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# finding ACES

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Cinematographer Brad Lipson initiates an ACES workflow  
for MTV's popular new "Atlanta-shot" series, *Finding Carter*

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by DEBRA KAUFMAN / All Frame Pulls Courtesy of MTV



**IN MTV'S ONE-HOUR DRAMA *FINDING CARTER*, TEENAGER CARTER STEVENS (PLAYED BY KATHRYN PRESCOTT) HAS A PERFECT LIFE WITH HER SINGLE MOM LORI UNTIL SHE LEARNS THAT LORI KIDNAPPED HER AS A 3-YEAR-OLD FROM HER BIOLOGICAL FAMILY. SHE'S RETURNED TO THEM AND HAS TO DEAL WITH THE STRESS OF GETTING TO KNOW HER BIOLOGICAL PARENTS AND SIBLINGS, JUST AS THEY HAVE TO ADAPT TO HER RETURN.**



*Finding Carter* Associate Producer Ashley Glazier notes that because Lipson wouldn't be able to come to Los Angeles to supervise color sessions, "we liked the idea that [with ACES] Brad could set a look on stage, and go to dailies, and they'd be exactly what he wanted all the way to final color."

When cinematographer Bradford Lipson was asked to join the production for the last 13 episodes of the second season, he immediately thought about his experience with ACES when he shot *The Wedding Ringer*, a Screen Gems/Sony film. "Sony was very involved in the implementation of ACES, and it was just part of the workflow for *The Wedding Ringer*," he says. "So I knew what ACES was all about. The dailies looked like what we shot, and the color grade was rock solid."

What made him appreciate the ACES workflow even more was another project he shot after *Wedding Ringers* without an ACES workflow: dailies didn't match the CDL and nothing matched in post. *Finding Carter* was a perfect candidate for an ACES workflow, thought Lipson, not just because he wanted the reliability he could achieve from camera to final grade, but because the show shot in Atlanta and then edited and finished in Los Angeles. He brought the idea to the show's producers.

**Ashley Glazier, Associate Producer for POPfilms**, which produces the show for MTV, thought it was a good idea. "Especially because Brad wouldn't be able to come to Los Angeles to supervise color sessions, we liked the idea that he could set a look on stage, and go to dailies, and they'd be exactly what he wanted all the way to final color," she says. "At the end, when we send Brad a color pass to approve, he should have minimal notes." The show, which shoots with ARRI Alexas ProRes 444 Log C, does its dailies at Bling Atlanta and its final color grade at Chainsaw, both SIM Group companies.

In pre-production Lipson worked with D.I.T. Nick Hiltgen to figure out the workflow for the on-set portion of the ACES workflow, while Bling director of workflow

services Jesse Korosi in Los Angeles and Bling Atlanta workflow producer Alex Brownley put together the post workflow.

The chance to work with Lipson and his first ACES show were huge selling points, says Hiltgen. "I had just finished a Local 600 workshop on monitor calibration they did in Atlanta, and I learned the concept behind ACES," he says. "Implementing it was the exciting part for me." He had been using Pomfort LiveGrade on set, with the beta .7 version of ACES software.

To his surprise, Hiltgen found that there was actually very little change to his traditional workflow – except for one thing. "All the fallbacks I used to have to do are now just ancillary," he says. "Yes, I'll still take a still and send it with the footage, but there's never been a need for it." He did have to adjust to a couple of differences. "When I was doing my normal CDL workflow, a millimeter one direction or another would result in a slight hue or color shift," he says. "In ACES, it's more pronounced. If I edge a little bit blue, I get more. I'm using just such a small amount of the space, but it's applying it into the ACES color space, which is so much bigger."

He notes that in the CDL workflow, every manufacturer had a different way of reading the values. "The technical accuracy of ACES is wonderful," he says. "Most D.I.T.'s won't have any issues in transferring over from a CDL or LUT-based workflow into ACES," he says. "The idea of ACES standardizing the entire workflow from beginning to end should make every D.I.T. breathe a sigh of relief."

**Monitors can be the weak link in any production/post workflow**, and Lipson says one of the first things



***“[Production designer] Jeffrey [Gordon] and I are on the exact same page. Shiny surfaces, color, reflections - eye candy in every direction,” Lipson declares. “With ACES, I can rest at ease knowing it’ll look the same from dailies all the way to finishing.”***

they did was to make sure the Sony OLED on-set monitors matched the dailies facilities monitors. “Once we were confident those were matching, we did our camera test, taking frame grabs from the raw footage and then with the ACES applied for references,” he says. “Then we sent those to Bling Atlanta and they ran the files through, creating dailies, and we found they were an exact match.”

On set, Lipson worked very closely with production designer Jeffrey Gordon, who created a new set: a bar where Carter works. “Every chance Jeffrey and I had to be together, we talked about the practicals,” says Lipson. “He and I are on exactly the same page with regard to the visual aspects – shiny surfaces, color, reflections. It’s a DP’s dream come true, eye candy in every direction. On every wall are these industrial pipe fixtures with Edison bulbs with really thick filaments that glow amber. And of course, there’s neon. Every surface has a sheen.”

“All the colors are amazing,” Lipson continues. “And in the back of my mind, while I’m shooting, I can rest at ease knowing that we’re running ACES and that it’ll look the same from dailies all the way to when it goes to Chainsaw for finishing. Before ACES, it was the constant

refrain of how to keep things consistent. With ACES, both Jeffrey and I have confidence.”

At Bling in Los Angeles, Korosi was responsible for making sure that the workflow in Atlanta, headed by Brownley, would follow the entire post-production pipeline including editorial, VFX and finishing at Chainsaw. “It’s easy to say, let’s do ACES because the cinematographer wants to,” says Korosi. “But you need to find out if all the departments are on board, which can save a lot of headaches down the road.”

The key players, says Korosi, are D.I.T., dailies lab, VFX and final color and, when appropriate, 3D. Although ACES 1.0 had just debuted, Pomfort hadn’t yet upgraded LiveGrade. That sealed the decision to stick with the beta version that would ensure consistency with all the gear. Working with VFX in the ACES workflow can be tricky, but *Finding Carter* has so few visual effects that, says Korosi, “it wasn’t a big deal.”

In the pre-production period, the SIM Group companies tested the entire pipeline. “We took a signal from a test shoot done in camera prep and pushed it through the whole chain to make sure it worked,” Korosi



***“All the fallbacks I used to have to do are now just ancillary [using ACES]. Yes, I’ll still take a still and send it with the footage, but there’s never been a need for it.”***

{ FINDING CARTER’S D.I.T. NICK HILTGEN }

explains. “We looked at it in LiveGrade and put it into Colorfront Express dailies, matching and checking both through the scopes. They matched, so we checked that off the list. Then, if you have VFX, you go from dailies to VFX to check if that matches. From there, we go out to online, and see if those files match the master files. The final check is in final color. We pull up the dailies and make sure it matches perfectly with what was in the lab and on set.”

In Atlanta, Brownley notes that the process took some tweaking to get right. “Since the ACES workflow is constantly evolving and not all software companies are on the same page all the time, it took quite a bit of mixing and matching software to find a solid pipeline all the way through,” he says. But he believes the next ACES project will take even less time. “It would be a totally different test but a quicker, easier testing process because all the software has become so much more mature, even in a couple of months,” he says.

**At the end of the chain, Chainsaw colorist Santa Cruz** describes how ACES has impacted his job. “As they’re finishing up shooting an episode, we receive the footage on a drive, and continue to ship drives back and forth,” he says. “We’re hand-in-hand with Bling, and [producer] Ashley [Glazier] is here, so we keep all the information here and accessible.”

“When they lock the episode, I get a bin, and from that bin we create an AAF, which tells the Baselight which media to look at,” he continues. “We grab the original camera masters and put all the camera media in a workspace, and the Baselight conforms the media. When I have the locked sequence in my Baselight, I take an EDL, which has all the color decisions from the DIT, and apply that to the media, so I have the look that’s already been established. That’s my starting point, and I go through and use Ashley’s notes to warm or darken a scene.”

“It definitely makes the process much more efficient,” says Santa Cruz. “I like it because I get to see the cinematographer’s vision, what he was going for. When they’re shooting one episode and I’m coloring an earlier one, I usually just get written notes from the cinematographer. I usually can get pretty close to the intention, but I’m a lot closer with the ACES workflow. This way, I’m seeing exactly what he was going for, so it’s improved the process a lot.”

Now that he’s into the process, cinematographer Lipson feels his expectations from what he’d get with ACES have been met. “I’ve heard only great things from all the technical people,” he says. “Without ACES, we’d be equally enthused, but to actually know we’ll consistently keep what we’re shooting makes it much more exciting.” 🍷