

# The beauty of creating Ugly Betty



Successful visual storytelling happens in a collaborative environment where everyone works to serve a single creative vision. "In a way, cinematography and production design are two different technical means to the same end," says Mark Worthington, production designer on *Ugly Betty*, the ABC television series based on the Columbian telenovella *Yo Soy Betty La Fea*. "Both disciplines utilize the visual image to build a narrative that will convey meaning and emotion."

Worthington works very closely with cinematographer Ross Berryman, ASC, an Australian whose credits include the TV projects *Angel*, *Timecop* and *The Poseidon Adventure*, as well as the recent features *The Virgin of Juarez* and *Pursuit of Happiness*. Their collaboration began when the sets for the series were still in the planning stages.

"I knew that the show had a lot of visual potential," says Berryman. "Working with Mark is a big plus for me. He is a very talented and collaborative individual. It's great fun throwing ideas back and forth with him and seeing what sticks."

Worthington's built sets, which depict the offices of a New York-based,

high-fashion magazine, echo the practical locations used in the pilot. The pilot was produced in New York City, partly in the Woolworth building, an art deco landmark. Cinematographer Vanja Cernjul photographed the pilot using tungsten-balanced film stock, but the images were uncorrected, resulting in a distinctive blue wash that the producers wanted to maintain in the series.

"The sets were designed to be as friendly as possible for Steadicam work and 360° shots," says Berryman. "They have a circle motif that is repeated throughout the design. You walk through many circles, and the ceilings have circular hanging lights. Together with a lot of glass, those touches give the sets a lot of interesting depth and character."

"Ross is a brilliantly collaborative director of photography, so what might have been a difficult process given the absurdly short prep time turned out to be a real joy," says Worthington. "We were in agreement both technically and creatively, so we were able to solve problems quickly and successfully."

## Integrated lighting

Much of the set's practical lighting is integrated into the structures. Some elements glow and many are backlit. Many of the ceilings in the office sets are dropped down, allowing for recessed lighting. "We ringed all the drop ceilings with blue Odyssey fluorescents in a perimeter gap between the ceiling and the walls, which really punches them up," says Berryman. "These lights are part of the visual storytelling."

Decisions about colors had to fit stylistically with the other choices. Blue tones are complemented by splashes of orange in the sets.

"For the magazine offices, the

producers wanted to carry through the very light color palette from the pilot, which goes against a cinematographer's instinct," Berryman says. "We went with very light blues and shades of white in the sets. It could have been a real trap, but with Mark's ideas and ability to incorporate a lot of the lighting into the set, we came up with an interesting look. We wanted to contrast the signature blue look with some very bold colors. There are a lot of orange signs, panels and dividers that break up the sets and give them a bit of character. The result is a modern, stylish look."

Worthington notes that some spaces prevented the use of traditional lighting units. "In the case of the 'tube' hallway that leads through the office, the only acting light comes from lighted shelves and a strip of lighted panels in the ceiling," he says. "Far from being frustrated by these challenges, Ross is energized by them and always interested in solutions that serve the overall look of the show. With Ross, a good lighting solution is also a good scenic solution. Cinematography and production design are both at their best when the distinctions between them are blurred rather than emphasized, and the process becomes seamless."

Berryman lights closer shots carefully, accenting them with Kino Flo Image 80s and smaller units hidden in the sets. The light he uses on actors is usually whiter. "I usually use a light grid on those fixtures," he says.

Berryman's use of longer focal lengths works in tandem with the sets. "We use the Optima 15-40mm short zoom quite often in the Mode offices, especially when the camera is handheld or on a Steadicam," says Berryman. "You can get wide and it looks great, particularly with the circles as a motif. Even on close-ups in certain comedy situations, we have had

the lens at minimum focus on some actors. It gives you a great sense of depth behind them, as well as helping the comedy a bit."

He usually covers the action with two Panaflex cameras mounted with zoom lenses. Berryman tends toward longer focal lengths when a character needs a high-fashion look. "Just to pop up the lights, I use a very light black Pro Mist filter on the camera," he says. "It just adds a glow to the fixtures that are showing in the frame a little bit, and helps the actors, too."

## Quality and malleability

*Ugly Betty* is usually photographed on KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film, with KODAK VISION2 250D 5212 film used for occasional daylight exteriors. "The VISION2 stocks are tremendous," Berryman says. "I am constantly impressed by their quality and malleability. Once upon a time, you used a high-speed stock only as a last resort. These days, the consistency and quality are there. Also, the show looks great when viewed in 16:9 high definition."

Worthington says that knowing the show is shot on film affects his decisions. "I'm not sure I would have been as comfortable with the very light palette we used in the magazine offices if we had been shooting in high def video," he says. "Issues of contrast might have made things difficult. Film's wider, more forgiving contrast range is better suited to the visual choices we made."

"More and more people are seeing the show in high definition," he adds. "My hope is those who view the show on HD will see more of the richness of the world we've created."

*Ugly Betty* and its star, America Ferrera, recently won Golden Globes for best comedy series and best actress in a comedy series.



1 DP Ross Berryman, ASC.

2 (L-R) Actors Ashley Jensen and America Ferrera in a scene from *Ugly Betty*, shot by cinematographer Ross Berryman, ASC.

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