



Microfilmmaker Magazine

Tips & Tricks

Making Infamous: Filmmaking with the Redrock M2 for the Web

by AJ Wedding

Web series have always been something of a proving ground for independent writers and filmmakers, now more than ever. New media companies are starting to fund projects that run the gamut of genres from sci-fi, to comedy, horror, you name it! There is still a Wild West feel to the business model, since no one really knows how they are going to make money. Some companies are spending \$10k an episode while others are spending \$1k...with mixed results. For filmmakers like us, it's a chance to have someone else put money out there so that we can play...and that's just what we did, with INFAMOUS.



This all started about three years ago when a friend from college (Craig Bonacorsi) and I (A.J. Wedding) started writing down funny conversations we have had. We have been struggling actors since moving to LA several years ago, so we had a lot to say about that. But as we all know, with the exception of fans of Swingers and Entourage, most people in the world don't care about the sad plight of the struggling actor. So we decided to put it into a better context. Everyone can relate to someone trying to reach their dream, but the struggle has to be interesting in some way. Given our comedic sensibilities and dark thoughts, we decided our script would surround the dayjob our main characters had chosen to support their acting dreams.... contract killing.

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Director John Asher talks with production designer Elvis Strange.

"Michael W. Dean has written the definitive book on microfilmmaking and has done it with all of the passion and attention to detail that it deserves.

9.7/10

-Kari Ann Morgan
Microfilmmaker
Magazine

The thought of it was so funny, these guys who have this dangerous, sexy job, but strive for something bigger. They truly hate killing, not because they think it's wrong, but mainly because it's not acting. It's like waiting tables. Not to mention, their job as contract killers involves keeping anonymity...if they ever made it as actors, they would be famous. So they are basically set up to where actually achieving their dreams is the worst possible thing that could happen for them. This is how INFAMOUS began.

While writing the scenes, Craig and I realized that we were running into problems coming up with other characters, and making it larger than the two guys. We brought in a producer named Pharaba Witt to help build the surrounding world, and get us some meetings to try and get this to television. She loved the idea, and helped develop it. We pitched it to several places that showed great interest. What they weren't interested in...were the two guys that WE wanted to play the lead characters—namely, Craig and I. We looked at this project as our Rocky, and we weren't going to allow ourselves to be recast.

We decided to make Infamous as a web series, since we could have more control and remain in our roles. We pitched it to several new media companies and finally settled on a deal with 60 Frames Entertainment. Because of contractual obligations, we are not able to discuss the budget. But let us just say that it was a low-budget production and, in order to do what we planned to do, we were going to need a LOT of favors! Everyone who has slaved away at their labor of love understands this concept. With friends and favors, you can make miracles happen.

Here's a little bit about the preproduction and an interview with Leo Jaramillo, the Director of Photography.



Craig and A.J. discuss the scene while the crew sets the shot.

After the laborious process of contract negotiations, it was time to get to pre-production. As a director/DP (when I'm not acting), I had a lot of ideas as to how we could produce this on such a small budget. For starters, I own a small equipment rental company, with quite a bit of equipment.

The main gear we could bring to the table were:
 Panasonic AG-HVX200
 Redrock M2 Adapter with 7 primes
 Redrock Micro X
 Glidecam V16
 Lights and grip, etc.

I love the HVX200 coupled with the Redrock, so I hoped that we could shoot with that setup in order to make the series feel more like a film-shot tv series than a web series. Luckily, 60 Frames also had several HVX200 cameras, so we would be able to shoot with 2 cameras. That was important to the shoot, since our dialogue is fast and almost always overlaps.

I cannot say enough about the Redrock M2 and MicroX. It really takes the HVX200 to a new level. And Brian Valente at Redrock was very helpful throughout our production, whenever we needed to fix a jammed follow focus that we dropped on cement, or had missing screws, etc. We never had a problem with the adapter as far as use goes, and our producer still shakes his head whenever she watches Infamous, because she's never seen that kind of quality with something as simple as the HVX200.

Since trying to direct AND star in a low-budget film (or TV/web series) is a nightmare that almost never works, we attached a director named John Asher, who has tons of experience shooting television and film. We were all happy to have someone of his experience at the helm, and it was also validating in that he loved our script, and was willing to take this on.

For our locations, we wanted to have as wide a variety as possible...but we had very little money. So, many of our locations were donated to us. In fact, I think we only paid for two locations, and they were really great deals. It was one of the many things that had to fall into place in order for us to do this for the budget. Pharaba Witt, our producer, was a master at finding ways to fit everything we needed into our miniscule budget.

From this point on, I resigned myself to my acting/writing duties. There's

nothing worse than an actor telling the DP or director what to do, and though I've learned to wear many hats, I've also learned when to take them off. The next portion of this article is a Q and A with our DP, Leo Jaramillo. He has been working with Annie Leibowitz in the still photography world as well as DP'ing several low budget projects. His understanding of lighting, and the camera equipment available to us made him a huge asset.



Director of Photography Leo Jaramillo.

AJW: How did you approach this piece as far as the visual style?

LJ: Before the shoot began, John Asher said that he wanted a "clean style" of light, which was basically clean/white light. This was a deviation from what I normally do since I tend to favor dark darks and vibrant color, and mixing color temperatures. I grew up risking the exposure on cross-processed film, and getting that high contrast look.

AJW: What types of tools were available, and what did you choose to use?

LJ: Not completely knowing the locations was difficult, so I prepared a shotgun approach. I knew using the Red Rock meant a little bit of light loss, so I planned on 1 and 2K's and an HMI. Our grip package was relatively small too because we were going to not want too much gear to slow us down. Aside from the dolly, and the two sticks of track and a 4' extension, everything was smaller and standard.

The only new thing on this job was a 1x1 Lite Panel. Just like all the ads say this thing was amazing—it would literally save the shot. Even off camera, using something as wide as a 35mm lens, it could still keep the eyes from "raconing." Because you have to remember any dark spot becomes a real dark spot [in digital], and when you fire 1k's all over the place you are going to get shadows somewhere. The 1x1 took the place of that 650 on Diffusion on a stand that you float all over the place as an eye light or fill light. And it had the option of being battery powered. So if I needed it to go into a car, or in an elevator, no sweat. I also highly recommend Pole Cats—I wish I ordered more of them. These adjustable speed rails come in sizes of 3'-5', 5'-8', and 8'-12'(not sure of that last one). Basically [they are] adjustable wall spreaders and speed rail kit. It's like a high powered shower curtain rod, allowing me to hang a lamp in a moving elevator and still be out of the shot(since this elevator had mirrors all over the place). It also allowed Kirk Bartolata (my gaffer) to hang some lights in some precarious places

reasonably fast. We also had a car rig, the same one that I've used before on a drift racing video series. So I was confident on what that rig could do

Camera-wise we had two HVX's available both with matching RedRock M2's with microX converters.

AJW: How did the microX and M2 perform?

LJ: There are always complaints of light stop loss and vignetting, which is expected when you use any lens converter and still lenses. However I have to admit that Micro X hardly took any of my light...if any.

I had used the RedRock before on a project that I shot called, 818. It ended up being nominated 8 times including Best Cinematography, so the thing works well. Although on that project we didn't have the microX so we had to flip monitors upside down, and even that cheap trick of flipping the onboard monitor away from you so you can see a "flipped" image. But having a seasoned director from film and television at the helm, I knew that having "upside" down images was probably not going to bolster the confidence of a director in the format/process. Having the micro X allowed us to have monitors run from both cameras that were not mounted upside down. In addition with Digital Capture just a few steps away, the image was not upside down and we were able to import and view dailies quickly and efficiently without flipping the computer or adding the step to flipping the image in Final Cut.



Jeff Meachum (The Mark) teaches Anthony about acting while Craig Bonacorsi (Tom) finishes his lunch.

AJW: Did your lighting scheme change at all when using the M2 and MicroX?

LJ: Not at all, light is light, the intensity changed but, the way you shoot, typically doesn't. You'll find a way to get what you normally shoot. You'll just end up flexing on the lights. If you think about it, most times, you scrim down a light, [whereas] in these cases we had either a naked lamp and some correction gel or nothing at all.

AJW: Were there any particularly difficult scenes to shoot/light? How did you accomplish them?

LJ: I had the benefit of a flexible director. John would often block out the

shot, and then say, "Okay, you got it." And then we'd rig. Kirk (our gaffer) and I have shot [together] before, and he brings a ton of experience with him. He was so valuable on the job. I gave him an idea that he might have had already and bam it was done. And then it was tweaked once cameras got in. I still used my light meter to point lights and get initial readings during blockings prior to bringing in lamps or stands. I only had five guys (including myself) to get these things lit up. (Incidentally, that seems to be my M.O.—a small quick Guerilla Cell that goes in, builds something, and leaves quickly. Once we got cameras positioned, we began making tweaks, brooming out extra stands/lights or repositioning them in one way or another.

AJW: What were the disadvantages with the equipment used on the shoot? The lighting, microX, lenses, etc.

LJ: Right off the obvious disadvantage was the light loss. However if you know that going into it, it doesn't really bother you that much. You just plan on bigger lighting instruments, and more drastic sources. It's along the same lines of shooting a different color temp in film. Shooting HD with the Red Rock is the same thing, only you have a calibrated monitor to tell you: "Its going to be okay." Because in person, you have 1200 HMI bouncing hard into a white surface 7 feet from the talent and it "feels" as if you are overexposing by about 6 stops, when in reality you look into the monitor and you see how "natural" the lighting is. After doing some calculations, I set my light meters to about 100 ASA, shooting HD on low gain, with the RedRock. So when we arrived at a location, I could get some initial readings and develop a battle plan quickly.

AJW: Were there any moments during the shoot that you felt really made the show? Any particular camera moves, etc?

LJ: I got to hand it to John here, his vision was so well conceived that it made the project that much more enjoyable. He created a series of shots that he saw edited already in his brain, and the moves were beautiful. There was a restaurant sequence where I shot a group shot and singles/doubles at a table. Thankfully, there were some Source 4's(Leko's) in my equipment package at the behest of John. I ended up using them at the restaurant, cross-keying talent by bouncing off a white tablecloth. The soft look on the girls faces was unbelievable. I thought to myself: "Holy crap I'm shooting this, my name is attached to this?" Even the spill from the Source 4 was able to provide either kick or edge lighting depending on the way they moved. But this was just one of many moments that I thought were so profound and perfect and lived up to the highly critical expectations of myself.

AJW: What was your favorite part of the making of Infamous?

LJ: Every film crew has some levels of camaraderie and some levels of animosity. On this shoot I can honestly say there were tons of good vibes and little to no anger on this project. I think it strongly came from the growing sentiment that there was some chemistry here. When you watch behind the scenes features on DVD's or hear crew stories of different shows in production, you hear stuff like: "We could all tell that there was something magical about this project."

The idea that there was so much good chemistry, it rubbed off on performances, it rubbed off on producers, on lighting and grip, that there was so much unity that when it was all done, you could look back and use that experience as a benchmark for all things good in a production. Well that was one of my favorite parts. To see so many qualified people who could easily be working for thousands a day, working for peanuts because they believed in a project. That also lends heavily to the flexibility in the director being able

to use what was available rather than demanding the world. But my favorite part was watching this magic I spoke of develop through the lens, to hold my laughter and not shake the camera because I was trying to contain myself, but as I would watch it, I would see what an amazing project this was, and how I was humbled that the writers, the producers, and a high caliber guy like John would give me the reins to create this look for them and trust me to get it done in a timely matter, when I had never worked a day in my life with any of them prior to this.



Sam Witwer (Jason) gets into it with Craig Bonacorsi (Tom).

AJW: What was your least favorite part?

LJ: The trivial nature of the hardships pale in comparison to the overall joy of shooting this project. But if I had to pick a least favorite part, that would be the guilt associated with not being able to pay my guys, Kirk-Gaffer, Carl-Best, Richard 1st AC, Jordan - B 1st AC, Benj- B Camera Op and Josh- B Camera Op, what they deserved. We shot an episode a day. 6-8 pages a day. 6 episodes in 6 days. Who does that? And by our final day I could tell that my guys were worn out. As the guy that brought them in, who has history with them, I feel a certain responsibility to pay them well because I value their work and loyalty. However on this job most us were working for hardly anything, and we all showed up on time, which is a testament of how we felt about being there, regardless of the pay.

With my deep thanks to Leo Jaramillo for his interview and his excellent work, let me move along with this article to our overall shooting schedule and what we accomplished in this.

Our schedule was to shoot 6 webisodes in 6 days....Our director, John Asher, wanted to shoot an episode a day so that we wouldn't owe anything at the end of each day. This helped continuity as well as the general feeling of the cast/crew, but it was difficult with scheduling. With scheduling conflicts and several episodes with multiple locations, we knew we were going to have to make some company moves. Luckily, in the end, all of our conflicts worked out.

DAY 1: HOTEL PALOMAR, WESTWOOD

Our director managed to get us this location for our premiere episode for very little money. We had use of an entire floor, as well as some conference rooms to set up craft service and holding. The usual "first day" issues were there, people all trying to figure out what the show was, what the look was,

and how we are all going to work together. But for me, it was really exciting. The crew was working really hard from the time they arrived, and still seemed very friendly and interested in what was being shot. Once we started rehearsing the master of the main scene, everyone's energy perked up. I think they were happy to see that this was going to be funny, and that their hard work was not going to be for nothing.

DAY 2: THE POST GROUP, HOLLYWOOD

Due to our DP's contacts, we were able to shoot our office scenes at a major post house in Hollywood, on a weekend that they were closed. This was one of the toughest locations for us to find, as well as to shoot. Our production designer, Elvis Strange, did an amazing job transforming the office into a hitman organization with wall and door graphics, personalized art dept., props...everywhere we turned he had some funny list on the wall-"Top 10 Rules for Handgun Safety" and of course "KILLZ" paint cans....it was a fun little set. The first day at this location we shot our fourth episode, which was two separate pieces that are cut between in the final edit.

This was a tough scene to make work because of the tight hallways. In the scene, my character (Anthony) chases Jessica Landon (Lola) trying to get the courage to ask her on a date. The chase goes down several hallways, back and forth. The director decided he didn't want to use any steadicam shots in the show, trying to create a very specific look. Plus, with the redrock and nikon lenses, the shallow depth of field makes it pretty tough to maintain sharp focus in this situation (i won't even mention the difficulty of hiding lights). So John decided to do his shots from the end of the hall, and then just punch in for coverage. It made for an interesting look.

The other part of the scene was a little easier to shoot because the actors are basically standing at a coffee station. But lighting the scene was difficult, with the walls so close to the actors, and no practical lights.

DAY 3: THE POST GROUP, HOLLYWOOD

This scene takes place in a conference room, with most of the actors sitting around a long conference table. John Asher, who's father was a director for 100 episodes of I Love Lucy, quoted his father about this situation. "Never do a poker film. The coverage will kill you!" And yet, here he was stuck in virtually the poker film situation, having to cover the entire table.

The lighting setups took quite a while on this day, because we wanted a moody look-and the walls were closing in on us....shadows become your worst enemy sometimes! Also, it is hard to get the most out of your shallow depth of field with the Redrock when you have so little depth in the set. But I think there were some fun shots, plus, this room gave Elvis Strange a lot of room to play.



Tom and Anthony follow Jessica Landon (Lola) into Silvera's Steakhouse.

DAY 4: SILVERA'S STEAKHOUSE, HUNTINGTON BEACH

Through a good friend of mine, we were able to use Dave Silvera's Steakhouse (Dave is the drummer for KORN) for free, on a day that they were closed. It's a gorgeous restaurant, and really brought up the production value of the show. This was going to be a tough day because we had to shoot a scene at the dinner table, as well as a fight scene in the kitchen. Fight scenes, for those of you that don't know, are tough to film properly, and take a lot of setups. We could have spent a whole day on the kitchen scene alone, but we didn't have that kind of time.

I'll tell you this...we were extremely lucky to have such a great location...and location contact. The manager of the restaurant, also named Dave, was so helpful all day long...and NEVER asked what time we would be done. We ended up having an 18 hour day...and he never got upset! This episode looks so great because of the time we were able to take...I should also mention that our crew never complained, either. In fact, our DP had to light a big photographic shoot on our day off, and when we were apologizing for keeping him so late, he said, "No...this is more important." That made me feel really good.... and if you are ever in Huntington and want a great meal, go to Silvera's....They are awesome, and the food is amazing.

Luckily, with an 18 hour day behind us, we had worked a day off into the schedule, because we knew we would be switching to nights for the rest of the shoot. So the 18 hour day helped people get on the new schedule, and I think everyone needed the day off.



Mike O'Hearn (Bambi) prepares to give Anthony the thunderfist.

DAY 5: ULTIMATE FIGHTING GYM-FULLERTON

This was a free location because of Mike O'Hearn, who called a friend and set it up. Aside from being ridiculously ripped, Mike is an awesome guy, who will hopefully be a huge star soon. No one deserves it more.

This was a huge gym...with a fighting cage on one side and a string of heavy bags and mats on the other. We tried to use as much of the space as possible, but it was difficult because of lighting. We weren't able to change out the fluorescent bulbs because of time, and we didn't have plus green gel...so it became a day of "it is what it is" otherwise, we weren't going to have time to get through all of the shots. For the cage fight, we had two Source 4s to give some edge light, and 4 bank Kino-Flo's for fill.

I can tell you something I learned about doing stunts....get a stuntman! We, of course, didn't have money for that, but here's the thing...getting flipped and kicked, and falling down is really fun for the first 5 takes...but in a fight, you need a LOT of setups, and getting the right angles for each punch takes a while. I was so sore towards the end of the day that when they said they needed one more take of Mike flipping me across the cage, I wasn't sure my body was going to handle it. I do know that if I had to do one more after that...I probably couldn't have done it.



A.J. Wedding (Anthony) tries not to be nervous with Liz Beth Santos (River) in his lap.

DAY 6: DOWNTOWN PARKING GARAGE/RIO STRIP CLUB

At night, when I arrived onset downtown, all I heard was the screeching of tires. I parked on the roof of the parking garage and looked down to see our hero car whipping around corners on the streets of downtown Los Angeles. Our producers had arranged for a stunt driver to come and do the shots whipping through the garage, but when they arrived on set, they saw how abandoned the area was. With that in mind, they decided to go outside and do some guerilla filmmaking. The driving shots really add some production value to the show, and add to the fact that our characters are both reckless and skilled.

We also had a shot where we were going to run over a bystander in the garage. We had looked at several ways of doing this in post, using After Effects. But our stunt driver Paulie was also a stunt man, and volunteered to be the man we hit. He was so believable in the pieces that we shot, that we never had to do any of the After Effects work we thought we might need.

In several of the episodes we needed gunfire. You can do it in After Effects, but I am always a fan of getting as much in camera as you can. The problem is that guns require a gun master, a pyrotechnician, and special insurance. Too much money. Luckily, someone has come up with a low budget answer...there are prop guns called "non-guns." They are great gun replicas, and have a 9 volt battery inside that ignites small flash loads, like little fireworks. They aren't very loud, and you can get different size flashes. They were life savers for us!

This was our big company move day....heading to the strip club. What a place to finish the shoot! Let me tell you that finding a strip club to shoot in is HARD. We attempted to use every contact we had, offered money, it didn't matter. In the end, one of the creative execs from 60 Frames had a contact that came through. We had a limited amount of time there, so we had to work fast. At this point in the shoot the crew was so dialed in that we knew we could make it. In the end, we actually finished early, and managed to give a cameo to our production designer, Elvis Strange. He was so perfect for the DJ at the strip club!

PICK UP DAY: TOWNHOUSE-WOODLAND HILLS

With the idea of shooting an episode a day, the director decided to cut the opening to our second episode. In the end, the studio really wanted it. With our director off to the east coast shooting One Tree Hill, we had our good

friend and producer Jeff Ketcham direct the scene. We shot it at my house, since I had some equipment, and it just made it easier. Our DP volunteered to come so the look could be maintained, and our crew was...our friends. It was a fun night.

POST PRODUCTION

While we were shooting, we were downloading P2 cards and sending a drive back and forth to our editor, Rob Dipple. He would start putting together rough edits, as the goal was to get out of post as soon as possible. After production, our director John Asher sat with Dipple and put together his first cuts. We all met at 60 Frames one day so that we could all see them...I was so excited. Though I can say that I would have liked to see them first without the studio there, since I felt like I had to laugh just because they were there, and I wanted them to be happy. The truth of the matter was that I was not happy. It's not that it wasn't good...some parts were really funny...but I felt like the rhythm was missing. The comedic timing that we had written in, and performed in wasn't quite there, while many parts felt a little 'slapstick,' whereas our original idea had our characters being a little more badass when killing. (I am probably going to get in trouble for sharing these notes with the world, but I want to be honest with you all about the process!) I know the studio felt like something was missing as well. They gave their notes, and we gave ours.

Let me also add that I began my filmmaking life by being an editor...way back when the Amiga Video Toaster was the best thing on the market! So not being able to edit this baby was really hard for me. But I knew that eventually I would get my hands on it. In the end, our director had another gig and wasn't able to finish all of the notes. He gave me the drive and I was finally able to turn and burn. I think I had eight hours of editing time before turning in another cut to the studio, and I had to start from scratch with two of the episodes. Because I had so much time to think about it and talk it over with Craig and Pharaba, I knew where we wanted it to go, and what it should look like, which helped me work fast. After that viewing with the studio, we locked 3 episodes, and only had minor tweaks on the others. It goes to show you that, when you are passionate about your project and you truly understand what it is, it's always going to be easier for you to put it together than someone else. I've said it a hundred times....you, me, and five other people from this message board could be given the same footage and make seven different movies. Luckily, the studio was on board with our original idea, and were relieved to see our finished edits.

SOUND

We had some issues with our production sound....I think our sound mixer was unprepared for the number of actors we would have on camera, so there were a few places where we were going to need some ADR. In addition to that, there were some sound effects and, of course, music that we had to come up with. For the music, our studio had a wide assortment of music available to them, so we filed through their library and managed to find some great music for every episode.

Through one of our producers, Jeff Ketcham, we were able to have an Academy Award winning post sound house do our ADR and final mix for us for free. They had a limited amount of time, but just having them work on it was really exciting. They were very complimentary, saying it's the funniest thing they've seen in quite a while...and these guys work on Adam Sandler films and such...so that was really nice.

COLOR TIMING

I ended up doing our color timing myself in Apple Color, but I didn't affect the color too much. Leo Jaramillo had already lit it so well, there was little that I

had to do other than crush the blacks and brighten the whites. I also ran the whole show through Magic Bullet, which gave the color the S-Curve of film. I also did a bleach bypass filter, just slight, and 3% film grain. My goal was to make it look somewhat like 16mm, without going too effect heavy. Some of the episodes with bright highlights and deep blacks look really great with the magic bullet. Some of the scenes where we didn't have as wide a range of light don't look quite as cool, but the look exists. If I had my way, I probably would have gone further with the bleach bypass and gone up to 5 or 6% and the whole show would look like The 300...but I didn't want to go too comic book-like....

IN CLOSING

I won't go into how you should market your project, as I am definitely not an expert! We have done many things, such as writing press releases, articles, and of course sending emails to everyone we know. What I will say is that the web allows you an opportunity that has never existed with previous distribution formats. Once you put your project up on a site like Youtube or Hulu, almost anyone in the world can see it...and they don't have to spend a dime! That should be exciting to everyone who thinks they have a great idea that needs to get out into the world. It's an exciting time...and right now, it's a level playing field! It's up to you to mark your territory...

Be sure to check out our series at:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/Infamousseries>



AJ Wedding graduated from Western Michigan University in 2000, and headed out to Los Angeles. As an actor, he has played co-starring roles on Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Drake and Josh, and most recently a TV movie, The Fall of Hyperion. As a writer/director, he has won awards from the East Lansing Film Festival, Houston Worldfest, and most recently sold a feature called The Disappearance of Jenna Matheson, set to release next year. He currently co-writes and co-stars in the web series Infamous, distributed by 60 Frames Entertainment.

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