

2012 ASC Career in Television Award Winner: William Wages

By Christine Bunish

More Excited Now Than When He Started

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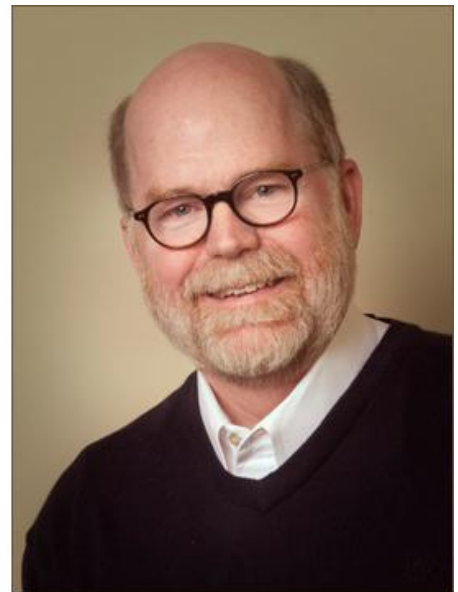
William Wages, ASC, recipient of the 2012 ASC Career Achievement in Television Award, still works from a home base in Atlanta, having ignored the advice he constantly got to move to LA if he wanted his career to advance.

“As far as the industry is concerned, I’m an LA cameraman,” he says. “But early on I made the decision not to move out there. I’m from Atlanta, my wife is from Atlanta; we have a very close extended family. I’ve managed to pursue my whole career while living here.”

Wages’ unconventional choice of residence hasn’t kept him from compiling a distinguished roster of credits for an array of Hallmark Hall of Fame productions, leading TV movies, the USA Network hit series *Burn Notice*, and now USA’s *Necessary Roughness*. He earned Emmy Award nominations for his work on *Buffalo Soldiers* (1998) and *Into the West* (2006), eight ASC Award nominations and two consecutive ASC wins for *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1997) and *Buffalo Soldiers*.

Not bad for a dyslexic kid who was a movie buff.

“I saw the original *Moulin Rouge*, shot by Ozzie Morris, BSC, on TV and it blew me away,” Wages recalls. “I was always good at art, I knew about Lautrec and here was a



movie that looked like his paintings. It was an epiphany – people did this for a living!”

He and a friend spent their Saturdays in downtown movie theaters. One day Wages wandered into a camera store and saw American Cinematographer magazine. “Fireworks went off in my head,” he says. “The store owner gave me a back issue; I took it home and said I wanted to be a cinematographer. My father said ‘Great! Now explain to me what that is.’”

Wages believes that his dyslexia has been “far more of an advantage than a disadvantage” in his chosen field. “You connect things in more unusual ways than non-dyslexics,” he says. “The flood of information that flows through your mind makes disparate things collide and combine into a solution.”

Wages launched his professional career in high school when rock ‘n roll DJ Bob Whitney came to town to produce *Now Explosion* on a local VHF TV station. “It was Top 40 radio on television,” he explains. “He and other DJs played one song after another with videotapes of dancers and every now and then showed a little film. I had been making 8mm films to music so I took one for *Bridge Over Troubled Waters* and knocked on his door. He liked it, gave me three rolls of film and told me to pick a song, shoot something and if he liked it he’d give me \$25. So I began making movies and buying equipment with my meager earnings.”

When the show moved to Miami, Wages’ parents allowed him to spend the summer working on the show. “I learned so much. The show had set up in the Videotape Associates facility, and I met VTA owner Ken Chambliss at 16 – we’re still friends. In fact, Ken, Bob Whitney and I had lunch recently.”

Wages hoped to attend the American Film Institute (AFI), which had given him positive feedback on a film he made. But his father suffered a massive heart attack and had to stop working. So Wages enrolled in Georgia State University as an art major instead. He became a photographic intern on the Sunday magazine section of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* then accepted a full-time job on the magazine racing the four blocks between his school and the office to maintain a full-time academic schedule and a full-time work load.



William Wages preparing to take off with Col. Swanstrom on location for the 1992 TV movie, *Crash Landing: The Rescue of Flight 232*.

His excellence in still photography led to a job offer from National Geographic's children's magazine, but – still wanting to make movies – Wages turned it down. “I used my position at the newspaper to call any production that came to Atlanta so I could take pictures on the shoot,” he says.

Legendary cinematographer William Fraker, ASC, was in town with Sharky's *Machine* and young Wages poured out his dreams. Fraker encouraged his ambitions and invited him to hang out on the set. He also met Stevan Lerner, ASC, who was teaching at AFI and was impressed by the self-taught Wages' technical knowledge.

Wages went on to shoot commercials and documentaries in Atlanta, saving his money with every job. Then he got a chance to shoot a low-budget feature, *Nightman*, in the mid-1980s. “I didn't get paid as much as I did on one day of a commercial, but it was what I wanted to do,” he recalls. “When the film's money was running out, I went off payroll so there'd hopefully be enough to finish it.” Wages even went to LA to color time the feature at his expense.

In 1986, John Korty came to Atlanta to shoot the Hallmark Hall of Fame production, *Resting Place* with John Lithgow and Morgan Freeman. “John [Korty] was a renegade director who was willing to look at local reels when his DP became unavailable. I was an unknown entity, but I had a movie to show and got the job.”

Wages followed up with another Korty project, *Baby Girl Scott*, which he shot in LA. “The TV movies opened doors for me; I started getting phone calls and living life on the road,” he says. A NABET member, he finally accumulated enough California credits to join the IA's LA local.

Wages was fortunate to have come along during the heyday of great TV movies. “I think half the viewing audience watched *Resting Place*,” he notes. “Now if you get five percent of the audience that's good!” In 1988, he shot Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*, then *Caroline?*, *Voices Within: The Lives of Truddi Chase*, *The Moving of Sophia Myles*, and *Miss Lettie and Me*.

In the early 1990s, Wages moved into features. “I've had very good luck in television, but I've never had a feature that was a huge hit, although there are some I'm incredibly proud of,” he says. He believes his high-profile television work is feature quality. “Ironically, some of the most exciting cinematography being done these days is on series television where you have the least amount of time. Good work is not about budget or time, it's about attitude.”

When he was shooting **Buffalo Soldiers**, producer John Watson asked Wages if he had ever directed, and Wages told him he started as a director/cameraman. Watson was doing a pilot for *The Magnificent Seven* series and offered him an episode to direct if the show was picked up.

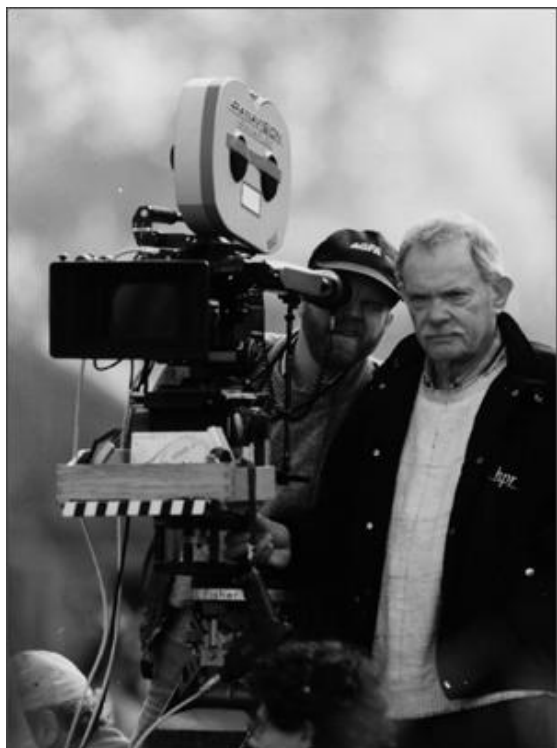
Wages was not a member of the Directors Guild of America (DGA), however, so he got the required three letters of recommendation from mentors and working directors Charles Haid, Lamont Johnson and Irvin Kershner. The latter questioned Wages' prospective move to directing, telling him he already had the best job in the film industry, but he wrote the recommendation anyway. Wages went on to direct one episode of *The Magnificent Seven* in 1998 and three the next season.

Wages was at a crossroads in his career. Johnson and Kershner told him he'd have to choose between being a director or a cinematographer, and directing would likely require a move to LA. "I really enjoyed shooting, so I decided to stay with it," Wages says. He has remained active as a 2nd unit director, however. He directed all the battle scenes for the Ted Turner-financed film, *Gods and Generals*. American Heritage Magazine called the Civil War battle sequences the best ever filmed, a kudos Wages was proud to accept.

"I haven't given up directing," he says. "It's just that my passion for cinematography is stronger."

As a television DP, Wages shot episodes of *Surface* and of HBO's *Big Love*. Then he met Matt Nix, creator of USA Network's, *Burn Notice*, who was searching for a DP for the show's second season.

Wages calls his three seasons of *Burn Notice* "the hardest work I've ever done – we'd blow something up every day then still shoot nine pages of dialogue in Miami in the summertime!"



He shot the second and third seasons of the series on 16mm after meeting opposition from the studio to convert the show to HD acquisition. ARRI offered Wages the opportunity to have *Burn Notice* become the first series shot with ALEXA, and an excited Matt Nix joined Wages into talking the studio into accepting. Unfortunately, delivery of the cameras was held up, but "the digital door was open. Fox wanted us to use a Sony PDW-F800 XDCAM HD camera recording to a Blu-ray disk

**William Wages with director
Lamont Johnson on the set for
The Broken Chain, a 1993 TV movie.**

“I felt we could make it work,” he says. “We were using a \$50,000 lens on a \$30,000 camera and getting phenomenal results. We were able to cut the lighting wattage by more than half and keep the convention center that we used for a studio much cooler, which in Miami in the summertime is a good thing.”

In addition, “the broadcast image quality was so much better than 16mm whose slow-speed stock looked grainier when broadcast than the high-speed stock because of compression. HD solved all that, and the ENG-style Sony camera was conducive to handheld shooting,” he reports.

Moving to HD also paved the way to using HD SLRs for the show’s car crashes. “You couldn’t intercut digital footage with 16mm, but we could intercut the Canon 7D with the Sony,” he notes.

Although Wages enjoyed his time with *Burn Notice*, spending seven months each season away from home was tough. And, in the meantime, “a lot of shows were happening in Georgia because of the state’s production tax incentives,” something Wages had been pushing for. “Last year, I did two television movies in Atlanta: *Field of Vision* and *Game of Your Life*, part of the Family Movie Night cosponsored by Procter & Gamble and Walmart, and targeted to mothers and kids 8-14,” he says.

Wages has begun prep in Atlanta for the returning USA Network series, *Necessary Roughness*, which received top reviews in its debut season. He plans to continue using ARRI ALEXA for the second season, supplementing it with a Sony camera for handheld.

With the digital revolution firmly underway Wages says, “I’m more excited now than when I was 16. Things I used to dream about doing, we can easily do now. Look at what you can accomplish with a \$1,000 camera you can hold in the palm of your hand. It’s ironic that with the evolution of cameras, they will soon be the cheapest thing on the set.”

He’s eager to see the democratization of filmmaking change the paradigm where “too few people have had too much control for too long,” and he wants to see what the future of Internet film distribution has to offer. “It should allow people to make movies which are targeted to an audience that you can get in touch with directly and cheaply. That’s what I want to do. It’s a great time to be in the business!”