

Nelson Cragg says that winning the 2004 ASC Heritage Award for his cinematography on director Howard Guy Vu's *Running in Tall Grasses* gave him the confidence to keep trying. "The award gave me some credibility and it helped me get my first professional job," says Cragg. "I have an agent now, but it's still hard to make a living as an artist in Hollywood."

Cragg shoots music videos between long-form projects to help pay the bills. He recently shot the independent feature *Special*. The film is the story of Les Franken, a parking-enforcement officer who begins to take anti-depressants to shake up his humdrum life. They work all too well. Franken's psychotic reaction makes him believe he is a superhero. *Special* premiered in the American



Nelson Cragg feels *Special* at Sundance

Spectrum portion of the 2006 Sundance Film Festival and was highly praised by reviewers.

"From our first meeting, the producer (Frank Mele) and co-directors (Hal Haberman, Jeremy Passmore) were willing to take big risks visually and that was very exciting," says Cragg. "We wanted to create a world that was believable, but at the same time had a comic-book, action feeling. There's a tension between Franken's real life, and the big superhero stunts and visual effects shots."

Cragg's collaborators initially thought that a "prosumer" digital video format was right for the story. As he became more deeply involved, Cragg realized that the film was really about Les Franken and his personal journey. "I realized that the only way to truly do the character justice was to shoot him on film because it has a more immediate connection to the audience," he says. "Once I pitched this to the directors, they quickly agreed, and we decided that Super 16 film would best serve the project. Also, doing lots of visual effects shots on DV was really not a viable option for Zoic (Studios), the effects house. Pulling greenscreen mattes for composite shots on DV is really hard, since the resolution is low and the compression is so massive."

The team spent weeks storyboarding and discussing other films. They contemplated shooting reversal stock, but cost led to a decision to shoot negative film and create a reversal look during digital post.

"Kodak's VISION2 (500T) 7218 (film) was the reason I was able to shoot Super 16 and still have the grain structure and image quality I wanted," says Cragg. "That film is amazingly smooth when scanned to HD resolution, and holds up on a big screen in a theatre. We also shot (Eastman) EXR 50D (7245) as our exterior stock."

The filmmakers decided the camera should never move on a dolly because the resulting smoothness went against the raw realism they envisioned. Instead, they used a handheld Panavision Panaflex camera for moving shots.

"If the actors ran across the room, so did I," says Cragg. "The freedom the handheld camera gave us became one of the great visual strengths of the film. The dance between the actors and myself created a great visual energy that helped communicate the manic, energized performance Mike Rapaport gives as Les. It allowed me to adjust literally by the second as I sensed the performance changing."

The lighting was built around a cool white overhead fluorescent look. One of the main locations was an

old government office building where the overhead fluorescents had plastic coverings that had taken on a yellow-brown grime.

"I kept the old 8-ft cool whites and their unique coverings and got the most amazing greenish-brown color out of them," says Cragg. "I knew I was with the right directors when Hal told me that he loved how the actors' faces were the same color as the sickly greenish-brown walls of the room. Not many directors would appreciate me turning their lead actor's face that color!"

The Super 16 footage was transferred to D5 master tapes at Post Solutions/Victory Studios in Los Angeles. The timer was instructed to maintain as much information as possible on the "best light" transfer.

"I wanted all the detail to be on the tape to allow me the most freedom when I did the final correction at the online session," says Cragg.

The color work, including the reversal look, was done on an Avid Nitris system.

"With the benefit of digital timing, I was able to build in a visual arc," says Cragg. "The film becomes more and more saturated as Les changes his perception of the world around him. It also gets more and more contrasty and grainy as we pushed the look later in the film. With only 20 days to shoot I didn't have time to change film stocks and fine-tune colors on the set. The digital color correction gave me the control I needed." ■

Previous page: (L to R) Cinematographer Nelson Cragg (far right) discusses a set up with co-directors Hal Haberman and Jeremy Passmore in the comic book store scene.

Above: Actor Michael Rapaport in scenes from the film *Special*.