

Bullseye!

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An all-Union crew, led by Local 600 DP Brad Rushing, *Aims High* for new original online content from Warner Bros. By Pauline Rogers. All photos courtesy of Warner Bros.



Director Ari Sandel (L), Natalie Dreyfuss (R)

These days, many households are bypassing cable and satellite pipelines for Web-based platforms like Hulu and Facebook, which in turn drive content to viewer's iPhones, iPads, computers and big screens. Big-time Hollywood directors like McG and Bryan Singer are exploring such alternative delivery formats by creating feature-quality Web adventures. One upcoming example is *Aim High 2*, whose producer, Shea Kammer, says there is a huge range of product among New Media "and no good metric of what's going to make something successful."

Nevertheless, Warner Specialty Films (a division of Warner Bros.) is intent on developing New Media content with production values equivalent to basic cable, thanks to what Paul McGuire, with Warner Bros. Corporate Communications, describes as "the skilled and talented members of IATSE, DGA, WGA and SAG-AFTRA" using side letters for New Media original programming.

"As of now, the New Media does not generate the sort of revenue necessary to sustain projects like an *Aim High* or *Mortal Kombat* Web series," McGuire adds. "The unions and guilds that entered into those side letters had the presence to understand that if there is ever going to be a viable business for productions made for New Media, someone has to build the market. Warner Specialty is able to take that chance, and the unions are going to be a part of it."



Director of Photography, Brad Rushing

Aim High 2 producer Mary Viola, with McG's company Wonderland Sound and Vision, says shooting Web-driven projects "gives us the ability to experiment with content that normally may not fit into traditional film or television constructs. The *Aim High* premise is a bit edgy. Occasionally [our hero] has to lay people. Because we don't have the same restrictions online as we might with a network, we are able to push the envelope with the action and storylines."

Aim High 2 director Ari Sandel, whose 2007 short *West Bank Story* won an Oscar, says creating a 100 page, 18-day feature-length action comedy film (cut up into nine-minute segments) with 10 big fight stunt sequences, tons of extras, and improv within the takes, could not have been done without union crews. "Having a quality union crew is something that really set our project apart, without question," Sandel insists. "When you get union workers, you know you are getting reliable people who will elevate the project and make the process smoother and faster, which are essential factors for this kind of shooting."

One shining example of that was *Aim High*'s second-season cinematographer Brad Rushing, CSC. The Houston, Texas-born DP, whose credits include indie features like the Hollywood Film Festival Best Feature *Cook County* and the forthcoming *Divorce Invitation*, says the high bar of talent in front of and behind the cameras made it clear from the outset that aesthetic expectations would be high, despite numerous logistical challenges.

"I knew I wanted an excellent crew behind me," Rushing explains, so I chose people that I've worked with before, who have the technical aptitude, speed and – very importantly – pleasant demeanor that would combine for a winning team. It was also important to have people that pay attention to what is happening such that they anticipate needs and make suggestions, not merely sit around and wait for me to ask for something," he adds.



Steadicam/A-camera operator Ari Robbins (L), B-Cam 1st AC Marc Wierciach (R)

Rushing brought in 1st AC David Landreth, whose skills organizing the camera department crew and gear always ensured "the right assets" were in the right place.

"Sometimes we had to send a camera off to shoot some B-roll or splinter unit shots, and [Landreth] managed all that seamlessly while keeping the main unit rolling at full speed," Rushing describes. "David also has a gift for pulling focus. We moved so fast, there was seldom time for him to lay extensive marks and he was often pulling using his eye alone. And, many times there were calls to shoot the rehearsal. It's even more impressive when you consider that we were often shooting on lenses like 50 millimeter and 85 millimeter at a T1.3."

Ari Robbins handled A-camera/Steadicam chores. Rushing says the operator has the "uncanny ability" to always get the shot right the first time, and "he's a machine when it comes to wearing the Steadicam and powering through long and complicated shots. Ari had really great suggestions and we have a similar sense of composition and coverage."

"In addition to downloading footage and prepping dailies, Peter Mascetta as D.I.T. helped us maintain quality control," Rushing continues. "He knows all the nuances of the camera, including the seldom-used and obscure settings and menus. A few times Peter saved the day by troubleshooting a camera hiccup and correcting it on set."



Ari Robbins (L), Aimee Teegarden (F), Brad Rushing (R)

Gaffer Graham Chart and key grip Tory Schoerner were also key pieces of the puzzle. "Because of the ISO 800 speed of the Red MX cameras and the size of our sets," Rushing explains, "the biggest HMI light we used was a 6K HMI. We also had a large selection of small units, like 2 by 2 Kino Flos, Dedos, Litepanels and LiteRibbon. We lit really diverse environments – the back of a baseball field at night, a cramped Winnebago night interior and a huge prom in a gymnasium with a dimmer board, using Martin MAC movers and Cyberlights. Because of our rapid shooting pace, the few tweaks we made often had to be done 'under the radar' without interrupting a rehearsal or while resetting actors. Graham and his team were fantastic at discreetly making adjustments under fire."

Of Schoerner's contributions the DP says: "Torrey was remarkably proactive with his suggestions and planning ahead to make all our locations and days smooth. He had to MacGyver all kinds of wonderful apparatus, and was fantastic at managing his resources so we were never waiting on the grip department."

With time and budget always factors, Rushing says he was frequently compelled to make creative use of available lighting. One standout example was a cavernous former call center in Irvine, California that offered a vast, two-story ceiling; blue fabric panels on the second-floor walls and stylish, recessed fluorescent lights. Overlooking the enormous room was a second-floor gallery with a broad window that the former company (Nikken) had used to show off the operation to investors.

"The building had a lot of impressive built-in lighting," Rushing recalls. "But since it was designed for visitors and not photography, the levels were very low. I was able to adjust the look by choosing which fixtures to turn off and which to leave on, and then I would light the actors with our own units, often Kino Flos and Lektos. But I had to keep the levels low in order to balance that lighting with the practical lighting. So even at an ISO of 800, I was usually shooting between a T2 and a T1.3. There were a few action shots that Ari Sandel, or our stunt coordinator, Mike Smith, wanted to over-crank, and in those cases I would raise the ISO to 1280. But never higher because it would get too noisy."



B-Cam 1st AC Cary Gallagher (L), Ari Sandel (R) at Van Nuys High School location

To facilitate the short schedule, Rushing also spent evenings and weekends putting together shot lists with Sandel. New technology also played a key part in moving the schedule along. Rushing was lighting and shooting multiple sets simultaneously, and could not always go to each set in person. "We used our smartphones and iPads to exchange photos of lighting setups and video of camera moves, and to text notes back and forth," he smiles.

The DP also resorted to old-school sleight of hand when his goals outstripped his means. "There is one scene that takes place at an auto garage," Rushing shares. "Our hero, Nick (Jackson Rathbone) and his partner, Dakota (Natalie Dreyfuss) drive up and walk in, then talk to a fellow at a counter. I thought it would be elegant to capture the action in one long Steadicam shot, but that required a few tricks. The first was hiding a five-stop iris pull in the move [undetectable because of the action]. And the second was to light the fellow inside at the desk, which doubled as a backlight for our lead characters. I put a shiny board outside, where the camera would be looking right at it. But I knew by the time we got to that part of the shot, the outside would be blown out, so you cannot see the shiny board at all."

While *Aim High 2*'s budget was respectable for a Web series, it was a long way off from the standards of the shoot's earliest team, who all came from features. "Our bridge the gap between our artistic aspirations and financial realities," Rushing states, "by working fast, getting things right the first time, and innovating non-conventional methods to achieve the shots desired. Our key crew was made up of young, relatively new union members. They are outstanding examples of the new generation and promise a bright future for our industry and IATSE."



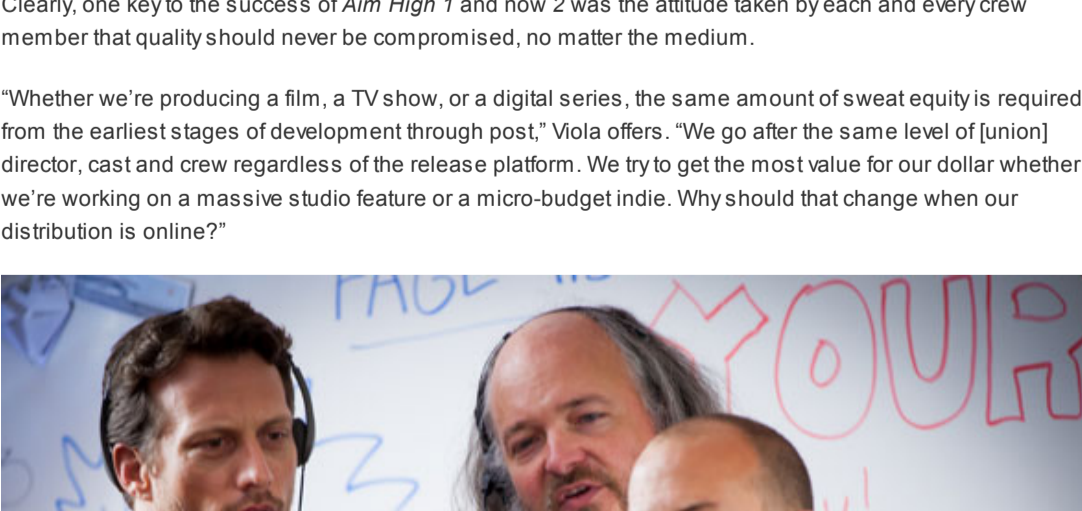
Nikken Building location, Irvine, CA

Reflecting on the experience, now that *Aim High 2* is in post and headed for the Web, Sandel bristles when he explains that "filmmakers assume that Internet means 'cheap' or that it doesn't matter how it looks because, 'Hey, it's just for the Web.' But the expectations [for Web content] from users are getting higher every day. The real mistake is spending a fraction of the time on story development for the Web compared to a TV pilot or feature. Great concepts are brought to YouTube all the time. But they fall flat after two minutes because the stories just aren't there."

Kammer says his outlook on making content for the Web changed rapidly during the first week of production. "In the beginning I was trying to cut cost and pinch pennies," he admits. "It's going on a little off-stage screen on a computer. You don't need this level of detail. Then I realized I was talking like it was 1995 – when we were shooting HD and streaming to television. If anything, we have to be more detail-oriented and understand that while these stories may originate on Facebook, they can and will end up on big-screen televisions."

Clearly, one key to the success of *Aim High 1* and now *2* was the attitude taken by each and every crew member that quality should never be compromised, no matter the medium.

"Whether we're producing a film, a TV show, or a digital series, the same amount of sweat equity is required from the earliest stages of development through post," Viola adds. "We go after the same level of [union] director, cast and crew regardless of the release platform. We try to get the most value for our dollar whether we're working on a massive studio feature or a micro-budget indie. Why should that change when our distribution is online?"



Clockwise from top left: Ari Sandel, Brad Rushing, Ari Robbins, Key Grip Torrey Schoerner

New Media contracts are still works in progress, of course, typically giving members hopes for benefits but no pension (yet). But Hollywood labor heads know the Web may well become a strong source of income for Union members. "Using a DGA crew on a Web series means working with talented, creative, professional directorial team members who bring all their knowledge and expertise to your project," says Russell Hollander, Associate National Executive Director/Eastern Executive Director for DGA. "It's an incredible asset to any project, and the DGA's New Media agreements provide the flexibility to make it possible."

SAG-AFTRA's National Director, New Media, Mark Friedlander, echoes Hollander. "New Media is the fastest growth sector of the entertainment business, making it a place of opportunity for our members who not only want to be employed in this space, but are increasingly the creators themselves. Generally speaking, content creators are seeing the value of professional talent and the satisfaction it draws for increasingly discriminating viewers. Contractually, our approach has been to facilitate this growth by balancing flexibility required to build the future of our entertainment business while protecting our members."

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