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# MANIFEST DESTINY

DPs **Caso and Wages** Detail Their  
Adventure Shooting “Into The West”

**S**ince producers of the TNT 12-hour miniseries, “Into The West”, wanted to richly illustrate their epic story about the opening of the American West, they quickly realized the job would require more than one talented cinematographer. Spanning a time-frame of over 60 years, “Into The West” documents the turbulent story of the transformation of the West from the perspectives of two families—one Native American and the other a group of white settlers.

To paint the story’s visuals, the production turned to two veteran cinematographers: Alan Caso, ASC (*Six Feet Under*, *Frankenstein*) and William Wages, ASC (*Buffalo Soldiers*, *Riders of the Purple Sage*). Both men say they were eager to tell the story without dipping into the conventional, Hollywood Western approach.

Touted by TNT as “a six-week television event,” the miniseries was produced in association with DreamWorks Television and executive producer Steven Spielberg. Using actual historical events, the shows cover the wagon train migration,

the Gold Rush, brutal massacres at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee, and the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, among other events. Production-wise, each two-hour episode was shot in Calgary, Canada, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, using a feature-film template, with roughly a 30-day schedule each.

Wages shot episodes two, three, and five. Upon taking the gig, he recalls that “the first thing that struck me was how huge this production was going to be, how vast, and what a wide scope it had. We meet characters who are born, they live, and they die (during the course of the miniseries). We have different actors playing the same character as they

age. It's quite extensive as to how big this story is. It was a bit daunting at the beginning, but you make movies one shot at a time, and that's how you get through it."

One of the first discussions filmmakers had was to determine the production's overall look and style.

"We both saw the show as having a very natural approach," explains Caso, who shot episodes one, four, and six. "We wanted to step away from typical Westerns. It was more about getting the sense of being there for the first time. For the first episode, we wanted to set a feel that was more about putting the camera in people's faces and making the audience feel like they were right there, tagging along with the characters for the first time. I wanted the audience to be there as if they were another character. I shot most of it with very wide lenses, up close to the actors. I did very little interpretative lighting—I mostly tried to recreate the natural situation with light."

A natural lighting approach in conjunction with period illumination shaped the project's general look, and that look was then further enhanced in post.

"Back in those days, people lived in the dark," Wages points out. "Lighting came from nature, or even with candles and lanterns, it was still very dark. For Native Americans, everything at night was fire-lit. In the tape-to-tape color correction, performed at Technicolor Creative Services (formerly Complete Post), Hollywood, we did a heavily desaturated look for all the episodes."

For scenes taking place inside teepees, Caso's lighting was inspired by nature.

"If we were inside a teepee, rather than lighting from inside, making the teepee look artificially lit, I would blast light in through the doorway, letting the light hit the ground and doing what it would do naturally, as with sunlight. If there was any fire, I would use that as a minimal fill for the faces of the actors inside. For me, there was a lot of play with bright, natural sunlight hitting bodies, and a lot of soft subtle bounce that would glow on the faces."

To create the look of firelight, Wages devised a system to mimic the random, yet subtle, nuances of that particular light source.

"I used a lot of Barger Bag lights, which are 6k lights with three circuits," he explains. "I would run one circuit on a flicker box, and run another circuit on another flicker box, and a third circuit would be constant, so I could duplicate the flickering effect of a fire. We rewired a bunch of ninelights so that we could do the same thing and have different circuits flickering. We also made very small three-circuit units that we could hide behind the fires."

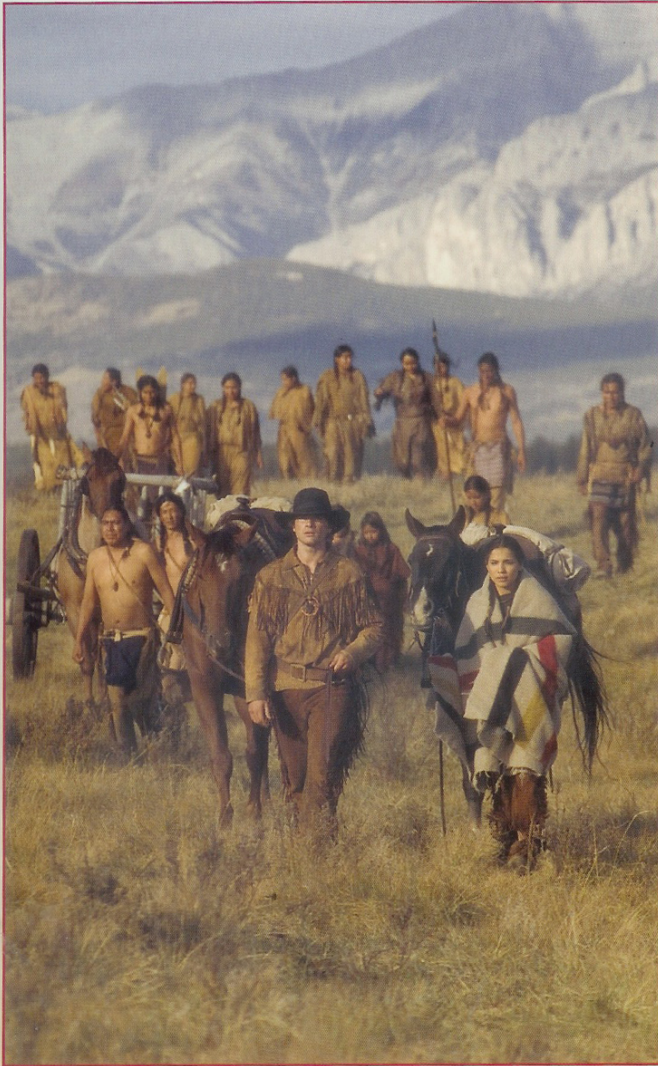
Wages applied his lighting on a much grander scale for a scene showing wagon trains circled together at night.

"These were some of the largest lighting setups I've ever done," he says. "We were working on 30



*above: Co-DP Alan Caso, ASC (right) consults on location with one of the miniseries' five directors, Michael W. Watkins, during production of "Into The West." bottom: Co-DP William Wages, ASC, who painstakingly devised ways to create realistic firelight during the production.*





*The scope of the story told in "Into the West" directly impacted the nature of the cinematography, according to DPs William Wages, ASC, and Alan Caso, ASC.*

**INTO THE WEST**  
**STOCK**  
**USED**  
**Fuji 400T**

acres of land with moonlight and all of the fire effects going in the camps. I had a yardage rangefinder because we were shining lights half a mile at times. Photometrics don't exist for that, so we had to make our own. We needed a Musco, but there wasn't one in Calgary, so we basically made our own with 12k Pars. Sometimes, we were throwing light as far as 500 yards, and it worked out great."

As towns sprung up overnight on the frontier, buildings with canvas roofs were typical during the era covered in the miniseries. For Caso, a gambling hall with a canvas roof brought in a large amount of ambient light, but that wasn't all that he was after.

"Because the canvas was translucent, I really had to pump up the sunlight that I was bringing in through the windows, so that all the ambient light was down enough to create the mood I was after," says Caso. "Otherwise, it would have been really washed out and unflattering."

From dark nights to bright daylight conditions, both cinematographers shot the entire miniseries on a single stock: Fujifilm's 400T.

"This stock had a tremendous amount of latitude in the highlights," says Wages. "The way I like to shoot for negative transfer is to get all the information that I can, so that later I can crush or burn it out if I want. With 400T, the grain structure is just beautiful. At the end of the day, instead of changing film for faster stocks, I just pull filters out so there is a seamless quality."

"We both decided on the 400T before we had even talked to each other," says Caso. "I find Fuji works well with period pieces, because it has a pastel quality. The 400T was the most moldable stock. It handled well when we were shooting daylight exteriors, and for night and day interiors, you've got enough stop to work. It's a very versatile stock."

For the cameramen, having a dependable film stock was especially important since some of the shoots took place in Calgary during the winter.

"By the time we did episode three in December, we were into the shortest days of the year," says Wages. "Our most valuable commodity was daylight. We would start with twilight stuff in the morning, work through the day, do twilight in the evening, and then do all of our daylight interiors after dark."

With a cast of famous actors playing characters in severe conditions, particular attention was paid to the actresses by the cinematographers.

"It was a delicate balance to make them look haggard, but not to make them look terrible," Wages explains. "They needed to look like they had been on the trail a while, so I did it with lighting instead of filters. I worked closely with makeup and hair to make sure they didn't look glamorous, and the cast was wonderful about that. They wanted to look like they'd really been out there."

Another challenge involved filming actors while on horseback, or seated in a wagon.

"Getting up to eye-level with people in wagons or horseback was always an issue," says Wages.

"If you're looking up at them, you just see sky behind them. The grips in Calgary do a lot of West-erns, and they have these great, flexible platforms. They look like a folding table, but can hold 2,000 pounds. You adjust them at different heights and it's a lot faster than scaffolding. You could set them up at an angle, so if you're on uneven terrain, you could level it out. It came in handy with the Steadicam because the operator could walk and stay level while people that followed could go up and down terrain."

The cinematographers also had to depict various vision sequences that foreshadow what will come later for Native Americans as settlers pour into their world. Filmmakers decided to shy away from special effects or other gimmicks to illustrate these sequences.

Says Caso, "I did very little to the visions. For instance, when the character, Beloved by the Buffalo, is visited by another character, Growling Bear, who is dead, I avoided things like shimmering or dissolving him to life within a given shot. I didn't do any trickery at all. Visions or ghosts who were not in a previous shot would later appear when returning to that shot, and disappear by the same editorial mechanism. What also helped was that the live actor did not look at the vision or ghost while talking to him, but often we wanted the audience to be there, as if they were another character. It was nothing interpretative or over the top. We were very conscious of that."

On the other side of such intimate scenes were large action sequences, depicting the bloody massacres.

"The Massacre at Sand Creek was one of the bloodiest," explains Caso. "On the very first shooting day of episode four, we had 300 cavalry and about 300 Indians. I had 10 cameras spread out over a quarter of a mile. We had a camera on one hilltop, one on another hilltop, cameras throughout the valley, Eyemos buried in the cavalry charge ground, and a Super 16mm Ikonoscope handheld by Ben Scott, a stuntman portraying one of the cavalymen. We really shot this battle, and for the matter, the entire six movies all in broad, epic scope. Our goal was to be brutally honest with what happened. I believe we were successful."

Wages adds that, generally, careful planning was crucial to achieving that success while shooting such a large production in remote locations.

"We were in the wilderness, so you have backup systems for everything," says Wages. "I engineered that into how my equipment packages were put together. We used the backups all the time, even when the primary equipment was working fine. By engineering redundancy into the packages, it gives you more options. If you do it properly, it doesn't cost you any more."

For both DP's, "Into The West" ended up being a demanding, yet fulfilling, endeavor, and they are quick to credit the crews that helped them get the job done.

Says Wages, "It was a great group of people, and that's how we got through it. There was a great esprit de corps. Even though things were tough, everybody had a great attitude. There were some big challenges, but we did it."

"Into the West" was slated to premiere June 10<sup>th</sup> on TNT.



*Matthew Settle (L) as Jacob Wheeler and Tonantzin Carmelo as Thunder Heart Woman. Making the actors appropriately haggard on the frontier was a constant challenge for the DPs.*

