

Tips on Lighting with Little Time and No Money

The topic of the August Image meeting was “Lighting for Low Budget Films” and the speaker/presenter was Marty Collins of Starlite Studios. Marty, one of the premier Directors of Photography (DP) working in the South Bay, has been DP for hundreds of commercial and industrial films, as well as several feature films, including “Lawrunower Mann, “Dead Pit” and “Time of Trials”.

According to Marty, the three most important positions that will save you time and money in making a film are a seasoned Director of Photography, gaffer and key grip. The DP is responsible for the overall look of a film. He/she helps scout for locations, worries about the film emulsion, and thinks about whether or not cranes or dollies will be used. The gaffer is responsible for putting the lights in place, changing them, worrying about power and generators. The key grip is in charge of rigging, carpenters, welders, pyrotechnics, divers, platform assemblers and the folks who do all the dolly work.

Having this team of three people work together during location scouting, enables them to decide on the best camera moves, angles, and beauty shots. The more preparation done on planning visuals ahead of time, the more money saved after the shooting begins. This team of three oversees a wide range of concerns: from the whole visual look of a picture, down to the smallest electrical details like the location of the circuit breaker box and what outlets are on what breaker. This “soup-to-nuts” planning saves immense amounts of time and money once the team arrives on location.

Marty has become an evangelist for a new type of lighting element that combines the safety of fluorescent lights with the color balance of

traditional lighting implements. According to him, Kino Flo fluorescent lights are going to revolutionize low-budget film lighting. One of the very definite advantages is that with these very cool burning lamps, actors don’t sweat through their makeup. They are color balanced for either daylight or tungsten and they use a quarter of the power of incandescent bulbs. This means you can run them off a 15 Amp household circuit, eliminating the need for generators and long cable runs. Another great advantage is that these lights can be dimmed without altering their color balance! Given a lighting budget of \$5,000, Marty would buy a light meter and as many Kino Flo lights as he could lay his hands on, avoiding having to use any tungsten lights at all.

Beside heralding a new age of low-power, cool lamps, Marty talked about some lighting techniques that can help filmmakers give a better look to their productions.

For one thing, over-lighting should be avoided. A much more interesting effect is often obtained by only lighting the layers that you want to see. This technique provides depth through background separation.

One trick Marty uses in low light conditions is to use chalk or white tape to mark the edges of dark objects to make them “pop” out. In a dark room, throwing light on a back wall will enable your eye to see the depth of the room without having to light everything in the room. He cautioned the audience to not forget that black areas must also be lit to avoid getting noise on both film and video. The human eye has great range of perception in dark conditions, but film only has 8 f stops from black to white, and video only has 4 to 5 stops.

A Director of Photography requires both light and color meters in order to insure continuity and consistency from one shot to the next. As Marty put it, “Fundamentally, lighting is control, and it can’t be controlled accurately without the proper instruments!”