

Tricks of the Trade

Wages' WagBag Comes to the Rescue

by Jay Holben

Every cinematographer cringes at the idea of going into the dreaded "white box," a confined practical set with white walls and a white ceiling. This is especially true for cinematographers who are fond of soft sources, which can be impossible to control under these circumstances. It isn't always possible to paint the walls a more desirable shade, or to construct a set that is more conducive to lighting, so the chore becomes trying to cut light from the walls and maintain some degree of control over your sources.

William Wages, ASC says this dilemma has troubled him for many years. With more than 50 telefilms and features to his credit, he often works in tight practical locations and on short schedules. "Whenever I run into a problem on a shoot, I do whatever I have to do to come up with a solution and move on, but when I get home I try to think of a better way to solve that specific problem," says Wages. "The goal is to find the simplest solution, which is often the most difficult one to find. Complicated is easy, but simple is the real challenge."

Wages says he often bounces light into the ceiling, which makes it difficult to keep light off the walls. About 15 years ago, he solved this problem by designing and making his own flag; measuring 7½' long by 6" wide, it's a very long, narrow blade that can be suspended as a teaser from a single C-stand. Wages then took black Rip-Stop nylon (an opaque version of the same material gridcloth is made from) in a

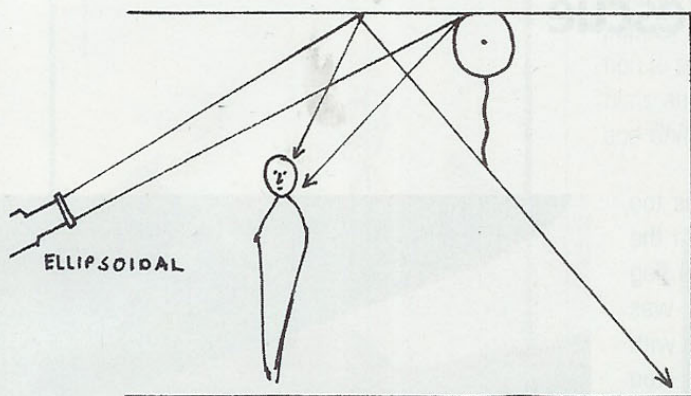
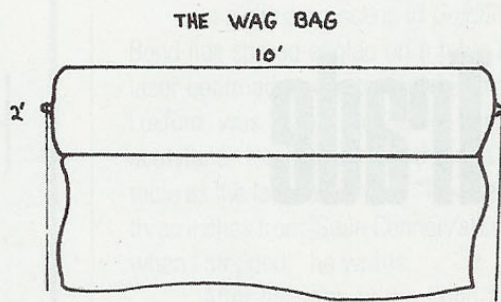
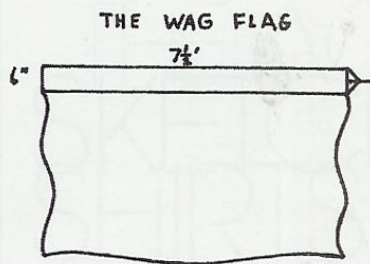
If the 4' length of the teaser was too much, Wages could simply roll up the excess Rip-Stop material onto the flag itself and create a teaser that was anywhere from 6" to 4' high. "I went with Rip-Stop because Duvetyn was too heavy to be able to hang off of a long blade and be supported from just one C-stand," he notes. "The whole flag weighs about 10 pounds." Wages' crew dubbed the tool the "WagFlag" in honor of a common mispronunciation of Wages' surname, and it has been included in his arsenal ever since.

On a recent project, however, Wages had to take his invention to the next level. He explains, "We were shooting in a Victorian house that's in the National Historic Registry, and it had hand-blocked French wallpaper that was a reproduction from 150 years ago. If we damaged the wallpaper, it would be a \$30,000 hit. We should never have been allowed in the building, but we were supposed to shoot there for three weeks. I looked at it in prep and thought, 'What are we going to do?' Finally, it occurred to me that I could make a black balloon that was like the Wag Flag, except it would float by itself, without requiring any grip equipment. I found a balloon company on the Internet that would make one for me. I wanted it to be 10 feet long, and it had to be about 2½ feet in diameter to hold enough helium to compensate for the physical weight of the plastic. It looks like a long cylinder or an extra-large sausage, and it did the job perfectly. But it cost about \$600, so it wasn't feasible to make



WagBags in use on location

The ever-enterprising cinematographer then took a trip to his local Home Depot, where he discovered bulk rolls of 2mm black plastic — perfect for making his own balloons. "I chose the 2-mil plastic because the lighter the material is, the smaller the diameter necessary to keep it afloat," he says. "Most plastic is 4-mil or thicker, so you have to search a bit to find the thinner stuff." Wages cut the material to make a balloon that was 10' long and 2' in diameter, and then taped the edges together with 2-inch cellophane tape. He then gathered up



USING THE BAG AS A SOFT BOUNCE BACK LIGHT WITH OUT ILLUMINATING THE WALL BEHIND THE SUBJECT.

A diagram outlines the WagBag's function.

and sealed it with a standard rubber band. With the other end still open, he filled the long tube with helium, sealed the remaining opening with another rubber band, and *voila!*

"People said the plastic would never hold the helium, but it does a great job," says Wages. "You have to get a filler tube to slip into the plastic to fill it, but that's just a brass valve with a hose attached, and it's available just about anywhere you find helium tanks. The whole thing cost about 50 cents, so it didn't matter if it got damaged. We made a whole bunch of them, and they worked like a charm. We shot the full three weeks in the Victorian house and never scratched a thing.

"You can make them at whatever diameter you need, but there's a limit to how small the diameter can be because of the thickness of the plastic and the overall weight of the device," he adds. "With 2-mil plastic, about 1½ feet by 8 feet long is the smallest you can go. However, at 2 feet by 10 feet, it will not only float, you can also clip a teaser to it!"

Wages doesn't use Rip-Stop material for the balloon teasers. "I ended up finding the silliest thing in the world, and it was under my nose the whole time," he says. The cinematographer discovered that the lightweight plastic

tablecloths used by catering companies come in almost every color, including black. "It's light as a feather and cheap as dirt!" he says with a laugh. "It's so lightweight we can clothespin it right to the balloons and make teasers of whatever length we need. Then we can clip two or three of these units together in an 'L' or 'U' shape, float them up to the ceiling, and we're ready to shoot! Originally I had weights and things to hold them in place, but if you clip them together they don't move around at all. And if you don't fully inflate them, they flatten themselves out a bit on the ceiling and stay perfectly in place without any other devices. You can even blow a fan in the room, and they won't move.

"My gaffer and key grip laughed at me when I explained the balloons to them, but after they'd worked with them for about 30 minutes they said, 'My god, this is great!'" he adds. With a nod to the WagFlag, Wages' crew promptly named his new invention the "WagBag."

"It's important to note that WagBags and WagFlags work best with ellipsoidal sources," Wages points out. "I usually bounce Lekos into ceilings so I can easily cut the light to the shape I want right at the source, and start controlling it before it even hits the ceiling. That way we don't have to use flags

and C-stands around the light fixture."

To move the balloons around the room, Wages attaches braided black fishing line to the end of each one; the line hangs down at just above head height. "You just need one person at each end to pull them down from the ceiling, walk around the room and float them back up," he says. "You can leave the fishing line hanging and you'll never see it in shot."

Of the WagBag's durability, Wages says, "They'll float for two or three days without needing a pick-me-up. The helium leaks out, but very slowly. We have also accidentally punctured them and, in one case, melted a hole into one of them, but because they're not under pressure like a Latex balloon, they don't shoot off around the room — they just slowly sink to the floor. You just tape up the hole with cellophane tape, and it's as good as new!

"It's such a simple thing that it's hard to talk about it without laughing, but the WagBags work like gangbusters, and I can't tell you how much time they save. Another thing about it — and this is *really* silly — is that when things get a little tense on set, it's really hard to get upset when you're standing in a room full of balloons.

"People tell me I should patent it, but it's the kind of idea a cinematographer shares with other cinematographers," he concludes. "I'd love it if others would go out and make their own WagBags and join in the fun." ■