 40 cinema and television credits as a cinematographer.

As a top DP, McLachlan has earned the respect of his peers. He has won nine Canadian Society of Cinematographers Awards and earned five more nominations, along with four ASC Outstanding Achievement Award nominations.

"Harper's Island" is the first television series that McLachlan has shot since his work on "Millennium" in 1999. "The story takes place during an eight-day period," he says. "We started shooting during the late summer and ran into mid-winter in the Pacific Northwest, when the days were shorter and darker. We had to maintain visual continuity and make exteriors that we shot on dismal winter days look like fall. There is also an increasingly tactile, scary look that the audience can feel."

The show was produced using a 35mm format despite a relatively modest budget. McLachlan says that the format decision was crucial given the logistics, the widely varying and unpredictable lighting environments, and the nuances of the different looks they envisioned. "We needed the latitude of film for the audience to see nuances in colors and contrast, and details in bright highlights and dark shadows the way the human eye does," he explains.

Panavision Vancouver provided most of the show's camera package, including ARRICAM Studio and Lite bodies and a range of prime and zoom lenses. McLachlan also used his own ARRI 435 camera with Cooke S4i prime and Angenieux 28-75mm zoom lenses.

An aerial unit helped to establish the island setting for the pilot episode. As the show's mystery heightens, the island's power goes out and the phones stop working. The assumption is that the anchor of a passing boat disconnected the underwater power and phone cables. That story point isolates the characters in darkness, which is artfully woven into the visual grammar of the night sequences.

The pilot was shot in 13 days, and subsequent episodes were mostly filmed in seven 12-hour days. McLachlan says that they rarely covered fewer than 50 setups a day, and frequently as many as 75 to 80, while moving from one location to another with no pre-set lighting.

McLachlan, along with Gaffer Burton "Joe" Kuchera and Key Grip Fraser Boyle, got early copies of scripts before they were released to the actors. That enabled them to determine whether any special equipment was needed, and they and the script supervisor were sworn to secrecy. "We only scouted locations for the pilot and one other episode during a brief Christmas hiatus," McLachlan says. "We were constantly on the move."

The DP generally covered scenes with the two ARRICAM cameras. He used them at 90-degree angles, on the same axis, and at times looking nearly straight at each other. For the latter, he adjusted lighting to work for both cameras.

The ARRI 435 was generally used for "grab" shots, which were often handheld to create an edgy look and feel, and for the occasional speed ramps used to create slow-motion effects. "My documentary experience was a big help," McLachlan observes. "There was a lot of running, gunning and grabbing shots to take advantage of natural light. [Camera Operators] Mike Wrinch and Trig Singer had the freedom to go with the flow when happy accidents happened." Both camera operators have worked with McLachlan on previous productions in Canada.

McLachlan made frequent use of Airstar lighting balloons, which enabled two crewmembers to move the main source of artificial light through the woods and rough terrain as quickly as they could walk. The balloons usually carried an HMI and a tungsten light. "You can use either HMI and tungsten lights, or you can use just one of them in a variety of sizes," McLachlan notes. "We used balloon light in the pilot episode where a couple of our characters go swimming at night. We put an eight-foot-diameter round lighting balloon and a small generator on one of our boats and took it way offshore in the background. The balloon light gave us a beautiful and believable reflection of moonlight on the ocean with characters on the shore looking at it. That put life into a shot that otherwise would have looked like two faces in a sea of black, because you can't front light the ocean. Then, we brought another balloon in closer to provide our key light."

Several directors helmed the show but not for consecutive episodes. McLachlan generally conferred with the director of the next episode while he was shooting. "They all had their own ideas," he says. "I was also getting input from Jon [Turteltaub] and the other executive producers. There is a cohesive visual arc from the beginning to the end of the series. The first episode has a flat, warm, romantic look because it takes place in golden sunshine. I added a little saturation to create a warm, golden, romantic aura by using diffusion filters.

"The lighting became progressively less romantic and more naturalistic as the tension heightened in each new episode," McLachlan adds. "We lit the environments realistically and gave the actors freedom to be spontaneous in finding light and darkness at the right times." McLachlan gradually reduced color saturation in each new episode, partly with filtration on lamps that made the light increasingly cooler. He also added green tones to night scenes and made the lighting more neutral.

His approach to camera movement evolved to subtly complement the show's increasingly intense drama. In early episodes, A and B cameras were generally still or gliding smoothly on dollies. That gradually transitioned to more handheld shots. "There aren't a lot of unnecessary shaky camera shots, because that would have sent the wrong message," McLachlan stresses. "Every technique we used was as much a part of the story as the words in the script. Everyone on the crew made creative contributions. Mike [Wrinch] has a unique way of putting a [J.L.] Fisher jib arm on a dolly and hand operating the camera off of an under-slung head on the end of the arm. It's a very fluid style of shooting that allowed him to constantly adjust for the actors. It also sped things up because he could make adjustments on the run. He and the dolly grip created a very fluid up-and-down and organic feeling at the right times."

McLachlan took digital stills of every setup. He used both the KODAK Look Manager System and Adobe Photoshop Lightroom to color-time selected shots, which he emailed as visual references to the dailies timer at Technicolor in Vancouver, where front-end lab work was done, and to Dan Judy, the postproduction colorist at Modern VideoFilm, Inc. in Los Angeles.

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