

# The Shield adapts as technology evolve

The FX Network series *The Shield* is entering its final season. From the start, *The Shield* has had a bold, unique approach to cinematography.

Aspects of the visual style have evolved over the years but for its entire seven-year run, *The Shield* has been posted at LaserPac in Los Angeles.

"LaserPac has been supportive and accommodating in every respect," says Rohn Schmidt, cinematographer on *The Shield*. "I like the fact they can handle every aspect in one place."

"I appreciate the continuity," he says. "It's nice to work with familiar people you know you can depend on. It's important to keep things personal even though they're doing some very complicated technical work. They've hung on to some older gear that is part of *The Shield* look, and we really appreciate that."

Schmidt's goal continues to be to create an unplanned, on-the-go look that is the opposite of perfect. "*The Shield* always looks best when it looks like Vietnam war footage," he says. "It has high contrast, and not all the information is there. It's kind of rough and tumble, and you can feel the grain and texture. If it starts looking too pretty, it's not working."

LaserPac has processed and telecined literally millions of feet of 16mm film

for *The Shield*. "Sometimes we'll make 25 hours of dailies in seven days for a single episode," says Schmidt. "When you shoot that much film in extreme situations, like we do, there is occasionally an issue with a scratch or dirt. There are never any awkward situations like you might have with one house processing and another doing the transfer."

Schmidt covers the action with ARRI SR 3 cameras that are usually mounted with zoom lenses. "As the show has evolved, we've gone with using a lot of handheld shots, and that's partly because our operators have become masters at it," says Schmidt. "They know the actors, and the actors have gotten used to it as well. It frees everyone up to follow his or her instincts."

Schmidt and his team have developed a number of unusual techniques for introducing controlled imperfections into their shots. One is to exclude the operators from rehearsal. That way, they're seeing and reacting to the action as they're filming it. The result is spontaneity that is absent from rehearsed shots.

Another method

of introducing realism through the photography is the in-shot aperture change. Schmidt did away with wireless aperture controls, and instead instructs the operators to adjust the aperture by hand, hitting a tape mark.

"It provides a raw, messy, iris rack," says Schmidt. "It's either late or early, and it just feels great. You'll come out of the dark room and it will be too bright for a couple of beats, and then they'll hit the iris and stop down. You get that feeling of reacting to the situation in the room."

As film and telecine technologies have improved, Schmidt has adapted his technique to maintain that look. During earlier seasons, he used as many as four different emulsions. Today his cameras are loaded with one stock, KODAK VISION2 HD Color Scan Film 7299. That scan-only film stock is designed for use with the KODAK VISION2 HD Digital Processor, which emulates the imaging characteristics and "looks" of various other negatives. But Schmidt uses the film as a versatile capture medium and works with LaserPac to fine tune the look he wants.

"We're using that one stock for everything—day exterior, night exterior, or even free driving at night," he says. "We achieve the texture in part by seriously underexposing, usually a stop to a stop and a half. We're way down in the toe of the curve. Sometimes I'm putting in five stops of neutral density, but we get the look we want. It's remarkable what is available in the response of the film. There's a great continuity now between all the scenes. LaserPac has done a great job of matching and incorporating the right timing, coloring and grain."

LaserPac colorist Tom Overton has handled every shot of every episode over the seven-year run. "Tom knows his job and what we're looking for so well that he gets very close on the first pass," says Schmidt. "I look at that and make handwritten notes, usually not more than a page or two. After six seasons, we understand each other."

"A great deal of the look is created in Tom's bay," says Schmidt. "We're not about making it look normal. We're always trying to exaggerate the colors, crush the blacks, blow out the whites, and find this incredible range in the mid-tones. It's fun, and it's distinctive. If you're flipping channels, you know when you've hit *The Shield*." ■



Above: Actress Paula Garces and below Actor Michael Chiklis, in a scene from *The Shield*, shot by DP Rohn Schmidt.

PHOTO: PRASHANT GUPTA

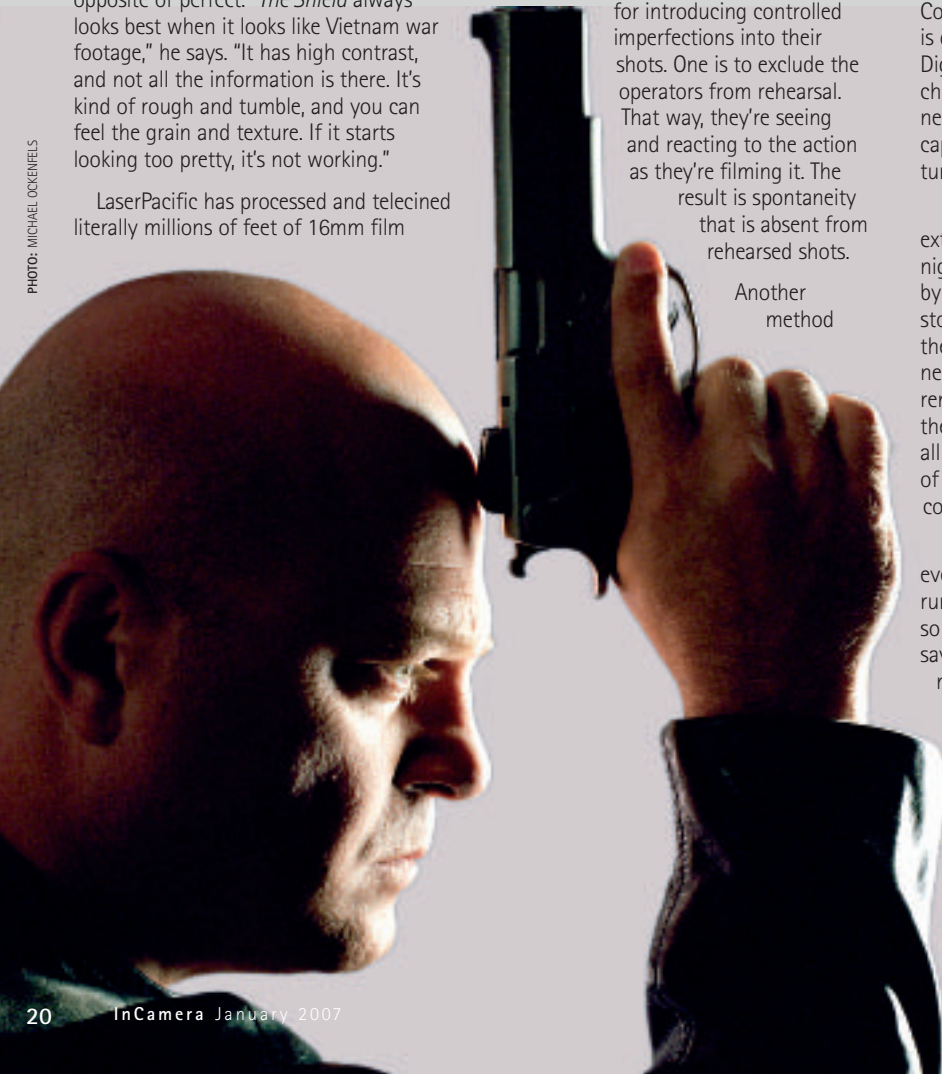


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