



# Blazing Trails

William Wages, ASC  
receives the Society's Career  
Achievement in Television  
Award after years of  
stellar work.

By David Heuring

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In presenting its Career Achievement in Television Award to Society member William Wages last month, the ASC recognized a cinematographer who has shot more than 50 TV projects and so far earned eight ASC Award nominations (winning twice) and two Emmy nominations. This latest award is the culmination of a journey that began in Atlanta, Ga.

Wages' early school experience was made difficult by unrecognized dyslexia. His interest in photography was sparked by his father and fanned into flames by a viewing of John Huston's *Moulin Rouge* (1952), photographed by Oswald Morris, BSC, and an encounter with a copy of *American Cinematographer*. The camera-store proprietor saw the fire in Wages' eyes and told him to keep the magazine. He still has it. "I had an epiphany," Wages recalls. "I connected the dots. Somebody actually made these films, and someone actually photographed and lit them. It was a revelation!"



Opposite: Director of photography William Wages, ASC on location in Moab, Utah, for the ASC Award-winning project *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1996). This page: The cinematographer at work on *Crash Landing: The Rescue of Flight 232* (1992), one of the many projects he shot for director Lamont Johnson.

His parents needed an explanation as to what exactly his newfound obsession entailed, but they were fully supportive. Soon Wages was shooting Super 8mm films in the backyard with his brother, Bob. In one memorable instance, the camera was crushed by a car, but Wages was undeterred.

The next step involved a TV program called *The Now Explosion!*, which aired on a local station. On weekends, a lack of programming meant that Top 40 radio hits were broadcast on television, usually accompanied by a variety of images, including videotapes of dancing teenagers and psychedelic graphics, or films that were a precursor to what later became music videos. Wages made an 8mm film to accompany Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge over Troubled Water"; he brought the film, a projector and the record to the show's offices, and started everything running to approximate sync. "At the time, I had just bought a 16mm Bolex with a 25mm lens, but I couldn't afford film to put in it," he recalls. "They liked my little movie, so they gave me three three-minute rolls of film, told me to



pick a song and said if they liked what I did, they'd give me \$25. I was in the film business!"

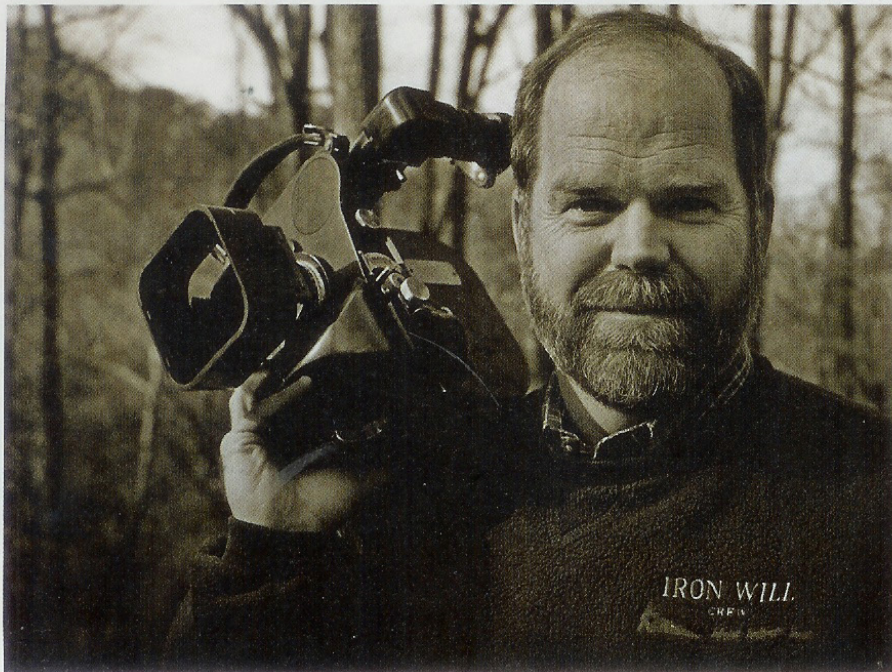
During the summer between his junior and senior years of high school, Wages made films for *The Now Explosion!* He teamed with Robert Whitney, the man behind the show, and Ken Chambliss, an inventor who owned Video Tape Associates and later went on to develop the Da Vinci color-

correction systems. "By the end of that summer, I had a Miller tripod, a 12-120mm zoom lens and \$25 in my pocket," says Wages. "I was broke, but I was rich!"

Next Wages enrolled at Georgia State University in Atlanta, where he studied fine art and art history on the advice of Stevan Lerner, ASC, whom he had met on a film set. He landed a summer photography internship at the

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Top: Wages at work with Johnson, one of his longtime mentors, on *The Broken Chain* (1993). Bottom: Ready for action on location.



*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and used the position to contact every film production that set foot in Georgia, saying that the newspaper needed file photos. Upon gaining access to the set, Wages would approach the cinematographer, confess his ruse and ask if he

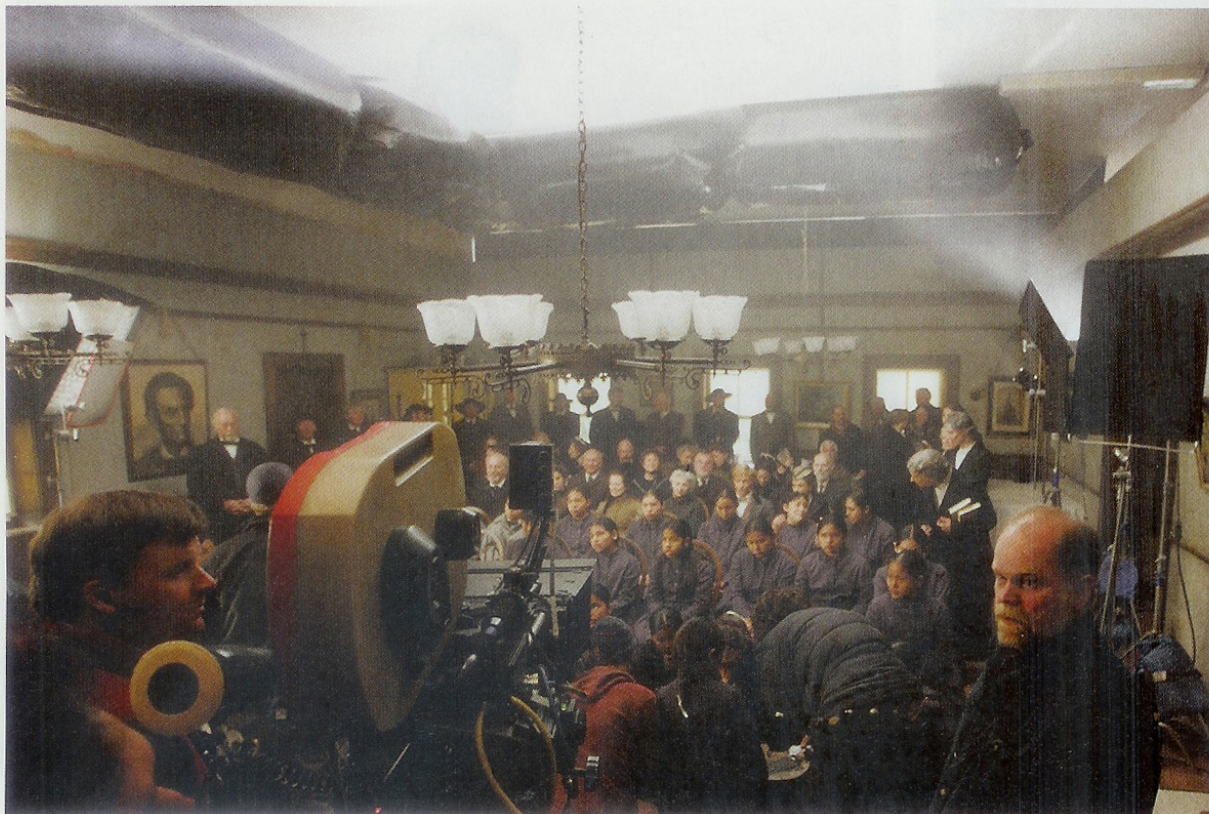
could learn from him. In this manner, he began friendships with Society members Lerner and William Fraker, as well as other cameramen. "Those guys took me under their wings," says Wages. "They let me ask any questions and never said they were stupid questions.

Even though these were very short periods of time, they came at critical moments in my life.

"Stevan told me to skip film school because I already knew the technical side," he adds. "He told me to study art history and keep shooting, even if I worked for nothing."

After graduating from Georgia State in 1976, Wages started freelancing on locally produced industrials and commercials. He shot a no-budget feature with the Bolex that was never released, but he started gaining some traction in the commercial arena, eventually landing bigger jobs with clients such as Budweiser. Often he did double duty as director and cinematographer. Still, his goal was feature filmmaking, so he started turning down commercials and taking on long-form documentaries. That led to *First Strike*, which included a fake vérité depiction of a Soviet nuclear strike. The first interview was with the head of Strategic Air Command, who allowed the filmmakers unprecedented access to missile silos in North Dakota and the war room inside Cheyenne Mountain. Some of that footage was picked up and used in the popular ABC miniseries *The Day After*, for which Gayne Rescher, ASC earned an Emmy nomination.

Meanwhile, Wages was trying to land an agent in Los Angeles. His work caught the eye of Ray Gosnell, but Gosnell didn't know how to sell Wages, given that he lived in Atlanta and was not a member of the Los Angeles union. Another year passed, and then Wages landed an assignment for Hallmark Hall of Fame, the first of several he would get over his career. *Resting Place* starred Morgan Freeman and John Lithgow, and it was directed by John Korty, whom Wages credits with giving him his first break in Hollywood. Upon completing it, Wages approached Gosnell again. "I said, 'Ray, you represent cinematographers from Australia, England and Germany, and I'm from the South, which is like another country. Can't you handle me just like you do them?' We made a deal



Top: With his WagBags in position, Wages (foreground right) preps a shot for the miniseries *Into the West* (2005), on which he shared cinematographer duties with Alan Caso, ASC. Bottom: Wages checks the light in another interior.

on the phone, and I had an agent.”

Wages decided to stay based in Atlanta for family reasons, but he found there were other advantages. “My wife, Cathy, and I decided early on to invest in my career and live well below our means, which is easier to do in Atlanta,” he says. “If I needed to take six months off or work without pay, I could do it. Staying there might look like a disadvantage, but it helped in many respects. For one thing, I became known as ‘that guy in Atlanta.’”

Once his career began to take off, opportunities to shoot more telefilms proliferated. “The shoots weren’t that long, which allowed me to do more projects. I also liked that I wasn’t gone for eight months at a time, because I had four young boys.”

One key association Wages made during this period was with director Lamont Johnson. Their first collaboration was *Gore Vidal’s Lincoln*, which brought Wages his first ASC Award nomination (*AC* April ’89), and they subsequently reteamed for many projects, including *Crash Landing: The Rescue of Flight 232*, *Broken Chain*, *Man*

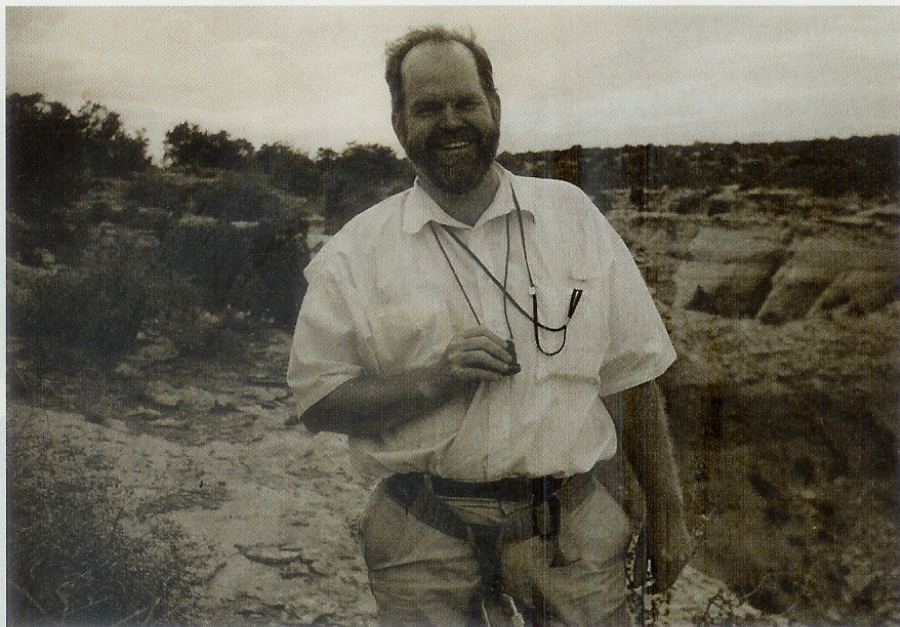


*Next Door* and *Voices Within: The Lives of Truddi Chase*, the latter of which also earned Wages an ASC nomination (*AC* May ’91).

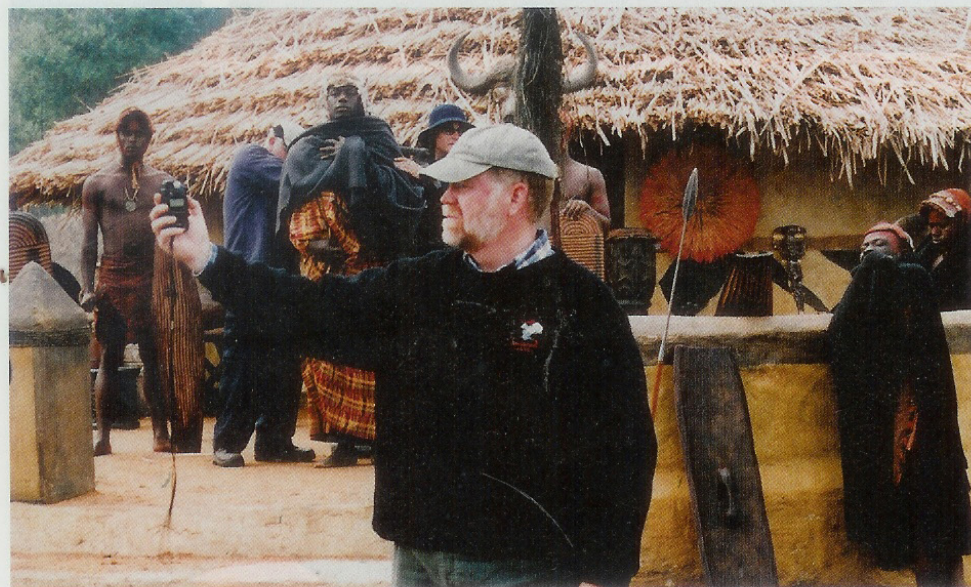
Wages was invited to join the ASC in 1992 after being proposed for membership by Society fellows Allen

Daviau, Robert Primes and John Hora. Around this time, he gained another mentor, director Irvin Kershner, with whom he made the HBO film *Traveling Man*, among others. “Lamont and Kersh were always supportive and brutally honest with me, and I stayed

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Clockwise from top left: Wages prepares to capture a shot for *Iron Will* (1994); on location in Utah for *Riders of the Purple Sage*; at work in South Africa for *King Solomon's Mines* (2004).



friends with both of them until they passed away," says Wages. "They were my fathers in this business. They told me the truth instead of what I wanted to hear. Until the very end of their lives, they were engaged, involved and excited about filmmaking. They wanted to know everything that was going on. I always ran my important decisions by them and asked for their wisdom and advice. It was sometimes painful but always truthful."

Wages' career hit its stride, and

he began taking on projects as fast as he could shoot them. Between 1987 and 1997, he shot more than 30 telefilms and pilots, as well as multiple features and episodes of series. More ASC nominations followed for *Caroline?* (AC May '91), *I'll Fly Away* (pilot; AC May '92), *The Moving of Sophia Myles* (AC May '01) and *Miss Lettie and Me*. Wages won ASC Awards in 1997 and 1998 for *Riders of the Purple Sage* (AC May '97) and *Buffalo Soldiers* (AC May '98), respectively. The latter project also earned an Emmy nomination, as did

*Into the West* (AC June '05).

*Buffalo Soldiers* producer Don Watson asked Wages during that shoot if he had ever directed. "He said he was doing a pilot, and that if it went to series, he wanted me to direct an episode," says Wages. "I thought it was merely a nice gesture, but about four months later he told me I would direct Episode 11 of *The Magnificent Seven*. Lamont, Kersh and Charles Haid, the director of *Buffalo Soldiers*, wrote letters to the Directors Guild on my behalf. I asked Lamont what he thought of the idea, and he said it was wonderful. Irvin, on the other hand, asked me if I had lost my mind! I asked him if he thought I was capable. He said, 'Of course. The least experienced person on a television set is usually the director. But you already have the best job in show biz — don't blow it!' My heart sank, but over time he gave me his support, and I directed four episodes of the show."

At first, directing was overwhelming. "I saw the first iteration of the schedule, and I was shocked by nine pages a day!" he says. "I called Kersh and asked, 'How do I do this?' He said, 'One shot at a time.' It sounds trite, but it's absolutely true. You have to focus on

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each shot and make intelligent compromises. I had never worked with a director of photography, so I told Gordon Lonsdale [ASC], 'If it's okay with you, I'll block and place the camera because that's the only way I know how to do it, but I will never question your lighting in any way.' Gordon said, 'Great,' and it was a wonderful collaboration."

Soon Wages had to make a decision. Pursuing a directing path would mean moving to Los Angeles. "What finally made me choose to continue as a cinematographer, though, was that I love shooting so much," he says. "I still get an occasional chance to direct. For example, I directed and shot the battle scenes for *Gods and Generals* [AC March '03], which was the most fun I've ever had in the movie business."

In recent years, Wages has taken on assignments shooting episodic television, including stints on the series *Big Love*, *Surface* and *Burn Notice*. "Episodic is the hardest thing I've ever done, and I

came away with a whole new respect for people who do it," he observes. "Some of the most creative work is being done in that arena, against all odds."

Whether he is shooting or directing, a healthy dose of spontaneity helps keep things fresh. "When you're flying without a net, it creates an energy and a spark," he says. "Kersh and Lamont taught me that when everything is perfect, you don't get a sense of reality. Instead of planning everything, you should let it evolve in front of your eyes and then jump on in. That keeps everybody on his toes."

"After the first take of the first scene on the first day of any project, Lamont would immediately say, 'Print. Move on.' That got everyone's attention and got the ball rolling. It surprised me at first, but later he told me it was a method. And it works. On a TV series, you work that way because you have to. It's very hectic, and I've learned a lot. I am so much faster now, and I like to

think I'm faster without compromising. There is a way to do that."

Over the course of his career, Wages has had a hand in developing a number of tools that contribute to on-set efficiency and flexibility, including Tiffen Glimmerglass diffusion filters and two devices named by his crew, WagFlags and WagBags. Glimmerglass filters got their start when Wages began experimenting with damaged filters. With advice from Denny Clairmont, he soaked them in acetone and separated them to reclaim the glass. He experimented with graphite and laminated the filters himself with various optical cements. Once he achieved the delicate, net-like diffusion he was after, he gave sets to Daviau and Steven Poster, ASC. "When I showed them to Ira Tiffen, he loved the effect, so [his company] came up with a way to manufacture them," says Wages. "Steve Tiffen has since combined the Glimmerglass effect with digital diffusion and created a filter that I



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think makes hi-def video look like film.”

The WagFlag grew out of the need for flexibility in practical locations. He explains, “It’s an 8-by-6-foot flag covered in black, rip-stop nylon that’s 4 feet wide and can be rolled up on the flag. By using this flag and a C-stand, you can tease a ceiling bounce off a wall in a practical location with no rigging. Believe it or not, we use it at 6 inches all the time. The WagBag is a 2½-by-8-foot black helium balloon that does the same job as a WagFlag. For a wider teaser, I use a black plastic tablecloth clipped to the balloon with clothespins.

“I came up with the balloon idea when we were shooting in a beautifully restored Victorian house that had French hand-blocked silk-screened wallpaper,” Wages recalls. “One tiny bit of damage would have required a complete repapering, which would have cost \$30,000. As an experiment, I had a balloon company make the first one. It

worked great, but it cost about \$500, and one was not enough. All my research says that helium will leak through Visqueen, but I filled up a garbage bag and it floated for two days, which was plenty of time for our purposes. I rounded up some 2-mil black plastic, and we started making them.

“Unless there’s a tremendous amount of wind, they settle and stay put,” he notes. “I also clip them together into a U shape, which can be easily reset when doing the reverse angle.”

Thinking back to his education in art history, Wages notes with irony that photography changed painting. “For me, painting became more interesting with the Impressionists,” he says. “Impressionism came about as a response to photography. Prior to that, everyone wanted to paint as realistically as possible, but [the Impressionists] quickly figured out that the camera could do that better, and that realism

was boring. Of course, there are shining examples where this isn’t true, like Vermeer and Rembrandt. But for a lot of painters, it was a technical quest for perfection in composition and perspective with little regard for chiaroscuro. Photography opened their eyes.

“Toulouse-Lautrec, one of my favorites, had a Brownie camera, and you can see compositional and spatial aspects of his paintings that came from that camera and lens. His work is absolutely astounding. Thinking about that takes me back to Huston’s *Moulin Rouge*, which took color, composition and other cues from his work. When Ossie Morris won the ASC International Award, I had the chance to tell him that he’s the reason I became a cinematographer.”

Of his own ASC honor, Wages says, “I’m deeply grateful. I love being a cinematographer, and becoming a member of the ASC was a high point in my career. This accolade is astonishing, to say the least.” ●

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