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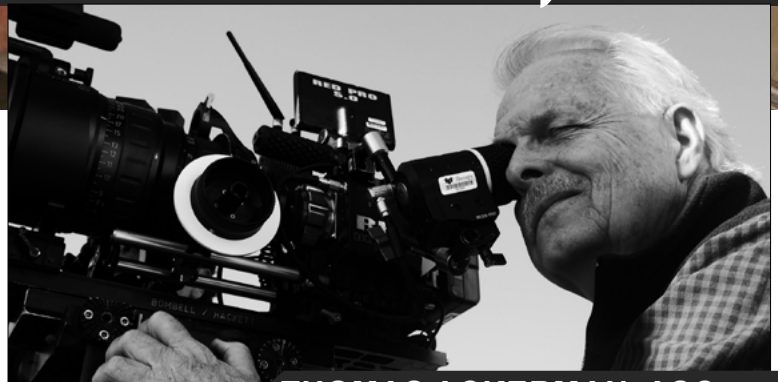
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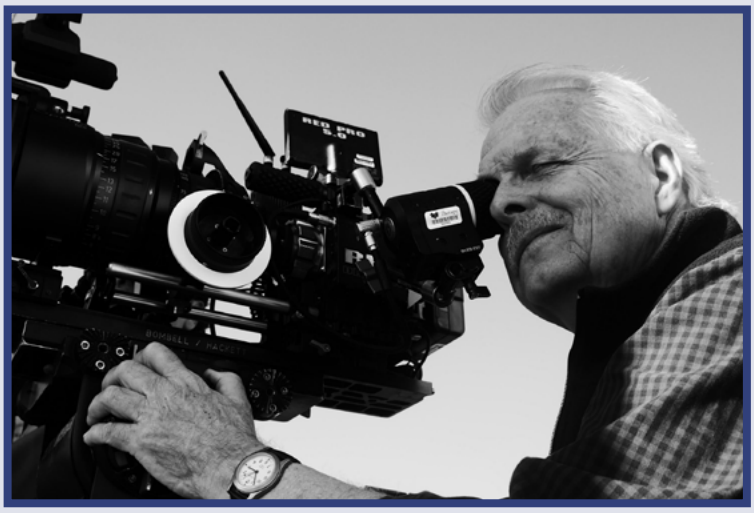
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Observations on 10 Years of Teaching

Includes a short list of things for the cinematographers to carry in their kit.

By Thomas Ackerman, ASC



Driving Interstate 40 to North Carolina in August of 2008 was a stupefying experience, 2,528 miles of tedium as I rarely left the main road. Without the distraction of touristy side trips, there was more than enough time to consider the consequences of my recent decision to teach. Having flirted with academia for a couple of years, mostly "safe haven" events like guest screenings and occasional lectures, I had finally decided to get serious.

In July, Jordan Kerner, who had recently become Dean of Filmmaking at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, alerted me to an opening on the school's cinematography faculty. I subsequently met with the Search Committee via teleconference from the production office of "Mardi Gras", a Screen Gems comedy I was shooting in New Orleans. It went well, and days later they made an offer which I accepted immediately. Forgoing what would have been an unsurprising (and prudent) inspection trip to the campus, I left for California as soon as we wrapped and started packing. My reasoning was simple. If UNCSA met Jordan Kerner's standards, it must surely be a good bet. I had shot "George of the Jungle" and "Snow Dogs" for Jordan and found his integrity beyond reproach.

There was plenty of time to think on the long drive to Winston Salem. I was feeling good about life in general. Even the prospect of spending most of the 10-month school year away from home wasn't daunting. My family was used to long location stays, although, it must be said, with the added perks that accompany location work. They attended the American School in Rome for a semester. Vancouver became a second home, and there were the two wonderful summers we spent in Chicago shooting movies for John Hughes. London became home for several weeks when I was directing a special venue film that would be the opening attraction at Volkswagen's Autostadt. It was all very nice, but overall there was a tremendous amount of time we as a family would never recover.

This is a factoid I like to bestow on my 4th year students as they approach graduation. Have a talk with your significant other, or if there's no one who fits that description, sit *yourself* down and think about what a career in the motion picture trade means. The interruptions to your life will be significant, probably in direct proportion to your success. This is not a job for the timid, the insecure, or those averse to living out of a suitcase. Or who relish the idea of schlepping out to LAX Sunday night to catch the last flight to Vancouver, having spent roughly 28 hours at home.

If there was a clincher mandating the decision to teach, a smoking gun that closed the deal with never a second thought, it was the fact that I had just completed two teen comedies with plot lines as follows:

Comedy #1 - Two high school football stars eschew summer practice for a chance to attend - wait for it - CHEER CAMP so they can hit on girls.

Comedy #2 - Three college friends drive down to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, hoping to - you'll never guess - MEET GIRLS and, well, just act crazy. One of them meets Carmen Miranda, and although he's a feckless loser, we believe for roughly 30 seconds that she is attracted to him.

It must be said that I have worked on my share of comedies. Some were average films, some were interesting, and a few turned out exceptionally well. All presented a range of photographic challenge, sometimes out of proportion to their supposedly lightweight narrative. Anyone who thinks it was easy to shoot "Beetlejuice", "Jumanji", or the great road trip movie, "Rat Race," is making an assumption that there's a "one size fits all" look that fits everything in the comedic genre equally well.

For example, shooting the live action original of "Frankenweenie" for Tim Burton was a journey into the vision of a true artist. This 28-minute live action short, intended to accompany one of Disney's animated features, was a body blow to the studio. They totally didn't get it. Its hybrid genre was a shock to the system. What kind of movie was this kid making??? During two weeks of prep and three weeks of production, I had a chance to put Tim's quirky way of seeing the world on film. That project got things going. I "moved up" in the Union (Local 659) to Director of Photography. And rarely looked back. My crew and I, most of us Hollywood newcomers, took an unexpectedly positive step to bigger things.

Students today graduate into a different world. In some ways it is better than the late 70's / early 80's when my friends and I came to town. True, there was an energetic indie market, but it was small in comparison to the major studios who were still adjusting to the impact of television. There were three major networks and PBS. Period. The movie studios and unions were closed to newcomers. In short, my friends and I had made a grave mistake in coming to Hollywood. Fortunately, we didn't know that when our impossible plans were hatched in Kansas, Iowa, and other outlying provinces where people should know better. When I got out of the Air Force, I had no particular expertise other than shooting training films on electronic warfare, sentry dog veterinary training [be sure to see, without fail, the classic **"Sentry Dog Support in Sea"** (Southeast Asia)]. Its numeric ID is **TF 6105**. Seriously, don't miss this extraordinary film. It will establish a drastic low water mark for cinematography. And it's all mine. Even though shot in a war zone, with the restrictions that would imply, the project verified that I had no possible future in film.

Then came my first lucky break, shooting for Charles Guggenheim. Winner of 4 Oscars and nominated for 12 Academy Awards, Charles was a tireless taskmaster who was intolerant of anything but hard work and pictures that meant something. By then a lover of cinema verité, Charles insisted on shooting life as it was - but depicting it artfully. This we did with two or three 1 K open face quartz lights. It was often impossible, and although not as excruciating as revisiting one of my Air Force movies, I see so many things now that could have been done better.

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StudentFilmmakers Magazine Announces

Must-Visit Booths @ 2019 NAB Show, Las Vegas

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The *StudentFilmmakers* readers and online community are creating the award-winning films of tomorrow using the latest technologies. They are learning to work with the equipment they will use for the rest of their careers. And, in an industry that changes each day, even the pros need to keep learning and many have found StudentFilmmakers to be an excellent resource.

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HDProGuide.com produces and hosts Professional Training and Continuing Education Workshops covering Camerawork, Cinematography, Audio, Post Production, and more.

A CONVERSATION WITH TOM HOUGHTON, ASC



Tom Houghton, ASC shares his insights and talks about working on the set of CBS Studio's "Elementary."

Interview conducted by Jody Michelle Solis

Tom Houghton, ASC is an Emmy nominated director of photography ("Rescue Me," 2008), whose body of work includes the episodic television series, "American Horror Story: Coven," starring Angela Bassett, Jessica Lang and Kathy Bates, "Love Monkey," starring Tom Cavanagh, "Canterbury's Law," starring Julianna Margulies, and "30 Rock," starring Tina Fey and Alec Baldwin. His feature film work includes "They Came Together," starring Amy Poehler and Paul Rudd and directed by David Wain, and "Finding Amanda," written and directed by "Rescue Me" co-creator Peter Tolan and starring Matthew Broderick, Brittany Snow, Maura Tierney and Steve Coogan. Houghton's other DP feature work includes "Fire Down Below" starring Steven Seagal, Marg Helgenberger, Stephen Lange, Kris Kristofferson and Harry Dean Stanton, directed by Félix Enríquez Alcalá; "The Cookout," starring Danny Glover, Meagan Good, Jenifer Lewis, JaRule and Queen Latifah; and "State Property 2," directed by Damon Dash, starring Beanie Siegel, Young Gunz, Freeway and Noreaga. Houghton's second unit and F/X unit DP work includes "Spider-Man," "Spider-Man 2," "Godsend," starring Robert De Niro, "STAY," "Stuart Little 2," "Deeds," and "Path to War," directed by John Frankenheimer. Houghton has photographed a number of independent features and shorts including "By Courier," directed by Peter Riegert, which was nominated for an Academy Award®, and "Jazz Night," directed by Wallis Nicita, starring Beverly D'Angelo and John Heard, which was presented as part of Lifetime Television's Third Annual Women's Film Festival.

In this exclusive Q&A with StudentFilmmakers Magazine, Tom Houghton, ASC shares his insights and talks about working on the set of CBS Studio's "Elementary."

STUDENTFILMMAKERS MAGAZINE: What do you enjoy the most about your work?

TOM HOUGHTON, ASC: I enjoy being with good, hardworking creative people. I also enjoy the process of breaking down a script and figuring out how to execute and light/shoot a scene. The planning you do in prep and with the crew is very important for bigger complicated scenes.

STUDENTFILMMAKERS MAGAZINE: How do you see technology affecting workflows?

TOM HOUGHTON, ASC: Technology is always changing. Film stocks and lights change, and these days with digital, the cameras are varied as can be. Now LED lights are changing some of our approaches to lighting, but good dramatic lighting will always be good lighting.

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Pictured above: Tom Houghton, ASC. "American Horror Story-Coven" stage.