



Funny Business

AC visits the set of the Showtime series *I'm Dying Up Here*, where Peter Flinckenberg, FSC and crew assist director Adam Davidson in lending a noir perspective to the 1970s Los Angeles comedy scene.

By Andrew Fish

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It's wrap day for Season 1 of *I'm Dying Up Here* — a Showtime series based on William Knoedelseder's book of the same name — which explores the struggles, sacrifice, desperation and heartache in the world of 1970s standup comedy, as Los Angeles comics vie for laughs and battle for fame. (Editor's note: This article contains season-finale spoilers.)

Arriving at Hayden Place Stages in Culver City, Calif., we're greeted at Stage A by director of photography Peter Flinckenberg, FSC, who's in the midst of shooting a scene on a darkened set. It's the office of Goldie Herschlag (Melissa Leo), the shrewd, astute, no-nonsense owner of Goldie's — a fictional Sunset Strip comedy club that serves as training

ground for the Next Big Things. A hint of atmosphere hangs in the room, whose hues favor the era's archetypal oranges and browns. Primary illumination is provided by two heavily black-wrapped Dedolights secured on stands and diffused with Hampshire Frost. The sense of film noir is tangible.

Flinckenberg notes that he's seeking the "perfect combination of shadow and eye light," as he points out two "Twiggy" lights hidden on the set. The stealthy little units — employed on this production in 6", 12", 24" and 36" sizes, according to gaffer Jeremy Launais — are bicolor, battery-powered, dimmable LEDs, used here for eye and hair lights. With Leo's stand-in, Marie Todd, at the desk, the cinematographer asks Launais to have the Twiggy behind the desk chair dimmed down to demonstrate how the subtle sheen on the stand-in's hair slowly vanishes. They bring it back up and all is well. The eye-light Twiggy, meanwhile, is tucked amid Goldie's desktop trappings.

A Quasar Science hybrid HMI/tungsten LED strip shines hard light through the windows located quite high on the wall, providing enough "sunshine" to indicate time of day, while maintaining the low-light motif. An off-stage voice instructs, "Kill the Cush," and the room darkens further. Leo enters and takes her seat behind the desk. She's immediately in character with cigarette in hand — hence the atmosphere — and is joined by Ari Graynor, who plays comedian Cassie Feder. The meeting between the two characters is clearly not a social call, as Cassie asks to regain her spot on the main stage.

Two Arri Alexa Classics are mounted on Chapman/Leonard dollies — A camera on a Hustler IV, operated by Anka Malatynska, and B on a Super PeeWee IV, operated by Nicholas Davidoff. The operators are assisted by respective 1st ACs Gunnar Mortensen and Patrick Blanchet. The Alexas are recording ProRes 4:4:4 at 2048x1152 resolution, to 128GB SxS cards, and framing for 1.78:1. We watch for a bit



Opposite and this page, top: Los Angeles comics mine their personal anguish to entertain the crowd and battle their way to fame in the 1970s-era Showtime series *I'm Dying Up Here*. Above: Cinematographer Peter Flinckenberg, FSC adjusts a set of Venetian blinds to control the in-bound light.

from behind the cameras, in a well-shadowed corner of the office set. The production shoots another take, this time with a 1/8 Pearlescent filter on the cameras' respective detuned Panavision zooms — a Primo 19-90mm on A, and a 24-275mm 11:1 on B.

At a stopping point, we retreat to the wings, where director Adam Davidson oversees the sequence at video

village. "It's not a comedy," he says of the show. "It has comedy in it, but it's really about the dark places that the comedy comes from." Regarding this first collaboration with Flinckenberg, he notes, "Both of us embrace the flaws. We don't like things to be too perfect. It's okay if there are flares, and it's okay if we miss a moment and it's not quite in focus — if the moment was real, and it

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Bill (Andrew Santino, above) and Cassie (Ari Graynor, right) take the Main Stage at Goldie's comedy club.



was unrepeatable, that's of more value. Sometimes those little flaws help things to feel more real." The director also emphasizes the importance of "the emotional story as well as the surface story. We can always dig a little deeper and get something to rise up from underneath — what the story is really about." (Read *AC*'s extended interview with Davidson at ascmag.com in September.)

Around the corner, Flinckenberg assesses at the DIT station, where digital-imaging technician Peter Brunet is matching color and brightness via a Blackmagic Design DaVinci Resolve

system — reconciling a lighting change made between takes. The Sony OLED monitor indicates that this is Episode 110 — the season finale — and notes that the cameras are shooting at 24 fps and EI 800, with the shutter at 180 degrees. There's some whispering about framing, and the next take has the A camera at a wider angle.

Launais and key grip Jake Cross join us at the monitors, and the conversation turns to the details of other California-based setups the crew has devised throughout the four-month shoot. There was a hot-wing-eating contest, shot at The Bear Pit restaurant,

which L.A. neophyte comics Eddie Zeidel (Michael Angarano) and Ron Shack (Clark Duke) enter so they can afford the meal they've just shared with their respective dates. The production has shot at a bar in North Hollywood and at a California state prison in Lancaster, and the location for Goldie's parking lot is in Echo Park. We're told that as the season's shoot began, there was about a two-to-three ratio of stage-to-location work, and that as the show progressed it evolved to around half and half.

We meet Adam Bedi from the special-effects department, who is recently back in the States after working in Bollywood. He reports that his responsibilities here have involved atmosphere, location wet-downs and fire effects.

Mortensen takes some time to provide detail on the lenses used for Flinckenberg's work on *I'm Dying Up Here*. As he offers us a look at the A-cam lenses, he explains that the show employs rehoused vintage Leica R primes, and that for Flinckenberg's episodes the cinematographer sought to expand the package's range of focal lengths with additional lenses that would match the vintage look of the Leicas. With assistance from Panavision Hollywood's manager of technical marketing and optics, Guy McVicker, a new scalable detuning process was employed to alter the lenses. These detuned Primo Primes and Zooms, the latter of which comprised the 19-90mm and 24-275mm lenses, provided an in-camera image conforming to the characteristics that Flinckenberg was after — including a decrease in crispness and an increase in flaring. As the 1st AC describes, "It's a vintage look, but modern mechanics. Panavision has a couple different versions of detuning, and [after testing] we used 'Noir.'" He elaborates that the production specifically chose Noir #3 — from the various levels of detuning available — as it is "more aggressive."

The Leica R lenses used on Flinckenberg's episodes were rehoused by G.L. Optics.

The camera and lens package was provided by Panavision Hollywood, with assistance from company marketing executive Cathy Peirce Ouellet.

In addition to this episode, Flinckenberg has shot Episodes 6-9. The pilot was shot by cinematographer Ken Seng, known for his work on *Deadpool*, and Episodes 2-5 were shot by Jim Frohna, of *Transparent* fame.

Mortensen shows us the Panavised Alexa's modular setup, which easily converts between studio, handheld and Steadicam, and features a custom rear handle. He notes that he prefers to be on the dolly when such shots are called for, and to pull focus directly on the camera whenever possible.

He further explains that Fogal netting was employed "for every shot. Panavision has a magnetic net holder in the mount of the camera — the entire season was shot with rear-mounted Fogals. [The effect can be seen in] the highlights, which was embraced."

During a reset, the Pearlescent filter is removed, and the framing now consists of two wide shots. A mirror is adjusted so both characters are in the reflection, as Flinckenberg notes the quality and variation you can achieve "if you take the time to set it up." Goldie and Cassie trade veiled aggressions over multiple takes until Davidson and Flinckenberg deem they have what they need.

Production moves on, and en route Flinckenberg gives us a quick tour of some of the other sets, many of which are in phases of breakdown.

We visit the Cellar, where upstart comics prove their chops. The area's walls are designed with a dilapidated cement veneer that's cracked and exposed to reveal the bricks beneath. The chairs are now stacked and other set elements are wrapped in plastic and ready for removal. Flinckenberg describes some of the work done down here, including a 180-degree crane shot from the stairwell to the performance space, enacted in these fairly close quarters. As Cross later explains, "This shot was [performed] with a 35-foot



Club owner Goldie (Melissa Leo, top) meets with Cassie (above) in Goldie's office. The room was designed to feature elements of the 1970s, as well as earlier eras — the latter evidenced by such fixtures as the Tiffany lamp — to suggest Goldie's cross-generational sensibilities.

MovieBird telescoping crane from TCC — Telescopic Camera Cranes."

On our way to the next setup, production sound mixer Jay Patterson stops for a quick word with the cinematographer. Flinckenberg enthuses about the show's "awesome sound guys. They're a big help."

We arrive at the main club, with its barroom-grade booths and chairs — all adorned in burgundy pleather — facing a black-curtained stage framed by black brick walls with sconces mounted on either side. There are built-in recessed practicals on the ceiling, along with Par cans and ellipsoidal spots. The

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Above: Nick (Jake Lacy, left) meets with his agent, Miles (Ryan Alosio), in a booth at Goldie's. Right and below: Eddie (Michael Angarano, left) and Adam (R.J. Cyler) talk with Goldie in the comedy club's kitchen.



rigging is clearly the remainder of what once was; there's been wide variation in lighting color on that particular set, used as a technique to enhance the storytelling. Weekday shows, for example, featured relatively muted lighting, while weekend shows were more colorful — and both set and lighting colors became bolder as personal success seemed imminent.

We pass through the nearly emptied re-creation of real-life L.A. institution Canter's Deli, which serves as our protagonists' sanctuary from their emotionally exhausting, makeshift, rollercoaster careers. During use, the set was lit with a combination of practicals, Source Fours, Quasar strips, 10K and 20K Fresnels, and 10K Mole-Richardson beam projectors. (See lighting diagram, page 88.)

Goldie's restaurant kitchen is a time-travel to the 1970s. Chrome magnet-clips dot the industrial refrigerator, and a cream-colored electric check-writer machine sits beside a rubber-stamped stack of carbon-copy papers. The details run deep, down to a piece of simulated aged Scotch tape stuck to a wall. Vintage boxes of Old Baker, Old Sport, Cook's and Dubuque Star beer are stacked beneath a wall-mounted rotary phone adjacent to a Pink Floyd '72 tour-date poster, a well-worn bulletin board, and a fuchsia sign that reads, "Your future depends on your working safely." A near-empty whiskey tumbler accompanies a cigarette-filled ashtray on a break-room table. It's all lit with dimmable fluorescent ceiling fixtures.

Hailing from Finland, Flinckenberg has a long list of credits, which include numerous documentaries as well as such scripted productions as 2013's black-and-white, ASC Spotlight Award-winning drama *Concrete Night* (AC Sept. '15), directed by Pirjo Honkasalo; *Woodshock*, starring Kirsten Dunst and directed by Kate and Laura Mulleavy, which hits theaters this month; and the upcoming *Come Sunday*, directed by Joshua Marston.

The cinematographer expresses



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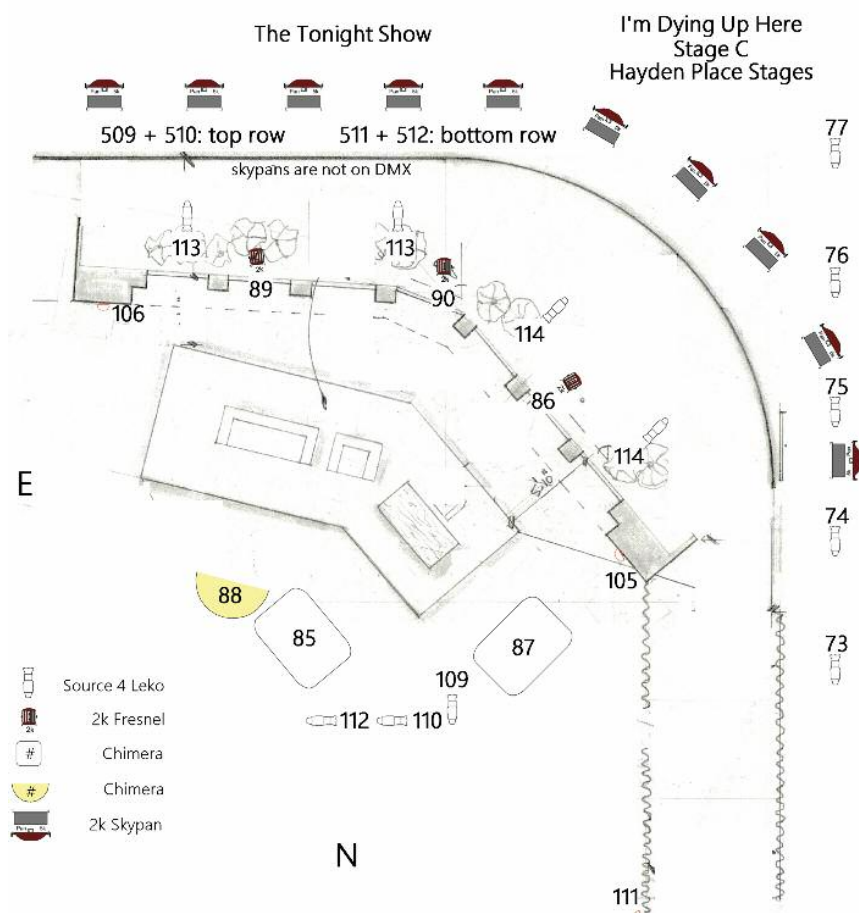


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Lighting diagram for the re-created set of *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. For comedians, the venerable talk show was considered the holy grail of opportunities.

his continued gratitude to be working in an environment with the kind of resources and physical space that Showtime has allowed for *I'm Dying Up Here*. He adds that "collaboration with, and support from, producers Michael Aguilar, Christina Wayne and David Flebotte has been really great. It's a lot of fun when the creative team is so supported by the producers."

We enter Stage C, where the rest of the day's shoot will take place. The first setup we spot is a re-creation of the set for *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, complete with Los Angeles cityscape backing, famous couch and performance stage. (See lighting diagram, above.) Leadman Jason Olson from set decoration ensures we have a word with produc-

tion designer Ruth Ammon, who's currently sitting at Carson's desk and working on a stack of papers of her own.

"Peter creates a very collaborative environment," Ammon says. "Because he is always filming and I am either designing or scouting, it would be easy not to communicate — but he always finds time to look at designs with me and ask for my thoughts. Then he takes it to a higher emotional level with lighting, camera movement and lens subjectivity."

"Light is such a critical part of the story," she continues, "because it's a story about people who are striving for the light. They are driven to perform, so finding the light is an important metaphor for what we are trying to do. And as you see, a lot of the interiors are

dark and natural, and the light only gets pushed up as we get more to the corporate level. *The Tonight Show*, for example, is a very bright, corporate look." (Read *AC*'s extended interview with Ammon at ascmag.com in September.)

Soon after, the crew — many of whom, we now notice, are wearing t-shirts featuring the "Goldie's" insignia — has the *Carson* set fully prepped. On wheels, with working monitors, and emblazoned with the words "NBC TV Color," two prop studio cameras appear ready to shoot.

The next slated sequence takes place backstage, where comic Bill Hobbs (Andrew Santino) is staring down the barrel of his big break. The space is lit with an Arri SkyPanel set to a cyan color tone, and a single practical. Malatynska and Davidoff are operating handheld as Bill nervously awaits his cue from the stagehand (Kim Delgado). The moment arrives, the stagehand gives the signal, and Bill offers him an awkward, inappropriate hug before stepping into the lights.

When she has a moment, we chat with Malatynska, who describes the liberated feeling of working on a project where she can "break the rules and operate on the fly." On working with Flinckenberg, she notes, "Probably stemming from his documentary roots, Peter's work is all about freedom. His lighting — and the combination of wide-angle lenses, smoke, reflective surfaces, and strong pings of light — create an unconventional and very evocative period look. He encourages us to go for things when we see them, to use every opportunity to frame a beautiful shot, rather than defining a hard start and end to a shot. While that way of working can drive a lot of technicians crazy, it allows us to capture unscripted glimpses at the realness of a character. It allows for a lot of creative choices and freedom as an operator. Aesthetically, it's been a great influence."

Bill launches into his routine — which envisions a world where two dogs who have previously mated might share an uncomfortable conversation down

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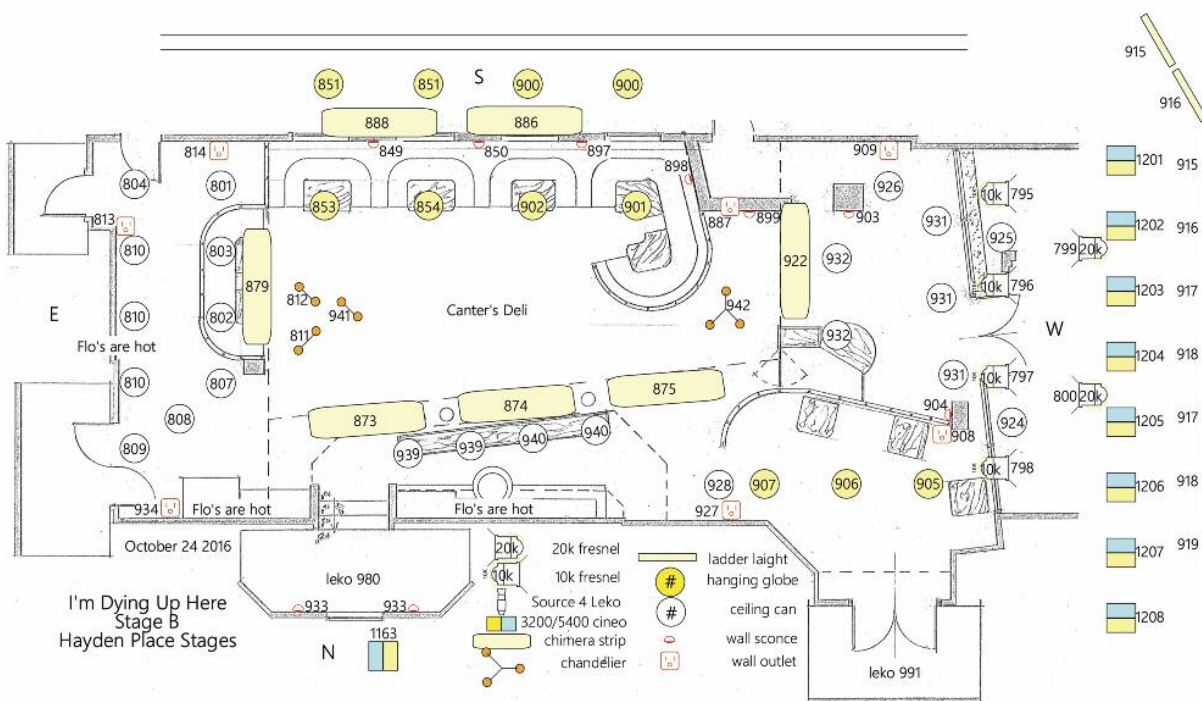
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Top: Lighting diagram for the on-set re-creation of Los Angeles institution Canter's Deli — the comics' local haunt. Above, from left: Bill, Cassie, Ralph (Erik Griffin), Edgar (Al Madrigal) and Nick let off steam at Canter's.

the road — as the operators capture his performance from backstage through the translucent curtain, which Flinckenberg takes a moment to adjust between takes. Mortensen explains that in this instance the B camera is shooting more conventionally, while A camera is a bit more stylized. The DIT monitor

notes the latter as shooting at 40 fps with a 90-degree shutter angle, and the 1st AC points out the use of Schneider Optics' Clairmont Swing/Shift lens, used here to ensure that the actor playing Carson — who, in this episode, is standing in for Dylan Baker, who's played the legendary host in previous

episodes — is blurred out.

Mortensen employs a Cmotion Evolution wireless lens-control system to alternate between focusing on the actor and the fabric through which they're shooting, and later notes the challenge of pulling focus for a hand-held Swing/Shift rig. He reports that the Swing/Shift lens has been used on *I'm Dying Up Here* for flashbacks and drug-experience sequences as well.

Flinckenberg adds that he, himself, has always been a fan of the swing-and-shift effect for storytelling, and has been "developing a new design of swing-and-shift lenses — based on old large-format Hasselblad glass — [with lens company] Whitepoint Optics."

Production soon moves to the more-traditional stage-facing perspective. Par cans and Chimeras fitted with 1Ks are rigged from the rafters of *The Tonight Show* set, and a Source Four spot is on a stand. An egg-crated Quasar unit has been placed on the floor and aimed upward to light the curtains. We're told this is the same strip that was used to provide light through the windows in Goldie's office

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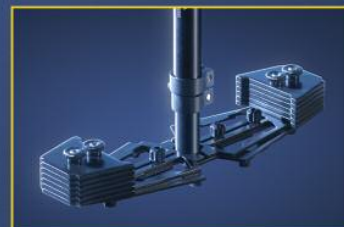
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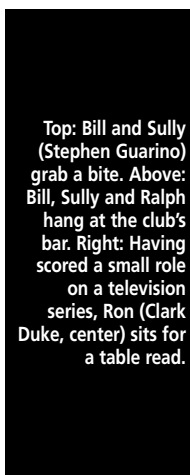
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Top: Bill and Sully (Stephen Guarino) grab a bite. Above: Bill, Sully and Ralph hang at the club's bar. Right: Having scored a small role on a television series, Ron (Clark Duke, center) sits for a table read.



earlier today. Skypans are illuminating the Translight city backing from behind.

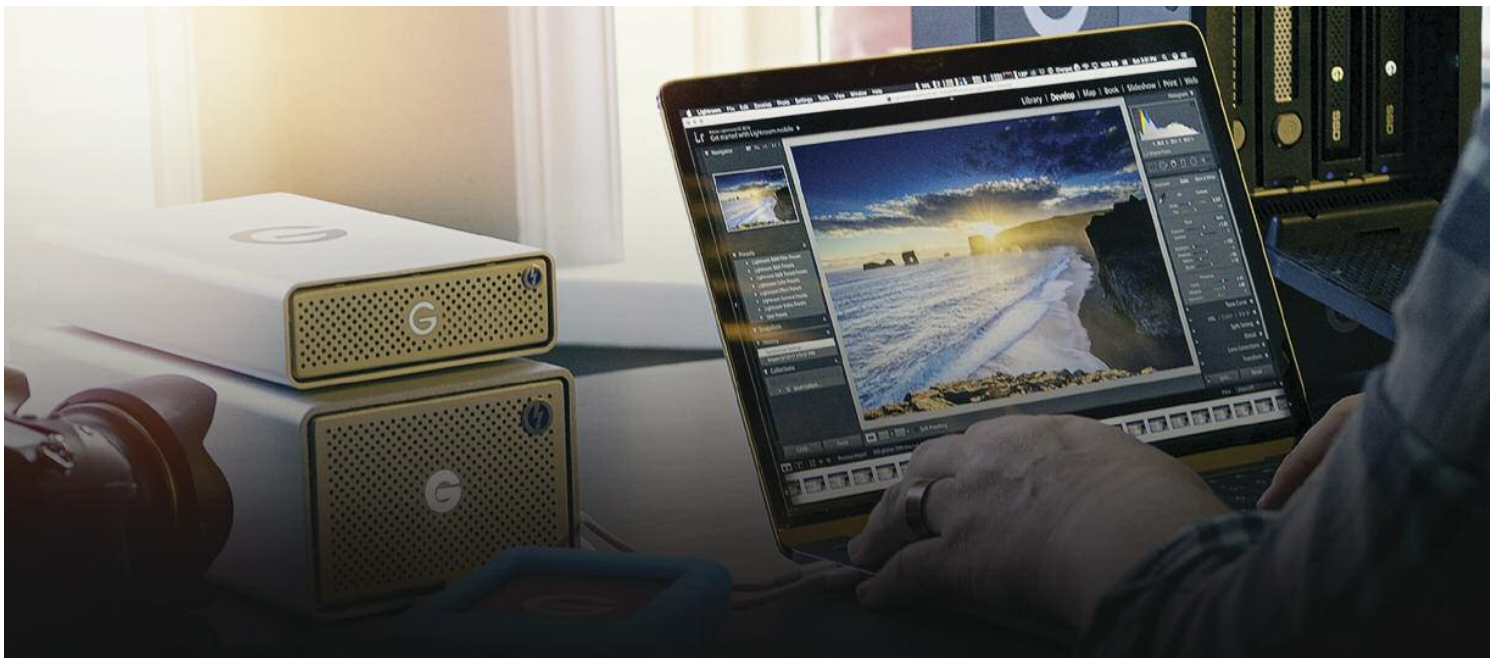
"For *The Tonight Show*, we wanted the Translight to be the main lighting [source]," Launais says. "For [Bill's anxious] entrance, we wanted to show the tension as well as highlight the importance of making it on the show — so we used the Quasar on the opposite side of the Translight to give him a dim 'Quasar' look. Once he went past the curtain, we reset to the traditional *Tonight Show* look."

The crew preps a Chapman Super PeeWee IV dolly on a track, and Flinckenberg and Launais adjust the spot. The shoot begins and the dolly — equipped with an Alexa and 40mm Primo — pushes in quick, first toward Santino, then into the black-and-white studio-camera monitor in which Santino is framed. Meanwhile, the handheld B cam fitted with an 80mm Leica R pans from Santino to the monitor and back again — always keeping the prop camera in shot. Atmosphere adds further texture to the image.

Flinckenberg submits that the emotional tension created by the shot design is an effort "to give drama to the comedy." He explains that it's not as important to him to emulate the lighting used in the 1970s as it is to give the scene a "cinematic, emotional feel."

Production enjoys a delicious lunch provided by Reel Chefs Catering — which includes a special wrap-day sushi station — before moving to the final setups: the dressing room, main stage and backstage of *The Dating Game*. First up, comic Nick Beverly (Jake Lacy) is getting a pep talk from his agent, Miles Farber (Ryan Alosio), who's doing his best to convince the cynical performer that this particular game show is a solid career move. They converse at a dressing-room makeup table, whose mirror is lined with frosted globe practicals, which serve as the scene's primary light source — supplemented by "a small Chimera strip bank to fill faces," Launais says.

The globes' soft glow dominates the frame, close to blowing it out yet illuminating only what's in immediate prox-



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Right: Cassie performs on a variety show called *Girls Are Funny, Too*. Below, from left: Flinckenberg observes the action as Nicholas Davidoff operates Steadicam and director Adam Davidson studies the monitor.



imity. The result is a localized brightness that leaves the characters in shadow. A and B cameras are on dollies — with B cam mounted on a Silent Cat slider with the aid of an OConnor 2575 Fluid Head. A and B slowly track from side to side, yielding a sequence one might think was aided by Steadicam. Davidson encourages Malatynska and Davidoff to try different things as the production rehearses. “We’re exploring

now,” the director says. During capture, the result is slow, smoky, moody, well-composed and quite beautiful.

Malatynska points out that on prior sequences, the production has employed a Lambda head “to get the camera right on top of tables or bars and use the reflections on the surface as foreground. We also used a 3-foot slider for adjustments.”

Flinckenberg says that long takes

like this one have been prevalent on the show. And though we haven’t seen it in use today, *I’m Dying Up Here* features frequent use of a dedicated Steadicam C camera. Mortensen notes that Andy Shuttleworth operated Steadicam for the first half of the season, while Davidoff has been operating on more recent episodes. There have generally been two to four MovieBird crane days per episode.

Brunet reports that each episode gets a double-up day with 2nd-unit cinematographer Michael G. Wojciechowski, who shoots additional on-stage footage. On such days, Brunet says, “we almost always have both units shooting on opposing stages. It’s a rare exception when either unit goes on location those days.” He also notes that the production “used Sony a7S II [cameras] for car rigs and specialty work.”

As we snack on pizza from food vendor Company 77’s converted 1983 Pierce Arrow Pumper fire engine, and sugar-dusted New Orleans-style pastries from The Beignet Truck — both of which have set up shop between the stages as another a wrap-day treat —

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From the Pros

1 Label your equipment cases

Use 1" cloth tape ("camera tape") and a Sharpie to label your equipment cases neatly with their contents. This can save time when readying a new camera component, and it enables you to easily identify which cases you'll need at your next location. A different color tape can be used to distinguish the components for cameras A, B, & C, etc., on a multi-camera shoot.

2 Get it right in-camera

If your camera has a special log or flat picture profile designed to be graded in post-production, don't get too caught up using it for every project. Many jobs that require a quick turnaround time can really benefit from getting it right in-camera with a standard picture profile.

3 New technology is your friend

If you own a tablet or a smartphone, there are many apps available that transform these consumer electronics into professional tools, in some cases. Slatting, metadata, camera control, and more can be achieved within a single device. Check your relevant application marketplace regularly for new tools. Some don't even cost anything.

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the crew prepares to capture the final shots of Season 1.

Lighting technician Jeremy Mennel takes some time to show us the Quasar fixture up-close. The light bank — which features LED “switch lamp” tubes, switchable between 30K HMI and 56K tungsten — is, on this produc-

tion, most often fitted with Chimera F2X boxes for diffusion, and has also been helpful on night-exterior shoots.

As Launais explains, “Where space and rigging points were not available, we used 5-by-10 and 5-by-15 Chimera F2Xs filled with two rows of 12 Quasar tubes.” These fixtures have

been controlled wirelessly via iPad running a Luminair app. The gaffer adds that if space did not allow for the use of these Chimera units, the production would employ a “flatpack” LED fixture, custom-built “using bicolor LiteGear LiteRibbon, [which] fit the same control grids used on the Chimeras.”

AC offers a special thanks to lighting-console programmer Alan Brownstein, who assisted in further detailing the lighting configurations on *I’m Dying Up Here*.

With cartoonish pastel flowers dotting the walls, and the playful, plump, 3-dimensional *Dating Game* logo on full display, the stage is literally set for Nick’s ill-fated encounter with Bachelorettes 1, 2 and 3. Ceiling-rigged Chimeras are lighting the performance area from downstage and 2Ks from upstage. Source Four spots are aimed in various directions, and a Quasar Chimera strip is rigged on a stand at stage right.

There are two dolly tracks for


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