



Photo courtesy Philomath Films

Cinematographer Cliff Charles shoots *The Hot 8 Brass* for *When The Levees Broke*, Spike Lee's HBO documentary on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

HIGH STAKES SHOOTING

ICG CINEMATOGRAPHERS DISCUSS THE COMPLEXITIES OF SHOOTING DOCUMENTARIES

By David Geffner

Cliff Charles remembers the exact moment on *When The Levees Broke*, an HBO documentary filled with heartbreaking stories of loss and survival, when just looking through the lens was a supreme professional challenge. "When I'm shooting I'm in the zone and need to be distanced to do my job," Charles recalls of his experience documenting the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. "But filming Kimberly Polk, whose five-year old daughter was swept away in the Lower Ninth Ward, pulled me out. I have a five-year-old named Sabrina; her daughter was named Serena. I felt myself welling up inside with emotion and had to basically stop listening [to the interview] in order to keep composed behind the camera."

Shana Hagan, who has photographed over 30 documentaries, shooting for filmmakers like Michael Apted, Jessica Yu, and Kirby Dick, recalls a similar experience on *Aging Out*, a non-fiction film about teenagers leaving the foster care system. "There's a scene where an 18 year-old boy tries to come back to his former foster care home," Hagan recounts. "He had been doing drugs and they didn't want him. It began to get violent and the family members started pleading with me to call the police. It was a real challenge to stay behind that fourth wall, and I basically thought: hey, I'm just the cinematographer. I'm here to document not participate."

Hagan did put the camera down. But only after the father had called a taxi and drove the boy away. Charles also kept rolling, yet admits he still has a hard time watching Kimberly Polk's footage nearly a year after he left New Orleans. Both filmmakers describe the experience of shooting documentaries as unlike anything else in moviemaking. The technical process is the same as any other format — same lenses, cameras, lights, and monitors. But as Cliff Charles says, "the stakes are just so much higher with a documentary. There are no rehearsals or do-overs. Every shot counts."

By way of an example from *When The Levees Broke*, Charles remembers filming a second line march (musicians parade alongside the funeral procession through the streets of New Orleans) where the sun and clouds were wreaking havoc on his subjects. "It was so hectic, I had lost track of my gaffer, and I obviously couldn't stop to take a light

reading." Charles says he bracketed T-stops and used experience and instinct to figure out what could be sacrificed. "The question with shooting documentaries is always: how can I get the best image under less-than-ideal circumstances," says Charles. Shana Hagan agrees, noting she has no idea how things will unfold, and is working on pure adrenaline. "You don't often have the luxury of tweaking lights or taking the time to set up a complex dolly move," Hagan notes. "It's real life and real people, and the technical imperfections of a location have to be embraced as points in the story being told."

Two fine examples from Hagan's work include the Sundance hit, *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, and the Michael Apted cable documentary, *Married in America*. The former was shot inside a Kentucky prison, as inmates prep and stage a production of *The Tempest*. Guards restricted the amount of gear Hagan could bring, prohibiting her tripod, battery charger and lighting instruments. Once inside, she discovered "really interesting color temperatures," that were sometimes all mixed together in one location. "The main wing had a large bank of windows with daylight; there were green fluorescents in each of the cells, tungsten inside the guard shack, and orange mercury vapor lights lining the entire block," she recalls. "If you tried to correct for one source, the rest would look terrible." Hagan used a mid-range white balance on her Sony DVCAM DSR-570 that was about 4300K. "The daylight went cool, the tungsten went warm, and everything else just fell where it did," she remembers. "We were nervous [shooting sans corrections], but the [audience] response was overwhelming; you could not have recreated this look—it was real and added to the intensity of the film."

The DP cites another example of the less-is-more credo from *Married In America*. Like his 7-UP series, Michael Apted's first installment followed nine couples just before and after their marriages. Hagan describes a scene from installment #2, which picks up four years later, where a young boy is playing video games in his family's home. "The parents are low-income, and they had created a tiny bedroom for the boy inside the living room. They'd thrown up some two-by-fours and plywood and put in a single, bare-bulb table lamp," she explains. "It

For *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, cinematographer Shana Hagan shot inside a Kentucky prison, as inmates staged a production of *The Tempest*.

was dark and I was concerned about getting an exposure. But Michael and I prefer not to alter reality." Hagan used a Panasonic SDX-900 (24P), which she calls a "fast camera." As she notes, "I flipped over the tungsten pre-set and chose not to raise the gain. To throw a light up and attempt to get a higher quality image would be a betrayal of this family's world. Shooting as it was told a more potent, and relevant story."

Although fly-on-the-wall cinematography has always been at the heart of the documentary format, as much by necessity as by content, that doesn't mean non-fiction DPs eschew visual themes. Cliff Charles shot *When The Levees Broke* with two ARRI SRs, a Canon 11-to-64mm zoom and more than 100,000 feet of Kodak 7218 500T Super 16mm stock. He says director Spike Lee wanted a portraiture feel that would recall the images of fine art photographer Andres Serrano and his book, *America* and other work. Charles stayed close to the tone of Serrano's work for the many interviews, shot in a New Orleans hotel and in New York City. Given the short window in which the production came together (Lee saw Katrina unfolding on television while attending the Venice Film Festival, and two months later was in New Orleans shooting), Charles ordered nine photographic backdrops, designed by Betsy Davis.

"I picked them all out on-line myself," he notes, "and we carried these textured backdrops with us down to Louisiana. We'd wanted to make each backdrop unique for each interview but we quickly began to repeat ourselves, given the small number we could afford to carry

around." Charles' solution was to "multiply" the backgrounds with different gels on his lighting schemes, mixing a theatrical yellow and blue, for example, on a grey drop to get a color variance. He used a bank of 4-by-4 Kino Flos as his 3/4 key light, and depending on subject, filled with a white card. He rigged one or two Pepper lights as a backlight, and lit the backdrop with a Leko. Lee, who had deigned to use Super 16mm before Charles came on-board, was mindful he was not shooting video. (The Panasonic SDX-900 24P has become the first option for most non-HD documentaries.) "Between Spike, myself, and our First AC, Christopher Gleaton," says Charles, "we were careful to roll-out on a moment that was, for lack of a better term, not highly critical."

Charles grew up in Brooklyn and was in high school when Lee made his groundbreaking indie narrative, *She's Gotta Have It*. He says attending a small film school like Brooklyn College laid a good foundation for non-fiction filmmaking. "We didn't have a lot to work with so we learned early on to light with bare bulbs and Chinese lanterns. We bounced light so [the light] would do double duty," he notes. "Your job is never just to point and shoot. You still need to make the shot, not just take it, so you work leaner and smarter than in any other format." Shana Hagan says she's grown used to the tight budgets. "You're forced to do a lot of the work yourself—operating, gaffing, gripping, etc.," she shares. "But that affords you tremendous control over the final image, on most projects, I try to supervise telecine and color correction, even if I'm not getting paid for it."

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 DP CLIFF CHARLES ON SHOOTING DOCUMENTARIES



Photo by David Lee