

Have you ever heard of a television show inspired by a building? **This is Wonderland** is a hit Canadian series that garnered 15 Gemini nominations last season. It began as an idea sparked during a visit by creators George Walker and Dani Romain to Toronto's grandiose Old City Hall. The building is a Gothic Revival structure complete with grotesques and gargoyles that has served as a location for many productions.

This is Wonderland, which began its second season in January, is set inside in an overcrowded, stressed out judicial system. The building's ornate halls and staircases play host to a range of characters from the desperate to the wacky. The mood runs from intensely dramatic to affectionately humorous. Cara Pifko, who plays a young lawyer trying to maintain her sanity in this unpredictable environment, leads the cast.

Courtroom scenes are done on stages, where cinematographer Gerald Packer, CSC, builds up overhead light using dimmer-controlled 1K PAR lights bounced off 4 by 4 reflectors mounted on gimbals. Packer studied film at Ryerson and worked at Film House in Toronto before becoming a cinematographer.

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"This set-up gives the same feeling as a tall ceiling, like you'd have if you were in an old city hall courtroom," he explains. "Also, it's a lot kinder to faces. We can shoot in any direction, change direction easily, and move in for close-ups very quickly. We cover 10-12 pages of dialogue on a normal day, so we have to be flexible."

The shooting style calls for lots of choreographed camera movement and re-framing within shots to follow dialogue-heavy action. Courtroom scenes are usually covered with two dolly-mounted ARRI SR-3 cameras with Cooke prime lenses.

"We want to give the show a rich, attractive look, without becoming over the top or too stylized, where things feel less than realistic," says Packer. "The emphasis is on the words. If the camera is moving too much, that can be jarring, and distract from the writing."

Packer photographed **This is Wonderland** on Kodak VISION2 200T 7217 and Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 films. "I really liked

the way the 7217 looks," he says. "I found that there was less tweaking in post to get where I wanted to be, because the film was already headed in that direction, where the blacks are really thick, and there are no light colors in the shadow areas. It's nice and clear and has a pearlescent feeling on the faces of the women. With the older stock, we had to crush the blacks a little bit, whereas with the (72)17, they're falling off naturally right on the negative. I found that very interesting."

Packer says that film is a better storytelling medium than video.

"I recently shot a stage play called **Blood** on HD," he says. "It was interesting, but I'd rather shoot film anytime. I like the way film works. You get used to the latitude of film, and you miss that with video. Film doesn't have that hard edge and 24P video doesn't have that softness that film has."

"With **This is Wonderland**, the challenge is to make it look satisfying and elegant while getting it done on time," Packer says. "We're not trying to make the image look exciting just by moving the camera around for no reason. There are a lot of words that the actors need to deliver, and a lot of drama. The writing is really great, and you want to enhance it, not distract from it. You have to keep the plate steady so you can enjoy eating the food." ■

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CBC TELEVISION



Toronto's Old City Hall sets tone for courtroom drama



Left: DP Gerald Packer CSC taking a meter reading for a scene from *This is Wonderland*.

Above: Actress Cara Pifko in a scene from *This is Wonderland*.

PHOTO: MICHAEL CARR