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Diaries' Camera Op Geoff Shotz

By **John Stoneburner** | Posted May 10, 2016, 2:30 p.m.

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Geoff Shotz, an Atlanta-based camera operator with almost 20 years experience and current operator for the CW's "The Vampire Diaries," took time out of his schedule shooting "Mercy Street" in Virginia to talk about the fascinating life of a camera op.

How did you get started?

Coming from an athletic and photography background, the moving of a camera was very attractive to me. I was working as an electrician and some of the operators who were very supportive saw I was interested in steady cam and they would train me at lunch, showing how things worked and letting me run around with it. That turned into a love affair with the steady cam.

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What exactly does a camera operator do?

The physicality of capturing a shot is about 5–10 percent of your job. The real job is how to run a set, how to set up a shot, how to work with actors, how to work with the technical sides, the crafts of lighting and grip—all the parts come together at the camera. You have to know story, eye lines, you have to know the script as well as the director if you really want to be a good one. The camera is what captures all the other work. You're the silent dance partner to all the crafts and talent.

How are you creatively fulfilled?

In the beginning I think you really worry about the technical aspects, but as you get better, you begin to think in terms of how each shot adds to the story. I tell my guys all the time, "every shot should have an opinion." "Look for a way to make the shot better." Everything from what's being captured in the frame (or not) to the camera movement—how is it adding to the overall story? Creatively I get to be a part of how a story is told, how a performance is captured. The placement and movement of a camera is an art form.

How does your relationship with the director work?

I'm directly under the director of photography so the DP and the director will both tell me what they want. Some DPs will tell you to talk to the director and work out the shots while they go handle another aspect; the opposite is the DP that sets the exact shot they want and then expects you to come in and just operate it for them. In my opinion, a great operator checks their ego. You can't get hurt when other people show you what they want—that's part of the game.

What are some common traits operators share?

They have both a very creative and a very rational brain at the same time. On one hand, a camera op is a cross between a child psychologist and a drill instructor. The other half of the job you deal in physics and quantum mechanics: arranging the movement of people and objects within time and space to capture a performance.... And a sense of humor! If you can't laugh at what we do each day, it's going to eat you alive.

What, to you, makes an engaging acting performance?

When an actor takes you to a place that's both familiar and completely new. When someone makes a choice on screen in a way or a direction you might not ever think to go but that you can completely relate to.

How can a camera op help a performer?

By putting yourself in the right place at the right time with the least amount of intrusion into what is going on for the actors. Knowing how to make those small lateral moves, as [Steven Spielberg](#) puts it, as things are changing. Anticipating where to be to capture that moment that you can feel is about to happen.

What's the natural progression from camera op?

Directing. Particularly in television. In TV the camera op is the one who spends the most time with actors, who watches the most performances, who is the constant on set. You never leave set. It's a really easy evolution into directing.

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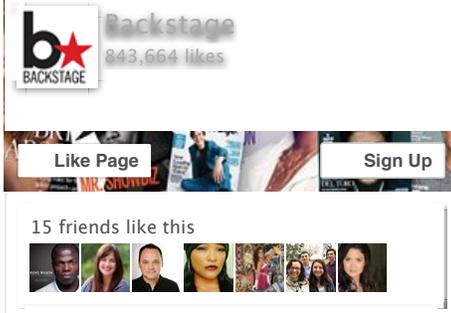
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