

Rocking Out

U.S.A.

Cinematographer Matthew Clark Brings his "A" Game to 2008 Emmy® Award-Winning Comedy Series *30 Rock*



Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) eyes Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin). Photo © NBC Photo



Tracy (Tracy Morgan) and Jenna (Jane Krakowski) vie for attention as co-stars of Liz Lemon's TV show. Photo © NBC Photo



Photo: Jessica Miglio/NBC

By the time Matthew Clark took over cinematography duties on *30 Rock*, he was already familiar with the challenges and rewards involved in working on the very popular, critically-acclaimed NBC comedy series. As an operator on first unit and cinematographer on second unit under cinematographer Vanja Cernjul, Clark learned firsthand that the show was fast moving, even manic at times, and that each five-to-six-day shoot had to cover quite a lot of material at a surprising number of locations.

"The scripts can be very dense," Clark remarks about this show, set behind the scenes at a late-night variety show and dealing with put-upon producer Liz Lemon (Tina Fey), her loose cannon star, Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan) and her overbearing but oddly likable boss Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin). "Often characters will be looking at a scene on their computer or a television," says Clark, "so we have to create the scene they see and shoot them in another space watching it. We'll also have very quick flashbacks within scenes. Most of the time these are just a single shot that will be onscreen for two seconds but, of course, you still have to light it and take care of it."

Clark, who has worked as a gaffer and as a cinematographer on several indie features in addition to his camera operating, says he takes all of that experience to work every day shooting *30 Rock*. Cernjul had been brought onto the show without any previous series television credits because producers had admired his work on some indie movies. Clark's shooting reel was also devoid of series work but he points out that *30 Rock* has more in common with independent filmmaking than with working on a lot of traditional half-hour comedies.

There's so much to get done so quickly, he says, "you have to get used to *reacting* as much as planning. You try to dot all the i's and cross all the t's but you can never have everything planned for on a show like this. Independent films helped me learn how to *react* to circumstances. 'Okay, how do we make this exterior work with three PAR cans and a 10K?'"

When Cernjul was the cinematographer, ETERNA 400 became the emulsion used for practically every setup, with some ETERNA 250 always on the truck for use in day exterior setups. Clark, who shot the feature *Never Forever* (2007) on the ETERNA 400 (pushed a stop to "boost the contrast and add some texture" and printed photochemically) was comfortable continuing the ETERNA 400 tradition.

Clark likes the general low-contrast attributes and latitude of the ETERNA 400 because they allow him to get aesthetically pleasing, soft close-ups using only a small amount of diffusion (Tiffen

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Black Diffusion/FX) and he can always introduce additional contrast at Postworks in the final grading. "It also helps us move a little faster," he says of the 400T. "It's fast and has the latitude that if we have to go someplace and shoot say a flashback very quickly, we know we've got [the information] on the negative. If we want a contrastier look, the colorist can crush the blacks. It allows us to have rich colors and blacks if we want to or go more muted. When you sit down for final [color correction], you can make it really 'crunchy' or really open."

Standing sets for the show at Silvercup Studios in Long Island City include Liz and Jack's offices, a writers' room and the studio where the show within the show is shot. Clark says his approach to lighting the studio essentially picked up where Cernjul left off. Any set with a window has a traditional backdrop outside to suggest the views from the famous office building at New York's 30 Rockefeller Plaza. "The backdrops are so close to our windows," he laughs, "it's crazy. I'll use light with a cooler color temperature at the window and then let it get warmer as we go inside the office to help sell the effect and I keep really close tabs on that so when we go back and forth in the offices, we don't have to spend a lot of time making the color of the light match."

Scenes are generally covered with two ARRICAM Lites mostly using mid-range Cooke S4 primes. "Having more than two cameras can really become a limitation," Clark observes. "We're already a hand-held, run-and-gun show. We're panning 180 or 270 degrees. So with a third camera, we'd start to get in one another's way." ▶



Kenneth the page (Jack McBrayer) relishes his exalted position during a TGS taping. Photo © NBC Photo



Clark enjoys the challenge of creating different looks for the *30 Rock* world, the show within the show, and even the interior visions of the characters. Here, Liz Lemon visits the set of TGS, the variety show she writes and produces. Photo © NBC Photo

The cinematographer credits operators Peter Agliata and Albino Marsetti and focus pullers Jeff Dutemple and Mike Cambria for being able to meet the rigorous challenges of this almost entirely hand-held show. "I usually want the lens open to about a T 2.8," he says. "The drops are so close that I need the shallow depth of field. I think it also helps lend a sense of immediacy to what's going on—that kind of documentary feel. But it means the operators have to be able to adapt to anything the actors do and the focus pullers have to be very good."

Shooting *30 Rock*, Clark observes, is not like working on a series with a handful of sets and one overall look. "On one day," he says, "we might be doing a variety show with a kind of studio look, spinning gobos with Lecos and cameras on dollies, then a fake Janis Joplin concert done rock and roll style with party lights, and then a scene in an office."

"I like doing all the different kinds of shooting you have to do on the show," he continues. "We did a Christmas episode this year where the whole

episode was basically Jack trying to hide from his mom"—Elaine Stritch in a recurring role—"so he decides the staff has to put on a Christmas special and we created the look of a television variety show onstage, something like the old *Perry Como Christmas Hour*. Then just outside that set, we had the '*30 Rock* world' of Jack and Liz and everybody involved in putting this Christmas show on. It ends with a really sweet moment of Jack and his mom singing at the piano and it made me think of all those old-time Christmas specials I'd watch as a kid."

Clark adds that the quality of the scripts combined with the talent in front of the camera help

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inspire him to meet any production challenges that come along. "It's not all the time that you get to work with such great actors and material week in and week out," he says, "and I feel the photography has to always meet those same high standards."

He first felt that as an operator on the show, trying to make every shot count, trying to capture every moment perfectly. Clark learned quickly that operators on *30 Rock* must deal with the kind of challenge that occurs only on shows where the material and delivery is genuinely funny. "Every once in a while," he admits, "an operator will ruin a take because their shoulders are shaking from laughing so hard." ■ Jon Silberg

This article is provided by courtesy of the *EXPOSURE* U.S.A. edition.

30 Rock	
STOCK USED	ETERNA 400 ETERNA 250



Jack and his mother (Elaine Stritch) call a temporary truce during production of a campy, old-fashioned Christmas special. Photo © NBC Photo



Sometimes, a flashback or fantasy sequence will only run for a second or two but Clark and crew must still devote the same attention to it they would to a four-page scene. Here, Liz imagines it's her wedding day. Photo © NBC Photo



Clark uses cooler color temperatures near the window of Jack's office and then lets the color get gradually warmer further from the window. Photo © NBC Photo