

television



FREAKY SHOW

JEFFREY JUR, ASC WINS AN EMMY FOR OUTSTANDING CINEMATOGRAPHY WITH HBO'S *CARNIVÀLE*

“The dark mood of the setting and stories fascinated me,” says Emmy Award winning cinematographer Jeff Jur, ASC (who alternates on this HBO series with DP Jim Denault), of *Carnivale*. “It is a very real American time period with a gothic/biblical undertone. The richness of that gritty carnival environment, with its pretensions to fun and color, are all faded and desperate. The wonderfully removed period of the piece allows us to have a strong visual interpretation.”

When Jur began discussions for the pilot of this unusual series, his first reaction was to study the photography of the era. “Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, for the sparseness and simplicity,” he recalls. “Saudek’s color work is something I showed to the producers early on, for its smeared and muted colors and for the way he looks at shocking things with directness and odd beauty. In addition, John Ford westerns and their iconic images contributed to the formation of the look.

“The skies in these movies were especially an inspiration,” he recalls. “When shooting outside, I’m always trying to get low and frame for the sky, putting the horizon way low.

“We decided to shoot the series with Panavision Platinum & Gold II cameras and Primo lenses. For many years, this has been my tried-and-true package. I feel this system is the most assistant friendly and gets me the sharpest images, as a result. Also, we knew that the conditions would be tough on the equipment, with dust being the biggest issue. Panavision equipment seemed the most able to withstand everything that we could throw at it, literally!

“I am also familiar with the Primos, especially in how they will handle flare. And, the zooms and primes match extremely well. I was initially resistant to using the zooms,” he adds. “But with an episodic schedule, I came to rely on the 11 to 1 and 4 to 1 zooms, not necessarily to zoom, but to find the precise frame quickly, for each set up. The composition of

Opposite: *Carnivale* follows a traveling carnival as it winds its way across the Dust Bowl, focusing on Ben Hawkins (Nick Stahl), a mysterious 18-year-old fugitive with hidden talents. Above Right: For cinematographer Jeff Jur, ASC, John Ford westerns and their iconic images contributed to the formation of the look. Right: Another influence for Jur was Jan Saudek’s color photography for its smeared and muted colors.



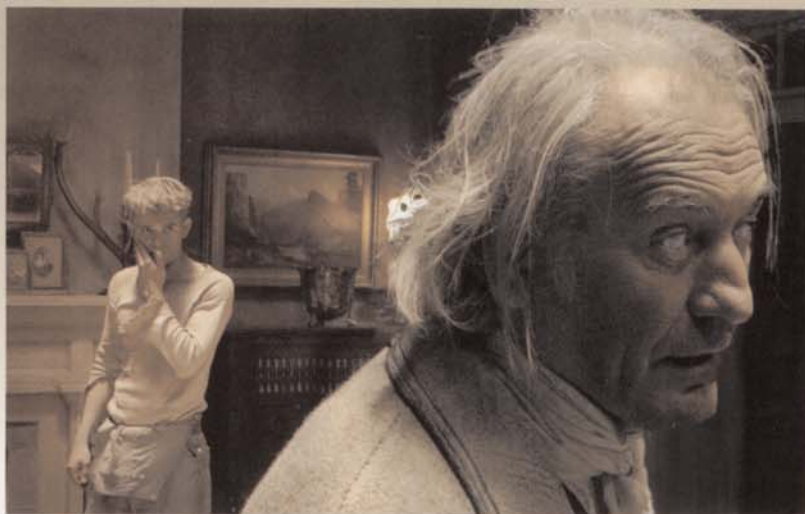
each shot is absolutely critical to me, particularly on this project. This was not documentary-style, run-and-gun shooting. I felt it needed to have very thoughtful and even iconic imagery. I was very particular about the relationship of the background to the foreground.

“As for on-camera filtration with exteriors, I used Polarizing filters whenever I could to darken the skies, which were so much a part of those frames. I tested diffusion filtration before we started, but it seemed to put the image into the realm of nostalgia, and we wanted a harder, more ‘desperate’ look. No on-camera color filtration was used, since I felt we could achieve the kind of subtle effects we wanted, reaching deep into the negative, in the Telecine suite.

“Our goal from the beginning was to try to do any effect in-camera whenever possible,” Jur continues. “I like to call it ‘acoustic’ effects. We wanted the supernatural events and the dreams and flashbacks to feel organic. It also fit the style of filmmaking we are evoking, not something new and glossy, but kind of old-fashioned. That said there are digital effects used in post-production, often to add an existing element to something we shot in principal photography.

“One script called for an enormous dust storm, and while we tried to get as much done in-camera, we couldn’t create the scope of what was needed. So, digital effects were used to supplement our work. Even then, our effects supervisor wanted real elements to work with and we shot a





Above: Jur's goal from the beginning was to try to do any effect in-camera whenever possible on what he calls 'acoustic' effects, which fit the old-fashioned style of filmmaking he was trying to evoke. Below: Jur credits post-production producer Todd London and finish color timer Pankaj Bajpai at Encore Hollywood as crucial to the look of *Carnivale*. "They have helped bring out the distinctive color palette that is one of the trademarks of the series," says Jur.

mini-dust storm in slow motion on stage that was blended into the location work."

"The toughest part was, of course, avoiding background and hills that say 'Welcome To L.A.,'" laughs gaffer Rick West. "On season one, locations found a 'Cow Bowl' for our dust bowls. They then had all the ground cover mowed down so that, when you looked past the actors or the scenery, all you saw was the side of a hill. This could work for Oklahoma or Texas or New Mexico. And, of course, when shooting the 'Dust Bowl' sequences, it was not as tough, except adding the 'period' to the piece."



"For the crew, this was one of the toughest sets to work on I've ever seen," says first season A-camera operator Cris Lombardi. "Every day, we were faced with dust, dirt, smoke and rough terrain. Even when we were doing stage work, all of those elements followed us inside. The stage floors were covered in six inches of dirt, which made something as simple as moving a dolly into position a major effort. Our dolly grip lived for the days when we shot in Iris and Justin's sets, which were the only ones with a nice smooth floor!"

Tents are a big part of the world of *Carnivale*. For Jur and crew, their flexibility, the ability to change the shape, texture, color, even movement is a big part of making the show's image a reality. "In an episode called 'Pick a Number,' we had the long 'carny justice' scene with the entire cast in our largest tent," Jur recalls. "We lit it simply, with one 12 by 12 soft

source from above. I'm most happy when I can find that single source to light a scene. We then added a bit of fill light off the ground under the actors, which we've taken to call the 'dirty bounce.'"

"This scene was a handheld marathon," says Lombardi. "Our director, Rodrigo Garcia, wanted the sort of edge that handheld operating can offer, so the camera went on the shoulder and stayed there. This scene was unusual, because all the major characters were in it. Of course, we needed to get coverage on everyone and the scene runs about six or seven minutes. So, Rodrigo and Jeff would pick angles and we would run the entire scene, stopping only for reloads. Lord knows how many magazines we went through for that sequence! I was impressed that loader John Vetter was able to keep up, though there were times when I wished he couldn't!"

"Jeff was able to light the scene in a way that required very little tweaking between set ups," Lombardi adds. "So, I never got much of a chance to catch my breath."

Tent sequences can also get a little complicated, lighting wise. "Tough because we shot them both on stage and on location for day and night," says West. "The toughest were day interiors of tents on stage because of limited space. Our key grip, Bobby Huber, would put up huge 10 by 20, 12 by 12, and 20 by 20 white bounces to light outside the tents so that when you would see through the cracks it would look like white sky outside.

"Otherwise, the tough part of the tent shooting was that they were small areas," West continues. "We used the same tents on stage as on location. Once the interiors were dressed there wasn't much room. That works for the look of the show, but even trying to 'wild' a tent flap would be tough because they weren't built for movie sets. They were for the real circus."

For Jur and crew, the trailer where the mysterious 'management' resides, is the most difficult space to work with. It is small, jammed with set dressing, dark, and has tiny windows. "I use hard light through the openings to put small bright patches of light into the space for day scenes and a single paper lantern in the center of the ceiling for night scenes."

"This was tough to light because the area was so small and the writers were still developing what they wanted to do with this area in the first season," adds West. "Bobby Huber saved us with the help of construction, by separating the ceiling

To Jur, exteriors are an interesting challenge and follow a creative style. "It's always about chasing the perfect light," he says. "Our various directors come in knowing the look of the show and how important the light is for us so they are usually patient when I want to move the blocking over where the light is better, or will wait for the right time of day. I think it really makes a difference to the look of the show."

pieces in two, three or four sections, making them easier to fly. Walls could come out and we could light from above, if needed."

"For nights, Rick devised these wonderful paper lanterns of different sizes from 12 to 24 inches with two sockets for household-style bulbs," Jur adds.

"Jeff used these Japanese lanterns for many different sets," explains West. "The rigs were built for Peter Deming, (ASC) and Toyomichi Kurita, a number of years ago. They are a basic metal harp with a socket at the top and one at the bottom. Each socket has an external switch so that you can use one or the other or both at the same time.

For B-camera operator Don Devine, the last half of season one was an interesting learning experience. "A-camera operator Cris Lombardi helped me understand the workings of the show right away," he says enthusiastically. "Jeff and Cris gave me freedom to look for B-camera shots during rehearsals. We did a lot of two-camera set ups on the exteriors and large interior sets.

"The hardest sets in which to use two cameras were these trailer sets," he adds. "They were so small that even thinking of using two cameras hardly seemed like an option. For the last episode, we did sneak two handheld cameras into that small space and got some great shots for the final scene. If it had not been for the enjoyable collaboration of Cris, his assistant Ron Vargas, my first Jan Ruona, and myself, I'm not sure we could have pulled these kinds of shots off."

Jeff Jur's favorite images involve Samson's (Michael Anderson) sequences. "There is one of him walking up the hill toward Babylon at sunset to get revenge for the murder of one of the carnies," Jur says. "Michael is 3-feet 7-inches tall, and we always try to shoot him with the camera low to the ground."

Another significant sequence is a scene where Samson sees the ghost of Dora May through a window being pulled away by a mysterious miner. "It is a strong image for people," Jur says. "In this case, I find sometimes good photography is good scheduling. I wanted a muted dusk feel to the scene and I made sure that we



shot this scene late in the day and then didn't mess with it. The art department put a wonderful haze on the windows that softened the image of her beautifully."

When Cris Lombardi looks back on the first season, his favorite sequence was an episode called "Lonnigan, Texas." "The visual motif that Jeff and director Scott Winant came up with involved intri-

cate setups designed to play with no cuts," he explains. "I'm not talking about entire scenes shot in one take, but setups that were part of a scene and eloquently told a piece of the story in the space of 20 to 30 seconds.

"For example, there is a beautiful high angle night establishing shot of the carnival that swoops down to the front

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Above: Steadicam operator Henry Tirl prepares for a shot in a creepy setting. Below: (From Left to Right) Bottom Row: 2nd AC Bob Settlemire, 1st AC Jan Ruona, Operator Paul Sanchez, Operator Cris Lombardi, 1st AC Patrick McArdle; Top Row: Loader John Vetter, DP Jeffrey Jur, ASC, 2nd AC Starrs McBurney.

door of Management's trailer and tracks inside to find Samson getting ready for the evening's work.

"My all-time favorite shot, though is of Brother Justin (Clancy Brown) in the mental institution," Lombardi adds. "He's sitting alone in a cavernous empty room bathed in afternoon light and we slowly dolly toward him, drift past him and then track around him, revealing a room full of asylum inmates that weren't there before. This was one of Jeff's 'in camera' effects. As we tracked forward, inmate extras filled in behind us and as we dollyed around to reveal them, we continued pulling back until the room is a sea of inmates, all with their attention riveted on Brother Justin.



"The shot says much more about Brother Justin's state of mind than many pages of scripted dialog could have. It was a simple idea, but complicated to pull off. And it reflects Jeff's goal of telling the story in as graphic a way as possible. You just don't see this kind of visual storytelling on episodic television, and it made the show really fun to work on."

"The thing that I liked most about *Carnivàle* is the way we shot ordinary scenes in different ways," says Don Devine who took over A-camera on the second season working Jur's first four episodes. Patrick Rousseau, who was Jim Denault's operator, did Jur's last two episodes. "We shot a scene with a guard and a prisoner in jail with a radio broadcasting in the background," he recalls. "We set up a standard over-the-shoulder shot on the guard with the prisoner in the foreground.

"Instead of keeping the focus on the

guard the whole time, we had Jan Ruona, the 1st AC, rack focus to the back of the prisoner's head to see his ear. While we hear the radio playing, the guard is out of focus talking. We did another exterior for a flashback scene where we got to play with focus, speed changes, exposure changes, and an open camera door to blow out the image. Jeff would take the chances with in-camera tricks instead of doing them in post."

To Jur, exteriors are also an interesting challenge and follow a creative style. "It's always about chasing the perfect light," he says. "Our various directors come in knowing the look of the show and how important the light is for us so they are usually patient when I want to move the blocking over where the light is better,

CREW

CARNIVÀLE

D.P.: Jeff Jur, ASC, Jim Denault
 Operators: Don Devine, Patrick Rousseau
 Assistants: Jan Ruona, Jen Bell, Marco Fagnoli, Dean Gunderson
 Film Loader: John Vetter
 Steadicam Operator: Colin Hudson
 Still Photographer: Doug Hyun
 SPLINTER UNIT
 Dir. of Photography: Herb Davis
 Operator: Leslie Morris
 Assistants: Steve Sfetku, Kirk Bloom

or will wait for the right time of day. I think it really makes a difference to the look of the show."

Jur credits post-production producer Todd London and finish color timer Pankaj Bajpai at Encore Hollywood as crucial to the look of *Carnivàle*. "They have helped bring out the distinctive color palette that is one of the trademarks of the series. They work very hard to de-saturate the colors just enough and suppress the bright blue Southern California skies and green vegetation. The carny world is muted, dusty, 'desperate' in tone and this is contrasted with the world of the preacher, Brother Justin, who is building his congregation in California, and so the colors there are a bit deeper and cleaner.

"We've got a great crew that really 'gets' what this show is all about," Jur adds. "And, there is so much support and creativity at the back end that I know I can relax during production with the knowledge of how my photography will be presented." ☘



Still Photographer Doug Hyun uses digital photography to help sell *Carnivale*

BY PAULINE ROGERS

“The incredibly ambitious drama, *Carnivale*, is a still photographer’s dream come true, but it can also at times become his worst nightmare,” says Doug Hyun. “Lush period costumes, gorgeous sets and larger than life characters create a dreamlike tapestry from which a photographer can cull amazing images.”

At the same time, the ever present dust (real and created) and the omnipresent smoke, cramped sets, hordes of background and extremely low light levels create a real challenge to a photographer like Hyun, who is hell-bent on telling the carry story one frame at a time.

“As the avatars of light and dark play out their struggle of good against evil, moments that communicate the story are often nonexistent in the single frame,” he explains. “Often we are ‘over’ the protagonist’s back and ‘on’ the antagonist’s face leaving us with only half of the story. When we have it ‘all’ in a single frame, we might be very tight and wide, giving us an intimate close-up, as well as enough depth-of-field to capture the other actor’s performance.”

A shot designed this tight offers Hyun little opportunity to shoot, unless production is willing to hold the actors and pull out the movie camera so he can be in the perfect position. It is not usually an option.

Digital photography has given him

the edge he needs to compete for image making on this busy a set. “Because more than one image can be combined with another, it is now possible to create our own multi-level infinite depth of field photographs and become the ministers of propaganda we were always meant to be,” Hyun explains.

While reading the script, Hyun begins to dream of the ultimate single frame that would sum up the story or scene. Then, after watching the rehearsals, he begins to capture the elements he will need. The first shots might be the 50/50. He will then try to get a clean shot or plate of the set. “If I can get the actor turning or leaving or listening to the director, it’s great. Or, I might risk saying, ‘Hey, over here!’ Then I can get my foreground element and I’ll be set.

“While production is turning around for coverage, I have a chance to download the shots into my computer and start playing,” he continues. “First, I look for the perfect shot of the background and one or more of the actors. Next, I search for the perfect foreground shot of the other actor. The great thing is that it could have been done with another lens in another part of the set completely. Of course, the more similar the background and lighting, the better the effect is.

“Then, I need to knock out the foreground character. This is not a Photoshop tutorial and I am sure you all have your favorite techniques for this, but once I have this done, I ‘Select’ and ‘Copy All,’ go to the other image and paste it into the

frame. Scooting it around for position and to get the eyelines right, I might also change the scale and rotation with the transformation commands and ‘Voila,’ I have the perfect shot and it only exists on my computer!”

These are techniques many still photographers are now using and are often necessary when the need for marketing a project overwhelms the need for the “reality” of images. “Today’s marketplace demands that people give something more and I believe that compositing images is an obvious place to start,” says Hyun. “Photojournalists take heed; these activities will not be tolerated while covering breaking stories of any kind!” he adds strongly. “My photography teacher used to tell me how news photographers would sometimes place a teddy bear or a shoe in the foreground of an accident photo to insure front-page placement and further employment. Thank goodness our credibility is not at stake—just our ability to get the shots.

“*Carnivale* is the perfect place to use these techniques, as almost nothing can be too far out for this supernatural noir world of misfits, freaks and lost souls. Ultimately, the still photographer today must be adept at all Photoshop techniques and compositing is one of the best ways of ensuring that our position doesn’t end up in the dust bin of lost positions.”

Above: For still photographer Doug Hyun, shooting stills for *Carnivale* is a still photographer’s dream come true, but it can also at times become his worst nightmare. Below: While reading the script, Hyun begins to dream of the ultimate single frame that would sum up the story or scene.



photo by Doug Hyun