

Panavision up close

With *Tomorrow When The War Began* in the can and *DAYBREAKERS* due to be released in Australia on 21st January, we thought it was time to discover what makes Ben Nott tick.



1. Going right back to the beginning of your life looking down a viewfinder, what camera did you use on your first picture? Does the equipment of today make it pale into insignificance?

My career in the camera department began working on staff for a commercial production house shooting with that fabulous work horse the 35mm Arri III and the 16mm SR2 ... both incredibly reliable and neither of which I would refuse to shoot with today. I would often use the Photosonics high speed 16mm camera to shoot table top work but I would never again choose to shoot with this beast given development of the high speed HD systems that offer 1000fps with the ability to review in an instant. My drama career began in 1999 when I was offered US TV producer New Line's series of Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Lost World' ... produced locally on the Gold Coast by Coote Hayes Productions. I photographed three seasons with the aid of the Arri SR3. We gave these cameras an absolute thrashing for a total of 378 days and they never missed a beat. Incredible!

2. Who were your mentors?

The biggest single influence on my career has without doubt come via filmmaker Dick Marks, himself a wonderful cinematographer and visionary.

I worked on staff for Dick at his production company for seven years where I progressed from Focus Puller to DP. Dick is very old school. While his expectations of those around him are very high he is very collaborative, supportive and generous. Lessons from the book of Dick I will forever practice include, 'close enough and near enough do not share the same post code' and 'the art of winning the war in preproduction'.

3. And idols? Was there a style to which you aspired?

Mmm ... idols. I'm not sure it is healthy to idolise anyone/thing but inspiration is certainly something I draw from many sources.

ROBERT RICHARDSON ASC ... everything he photographs.

CARAVAGGIO and his mate REMBRANDT ... you want to learn about contrast then you talk to them.

RON JOHANSON ACS (National President of the ACS) ... an example of absolute dedication and commitment to something you love and believe in.

MUM ... I was born 10 pound six ... do I need to go on!

4. What was your 'big break' in the industry and how has being a Brisbane boy opened doors (or otherwise) for you over the years?

My big break came by way of a broom. I was employed as a freelance runner on an Ikea commercial and happened to sweep up in between takes just as the director/operator was complaining to the grip that the dolly was running rough on the floor. That director was Dick Marks. He then employed me as a clapper loader on a 4 month doco shoot that circumnavigated the country.

Being Brisbane based has both helped and hindered my career. Helped because I was able to move up through the ranks faster with less competition and hindered because there are less opportunities.



5. Is it always about 'story' as Sam Fuller claimed? Do your pictures tell a thousand words (or more)? Does a DP have time for that now or is it all about a tight schedule.

As far as narrative driven filmmaking is concerned Sam Fuller will always be right. I share the opinion that the photography must support script. In saying this I am in no way diminishing the story telling power of the visuals and the sound mix. Producorial belt tightening dictates that we have to be more clever in our work practices to achieve good results. I don't believe in being average just because time and money are in short supply. Good planning = Good results.

6. These days, everyone's a cameraman, director, writer, perhaps using a mobile phone to shoot a film. What can a camera of quality add to a story and does that make your life as a DP more challenging (ie. learning the new equipment) or do the new cameras, to some extent, do the work for you?

I love the fact that modern technology has made filmmaking accessible to virtually everybody. I am convinced that more and more great cinematographers and filmmakers will be unearthed due to the increased opportunities afforded by the accessibility of the medium, where as 30 years ago these people would have taken another path. Just spend a day trolling YouTube. As far as the quality of these new camera formats and their impact ... the art is choosing the best marriage between the acquisition format and the viewing platform.

7. If you could give one piece of advice to an up and coming DP, what is it?

DP's have to be filmmakers. To be truly successful you have to understand how films are made. In addition to composition, exposure, lighting, shooting formats and camera systems, DP's need to understand scheduling, editing, production design and post production. All these things have a MAJOR impact on the photography. My advice to up and coming DP's is to involve themselves in all these departments and understand how they contribute to the process.

Scheduling - shoot a day exterior scene at the right time of day using available light.

Editing – the time management given to those shots that occupy the most screen time.

Production design - colours, textures, shading and contrast that can be designed into the sets and wardrobe.

8. Ditto to producers and directors. What would you like to tell them that makes shooting more effective for you?

My current soap box topic regarding producers is

never underestimate the value an experienced crew will add to your production. There has been a wages freeze in this country for the past 10 years and as a result we have lost many experienced technicians to other industries. Regarding my own situation... I am fiercely loyal to this country and our industry but I am being offered less money in 2009 to work on budgets that are more than triple those I worked on 10 years ago. The maths don't add up. I will eventually take my skill set to America because I have to. Again I say ... the value added by experienced technicians who make good decisions is impossible to calculate.

To Directors I would say.... please take a compass with you when you survey day exterior locations. By simply choosing to shoot backlit you will save loads of time that would have been spent lighting and attenuating which you in turn get to use with your actors. Not to mention the photography will look 87 thousand time better.

I would also advise that age old disciplines of rolling, cutting and slating should be honored when using a digital format or risk enormous frustration and expense in the edit by having to log the mountains of data.

9. Your resume has an impressive collection of names of luminaries such as Ridley and Tony Scott, Lawrence Bender, quite a lot with Coote & Hayes and many others. Is there more pressure working with these industry leaders? Do you modify your performance as a DP? Or is it more 'fun' working pro bono for the unknown up and coming young director with a wacky, naïve vision? (assuming you ever have time to do this these days!).

I try and approach all jobs on their merits regardless of the IMDB ranking of those above the line. My only hope is that they will be collaborative and supportive.

10. Are there genres you prefer to work on?

I would be happy to photograph Film Noir period pieces for the rest of my career because they are reliant on striking composition using high con lighting to create positive and negative space. Frankly, I also love the horror genre because the lighting (or lack there of) has such a profound effect on the mood of the piece.

11. What films have influenced you with their extraordinary 'look'?

Love the raw beauty of Michael Seresin's work on Angel Heart. Mississippi Burning is another Alan Parker film photographed by Peter Biziou that I thought was great. Bob Richardson's work on JFK and Tonino Delli Colli's artistry on Once Upon A Time In The West ... Blah blah blah ... I could go on ...



12. You shot the Spierig Brothers' 'Daybreakers' (Dir.: Michael Spierig, Peter Spierig, 2009) on Genesis and just finished shooting the film of the best-seller John Marsden book, 'Tomorrow When The War Began' (Dir.: Stuart Beattie, 2009-10) on 35mm. Given the genre differences, can you tell us something about the individual demands on lighting, production design and how the different systems impacted on what the audience sees? Is there a particular scene in each that highlights the challenges you faced?

Big time question ...

OK. First, in both cases I chose the format based on what was right for the project. In the case of Daybreakers we wanted a chic, modern almost plastic look and since the show was shot largely on stage or night exterior I went with the Genesis. The lack of film grain bought the 'plastic' feel that I softened slightly by using a Mitchell B filter up front. I also planned to work in the blue/cyan end of the colour pallet and felt that HD images would be cleaner in this typically noisy channel. Because I was in a position to maintain complete control over the dynamic range I felt comfortable shooting with the HD format. Being mindful of this I worked with the Production Designer to choose Prac lighting units (lamp shades) that had enough density to control the light output so they would not burn. We also tested different fabrics to find the right sheen to bring the actors dark suits to life.

Tomorrow When the War Began posed a completely different set of issues.

We shot 95% of this film on practical locations in the Hunter Valley, Blue Mountains and Sydney. I shot 35 mm film because I knew I needed the extended dynamic range offered by film to deal with the harsh day exterior locations. The added colour depth offered by 35mm film helped to accurately capture the beauty of the Australian landscape ... an important story point.

13. Is film dead? Has digital killed film?

NEGATIVE.

In addition to the technical superiority of film it is my belief that shooting film is much quicker than shooting HD. While HD may appear to have budgetary advantages up front the soft costs must be considered. Assuming that producers are interested in producing quality product then the initial savings must be amortised against other HD specific expenses over the course of the whole production. Shooting HD means an elevated emphasis on monitoring, a greater requirement for fill lighting and highlight attenuation, which has associated costs of more equipment, men

and time. The belief in some quarters that the camera can roll continuously can cause issues with data management and logging time in the edit suite. There are also the archiving issues associated with digital acquisition. Apart from all this, as the DP I find myself enslaved in a monitoring tent during a HD shoot whereas when shooting film I am rooted behind the magazine of the A camera. All decisions are made from the epicenter of the set, not off in some tent.

14. If you were a camera inventor, what modifications would you add to existing cameras to make your life easier and to make cameras more expressive?

Cameras are not expressive ... they are photographic shovels. They must go when you plug in the battery and push the button to roll. If they fail in this basic task and rob the production of a piece of magic then I find this is unacceptable. So I would say to the manufacturers forget developing any fancy functions if the basic system is not 99% reliable. I am happy to say that in my experience Panavision have, to their credit, ticked this box.

15. How is the Australian industry doing at the moment from a DP's point of view? Or should we be looking at it as an international industry these days?

I believe the local industry needs to place more emphasis on developing the skills of up and coming writers as well as providing more support to established members of the writing fraternity. I want to read material that makes my heart pump as I'm realizing that if I'm lucky enough to be awarded the job then I have a serious obligation to perform. Put simply... if the script is great then the movie has the chance to be great. If this is not the case then the weeks spent filming add up to another uninspiring job.

16. How important is that ACS tag after your name? I can't help noticing that many DP's have been accredited. How much does it matter in getting work? How hard does a DP have to work to get it?

I have enormous respect for the Australian Cinematographers Society and I am immensely proud to be an accredited member.

17. How is the Ben Nott ACS résumé shaping up for 2010?

Currently I'm unemployed for the rest of my life. I have a few irons in the fire and soon hope to give my family some indication of the culture in which they will be immersed. Frankly, I wouldn't mind reading that heart pumping script right about now ...

Tech Info:

Tomorrow When the War Began

Cameras Arricam ST & LT

Lenses Master Primes and Optimo Zooms

Daybreakers

Cameras Genesis

Lenses Panavision Primo Zooms and Primes