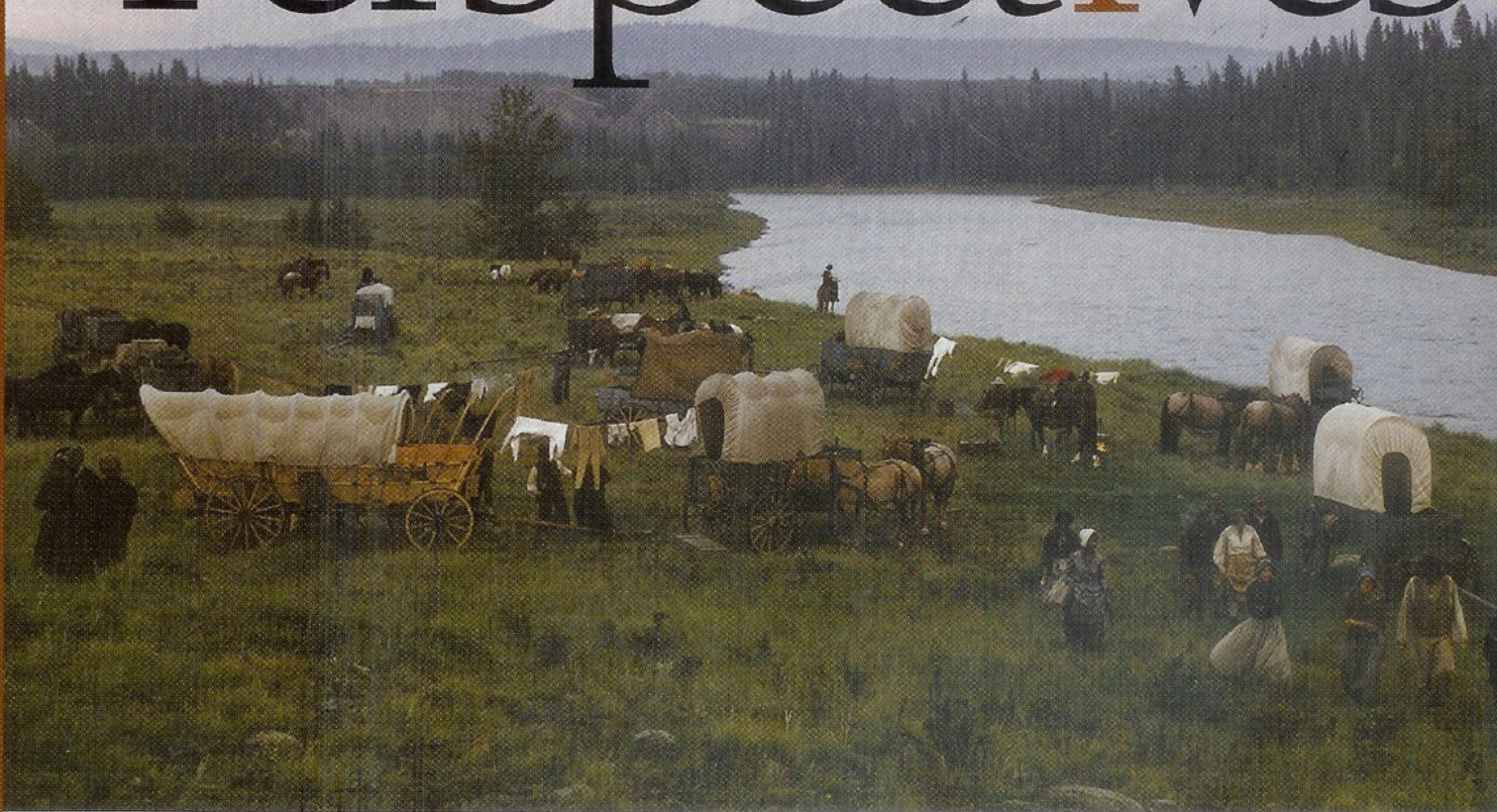


Western Perspectives



Into the West tells 'a frontier saga through the eyes of Native Americans and pioneering settlers — and two ASC cinematographers, William Wages and Alan Caso.

by John Pavlus

Unit photography by Erik Heinila, Chris Large and Kurt Markus.

If Alan Caso, ASC is correct in asserting that “everyone wants to shoot a Western,” then TNT’s new miniseries *Into the West* must have made him and co-director of photography William Wages, ASC the envy of cinematographers everywhere. The epic series is split into six two-hour segments, each equal in scope to any theatrically released Western. The production set the ambitious goal of telling the story of the West from the perspectives of both the Native Americans and the settlers, and it spans nearly 70 years of history in the process. Filmed on

location in Calgary, Canada, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, each episode had a different director. The two cinematographers split their duties in half: Wages shot episodes two, three and five, and Caso shot episodes one, four and six.

Both Wages and Caso cite the project’s sprawling scope as its primary attraction. “I was really excited about it, and at that point there wasn’t a script,” recalls Caso. “All we had was an outline for 12 hours divided into six episodes, following all the key points in the development of the West from 1827



Opposite: Settlers stop to recover after a challenging river crossing on the way from Independence, Missouri to California. **This page, top:** During the journey, Jacob Wheeler (Matthew Settle) meets and marries a Native American, Thunder Heart Woman (Tonantzin Carmelo). **Below:** A Native American man attempts to herd buffalo during a stampede.

to 1895. I knew I could do a lot of different things in the genre with that amount of time, especially working with three different directors; that gives you three different perspectives from which to shoot a vision of the West.”

The cinematographers were also intrigued by the series’ parallel stories, which Caso describes as “James Michener-like, following two family trees and all their crisscrossing offspring.” Adds Wages, “It’s an attempt at an honest telling of what really happened in the conquering of the West and the annihilation of the Native Americans. There are times when characters on both sides of the story are vicious, and times when they’re magnanimous. That’s the human drama: nobody’s all good and nobody’s all evil.”

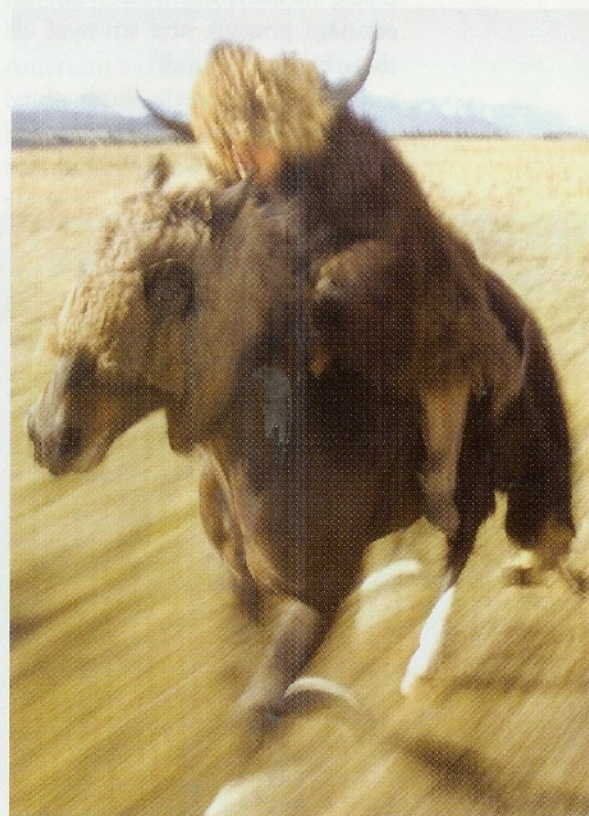
In addition to racking up a slew of Emmy nominations, Wages and Caso have won ASC Awards for their work on telefilms: Wages in 1997 and 1998 for *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *Buffalo Soldiers*, respectively, and Caso in 1998 for *George Wallace*. That all three films were made for TNT only made the cinematographers more sought-

after for *Into the West*. “[Executive producer] Steven Spielberg seems to know everything that’s going on in the business at any given time,” notes Wages.

Into the West wasn’t the first time Wages and Spielberg crossed paths. Raised in Atlanta, the cinematographer chose to stay there rather than move to Los Angeles to further his career, because he wanted to keep his family rooted. This decision prevented him from joining the union or getting an agent, and initially confined his work to commercials, documentaries and independent features. But a few years later, after a lucky break gave Wages the chance to convince a top agent of his talent, the industry reaction was swift. “Literally an hour after I signed with [the agency], I got a call from Spielberg’s office, offering me a TV series,” recalls Wages. “Of course, I couldn’t take the job because I still wasn’t in the union and didn’t live in L.A. I became known in the industry as ‘that guy in Atlanta!’”

Caso’s Los Angeles-based career has not been without its share of dramatic twists, beginning with his very first gig in 1976. When he

walked onto the set for his first day of work as a loader, he passed his boss, director of photography Jan DeBont, ASC, coming out — on a stretcher. The film was *Roar*, a notorious project about a rampaging pride of lions. “Jan got attacked by one of the



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Right: Jacob Wheeler (Matthew Settle), Fletcher (Will Patton) and Jedediah Smith (Josh Brolin) lead a group of mountain men from California after being taken prisoner for trespassing on Mexican territory. The group is released by the Governor of Mexico on condition that they leave California and never return. Below: A crane-mounted camera is used to capture action on horseback.



females and had his scalp ripped open," says Caso. "He needed 120 stitches." DeBont's first AC was temporarily promoted, and Caso was moved up to fill the vacancy. "I'd never [assisted] before, so I was trying to learn how, but with the constant pressure and stress of all those big cats around!"

Over the years, both cinematographers have continued to be adept at finding ways to turn the

odds against them into assets, and they note that *Into the West* put up some pretty heavy odds. "The scope of these films is gigantic," says Wages. "In standard moviemaking, it's one minute of screen time per each page of script, but on this project, some pages ran three or four minutes with only three lines of dialogue, and they were all important story points that we had to hit." Add the challenge of shooting in some volatile weather

conditions, period trappings such as long wagon trains and cavalry charges, and a production schedule that allotted 30 days or fewer per episode, and you've got a daunting scenario. "We were shooting epic Westerns on a TV-series schedule without the infrastructure of a TV series," says Wages. "I have never danced faster in my life."

Spielberg wanted to shoot the episodes out of order, beginning with episode two in Calgary. "Steven had had some trouble in the first few weeks of production on *Taken* and *Band of Brothers* [see AC Sept. '01]," explains Caso. "It's a matter of getting the machine up and running. And he was right, Bill ran into a lot of complications during that first shoot, but he handled it so beautifully that by the time I came on to shoot episode one, it was pretty much a well-oiled machine. And when Bill came back for number three, it went without a hitch."

One complication Wages encountered was the slim two-week prep period allotted to the first episode that was shot. "Fortunately, I'd shot in Calgary before, and a lot of





Left: Naomi and Jethro Wheeler (Keri Russell and Skeet Ulrich) pause to watch a herd of stampeding buffalo as they lead a wagon train of settlers migrating west. Below: A ladderpod is used to elevate the camera on location.

the crew I knew were available," he says. "Those guys really know how to shoot in the wilderness because they do a lot of that kind of work there." It also helped that Wages and Caso are good friends who have similar visual tastes. At the same time, they agreed that with such a vast canvas to fill, they'd do well not to stylistically hem themselves in. "We talked it over a lot

before we started, and we decided that each story was so different that [trying to maintain a consistent style] wasn't really an issue," says Wages. "The opening title sequences are the same, and after that, we met the needs of each story."

Of course, basic parameters for the project's look were set during a preproduction meeting with

Spielberg. The first edict he issued concerned the show's naturalistic depiction of the West's conflict-riddled history. Visual effects would be kept to a minimum, Native American technical advisers were to be on set at all times, and violence had to be staged as simply as possible, so as not to unintentionally glorify it. "We clearly weren't going



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After being captured by Cheyenne while traveling to California, Naomi adjusts to life with the Native Americans and marries Chief Prairie Fire, a Cheyenne warrior. Here, she is taken prisoner by soldiers who attack the Cheyenne village, killing her husband and many others.



to do any killings in slow motion," says Caso. "That was a real no-no."

The filmmakers also decided on a fairly desaturated color palette of earthy browns and washed-out pastels that was inspired by a book of hand-tinted period illustrations borrowed from costume designer Michael Boyd. One particular photo of an interior, dominated by naturally motivated light and soft, heavy shadows, also dictated the series' lighting style. "When Steven said that was what he wanted the series to look like, Bill and I knew we were all on the same page, because both of us had already chosen that very same photo as an example of what we wanted to create," recalls Caso. "It was a question of density in the blacks. Except for sunlight and candlelight, it was a dark world back then."

Within these parameters, each cinematographer brought his own sensibility to bear on the project. For Caso, that meant priming the audience to "open their eyes and hearts to

the spiritualism of the Indian nation, and to realize that this was going to be every bit as much their story as it was the white man's story, without relying on hokey special effects." Wages used a slightly unconventional example to communicate his vision to Spielberg: "I told him I was going for film noir, which sounds bizarre, but what that means to me is hyper-reality. You take your cues from reality and all the lighting is motivated, but it may be pushed to the edge a bit to tell the story. Steven latched onto that instantly; his only comment was, 'If you use smoke, make sure I know why the smoke is there.' Fortunately, people in the West lived in very smoky environments, so it was easy to justify."

The final concern during prep was the project's aspect ratio — namely, how to reconcile the Western's epic visuals with "TV-safe" framing. "One of the first requests I made to TNT was that they air this in 16x9," says Wages. "That was not the original plan, and it took a lot of

persuasion. The Western is a horizontal format, and that affects everything in composition. We had ground glasses for 16x9 with 4x3 pumpkins in them, but you can't effectively compose for two formats at one time."

With the help of Simon Wincer, who directed the first episode that was shot, Wages convinced TNT to sign off on 16x9, much to Caso's delight. "When I came on the project, I said, 'If we shoot in 16x9, then by God, we're going to compose for 16x9,'" says Caso. "I used a lot of off-balance framing in my episodes. [Widescreen] is always about the negative space as much as it is about the space you're filling, and I'm using all of [the frame]." The format also encouraged the kind of wide-angle work that is rarely seen on TV, though Caso notes he has been doing it for some time. "I'm not afraid of using wide lenses in TV — I've been doing it for a long time on *Six Feet Under* [AC Nov. '02]," he says. "I