

Post Producing HD

by Amy Stodghill

Pablo Toledo, a USC film school graduate, is a Tucson-based filmmaker who is completing his first feature-length film, Runnin' at Midnite, in HDTV. I followed up with Pablo recently to find out how post-production was coming along.

Give an overview of the post-production process for HD.

Well, it started in pre-production, when we faced the question "how do we see our HD tapes once we shoot them"? Well, we started hustling....

During production we had a HD downconverter, which was graciously donated to us from a firm in LA. We could take our HD signal to anything, from PAL to NTSC to some formats I'd never even heard of before! This is a necessary evil because there is no way to run HD through an NTSC system. It's like apples and oranges. So, as we watched our "dailies" (somewhat outdated term in this digital age!) we downconverted at the same time to BetaSP. After production we archived our HD masters, as well as our DAT Backup masters, and went into post with Beta dubs.

Our first session was on a discreet logic *edit 5.0. We compressed most of our downconverted footage at 5:1 and it still looked amazing coming from HD, and the discreet system was a workhorse. Our second offline begins next month, where we'll take our EDL from the first session and recapture uncompressed to give us an amazing offline copy to begin to present to festivals and distributors.

Currently we are comparing various HD online suites. It can get pretty expensive so we are doing a lot of research. Most everything else is the same as far as post in HD, save the process of downconverting and finding a shop that specializes in HD. The rest of the process, such as audio, titles, scoring, is pretty much the same as a film post process. The downconversion process, however, is something that shouldn't be overlooked. The best quote we got prior to production was 100/tape, and with each HD tape running 80 dollars and a corresponding Beta for each HD running in the 20-dollar range, you can see how the numbers start to add up. There is no way around downconverting, so you have to have a good plan going into production to handle it smoothly. If not, you'll be stuck with a bunch of tapes you can't watch, and that is a filmmaker's nightmare.

What are the drawbacks of shooting HD from a post-production perspective?

The downconversion process is somewhat cumbersome and it adds a hefty price tag to your stock. Also, the high price tag of HD online makes it tough, from an indie filmmaker's perspective, to cut your HD footage before your online. For example, I would love to cut a short HD trailer to show people how amazing this format is, yet it is cost prohibitive. It can be frustrating. On the other hand, even our downconverted BetaSP footage for our offline looks spectacular. I've cut some low rez trailers on a firewire system and people still comment on the great resolution and latitude. Remember, once you have the downconverted footage you can cut away on any edit suite out there and go back to the masters when the time is right.

Even though finishing on HD is our ultimate goal, the quality of the downconverted footage is far superior in every way to every other digital format out there. So, if you

don't want to spend the coin on an HD online I would still consider downconverted HD better than anything else out there.

Did you run into any problems with the downconversion?

Since we didn't send the tapes out to a post house to do the downconversion that job fell on our shoulders. The downconverter box, which is about as wide as a beta deck but only about 6 inches high, was brought down from LA to our shooting site in Tucson, Arizona. It's a very expensive machine, around 44K for the low end model is what we were told. Anyhow, like any machine, it can take awhile to master, especially when your downconverting after 17 hours on the set. The technology didn't seem to be as seamless or user friendly as most digital devices out today, especially something that costs 44K to buy! Nonetheless, it provided us with a beautiful signal to pipe into our Beta deck. There were a few artifacts in the downconverted image but I tend to blame our unfamiliarity with the machine rather than the box itself. It was a blessing, however, to have it donated.

The artifacts are something we decided not to worry about. After all, the downconverted footage was for an offline anyhow. Everything else went smooth.

Would you shoot on HD again?

I absolutely love HD. It does not remind me of film, nor does it scream "video". It is it's own monster. I am thankful my DP and I saw eye to eye and decided to let "HD be HD". No filters, no schemes to mimic a "film look". The latitude of HD allows you to compose shots and do things you just couldn't do with any other format, period. If your lighting scheme is right, it will handle anything you throw at it, and most of all it has an "emotional" quality I think every filmmaker wants to capture. As a director I felt HD gave me unlimited options when it came to my compositions and choices in our cinematography.

I would caution, however, that HD needs to have a DP who can bring out the format's qualities. So many times I hear of these digital filmmakers becoming "one man bands" and saying "we'll just use natural light". If your DP doesn't understand lighting then you will be disappointed in HD, and probably any other DV format you choose.

I would only shoot HD again if the story or subject warranted it. I am a firm believer that the format you choose should compliment and highlight your story.

Pablo expects an October completion for *Runnin' At Midnite* (www.runninatmidnite.com) then hopes to premiere it at various festivals. He is currently in pre-production on his next project, a feature length drama set in the hills of Nogales, Mexico. Pablo is looking into shooting on HD again or possibly experimenting with 24fps progressive camera.

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