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Although shot on film, *NCIS* mixes numerous digital formats to help create a unique action-drama series

BY BONNIE GOLDBERG

In this age of network conservatism, the Don Bellisario-created series *NCIS* is nothing short of a phenomenon. There are hundreds of fan clubs, blogs and hundreds of thousands of rabid fans known to interrupt major meetings to make sure the TiVo is set for the week's episode, schedule vacations around *NCIS* marathon weekends and haunt video stores to rent or buy every episode available.

This rabid attraction has convinced CBS that they've got audiences where they want them, and in a time when a pickup for nine or maybe 12 new shows per season is the norm, this year, *NCIS* has an order for 26.

"I think one of the reasons that the show is such a hit is that people really key into our characters," explains cinematographer William Webb. "I am always amazed at the audience reaction. Even though this is a 'crime' show set with a military-service backdrop, what they remember are the relationships. Father figure Leroy Jethro Gibbs and his dysfunctional family could very well live next door and often have the same problems that everyday Americans face.

"In the past few seasons, we've begun to back off of the military stories," Webb adds. "The public is getting enough from the real war. They don't need to see their 'extended family' involved in Iraq or Afghanistan. For this sixth season, you will see a lot more interpersonal relationships in areas that are definitely not war-oriented."

There's another rarity in this television series—it's still shot on film, and Webb recently changed stocks. The show started on Kodak 5279. He tested 5260 but found the



Naval Gazing

Five putrid tickets abused one lampstand, because the elephants mostly annoyingly untangles five wart hogs, but Paul telephoned one partly



slightly low contrast not great for the series. He later moved into 5218, but when it became scarce, he switched to the new 5219. "And I'm loving what I get out of the film," he says. "The color, the density, the latitude exceeds even what I got in 18. It has such tremendous depth that it is phenomenal in what I can do digitally when we get into post."

It's rare to see just one Panavision camera on the set. At least 75 percent of the time there are two, or even three or four cameras capturing the action from very unusual angles. "More cameras mean more work for our camera crews," explains Webb. "I love the idea of being able to bring in top-quality camera people who can make those challenging moves that are really the 'norm' of this show. I couldn't do it without a crack crew."

None of the setups are simple, which is not in the *NCIS* vocabulary. "Our shots are a lot more extreme than most shows," he admits. "That's where superior equipment is so important. What we've learned to do with all the equipment available is unusual. It isn't uncommon for us to put a Steadicam on a Titan crane and drive it at 12 mph starting with a shot of people driving in a car and passing off to a couple walking down a street. That's a feature move, but we can do it on a television schedule because my crew really knows their stuff."

Another favorite tool for Webb is a Sachtler head. "It works constantly," he



says, "and captures a different perspective. It's quite common to put the camera almost on the floor and have a loose eyepiece. We can design a shot from two feet off the floor to six or seven feet in the air. And, we even do it on a dolly, doing at least a 180-degree dance around our characters."

While main action is captured on film, there's a certain amount of digital footage integrated into each episode. "We use several different formats," explains producer Avery Drewe. "For the beginning of each show, our still photographer (Mike Kubeisy or Mitch Haddad) uses Nikon or Canon still cameras to pre-create a life for our victim/suspect, which is then seen on our LCD television screen. They also often shoot in tandem with our actors as they document a crime scene. For every one still frame our actors shoot, they capture

three. This gives editorial a device to pick up the pace and give impact to a scene."

Drewe also supervises several different 24p HD shoots. Recently, Webb wanted to have some shots of a bicyclist's point of view. A Sony EX1 camcorder (often they'll use the EX3) was mounted on top of a helmet, for cameraman Jody Eldred as he rode a mountain bicycle through a canyon. In addition, another camera was mounted on the back wheel.

"We use HD for all our surveillance shots," adds Drewe. "The format is great for this because we can match the action and blow in faster and farther. It's simply more flexible."

Often a key point to the story is a flashback. Originally, this was done with Super 8 film stock. However, when Drewe and Webb discovered the Sony Z1U, it opened up a whole new way of doing things. "Again, we get so much more and quicker," Drewe explains. "With Super 8, we would have to wait two days to see what we got. And, we couldn't manipulate it as much as 1080i footage. With the Z1U, we can adjust from 60 down to 4 frames per second, and the effect is fabulous. And we have it immediately."

"We're also planning to use two Z1Us mounted left and right ear on a helmet for a flashback to a mission Gibbs was once on in Columbia. Our operator, Doug Froebe, will run through the 'jungle' at the Arboretum in Pasadena, and editorial will turn the shots into the jungle in Bogotá."

Once all this footage is captured, it's off to the post world. John Robinson at Encore Video will transfer it to 24p HD and send it to edit where 35mm, stills and 24p are combined together. A 24p submaster goes to the effects house, and once all the material is combined, George Delaney does the final color correction in Power Windows. "We actually used two different da Vinci systems," says Drewe. "One for film-to-tape and the other tape-to-tape. The final output is a 24p HD master for broadcast."

So, although the main bulk of *NCIS* is shot on film, the magic of the digital and HD world has become an important element in delivering the high-concept, high-quality image that has kept this rabid audience coming back each and every week. HDVP