

MIAMI NOT-SO-NICE

William Wages, ASC, gets in touch with his inner spook in USA Network's searing new spy drama, *Burn Notice*.

By **Pauline Rogers**

Photos by **Glenn Watson / Fox Television Studios**





The concept for a hit show can come from anywhere: a real-life news event, a casual reference on the Web, or, in Matt Nix's case, a series of conversations with his friend Michael Wilson (now consulting producer), whose background is in the intelligence field.

"I became interested, not only in the nuts and bolts of espionage, but also the real, human side of what it means to be a spy," producer Nix relates. "What sort of a person chooses that life? What are the costs associated with a career built on deception? The more I learned about it, the more I realized there was an interesting show there, one that was less about international politics and more about a compelling character."

And thus Michael Westen (any similarities to Michael Wilson are purely intentional!) was born. The protagonist of USA Network's popular new drama, *Burn Notice*, came equipped with an intriguing backstory as a blacklisted spy, i.e., one who has been "burned" by his former employers and is now quarantined in South Florida. The show elegantly mixes espionage caper with believable human characters, and as lead actor Jeffrey Donovan confesses, "I have more fun doing this role than any other I've ever played. Michael went away from his family because he didn't feel wanted or needed. He went for a bigger family – the flag and country that needed him. When he comes back to town, it's less about helping out the little guys and more about Michael validating that someone needs him!"



Faster Than a Wildfire

Nursing his new life in Miami for past transgressions, Michael's inner circle includes his hard-talking, chain-smoking mother, Madeline Westen, who was initially out of synch with her exiled spy son when he came back to town. "But I connected with the character," says actress Sharon Gless. "Madeline was totally in the dark and very needy. But, as time went on, Matt said 'She's smarter than I was writing.' He told me to remember that he gets his smarts from her. I can't say that he gets his technical skills from her. She's not totally informed as to what he's doing but she knows him. It's her boy."

Add to this mix a relationship with his quirky ex-girlfriend (Gabrielle Anwar), and a slightly off-center ex-spy cohort (Bruce Campbell), the sun, sand, and sex of Miami Beach locations, and a look that pushes the envelope in every respect, and no wonder *Burn Notice* has found such a loyal and enthusiastic cable audience.

Nix says he didn't create the series with the specific intent to blow past production norms. "We're driven by ambitious storytelling, a limited budget, and limited time," he explains. "So we have to pack a lot of story into 42 minutes. We're also operating on a cable budget, so we had to make some creative decisions to accommodate that. For example we do a lot of helicopter shots that take the audience from place to place in Miami. They're cool looking, certainly, but they're also practical. We don't have the time or money to do a lot of driving scenes and establishing shots. One day of helicopter shooting takes care of a season's worth of transitions."

Charged with keeping *Burn Notice* aflame is series cinematographer William Wages, ASC, who took over for Roy Wagner, ASC, after the show's first season. "Roy was a big help in the transition but this type of production was new for me," says Wages. "I've done features, mini-series and television movies – but nothing has been as challenging or as interesting as *Burn Notice*. We shoot each episode in seven days, and average only 8 hours of second unit per show. Every day we have car chases, explosions, fights, as well as regular dialogue scenes. We average 50-60 setups a day and occasionally have reached 100! One thing that helps us go this fast is using a small versatile camera, the Arriflex 416. To go from handheld to studio or Steadicam takes only minutes. The extended latitude of Fuji film stock helps as well."

To move these action-packed, yet character-driven stories along, the series uses a variety of different cinematic tools. "Our voice-over narration is a perfect example," says Wages. "At some point in the story, the audience must be introduced to a large amount of information, and Michael explains it with voice-overs."

"To enhance this we use ramping," he continues. "We shoot everything in increments of 24, 48, 72, etc., frames-per-second. This way the editors chose the point that the ramp will happen. The scene might start at normal speed and when it goes to voice over, we ramp to slo-mo, suspending reality for the moment while Michael explains spy technique. The audience loves this inside information."



Controlled Burn

Yet another innovative technique *Burn Notice* employs is the use of “box” sequences, i.e., dividing the screen into multiple images. “A box is a way of creatively dealing with the fact that we often have to do big scenes with lots of points-of-view and pieces of action,” Nix asserts. “By splitting the screen into boxes, we can show both a character doing surveillance and what he is seeing at the same time. It makes it easier to do the scenes quickly and economically.”

“The other kind of ‘box’ is when we are really building something,” Nix adds. “The characters often build devices to use, improvising with whatever they have around. Those are usually accompanied by a voice-over explaining how the device works, or how it is constructed. By splitting the screen into boxes, it lends the sequences some style, and also allows us to speed them up, showing different parts of the building process happening simultaneously. Our philosophy is that people don’t necessarily want to see the entire process of say, armoring a car, but they do want to see the fun parts and learn basically how it is done.”

“The box sequences are routinely shot with the principal

actors,” explains B-camera operator Paul Krumper. “We pick a couple of angles for a bomb making montage or a listening device plant, then instinctively tilt from the actor’s face down to what they are working on. This ties the actor into the action. Then the first team will move on to another scene and leave a camera unit behind to clean up the inserts and details.”

“Another time-saving device is rear screen projection for interior moving car shots,” Wages says. “We use a digital projector with its image slightly out of focus, and overexpose the screen 2-1/2 to 3 stops. We also do a lot of kinetic moving lights on the actors, but the most important part is camera shake.”

“These shots are a complete team effort, as I give the camera constant but non-rhythmic vibration,” says A-camera operator David Kimelman. “In addition to that the dolly grip keeps moving a little and adds an extra bump in the road now and then.”

Wages and his team have found a way to speed up lighting Michael’s loft and Madeline’s house interior and exterior, which are standing sets. “Our ‘stages’ are in the [now defunct] Coconut Grove Convention Center,” the DP shares, “where there are no green beds or catwalks and heat is a problem.



So, instead of hanging lights we work from the floor with Maxi-Brutes and Dinos bounced off a number of 20x20 Ultrabounce. This way the heat is closer to the floor and easier to vent out. Also burnout replacements are easier. Outside Michael's loft we have mounted 12x12 Ultrabounce frames above each window hinged from the set wall and on pulleys. We can angle them up and down and then use a Maxi-Brute on the studio floor to create ambient light through the window. In this configuration one Maxi-Brute can replace 20 6K space lights, and that eliminates a lot of heat."

Wages says he likes using backlight in the loft - a big open room with nowhere to hide rigging. "We've created a rig with a Barger Lite and Chimera that can be pulled like a Cablecam anywhere in the room," he continues. "When we aren't using it, we take the bag off and pull it up to the ceiling to get it out of the way. Production design has painted the rigging points to match the wall so the camera does not see them.

"And, thanks to the creativity and cooperation of the art department, we are able to get backlight on people when they are near the walls by using standard window shades (which are installed all around the loft), instead of stapling up bounce

cards. When they are rolled up, the outside has been painted to match the walls so the camera cannot see them."

Collateral Damage

The style of *Burn Notice* affects the directors who come on the show. "It's an intriguing series to do," observes Dennie Gordon, "and you have to be on top of your game. When I get a script, I know that it has been designed head to toe - opening moment to transition and finish - for every story-telling moment. I know it's going to be a dense show and a lot is going to happen. There is not very much wiggle room. I remember one day we were shooting and Jeff Donovan looked at me with a smile. 'I know what you are doing,' he said. 'You're shooting our edit.'"

Donovan was right, of course, with Gordon adding that *Burn Notice* directors must take advantage of each star's strengths. "And I don't just mean the actors," he smiles. "Miami is a killer backdrop! Open the doors to our 'stages' and there's the Marina, boats, palm trees, and water. So you can bet a lot



of South Florida needs to be seen as well.”

Yes, Miami is another star of *Burn Notice*, although Nix refers to the city as a “fickle” leading lady. “Florida has two sides,” explains the producer. “There is the beautiful, scenic Florida which everybody loves. And then there is the rainy, brutally hot Florida, which can be pretty intense.

“We try to avoid the ‘real’ Florida, when we can,” he smiles. “Because the weather doesn’t mess around. When it’s hot it is 105 degrees and 90 percent humidity. When it’s rainy, it’s torrential. The good news, though, is that Miami weather never seems to last very long.”

“Our crew is all Miami-based, except for myself and one AD,” adds Wages. “So they know how to deal with Mother Nature. We can be in the middle of a shot and I’ll see them start to cover equipment. I used to ask why. Not anymore. By the time the covers are on, the rain has hit, and minutes later, it’s clear again. I turn around and the covers are already off and we continue shooting.”

Well, not all the time, Wages admits. “Once in South Beach,” the DP recounts, “we were shooting a huge stunt with a car flying off the fourth floor of a parking deck, and it started to rain and didn’t stop for four hours! We learned a valuable lesson as the rising water pushed us to the second floor of the parking deck: Mercedes, Porsches and Audis sink, but Toyotas float! We lost a half-day to this flood but thanks to the creativity

of our crew, a top-drawer cast, and scripts that take advantage of every aspect of this unique location, we were still able to finish even that episode in seven days.” 🎬

CREW

“BURN NOTICE SEASON 3”

Dir. of Photography: William Wages, ASC

Operator: David Kimelman, Paul Krumper

Assistants: T. Michael McLean, Peter Farber, Roberto Ballesteros, Billy Wells

Steadicam Operator: David Kimelman

Steadicam Assistant: T. Michael McLean

Film Loader: Joe Dare
