



## CREW VIEW

# DP LISA WIEGAND IS A FAMILIAR FACE AT THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

By Bonnie Goldberg Photo courtesy of Lisa Wiegand

"We had a darkroom in the basement of our house in Royal Oak, Michigan, and my father, who taught photography classes at the local high school, was always giving me film as gifts," explains cinematographer Lisa Wiegand.

As a teenager, Wiegand's love for photos grew to shooting Super-8 "stories" à la David Lynch and Stan Brakhage, her film heroes, since she worked part time in a store that rented hard-to-find and cult films. She even shot the store's local television commercial.

With a BA in film, radio and television from Wayne State University and work at several production companies in the Detroit area, she realized she had to leave Michigan to find like minded people, who wanted to make artistic films, not industrials about automotive manufacturing. Wiegand knew nothing about Los Angeles, and had no contacts, but she took the plunge and applied to UCLA's Master's program in film production and was accepted.

At UCLA, Wiegand studied under cinematography professors like Bill McDonald, Tom DeNove, and Johnny Simmons, who helped her make some hard decisions about her future. "Tom was also teaching at AFI and suggested that I take a year leave-of-absence from UCLA to get the 'AFI experience,'" she explained. "I took his advice and when I returned to UCLA, Tom and Bill helped me design a Masters thesis in cinematography, a first for UCLA, since it is mainly a program that focuses on directing. I was able to take advantage of the fact that there were so many directing students and I was the only 'cinematography student' there at the time."

While still at UCLA, Wiegand shot her first feature. *Shopping for Fangs*, co-directed by fellow students Quentin Lee and Justin Lin, was made for under \$100K on 35mm with a small crew and rapid-fire shooting schedule. "It went to several well-known film festivals and got a

write up in *American Cinematographer*," says Wiegand. "Thrilling!"

After graduation, Wiegand got another 35mm feature project with UCLA alumnus Orin Walker. The executive producer on *Dean Quixote*, was Kim Gottlieb-Walker. "Kim was the first one who mentioned to me that I should start saving my paperwork to get into the Union," says Wiegand.

Over the past ten years Wiegand has shot several indie features and documentaries, including *My Suicide*, a dark comedy about a high school student who declares that he will commit suicide on tape for his video production class' final project. Recently, she completed *Bob Funk*, a comedy about an alcoholic futon salesman who gets fired by his mother.

In addition to shooting, Wiegand has taught cinematography at AFI, Loyola Marymount University and UCLA. Much of her teachings are drawn from her experiences, and

from that of mentors like Scott Kevan, Bill Dill, ASC, Steven Poster, ASC, Rodney Charters, ASC, Allen Daviau, ASC, Laszlo Kovacs, ASC, Dean Cundey, ASC, Robert Elswit, ASC, Tim Suhrstedt, ASC and Amy Vincent, ASC.

"When I was a student at UCLA, Dean Cundey gave a workshop and one of the things that really stuck in my head was the basic concept of soft light," she recalls. "He said, 'In order to make a light softer, you need to make it larger and closer to your subject. That is what you are doing when you use diffusion frames in front of lights. We think of the sun as a hard source, but if you could bring it much closer, it would become soft. Of course we'd all be burned to a crisp, but we'd be lit softly.' I use that concept when I teach, including the joke!"

Another part of Wiegand's progress as a filmmaker has been her involvement with the Sundance Institute Director's Lab. For one month every summer, Sundance invites several talented young directors to workshop scenes from scripts they are working on. "On several occasions, I have worked at these workshops, shooting scenes for the directors," she explains.

"The experience at the labs is intense and invigorating. When I get the chance to go, I always leave with a renewed sense of why I wanted to be a DP in the first place—to bring new and interesting voices to the big screen. Many wonderful mentors volunteer their time to the labs and I have fostered stronger relationships with Steven Poster, Allen Daviau and Robert Elswit."

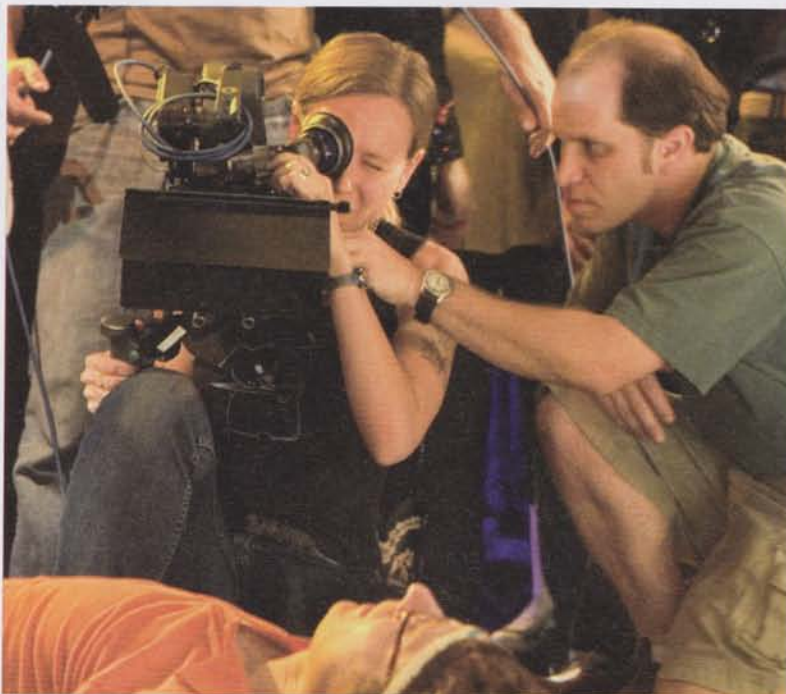
After many years working in the indie world, Wiegand's first job in the studio realm was as a second unit DP on the Fox series *24*. "When I met with Rodney Charters, we talked about the established shooting style of the show. I knew I could fit right in."

"On *24*, we work with a handheld camera and another camera on a dolly carrying a very long lens," she explains. "On most dramatic shows, A and B cameras are shooting from a similar angle. Not so on this show."

"The directors on *24* and the style of the show necessitate being able to do sweeping

moves through all of our sets. This creates the need for very creative lighting solutions as well as talented and experienced camera operators and focus pullers.

"In my indie feature experience, I have shot several multi-camera films and many action sequences. And, because of the small budgets that the indie filmmakers have to work with, we work



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DP LISA WIEGAND

fast and need to do a large amount of set-ups per day. It was a wonderful training-ground for the fast-paced, creative world of *24*."

Wiegand's work in both worlds has been taken very seriously. In 1998, she won the Karl Struss Heritage Award from the ASC. The Heritage Award is designed to encourage talented student filmmakers pursuing careers in cinematography. "I submitted a reel of clips from my body of work that included four short films and my first feature," she remembers. "It's wonderful to be honored by your peers, but when you are honored by your heroes, it really blows you away. Winning an award like that lends a validity to your work and helps directors and producers realize that they are in good hands when they hire you."

Wiegand has brought two films to Sundance in the last two years. *Chasing Ghosts*, the documentary about the pioneers of video gaming, was very well received at the festival. "We even had an arcade built on Main Street

with all the old games that people could come and play for free." This year she was at Sundance with a different kind of film. *Adventures of Power* is a fictional comedy about a social misfit who tries to save his small town through his amazing air-drumming skills.

"We shot in Utah, Los Angeles, New Jersey and New York—a pretty scattered year-and-a-half schedule," she explains. "We shot on Super 16 and did a DI at Post Logic in LA."

"In this picture, we tried to create a visual world that is not quite real—let's call it 'hyper real'—with saturated colors and high contrast. We needed a world that was fantastical a place, where it was possible that something as crazy as air drumming could be perceived as a force for healing and social change."

"I loved the script immediately, and when I met [writer/director/producer and lead actor] Ari Gold, we talked about how to approach the visual world of the film. I knew it would be a great experience—one so unique I couldn't pass it up."

The Sundance premiere of the film went extremely well. "After working on the

film for so long, it was hard for me to be objective," reveals Wiegand. "I was hoping the audience would find it as funny and touching as I did. I was so excited when we screened it and the audience really got it and laughed more than I had even hoped they would."

"Even though the film is a comedy, it has a dramatic message of community and celebrating our differences. I'm impressed how Ari was able to successfully convey these concepts through the wacky world of *Adventures of Power*."

Lisa Wiegand's take on the world of independent filmmaking is heartening. She really loves what she does and it is obvious. One of the most important things that she tries to impart on others is to cultivate patience and enthusiasm, and to not let go. "It's a business of relationships, so always be thankful for all the help you've received along the way and help others achieve their goals. In most cases, what comes around goes around." ☘