



ASC AWARDS MOVIE OF THE WEEK OR PILOT

WILLIAM WAGES, ASC - Winner Riders of the Purple Sage

When he was 12 years old, William Wages discovered **American Cinematographer** magazine on the stands at a local camera store. After thumbing through its pages, he knew he wanted to become a director of photography. Describing himself as "the kid who grew up to be the fireman," Wages worked his way through school at Georgia State University as a still photographer for the **Atlanta Journal**. Upon graduation, he began his career as a cinematographer.

He quickly accumulated credits on such television projects as **The Traveling Man, The Crash of Flight 232, With Savage Intent, For Their Own Good, Secrets, Shadows of Evil, Mortal Fear** and **Every Woman's Dream**. He has also shot the features **Love Potion No. 9, In the Army Now, Iron Will** and the upcoming **American Perfekt**.

Wages' nominated work, the Turner/Rosemont-produced MOW **Riders of the Purple Sage**, earned him his fifth ASC Award nomination, following prior nods which came for **I'll Fly Away** (1991), **Caroline** and **Voices Within: The Story of Truddi Chase, Part II** (both 1990), and **Gore Vidal's Lincoln** (1988).

Riders of the Purple Sage is Wages' fifth collaboration with director Charles Haid; they had previously teamed on the feature **Iron Will** and the telefilms **Cooperstown**, **In the Line of Duty** and **Nightman**. Also along for the ride were such frequent collaborators as production designer Michael Baugh, gaffer Tully McCulloch, key grip Richard Fezzey and first AC Heather Page. Wages also praised longtime friend and second-unit director of photography Jerry Calloway for adding immeasurable value to the production.

In their initial talks, Haid and Wages decided to lend the Western an almost black-and-white noir ambiance, even though the film was shot on Fuji 250 and 500 ASA color stocks. "We wanted the picture to feel hot and rugged," Wages explains. "We didn't do anything to soften the look. The only filters I used were polarizers and grads — nothing else. Amy Madigan [the show's lead actress, who served as co-executive producer with co-star/husband Ed Harris] wanted to look like a real rancher, like someone who lived in those conditions and did that work. I wasn't forced to use any kind of diffusion on her, and we shot her the way she was. Amy's such a wonderful, brilliant actress that it was more important for her to look real and be believable than anything else. And she did look beautiful and real. I really appreciated it, because not many actresses want to do that."

Shot within an hour's drive of Moab, Utah, the production built several of the film's buildings, which were designed specifically for their filming needs. Wages explains, "We built the church, the farm house, the barn and some other buildings. With the ranch itself, more consideration was given to the trees; knowing which scenes we would do there, we tried to position the buildings so that we could get wonderful afternoon light on the porch.

"The church was the most important building," he maintains. "We positioned it so that we would get shafts of light through the windows, and boy did that work! The shootout sequence at the end of the story was engineered around a four-hour period in the afternoon when we got incredible shafts of light through the windows — that is, as long as it wasn't cloudy outside. On the days that we were [at the church location], we would shoot bits and pieces of other scenes and then go in and shoot parts of the shootout sequence while we had those shafts of light. The shutters [on the windows] were designed

with cracks so we could have that effect. The more guns that were fired in the scene, the smokier it got, and the more the shafts of light we had. But I was a nervous wreck the whole time, because if the sun went behind clouds, I really couldn't duplicate that effect."

A substantial portion of the script utilized exterior locales, so Wages and the first assistant director Craig West had to carefully map out the production strategy. "Westerns are about logistics," he says. "If you plan well, you'll be at the right place at the right time, and that's what Charlie [Haid], Craig and I did. I spent my entire time during preproduction going to the locations so Charlie and I could figure out how we were going to shoot the scenes and decide what time of day we should film them at. Craig then created a schedule that reflected all of that. Craig consistently got us to the right place at the right time of day.

"It was a very rough shoot, as any Western is. To film a Western, you have to go out into the middle of nowhere so you can see 360 degrees of horizon. That means you can't hide the film company anyplace. You have to plot every scene and know exactly how you're going to do it to make sure that you don't end up parking the company right in the middle of it all. Sometimes there are rocks to hide things behind, but many times there aren't. Also, a lot of the picture was shot on Bureau of Land Management property, which meant we couldn't drive on it and had to hand-carry a lot of equipment a long way."

Recalling one such instance, Wages relates, "We wanted to do a sunset scene on top of one of the buttes. There was only one way up, which was through a big crack that was about six feet wide and had filled up with dirt and rocks over the years to form almost natural steps to climb up. Without equipment, it took about 10 minutes to climb to the top, and it was a real problem to get up there with the equipment, shoot the scene and then get back down before it got too dark and dangerous. In a moment of inspiration, I came up with the idea of lining up the entire crew from the bottom of this crack all the way to the top — forming a daisy-chain, like a bucket brigade. This way, we handed our equipment up, got our shot, and then handed the equipment all the way down.

"What was also interesting about this was that Ed Harris, Amy Madigan and Charlie Haid were right in the middle of this line of about 75 people, handing equipment up. Once we got the equipment in place, we'd climb up and shoot with Ed and Amy — and then they'd get back in the middle of the line and help to hand the equipment down. That was the kind of spirit this project had all the way through. It was very much a team effort on everybody's part, and that's what made **Riders** so wonderful."