

**D**esperate *Housewives* has captivated audiences by veiling the unpleasant truths of this seemingly ideal suburban neighborhood and its beautiful residents. After a woman with a picture perfect life commits suicide, the residents of Wisteria Lane realize that everything isn't always as it appears. How do you create a look for a show based on a theme that things are rarely as they seem?

Walt Fraser who shares cinematography duties with Lowell Peterson, ASC on alternating episodes, explains how they create an appropriate look for creator Marc Cherry's hit show. The one-hour program, which airs on ABC, has been recognized with numerous awards including a Golden Globe for Best Television Series - Musical or Comedy, and a Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Comedy Series.

"The overall look calls for a lot of golden sunlight and warm backlight, preserving a natural beauty," says Fraser. "The pristine images make the drama more poignant or shocking when eventually secrets are revealed. It's sort of a 'Donna Reed' veneer of beauty and perfection, only as you get to know the character is the broader truth revealed. Our job is to create that surface beauty."

The show has elements of comedy interwoven with drama, and characters that could be your neighbors. The cinematographer, whose TV credits include **Family Law**, **Chicago Hope** and **Threat Matrix**, typically receives a script outline a week ahead of schedule to allow time for location scouting and preparation.

Each hour-long episode is filmed in eight days, typically three on location, and five on the Universal Studios lot. They shoot interiors on lavish standing sets and one swing set on stages, and exteriors outside on Wisteria Lane. Believable backgrounds are created with TransLights and green foliage outside windows and doors.

"Producer/director Larry Shaw preserves the visual groundwork and directing style of the show," says Fraser. "We now work with a core group of seven or eight directors who each bring their own creativity, while following a common visual pattern. Our look follows the activity of the characters, who rarely just sit and talk. The staging is organic, letting the words lead the actors in terms of motion. We don't want the camera to get in the way of the story so it's important to create a fluid style of movement that complements what the actors are doing."

Fraser estimates that 75% of the show is filmed with a Panaflex Lightweight camera mounted on a Steadicam. "The Steadicam with a 27mm Primo lens is our usual mastering tool but I'm not reluctant to use wider angles, including 14mm when that's what a shot calls for. Our Steadicam operator Rory Knepp and his assistant Paul Plannette are simply geniuses at incorporating last minute changes and directives into shots that are seamless, efficient and unobtrusive."

The B camera is a Panaflex G-2 mounted with a Primo 11:1 used for variable focal lengths. It's usually tracking on a dolly next to the Steadicam capturing approximately 40% of the footage, giving the editors and directors more choices in polishing the scenes.

Images for interior and night scenes are recorded on Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 film, and Eastman EXR 100T 5248 film is usually used for daylight exteriors.

Fraser says, "We have a great looking cast," he says. "We don't do any filtering. We just compose in a classical style with a high soft light that provides a nice contour to the face. All I have to do is let the public see the beauty that I see in person. We have a great group of people both in front of the camera and behind it. In the end, it's the writing that really dictates the look." ■

**Below:** (L to R) Actors Teri Hatcher, Eva Longoria and Felicity Huffman in a scene from *Desperate Housewives*

## Walt Fraser finds a home on Wisteria Lane

