

# The anatomy of shooting a hospital drama

If you check into Seattle Grace Hospital, you may not want to leave. The hospital, which is the setting for the ABC drama series *Grey's Anatomy*, is home to resident Dr. McDreamy (Patrick Dempsey), aspiring surgeon Meredith Grey (Ellen Pompeo) and her fellow interns. Each week, audiences have become engrossed in the colorful characters' professional struggles and poignant personal relationships.

Executive producer and frequent director Peter Horton brought Herb Davis on to shoot the series. The two had previously collaborated on a series called *Brimstone*. "Peter was interested in investing the show with the cool, desaturated tones of his native Seattle, where the series is set," says Davis. "He also believes that in reality hospitals are not typically dark places. So, my primary approach has been to retain some sense of the institutional character of the hospital while providing shape to the lighting."

Davis says it has been challenging to present the sets with their hard ceilings and overhead lighting. "The goal is to shoot it without lighting the actors from overhead, while adding as much visual interest to the background as possible. Our primary hospital sets fortunately have a number of glass walls and windows between rooms that allow for deep background highlighting as well as shiny chrome and glass equipment, video monitors, and set dressing that help provide a lot of out-of-focus shimmer."

*Grey's Anatomy* is shot primarily on Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 film, with day exteriors and interiors on VISION2 250D 5205 film. "I rate both stocks normally," says Davis. "I tend to give them a rather healthy exposure to get plenty of information on the negative."

Davis uses two ARRIcam ST cameras and an ARRIcam Lite for



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Steadicam work. He has a wide variety of Cooke primes, as well as long and short Angenieux zooms. "The zooms are rarely out of the box since I very much prefer the clarity of the fixed lenses, especially when shooting into hot backgrounds and specular highlights," he says. "Also, the physical size of the zooms can become obtrusive in some of our tight quarters."

Davis explains that scenes frequently take place in confined spaces such as patient and trauma rooms. "I tend to hang 2' and 4' Kino Flos down through the drop ceilings and staple bleached muslin to available wall spaces for some ambient or bounce fill," he says. "Or, depending on how a scene blocks out, I am able to bring a large source through the window to key a scene. By the time you get two cameras, four to 10 actors, and a hospital bed into a patient room, there is very little floor space for lighting."

"Other than backlights, I try to keep any hard light off our actors, using mostly full grid on frames or outside the doors of Kinos," adds Davis.

Each hour-long episode is scheduled to be shot over eight days, but many of the scripts are 60 pages with 50 or more scenes, so efficiency is important.

"I try to get a second camera in for coverage as much as I can without compromising the lighting on the actors or crippling the sound department," Davis says. "I also tend to use fewer, larger sources. Someone once told me that every time you add a light, you add a shadow you have to deal with. That was a sage piece of advice. Luckily, I have a great crew to work with and we get the job done on schedule without compromises." ■

**Inset left:**  
DP Herb Davis on location filming a scene for *Grey's Anatomy*.

**Inset right:** (L to R) Actors Rosanna Arquette and Sandra Oh in a scene from the series.

**Below:** (L to R) Actors Patrick Dempsey and Ellen Pompeo.

