

Behind the scenes with Tom Del Ruth on *Studio 60*

Studio 60 on the *Sunset Strip* is a new television series created by Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme on the heels of their amazing success with *The West Wing*. Their new series also airs on the NBC network. However the stories and visual styles are polar opposites. One common denominator is Thomas Del Ruth, ASC who earned two Emmy Awards and four additional nominations for cinematography during the five years that he collaborated with Sorkin and Schlamme on *The West Wing*.

The new series is a behind-the-scenes comedy drama about the production of a weekly, late night, live television series similar to *Saturday Night Live*. It features Matthew Perry as the brilliant comedy writer Matt Albie and Bradley Whitford as the talented director Danny Tripp. Both Albie and Tripp were the engines that drove the early success of the live TV series. They were fired following a dispute with network executives and are brought back on a rescue mission after ratings begin to falter. There is a large, ensemble cast, including Amanda Peet, Judd Hirsch and D.L. Hughley, and high-profile guest stars in every episode.

"We take the audience behind the scenes where they witness the making of a new skit comedy show every week," Del Ruth relates. "We film elements of the live performances and also use them as backgrounds with celebrity stars performing for an audience of some 500 to 600 people. Other times the live performances are seen on video monitors on sets where the drama is unfolding. Each episode is kind of a balancing act between the demands of network executives and the desires of the producers and talent."

Del Ruth estimates that about 30 percent of each episode involves scenes filmed on a very large, ornate set where the live acts are rehearsed and performed. The actual show is covered with both live video and film cameras. Other sets include the offices of network executives, the bullpen where writers craft their scripts, the video control room, and other places behind the scenes as well as locations around Los Angeles. The sets are built on stages of the 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros lots.

They filmed the pilot episode in Super 16 format as a concession to the budget. Del Ruth worked with a modest palette, including a couple of ARRI SR3 cameras mounted with Zeiss prime and zoom lenses, and KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 film.

"We only used both cameras about 20 percent of the time, because the pilot was mainly dedicated to

establishing the characters and we were shooting in some tighter spaces," Del Ruth comments. "The performances by the actors, composition and lighting tell the story. Tommy directed the pilot. It's his philosophy, and I concur, that you only move the camera with the actors and to make dramatic story points."

The camera was on a dolly most of the time, either tracking or static, and on a Steadicam about half the time when it was moving including 360° shots around characters. There are occasional handheld shots when they wanted more kinetic energy.



PHOTOS: NBC, SCOTT GARFIELD



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"Aaron and Tommy can tell me what they are thinking without opening their mouths," Del Ruth says. "We had a static shot of a sketch comedy, then dollied through it, and panned to a monitor so the audience sees the same scene in another medium. We continued with a handheld shot following several characters backstage."

Del Ruth says that the 7218 emulsion gave him the latitude he needed to shoot with moving cameras on sets and locations with lighting varying from near darkness to extreme brightness with no intrusive grain rendered on the negative. He considers the Super 16 format "a viable option for anyone considering shooting in HD for budget reasons."

The cinematographer is shooting the episodic series in 35mm format with the same KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film and a couple of Panaflex Millennium lightweight bodies mounted with Zeiss prime lenses and a couple of long zooms. They are making more use of multiple cameras and shooting in larger spaces. Del Ruth says that the 35mm format gives him "a bit" more flexibility. For example, it gives him the ability to use nets and other diffusion to occasionally soften a look when that is appropriate for the story. ■

Below:
(L to R) Matthew Perry as Matt Albie, Bradley Whitford as Danny Tripp.

Inset right: The large ensemble cast of *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*.

Inset left: (L to R) Amanda Peet as Jordan McDeere, Steven Weber as Jack Rudolph, Matthew Perry as Matt Albie.



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